

## 12. JEERS

A few day later, I recover. I feel as if I have to try on a bunch of different identities until I again find the one that is my own. I realize that the road manager is a total asshole. He is acting as if it is his band. Jimmy finally gets through to me. He has been having trouble with his cell phone. He tells me that the guy is insufferable.

I have to fly out there to head off a crisis. I meet them in Seattle. I send the road manager packing.

“You can’t fire me,” he tries to tell me.

I am smart enough to bring his contract with me. “Sorry, but you’re working for me. And you ignored my phone calls. You’re finished!”

I plan to hang on through Vancouver. They need a suitable replacement. The organization is too complex for the band to do on their own. None of the others can take over.

The band is selling out medium-sized venues. Places that hold around 1,000 people. Cam is getting more than restless. I know that I will have to get him in the studio soon.

I pull him aside, “I know what you’re feeling, sport. I’ve almost gone crazy myself. I just need you to hang on for three more weeks. Then we’re going to have you in a really nice studio in the Tennessee mountains.”

After Vancouver, I feel that I need to stay with them. We head on south through Idaho. Then it’s Denver and further east. This is my job. I accept it for what it is.

I notice that there is a Memphis gig on the circuit. I wonder if I will still be with them for that show. I can hardly imagine meeting Hattie. I know that my cousin will show up. Maybe I should head back before that point.

Jimmy teases me one night, “You’re going to high tail it before Memphis?”

“I didn’t think that you’d notice.”

“Hattie, Hattie, Hattie. That’s all that you ever talked about. I bet that she’s waiting back there for you.”

“I bet that she doesn’t even know anything,” I say in my defense.

Jimmy says, “If your cousin Robbie has his way, he would have blabbed all about you to her. It would be his way of getting revenge.”

I am trying to figure out when I really said anything to Jimmy. I guess that I just went on when I first hit Chicago. Hattie seems like she never was real. We haven’t kept in contact. I’m the only one who carries a torch. I’ve already had an uncomfortable time with Brenda. I can imagine what a Hattie confrontation is going to do for my psyche. After the desert, I should avoid such an upset.

A few of the Midwest gigs are a little shaky. The crowds are enthusiastic, but not as large. Cam lets it affect him. But by Kansas City he comes alive. And he is just crazy in St. Louis. This seems like my cue to leave. We’ve got Little Rock and then Memphis.

That night in St. Louis I feel that I am at a crossroads. Again, it is Jimmy and I busting down a bar not far from the auditorium where I played.

Jimmy asks, “Are you going to stay with us?”

“I don’t know how I can’t.”

He kids me, “You’re such a weakling.”

“And I thought about nothing but Hattie in the desert.”

He asks, “I thought that it all was past.”

“That’s why I’m afraid to keep on. This could be ego-deflating. I’m not like you and Cam. I can’t go write a song about it. If she busts me, I’m going to just crack.”

Jimmy works to comfort me, “It won’t be that bad.”

In Little Rock, I feel that I have missed my opportunity to leave. I am numb as I watch a marvelous performance by the band. Cam is in rare form.

Afer the show, Jay, Jimmy and I go looking for a place to drink. We find this hip bar, sort of the place where college beats might go to hang out.

“It’s only a few hours to Memphis. I feel it’s impossible to turn back now.”

Jimmy kids me, “You could take a razor to your throat in the bathroom.”

I counter, “For bad or worse, I have to go there and see what happens.”

Jay wonders, “How bad can it be? It’s not like you’re going to move to Memphis.

You’ve got a life.

“That’s what I think I just feel that she can do it to me. One touch.”

I look around the bar. There’s a girl in a grey t-shirt with short hair. She has that look that stops me dead. Just a purity. It frightens me.

I want to give her a bear hug. I want to protect her from the world. The wrong guy, and she’s going to be bitter about life after that. I don’t want it to happen.

Jimmy notices that I am looking at her. “Is that Hattie?”he asks.”

“Quit teasing me?”

Jimmy asks, “Is she another innocent girl that you’re trying to save from the world?”

“I don’t know. I just like the way that she looks. So positive about the world.”

Jay tells me, “Walk over to her.”

I stand up and walk over to her table, “You’re look sort of friendly. What are you writing in the book?”

“My memoirs.”

