

**BROKEN PROMISE RECORDS**

Written By

A.P. Miller

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Broken Promise Records by A.P. Miller

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## [Prologue]

*"Downtown / Lights will be shining / On me, like a new diamond / Ring out, under the midnight hour."*

- *"Waiting" by Green Day*

August 2003.

Four members of the band Echolocation have just graduated high school and they have no idea what they want to do with themselves outside of playing music. On this particular night, a big show was held at the Casey Graham building in Verona Park; four bands were on the bill, including Echolocation. To their classmates, Hendrix Wilson, Anthony "Antics" Reams, Lori Marshall, and Dan Goss were a bunch of misfits who weren't going anywhere in life, in fact, they didn't belong in the halls of the school. To the concert-going crowd, they were a fixture.

If you're reading this, and you feel like you don't belong, I want you to be okay with the fact that you don't belong. It's that feeling that you don't belong that's going to take you to great places and inspire you to do great things. The world you live in now is not the world that you are damned to live in if you don't want to. Pick up a book, read about things you love, and be prepared to follow those things you love. Even if it doesn't make you filthy rich, you still lived a life where you lived on your terms. Surround yourself with people who encourage you, fill your days with people who love you. Give everyone one opportunity to be forgiven and repent; if they still insist on trying to bring you down, then you write them off.

On this night, Echolocation had just got done playing their show and some girl from the school TV station wants an interview. Everyone is sweaty, the boys are shirtless, and everyone is so hopped up on adrenaline that they can't be responsible for what they say.

"Thank you for joining us on 'Voice of a Generation,' where we're talking to local musicians about local music." The girl's voice was stiff and clumsy, "We're here with Echolocation, who just graduated from Duncannon Valley last year. How was the show guys?"

"How was the show? Didn't you watch it?" Hendrix asked, wiping sweat off his face with his shirt.

"I, um, did."

"Then what did you think?" Danny asked, concussively.

"It was, um, really loud. It rocked, I guess." The anchor swam in her head for the most appropriate response.

"You guess?" Lori asked, offended, "It either rocked or it didn't, it either moved you or it didn't. For the love of all that's holy, woman, what did the music do for you?"

"Hey!" Antics called out from the back of the group, "I remember you!"

"Uh, you do?"

"Yeah!" Antics pointed, "You're the girl who told the hall monitor about a bunch of us smoking in the men's room!"

"That was, uh, someone different!" The anchor offered defensively.

"No, I remember you," Danny got real close to her face, "You got Ricky Chalmers suspended for a week because he had the cigarettes on him."

"That *totally* wasn't me!"

"What was that nickname they gave you after that?" Hendrix quizzed.

"I don't know of any nickname!" Agitation was beginning to surface.

“Tampon Face!” Lori belted out, pointing right in the poor girl’s face, “Everyone called you Tampon Face for getting the guys in trouble!”

“Oh my God!” Hendrix yelled out to the musicians congregated behind him, “Guys! We’re being interviewed by Tampon Face! It’s the girl who got Ricky in trouble for having those cigarettes!”

“My name isn’t Tampon Face!” The anchor threw her mic down, stomping away and yelling behind her: “Assholes!”

That’s where our story starts. It’s the mid-2000’s. Good music is pirated online, CD’s are still purchased, and not a whole lot of people spent their days looking at their phones all day. It was a time when everything was changing. Before the mid-2000’s, media was tangible. You had to buy CD’s or cassettes, then iPods happened, and then streaming. You actually had to go to a show and put in effort to discover a band. You wore a shirt for a band that no one’s ever heard of? That was your badge of honor for going out and supporting a band.

Our story revolves around Echolocation; a band in the mid-2000’s that had nu-metal down-tuned riffs, with classic hard rock melody. Their lyrics were deep and meaningful without being cliché; it was a dangerous point in history when there was no making it huge on YouTube just yet, and obscurity was final.

This is their story.

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## [Chapter One]

*"It's hard to notice what is passing by with eyes lowered."*

*- "The Leaving Song, Part 1" - AFI*

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If disappointment could manifest itself into a home, it would surely be the house that stood before Hendrix Wilson, Danny Goss, Lori Marshall, and Anthony "Antics" Reams. There are serial killers who keep body parts in jars that have homes with more curb appeal than the pile of cardboard and asbestos.

There was an intangible heft in the air; this was a life changing moment, one of those life changing moments when you are actively aware of its density. Hendrix scratched at his chin; the beginning of a five o'clock shadow had presented itself on his perfectly hued skin, his hair hung in shaggy tresses over his forehead, covering a furrowed brow. This was indeed a heavy moment.

Hendrix looked to his left, where Danny stood. Danny was a little taller than he was, his hair had bleach blonde spikes that stood straight up, and his eyes were intense all of the time. Beside Danny stood Antics, who had the worry of the world in his eyes. Antics' hair was short, he was skinny, and his face had a smudge on it that Antics had been oblivious to since middle school. Lori wore her long raven hair in a braid; she folded her arms over her chest, she was insecure about herself all the time. Her face was made to smile, her skin was porcelain when she felt good about herself, but she rarely smiled and always looked kind of sickly. Her chronic bouts with depression had taken its toll on her.

"Anthony," Danny breathed in deep, "You've done screwed the pooch, son."

"It's not that bad," Antics began to defend, "...is it?"

"I'm pretty sure discount prostitutes wouldn't do business here." Lori chirped.

"Hendrix?" Antics pleaded with his eyes.

"Well, I definitely had a different picture in my head when you described the place."

"The landlord let me make payments on the security deposit, he didn't do credit checks, and I'm pretty sure he doesn't care about the underage drinking charges on my record or the assault charges on Danny's. The rent is ridiculously cheap, and the roof doesn't leak. What more can we really ask for?" Antics blurted in exasperation.

"Antics is right," Hendrix spoke up to the affirmative, "We're living on our own, we can practice and not bother anyone and let's be honest: we're not going to be able to afford much else working retail. What do we really have to lose?"

Hendrix Wilson was really too good for this world, ethereal or otherwise. Most people who ran in their circle had some incredible flaw that kept them from being able to fully embrace the world around them, or kept the world around them from letting them in. Some people have aesthetic compromises, others have emotional ones; Hendrix was good looking, striking blue eyes, a charming smile, and his voice was audible gold. In addition to being eye-candy, Hendrix was genuine and sincere; people knew that they could take him for his word. All of these things made people want to be around Hendrix, to trust him without trying.

The house, admittedly a heap, did have a charm. The gray exterior paint was cracking and the porch's floor boards were coming up, weeds were growing through the cracks in the sidewalk and the grass had been committed to hospice long ago; all of that being said, the house on West Street had everything that nurtured late-teen independence. There might not be granite counter-tops, but there'd always be a place for a friend to crash.

\* \* \*

The music scene in Duncannon Valley was a who's who of people who would sacrifice for the lives they want rather than a life that would be more comfortable. If you did the math, you'd find that there wasn't a minimum wage employer in the township that didn't hire two or more of those musicians. They were broke, starving a lot of the time, but they were happy.

It was no secret that Echolocation was getting their own pad, so friends in the scene volunteered favors as a housewarming gesture. Ricky had an order that was never picked up, so dinner was covered. Jake Dalton worked at a grocery store bakery, so when a cake fell, there was a cake to celebrate with. Luke Pressman just happened to snag a grab bag of soda that was "punctured by a forklift during receiving" and so they were set.

That's how the scene worked. When Ricky's amp blew up, Hendrix was the first one to bring his to the show; when Jake's drummer had to work a double at the last minute, Antics was right there and didn't miss a beat. If the house sound guy couldn't make it work, Lori would haul ass up to the booth and dial in the sound that everyone was familiar with. It was a free exchange of mix-tapes, free admission to shows and a fraternity that was never put into words; there were no ledgers of favors owed and performed, there was misfits looking out for their own.

Friends came and paid their well wishes. Posters were hung on the walls, loud music was the background din and the potluck was cleaned up. Under the guise of night, Hendrix and Antics borrowed the band van (known around town as the Skank Tank, due to Danny's indiscriminate appetite for groupies) and went cruising around for furniture. The rule of thumb during the crusade was "no fabrics or anything that could carry bed bugs or crabs." In the middle of the month, the super at the trailer park was handing out eviction notices to the dead-beats. Men, women and families would up and leave everything behind because they couldn't afford to live there anymore. It was sad; Hendrix met a guy at Bullseye who'd been hired for part time, hoping to support a wife and kids on temporary seasonal hours. The trailer park dumpster had just what they needed: a sofa, a table and some chairs.

At about 12:30 AM, the house had finally cleared. Friends that were more like siblings gave in to decorum and allowed the new tenants of the house to settle in. What had been a raucous party just hours before was eerily silent.

As Hendrix and Antics were out on their recon mission of furniture that would be the least likely to give them a skin disruption, Lori took a chance to get a shower and settle into her room.

The bathroom was more in need of a house fire than a woman's touch. The drains in the sink and the bath tub wore matching rust rings and had calcium build up that would make the Illuminati of Dairy Farmers that pay for milk commercials cry. The walls were half tile / half plaster and both surfaces had a ding that was either age or despair. Anything with a chrome finish, such as the towel bar and toilet paper holder, had unnatural discoloration. The mirror was in later stages of deglazing and only half of the surface would reflect. The toilet had a perma-stain that looked like the aftermath of dollar taco night at the Burrito Barn and the water that came out of any of the faucets looked like Mountain Dew in the poor lighting of the bathroom. Home, Sweet Hell.

