

Our Lady of the Open Road

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The needle on the veggie oil tank read flat empty by the time we came to China Grove. A giant pink and purple fiberglass dragon loomed over the entrance, refugee from some shuttered local amusement park, no doubt; it looked more medieval than Chinese. The parking lot held a mix of Chauffeurs and manual farm trucks, but I didn't spot any other greasers, so I pulled in.

"Cutting it close, Luce?" Silva put down his book and leaned over to peer at the gauge.

"There hasn't been anything but farms for the last fifty miles. Serves me right for trying a road we haven't been down before."

"Where are we?" asked Jacky from the bed in the back of the van. I glanced in the rearview. He caught my eye and gave an enthusiastic wave. His microbraids spilled forward from whatever

he'd been using to tether them, and he gathered them back into a thick ponytail.

Silva answered before I could. "Nowhere, Indiana. Go back to sleep."

"Will do." Without music or engine to drown him out, Jacky's snores filled the van again a second later. He'd been touring with us for a year now, so we'd gotten used to the snores. To be honest, I envied him his ability to fall asleep that fast.

I glanced at Silva. "You want to do the asking for once?"

He grinned and held up both forearms, tattooed every inch. "You know it's not me."

"There's such thing as sleeves, you know." I pulled my windbreaker off the back of my seat and flapped it at him, even though I knew he was right. In the Midwest, approaching a new restaurant for the first time, it was never him, between the tattoos and the spiky blue hair. Never Jacky for the pox scars on his cheeks, even though they were clearly long healed. That left me.

My bad knee buckled as I swung from the driver's seat. I bent to clutch it and my lower back spasmed just to the right of my spine, that momentary pain that told me to rethink all my life's choices.

"What are you doing?" Silva asked through the open door.

"Tying my shoe." There was no need to lie, but I did it anyway. Pride or vanity or something akin. He was only two years younger than me, and neither of us jumped off our amps much anymore. If I ached from the drive, he probably ached, too.

The backs of my thighs were all pins and needles, and my shirt was damp with sweat. I took a moment to lean against Daisy the Diesel and stretch in the hot air. I smelled myself: not great after four days with no shower, but not unbearable.

The doors opened into a foyer, red and gold and black. I didn't even notice the blond hostess in her red qipao until she stepped away from the wallpaper.

"Dining alone?" she asked. Beyond her, a roomful of faces turned in my direction. This wasn't really the kind of place that attracted tourists, especially not these days, this far off the interstate.

"No, um, actually, I was wondering if I could speak to the chef or the owner? It'll only take a minute." I was pretty sure I had timed our stop for after their dinner rush. Most of the diners looked to be eating or pushing their plates aside.

The owner and chef were the same person. I'd been expecting another blonde Midwesterner, but he was legit Chinese. He had never heard of a van that ran on grease. I did the not-quite-pleading thing. On stage I aimed for fierce, but in jeans and

runners and a ponytail, I could fake a down-on-her-luck Midwest momma. The trick was not to push it.

He looked a little confused by my request, but at least he was willing to consider it. "Come to the kitchen door after we close and show me. Ten, ten thirty."

It was nine; not too bad. I walked back to the van. Silva was still in the passenger seat, but reading a trifold menu. He must have ducked in behind me to grab it. "They serve a bread basket with lo mein. And spaghetti and meatballs. Where are we?"

"Nowhere, Indiana." I echoed back at him.

We sat in the dark van and watched the customers trickle out. I could mostly guess from their looks which ones would be getting into the trucks and which into the Chauffeurs. Every once in a while, a big guy in work boots and a trucker cap surprised me by squeezing himself into some little self-driving thing. The game passed the time, in any case.

A middle-aged cowboy wandered over to stare at our van. I pegged him for a legit rancher from a distance, but as he came closer I noticed a clerical collar beneath the embroidered shirt. His boots shone and he had a paunch falling over an old rodeo belt; the incongruous image of a bull-riding minister made me laugh. He startled when he realized I was watching him.

He made a motion for me to lower my window.

"Maryland plates!" he said. "I used to live in Hagerstown."

I smiled, though I'd only ever passed through Hagerstown.

"Used to drive a church van that looked kinda like yours, too, just out of high school. Less duct tape, though. Whatcha doing out here?"

"Touring. Band."

"No kidding! You look familiar. Have I heard of you?"

"Cassis Fire," I said, taking the question as a prompt for a name. "We had it painted on the side for a while, but then we figured out we got pulled over less when we were incognito."

"Don't think I know the name. I used to have a band, back before..." His voice trailed off, and neither of us needed him to finish his sentence. There were several "back before"s he could be referring to, but they all amounted to the same thing. Back before StageHolo and SportsHolo made it easier to stay home. Back before most people got scared out of congregating anywhere they didn't know everybody.

"You're not playing around here, are you?"

I shook my head. "Columbus, Ohio. Tomorrow night."

"I figured. Couldn't think of a place you'd play nearby."

"Not our kind of music, anyway," I agreed. I didn't know what music he liked, but this was a safe bet.

"Not any kind. Oh well. Nice chatting with you. I'll look you up on StageHolo."

He turned away.

"We're not on StageHolo," I called to his back, though maybe not loud enough for him to hear. He waved as his Chauffeur drove him off the lot.

"Luce, you're a terrible sales person," Silva said to me.

"What?" I hadn't realized he'd been paying attention.

"You know he recognized you. All you had to do was say your name instead of the band's. Or 'Blood and Diamonds.' He'd have paid for dinner for all of us, then bought every t-shirt and download code we have."

"And then he'd listen to them and realize the music we make now is nothing like the music we made then. And even if he liked it, he'd never go to a show. At best he'd send a message saying how much he wished we were on StageHolo."

"Which we could be..."

"Which we won't be." He knew better than to argue with me on that one. It was our only real source of disagreement.

The neon "open" sign in the restaurant's window blinked out, and I took the cue to put the key back in the ignition. The glowplug light came on, and I started the van back up.

My movement roused Jacky again. "Where are we now?"

I didn't bother answering.

As I had guessed, the owner hadn't quite understood what I was asking for. I gave him the engine tour, showing him the custom oil filter and the dual tanks. "We still need regular

diesel to start, then switch to the veggie oil tank. Not too much more to it than that."

"It's legal?"

Legal enough. There was a gray area wherein perhaps technically we were skirting the fuel tax. By our reasoning, though, we were also skirting the reasons for the fuel tax. We'd be the ones who got in trouble, anyway. Not him.

"Of course," I said, then changed the subject. "And the best part is that it makes the van smell like egg rolls."

He smiled. We got a whole tankful out of him, and a bag full of food he'd have otherwise chucked out, as well.

The guys were over the moon about the food. Dumpster diving behind a restaurant or Superwally would have been our next order of business, so anything that hadn't made a stop in a garbage can on its way to us was haute cuisine as far as we were concerned. Silva took the lo mein - no complimentary bread-, screwed together his travel chopsticks, and handed mine to me from the glove compartment. I grabbed some kind of moo shu without the pancakes, and Jacky woke again to snag the third container.

"Can we go someplace?" Silva asked, waving chopsticks at the window.

"Got anything in mind on a Tuesday night in the boonies?"

Jacky was up for something, too. "Laser tag? Laser bowling?"

Sometimes the age gap was a chasm. I turned in my seat to side-eye the kid. "One vote for lasers."

"I dunno," said Silva. "Just a bar? If I have to spend another hour in this van I'm going to scream."

I took a few bites while I considered. We wouldn't be too welcome anywhere around here, between our odor and our look, not to mention the simple fact that we were strangers. On the other hand, the more outlets I gave these guys for legit fun, the less likely they were to come up with something that would get us in trouble. "If we see a bar or a bowling joint before someplace to sleep, sure."

"I can look it up," said Jacky.

"Nope," I said. "Leave it to fate."

After two thirds of the moo shu, I gave up and closed the container. I hated wasting food, but it was too big for me to finish. I wiped my chopsticks on my jeans and put them back in their case.

