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# Distant Family

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DISTANT FAMILY

By

Luke A. Marsy

THESIS

Submitted to  
Northern Michigan University  
In partial fulfillment of the requirements  
For the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

Graduate Studies Office

2009

## SIGNATURE APPROVAL FORM

This thesis by Luke Marsy is recommended for approval by the Student's Thesis Committee in the Department of English and by the Dean of Graduate Studies.

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## ABSTRACT

### DISTANT FAMILY

By

Luke A. Marsy

“Distant Family” is a collection of three short stories whose characters are inextricably connected. It is the first installment of what will become a larger work. The characters are loosely based on people that I have encountered throughout my own life. My main inspiration has been the short stories by J.D. Salinger that center on his fictional Glass family. In that spirit I have tried to objectively create a family with their own dysfunction and their own means of resolve.

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2009

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This thesis follows the format prescribed by the *MLA Style Manual* and the Department of English.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction.....	1
Family Reunion.....	2
The Tupperware Party.....	17
The Café Player.....	35
Works Cited.....	52



## INTRODUCTION

My M.A. thesis is a story cycle, three stories connected through characterization, events, and theme, inspired directly by J.D. Salinger's acclaimed *Nine Stories*. This is the first installment of what will eventually become a larger work, eight to ten stories. Each story is told from a different point of view, much like a traditional collection, but in a story cycle characters and their stories are intertwined, inextricably. Using the form of a story cycle allows my characters to become fully developed through multiple appearances, and in the end my hope is that I will have created a full picture of this family's history, even its future.

I begin with "Family Reunion." On their inaugural visit to a family reunion, a father, mother, brother, and sister negotiate the complex territory of this dysfunctional family, laying the groundwork for future stories and interactions. "The Tupperware Party" continues with a young mother introduced in the first story, revealing her conflicted sensibilities as a mother as well as someone searching for her own identity. "The Café Player" takes place many years after the first two stories, revealing what happens to a father who has lost contact with his son, introduced in the first story, and gives the reader a glimpse into his redemption.

## Family Reunion

By

Luke Marsy

Russell tightened his grip on the leather wheel. Elbows bent, hands at ten and two. The children were in the back seats of the minivan discussing something. His eyes darted from highway signs to the road to the speedometer and back again as cars whiffed by. Within four hours he had sped from Chicago with his wife Rita, son Clayton, sixteen, and daughter Krista, ten. They had entered Michigan's Upper Peninsula and were less than an hour from what he liked to call the "Kee-wee-naw." He was overjoyed and at the same time confused because it was odd to think that this would be his first reunion of any sort.

They came up behind a large logging truck at a stop sign. Russell tried but could not see around the trees in the trailer. He banged his fist on the horn and exhaled loudly.

"Jesus, Russell," cried Rita. "What on Earth is going on with you? Calm down before you kill us."

He had not spoken a word to her through the entire trip, and he had been pleasantly surprised when she had kept quiet as well.

"I told your uncle that we would be there by ten a.m.," Russell said through his teeth.

Eight cases of beer were in the back. Rita was upset that he had volunteered to bring beverages. She was more upset about being around her family. A lost earring caused a fifty minute delay that morning, and Russell was certain that it had been

deliberately misplaced. Russell had respected his wife's wishes to remain distant from her side of the family. She described them as dysfunctional alcoholics, but he had witnessed worse. His children had only met their Grandmother Doris, Aunt Janet, and her son Louie at their grandfather's funeral a year ago. What Russell did not expect was that he would have more fun bonding with her family at the funeral than he could honestly remember.

Rita's father and her uncle, George, had owned a lumber and trucking company in Ontonagon. Russell learned that they did their own taxes, and in just a couple minutes of conversation he pointed to a couple ways they might save money. He admired their success and how at ease they were in spite of running a business. And he liked how different they were from him. They wore their steel toed boots, drank domestic beer, and ate pig on a spit. The language was coarse and sounded foreign at times. Their main entertainment was horseshoes, and when it came to football they were divided between the Lions or the Packers. Russell only talked about accounting with clients and co-workers. He'd never stood in a circle of men smoking cigarettes and drinking cups of beer from a barrel, especially with a casket in the garage. Uncle George called him a couple of weeks later on business and mentioned the reunion. After months of prodding by Russell and his kids, Rita finally acquiesced and agreed to attend.

His children had only met cousin Louie twice before. Both times were short visits when Janet arrived and departed out of O'Hare. Russell found Janet charming and attractive, much more outgoing than his wife. There was an obvious tension between the two sisters, evident by the amount of wine Rita consumed before each visit.