Lori's bedroom was the next door to the bathroom and the jury was still out on whether or not she'd regret that decision at all; the trek from the bathroom to her room was risky in a towel, but the silence said that she'd be alright.

Each room had to be reasoned for and argued; Lori didn't really have a preference as long as the door shut and her mother wasn't anywhere nearby to beat on the said door. Boys being boys, Lori was given the first room on the left because it had a wall mirror mounted on the wall and she would probably need it to do girl stuff. This argument happened two months ago when Antics saw the house and to date no one has been able to define "girl stuff." Regardless of the sexist ambiguity, it was a room of her own where no one would invade and make her feel inferior for being human.

The reality of the move hadn't completely set in for Lori yet; something was missing, the frantic screams of disapproval or the feeling that the walls were closing in. It was gospel truth that the only time that Lori didn't feel as if life was a gallery of people waiting for the lethal injection to take hold, was when she was playing her bass. Now, at eighteen years old, she lived in the house where she could play her bass any time she was needed or when she needed to. These walls, this house and this situation were her salvation, despite how dingy everything appeared.

There was someone strange staring at Lori in the "Girl Stuff" mirror. It was a woman, her eyes were sullen and she was too thin. The strange woman's hair was raven and hung to the middle of her back, she looked like she hadn't smiled for any good reason, other than appearances, in quite a long time. The woman in the mirror held a towel around herself with an insecurity that was forged in the flames of despair. Up and down the woman's arms was an intricate and complex lattice of scars. A few of the scars were a little less severe than a scratch from a cat; other scars were deep and broad, a brutal yarn of a girl who felt helpless and the only control she had was contorted on the delicate skin of her arms.

"Huh." Lori exhaled.

Since she was seven years old, Lori's doctors had always warned her mother of a potential for Dissociative Identity Disorder; Lori would physically be doing things, materially there for the act, the psychological presence was another story entirely. While she stood in her own room, Lori briefly believed a woman was looking at her in the mirror. The woman looked like Lori, was even wrapped in a towel identical to Lori's, but was clearly a different person. It was the scars, the toughened streams of skin, which Lori recognized. The scars are what reconciled what she believed and what she saw.

As a gift to herself for her thirteenth birthday, Lori discovered self-harm. Dawn Marshall, Gordon and Regina Marshall's eldest, flourished under the pressure of high school academia. Fawn had chased the carrot, the promise that with the right amount of study and diligence, she too could leave Duncannon Valley. Lori, the middle daughter, questioned everything. At times when she'd deemed that something was pointless, she'd shut down. Seventh grade was pointless, Lori shut down and Regina couldn't have been crueler. Birthday evenings at the Marshall house were standard issue: a cake, superficial exclamations of pride in how much of a wonderful woman they'd grown up to be and everyone was excused to ignore each other for the night. On Lori's thirteenth, Regina phoned in the joy and couldn't be bothered with the pride. Lori's pain was soothed with a broken shard of glass that had been produced by breaking a family picture in her room.

Danny held the cordless phone in his hand, staring at it intently. The phone call that he had to make was going to be excruciating, a calculated torture. Who'd have guessed that a perfectly placed phone call to a person could actually make someone bleed from the soul? That sounded like some pansy ass lyrics that Hendrix wrote when he was dating Lilly Temper, but

that's a pretty accurate description of how this was going to feel. Danny tapped the phone against his hand; it would have been easier to prepare to stab yourself in the thigh than it was for him to decide to make the phone call.

"Hey, assholes!" Danny called down the stairs, "I'm going to be on the phone and it's going to be pornographic! Don't listen in!"

"Hendrix and Antics are gone," Lori called out from her room, "It's just me and I'll stay off the phone."

"Thank you, Lori." Danny's tone softened, "Your boyfriend is still an asshole!"

"I'll let him know."

Danny's thumb punched in the series of numbers into the dial pad. The number poured from memory and Danny actually started to sweat, his thumb cramped. He wiped his ear off before putting it to his ear.

"Hello?" the voice was feminine and sweet, but it was weak.

"Hey Chelsea," Danny's voice cracked, "It's me."

"Hey!" Chelsea's voice was raspy, still weak, and enthusiastic.

"How are you, babe?"

"Same as you, I imagine."

"Yeah," Danny rested his head against the door, "I bet you are."

"Are you doing OK, Daniel?"

"I moved in with the guys today," Danny was fighting to hold on to his composure. "The house is such a fuckin' dive."

"Is it that house on West Street? The one in Potter?"

"Yeah."

"Daniel! People were murdered in that house!"

"Haha, my kind of house, right?"

"Daniel, you make terrible decisions for yourself."

"Chelsea?"

"Yeah?"

"Tell me something great that's happening in your life. Tell me that you are doing something amazing and that everything is going great. Tell me that you've met someone and that you aren't coming back here."

"Daniel..."

"Chelsea, if things don't work out for you, then this whole thing has been for nothing. I promise it won't hurt, just tell me that everything is going great for you."

"Well, my classes are going great. I'm thinking about electing medicine as my major, and I've started seeing this guy named Justin; it might go somewhere, we don't know."

"I'm genuinely happy for you, Chelsea. I really want this all to work out for you."

"Daniel," Chelsea's voice cracked over the phone, "I know we said we'd talk to each other every year on *the day*, but I don't want you doing this to yourself. You need to get yourself up and moving on with life too."

"It all happened because I lov..."

"I love you too." Chelsea cut Danny off angrily, "I love you too and because I love you, I have to cut you off, Daniel. No more calling me, no letters, nothing. My family wronged you and you need to be pissed off about that, you need to be angry. Daniel, be angry at everyone; no one in this world can stop you when you're angry. Good bye, Daniel."

Click.

The phone dropped out of Danny's hand and hit the floor; the battery compartment of the cordless phone popped off and slid across the floor. The truth was, Danny expected that phone call to be like that. Neither he, nor Chelsea, knew what their scheduled contact was going to be like. Dan was prepared for it to be a one-and-done ordeal, likened to something like bloodletting. He'd call, they'd cry, and the memory would be exorcised. Chelsea was right: no one could stop or derail Daniel Quentin Goss when he was angry. If someone needed to redirect Danny's energy, they had to wait for the hate to burn off; they were usually waiting a while.

\* \* \*

It took three hours and a half a tank of gas, but the house on West Street had a sofa and love seat made out of pine, a table, three chairs and a coffee table. It was in the daylight that they all had got a good look at how the house was shaping up. While they appreciated all of the posters and Do-It-Yourself approach to decorating, Lori had taken it upon herself to straightened the posters, and frame them in strips of black paper. It wasn't really a frame, but it was much more appealing to the eye than the thirteen-year-old-boy chic of just taping them to the wall. Hendrix and Antics had rearranged the living room three times, trying to find the perfect configuration for entertaining guests while making sure that everyone had the perfect auditory access to the tunes.

Danny, who was surprisingly good with his hands, mastered the kitchen. He fixed the broken cabinet handle, replaced the ever elusive range hood light bulb, and anchored garbage receptacles to the back porch that was just off of the kitchen door. The real artistry in Danny's handy work was the kitchen stools that he had built using some old piping they'd found in the basement; it was crude and uncomfortable, but it would support an ass or two while they ate their cereal.

The real burn on time and energy was how much cleaning had to be done before any of them could really feel "at home." It was no secret that the house on West Street was "the murder house." No one had to clean up any brains or teeth, but every time a new cabinet was opened or a new corner of the basement was discovered, everyone held their breath and said a little prayer. The landlord, Mr. Phelps, was a guy in his 90's, who meant very well. His sight was failing and he couldn't get around well, but he didn't abandon his property in Potter like the other homeowners did when the bottom on the real estate market fell out. It was a supreme shithole, but a supreme shithole with someone else on the hook.

By the late afternoon, there had been three van loads of broken shit taken to the city refuse authority; all of the windows had been pried open from being painted shut, the house was airing out and Lori had lit a few subtle candles in strategic locations. The house was beginning to not smell like a mold farm anymore.

While Lori cooked dinner for everyone, Danny, Hendrix, and Antics were in the basement arranging the rehearsal space. This process was an exact science and had to be done carefully. First was the issue of sound proofing. When the boys emptied out the basement and attic, there was a lot of carpet underpadding to be repurposed, that was the first layer against the wall. The only thing that really stops sound from cutting through the walls was density, being that they were in a basement; they didn't have to worry about the concrete walls allowing things out, but the ceiling allowing sound to go up and then out. While Danny and Antics tried to steady the rickety ladder they'd found in the attic, Hendrix stapled padding to the ceiling. Keeping in mind that density is really what stops sound from coming out, the boys then stapled loads of

cardboard and then those hard cardboard drink carriers from the only fast food joint in town: Frosty Boss. There were a lot of those drink carriers, and you probably want to know how they got all of them. I could tell you, but it may change your opinion of our boys and the company they keep. Let's just say, they were donated.

The sun was setting on the second day of Echolocation being at the house on West Street. Danny cleaned up dinner while Lori disappeared into her bedroom. She was doing that a lot more lately. In the last two days, Lori was scarce when Antics was looking for her. Hendrix was being careful to see what kind of clothes she was wearing. Her self-harm experiences were not new to anyone; if she were wearing long sleeves, she may be harming and someone may be able to say something to her to help. As nightfall had completely arrived, Antics and Hendrix retired to the porch to have a cigarette.

"How did your mom take it when you left?" Antics asked.

"Well, every week since graduation had been 'the national bank of mom is closing your account' and a lot of other tough talk. It was real emotional, like she'd never thought I'd leave."

"Think you did the right thing?"

"Leaving was a good thing; I'm developing my sense of independence and adventure I guess. How about your parents?"