Two miles down the road from the restaurant, we came to Starker's, which I hoped from the apostrophe was only a bar, not a strip club. Their expansive parking lot was empty except for eight Chauffeurs, all lined up like pigs at a trough. At least

that meant we didn't have to worry about some drunk crashing into our van on his way out.

I backed into the closest spot to the door. It was the best lit, so I could worry less about our gear getting lifted. Close was also good if the locals decided they didn't like our looks.

We got the long stare as we walked in, the one from old Westerns, where all the heads swivel our way and the piano player stops playing. Except of course, these days the piano player didn't stop, because the piano player had no idea we'd arrived. The part of the pianist in this scenario was played by Roy Bittan, alongside the whole E Street Band, loud as a stadium and projected in StageHolo 3D.

"Do you want to leave?" Jacky whispered to me.

"No, it's okay. We're here now. Might as well have a drink."

"At least it's Bruce. I can get behind Bruce." Silva edged past me toward the bar.

A few at leasts: at least it was Bruce, not some cut-rate imitation. Bruce breathed punk as far as I was concerned, insisting on recording new music and legit live shows all the way into his eighties. At least it was StageHolo and not StageHoloLive, in which case there'd be a cover charge. I was willing to stand in the same room as the technology that was trying to make me obsolete, but I'd be damned if I paid them for

the privilege. Of course, it wouldn't be Bruce on StageHoloLive either; he'd been gone a couple years now, and this Bruce looked to be only in his sixties, anyway. A little flat, too, which suggested this was a retrofitted older show, not one recorded using StageHolo's tech.

Silva pressed a cold can into my hand, and I took a sip, not even bothering to look at what I was drinking. Knowing him, knowing us, he'd snagged whatever had been cheapest. Pisswater, but cold pisswater. Perfect for washing down the greasy takeout food aftertaste.

I slipped into a booth, hoping the guys had followed me. Jacky did, carrying an identical can to mine in one hand, and something the color of windshield wiper fluid in a plastic shot glass in the other.

"You want one?" he asked me, nudging the windshield wiper fluid. "Bartender said it was the house special."

I pushed it back in his direction. "I don't drink anything blue. It never ends well."

"Suit yourself." He tossed it back, then grinned.

"Your teeth are blue now. You look like you ate a Smurf."

"What's a Smurf?"

Sometimes I forgot how young he was. Half my age. A lifetime in this business. "Little blue characters? A village with one chick, one old man, and a bunch of young guys?"

"Like our band?" He shook his head. "Sorry. Bad joke. Anyway, I have no idea what was in that food, but it might have been Smurf, if they're blue and taste like pork butt. How's your dinner sitting?"

I swatted him lightly, backhand. "Fine, as long as I don't drink anything blue."

He downed his beer in one long chug, then got up to get another. He looked at mine and raised his eyebrows.

"No thanks," I said. "I'll stick with one. I get the feeling this is a zero tolerance town."

If twenty-odd years of this had taught me one thing, it was to stay clear of local police. Every car in the parking lot was self-driving, which suggested there was somebody out on the roads ready to come down hard on us. Having spent a lot of time in my youth leaving clubs at closing time and dodging drunk drivers, I approved this effort. One of the few aspects of our brave new world I could fully endorse.

I looked around. Silva sat on a stool at the bar. Jacky stood behind him, a hand on Silva's shoulder, tapping his foot to the Bo Diddley beat of "She's the One." The rest of the bar stools were filled with people who looked too comfortable to be anything but regulars. A couple of them had the cocked-head posture of cheap neural overlays. The others played games on the

slick touchscreen bar, or tapped on the Bracertabs strapped to their arms, the latest tech fad. Nobody talking to anybody.

Down at the other end, two blond women stood facing the Bruce holo, singing along and swaying. He pointed in their general direction, and one giggled and clutched her friend's arm as if he had singled her out personally. Two guys sat on stools near the stage, one playing air drums, the other watching the women. The women only had eyes for Bruce.

I got where they were coming from. I knew people who didn't like his voice or his songs, but I didn't know anybody, especially any musician, who couldn't appreciate his stage presence. Even here, even now, knowing decades separated me from the night this had been recorded, and decades separated the young man who had first written the song from the older man who sang it, even from across a scuzzy too-bright barroom, drinking pisswater beer with strangers and my own smelly band, I believed him when he sang that she was the one. I hated the StageHolo company even more for the fact I was enjoying it.

Somebody slid into the booth next to me. I turned, expecting one of my bandmates, but a stranger had sat down, closer than I cared for.

"Passing through?" he asked, looking at me with intense, bloodshot eyes. He brushed a thick sweep of hair from his forehead, a style I could only assume he had stuck with through

the decades since it had been popular. He had dimples and a smile that had clearly been his greatest asset in his youth. He probably hadn't quite realized drinking had caught up with him, that he was puffy and red-nosed. Or that he slurred a bit, even on those two words.

"Passing through." I gave him a brief "not interested" smile and turned my whole body back toward the stage.

"Kind of unusual for somebody to pass through here, let alone bother to stop. What attracted you?" His use of the word "attracted" was pointed.

If he put an arm around me, I'd have to slug him. I shifted a few inches, trying to put distance between us, and emphasized my next word. "We wanted a drink. We've been driving a while."

His disappointment was evident. "Boyfriend? Husband?"

I nodded at the bar, letting him pick whichever he thought looked more like he might be with me, and whichever label he wanted to apply. It amused me either way, since I couldn't imagine being with either of them. Not at the beginning, and especially not after having spent all this time in the van with them.

Then I wondered why I was playing games at all. I turned to look at him. "We're a band."

"No kidding! I used to have a band." A reassessment of the situation flashed across his face. A new smile, more collegial.

The change in his whole demeanor prompted me to give him a little more attention.

"No kidding?"

"Yeah. Mostly we played here. Before the insurance rates rose and StageHolo convinced Maggie she'd save money with holos of famous bands."

"Did she? Save money?"

He sighed. "Probably. Holos don't drink, and holos don't dent the mics or spill beers into the PA. And people will stay and drink for hours if the right bands are playing. "

"Do you still play for fun? Your band?"

He shrugged. "We did for a while. We even got a spot at the very last State Fair. And after that, every once in a while we'd play a barbecue in somebody's backyard. But it's hard to keep it up when you've got nothing to aim for. Playing here once a week was a decent enough goal, but who would want to hear me sing covers when you can have the real thing?"

He pointed his beer at one of the women by the stage.

"That's my ex-wife, by the way."

"I'm sorry?"

"It's okay." He took a swig of beer. "That's when Polly left me. Said it wasn't cause the band was done, but I think it was related. She said I didn't seem interested in anything at all after that."

He had turned his attention down to his drink, but now he looked at me again. "How about you? I guess there are still places out there to play?"

"A few," I said. "Mostly in the cities. There's a lot of turnover, too. So we can have a great relationship with a place and then we'll call back and they'll be gone without a trace."

"And there's enough money in it to live on?"

There are people who ask that question in an obnoxious, disbelieving way, and I tend to tell them, "We're here, aren't we?" but this guy was nostalgic enough that I answered him honestly. Maybe I could help him see there was no glamor left for people like us.

"I used to get some royalty checks from an old song, which covered insurance and repairs for the van, but they've gotten smaller and smaller since BMI v. StageHolo. We make enough to stay on the road, eat really terribly, have a beer now and again. Not enough to save. Not enough to stop, ever. Not that we want to stop, so it's okay."

"You never come off the road? Do you live somewhere?"

"The van's registered at my parents' place in Maryland, and I crash there when I need a break. But that isn't often."

"And your band?"

"My bassist and I have been playing together for a long time, and he's got places he stays. We replace a drummer

occasionally. This one's been with us for a year, and the two of them are into each other, so if they don't fall out it might last a while."

He nodded. The wolfishness was gone, replaced by something more wistful. He held out his beer. "To music."

"To live music." My can clinked his.

Somebody shouted over by the bar, and we both twisted round to see what had happened. The air-drum player had wandered over — Max Weinberg was on break too — and he and Jacky were squaring off over something. Jacky's blue lips glowed from twenty feet away.

