

4. SUMMERTIME BLUES

I need a job for the summer. I've been out of school for almost six months. I can only earn so much helping Luke. I'm going to need a lot money if I want to go back to college in the fall.

My mother screams at me, "Your uncle can get you a job driving a truck."

My father was a totally unreliable guy. But his brother is a serious businessman even if does a few thing that are a little shady. So I move to Chicago for the summer to live with my uncle.

I am with Uncle Vince who is driving a semi-truck loaded with cigarettes. By bringing in cigarettes from Indiana we can avoid the heavy tobacco taxes in Illinois. The destination is Chicago. The plan is to avoid the Illinois State Police patrols on the Interstate. They had been bringing in loads from Gary, but they've all been stopped on I-80. Our plan is to head up route 1 up to Kankakee. Just as we get off I-64 at Grayville, this county sheriff rolls up on us. My uncle is sure that he has already been paid off. But I guess that is simply not the case. He confiscates the truck, and take us both to jail. So we're sitting in the county jail in Grayville waiting for one of my uncle's associates to get us out.

We are praying that the local cops don't call in the State Revenue agents or the Illinois State Police. This is supposedly the weak link in the whole chain. We've got to act fast. There's a whole convoy right behind us. If they don't get things straightened out, there may be hell to play. I'm just worried that I'm going to have to rot in this place. Or worse, I'm going to get sent to Joliet. All I wanted was spending money.

They've purposely put us in separate cells. I am in there with the local freak, I mean this guy is a freak. He's talking to me about prison sex. I'm pretty sure that he is pulling my leg. But it is scaring me just thinking about it.

The guy looks like he's her all the time. I'm just a visitor from out of town I half expect him to roll out his PJ's for a sleepover. And then pull out a big candy cane and start circling the cell in a giant tricycle.

"Kid where are you from?"

"I live in Atlanta."

"I've heard about you southern boys. You know the whole deal."

I of course don't want to know about the whole deal. I don't want to be in here, and I want to get out as soon as I can.

Jessie leans in close to me, "Do you know what they do to perverts in prison?"

"I wouldn't know." Of course, I don't fucking know. I'm not a fucking pervert. I'm just a college student looking to make a buck. And I'm trying not to live the shiftless life of my father.

I lie on my bunk and try to ignore Jessie. I try to ignore my uncle. I try to ignore my father. I try to ignore life. Is this what celebrities feel like when they get arrested for a DUI after crashing their new Ferrari? I never even knew that there was a Grayville, and now I am about to become one of its permanent residents. Shit, shit, shit!

I've done all kinds of stupid shit in my life and never got caught. And now I'm in jail for the stupidest thing around. Why do they even have laws about cigarette tax? I don't even smoke

cigarettes. Here's Jessie trying to hit me up for a smoke. I mean there ought to be a law. I wish that I had a fairy godmother at a moment like this. I could really use her help. I'm just hoping to heavens that this rhino next to me doesn't pull out a skin mag from under his bed. That's all that I need to make this a perfect day.

I'm trying to use my imagination to break myself out of these four walls. I've seen this kind of thing in prison movies all the time. A lost soul uses his time in prison to reevaluate his profligate life style and make a change for the better. The iron bars can no longer hold him because his spirit flies high and wide like a bird.

In my mind, I am no longer in jail. I am in a park along Lake Michigan. I watching kids sail boats. I'm watching crazy people swim around in sub-zero temperatures. I'm looking at sea gulls fly so close to my face that I can count every feather on their beating wings. Hey, this shit works. I feel as if I'm having an acid flashback. Maybe I can go so far back in time that I can meet Adam and Even and really cuss them out for getting me in jail. It all goes back to that first sin. Daddy, why did you do this to me?

I think about how all the great people in history learned a deep lesson in jail. Martin Luther King, Fedor Dostoevsky. Vladimir Lenin. I am about to take my place among the truly great. I just can't figure out what that lesson is supposed to be. Where do I find it? Written on the walls or etched deep in my soul. Maybe, I need to suffer more.