Antics let a bitter chuckle out before he reached into the pocket of his jeans to get a cigarette. Hendrix didn't need to ask the question, he already knew what an emotional blood bath it was at Antics' house.

"I think part of me still hopes that my mom can be like Mama Wilson," Antics said as a precursor to a long drag of his cigarette, "...and that part of me is the one that gets hurt the most when she disappoints me. I'm the woman's only son, you know? I'm her only son and she still chooses her married life over her mother life."

Antics Reams got his nick name because of his ADHD affliction; it was so bad that his first grade teacher actually got fired for tying him to his chair. Anthony didn't want to be the class clown, he wanted to be loved and respected just like anyone else. Home was his safe place until he was about thirteen years old and his mother remarried. Antics wasn't physically abused, he might have been better off if he was, a fist fight might have cleared out a lot of the burden that Antics walked around with. His stepfather was cold and had little tolerance for Antics' behavior; the worst was the favoritism to Anthony's kid sister. The family didn't have a lot in the way of money or earning potential and Antics wore his socioeconomic situation to school every day. There wasn't money for a decent pair of jeans but his mom sure found funds to make her husband feel comfortable.

"There is plenty of Mama Wilson to share, Antics, you know that."

"I know. It's the envy, brother. I guess I would have liked for you to know that you could have come to my couch in the middle of the night when your old man was going off the deep end about bullshit that your mom was feeding him."

"All you can do about it now is being a better person than they are going forward, right? Your couch is welcome to whoever you want now."

There wasn't a whole lot that calmed Anthony Reams down. There were drums, punk rock and the philosophy of Hendrix Wilson; that's all he really needed.

Duncannon Valley is the name for a region of small towns that kind of congregate into one area. The more specific you get about where you live, and what street you are on, it paints a drastic portrait as to what kind of neighborhood you live in. The house on West Street was in a

micro-town named Potter. Potter was a small village that was built as someplace for the railroad workers to live as the tracks were developed. The village evolved from a few small houses to a few small houses and a post office; from there it became the lowest income neighborhood in the Duncannon Valley. The median education level was highly drop-out and the people who owned the houses to rent could hardly afford the taxes, let alone improvements on the homes. Moving into a town like Potter meant that you accepted that you'd be awoken by the sound of domestic disputes and loud parties. That being said, who'd ever guess you'd see a car screaming down the street, lights blinking and horn blaring.

"Hendrix, who is that?" Antics asked as he shielded his eyes and tried to get a better look at the car.

"I don't know, neighbors maybe?"

As the car approached, the sound of loud music began to intrude through the din of the car horn. Hendrix and Antics were standing at this point, half ready to jump inside the door and out of the way of the vehicle, should it decide to ram through the porch.

"HEY!" A girl was screaming out of the window as the car passed by, "IT'S GEEZER NIGHT AT THE PESCADERO! FREE ADMISSION!"

The battered yellow car was gone as fast as it approached. The cigarette in Antics' mouth nearly fell out as he watched the tail lights fade into the night.

"Danny! Lori! It's Geezer Night!" Hendrix called into the house and jumped into the passenger seat of the Skank Tank.

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## [Chapter Two]

*"The look on her face, a waste of time / Won't let go, gonna roll the dice / Losing her grace, she starts to cry / I feel the pain when I look in her eyes."*

- "Everything" - Buckcherry

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Back in the 1970's, the Pescadero was a novelty bar that was trying to cash in on the Rhinestone Cowboy / Smoky and the Bandit appearance that the insecurities of men were trying to cling to in the country. Unfortunately, it wasn't as big of a success in the North East as Henry Fine would have you believe. Henry Fine would have rather been spoon fed rat shit with a side of pulverized glass before he ever admitted defeat and so he kept the bar alive by having silently understood drink specials and letting the local bands play at the bar. After Henry had passed away, his son Hank took over and really embraced the Pescadero as a music stop in the town. Hank believed that if the kids where in his place, listening to bad music, and then they weren't on the street and causing themselves harm.

"Geezer Night" at the Pescadero was a tradition that started when Wyld Fyre, a Glam Metal cover band from the next city over, booked a show at the venue without knowing who the audience was. Guys in their late forties and early fifties, practically wearing spandex, faced a crowd of angry and rebellious young rock fans and it didn't end well. The crowd began taunting Wyld Fyre, chanting "Ger-i-tol" and throwing empty beer cups on the stage. Normally, this would have discouraged a band from ever playing at the Pescadero again, if not for the good sense of the drummer.

Steve Steel (real name: Steven Mansteel, a business executive) had the sense of mind to play into the taunting, to make it a game, how far could the crowd push it? Steve called out for the cups to be full when they threw them and the crowd obliged; Steve called out over the mic that he'd been with each and every one of their mothers. As the night went on, the bond between Wyld Fyre and the angry youth of the Pescadero became more solidified. The next show that Wyld Fyre booked as called "Geezer Night" and a tradition was born.

Jock Sanders was Hank Fine's best friend since they were kids. It was the unfortunate hand that he'd been dealt that Jock wasn't meant for great things. Jock learned slowly, spoke even slower and didn't have the capacity to dream with the big dreamers; if all he'd ever accomplished in life was seeing a couple bands play, go to baseball games with his Dad and maybe kiss a girl or two, he'd die happy. As sad as that story may be, Jock was the first one to volunteer when Hank needed a door man, just as long as he got to see the band play. Hank always paid Jock \$150.00 for the few hours of work, but Jock could care less about the money; over time, he'd been accepted as a fixture at the Pescadero and the kids who came to Geezer Night were genuinely glad to see him as he stamped their hands at the door.

"You can't go in yet." Jock stopped a group of four girls, unnecessarily worried about where his outstretched arm was, concerned he might make inappropriate contact, "I need to see your ID's. I've got to put an X on your hand if you aren't old enough to drink."

There wasn't a fuss, the girls reached into their pockets to produce their ID's. They were very pretty, had pretty smiles and were from China or something, as far as Jock could tell. There was a weak spot in the dull emotional exterior of the door man, he didn't want to give those girls too much of a hassle because he wanted them to come back, and be happy to see him like the

other kids did. Jock thought each girl smelled prettier than the last as he scribbled the X on the back of their hand; their skin was soft, and delicate, like a flower or something.

“Go ahead in, Ladies. Enjoy the show,” Jock smiled, hoping he wasn’t pouring it on too thick. “Next?”

Veronica “Roni” Kanagawa lead the four-fifths of the band “The Violet Nightfall” into the doors of the Pescadero, playing as cool as she could, trying to blend in by sheer force of will. The Pescadero was crawling with people that she needed to know, the movers and shakers that gave the local music scene its credibility. Roni was a guitarist and she had high hopes of being noticed and being heard. Roni played guitar, Hitomi played drums, Holly was a sleek fox of a girl that could almost play whatever she laid her hands on. Kim, who seemed to be drowning in her own anxious brain chemicals, was the singer and primary songwriter.

“Kimmy,” Roni turned to her identical twin sister, “be cool, okay?”

“Roni, I am freaking out, there are so many people!” Kim started breathing heavier and heavier.”

“This is what I mean, Kim. Be cool.”

The youngest daughters of Hiro and Fujiko Kanagawa were born just two minutes apart, ten years after they emigrated from Japan. Hiro always wanted to be a rock musician and he felt stifled by the strict traditions that his family had imparted on him. When he was twenty years old, he and his girlfriend Fujiko left Japan and settled in Spokane, Washington. The hope was that he’d find a band, go on tour and make his millions as a musician. While a very talented guitar player, the hair metal scene of the time was not kind to Hiro. Wigs and a womanizing stage presence slipped through his fingers and he started a software engineering firm. Hiro married Fujiko and four children were born, the youngest being Veronica and Kimberly.

Despite sharing identical genetic material, Roni and Kim couldn’t be more different. As children, Roni was outgoing and friendly while Kim wanted to play by herself, in her own imagination. During middle school, Roni was a cheerleader and Kim was deep in her study of music theory. As high school approached, Roni Kanagawa was the cool Asian guitar chick and Kim was the one you went to when you needed to know how to tell someone to eat a steaming load of post-consumer tacos (read: feces) in Japanese. Differences like these could alienate and strain a relationship between siblings, but the Kanagawa twins learned to celebrate their differences and become closer. Kim would make sure Roni’s homework was done and Roni would be the business end of an ass-kicking if Kimmy was being bullied.

“I can’t believe I wore my good underwear for this,” Hitomi Kano spoke up from behind Kim, “I wouldn’t let any of these guys show me the way to pound town.”

Hitomi “Thunder” Kano was Roni’s best friend and best described as a “challenge”. Hitomi’s story was a lot like Roni and Kimmy’s: her parents emigrated from Japan and was setting out to work hard as business owners. The difference being that her parents held firm to the strict methods of child rearing as they had known. The combination of strict parenting and going to public school with people who did as they pleased created a behavior envy that Hitomi acted on. She smoked, drank and would make sport of going to parties and seeing how many relationships she could. Rules were meant to be broken in Hitomi’s world; fire alarms were meant to be pulled, the paint on cars were meant to be carved in the sake of preserving one’s own honor and noses were meant to be broken in the heat of an argument. Her only extra-curricular activity at school was learning percussion and drums; the first time she held the sticks in her hands, she found her release. “Thunder” isn’t just a clever nickname, Hitomi was stifled, angry

and she expressed it all on her drum set. Hitomi's drum skill was discovered by a student teacher who had stormed into the band room, upset that one of the instructional videos had been turned up so loud. In Hitomi he found a drummer, in that teacher Hitomi found a reluctant mentor, and neither has ever mentioned that she was in tears during their first meeting.