Russell's parents were the only other family the children had known. He understood Rita's concern with her family. The wealth of his parents had always embarrassed him, and for a good length of time he tried to keep his wife and children away from its influence. Then Rita started going on lavish shopping sprees with his mother. He was disappointed when Rita began bringing up money in dinner conversation. Russell wanted to shield the children from the effects of excess. Some time away with Rita's working-class family would be perfect, and it might even help Rita find a sense of her roots.

Clayton had already unbuckled his seat belt and was holding the door handle with both hands. They had just passed the Ontonagon city limits sign. His sister was jostling for position underneath his arms, trying to make herself into a wedge and gain control of the lone handle for the van's sliding door.

"If you two don't cut that out right now and sit back down I swear to God I will make your father turn this van around and we will ride home without air conditioning or music," screamed his mother. She was unbuckled, glaring at them from the top of her seat. "Am I making myself clear?"

"Yes, mother," the two said in unison. His sister moved back to her own seat, buckling up as their mother watched. Clayton placed his hands back on his lap and looked at his father, who was whistling and bobbing his head.

"Clayton, can I *please* come with you and Louie today?" asked Krista. "*Please?*"

"No," he said. "We're not going to hang out with a little girl, so get over it. Go play in the lake or something." He leaned over the armrest and spoke under his breath,

“And don’t you dare follow us around. It’s not my fault there’s no one your age to play with.”

He turned his back to her and gazed out of the window. A good sized creek now appeared on the side of the road, the same creek that bordered the back of Agate Beach Park and spilled directly into Lake Superior. The trees grew sparser, and between their trunks the massive body of water became more visible. Clayton’s knee bounced higher and faster as they passed the park entrance signs.

“Mom, are you sure Aunt Janet and Louie are coming this year? I don’t see their car anywhere.”

“Janet doesn’t *have* a car anymore, and they’ve been living in your grandparents’ house for some time now, so I’m sure they’ll be here at some point.”

He frowned and turned to his sister. She gave him a sympathetic grin, but he quickly extended his middle finger to her and put it away before his mother turned around. His father put the van in neutral and turned it off as Clayton tried to dash out of the door and into the park.

“Oh no you don’t!” yelled his mother. “You get back here and help us unload. Then you’re going to march over there and say hello to your grandmother and anyone else you haven’t seen in a while.”

“But Mom, she’s going to kiss me on the lips again. Can’t I just go see if Louie is here?”

“You be very careful around that boy, alright?” His mother approached and bent down, pinching his ear lobe and bringing his face close to hers. “I know he’s your cousin, but his mother is trouble. Who knows what sort of riff-raff he’s been exposed to.”

She walked to the rear of the van and picked up a handful of Tupperware containers before handing them off to Clayton and his sister. The three of them made their way toward the tents. “Oohs” and “aahs” clamored together as a mixture of middle-aged and elderly women came up to paw the twosome. Clayton and Krista were patted on the head, inspected by numerous hands, and subjected to a wide palate of lipstick shades on their cheeks. After a few minutes of hugs and his mother forcing him to recite how long he’d been on the honor roll, Clayton managed to get away and walk to where his father stood. The men were gathered around a smoking stove, drinking beer from plastic glasses. Clayton nudged his sister and nodded in the direction of their father. Uncle George filled a plastic glass and handed it to him, and then their father lit up a cigarette.

“That’s weird,” Clayton said. “Dad doesn’t smoke.”

“Who’s that man standing next to Uncle George?” Krista asked.

A voice from behind startled them both. “That’s my mom’s boyfriend, Ben.”

Both Clayton and Krista turned to see their cousin Louie. He looked much larger than Clayton had remembered, and he had grown a goatee. They were only a year and a half apart, but Clayton still didn’t have hair on his legs.

“C’mon, Clay, let’s go,” Louie said. “I got something good to show you.”

Clayton’s mother was setting up dishes with their grandmother so she didn’t notice them dash off into the trees. Krista bowed her head and sulked as Louie led Clayton through the thick woods. They came through an opening and onto a clearing where a tent was set up next to a pop-up trailer. A small fire was still smoldering but no one else was around.

“I didn’t know people could camp here,” Clayton said.

“I guess we’re not really supposed to. We’re just staying here for a few days before Ben gets some more money. Then we’re heading down to California to do some surfing and hang out with some Mexicans or something. Ben’s really cool.”

“So you guys are living in the woods?”

“Yeah. We were staying at Grandma’s house, but I guess you guys are going to be staying there tonight. We got a camper. It’s pretty rad. My mom’s friends all came out. There’s some nice lookin titties on those ladies.”

Clayton stared at his feet.