"Nothing good ever comes of blue drinks," I said to my new friend.

He nodded. "You're gonna want to get your friend out of here. That's the owner behind the bar. If your guy breaks anything, she'll have the cops here in two seconds flat."

"Crap. Thanks."

Blue liquid pooled around and on Jacky, a tray of overturned plastic shot glasses behind him. At least they weren't glass, and at least he hadn't damaged the fancy bar top. I dug a twenty from the thin wad in my pocket, hoping it was enough.

"You're fake-drumming to a fake band," Jacky was saying. "And you're not even good at it. If you went to your crash

cymbal that much with the real Bruce, he'd fire you in two seconds."

"Who the hell cares? Did I ask you to critique my drumming?"

"No, but if you did, I'd tell you you're behind on the kick, too. My two year old niece keeps a better beat than you do."

The other guy's face reddened, and I saw him clench a fist. Silva had an arm across Jacky's chest by then, propelling him toward the door. We made eye contact, and he nodded.

I tossed my twenty on a dry spot on the bar, still hoping for a quick getaway.

"We don't take cash," said the owner, holding my bill by the corner like it was a dead rat.

Dammit. I squared my shoulders. "You're legally required to accept US currency."

"Maybe true in the US of A, but this is the US of Starker's, and I only accept Superwally credit. And your blue buddy there owes a lot more than this anyway for those spilled drinks." She had her hand below the bar. I had no clue whether she was going for a phone or a baseball bat or a gun; nothing good could come of any of those options.

I snatched the bill back, mind racing. Silva kept a credit transfer account; that wouldn't be any help, since he was

already out the door. I avoided credit and devices in general, which usually held me in good stead, but I didn't think the label "Non-comm" would win me any friends here. Jacky rarely paid for anything, so I had no clue whether he had been paying cash or credit up until then.

"I've got them, Maggie." My new friend from the booth stepped up beside me, waving his phone.

He turned to me. "Go on. I've got this."

Maggie's hand came out from under the bar. She pulled a phone from behind the cash register to do the credit transfer, which meant whatever she had reached for down below probably wouldn't have been good for my health.

"Keep playing," he called after me.

Jacky was unremorseful. "He started it. Called us disease vectors. I told him to stay right where he was and the whole world would go on turning 'cause it doesn't even know he exists. Besides, if he can't air drum, he should just air guitar like everybody else."

Silva laughed. "You should have pretended to cough. He probably would have pissed himself."

He and Silva sprawled in the back together as I peeled out of the parking lot.

"Not funny. I don't care who started it. No fights. I mean it. Do you think I can afford to bail you out? How are we supposed to play tomorrow if our drummer's in jail? And what if they skip the jail part and shoot you? It's happened before."

"Sorry, Mom," Jacky said.

"Not funny," I repeated. "If you ever call me 'Mom' again I'm leaving you on the side of the road. And I'm not a Chauffeur. Somebody come up here to keep me company."

Silva climbed across the bed and bags and up to the passenger seat. He flipped on the police scanner, then turned it off after a few minutes of silence; nobody had put out any APBs on a van full of bill-ducking freaks. I drove speed limit plus five, same as the occasional Chauffeurs we passed ferrying their passengers home. Shortcutting onto the highway to leave the area entirely would've been my preference, but Daisy would have triggered the ramp sensors in two seconds flat; we hadn't been allowed on an interstate in five years.

After about twenty miles, my fear that we were going to get chased down finally dissipated and my heartbeat returned to acceptable rhythms. We pulled into an office park that didn't look patrolled.

"Your turn for the bed, Luce?" Jacky asked. Trying to make amends, maybe.

"You guys can have it if I can find my sleeping bag. It's actually pretty nice out, and then I don't have to smell whatever that blue crap is on your clothes."

"You have a sleeping bag?"

"Of course I do. I just used it in..." Actually, I couldn't think of when I had used it last. It took a few minutes of rummaging to find it in the storage space under the bed, behind Silva's garage sale box of pulp novels. I spread it on the ground just in front of the van. The temperature was perfect and the sky was full of stars. Hopefully there weren't any coyotes around.

I slept three or four hours before my body started to remind me why I didn't sleep outside more often. I got up to pee and stretch. When I opened the door, I was hit by an even deeper grease smell than usual. It almost drowned out the funk of two guys farting, four days unwashed. Also the chemical-alcohol-blue scent Jacky wore all over his clothes.

Leaning over the driver's seat, I dug in the center console for my silver pen and the bound atlas I used as a road bible. The stars were bright enough to let me see the pages without a flashlight. The atlas was about fifteen years out of date, but my notes kept it useable. The town we had called Nowhere was actually named Rackwood, which sounded more like a tree disease than a town to me. A glittery asterisk went next to Rackwood,

and in the margin "China Grove – Mike Sun – grease AND food." I drew an X over the location of Starker's, which wouldn't get our repeat business.

I crawled inside around dawn, feeling every bone in my body, and reclined the passenger seat. Nobody knocked on the van to tell us to move on, so we slept until the sun started baking us. Jacky reached forward to offer up his last leftovers from the night before. I sniffed the container and handed it back to him. He shrugged and dove in with his fingers, chopsticks having disappeared into the detritus surrounding him. After a little fishing around, I found my dinner and sent that his way as well.

Silva climbed into the driver's seat. I didn't usually relinquish the wheel; I genuinely loved doing all the driving myself. I liked the control, liked to listen to Daisy's steady engine and the thrum of the road. He knew that, and didn't ask except when he really felt the urge, which meant that when he did ask, I moved over. Jacky had never offered once, content to read and listen to music in his back seat cocoon. Another reason he fit in well.

Silva driving meant I got a chance to look around; it wasn't often that we took a road I hadn't been down before. I couldn't even remember how we had wound up choosing this route the previous day. We passed shuttered diners and liquor stores, the ghost town that might have been a main street at one time.

"Where is everybody?" Jacky asked.

I twisted around to see if he was joking. "Have you looked out the window once this whole year? Is this the first time you're noticing?"

"I usually sleep through this part of the country. It's boring."

"There is no everybody," Silva said. "A few farmers, a Superwally that employs everyone else within an hour's drive."

I peered at my atlas. "I've got a distribution center drawn in about forty miles back and ten miles north, on the road we usually take. That probably employs anybody not working for the company store." There wasn't really any reason for me to draw that kind of place onto my maps, but I liked making them more complete. They had layers in some places, stores and factories that had come and gone and come and gone again.

Most backroad towns looked like this, these days. At best a fast food place, a feed store, maybe a run down looking grocery or a health clinic, and not much else. There'd be a Superwally somewhere between towns, as Silva had said, luring everyone even farther from center or anything resembling community. Town after town, we saw the same thing. And of course most people didn't see anything at all, pattering along on the self-driving highways, watching movies instead of looking out the windows, getting from point A to point B without stopping in between.

We weren't exactly doing our part either. It's not like we had contributed to the local economy. We took free dinner, free fuel. We contributed in other ways, but not in this town or the others we'd passed through the night before. Maybe someday someone here would book us and we'd come back, but until then we were passing through. Goodbye, Rackwood, Indiana.

"Next town has the World's Largest Salt Shaker." I could hear the capital letters in Jacky's voice. He liked to download tourist brochures. I approved of that hobby, the way I approved of supporting anything to make a place less generic. Sometimes we even got to stop at some of the sights, when we could afford it and we weren't in a hurry. Neither of which was the case today.

"Another time," Silva said. "We slept later than we should have."

"I think we're missing out."

I twisted around to look at Jacky. He flopped across the bed, waving his phone like a look at the world's largest salt shaker might make us change our minds. "It's a choice between showers and salt shaker. You decide."

He stuffed his phone into his pocket with a sigh. Showers trumped.

About an hour outside Columbus, we stopped at a by-the-hour motel already starred in my atlas, and rented an hour for

the glory of running water. The clerk took my cash without comment.