Rounding out the troupe was Holly Watanabe, the most fun you'll ever have hanging out with a girl who doesn't speak often. The young woman was dressed in her favorite going out wear: a collection of shiny fabrics that were visually appealing, perhaps to distract from the fact that she didn't speak much. For the Violet Nightfall, Holly was the keyboard player, sampler and second guitar when needed. Roni had one hell of a time convincing her to join the band, as Holly's musical tastes were in electronic and techno flavors. It wasn't until Roni brought Holly a tape recording of the band's playing and a challenge that Holly couldn't liven it up with her techno skills that Holly was persuaded to join.

Holly's story was no tragic tale of overcoming cultural boundaries, no whimsical tale of two lovers escaping the confines of tradition to have a child perfectly forged in love; in fact, her story was quite boring. While Hitomi, Roni & Kimmy's parents had to be naturalized as American Citizens, Holly's family was already three generations deep of being born American. Her parents were two people who had met in high school, socially obligated to date because they were "the foreign kids," despite their legal status as American. Holly never knew much about Dave Watanabe, other than he was a scumbag who convinced Julie Onoo to make a bad decision that she had to carry around with her for nine months. Julie married a construction business owner and became Julie Frank. Holly was given the option of adoption, but declined to honor her heritage.

Kim's eyes fell longingly on the stage, and the rest of the world drowned out. The stage lights almost cast a halo over the microphone, as if the Universe were telling her that is exactly where she belonged. In the car, on the ride over, Kim sat in the back of the car and had wonderful visions of herself as a supreme entertainer. In her own imagination, Kim wasn't a neurotic mess who was afraid of everyone judging her, that she was worthy of pure love without requisite. Kim could see herself, the uninhibited version of herself, taking the stage and commanding the microphone; the crowds of people were giving her back all of the energy that she was putting out. It was a beautiful contemplation.

"Kim," Roni grabbed her by the arm and snapped her back to the now, "c'mon, we found a table."

One of the fringe benefits of the Skank Tank was that it was a mobile party, wherever it went. Antics bought the van for \$300.00, which he saved from his job of filling cups of worms at Kletch's Bait Shop. He'd get fifty cents for every cup he filled with soil and night crawlers. It was extremely demeaning work, but it got him out of the house and Mr. Kletch didn't mind if he worked with his headphones on. After he bought the van, it ran for four days consecutively before it broke down and needed the engine rebuilt. Mr. Thomas, the auto shop teacher, offered to fix it for free as a learning experience as long as Antics bought the parts required. The Skank Tank sat in the school garage for six months while Antics filled cups with worms to pay for the parts. Ever since the day Mr. Thomas gave him the keys back, it has been Echolocation's tour bus, hotel room and rolling party palace. As soon as Antics killed the engine, friends began moving their cars in the parking lot to occupy the same row. The pre-show was on. Danny ran off to take a leak around the back of the building, Hendrix was drawn off to a conversation in another direction; Antics and Lori were left to receive people coming to the van.

“GEEZER NIGHT!!!” Derek Keller, the lead guitarist from Ghostworks shouted from the top of his car, his arms stretched overhead. Those in the know about Geezer Night returned a similar bellow. Those who weren’t assumed that recreational drugs had been consumed and another young life had become a statistic.

“Antics, open your back doors, I got a house warming present for you.” Brady Dossler, drummer for Ghostworks called out as he was lifting a brown box from his trunk. “Sorry I couldn’t make it out, I’ve been working doubles.”

“Don’t sweat it.” Antics replied as he opening the double doors on the back of the cargo van known as the Skank Tank.

Brady sat the box down and opened it up. Inside was a case of mid-shelf beer and a plethora of tiny bottles of booze that you’d see in a hotel mini bar. Antics gave Brady a hug out of appreciation.

“If you get caught with this, it *did not* come from me and I *did not* get it from Yancy Cooper. Understood?”

“Who is Yancy Cooper and do I know you?”

“I don’t give a single shit what those doctors told your parents, you’re goddamn brilliant.”

Who is Yancy Cooper, you ask? Yancy Cooper was a musician from the generation before who could never leave town. His band, Mister Blister, packed up and headed to California and Yancy couldn’t go with them because his mom was sick and he’d be racked with guilt if anything happened while he was away. He tried in vain to find a new band and be a part of the sound, but the local musicians were all in bands that they’d believed in and he was stuck working at Gambino’s Wine & Spirits. The underage kids could sometimes make a deal with Yancy for alcohol in exchange for demo tapes, money, and porn. By the look at the case of beer and the samples of booze that Yancy lifted from different establishments, Brady traded in his vintage Hustler collection, making the gift even more heartfelt.

Danny had come back to the van and to the gathering that had amassed. He seemed amused as he lit the cigarette hanging out of his mouth.

“Well,” Dan said before a drag of his smoke, “Pedro just quit.”

Pedro was Paul Jasper, a guy in Duncannon Valley who’d been born with a “darker than your average person in town” complexion, hence the nickname: Pedro. Everyone knows that in a pinch, Lori could run a soundboard for a show. Pedro made Lori look like a toddler playing with her dad’s stereo system; he was good and his ear was impeccable. As more and more people began coming out to the Pescadero for shows, Hank Fine hired Pedro as his house soundman. There was a slight vision of the dream, getting paid for a talent that you’d do for free to help out.

“Like “quit” quit or “the usual” quit?” Hendrix, who had just completed his obligatory “talk to everyone” circuit, asked.

“Quit quit.” Danny chuckled a plume of smoke at Hendrix’s question.

“Like, no coming back quit?” Hendrix recommitted to gauging the severity of the statement.

“The singer from Wyld Fyre had an exceptional hair up his ass during sound check, from what I’ve heard,” Danny paused to take a drag and exhale, “...Pedro came home today to find his girlfriend packing her shit and moving out. Pedro being Pedro, he came in to work tonight anyways. The dickbag from Wyld Fyre and Pedro start picking back and forth, it starts escalating to shouting and then Hank demands that Pedro apologizes to everyone for being an asshole.

Pedro says he'd rather backdoor a Golden Retriever and tells Hank to go pound salt. No one can get a hold of him."

"So, who's going to run sound? Does Wyld Fyre have a guy?" Antics butted in to the conversation in progress.

"Funny you ask," Danny turned to Lori, who was digging through the Booze Box like she's possessed, "Hank is looking for that 'chick on bass,' I'm assuming he means you."

Lori's frantic digging would not be interrupted by a statement aimed directly at her; awkward stares and the complete void of sound really couldn't do the trick.

"Lori," Antics spoke up. "Babe, Danny is talking to you."

"Wha?..." Lori looked up from the box.

"Hank is looking for you; he needs you to run sound tonight."

"Why can't Pedro do it?"

"...have you completely missed everything that was just said two feet away from you?" Danny's patented annoyance at just about everything was being pointed at Lori, "...and since when do you drink booze? Near-Beer gives you a headache."

It was like being groped in public, the way everyone's stares had turned to her. Lori looked down at her arms like they were on fire. Could everyone see her scars? Then she looked back up at their scrutinizing glares; it felt like a thousand eyes trying to peer through her at once. The eyes, the staring; why were they staring? Why were they staring?! What's wrong with her? What do they know? How could they know? It was only one time; don't judge for just one time! We all make mistakes, don't we? Why was this mistake so obvious?! Stop staring! WHY ARE YOU STARING?! It only happened once! We all have to live with the mistakes we've made! PLEASE STOP STARING!

"Lori," Hendrix's calm voice with the soothing register broke through the panic, "Lori, are you OK?"

"...yeah!" Lori snapped back into the here and now, "I'm fine."

"Are you sure, babe?" Antics asked as he placed a palm on the middle of her back.

Lori didn't want to be touched, but she didn't want to offend Antics either. As her boyfriend, he'd been the only rock over the last year or so. When everything went to hell in a hand basket at home, Antics was the first one ready to jump out his window and meet her in the middle of the night for a cigarette and to talk. They're relationship was symbiotic: Lori got to vent about the hell at home and Antics had someone who wouldn't get frustrated when his mind and mouth raced at a thousand miles an hour.

"I'm fine," Lori could barely hide the reaction to the slimy feeling she got when Antics placed his hand on her back, "I was just lost in the freedom of being able to kick one back without having to try and hide it from the Marshall family, is all."

"You're alright, kid." Hendrix said with a smile and a wink, "I'm going to bet that Hank is going to pay you for doing sound tonight if he finds you."

It was a ritual with Hendrix and Lori, she'd be lost in a freak out, Hendrix would bring her back and then tell her that she was alright. Everyone believed Hendrix when he spoke; when he'd tell Antics that there was nothing wrong with his brain, when he told Lori that she was OK and when he sat down with Danny and talked about Chelsea Kramer's abortion. Antics was able to believe that he was unique, Lori understood that she was fine despite everything and Danny was made to see that he couldn't have stopped an abortion if he didn't know his girlfriend was pregnant.

“Alright, but come see me in the booth, alright?” Lori called out to her gang as she ran off towards the Pescadero.

“Hendrix,” Antics had never sounded more serious in his life, “There is something wrong with her.”

“Of course there is, there is something wrong with all of us; it’s the affliction known as youth. It’s unfortunate for her that she wears her scars on the outside as we wear ours on the inside.” Hendrix postulated.

“No, I mean something else.”

“Like what?”

“She’s been moody, like moodier than usual. Her skin feels different, she’s almost green instead of her normal shade of pale and it’s almost like her skin crawls when we touch.”

“How long has she been like that?”

“Two weeks, maybe three.”