I question her, “You don’t seem like you could have enough experience for a memoir. What is in there?”

“I make up stuff if I need to.”

“Make up stuff about what?” I ask

She doesn’t look up from the book.

“It’s about my lovers.”

I wonder how many lovers she could actually have.

“How many lovers do you have right now?”

She counts with her fingers. “Eight or ten.”

“All at once?”

She smiles, “It’s not like I’m immoral. These are guys that I care about. I don’t know how it happens. I tell myself that these guys are no good. But there’s something that turns me on every time.”

I pry, “Then why do you write about it? Isn’t the experience just too over whelming?”

“I love the experience. And every time it’s different. I’m just trying to figure out why I do what I do.”

I feel that she is trying to exclude me because I ask too many questions. I also sense that she is exaggerating. She wants to say something nasty just to shock me. I am her audience. She is the same with herself. She wants to do something really nasty to shock herself. We have become one and the same.

Then there are the men that come on to her. She can't help it at all. She just gives in to them for no reason at all. If there was a reason like with me, she would be able to reject them. She writes so that she can find out what it the reason. But she also wants to prevent herself from knowing. Otherwise, she could stop. She doesn't want to stop.

I want her something fierce. But I can't have her. I should feel privileged that she shares her ideas with me.

I glance over at Jimmy. He is teasing me from the other end of the bar.

I ask her name.

"Julie."

"That's a pretty name."

She gives me a quizzical look, "You're trying to hit on me."

"I'm just talking." She looks even cuter after hearing her talk about her writing. I imagine her embellishing the story. I want to be one of her character.

I am doing everything that I can to ease the pre-Hattie jitters. Julie a sufficient distraction. I admire the fact that she writes. But she writes to encourage her helplessness. I would hope that it would be the opposite.

Her hopeless condition is turning me on. I should be scared away. It only makes me want her more. Memphis looms closer and closer.

Julie promises to visit me in Atlanta. I give her my card.

I walk back to the bus with Jay and Jimmy. We leave for Memphis. We get into Memphis at 3. We go to the hotel and we crash. Cam and Steve had been sleeping while we were in the bar. They get up and go to the rooms. They seem disoriented.

When we get to the venue, nothing seems too unusual. I keep expecting to run into Hattie on the street.

I call up Robbie. I tell him that I'm going to leave a couple of ticket at the door for him. He plans to bring Hattie with him.

After the show, I get them backstage. I pretend that I am unaffected by Hattie's arrival. I pat Robbie on the shoulder. I give her a hug. She squeezes me close."

"I've missed you," she tells me.

"Your hair is darker," I tell her.

"Yes, it is," she says. "I wanted to look more serious."

"You do," I tell her.

There are now these nervous pauses.

I ask her, "Do you want to get away somewhere to talk?"

She looks uncomfortable, "It might not be such a good idea."

We end up going to get coffee. Robbie leaves us along.

"I know I had a problem. But you weren't going to be the one to tell me. Now I'm clean. I've got a guy."

"You like your life?"

“I do. We could never go back to being together. I was weak.”

“I thought that we were the only strong thing in your life.”

She corrects me, “You thought too much about yourself.”

I feel that this is not at all the same as Brenda. I cared for Hattie. She couldn’t deal with too much love. I move my hand over so that it is covering hers. She looks at me in the eyes.

“Do you want to come back to my place?”

I don’t say anything. I nod my head.

All this is for old time’s sake. I know that we can’t go back. I am trying to avoid nostalgia. That ruined it with Brenda.

I realize that I have never cared for someone as much as I care for Hattie. We were never together for that long. But it has an urgency. She kisses me. We sit in silence for a half an hour. We don’t do anything else.

“I can’t”, she tells me. “If we sleep together, it’s going to be forever. You walk out, you’ll walk out with my soul.”

I sit with her on the couch. I hold her until the sun comes up. She is asleep. I stand up and let myself out.

I had hoped for something more dramatic. Either a total rejection or a deeper pledge of love. I walk back to the hotel.

Nashville is the next stop. Jason is going to meet up at the gig. I’m going to stay at his place. I have had my meeting with Hattie. I am incomplete. It is not the love that I have been seeking.

Jason gives me a hug. He is glad that we are in town. I tell him about all my adventures since I last saw him. I can rest easy with Jason around. He realizes that things are not right. It is obvious that I am all wound up. He leaves me to wrestle with my pain.