“What?” said Louie. He leaned toward Clayton. “Ain’t you touched some titties yet? Well, you will someday. But, in the meantime, here’s what I wanted to show you.” Louie reached into his pant’s pocket and pulled out a package of Marlboro cigarettes.

“I tried smoking a while ago, and I didn’t really like it,” Clayton said.

“*Sure* you did. But you didn’t try smoking this,” and he pulled from the cardboard box a white paper cigarette twisted at both ends. He slowly placed it between his lips and closed them, and then turned to Clayton while it dangled there and said, “Do you wanna try a little marijuana?”

Russell stood with his in-laws around the spit. He turned from talking to Janet’s boyfriend Ben and handed Uncle George his empty glass. George smiled and walked away to refill it.

“So, Russ the bus, what do you cats do for fun down in Chee-kago?” asked Ben, smoke coming out with his words.

“Well, to tell you the truth, we don’t get out that much.”

“Well, no shit. With Rita down your neck every day, I imagine not.”

George laughed out loud as he rejoined the conversation. “That child can be stubborn, but she gets it straight from her mother, and I’ll give you boys both some advice: the more you fight against them, the harder it gets to win.”

Russell took a drink and thought about it for a second, then said, “I never really fight Rita on anything.”

“Why not?” asked Ben.

“I don’t know. I guess I’d rather just avoid a fight.”

“Well listen here, my man, you’ve got to be what, forty or something like that?”

“Thirty-eight.”

“And how much fun have you had in your life?”

The last time Russell had fun was when his co-workers had convinced him to join their bowling league a few years ago. They met at an alley on the south side and after each outing he returned home in a taxi. Rita would wait in the entryway with her hands on her hips. On the fifth week of the league, she got the flu and begged him to spend the night taking care of her and the kids. When the league came together the following week she asked him not to go.

“Well, I haven’t had a whole lot of fun lately, save for the funeral last year, as odd as it sounds. It’s hard to really do much of anything, because if Rita knows I’m out doing something she doesn’t approve of, then it gets uncomfortable at home.”

“Man, you really don’t know much about women,” Ben said. “You say you work long hours, so why don’t you just tell her that you’re working and then take off early?”

“What if she found out?”



“What if the world ended tomorrow? What if I won a million dollars? What if George here was a fucking Martian? Geezus, man, who cares about what if. It’s all about ‘what now’!”

Russell liked that. What now?

“Well, now we drink!” He held his cup out to cheer with Ben and George, then tipped his head back and finished it all. He burped and handed the cup to George. “So, Ben, what is it that you do for a living?”

Ben smiled, finished his entire drink, and said to Russell, “You could say that I work in sales.”

Clayton lay on his back looking up at the branches and sky above him. Louie smoked a cigarette, sitting with his legs crossed into a pretzel.

“So I didn’t get my license yet because we’ve been between schools and I haven’t been able to take driver’s ed,” Louie said.

“My mom won’t let me drive the car even though I just got my permit.”

“Your mom sucks.”

“Yeah, she kinda does.” They both laughed, then Clayton propped himself up on his elbows. “Why is my mouth so dry?”

“It’s called cotton mouth.”

Suddenly there was the crack of a branch behind them. Both of them saw Krista try to dart away from a tree and head back toward the reunion. Louie ran after her. Clayton slowly rose and when he’d gotten up he saw Louie sitting on top of Krista.

“Look here, you little bitch, I don’t know how long you were sitting there, but I don’t like it one bit,” Louie said.

Krista squirmed under his legs, but she didn’t say anything. She grunted, and then stared pleadingly at Clayton as he approached. He had a blank facial expression and hovered over them both breathing heavily.

“Well, looksie here, little Krista’s got some little boobies,” said Louie, pinning her arms under his kneecaps and putting both of his palms over where her bra was.

“Damn, girl, for a ten-year old you sure are developing fast.”

“Stop it,” she shouted. Clayton remained still. He watched Louie reach his hand up and under his sister’s t-shirt. She looked at Clayton again, this time much more frantic.

“Why you squirming so much? You know you like it. I wonder what’s going on down here.” Louie scooted his butt down onto her thighs and pinned her arms with one hand. He circled her belly button with his other hand, making a bigger circle until it brushed the top of her jeans. “Is there any grass on the field yet?”

At that moment, Clayton reached down and threw Louie off of his sister.

“Stop. She’s your cousin, you sicko.”

Louie got up and pushed into Clayton with his chest. “What are you going to do about it? You think you’re gonna beat me up or something like that? You’re so fucking stoned you couldn’t beat up your sister if you tried. You’re just a little fag.” Then he knocked Clayton to the ground.