“Maybe she’s knocked up.” Danny chided as he lit another cigarette, humorless.

“...maybe.” Antics replied as Danny laid down his pregnancy trump card.

Danny and Antics could and would fight about everything. If a guitar was out of tune, if a cymbal crash was missed or if the wind blew wrong, an epic fight would erupt and even Hendrix couldn’t put the flames out. Nothing was sacred during one of these verbal brawls either: Antics parents didn’t love him, Danny’s other band found a better guitar player and everything in between was in play. Everything except Chelsea’s abortion and anything related to pregnancy; that’s where the line was drawn and no one crossed it.

“Why would she be trying to swim in the box of booze if she were pregnant?” Hendrix tried to rationalize Antics’ mind at ease.

“She either doesn’t know or she doesn’t want to keep it.” There was a lifetime of hurt behind Danny’s eyes as he laid theories out for Hendrix to digest. It was a door in his mind that was best left unopened, but now was open to be seen. Silently, he relived every emotion, each tear that fell as he matched Calvin Kramer shout for shout about his daughter’s abortion. The stake through the heart is when Calvin laid Danny out with “Your son was an abomination and now it’s in hell.” It wasn’t that Calvin was enough of a monster to say that a life wasn’t precious enough to live, that it was damned; the hurt came from the gender of the baby, that Danny wouldn’t get to teach his son how to play guitar or share his stories from the road to the particular life. That emotional scar had been torn open and was now bleeding in front of the Pescadero on Geezer Night.

“I guess we should keep an eye on her. We’re her friends and I guess she needs to know one of us is there if she needs to let some stuff out.” Hendrix’s calming influence was running on fumes at this point.

The rest of the pre-game, before everyone migrated inside to see Wyld Fyre, was a façade for Hendrix and Antics. Lori and Danny weren’t remotely close to fulfilling the definition of “friends,” but Danny’s mind was heavy all the same. This was the worst part about living to fulfill a dream: the good times were great but the bad times were in large supply. What if Lori was pregnant? How could she and Antics raise a child together when neither of them had any sort of prospects for a future other than a life that a child couldn’t be brought up in?

\* \* \*

Wyld Fyre was concluding the last song of the night, the last song of the second encore and everyone that had piled into the Pescadero was losing their minds. It was loud, hot from the

body heat and Roni couldn't focus on anything other than the skinny brunette girl that she'd bumped into at the bar when she was getting a bottle of water. It was certainly an ego check; Roni certainly thought of herself as attractive and was getting a decent glance or two, until that girl walked in. All eyes left Roni's exposed mid-drift and cascading tresses of black hair flowing down her back and were on the girl with dark circles under her eyes and a sickly complexion. People were genuinely happy to see her and Roni hated it.

This sort of thing was supposed to come easy to Roni, it was supposed to be survival of the most attractive and Roni was supposed to be the victor. It was yet another reminder that the world of independent music didn't work the way the rest of the world did. In Roni's world, this girl would have been thrown to the wolves; she would have been scrutinized, ridiculed and left to be forgotten and Roni would continue to reign over popularity. It wasn't Roni's world; this existence, the one that Roni wanted to belong to, was this girl's and no amount of dismantling her self-esteem would change that.

"Well," Hitomi interrupted Roni's seethe, "I've had menstrual cramps that were more entertaining than those guys."

"I think that's the point." Kim offered, "Someone in the bathroom said how much they love 'Geezer Night.'"

"...and Roni wants to play at a bar that holds a 'Geezer Night'?" Hitomi's glare was a healthy mix of baffled and accusatory, "Maybe we can play on 'Uterus Night' or 'Tampon Tuesday,' wouldn't that be fun?"

"I need to go outside and have a cigarette." Roni lamented.

"That is the first good idea you've had all night, you bitch." Hitomi was groping her own pockets as she followed Roni outside, looking for the new pack she'd just bought.

Anthony Reams wanted to be drunk as he sat at a table along the wall of the Pescadero. Not just normal drunk, black-out-can't-be-responsible-for-your-actions drunk. So drunk that he might end up in the hospital and people would come see him, even if it was a synthetic sympathy and he'd have a mountain of medical bills that he couldn't pay, at least people would *pretend* to care about his existence. Maybe Lori would even stop being so cold to him.

Was today the day? Was today the day that Lori finally had too much of Antics suffocating her with his affection and attention? The day when Lori stopped playing along with the implied charade that her and Antics had genuine feelings for each other? Antics didn't know if he really needed Lori or just needed someone who would treat him like a human being. Lori, even if she were pretending for the benefit of karma, didn't look down on Antics outwardly. When they started dating, she was fine with just hanging out at the park and watching the band play. When they went out to eat, she paid, swearing up and down that she didn't mind, that she wanted to do it for him. When the opportunity arrived for them to live together, for Antics to finally contribute to their relationship, he was voracious about it. Further evidence that he'd driven a wedge between he and Lori, because he didn't know how to act any other way. Do you know what the dating prospects are for the poor kid at school? Other poor kids; kids who don't have the tastes and experiences that Lori had. Antics had no idea how to hold onto her.

Anthony Reams and Lori Marshall started dating during the Summer between Junior and Senior year. Antics just had a blow out with his parents; God forbid that the kid want to live in a bedroom that didn't leak, right? By the time he was a Junior, Antics had resolved that there was nothing he could do to change the popular opinion of himself. He was going to be a scruff, at least he had a friend in Hendrix that made him CD's of new bands. That particular evening,

Antics had retired to the park, swinging by street light, thinking about how life was going to be different when he was in charge. It was almost metaphysical, Antics and Lori often showed up at the swings when they needed each other the most.

When Lori would show up at the swings, she'd often greet Antics with a hug. It wasn't just a hug, a pleasantry contact, it was Lori opening up parts of herself with physical contact. Her tears were warm and seared through the thin fabric of his shirt, her hair smelled nice and her slender form was welcoming as Antics wrapped his arms around her. Anthony Reams had actually gotten into a habit of carrying a first aid kit that he'd bought from the Dollar Store, knowing that Lori's emotional distress usually came with physical trauma. They'd sit in Lori's car and Antics would play her new music as he dressed her wounds with antiseptic and bandages. One night, by the light of her car's CD player, she leaned in and kissed Anthony. Neither ever came out and asked if they were dating, they just were. They were what each other needed: Antics needed a friend who saw him as a human being and Lori needed someone who'd care without trying to change her. It was beautiful.

Antics hadn't let Lori see his house until he needed her help moving his stuff. It was a shell of a home; a pig with the finest perfume on it. The walls had his step father's memorabilia and decorations on it, the TV was out of place due to how nice it was. Antics' room was a mattress on the floor, the walls leaked and the only thing of value was his stereo and collection of CD's that Hendrix had given him over the years. It may have been the suffocating pity, or stifling sadness, but Lori encouraged Antics to leave the house by asking him repeatedly what the new house looked like and how he'd decorate it. The boy needed that as he left his circumstance behind. Now Lori was up at the sound booth and wanted nothing to do with him. She may be pregnant or may be trying to cope with the worst decision she'd ever made in her life.

Danny sat down with Antics, mid-chug of his bottle of water.

"Dan," Antics tried to talk over the sound of the band, "I'm scared, about losing Lori."

"Why?" Danny shot a look to Antics, "And what are you telling me for?"

"What if she's pregnant?"

"What do you mean what if? Pregnancy leads to child birth. Then, you have to feed the kid until it can feed itself. Are these new concepts to you?"

"Dan, you know why I'm asking you." It was the unwritten law again. Antics couldn't use the "A" word, but if he insisted enough, Danny would get his drift.

"I don't know how I got this reputation as this abortion counselor, Antics. I have no idea what you and Lori are going to do. Chelsea and her parents killed a child because the circumstances weren't convenient; how does that fact make me an expert on how people feel about shit? The best I can tell you is that Lori and Chelsea used to be friends in Elementary school, I'm pretty sure their parents still play cards, and you might want to get ready for a whole lot of sleepless nights wondering what your unborn child would have looked like. Be prepared that every time you watch TV and some cutesy baby show comes on, or when you see some guy pushing a stroller, to get sick to your stomach and feel a kind of hate for Lori that you didn't think was possible. That is your future now, I hope it helped."

"Thanks for the talk, it was very helpful."

"Sit and spin, Antics." Danny responded with a middle finger, "You want the truth? You want the truth that helps? What business do you have bringing a child into the world? I think you're an idiot, but you've lead a life I wouldn't wish on anyone. How are you going to prevent a child from living that same life? What prospects in life do you possess to keep that kid from

being called the same names and going through the same shit that you did? You and Lori trying to take care of a kid now is just going to bring everyone down, and I do mean everyone. Not Hendrix, not me, but the both of you. Lori comes from money, buddy. Her parents are going to buy shit that you can't, then they are going to start floating Lori money so that their grandchild doesn't have to be Bastard Reams, resident scruff just like his dad. Lori hates her parents, would resent the help and then would *finally* push the blade deep enough to end it all. What does that leave you with? A kid you can't support. You want to help the situation, Antics? Pour her another drink and let nature take its course."

One of the symptoms of Antics' condition is impulsive behavior. Anthony Reams didn't really think when he flipped the table over, he didn't have control when he started raining fists down across the bridge of Danny's nose, and was taken aback as he was being carried out of the Pescadero by security.

Roni, Hitomi, and Holly had lit up their cigarettes and Kim found herself turned off by the sub-generic tobacco in their cigarettes. Kim was on social sensory overload and everyone could tell, there was no argument when Kim excused herself to get some fresh air by herself. Kimberly Kanagawa meandered to a corner of the building where a bench had been illuminated by the sign out front. Kim sat and ran her fingers through her hair, trying to breathe out the panic.