I let the guys go first, so I wouldn't have to smell them again after I was clean. The shower itself was nothing to write home about. The metal booth kind, no tub, nonexistent water pressure, seven minute shutoff; better than nothing. Afterward, I pulled a white towel from the previous hotel from my backpack to leave in the room, and stuffed one of the near-identical clean ones in my bag. The one I took might have been one I had left the last time through. Nobody ever got shorted a towel, and it saved me a lot of time in Laundromats. I couldn't even remember who had taught me that trick, but I'd been doing it for decades.

We still had to get back in our giant grease trap, of course, now in our cleanish gig clothes. I opened all the windows and turned on the fan full blast, hoping to keep the shower scent for as long as possible. I could vaguely hear Jacky calling out visitor highlights for Columbus from the back, but the noise stole the meat of whatever he was saying. I stuck my arm outside and planed my hand against the wind.

I didn't intend to fall asleep, but I woke to Silva shouting "Whoa! Happy birthday, Daisy!" and hooting the horn. I leaned over to see the numbers clicking over from 99 999.

Jacky threw himself forward to snap a picture of the odometer as it hit all zeroes. "Whoa! What birthday is this?"

I considered. Daisy only had a five-digit odometer, so she got a fresh start every hundred thousand miles. "Eight, I think?"

Silva grinned. "Try again. My count says nine."

"Nine? I thought we passed seven on the way out of Seattle two years ago."

"That was five years ago. Eight in Asheville. I don't remember when."

"Huh. You're probably right. We should throw her a party at a million." I gave her dashboard a hard pat, like the flank of a horse. "Good job, old girl. That's amazing."

"Totally," said Jacky. "And can we play 'Our Lady of the Open Road' tonight? In Daisy's honor? I love that song. I don't know why we don't play it more often." He started playing the opening with his hands on the back of my seat.

"I'm on board," Silva agreed. "Maybe instead of 'Manifest Independence?' That one could use a rest."

"'Manifest Independence' stays," I said. "Try again."

"'Outbreak?'"

"Deal."

Jacky retreated to make the changes to the set list.

Our destination was deep in the heart of the city. Highways would have gotten us there in no time, not that we had that option. We drove along the river, then east past the decaying convention center.

We hadn't played this particular space before, but we'd played others, mostly in this same neighborhood of abandoned warehouses. Most closed up pretty quickly, or moved when they got shut down, so even if we played for the same crowd, we rarely played the same building twice.

This one, The Chain, sounded like it had a chance at longevity. It was a bike co-op by day, venue by night. Cities liked bike co-ops. With the right people running the place, maybe somebody who knew how to write grants and dress in business drag and shake a hand or two, a bike co-op could be part of the city plan. Not that I had any business telling anyone to sell themselves out for a few months of forced legitimacy.

Our timing was perfect. The afternoon bike repair class had just finished, so the little stage area was more or less clear. Better yet, they'd ordered pizza. Jacky had braved the Chinese leftovers, but Silva and I hadn't eaten yet. It took every ounce of my self-restraint to help haul in the instruments before partaking. I sent a silent prayer up to the pizza gods there'd still be some left for us once all our gear was inside.

I made three trips – guitars and gear, amp, swag to sell– then loaded up a paper plate with three pizza slices. I was entirely capable of eating all three, but I'd share with the guys if they didn't get their gear in before the food was gone. Not ideal dinner before singing, anyway; maybe the grease would trump the dairy as a throat coating. I sat on my amp and ate the first piece, watching Jacky and Silva bring in the drums, feeling only a little guilty. I had done my share, even if I hadn't helped anyone else.

The bike class stuck around. We chatted with a few. Emma, Rudy, Dijuan, Carter, Marin – there were more but I lost track of names after that. I gave those five the most attention in any case, since Rudy had been the one to book us, and Emma ran the programming for the bike co-op. We were there because of them. We talked politics and music and bikes. I was grateful not to have to explain myself again. These were our people. They treated us like we were coming home, not passing through.

More audience gradually trickled in, a good crowd for a Wednesday night. A mix of young and old, in varying degrees of punk trappings, according to their generation and inclination. Here and there, some more straight-laced, though they were as punk as anyone, in the truest spirit of the word, for having shown up at this space at all. Punk as a genre didn't look or sound like it used to, in any case; it had scattered to the

wind, leaving a loose grouping of bands whose main commonality was a desire to create live music for live audiences.

The first band began to play, an all woman four piece called Moby K. Dick. They were young enough to be my kids, which meant young enough they had never known any scene but this one. The bassist played from a sporty little wheelchair, her back to the audience, like she was having a one-on-one conversation with the drummer's high hat. At first, I thought she was shy, but I gradually realized she was just really into the music. The drummer doubled as singer, hiding behind a curtain of dreadlocks that lifted and dropped back onto her face with every beat. They played something that sounded like sea chanties done double time and double volume, but the lyrics were all about whales and dolphins taking revenge on people. It was pretty fantastic.

I gave all the bands we played with a chance to win me over. They were the only live music we ever got to hear, being on the road full time. The few friends we still had doing the same circuit were playing the same nights as us in other towns, rotating through; the others were doing StageHolo and we didn't talk much anymore. It used to be we'd sometimes even wind up in the same cities on the same night, so we'd miss each other and split the audience. That didn't happen much anymore with so few places to play.

Moby K. Dick earned my full attention, but the second band lost me pretty quickly. They all played adapted console-game instruments except the drummer. No strings, all buttons, all programmed to trigger samples. I'd seen bands like that before that were decent; this one was not my thing.

The women from the first band were hanging out by the drink cooler, so I made my way back there. I thrust my hand into the ice and came out with a water bottle. Most venues like this one were alcohol-free and all ages. There was probably a secret beer cooler hidden somewhere, but I wasn't in the mood to find it.

"I liked your stuff," I said to the bassist. Up close, she looked slightly older than she had on stage. Mid-twenties, probably. "My name's Luce."

She grinned. "I know! I mean, I'm Truly. And yes, that's really my name. Nice to meet you. And really? You liked it? That's so cool! We begged to be on this bill with you. I've been listening to Cassis Fire my whole life. I've got 'Manifest Independence' written on my wall at home. It's my mantra."

I winced but held steady under the barrage and the age implication. She continued. "My parents have all your music. They like the stuff with Marcia Januarie on drums best, when you had the second guitarist, but I think your current lineup is more streamlined."

"Thanks." I waited for her to point her parents out in the room, and for them to be younger than me. When she thankfully didn't volunteer that information, I asked, "Do you guys have anything recorded?"

"We've been recording our shows, but mostly we just want to play. You could take us on the road with you, if you wanted. Opening act."

She said the last bit jokingly, but I was pretty sure the request was real, so I treated it that way." We used to be able to, but not these days. It's hard enough to keep ourselves fed and moving to the next gig. I'm happy to give you advice, though. Have you seen our van?"

Her eyes widened. She was kind of adorable in her enthusiasm. Part of me considered making a pass at her, but we only had a few minutes before I had to be onstage, and I didn't want to confuse things. Sometimes I hated being the responsible one.

"It's right outside. They'll find me when it's our turn to play. Come on."

The crowd parted for her wheelchair as we made our way through. I held the door for her and she navigated the tiny rise in the doorframe with practiced ease.

"We call her Daisy," I said, introducing Truly to the van. I searched my pockets for the keys and realized Silva had them.

So much for that idea. "She's a fifteen seater, but we took out the middle seats for a bed and the back to make a cage for the drums and stuff so they don't kill us if we stop short."

"What's the mpg?" she asked. I saw her gears spinning as she tried to figure out logistics. I liked her focus. She was starting to remind me of me, though, which was the turnoff I needed.

I beckoned her to the hood, which popped by latch, no keys necessary. "That's the best part of all."

She locked her chair and pushed herself up to lean against Daisy's frame. At my look, she explained, "I don't need it all the time, but playing usually makes me pretty tired. And I don't like getting pushed around in crowds."

"Oh, that's cool," I said. "And if you buy a van of your own, that's one less conversion you'll have to make, if you can climb in without a lift. I had been trying to figure out if you'd have room for four people and gear and a chair lift."