It's not as if my uncle can just hand the sheriff money. That would be a bribe. But one of my uncle's associates is able to get him the money that he requires so that we can conduct our business in peace. Once again, I'm with my uncle in the cab of the semi. Good bye Jessie. Maybe we can hang out next time that I'm down here.

We stick according to plan and stay on the back roads. It's all pretty suspicious to me. Here's a bunch of semis rolling along roads that aren't even fit for tractors. But I deal with it. I stare out the window at the flattest land that I have ever seen in my life. The corn and soybeans are just starting to make their stand. This is indeed a land of plenty. I just don't want to get stuck down here.

I have my revelation along the way. If I can just get to the city in one piece, I am going to mend my evil ways. I'll devote my life to mankind. I'll be the best recycler on my block. I won't even drive a car anymore. I'll ride a bike. And I won't consume animal flesh anymore. Why didn't I think about this kind of pledge while I was in jail? It might have gotten me out sooner.

I think that I've always been afraid of conflict. When my parents used to fight, I'd high tail it to my room and blare the stereo. Those were the initial seeds of my obsession with music. I know I like it weird, but I try make it all soothing. I can't worry too much about the world's problems. The world is just too big for me.

The world is like the big sky in downstate Illinois. It just goes on forever. Here a man's troubles just get swallowed up by the limitless horizon. You can see a cloud formation build into a storm. It is ominous to see this giant cloud bring darkness with it. The fear of the Lord strikes the soul. Amen!

Everything seems for the best until we get stuck in Charleston with gear troubles. The way this is going, we might as well have moved the stuff in covered wagons. It would have attracted less attention. My uncle pulls to the side of the road and lets the engine cool. He

figures that if he takes some of the stress off the gear box, that it might lock back into place. From an engineering point of view, this hardly makes sense. But if he has a plan, I'm willing to wait it out. It's not like I'm going somewhere else.

"We'll be OK," he reassures me. I am trying to remember what he said when we got arrested. *Hide beneath the dashboard.*

Sometimes our families are the worst prisons where we spend time. I am trying to keep my mouth shut. I'm showing as much respect to my uncle as possible. But this is the worst. Couldn't he have planned a little better for these eventualities. You don't have to go to college to avoid shit like this.

"Shut up, kid!"

After a while, I realize the angels are on our side. The truck starts and we are on our way. We are going to make. I am sure the hell glad that we don't get stuck again.

A little further north of Urbana, there is a car that is hassling us on the highway. I don't know what he thinks we did. But he buzzes the truck almost hitting it. Then he gets in front of us and starts to go about 45 miles per hour. My uncle has a plan. He waits until the guy turns off. He manages to follow him. Once the car arrives at his destination, my uncle waits until dark, good and dark. Then he comes out of pitch black and demolishes the son of a bitch's car. Wait until morning.

We finally make it to a warehouse on the near north side. This is where I come in. We unload the truck, and head back to the house.

I ask my uncle, "Why don't we try to sell the cigarettes ourselves? We'd get a bigger cut."

"There's a lock down on the cigarette trade in Chicago. The last person who tied to muscle in is now sitting at the bottom of the Calumet River. I think they burned his face off before they threw him in. "

My cousin Taylor should probably be doing the job that I am doing. Instead he works part-time as a night watchman. He is spending the rest of his time trying to become a professional gambler. Last fall he flies to Vegas where he can play the sport-book 24/7. He is even betting on motorcycle races in Japan. He puts all this money on the White Sox to win the pennant. A totally homer bet. And he pulls up lucky. What does the son of a bitch do? He loses his winning tickets. Sixty thousand dollars worth. And he can't find them to save his life.

He is major time in the shits! Poor guy. He must have pulled apart his hotel room. His dirty laundry is in shreds on the floor. Guess where the ticket is. He has been eating downstairs and reading a book. And he uses the tickets as a bookmark. Well he leaves the book on the seat in the restaurant. When they clean the restaurant, this guy finds the book. And he takes it home and starts to read it.

When he finds the tickets, he could try to claim them as his own. But it's all registered and that. This clerk just turns the guy in. Taylor had paid for the meal with a credit card and they track him down. What good fortune for the dirty bastard that Taylor!