The staggering truth was that Kim didn't want to be this way, she had no outward desire to be a crippling introvert; in fact, it was quite the opposite. On the walls of the room that she shared with Veronica, Kimmy had posters on her wall of her favorite musicians and songwriters. Roni's side of the room had pictures of friends, medals, and certificates; Kim's half had posters of Bruce Springsteen, David Bowie, and Freddie Mercury. It's said that if you want to know where the heart belongs, you follow where the mind goes when it wanders; Kim wanted to be a beloved musician and artist, to give great interviews, and be publically adored.

Finding out that what you'd call a frontwoman and principle songwriter has crippling social issues makes one wonder: "How does she function on stage?" Well, it's not easy, but it's something of a dependency on mood elevators. Kim tutored Gregg Chapman, Gregg Chapman would have nuclear emotional meltdowns, super nova type meltdowns. Once, during Chemistry, Gregg felt overwhelmed by the florescent light bulbs in the classroom, in his mind the only appropriate response was to pour all of the chemicals on the table and set them on fire. Now, it was fortunate that the only chemicals on the table were hydrogen peroxide and distilled water, but Gregg had to spend some time in a facility. When he got out, Kim volunteered to tutor him on what he missed in Chemistry as part of community service hours she needed for an advanced musician program over the summer. The Violet Nightfall was about to have their first show, Kim certainly couldn't tell Roni that she couldn't perform in front of everyone at Leslie Feld's party, so Kim let her guard down to Gregg. Greg had more intention of juggling severed mouse testicles than taking his meds, so since then, he'd been floating them to Kim. The Violet Nightfall's first show was an amazing success, Kim had a charisma that no one knew she ever had; she now carried the burden of having to rationalize keeping a deep dark secret hidden in her bed frame.

From the corner of her eye, Kim could see a boy approaching; he was sucking down a bottle of water, and he was gorgeous. His hair hung perfect, his jawline was serious, and the way he moved was vibrant and ethereal at the same time. As the bottle of water lowered, Kim saw the most striking blue eyes that had ever been set in the skull of another human being. She could feel the blood rush to her face.

"I'm sorry to bug you," the stranger smiled, "would it be OK if I joined you?"

"N-no," Kim stammered, "I mean, yes! No, you're not bugging me, yes you can join me." Kim could feel a throbbing in the side of her head. Ol' butter tongue was at it again.

"Thanks!" the stranger smiled and sat down, "I may have just found the answer to the question 'how many cigarettes are too many' and I needed some fresh air. This is my favorite spot to think about bands I've just seen when I come to the Pescadero."

"How many?" Kim tried to keep her cool.

"How many bands have I seen here? I've been coming since I was fourteen, a hundred or better, I guess."

"How many cigarettes are too many?" Kim was hating herself inside; the boy didn't understand her question, that has to be her fault, right? Why can't she communicate better?

"Oh!" The boy's eyes lit with understanding, he reached in his pocket for the cardboard pack of cigarettes, "it's actually a scientific number based on a couple of things. Your first variable is the strength of the cigarette. If you're smoking lights, or ultra-lights, then your threshold number goes up. If you're smoking full flavored or unfiltered, clearly your saturation of nicotine and tar is going to lower the number. So, you take your strength and compare it to the available ambient oxygen in any setting. If I'm inside the Pescadero, in the backstage area where the only ventilation is a crack in a broken window, less ambient oxygen, being outside is a different story. Then you have to take time into consideration, all of that information has to be measured and quantifiable, right? For argument's sake, let's say an hour is our window of consumption. According to my pack of Spirit Tradition, twelve cigarettes in one hour in a poorly ventilated space is too many."

"How much time have you had to think about that?" Kim asked, hoping that it came out right.

"I actually pulled all of that out of my ass. It's a gift that got me through just about every term paper that I ever had to write. With enough wordy bullshit, teachers stop questioning how much research you've done." The boy stuffed the cigarettes back in his pocket, "I'm Hendrix, by the way."

"Hendrix? Like, Jimi Hendrix?"

"Well, it was supposed to be 'Hendrick,' like my grandfather, but the nurse wrote 'Hendrix' and the name stuck."

"Do you play guitar? With a name like that, it would almost be destiny that you did."

"I do." Hendrix replied with a sincere chuckle, indicative that he'd never thought of it that way before.

"Are you in a band?"

"I am."

"Have you played here before?"

"Many times. How 'bout you? You have to be something of a music fan to come out to Geezer night at a bar in the slimy part of town. What are you in to?"

Kim could feel her stomach trying to turn itself inside out. Boys don't talk to Kim, she was sure there was some sort of understood agreement, Kim was a pariah not to be addressed. She was a ghost to males, and now a beautiful boy wants to know about her? Kim gulped hard to keep the vomit from making an introduction to the public.

"Are you OK?" Hendrix asked, leaning forward in concern.

"Yeah," Kim feigned a smile as the color drained from her face, "I don't think dinner is agreeing with me."

Kim fidgeted with her hands, trying to quell the awkwardness that was consuming her.

"I'm in a band too." Kim spat out.

"Really?" Hendrix had a cool enthusiasm that was to be envied.

"My twin sister and I, and our friends from school. We're in a band."

"What's the name of your band? Have I seen you guys play before?"

"the Violet Nightfall. We've been playing parties and stuff, haven't been playing club shows yet."

"The Violet Nightfall?" Hendrix scratched his chin, "I like that. It's graceful and invokes an interesting image."

"Really?"

"Yeah, I'd like to see you play some time. Have you guys thought about booking clubs and stuff?"

"...we haven't really called anyone ...a lot of our band is barely eighteen." Kim was thinly veiling her age.

"So?"

"So?" Kim was genuinely surprised, "Don't you have to be twenty-one to play shows at places that serve alcohol?"

"Only if you want to drink. Places have minors play all the time, including the Pescadero. See the X on your hand to get in? That's what they do if you want to play and you aren't twenty one."

There was a long, sobering pause as Kim's expression began to sour. It was slow and gradual, as if some unswallowable truth was basting the inside of her mouth. The Universe could be a cruel bastard, why would a good looking boy sit down and be genuinely interested in who she was?

"OK, I get it." Kim started to gather her purse and shake her head. It was so obvious, this guy was an asshole. Boys don't talk to Kim Kanagawa, if they do, it's usually to pick on her. How stupid could Kim be at any given moment, "I get it. It's funny. Ha. Ha. Ha."

"I think I'm missing something. This conversation just took a really weird turn and I don't know where."

"You know, I've been the butt of a lot of jokes; getting dressed up for dates that no one ever intended to take me on, having letters from the heart copied and posted all over the walls, I really should have seen this one coming. Thanks for not being *too* cruel."

"Kim," Hendrix reached out for her hand as the young woman stood, "I really have no idea what you are talking about."

"Hendrix, if that is your real name, I see the joke. We come in to a place like this, say we want to play and then the bar tender drums us out, and we all look like assholes. I get it, the music scene here is a little bit of a fraternity and you want to keep outsiders out. At least I caught on before I have some sort of breakdown, right?"

"The owner of the Pescadero's name is Hank Fine, give him a call on Monday afternoon, about four-thirty; he's guaranteed to be there because that's when the alcohol deliveries are. Tell him that you want to play for his next local bill; he's going to tell you that the show is booked, that he can't pay another band. Tell him that you'll take fifty bucks and the opening spot; tell him Hendrix Wilson told you to call. If he likes what he hears, he calls you back."

"God damnit, Hendrix, you really are some kind of asshole!" Kim erupted, jerking away from Hendrix violently.

"Have you been doing LSD?"

“The first words out of your mouth are some bullshit pseudo-science about cigarettes and you tell me that you can pull a long winded story that sounds good out of your ass. You just pulled another one out!”

Hendrix stood, slowly, trying not to agitate the young woman any more than she already was.

“I’m gonna go. I’m not sure what I did ...but, I’m sorry?”

“Kimmy!!! We did it!!!” A falsetto voice rang out from the parking lot, coming ever closer to the conflict in progress, “We booked a show!!!”

“Huh?” Kim turned to the ruckus, seeing her sister, Hitomi, and Holly running up to her.

“We booked a show!!! We’re going to be playing here!!!” Roni was screeching, jumping up and down.

“What? How?!” Kimmy was jumping with her.

“The band, those old guys, were carrying their stuff out back and we stopped them and talked to them about the show. I told them we were in a band and looking to book shows, asked who their contact was here, trying to sound all band manager like. The drummer told us to go inside and ask for some guy named Hank, he said we’d have to haggle, but we could play the opening spot for fifty bucks or something. If Hank likes us, he calls us back.

WE’REPLAYINGNEXTMONTHOHMYGODICAN’TBELIEVEIT!!!”

The color drained from Kim’s face.

“...Kimmy?” Roni’s tone changed to concern, “Are you OK?”

“She’s gonna hurl.” Hitomi chimed in.

It was apparent that Roni holding on to Kim’s shoulders was the only thing that was keeping Kim upright.

“Roni,” Kim looked to her sister with the most remorseful, pitiful look she could muster, “That boy must think I’m crazy.”

“Huh?” Roni turned to see the boy that Kim was talking about. He was handsome, his eyes seemed a little bewildered by whatever happened before Roni had arrived, but they were *so blue*.

“Uh, hi.” The boy waved at the new girls, “I’m Hendrix and I’m leaving now. Congratulations on the show and everything.”

“Roni.” Kim’s eyes were pleading with her sister to do something to make this OK.