"Nah, you can go back to the part where we wonder how I'm going to afford a van, straight up. Right now we just borrow my sister's family Chauffeur. It's just barely big enough for all our gear, but the mileage is crap and there's no room for clothes or swag or anything."

"Well, if you can find a way to pay for an old van like Daisy, the beauty of running on fry oil is the money you'll save

on fuel. As long as you like takeout food, you get used to the smell..."

Silva stuck his head out the door, then came over to us. I made introductions. He unlocked the van; I saw Truly wince when the smell hit her. He reached under the bed, back toward the wheel well, and emerged with a bottle of whiskey in hand. Took a long swig, and passed it to me. I had a smaller sip, just enough to feel the burn in my throat, the lazy singer's warm-up.

Truly followed my lead. "Promise you'll give me pointers if I manage to get a van?"

I promised. The kid wasn't just like me; she practically was me, with the misfortune to have been born twenty years too late to possibly make it work.

I made Silva tap phones with her. "I would do it myself, but..."

"I know," she said. "I'd be Non-comm if I could, but my parents won't let me. Emergencies and all that."

Did we play extra well, or did it just feel like it? Moby K. Dick had helped; it was always nice to be reminded that what you did mattered. I had a mental buzz even with only a sip of whiskey, the combination of music and possibilities and an enthusiastic crowd eager to take whatever we gave them.

On a good night like this, when we locked in with each other, it was like I was a time traveler for an hour. Every

night we'd ever played a song overlapped with every night we'd ever play it again, even though I was fully in the moment. My fingers made shapes, ran steel strings over magnets, ran signals through wires to the amplifier behind me, which blasted those shapes back over me in waves. Glorious, cathartic, bone-deep noise.

On stage, I forgot how long I'd been doing this. I could still be the kid playing in her parents' basement, or the young woman with the hit single and the major label, the one called the next Joan Jett, the second coming of riot grrl, not that I wanted to be the young version of me anymore. I had to work to remember that if I slid on my knees I might not get up again. I was a better guitar player now, a better singer, a better songwriter. I had years of righteous rage to channel. When I talked, I sometimes felt like a pissed off grump, stuck in the past. Given time to express it all in music, I came across better.

Moby K. Dick pushed through to the front when we played "Manifest Independence," singing along at the top of their lungs. They must have been babies when I released that song, but it might as well have been written for them. It was as true for them as it had been for me.

That was what the young punks and the old punks all responded to; they knew I believed what I was singing. We all

shared the same indignation that we were losing everything that made us distinct, that nothing special happened anymore, that the new world replacing the old one wasn't nearly as good, that everyone was hungry and everything was broken and that we'd fix it if we could find the right tools. My job was to give it all a voice. Add to that the sweet old-school crunch of my Les Paul played through Marshall tubes, Silva's sinuous bass lines, Jacky's tricky beats, and we could be the best live band you ever heard. Made sweeter by the fact that you had to be there to get the full effect.

We didn't have rehearsed moves or light shows or spotlights to hit like the StageHolos, but we knew how to play it up for the crowd. To make it seem like we were playing for one person, and playing for all of them, and playing just for them, because this night was different and would only ever happen once. People danced and pogoed and leaned into the music. A few of the dancers had ultraviolet tattoos, which always looked pretty awesome from my vantage point, a secret performance for the performers. I nudged Silva to look at one of them, a glowing phoenix spread wingtip to wingtip across a dancer's bare shoulders and arms.

A couple of tiny screens also lit the audience: people recording us with Bracertabs, arms held aloft. I was fine with that. Everyone at the show knew how it felt to be there; they'd

come back, as long as there were places for us to play. The only market for a non-Holo recording was other people like this audience, and it would only inspire them to come out again the next time.

Toward the end of the set, I dedicated "Our Lady of the Open Road" to Daisy. At the tail of the last chorus, Jacky rolled through his toms in a way he never had before, cracking the song open wide, making it clear he wasn't coming in for a landing where he was supposed to. Silva and I exchanged glances, a wordless "this is going to be interesting," then followed Jacky's lead. The only way to do that was to make it bigger than usual, keep it going, make it a monster. I punched my gain pedal and turned to my amp to ride the feedback. Our lady of the open road, get me through another night.

Through some miracle of communication we managed to end the song together, clean enough that it sounded planned. I'd kill Jacky later, but at that moment I loved him. The crowd screamed.

I wiped the sweat out of my eyes with my shoulder. "We've got one more for you. Thanks so much for being here tonight." I hoped "Better to Laugh" wouldn't sound like an afterthought.

That was when the power went out.

"Police!" somebody shouted. The crowd began to push toward the door.

"Not the police!" someone else yelled. "Just a blackout."

"Just a blackout!" I repeated into the mic as if it were still on, then louder into the front row, hoping they were still listening to me. "Pass it on."

The message rippled through the audience. A tense moment passed with everyone listening for sirens, ready to scatter. Then they began to debate whether the blackout was the city or the building, whether the power bill had been paid, whether it was a plot to shut the place down.

Emma pushed her way through the crowd to talk to us. "They shut this neighborhood's power down whenever the circuits overload uptown. We're trying to get somebody to bring it up in city council. I'm so sorry."

I leaned in to give her a sweaty hug. "Don't worry about it. It happens."

We waited, hoping for the rock gods to smile upon us. The room started to heat up, and somebody propped the outside doors, which cooled things down slightly. After twenty minutes, we put our instruments down. At least we had made it through most of our set. I had no doubt the collective would pay us, and no concern people would say they hadn't gotten their money's worth. I dug the hotel towel out of my backpack to wipe my dripping face.

A few people made their way over to talk to us and buy t-shirts and patches and even LPs and download codes, even though

you could find most of our songs free online. That was part of the beauty of these kids. They were all broke as hell, but they still wanted to support us, even if it was just a patch or a pin or a password most of them were capable of hacking in two seconds flat. And they all believed in cash, bless them. We used the light of their phone screens to make change.

The girls from Moby K. Dick all bought t-shirts. Truly bought an LP as well – it figured she was into vinyl – and I signed it "To my favorite new band, good luck." She wheeled out with her band, no parents in sight. I wondered if they'd decided they were too old for live music, then chided myself. I couldn't have it both ways, mad that they were probably my age and mad that they weren't there. Besides, they might have just left separately from their kid. I knew I must be tired if I was getting hung up on something like that.

"You look like you need some water," somebody said to me in the darkness. A bottle pressed into my hand, damp with condensation.

"Thanks," I said. "Though I don't know how you can say I look like anything with the lights out."

At that moment, the overheads hummed on again. I had left my guitar leaning face down on my amp, and it started to build up a squeal of feedback. I tossed the water back, wiped my hands

on my pants, and slammed the standby switch. The squeal trailed away.

"Sorry, you were saying?" I asked, returning to the stranger, who still stood with bottle in hand. I took it from her again. I thought maybe I'd know her in the light, but she didn't look familiar. Mid-thirties, maybe, tall and tan, with a blandly friendly face, toned arms, Bracertab strapped to one forearm. She wore a Magnificent Beefeaters T-shirt with the sleeves cut off. We used to play shows with them, before they got big.

"I was saying you looked like you were thirsty, by which I mean you looked like that before the lights went out, so I guessed you probably still looked like that after."

"Oh."

"Anyway, I wanted to say good show. One of your best I've seen."

"Have you seen a lot?" It was a bit of a rude question, with an implication I didn't recognize her. Bad for business. Everybody should believe they were an integral part of the experience. But really, I didn't think I'd seen her before, and it wasn't the worst question, unless the answer was she'd been following us for the last six months.

"I've been following you for the last six months," she said. "But mostly live audience uploads. I was at your last Columbus show, though, and up in Rochester."

Rochester had been a huge warehouse. I didn't feel as bad.

"Thanks for coming. And, uh, for the water." I tried to redeem myself.

"My pleasure," she said. "I really like your sound. Nikki Kellerman."

She held her arm out in the universal 'tap to exchange virtual business cards' gesture.