We have one more show until Atlanta–Chattanooga. I am glad to be going home.

The band needs to get off the road. I’ve only been with them for part of the tour, and I am exhausted. They are going to take a couple of weeks off, and then head to Tennessee.

Cam has felt his life spinning out of control. But he has been writing some great stuff since the first album. He shows up at the studio with the most stupendous cut to date. I am at a loss for words.

“Desert Rose, stay in bloom. You’ve kept me clean, sweet perfume. You’ve been the flower in my life, now you grace the tomb.”

Jay reaches for his guitar and does some slide work. You can feel the haunting desert breezes.

“Desert Rose, I hear your song, and in the windstorm, you’re blowing strong. All around me is bedlam, you stay in tune.”

He reaches deeper in himself for the transition to the chorus. “I’ve given my life to you. I’m still not through. What kind of love is this if you won’t set me free?” He has given himself to the desert. He has believed in its sweet rescue. But it has denied him. The rose has deluded him. He works to rise above his defeat.

His voice now hits his higher register, almost a falsetto. This is the crowning moment of his career when he gambles it all for salvation.

“I am lost but I am found, a drifter’s trust, I’ll stay around. I’ll take the worst, you’re not

alone, I give my heart, my flesh and bone.”

“A Drifter’s Trust” is the song that completes the album. Cam has been struggling with it. And now he delivers. The song builds to its climax. Then it fades out with him saying, “A drifter’s trust, I’ll give that to you.” He feel emptied out. Here he is a successful young performer. But it is nowhere near enough to express the hollow. Nothing has touched him.

Some might ignore the struggle. They’d point to the privilege in his life. They wouldn’t understand, not in the least. He is already so far out there. Everyone else hides behind his possessions. Cam Pearson is not like that. He has crossed over into this world of silence. That is why he hears music so acutely.

There is no soap opera here to make sense of the turmoil. This is not a psychologist’s dream. You either get it or you don’t. It’s not an intellectual puzzle. Listen to the damn tunes, and it will all make sense. He has gone as far out as possible without cracking.

The band goes on the road for six months to push the new album. They’ve had loads of time to recover from their travels. Cam calls me when they are in DC. He needs me to meet them in Baltimore.

“I’m not sure that I want to do this anymore.”

I try to be sympathetic, “Do you want to end the tour right now.”

I am ready to cancel all the dates.

“I don’t want to mess it up for the other guys. I know that they’ve come this far”

“You’ll hang on.”

He agrees to stay on the tour. I need to baby sit him until things fall into place.

I wish that someone could come in my life and pull together the loose ends. It’s been a while since I was in Memphis. It was a terrible anti-climax for me. I’ve been doing stuff for the band to get my mind off my troubles. I’m just going crazy.

I look at Cam and I realize how easy it is to let it all go. One push either way. I’m glad that someone needs me.

After the Baltimore show, Cam tells me that he just needs to rest back at the hotel. Steve and Jay have already gone out for some food. I find Jimmy.

“You’re still the same old boy you used to be,” he tells me.

“The album is doing well. It’s only been out a few weeks. Already the reviews are great, and it is being picked up by college radio.”

Jimmy wants to talk about the business, “What about the commercial stations?”

“A few of them have got us in rotation. I just think that you need to tour more. If they see the numbers, they’re going to have to play it more. I know some of the stations are sponsoring the shows. It’s going to all work out for the best.”

He tells me, “I hope so. We need a break.”

“Patience is the key. You don’t want to rush things too much.”

“Cam is freaking out!” his face tells the story.

“I know. That’s why I’m here.”

“Maybe you needed to get here sooner. He may just pull the plug on the whole shebang.”

I say, “That would really suck. We have to keep this ship afloat.”

Jimmy reminds me, “The ship is Cam.”

I know all too well that is the case. Everything is based around the fragile psyche of the

man himself. He can feel the weight of the world on him. I want to shoulder some of the load. But he is turning more into him. He sits in the hotel room all the time. He only comes out to get on the bus or to go to the show. This is no life.

The tour starts to pay off, A number of commercial stations add the single to heavy rotation. The album has already sold 150,000. But Cam wants out. They're on the verge of solid success. And it's all sputtering around me.