He always stumbles into stuff like that. And his dream is to string together a bunch of crazy situations. Of course, it's not as if it's ever going to really happen. As I said, he's such a homer. He doesn't know when it's right to bet against his team.

When I get back to the house, Aunt Dorothy tries to shove a pork sandwiches smothered

in tomato sauce in my mouth. I call her Dox. I do everything that I can to avoid her cooking.

“You’re so thin.” She pulls on my cheeks. She really is a bizarre little woman. She spends most of her time watching reruns of Seinfeld and Cheers. I have to admit that I can’t identify with her lot. I guess it might be cooler if it was the Simpsons. But I don’t watch TV that much since I’ve cut back on the pot. I want to experience life first hand. Dox definitely has no idea what that is. I thought my Mom was out there. Put electrodes on this lady, and you could run a university Psychology Department for a year.

She’s come into my room with breakfast in bed. I think that she quickly got out that habit when I assumed the ninja death pose on her one day. I almost give her a heart attack.

“Sorry, Aunt Dox, we just live in such a bad neighborhood Atlanta. This is only the natural reaction if someone comes in my room unannounced.”

Definitely a sorry neighborhood indeed as parents could only buy the poor kids BMW’s instead of Range Rovers and Lexises.

After my surprise counter attack, she pretty much leaves me alone. She leaves it up to Uncle Vinnie to make sure that I am up for work. The rest of the time, he also leaves me to my own devices. Here I am, a young whipper snapper released on the unaware city for the year.

My relatives live off of Augusta Avenue not too far from Milwaukee. The city is a wonderland for social life. There is a neighborhood bar every few blocks. This is not simply a place to get drunk. It is a place where people who live in the area can congregate and enhance city living. I show up at the Second Story. There I meet Jimmy and Flood who become my tour guides.

Jimmy is the guitar player for the Sacred Hearts. He’s peppering us with statistics about how many girls have been picked up from whatever bar that we’re in. He has gossip about a friend of a friend, “She worked in a bank as a financial planner. She went home with a different guy every night.”

I ask, “How do you know this, Jimmy? From personal experience.”

“I’ve seen her before.”

Flood is more of a mystical type of guy, a guru for the corporate age.

“We’re all plugged up now and they can just tap our minds. We have to learn to disconnect.” He’s always talking about the architecture of building that we pass by.

“They took that gargoye from some church in Paris. That other building across the street was built in 1897. They tried to gut it recently and build condos there, but a citizens’ group blocked them.”

I wonder, “Where’s that club where the devil worshipers used to congregate?”

“That’s near downtown on Dearborn,” he tells me.

“You told me how the police were involved in human sacrifice.”

He goes all serious on us, “I’m not joking. The coroner used to show up with pictures of girls who disappeared. He laughed about them with the owner.”

I tell him, “That’s some weird shit.”

Jimmy interrupts, “That’s some bull shit. I heard the same story when I lived in New Orleans.”

The cool part about Chicago is that you can get around without a car. In about a mile radius there are more than 20 bars that we can visit. Jimmy is particularly eager to discover that

moment. You know the one that makes the search meaningful. When he can turn to us and say, "I am living"

A couple of shot's at Mabel's, and he's on his way. He is a pro. Flood feels that he doesn't need artificial inducements to reach Nirvana. That's not to say unusually he doesn't keep up with Jimmy. They just feel it in a different way.

When we walk into Beyond Zero, all the girls turn and give Jimmy the eye. He just walks on with his head in the air. That's his style. He comes to life as the night wears on. The peacock just spreads out his feathers. Flood mopes on behind him. I'm still trying to take it all in. Whereas Jimmy's game seems to work here, I can't get anyone to even look up from their drink. I don't have the same technique.

After a couple days of relaxation my uncle tell me that we need to take another run. Hele tells me, "You came here to make money, not to sit around in my living room."

I agree with his logic. But I can't imagine myself spending another minute in jail. If my uncle had hired me to empty boxes in the warehouse, I'd jump at the chance even if it is was a 110 degrees in there. I'm just not all that willing to take the heat behind bars.