"Sorry, I'm Non-comm," I said.

She looked surprised, but I couldn't tell if it was surprise that I was Non-comm, or that she didn't know the term. The latter didn't seem likely. I'd have said a third of the audience at our shows these days were people who had given up their devices and all the corporate tracking that went along with them.

She unstrapped the tablet, peeled a thin wallet off her damp arm, and drew a paper business card from inside it.

I read it out loud. "Nikki Kellerman, A & R, StageHolo Productions." I handed it back to her.

"Hear me out," she said.

"Okay, Artists & Repertoire. You can talk at me while I pack up."

I opened the swag tub and started piling the t-shirts back into it. Usually we took the time to separate them by size so they'd be right the next time, but now I tossed them in, hoping to get away as soon as possible.

"As you probably know, we've been doing very well with getting StageHolo into venues across the country. Bringing live music into places that previously didn't have it."

"There are about seven things wrong with that statement," I said without looking up.

She continued as if I hadn't spoken. "Our biggest selling acts are arena rock, pop, rap, and Spanish pop. We now reach nine in ten bars and clubs. One in four with StageHolo AtHome."

"You can stop the presentation there. Don't you dare talk to me about StageHolo AtHome." My voice rose. Silva stood in the corner chatting with some bike kids, but I saw him throw a worried look my way. "'All the excitement of live entertainment without leaving your living room.' 'Stay AtHome with John Legend tonight.'"

I clapped the lid onto the swag box and carried it to the door. When I went to pack up my stage gear, she followed.

"I think you're not understanding the potential, Luce. We're looking to diversify, to reach new audiences: punk, folk, metal, musical theater." She listed a few more genres they hadn't completely destroyed yet.

I would punch her soon. I was not a violent person, but I knew for a fact I would punch her soon. "You're standing in front of me, asking me to help ruin my livelihood."

"No! Not ruin it. I'm inviting you to a better life. You'd still play shows. You'd still have audiences."

"Audiences of extras paid to be there? Audiences in your studios?" I asked through clenched teeth.

"Yes and no. We can set up at your shows, but that's harder. Not a problem in an arena setting, but I think you'd find the 3D array distracting in a place like this. We'd book you some theaters, arenas. Fill in the crowds if we needed to. You could still do this in between if you wanted, but..." she shrugged to indicate she couldn't see why I would want.

"Hey, Luce. A little help over here?" I looked down to see my hands throttling my mic instead of putting it back in its box. Looked up at Silva struggling to get his bass amp on the dolly, like he didn't do it on his own every night of the week. Clearly an offer of rescue.

"Gotta go," I said to the devil's A & R person. "Have your people call my people."

Turning the bass rig into a two-person job took all of our acting skills. We walked to the door in exaggerated slow motion. Lifting it into the van genuinely did take two, but usually my back and knee ruled me out. I gritted my teeth and hoisted.

"What was that about?" Silva asked, shutting Daisy's back hatch and leaning against it. "You looked like you were going to tear that woman's throat out with your teeth."

"StageHolo! Can you believe the nerve? Coming here, trying to lure us to the dark side?"

"The nerve," he echoed, shaking his head, but giving me a funny look. He swiped an arm across his sweaty forehead, then pushed off from the van.

I followed him back inside. Nikki Kellerman was still there.

"Luce, I think you're not seeing everything I have to offer."

"Haven't you left yet? That was a pretty broad hint."

"Look around." She gestured at the near-empty room.

I stared straight at her. I wasn't dignifying her with any response.

"Luce, I know you had a good crowd tonight, but are there people who aren't showing up anymore? Look where you are. Public transit doesn't run into this neighborhood anymore. You're playing for people who squat in warehouses within a few blocks, and then people who can afford bikes or Chauffeurs."

"Most people can scrounge a bicycle," I said. "I've never heard a complaint about that."

"You're playing for the people who can bike, then. That bassist from the first band, could she have gotten here without a car?"

For the first time, I felt like she was saying something worth hearing. I sat down on my amp.

"You're playing for this little subset of city punks for whom this is a calling. And after that you're playing for the handful of people who can afford a night out and still think of themselves as revolutionary. And that's fine. That's a noble thing. But what about everybody else? Parents who can't afford a sitter? Teens who are too young to make it here on their own, or who don't have a way into the city? There are plenty of people who love music and deserve to hear your message. They just aren't fortunate enough to live where you're playing. Wouldn't you like to reach them too?"

Dammit, dammit, dammit, she had a decent point. I thought about the guy who had paid for our drinks the night before, and the church van guy from outside the Chinese restaurant, and Truly if she didn't have a sister with a car.

She touched her own back. "I've seen you after a few shows now, too. You're amazing when you play, but when you step off, I can see what it takes. You're tired. What happens if you get sick, or if your back goes out completely?"

"I've always gotten by," I said, but not with the same vehemence as a minute before.

"I'm just saying you don't have to get by. You can still do these shows, but you won't have to do as many. Let us help you out. I can get you a massage therapist or a chiropractor or a self-driving van."

I started to protest, but she held up her hands in a placating gesture. "Sorry – I know you've said you love your van. No offense meant. I'm not chasing you because my boss wants me to. I'm chasing you because I've seen you play. You make great music. You reach people. That's what we want."

She put her card on the amp next to me, and walked out the front of the club. I watched her go.

"Hey Luce," Jacky called to me. I headed his way, slowly. My back had renewed its protest.

"What's up?" I asked.

He gestured at the bike kids surrounding him, Emma and Rudy and some more whose names I had forgotten. Marina? Marin. I smiled. I should have spent more time with them, since they were the ones who had brought us in.

"Our generous hosts have offered us a place to stay nearby. I said I thought it was a good idea, but you're the boss."

They all looked at me, waiting. I hadn't seen the money from the night yet. It would probably be pretty good, since this

kind of place didn't take a cut for themselves. They were in it for the music. And for the chance to spend some time with us, which I was in a position to provide.

"That sounds great," I said. "Anything is better than another night in the van." We might be able to afford a hotel, or save the hotel splurge for the next night, in – I mentally checked the roadmap – Pittsburgh.

With the bike kids' help, we made quick work of the remaining gear. Waited a little longer while Rudy counted money and handed it over to me with no small amount of pride.

"Thank you," I said, and meant it. It had been a really good show, and the money was actually better than expected. "We'll come back here anytime."

Just to prove it, I pulled my date book from my backpack. He called Emma over, and together we penned in a return engagement in three months. I was glad to work with people so competent; there was a good chance they'd still be there in three months.

We ended up at a diner, van parked in front, bikes chained to the fence behind it, an unruly herd.

I was so tired the menu didn't look like English; then I realized I was looking at the Spanish side.

"Is there a fridge at the place we're staying?" Silva asked.

Smart guy. Emma nodded. Silva and Jacky and I immediately ordered variations on an omelet theme, without looking further at either side of the menu. The beauty of omelets: you ate all the toast and potatoes, wrapped the rest, and the eggs would still taste fine the next day. Two meals in one, maybe three, and we hadn't had to hit a dumpster in two full days.

Our hosts were a riot. I barely kept my eyes open – at least twice I realized they weren't – but Emma talked about Columbus politics and bikes and greenspaces with a combination of humor and enthusiasm that made me glad for the millionth time for the kind of places we played, even if I didn't quite keep up my end of the conversation. Nikki Kellerman could flush herself down the toilet. I wouldn't trade these kids for anything.

Until we saw the place on offer. After the lovely meal, after following their bikes at bike speed through unknown and unknowable dark neighborhoods, Silva pulled the van up. The last portion had involved turning off the road along two long ruts in grass grown over a paved drive. I had tried to follow in my atlas on the city inset, but gave up when the streets didn't match.

"Dude," I said, opening my eyes. "What is that?"

We all stared upward. At first glance it looked like an enormous brick plantation house, with peeling white pillars

supporting the upper floors. At second, maybe some kind of factory.

"Old barracks," said Jacky, king of local tourist sites. "Those kids got themselves an abandoned fort."

"I wonder if it came with contents included." Silva mimed loading a rifle. "Bike or die."