Roni knew what she had to do.

“Hendrix, wait!” Roni closed the gap between herself and the surely traumatized boy.

Hendrix turned, his expression now something of impatience, a yearning to erase the last few moments out of his mind together.

“Listen, whatever happened back there, Kim was doing it for me.”

“So, it’s a sister thing? Going completely bat-shit crazy in the middle of a simple conversation?”

“Uh..” Roni’s mind raced, “Yeah! It’s a *twin* sister thing! See, *I* was supposed to be meeting a boy here. He’s really a jerk and so Kimmy was going to pretend to be me, let him get comfortable and then completely go berzerk on him. It’s Kim trying to keep her twin sister from getting a broken heart, you know?”

“That’s kind of noble. What made her think it was me, though?”

“That’s my fault, all I told her about the guy was that he had blue eyes, dark hair and was good looking. So, she clearly thinks you’re cute.” Roni punctuated the lie with a wink.

Hendrix looked over the girl's shoulder at Kim, maybe she did feel really bad about herself for going off as a mistake. Maybe that's what really close siblings did for each other.

"I really do have to go, but tell her not to worry about it. I'll try and catch your show." Hendrix waved as he left.

"Swing and a miss, Kimmy." Roni surrendered as she returned to her friends.

Kim's knees buckled a little, Roni had to race to catch her.

"Don't sweat it Kim, I gave him a good story. He might even come see us play."

"Really?" Kim's eyes perked up a little.

"Sure," Roni soothed, "He'll probably avoid you like herpes, but he might go. What did you say to him anyways?"

"Ugh..." Kim groaned, "I'll tell you in the car."

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## [Chapter Three]

*“and I open bloodshot eyes into florescent white / flip the siren, close the doors, and I am gone.”*  
- *“Artist in the Ambulance” - Thrice*

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The green digits of the Skank Tank’s radio said that the dial was on 105.9 and that it was 11:04 PM. Antics was behind the wheel, Hendrix was scrawling in the notebook that he took everywhere, Danny and Lori were asleep in the back passenger seats. The Skank Tank was loaded to the brim with their equipment: Echolocation was heading from a show. In the three weeks since the last Geezer Night at the Pescadero, the Badlands Bar & Grille needed an indie band to play for the new music focus they were trying on.

“I feel stupid when you are writing in that notebook.” Antics’ voice cut through the silence of late evening.

“Why?” Hendrix responded, half insulted.

“Because I know you are writing powerful words and beautiful lyrics,” Antics made eye contact for a brief second before turning back to the road, “When you are writing those words, I feel like I should say something profound ...it all comes out sounding like word snot.”

“Well, thank you for the compliment, but I actually hate the lyrics I write. They sound petty and juvenile.”

“Hendrix ...blow it out your ass.”

“What? I don’t like the words I write.”

“You’re either fishing for praise, which I’ve never known you to do, or you are really clueless how much your words mean to people.”

“Again, thank you, but I genuinely disagree.”

“Ok, asshole,” Antics felt he had the ammunition to win this argument, “What about Jen Healy?”

“What about Jen Healy and who is Jen Healy?”

“Jen Healy is that girl that flung herself off of the railing at Verona Dam.”

“Suicide girl?” Hendrix was a mixture of horrified and surprised, “What do my words have anything to do with Suicide girl?”

“Jen Healy was at our show at the Guilty Lizard the night before she flung herself off of that railing,” Antics made micro-eye contact again, “After she woke up in the hospital, she had to start playing guitar as therapy for the nerve damage she suffered from the fall.”

“And?”

“And, she took a sharpie and wrote a line from ‘Ghost of a Chance’ on her acoustic guitar.”

“That song sucks, I hate that I wrote it. Which line did she use?”

“It was ‘Is a love so lost that all it knows is sand or can it still kindle the ghost of a chance?’, powerful stuff.”

Hendrix groaned audibly. Everyone in the van at the moment was waging some sort of battle with themselves. Antics was hoping against hope that he’d be able to overcome his social status by doing something he loves; Danny is at war with himself over a perceived flaw in his psyche and Lori wore the evidence of her issues up and down her arms. Hendrix’s affliction was that his art was never good enough. His words, his sketches and his music couldn’t create the moods and the feelings that he felt; Hendrix felt that he was incapable of expressing himself and that ate at him.

“Ghost of a Chance is a song about a petty middle school fling and is hardly worth remembering.” Hendrix lamented.

“Well, to Jen Healy, it felt real enough to get her through her therapy. Maybe you need to see things from a view outside of your own head.”

“Ha! Look at you.”

“What?” Antics questioned.

“That was very profound of you.”

Antics struggled not to beam with pride. Anthony Reams didn’t get praise often and it was extra special coming from Hendrix. There were countless nights of being alone in a bedroom that was in a house that was falling apart, beating on pillows because his mom wasn’t going to spend money on drums and diving headlong into the world of comic books because it was an escape from the world he lived in; on those nights, a little pat on the back would have gone a very long way.

If you were to ask Antics Reams what the worst year of his life was, he’d tell you the year that he entered Seventh grade. He’d outgrown all of his clothes from the year before and his mom had accounted for any extra funds to go to visiting gun expos and hunting parties with her new husband, certainly not buying anything decent for her son to wear to school. The worst part of it was that there were no means for Antics to discover new music, outside of a Top 40 radio station that barely came in on a cheap radio. To this day, there are songs from those days will aggravate emotional scars in Antics’ psyche. All of us, each and every one of us, yearn for acceptance in one way or another. Those of us who embrace counter culture still yearn to embrace it with others. The year that Anthony Reams went into Seventh grade, there was no one who understood who he was or what he was going through. Let that set in for a second and contemplate how lonely it would be: he actually had no one.

“What is this asshole doing?” Antics muttered to himself.

“Is he going to move over into his own lane?” Hendrix leaned forward, closing his notebook.

“Jesus, he must be drunk.”

It’s been said and theorized that during moments of high-speed trauma and duress that the brain will actually slow down the events as they are being processed. Hendrix saw the vehicle wobble in its lane, the headlights dancing in his field of vision and then he saw those headlights coming towards him as if to say hello. He didn’t know what putting his hands up would do, as if the act of doing so would invoke divine intervention and the vehicle would stop. It didn’t. The vehicles collided and the sounds were an orchestra of chaos. Glass flew, metal twisted and rubber burned. Hendrix’s head hit something hard; he saw stars, tasted blood and was then enveloped by blackness.

Danny felt like a sock that had been in the dryer; it was violent, dark and hot. Danny had been dreaming of his son, sitting down and showing his little boy a few chords and watching him fumble with his own fingers and plucking at the strings. The chords were wrong; the notes were dull and sour. Every time he had this dream, the little boy looked different. Sometimes, the child would be identical to Danny, other times he’d look like his mother. It was a painful dream that was mercifully ended by his physical existence being tumbled around in the van.

The van came to a violent stop. Everything stood still; there was no sound except for the ringing in everyone’s ears and everything began to smell like a cocktail of engine fluids.

“Holy shit,” Danny was finally able to mutter, “Lori? Antics? Hendrix? Are you guys OK?”

Danny's eyes were finally able to adjust to the sparse light, his ears finally able to register that car horns were trying to out-shout each other and there was a searing pain every time he drew breath.

"Guys, are you OK? Say something!" Danny was beginning to panic, "Anyone?!"

With each of his senses regaining orientation, Danny was able to deduce that the van was on its side. Lori has been in the seat next to him and now she wasn't. The groan from the back of the van had come from Lori and she sounded hurt. Dan maneuvered to get to where she was and found her with his half-stack pinning her chest down; she was bleeding from the face.

"Lori!" Danny yelled out, frantically trying to move the stack from her chest; the way that Antics' drums and Lori's bass cabinet fell, he couldn't do much.

"Danny? What's going on?" It was Antics, he sounded confused.

"Lori is trapped, she's going to suffocate!" Danny called back.

Antics crawled over the wreckage from the front seat, which included a cruel maze of broken glass and sharp metal, to the back where Danny was trying to get gear off of Lori. Antics and Danny pushed and angled, trying to remove the pressure from Lori. Antics shoulder checked Danny's amplifiers and the Jenga configuration that was going to kill Lori finally broke. Danny pulled Lori out, out of the danger of being crushed again.

"Are you OK?" Danny asked Antics.

"I can move, but I can't see out of my left eye." Antics tried squinting his eye into function, "Hendrix?"

"Hendrix?" Danny echoed.

"Dan, look." Antics was pointing to a healthy river of blood pouring from the front seat.

Danny, being the most able bodied, climbed over the upturned seat that Hendrix had been sitting in. His friend had the dashboard pressed into his chest and his face was hardly a crimson silhouette of what it had been half an hour ago.

"Hendrix? Hendrix! Talk to me, buddy!" Danny didn't know how to get down to his friend to help him out of danger. If he did get down there, he'd have to step on Hendrix. What if his neck was broken? What if he was dead?

"Danny..." Hendrix coughed and moved his head slightly, "...I'm busted up pretty bad."

"Just stay with us, OK? We're going to get help!" Danny turned to Antics, "Keep talking to him, I'm going to try and get outside to flag someone down."

"OK." Antics replied, his face swollen badly, "Hurry, OK?"

\* \* \*

"Gus, this is either insanity or brilliance," Dessa Forshey, General Manager of WZRK "Z-Rock" said through a yawn, "This is good stuff."

Gus was an old school rocker, who had a style to match. He wore coke bottle glasses, a black tour jacket with a high sheen; he was stout, and his long grey hair hung in a ponytail. Ask anyone who played a guitar in town: Gus Shaver was a celebrity.