They need to get on the road again if they are really to take advantage of the moment. The single is hot. The album is getting some heavy endorsements. Major artists are name-dropping the Sun Runners in interviews. It's time to strike now..

I need to decide how I am going to handle Cam's situation. He is the band. Without him, there are no Sun Runners. I got into this for fun. Now it is getting to be a burden. What must it be for Cam?

The compromise appears to be one more tour. And Cam lives up the billing. I have never seen the man so on fire. It is as if he realizes that his release from imprisonment is imminent.

After the final tour, the band calls it quits. At least Cam goes off on his own. He contemplates a solo career, but only after a long sabbatical. He needs to get away.

The other three aren't ready to pack it in. They have one of the best singer-songwriters in the country. Jimmy has matured on the road. He and Jay are such natural players together. Steve is a player. He's not at all ready to pack it in. This is his life.

I back off on management. But I help them get a new deal. I am putting out the first album. I have an option on future work. I trust their judgement, and they have faith in me.

Julie shows up in Atlanta. If I can manage a band to success, then maybe I can manage her life to some kind of order. I accept her offer. I let her stay at my place. I have finally moved out of my mother's house. I am making payments on my own place.

I take Julie to my lucky coffee shop. This is where I first discussed music with the Sun Runners.

"What can you do for my life?" she asks me.

"I don't know. You came looking for me. I didn't come looking for you."

She shows me an unhappy face, "I thought that you were good for something."

I want to help her the best that I can.

"What happened to your 10 lovers?"

Julie answers me, "I told you that I was prone to exaggeration. I've had 10 lovers. But never all at once. All that is past."

She hands me a pile of papers. "What's this?" I ask.

"It's my notes."

"Wow. It seems like a small library." I try to organize what she has given me in the hope that I might make sense of it all. It is a mish-mash of long narration and fragmentary notes.

"These are you memoirs?"

She guides me, "Up to this point in my life."

"Wouldn't it be better to get more experience before you get too serious about writing?"

She laughs, "This stuff is full of experience."

I imagine that she is going to lead me through a detailed anatomy lesson. My lips are

watering. We head back to my place after hanging out for a while. I have a guest room that I set up for her. She tells me that she's going to take a shower and rest for a while.

I join her in the living room later in the evening.

"Are you going clubbing tonight?"

"I'm just going to take it easy."

She reasons that this is a good opportunity to confess all her sins to me. I am a willing listener, especially if I plan to edit her memoirs.

"I think that I have a taste for danger."

I ask, "Are you trying to explain why you just came here on a whim?"

She giggles, "No, my ex."

"I thought there were 30 ex's."

"I said 20."

"20, " I repeat.

"It was all exaggeration," she admits,

I smile, "You're kidding."

"I want to talk to you about Adam."

"Who's that?"

"My ex."

"What about Adam?" I answer back

She describes him, "He was studying finance. He worked in a bank. He has prospects. But he was weird. A little bit sadistic."

"But he turned you on anyway."

"Something like that. He helped me study for an accounting exam. We studied for days. When I thought about him, I realized that I had developed a thing for him."

I challenge her, "You believed your own shit?"

"Yeah."

I fill in, "Then the real Adam started to come out. How he liked to tie you up. How he enjoyed degradation."

She interjects, "Now you're the one who's exaggerating, but you get the picture."

"So he leaves you in the house one day and goes off to work in the bank."

She can't take my humor. "Quit that."

"Or you're going to hurt me too. How yummy!"

"Let's move on to something else," she requests.

"You were the one who brought up Adam."

Pretty soon, it is obvious that she wants to cast me in her memoirs. Rail thin with striking features, I can hardly resist. She is a sylph out of an art film. But I hardly want to give in to her taste for the bizarre. I also envision her trying to move in here. She is a welcome visitor for the time being. But I don't see this going on much past two weeks.

On the first really lonely night, I am afraid that a kiss will take me down the winding road. She really has a face to move heaven and earth. The frisky little rabbit grin. I have already been seduced by her take on purity. Her pouts. Her little girl eyes. Her waves. I am smitten. But that is my nostalgia talking.