I laughed.

Jacky leaned into the front seat. "If you tell me I have to haul in my entire kit, I swear to god I'm quitting this band. I'll join the bike militia. Swear to god."

I peered out the windows, but had no sense of location. "Silva?"

"I can sleep in the van if you think I should."

It was a generous offer, given that actual beds were in the cards.

"You don't have to do that," I decided. "We'll take our chances."

I stopped at the back gate for my guitar, in the hopes of having a few minutes to play in the morning. Silva did the same. We shouldered instruments and backpacks, and Jacky took the three Styrofoam boxes with our omelets. The bike kids waited in a cluster by an enormous door. We staggered their way.

"So who has the keys?" Silva asked.

Emma grinned. "Walk this way."

The big door was only for dramatic effect. We went in through a small, unlocked door on the side. It looked haphazardly placed, a late addition to the architecture. A generator hummed just outside the door, powering a refrigerator, where we left our leftovers. I hoped it also powered overhead lights, but the bike kids all drew out halogen flashlights as soon as we had stored the food.

The shadows made everything look ominous and decrepit; I wasn't sure it wouldn't look the same in daylight. Up a crumbling staircase, then a second, to a smaller third floor. Walls on one side, railing on the other, looking down over a central core, all black. Our footsteps echoed through the emptiness. In my tired state, I imagined being told to bed down in the hallway, sleeping with my head pressed to the floor. If they didn't stop soon, I might.

We didn't have to go further. Emma swung open an unmarked door and handed me her flashlight. I panned it over the room. A breeze wafted through broken glass. An open futon took up most of the space, a threadbare couch sagging beneath the window. How those things had made it up to this room without the stairs falling away entirely was a mystery, but I had never been so happy to see furniture in my entire life.

I dropped my shoulder and lowered my guitar to the floor. The bike kids stared at us and we stared back. Oh god, I thought. If they want to hang out more, I'm going to cry.

"This is fantastic," said Silva, the diplomat. "Thank you so much. This is so much better than sleeping in the van."

"Sweet. Hasta mañana!" said Rudy, his spiky head bobbing. They backed out the door, closing it behind them, and creaked off down the hallway.

I sank into the couch. "I'm not moving again," I said.

"Did they say whether they're renting or squatting? Is anybody else getting a jail vibe?" Jacky asked, flopping back onto the futon.

Silva opened the door. "We're not locked in." He looked out into the hallway and then turned back to us. "But, uh, they're gone without a trace. Did either of you catch where the bathroom was?"

I shook my head, or I think I did. They were on their own.

The night wasn't a pleasant one. I woke once to the sound of Silva pissing in a bottle, once to a sound like animals scratching at the door, once to realize there was a spring sticking through the couch and into my thigh. The fourth time, near eight in the morning, I found myself staring at the ceiling at a crack that looked like a rabbit. I turned my head and

noticed a cat pan under the futon. Maybe it explained the scratching I had heard earlier.

I rolled over and stood up one vertebra at a time. Other than the spring, it hadn't been a bad couch. My back felt better than the night before. I grabbed my guitar and slipped out the door.

I tried to keep my steps from echoing. With the first daylight streaming in through the jagged windows, I saw exactly how dilapidated the place was, like it had been left to go feral. I crept down to the first floor, past a mural that looked like a battle plan for world domination, all circles and arrows, and another of two bikes in carnal embrace. Three locked doors, then I spotted the fridge and the door out. Beyond this huge building there were several others of similar size, spread across a green campus. Were they all filled with bike kids? It was a pleasant thought. I'd never seen any place like this. I sat down on the ground, my back against the building, in the morning sunshine.

It was nice to be alone with my guitar. The problem with touring constantly was we were always driving, always with people, always playing the same songs we already knew. And when we did have down time, we'd spend it tracking down new gigs, or following up to make sure the next places still existed. The

important things like writing new songs fell to last on the list.

This guitar and I, we were old friends. The varnish above her pick guard had worn away where I hit it on the downstroke. Tiny grooves marked where my fingers had indented the frets. She fit my hands perfectly. We never talked anymore.

She was an old Les Paul knockoff, silver cloudburst except where the bare wood showed through. Heavy as anything, the reason why my back hurt so constantly. The hunch of my shoulder as I bent over her was permanent. And of course with no amp she didn't make any sound beyond string jangle. Still, she felt good.

I didn't need to play the songs we played every night, but my fingers have always insisted on playing through the familiar before they can find new patterns. I played some old stuff, songs I loved when I was first teaching myself to play, Frightwig and the Kathleen Battle School and disappear fear, just to play something I could really feel. Then a couple of bars of "She's the One," then what I remembered of a Moby K. Dick whale song. I liked those kids.

When I finally hit my brain's unlock code, it latched onto a twisty little minor descent. The same rhythm as the whale song, but a different progression, a different riff. A tiny theft, the kind all musicians make. There was only so much

original to do within twelve notes. Hell, most classic punk was built on a couple of chords. What did Lou Reed say? One chord is fine, two chords is pushing it, three chords you're into jazz?

I knew what I was singing about before I even sang it. That StageHolo offer, and the idea of playing for a paid audience night after night, the good and the bad parts. The funny thing about bargains with the devil was you so rarely heard about people turning him down; maybe sometimes it was worth your soul. I scrambled in my gig bag pocket for a pen and paper. When I came up with only a sharpie, I wrote the lyrics on my arm. The chords would keep. I'd remember them. Would probably remember the lyrics too, but I wasn't chancing it.

Silva stepped out a little while later, wearing only a ratty towel around his waist. "There's a bucket shower out the back!"

"Show me in a sec, but first, check it out." I played him what I had.

His eyes widened. "Be right back."

He returned a moment later wearing jeans, bass in hand. We both had to play hard, and I had to whisper-sing to hear the unplugged electric instruments, but we had something we both liked before long.

"Tonight?" he asked me.

"Maybe... depends on how early we get there, I guess. And whether there's an actual soundcheck. Do you remember?"

He shook his head. "Four band lineup, at a warehouse. That's all I remember. But maybe if we leave pretty soon, we can set up early? It's only about three hours, I think."

He showed me where the shower was, and I took advantage of the opportunity. The bike kids appeared with a bag of lumpy apples, and we ate the apples with our omelets, sitting on the floor. Best breakfast in ages. They explained the barracks – the story involved an arts grant and an old school and abandoned buildings and a cat sanctuary and I got lost somewhere along the way, working on my new song in my head.

After breakfast, we made our excuse that we had to get on the road. They walked us back the way we came, around the front.

My smile lasted as long as it took us to round the corner. As long as it took to see Daisy was gone.

"Did you move her, Jacky?" Silva asked.

"You've got the keys, man."

Silva patted his pockets, and came up with the key. We walked closer. Glass.

I stared at the spot, trying to will Daisy back into place. Blink and she'd be back. How had we let this happen? I went through the night in my head. Had I heard glass breaking, or the engine turning over? I didn't think so. How many times had we

left her outside while we played or ate or showered or slept? I lay down on the path, away from the glass, and looked up at the morning sky.

The bike kids looked distraught, all talking at once. "This kind of thing never happens." "We were only trying to help."

"It wasn't your fault," I said, after a minute. Then louder, when they didn't stop. "It wasn't your fault." They closed their mouths and looked at me.

I sat up and continued, leaning back on my hands, trying to be the calm one, the adult. "The bad news is we're going to need to call the police. The good news is, you're not squatting, so we don't have to work too hard to explain what we were doing here. The bad news is whoever stole the van can go really far on that tank. The good news is they're probably local and aren't trying to drive to Florida. Probably just kids who've never gotten to drive something that didn't drive itself. They'll abandon her nearby when she runs out of gas." I was trying to make myself feel better as much as them.

"And maybe they hate Chinese food," Jacky said. "Maybe the smell'll make them so hungry they have to stop for Chinese food. We should try all the local Chinese food places first."