Dessa, on the other hand, wore the cookie-cutter garb of someone trying to be respected as a business person on the last generation's standards. She dressed very nice; her makeup was well done, her pant suit well ironed, and her hair was flawless. Still, despite all of her effort to look like an executive in the radio business, her style had no personality, and it showed.

Gus Shaver's late night radio show on Saturday, "The Ground Swell," featured local music and local musicians. If there was a band in the Duncannon Valley that didn't curse in their

songs, or could at least censor it so it was audible, they'd scrape and claw to get their CD's in the hands of "The Doctor" Gus Shaver and their compositions would hit the airwaves. Duncannon Valley didn't have a whole lot in the way of local tradition: businesses leaving town, Geezer Night at the Pescadero and a group of kids who weren't afraid to pick up and instrument and dream despite themselves. Gus wanted to support the traditions he could, if it meant sleeping hours that an owl would turn his nose to, it was worth the sacrifice.

"Thanks," Gus said out of the peripheral of his attention.

Gus and Dessa were outside of the Mercy Memorial Hospital, the medical center that services the Duncannon Valley and the Kissinger Hills areas. That hospital was the great equalizer between the two areas; Duncannon Valley was a very blue collar location and Kissinger Hills is best described as posh; when people from either side of the hill needed medical attention, they came to Mercy Memorial.

Gus's pudgy fingers were punching a number in to his cumbersome cellphone. In radio lingo, Gus was going to be doing a "phone drop," or using his cellphone to go on air from where he was.

"Z-Rock," the voice crackled in Gus's ear, "This is Rooster."

"It's Gus, you ready?"

"We're good to go," Rooster confirmed, "You're going on after 'Ironside' by Ghostworks."

"Thanks."

The hard rock sounds of local music began playing in Gus's ear in lieu of Rooster's voice, he was patched in and ready to go. You never really understand how long three minutes can be until you've worked in radio; sixty seconds can be the most agonizing crawl of time when you're waiting for your turn to go on air and be an entertaining voice to listen to.

"You're listening to the Ground Swell on Z-Rock and I'm your main man: The Doctor, Gus Shaver. That was the hot new track from local rock-monsters, Ghostworks, called 'Ironside.'" Gus' voice was steady as a rock, despite juggling the events of an entire evening in his head, "Z-Rock is outside of Mercy Memorial Hospital where the band 'Echolocation' has been admitted. Listeners and friends of the Ground Swell has called in and let us know that they will be here all night to support their friends, until word that everyone in the band has been reported as being in stable condition. Right now, all we know is that the band was in a head-on collision at high speeds. Z-Rock and the Ground Swell are going to be right here, supporting the vigil, until word comes down. Coming up after the break: Echolocation and their first track, 'Emoetry,' on Z-Rock!"

"...and you're clear, Gus." Rooster called through the phone receiver.

"Thank's Rooster," Gus exhaled deeply, "call me back at the top of the hour, I'm going to try and figure out what's going on."

The Finch's Collision tow truck pulled into the Mercy Memorial Hospital parking lot and a scruffy, skinny kid jumped out of the cab. He was dressed in a cut-off garage shirt, his long hair was roughly captive underneath a plain ball cap and his facial hair was a curation of pride for being grown. This kid was Chuck Finch, road-worn and grease stained as his reputation promised. When Chuck wasn't slinging tow chains and rebuilding engines for his father's garage, he was the bass player for "Home Like Hell" and Antics' classmate in the Emotional Support program.

"Chuck," Jake Dalton, guitar for Home Like Hell called out, "We're over here!"

Chuck's natural demeanor was a subdued intensity; he walked slowly and didn't say much, but his eyes held a fire that scared most people who didn't know him. For those reasons, Chuck was the perfect bass player for a hard rock band: he didn't want the spotlight and his riptide personality drove the music to new intensity. As Chuck joined his friend, Jake was already in mid conversation with Derek Keller and Luke Pressman from Ghostworks and Ricky Chalmers from Oversight about the mayhem that drew them together.

"Pedro stopped by," Derek started before taking a drag from his cigarette, "His girlfriend is friends with some girl from Foster. Apparently the guy driving the other car broke up with his old lady and was going to show her what was up by shooting up and driving to her house. The Skank Tank was passing by when the guy tweaked."

"Did you tow the van, Chuck?" Luke asked.

"Yeah," Chuck's voice was a low rumble, "the van is totaled, all of their equipment is busted."

"All of it?" Ricky pressed.

"All of it. The van interior is covered in busted wood and blood. Dad will look again, but I don't think there is anything that can be salvaged."

"Christ..." Luke lamented, "That's their entire life in that van and now it's totaled because of some lick-bag getting hopped up and behind the wheel..."

"We should talk to Hank at the Pescadero," Derek spoke up, "see if he'd let us hold a concert for those guys or something."

"No good," Chuck intervened, "Pescadero can't hold a concert since Pedro quit and Lori is in the hospital."

"...Shit, he's right." Luke confirmed.

"Well, it wouldn't hurt to ask around, see if someone will let us do something. Can you guys talk to the venues you play? We'll talk to our guys." Ricky Chalmers piped up.

Everyone nodded to the affirmative, any other response would be sacrilege; it was how the town worked. The losers were musicians and the losers took care of each other. Right now, Duncannon Valley's favorite losers were in hospital beds and their friends would come together to mend their spirits if they couldn't mend their possessions.

The hours passed and Hendrix's mom was kind enough to the people outside to let them know what was going on with her kids. Anthony was the first to be admitted from the emergency room, as he was the least injured. A miracle, considering that he was driving. Then came Danny, who was a little more critical than Antics. No one could get word about Lori, the Marshall family made sure that their daughter's medical predicament was kept under close guard. After six or so hours, Mama Wilson asked everyone to go home and get some sleep, Hendrix would have to go into surgery.

Lori's hair sprawled over the hospital pillow as she slept. Antics couldn't help but notice that she looked remarkably like an angel, an emotionally flawed angel who wore the weary of the world in darkened circles under her beautiful brown eyes. Lori's rest was medically induced and tubes were pumping liquid life into her veins, but the girl worried about so much and the sterile solace of the hospital was almost a peace for her boyfriend, who held a one man vigil in the chair at her bedside. Lori's eyes opened and a subtle groan escaped her cracking lips.

"Hey, babe." Antics choked out. How else are you supposed to greet someone who'd been in Death's arms? Even those words sounded petty, but what else do you say?

"I'm ...in a hospital?"

“Yeah,” Antics exhaled deeply, trying to extinguish the flame the made his tears burn, “we were hit by a driver who was using.”

“...am I alright?”

“I can’t get a straight answer; they keep talking like you have a punctured lung.” Antics kept his voice low, as if exuberance would exacerbate Lori’s situation.

“...how’s everyone else? How are you?”

“Well, Danny has a broken nose and a big cut on the back of his head. I had shards of windshield dug out of my eye.” Antics pointed to the pile of gauze that had been taped to his left eye.

“What about Hendrix?”

“...Hendrix is still in surgery.” Antics’ could no longer hold his tears back, hot streams of emotion pioneered their way down his cheeks, “He got the worst of it, even had a seizure in the ambulance on the way here. The doctors are trying to relieve pressure and bleeding in his brain.”

“Jesus.”

Lori’s eyes became momentarily too heavy to fight and her eyelids sagged. There was a mass of awkwardness in the room, almost tangible. Antics chewed at the inside of his mouth, meditatively, trying to find the right way to broach the subject.

“Lori, listen.” Antics spoke up, unclear of where his next words would take him, “I overheard your Mom talking to the Doctor. The doctor said you had lost the baby.”

“Huh,” Lori’s morphine gaze was at the ceiling, “Bummer.”

“When were you going to tell me that we were pregnant?”

“...I find it funny when guys say that.” her tone became quizzical, “We’re’ pregnant. There really isn’t any ‘we’ to it, when you think about it.”

“When were you going to tell me?”

“Do you want the truth?” There was a distant sadness in Lori’s eyes as her gaze met Antics’, it could almost be mistaken for clarity.

“I do.”

“I wasn’t going to tell you, at all. It wasn’t your problem.”

Antics’ hands tensed, gripping the pole of his IV distributor, his jaw clenching. Anthony Reams was preparing himself for another accident, one just as brutal and damaging; the only difference between the one he’d survived and the one that was coming was that the damage would be entirely emotionally this time around.

“Why weren’t you going to tell me, Lori?”

“What answer is going to hurt you the least, Anthony? Would you like me to tell you that we’re two kids who aren’t ready to be parents and that I was going to save you the trouble until I could take care of the problem myself? Or would you like me to tell you that I was so overwhelmed by the constant pressure of us having to move in together that I helped myself to my mom’s liquor cabinet and lost myself in the arms of a friend who took advantage of the situation?”

Sometimes when people are dying or in critical situations, they claim to have had an “out of body experience.” Anthony Reams felt like he was floating above Lori Marshall and himself, watching it all from a distance. Physically, Antics was fine; emotionally? The kid was nearly off of the rails. Pop quiz: what’s the appropriate reaction here? Do you cry? What’s the point? Do you lash out physically? The girl was in the hospital and Antics wasn’t the type. A numbness seized Antics’ physiology; he couldn’t feel and he couldn’t process what he’d been told. A side

effect of the trauma he was experiencing was that he had more focus and clarity than his affliction would ever allow.

“Which friend?”

“No one that matters at the moment, I guess.”

“I’m going to go now.”

“Anthony, are you OK?”

“You’re an asshole, Lori.”

“You’re going to be fine, Anthony.”

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