I have already been down that road in a quite disastrous fashion with Brenda. The risks

are far less. But her proximity is immediate. I just lean and over, I can run my hands along those slinky hips. That may be her best feature. She is so wiry. She gestures to me in what is almost an S. I am taken in immediately. WOW! WOW! WOW!

Her incredible raw talent makes her vulnerable for the next jerk down the line. I can tell that my time with her is only rental. This has nothing to do with a permanent commitment. Although she would die for unconditional love, forever is quite literally right now, over and out!

After her two weeks of residency, I remind her that it is time to hit the road. I drive her to the plane. In my car, we indulge in my first kiss with her. She has a sweetness that I could definitely explore at another point in my life.

Her last words are, “See you in the summer.”

I answer back, I’m not even sure what my name is going to be this summer. But I can hope.

It’s a Saturday night. I drive to Athens to see Of Montreal at the 40 Watt. My friend Benjy is opening up with his band Boulevard. Benjy is his usual demure self. I love it!

The crowd are wild for local faves Of Montreal. When they play “The Party’s Crashing Us” the crowd goes super wild. I am right in the middle dancing with everyone else—all the freaks and losers! Us indie kids!

“You’re such a mystery I just want to stand and stare.”

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My mother has been on my case for the past week. I’ve skipped a couple of days at community college. I’ve been a little glum. I close the door to my room and stay in there and listen to music.

She comes in my room without knocking

“Aren’t you going to do something with you life? All you do is go see these band concerts.”

“I’m still in college. What do you want me to do?”

“In college,” she says angrily. “You’re taking a couple of classes. At this pace you might graduate in 2025.”

I laugh, “You’re exaggerating.”

She remains stern, “Do the math.”

Maybe she is right. I just can’t get motivated. I went to college so that I could figure out what I might like as a major. I don’t seem to be good at much of anything. What could I possibly do to make things better.

I haven’t smoked weed for about 6 years. I hardly drink. What can I do to turn my life around. I can’t stop listening to music.

I slip on the new Walkman CD.

The first song is “Louisiana” I love the strained vocals of Hamilton Leithauser’s vocals. This is what I need. The singer has a destination. Listening to the song gives me a sense of purpose. It also captures my lethargy. It has a Mexican feel with the horns. “Never saw the morning, slept through half the day, there’s thunder and lightning a hundred miles away. I want to find my Louisiana.

“Another One Goes By” summarizes my feelings completely. I don’t want to leave the house. There are things going on outside. I’m not part of them. I just feel complacent. I wish



that I hadn't missed class this week. I am feeling useless.

I need a cause. If there was something that inspired me more. There is not much that I find uplifting. That is why I need my music. I need to live through the ups and downs of the artist.

My textbooks are on the desk. I don't want to open them up. If I want to figure out what is the price of tea in China, I can find it on the internet.

Hattie is the only good thing in my life. I met her at a café near here. Some of the high school kids hang out there with their dog eared copies of Rimbaud and Keouac. They are trying to be beatniks. I try to keep out of their way.

Hattie is at Georgia State. She is serious about herself. She takes care of her hair. She has fantastic clothes. She tells me that she is studying philosophy. But I think that she really wants to be a lawyer. She dresses up just to go to the grocery store.

I decide that I need to go out. I need to meet Hattie. She will perk me up.

"Have you gone to class this week,?" she asks me.

I drink my coffee. It is my stimulant, my drug.

"I've been thinking about things at home. Important shit."

"The meaning of life is that you've got to get out of community college. That's not going to happen if you don't go to class."

I tell her, "You sound like my mother."

"It's great to listen to music all the time. But it's not going to give you the answer for your life. You could even get a part-time job."

"I've got a job. I sell stuff on the internet."

She smiles back at me, "You have an answer for everything."

"Want to come back to my place and fool around. We could listen to music. I've got some new CD's"

"Let me make one thing clear. I'm not going to have sex with you again until you turn your life around."

"I promise!" I cross my heart.

She pushes me. "You're silly."

I ride back to my place in her car. I put my bike in the trunk. She has a plan for her life. I just have a plan for Hattie.

We are lying on my bed. I've just put on a CD.

"What is that?" she wonders.

"It's this band from Atlanta. The Sun Runners. It's their second CD."

She says, "Listen to the singer. He sounds like Neil Young. That's what the music reminds me of."

"His name is Cam Pearson. He's this young poet guy. They are blowing up all over the country.