I reluctantly agree to go on another run. I'm enjoying the city too much, and hate to leave it. But I'm here. The easy part is heading south. We don't have a load. It's just a leisurely ride. We have to go to Evansville Indiana. We head down 45 through Terre Haute and Vincennes.

I try to explain my interest in music to my uncle. He really likes Eric Clapton. He's also a big Led Zeppelin fan.

My uncle looks at me, "So what is indie?"

I tell him, "It's an off shoot of punk. Guys realized that they could put out their own records. And they started to tour on their own without depending on a record label to do the work for them."

"Like Nirvana," he wonders. He's trying to makes sense of it.

"Sort of. I think Nirvana started out in that spirit. But they were more like a rock and roll band. Indie music allowed bands to branch out into areas that weren't rock and roll."

"Were they more like folk music?" He has a number of references points.

"Sometimes. Or the band would use unusual noises in their music. Sometimes they'd add an accordion. Or horns. Use unusual tunings on a guitar."

"Would it be like Hendrix?"

"A little." I tell him. "But Hendrix still uses the blues rock song structure." I also talk to him about bands like the Velvet Underground, and Iggy and the Stooges. Or even the Smiths. All these bands helped define the attitude of Indie.

"Is it protest music," he wonders. Vinnie is a pretty conventional guy. But he has had his wild side.

"It's not just about protesting. In some ways, it's about using the songs to put you in different mood. Changing the world in which you live."

He looks over at me, "Like smoking up and listening to the Zeppelin."

"Sort of. But you don't have to take anything to get that feeling. You can just listen to the music."

I put on "Sugarcube" by Yo la Tengo. He gets into the bouncy feeling of the track. There is this overall haze through the song that adds to the feeling. It makes me feel that I am part of

something unusual. As we edge closer to Evansville, I play more of my stuff for my uncle. I don't think it's as hard-edged as he's used to. But he enjoys it.

My uncle and I are really different. But we are starting to relate to each other. I just don't want to get caught moving shit again.

"So what is this *indie rock* that I keep hearing about."

I try to explain the The Strokes and the White Stripes to him, "You had all these indie bands touring the country developing a following. And they were fun. They tried to avoid the rock star trip."

"How do you do that? The musicians are on stage and the crowd is in their seats. They come to see a show."

"But the rock star tries to be larger than life. He acts as if he's from another planet. A gift to the earthlings. Indie is different. At least it tried to be. But then it just turned into this religion. There was the indie credo. The idea of indier than thou. If you didn't obey the code, the indie kids banished you. Indie rock worked to break that mold. The performers took some of the indie sensibility. Sparse production. Finely crafted guitar lines. But they put some of the rock back in the product."

I keep on with my lecture. My uncle is digging it. "At times, the White Stripes sound like Zeppelin played on a little transistor radio. It gives you the feeling that all the emotion is just dying to burst out."

As he is talking, I can see an Illinois trooper roll in on us. I am about to lose it. My uncle gets out of the truck and starts to joke with the guy.

"What the..." I begin to wonder what is going on.

After about twenty minutes, my uncle gets back in the cab.

"What was that about?" I ask.

"He's working for us. He was just alerting me to some roadblocks."

"Talk about service."

"I told you that there was nothing to worry about."

"We could transport drugs or guns with this kind of protection."

He puts his fingers to his lips, "Don't even think about such stuff!"

I wonder why. Maybe his boss is doing it for him.

He wants to hear more about music. My uncle's this cool guy. He grew up as a motorcycle punk. He used to listen to Steppenwolf and Thin Lizzy and hang out at the Thirsty Whale.

I continue on with the lecture, "After the Strokes, a whole lot of rock bands came out of the closet. They owed more to the Stones and the Doors than Van Halen. And then there was stuff like Interpol. It had all these other art rock influences like Joy Division. All this music came from stuff like the New York Dolls and the Velvet Underground."

Vinnie relates to a lot that I am telling. I am sure that he wishes that his son was a little more with it. Better than the slug that he is on the verge of gambling his life away.

After doing a bunch of jobs for Vinnie, I have a good chunk of change. Now I can just hang around the city. He still gets me other work. But I'm not unloading trucks anymore.