Silva had stepped away from the group, already on the phone with the police. I heard snippets, even though his back was turned. License plate. Yes, a van. Yes, out of state plates. No,

he didn't own it, but the owner was with him. Yes, we'd wait. Where else did we have to go? Well, Pittsburgh, but it didn't look like we'd be getting there any time soon.

He hung up and dug his hands into his pockets. He didn't turn around or come back to the group. I should probably have gone over to him, but he didn't look like he wanted to talk.

The kids scattered before the police arrived, all but Emma disappearing into the building. Jacky walked off somewhere as well. It occurred to me I didn't really know much of his history for all the time we'd been riding together.

The young policewoman who arrived to take our report was standoffish at first, like we were the criminals. Emma explained the situation. No officer, not squatting, here are the permits. I kept the van registration and insurance in a folder in my backpack, which helped on that end too, so that she came over to our side a little. Just a little.

"Insurance?"

"Of course." I rustled in the same folder, presented the card to her. She looked surprised, and I realized she had expected something electronic. "But only liability and human driver."

Surprised her again. "So the van isn't self-driving?"

"No, ma'am. I've had her — it — for twenty-three years."

"But you didn't convert when the government rebates were offered?"

"No, ma'am. I love driving."

She gave me a funny look. "

"Was anything in the van?" she asked.

I sighed and started the list, moving from back to front.

"One drum kit, kind of a hodgepodge of different makes, Ampeg bass rig, Marshall guitar amp, suitcase full of gig clothes. A sleeping bag. A box of novels, maybe fifty of them. Um, all the merchandise: records and t-shirts and stuff to sell..." I kept going through all the detritus in my head, discarding the small things: collapsible chopsticks, restaurant menus, pillows, jackets. Those were all replaceable. My thoughts snagged on one thing.

"A road atlas. Rand McNally."

The officer raised her eyebrows. "A what?"

"A road atlas. A book of maps."

"You want me to list that?"

"Well, it's in there. And it's important, to me anyway. It's annotated. All the places we've played, all the places we like to stop and we don't." I tried to hide the hitch in my voice. Don't cry, I told myself. Cry over the van, if you need to. Not over the atlas. You'll make another. It might take years, but it could be done.

It wasn't just the atlas, obviously. Everything we had hadn't been much, and it was suddenly much less. I was down to the cash in my pocket, the date book, the single change of clothes in my backpack, my guitar. How could we possibly rebuild from there? How do you finish a tour without a van? Or amps, or drums?

The officer held out her phone to tap a copy of her report over to me.

"Non-comm," I said. "I'm so sorry."

Silva stepped in for the first time. He hadn't even opened his mouth to help me list stuff, but now he held up his phone. "Send it to me, officer."

She did, with a promise to follow up as soon as she had any leads. Got in her squad car. She had to actually use the wheel and drive herself back down the rutted path; I guessed places like this were why police cars had a manual option. She had probably written us off already, either way.

I turned to Silva, but he had walked off. I followed him down the path toward an old warehouse.

"Stop!" I said, when it was clear he wasn't going to. He turned toward me. I expected him to be as sad as me, but he looked angrier than I had ever seen him, fists clenched and jaw tight.

"Whoa," I said. "Calm down. It'll be okay. We'll figure something out."

"How? How, Luce?"

"They'll find Daisy. Or we'll figure something out."

"Daisy's just the start of it. It's amps and records and t-shirts and everything we own. I don't even have another pair of underwear. Do you?"

I shook my head. "We can buy..."

"We can buy underwear at the Superwally. But not all that other stuff. We can't afford it. This is it. We're done. Unless."

"Unless?"

He unclenched his left fist and held out a scrap of paper. I took it from him and flattened it. Nikki Kellerman's business card, which had been on my amp when I last saw it.

"No," I said.

"Hear me out. We have nothing left. Nothing. You know she'd hook us up if we called now and said we'd sign. We'd get it all back. New amps, new merch, new stage clothes. And we wouldn't need a new van if we were doing holo shows. We could take a break for a while."

"Are you serious? You'd stay in one place and do holo shows?" I waited for an answer. He stomped at a piece of glass in the dirt, grinding it with his boot heel. "We've been playing

together for twenty years and I wouldn't have guessed you'd ever say yes to that."

"Come off it, Luce. You know I don't object the way you do. You know that, or you'd have run it past me before turning her down. I know we're not a democracy, but you used to give me at least the illusion I had a choice."

I bit my lip. "You're right. I didn't run it past you. And actually, I didn't turn her down in the end. I didn't say yes, but she said some stuff that confused me."

That stopped him short. Neither of us said anything for a minute. I looked around. What a weird place to be having this fight; I always figured it would come, but in the van. I waited for a response, and when none came, I prodded. "So you're saying that's what you want?"

"No! Maybe. I don't know. It doesn't always seem like the worst idea. But now I don't think we have another option. I think I could have kept going the way we were for a while longer, but rebuilding from scratch?" He shook his head, then turned and walked away again. I didn't follow this time.

Back at the building where we had stayed, the bike kids had reappeared, murmuring amongst themselves. Jacky leaned against the front stoop, a few feet from them. I sat down in the grass opposite my drummer.

"What do you think of StageHolo? I mean really?"

He spit on the ground.

"Me too," I agreed. "But given the choice between starting over with nothing, and letting them rebuild us, what would you do? If there weren't any other options."

He ran a hand over his braids. "If there weren't any other options?"

I nodded.

"There are always other options, Luce. I didn't sign up with you to do fake shows in some fake warehouse for fake audiences. I wouldn't stay. And you wouldn't last."

I pulled a handful of grass and tossed it at him.

He repeated himself. "Really. I don't know what you'd do. You wouldn't be you anymore. You'd probably still come across to some people, but you'd have the wrong kind of anger. Anger for yourself, instead of for everybody. You'd be some hologram version of yourself. No substance."

I stared at him.

"People always underestimate the drummer, but I get to sit behind you and watch you every night. Trust me." He laughed, then looked over my shoulder. "I watch you, too, Silva. It goes for you, too."

I didn't know how long Silva had been behind me, but he sat down between us now, grunting as he lowered himself to the

ground. He leaned against Jacky and put his grimy glass-dust boots in my lap.

I shoved them off. "That was an old man grunt."

"I'm getting there, old lady, but you'll get there first. Do you have a plan?"

I looked over where the bike kids had congregated. "Hey, guys! Do any of you have a car? Or, you know, know anybody who has a car?"

The bike kids looked horrified, then one – Dijuan? – nodded. "My sister has a Chauffeur."

"Family sized?"

Dijuan's face fell.

Back to the drawing board. Leaning back on my elbows, I thought about all the other bands we could maybe call on, if I knew anybody who had come off the road, who might have a van to sell if Daisy didn't reappear. Maybe, but nobody close enough to loan one tonight. Except...

"You're not saying you're out, right?" I asked Silva.

"You're not saying StageHolo or nothing? Cause I really can't do it. Maybe someday, on our terms, but I can't do it yet."

He closed his eyes. "I know you can't. But I don't know what else to do."

"I do. At least for tonight."

I told him who to call.

Truly arrived with her sister's family-sized Chauffeur an hour later. We had to meet her up on the road.

"It'll be a tight squeeze, but we'll get there," she said. The third row and all the foot space was packed tight with the Moby K. Dick amps and drums and cables.

"Thank you so much," I said, climbing into what would be the driver's seat if it had a wheel or pedals. It felt strange, but oddly freeing as the car navigated its way from wherever we were toward where we were going.

I was supposed to be upset. But we had a ride to the gig, and gear to play. We'd survive without merch for the time being. Somebody in Pittsburgh would help us find a way to Baltimore if Daisy hadn't been found by then, or back to Columbus to reclaim her.

With enough time to arrange it, the other bands would let us use their drums and amps at most of the shows we had coming up, and in the meantime we still had our guitars and a little bit of cash. We'd roll on, in Daisy or a Chauffeur, or on bikes with guitars strapped to our backs. No StageHolo gig could end this badly; this was the epic, terrible, relentlessness of life on the road. We made music. We were music. We'd roll on. We'd roll on. We'd roll on.

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