"I think that I've heard people talk about them. I'm surprised that I haven't heard their stuff."

"It's cool"

"Are you going to that festival in Chicago? There's all these bands that are going to be there?"

I tell her, "I could stay with my uncle. But I don't think that I could afford to get up there."

"I could drive," she is all excited.

I reach over to give her a kiss. She acts all involved. We are so comfortable together. Both of us are almost naked when my mother bursts in the door.

"Sorry," she says. "I thought that you were alone beating off."

She doesn't close the door immediately. She stays there gawking at us. It is giving me the creeps. When she closes the door, Hattie pulls her clothes on.

"I shouldn't have done this."

I tell her, "Don't mind my mother. It's OK with her. She's just a bit of a voyeur."

Hattie is freaking out, "She gives me the creeps. I should go."

I want her to stay and hang around. I could play some more stuff for her.

She tells me, "I'll see you later."

"Do you want to go see a show tonight?"

"Maybe. I've got to work at the restaurant tomorrow. It's going to be a double."

I try to sympathize. I need to find a job. Maybe!

Even if she's not going to come with me, I plan to get out. I am going to go crazy if I have to stay in here any more. I think about watching a movie in the living room. My mother is gone so I make myself something to eat.

I wish that I played music. I want to get money just for being a listener. I have no idea what I am doing. I watch a stupid movie about high school. I might as well go to the café and listen to gossip. At least the kids there pretend to be cool. I hated high school. I dreamed about leaving. I've been out for years. But the sign telling me what to do still hasn't come on. I've got to go to class sometime. Next week.

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I know the valet at the club on a first name basis. He drives up in my new red Lexis sport car. He hands me my keys, "Here's the car, Steffe."

I ask him, "Something smell's strange. Is something in the trunk?"

The valet name is Tom. He smiles, "You're kidding!"

"No, I'm serious."

I usually have the valet park my car. The one day that I leave in a parking lot, I come out and someone has broken in. It turns out to be some twirp of a kid. He steals my electronic organizer. He tries to assume my identity. He has my key too, and he hangs out at my place when I'm gone.

I've finally gotten a studio built in my basement. I manage a band, the Sun Runners. They're coming over to do some recording later in the week.

Tonight Rachael, Sly, and Stony are coming over for drinks. Stony is a movie stunt guy. He also plays drums. We're calling it a pool party. I'm going to get to see Rachael in her swimming suit. I can't wait.

I get a call from Wayne, my assistant,

"There's some guy from Chicago asking about you. He claims that you owe him money."

"I've paid them. I've got the papers. I think he's a friend of my cousin's. He got himself

fired, and now he's trying to take it out on me."

"He asked me if you got his calling card. I didn't know what he meant."

"I think that's an old joke from Mafia movies. I'll take care of it."

I'm waiting for a dead body to turn up. I remember the smell from the trunk. I open it just to make sure. I even run my fingers along the insides to see if there are any traces of blood. I don't want the police to be doing a follow up.

Rachael calls me. She asks if she can get in my place early.

"Honey, I'll be over there in a couple of hours."

"I want to swim now while the sun is still up."

"I'll have Rosa let you in."

I call Rosa.

"Mr. Steffe, I have to go in an hour."

"Just let Rachael in. She'll be OK by herself. She's bringing a couple of friends. You know Stony and Sly."

Rosa agrees to let them all in.

"If they mess up the place, don't blame me."

"I'll take the fall," I say.

The next morning I have to admit the place has gone to the dogs. Rosa is going to kill me.

I see a girl waiting on the side of the road. She smiles. I pull over.

"Nice car." she says

I ask her, "Do you want a ride?"

She takes a second look at the car and jumps in.

"What's your name," I ask her?

"Rachael."

They have cornered me and caught me. I tried to escape. I can't run any longer. They want their suffering on stage. They escort me up there. They jeer me, they spit on me, they even throw things at me.

I face them from the stage. The cameras are on me.

"Do you recognize him?"

It is like a basketball game in overtime. They all scream, "We know him?"

"Who is he?"

They all scream, "The evil one."

I will give them what they want. I will show them pain. I will show them temptation. I will show them suffering. The first nail goes in.

"He is the one!" they roar at the top of their lungs. The building quakes.

The music begins!