A little while later, Jimmy and Flood are with me in a booth at the Pyramid Lounge. Jimmy is acting his regular aloof self. The woman are trying to catch his eye. The girl across

from us is tall and thin with medium-length black hair. She has big eyes, a long nose, and wide lips that form a very appealing smile. Flood is trying to look at her. She won't give him the time of day. She has zeroed in on Jimmy. She is giving it the full pressure of his charms. She is coming at him with so much force, that Jimmy just deflects her in the opposite direction. He gets a kick out of his irresistibility.

She walks up to him.

“What do you think that you're doing? Laying a fucking force field?”

He comes out of his trance, “Sorry, I was somewhere else.”

I tell him, “Jimmy, come back to the Pyramid Lounge.”

She sits down and introduces herself. Her name is Brenda. Pretty soon, she starts to lecture us about her opinion on men. She claims that all men are carnivores. She intends to take us through her encyclopedic hierarchy of males all with the intent of telling us that every single man is a carnivore.

I object, “I'm basically a vegetarian, not a carnivore.”

She clears up the confusion, “We are not talking about the foods that you eat, This is more about your romantic impulses.”

Flood jokes, “I think that this conversation is the least romantic impulse.”

Brenda ignores him. She starts with her first classification, “The enforcer. He verges on a sociopath. He's been so used to getting what he wants that he's not going to hear the word no. Never. Sometimes, he's an over achiever. Things seem to come naturally. But then the curve catches up with him. What used to be automatic now requires inordinate amounts of effort. He becomes frustrated. Eventually, he is primarily an aggressor.”

Flood jokes, “Sound like the law of the jungle: kill or be killed.”

Brenda is very serious, “It's not like he's really being threatened. The threat is all part of his psychological disorder. He can't allow a girl to have that give and take. It's yes or your dead. I've known guys like this who live by their fast cars and wads of cash. And some girls eat up that kind of thing. But the moment come when he can't peel off any more hundreds. And he faces a rejection like he has never known.”

Jimmy looks her in the eye, “I guess that's something I can't really understand at all.”

She works to regain her composure so she can continue the demonstration. I wisely tell her, “Let me get you another drink.”

“Cranberry and vodka!” She has such a collegiate appeal.

“What's the next phase?” I ask after getting her drink.

“That's the sport. He's turned it all into a game. Sure he knows how to lose. But he doesn't like to accept defeat. He's in the game to win. Often, he works in packs. A quarterback with his trained linemen. And sets up the plays as if he's passing the football to his favorite son. Girls are just fruit to be harvested off the tree. He finds someone that he likes and his pack just swarms in. They have the routine down. Glib opening lines. Friendly introductions. Clumsy handshakes. Early attempts at intimacy. Pretense of knowledge even when they're in way over their heads.”

Flood remarks, “None of us here are really sports geeks.”

Jimmy gives her credit, “I don't think that she means it literally. She's just trying to describe how frat boys act.”

Flood tries to be funny, "I don't see why everybody always has it in for frat boys."

"I think it's because they're always afraid of leaving the frat," I say.

Brenda takes a sip from her drink. Then she continues. "The sport tries to get the girl to play in his court. The fabricator is a little more subtle. He wants to learn the girl's gig. He's the perfect translator. There's something that he wants. All in his language. And the girl speaks her language. Actually gibberish to him. But he's learned how to tell her what he want so that it makes it seem that it fits the dream of her lifetime. He appears to promise the world. A fortune and a whirlwind romance. In fact, he's going to give her very little of himself. He makes her do all the talking. He's just trying to ensnare her in the trap."

I ask, "Is he looking for marriage material?"

"Not necessarily. But he does give off that vibe."

Jimmy looks a little bored. Flood is the perfect student. I want to hear more.

Brenda continues, "Now we get to the story teller. He's a lot like the fabricator in that he spins a story to entice the woman. But his style is a lot more clever. He's willing to put himself on the line. He believes his own shit. He's after a life time commitment. The emphasis here is on getting committed—to an insane asylum."

"That sounds like a pretty severe indictment of marriage," I tell her.

"This is not about that. We're talking about the guy's intent. He's basically a warden at an asylum for the criminally insane. And his goal is to take a nice healthy young girl and just drive her mad. He kills with his kindness. And when she starts to expect it, he cuts her off cold turkey. By that point, it's too late. She's already bought his story hook, line, and sinker."

Juimmy is hardly looking her way, "You seem as if you have nothing good to say about men. Do you want to hear my classification system of women?"

"Chill out." I chide him. "I want to hear the rest of this."

"The last phase is the love poet. He has seduced himself before he goes to work on the girl."

Flood jumps in, "That sounds like you, Jimmy."

He is hardly amused, "Brenda is just a man-hater."

Flood defends himself, "I wished all men haters looked that good."

I intervene, "I want to hear the rest of this."

"The love poet knows how to get a girl involved. She gets aroused just hearing about his dreams for the future. He is a real poet. He deals in concrete terms. All he has to do is hear a few detail about the girl's past, and he like a travel agent planning her idea vacation. A placid beach, the cool sea breeze, and a rum drink. She is in heaven. This is the scam that doesn't wear off. Even as he is reclaiming her beach property for development, she is building castles in the sand. She is still reaching for the summit of Olympus. He lacks for nothing in weaving his ideal."

Flood asks, "So what am I?"

Jimmy looks at Flood, "I think that you've been sidelined for inadequate use of your brain power. You need to lay off the acid, and girls will dig you more."

Brenda accuses Jimmy, "You could back off a bit. Are you the fucking tin man with all your sensitivity?"

He reacts, "I don't remember hearing the tin man as one of your categories."

Flood has a clever reply, "I think that she wanted to come up with a category just for assholes likes you, but you haven't given her the chance with your meaningless banter."

"I'm just tired of girls who take a couple of courses in sociology, and think that they can size up the gender in five easy paragraphs."

I counter, "She has things pretty much on point. Or don't you like someone reading your game."

Jimmy acts as if he is being picked on, "I get enough from you two without her adding more psycho-babble in the mix."

Brenda is relentless. If Jimmy isn't going to respond to her romantically, she can at least get him going emotionally. For being so comfortable with his game, he seems to be protesting a little too much. I work to improve things.

I ask, "Where did you go to college?" Jimmy is still sneering. I am playing the part of the love poet.

"Oberlin."

"That's where they teach how to analyze with the knife," Jimmy interjects.

Flood challenges him, "Don't you know when to lie low?"

Jimmy is restless. There are no girls that really strike his fancy. He really is turned on by Brenda. But he would have to adjust his Mr. Cool act if he is going to get anywhere.

Admittedly. I am a little smitten. And Flood only has eyes for his sociology professor. Keep on Ms. Brenda.

"I never studied sociology or psychology much to Jimmy's surprise. I was an English and women's studies major." I am doing everything that I can to shut off the incipient criticism from Jimmy.

Brenda has this hip chic style. Part of it says I don't care. It rubs Jimmy the wrong way because he has this urban air. He is a wise ass, always with a quick answer to everything. He feels that he has sharpened his wits on the street. Brenda's interest in Jimmy is not so severe as it was when she first sat down. Now she is more interested in just talking with us.

I am a little smitten. I revel in her self-consciousness. Her book smart is a welcome contrast to Hattie. Hattie was definitely my love poet.

Jimmy ends up hopping to another table. And Flood realizes that he is only barely in the conversation.

Flood tells us, "I've got to duck out. Stuff to do in the morning. Nice meeting you Brenda."

I am on my own. I don't know if I'm ready to take this game to its conclusion whatever that might be. I have been playing it out in my head. I almost want my own resolution to my life. What am I thinking?

I feel like I can hardly make a play for her after she's gone through her whole classification system of carnivores. I just don't want to end up on the list in a special category of my own.

The next evening I see Flood and Jimmy at Mabel's.

Jimmy is brutal, "Did you score?"

"Don't be a prick," I tell him.

"You're the one who's deluding yourself. She wanted to fuck me. All her shit about

carnivores was an excuse. You're holding out for something that doesn't even exist. Either she gives you what you need, or she's the one who's treating you like shit."

"There's another side to life," I tell him.

"And that's called death. And that's where you're headed if you're going to keep this up."

I work to change the subject. He wants one last parting shot.

"Either you've got it, and you get what you want. Or you're just some loser like everyone else here. There's no middle ground. So what's it going to be?"

I am hesitant, "I don't know."

He asks, "Did you get her number?"

I shake my head numbly.

Jimmy gets up and starts to head for the door?

"Where are you going?" asks Flood just waking from his narcotic slumber.

"You're all going with me. We're going back to Pyramid Lounge."

"What do you mean?" I ask.

"You can set your watch on it. She's going to come skulking into there around the same time as last night."

I wonder, "What if she has to work? I think that she works tonight."

Jimmy never deals with the chaotic. He leaves a wave of chaos behind him. But he himself moves in sure waters. And he is using them to guide us back to the Pyramid Lounge.

When we get there, it seems that he is wrong. She is nowhere to be seen.

"Patience, patience. She's at home or where ever she is right now telling herself that doesn't need to get out. Believe me. She is going to show." Jimmy is still as cocky as ever.

Around 1:15, she rolls in. The clock has been telling us to go. Jimmy has been lining up beers. I wonder if he is taking care of his own interest. Or is this his own interest. Does he want to prove that he can have her? He really can be this petty.

She doesn't want to rush over to us. She doesn't want to seem as if we are the only game in town.

"Hunting down carnivores?" Jimmy asks.

She gives me a hug. Jimmy goes in for a kiss. I half-imagine him kissing her hand. I am playing a losing battle. She sits at our booth. She looks at Jimmy's line of beers.

"You've been here a while, Jimmy. Are you burning a torch for me?"

She has struck deep. He has to figure out if he can deflect her.

"I'm actually looking out for my man." He smiles at me. I feel sheepish.

"Jimmy's been a dick."

Jimmy admits, "At least I know about meat-eating."

He won't give it a rest.

I am speculating if he can really make a play for her under the circumstances. But then I don't want to put anything past him. He is way out ahead of the rest of us. Flood is nowhere to be seen. Brenda is proving worse than predictable. I am just in awe of the whole thing,

Jimmy feels that he has made his point. To stay here longer would mean that he actually wants to make a play for Brenda. He doesn't want to rub my face in the shit. He can leave with a sense of vindication. It is suddenly really awkward. I feel as if I am supposed to do something.

Brenda looks at me, "Just don't worry about it."

I am confused. I suck hard on my straw to get the last drops of my vodka grapefruit.

She continues, "You don't have to do anything."

This girl has been eyeing us from across the room. She comes over and sits at the booth. I say to myself, "There are other places that you could sit."

She puts out her hand.

"Hi, my name is Amy. I don't want to be a creep or something. But I was admiring you both from the other end of the room. I know that you're going to go back to your place and make love. I want to watch you. I know that it sounds freaky. But it's the sort of thing that really turns me on."

Amy is running her fingers through her blonde hair. I wonder where Jimmy is when I could really use his help. This is too good to be true. I can barely relate to Brenda, and now this. I could just disappear now and let them be alone. Although I think that Brenda appears less amused than I am. But she wants to use Amy to make a point.

"Amy, you're seeking this sense of completeness that just doesn't exist. You're trying to feed off the ecstasy of other people, as if it gives you some deep insight into yourself. Life isn't about these deep insights. It's the little moments. The pleasure you get in just taking out the trash. Or riding your bike to work."

I am laughing to myself just hearing Brenda go on. This is what Amy needs to get off, the certainty that she is not alone.

Amy's face is face sculpted from a smile. I would give the world to her. I would give her Chicago. She is our devil. She takes me to the top of the Sears Tower. She tells me to look down.

"If you jump, I'll give you a million dollars."

"So what. I won't be able to spend it. Besides, you can't really jump from the observation deck. It's an obstructed drop."

"But if you could drop, I would catch you."

Brenda tells us, "I would watch."

I am sitting at a table with my wife Brenda.. My two kids are playing before me. They are 5 and 7. I feel as if I have missed something. It was only yesterday that I was 21 and visiting Chicago.