Clayton jumped and launched his fist forward. Louie stepped back, and Clayton missed him by about five inches. Louie waited until Clayton got his balance back and

then swung, colliding with Clayton's temple and sending him back to the ground. Krista screamed and started running. Louie chased her, but as he reached for her shirt Clayton tackled him, and the two tumbled onto the ground.

Russell blinked to try and bring Ben into focus. The two of them had stepped away from the crowd and into the woods to discuss Ben's "business."

"So then, we take this weed, right, and we have these unattended bags that belong to these guys, these douchebags from Boston University, right? And, so you know, at airports in Jamaica they do random sampling for the shit. And we totally stuff it, everything we've got, inside their bags and then make a beeline for our boarding call. We got their addresses, so when they get home, we're there before them, waiting to get our bags. And guess what? No one got searched, and we made, like, ten-fucking-thousand dollars. And, so, I used that to buy some more, and then it just went from there. I met Janet at a concert in Madison when I was dropping some shit off there, and we just hit it off and have been hanging out since."

Russell smiled and tried to laugh, but only a faint mumble came out. He had never been stoned before and didn't understand what was wrong with his mouth. He was dizzy. Ben was still talking, but Russell had turned away. He wanted something to prop his body against. His cup was empty, but he had lost count of how many beers he'd finished. Food sounded like a good idea. A new wind blew through him with the thought of pig, but when he turned around he saw Rita staring at him.

"What in the hell do you think you are doing? Are you seriously over here smoking *pot* with that degenerate?"

He smiled. It was funny, and it was so funny, he even chuckled a bit.

“Oh, for the love of God, Russell, get yourself together. This is just ridiculous. And you,” she said, pointing at Ben. “Do you want to get us all arrested.”

“Listen here, Lady, I don’t care if you yell at me, but give your man here a break. Quit being such a bitch!”

Russell smiled again. Rita gave him the same look she gave him during his bowling league days. This time he didn’t care. She huffed and puffed and turned back toward the reunion. Ben walked over and handed him a can of beer. Russell smiled as it opened, and they clanked their cans together and drank. Then his daughter screamed.

Clayton lay on the ground. His nose was dripping blood and his right eye was swollen and made everything partially blurry. Krista knelt beside him and softly brushed his hair. His mother was yelling, and Uncle George had Louie in one arm trying to restrain his aunt Janet with the other.

“You don’t know how to raise a child,” his mother hollered. “Look what he does: Beats the ever living Jesus out of his own cousin!” She looked at Louie. “Why on Earth would you do that to him?”

“Fuck you,” Louie yelled at her.

“You see, Janet! You see! This is what kind of son you’ve raised. This is what happens when they don’t have a real father around.”

“Oh, and what would you know about it?” yelled Janet. “You haven’t been around here in twenty years. Why’d you even show up again? You don’t want to be here, so leave. You should have sent your kids with your husband.”

“I’ve seen what effect you have on children. And don’t worry, we won’t be around for next year’s fun. We came for the kids, and a whole lot of good it did them.”

She looked at Clayton and his sister. “Get up. We’re leaving.”

Grandma Doris offered Clayton a hand and his mother gave her a hug as he brushed himself off.

“We’ll be at your house. If you see my drunk husband, tell him he can spend the night out in the woods. If he wants to act like an animal, then he can live like one.”

Clayton followed his mother to the van. She slid the door open and walked around. His sister climbed in after him, and when he leaned back he saw that his mother had the rear view mirror trained in on him.

“I’m not going to ask any questions about what happened, but whatever it was you were doing today, I want you to promise me that you will stop.”

He nodded yes and then lay back on the seat and closed his eyes.

Russell sat in a chair and rubbed his stuffed belly. The majority of the family had departed. He figured it was due to Rita and Janet’s fight. He was glad he missed it. His daughter was fine, and even though his son had some bumps and bruises that wasn’t his main concern: the food was. Uncle George walked up and put his arm around Russell.

“Son, I think it’d be best if you stayed out here with Janet and Ben tonight. I went ahead and made you up a tent next to their camper. Rita’s requested it, for the sake of the children.”

“Are you taking all the leftovers with you?”

George laughed. “No, Russ. Ben’s got some in the camper. I’ll see you tomorrow, and remember to be up and ready for church.” He patted Russell on the back, then got up and took the last box to his car and left. Russell sat, content, alone and drunk. Then Ben interrupted him.

“So, c’mon man. There’s someone I want you to meet.” Ben grabbed Russell under the arms and lifted him up playfully. “Let’s go there, big boy. You’ve got a night out with the boys, and there’s only one thing the boys really like to do.”

Russell wasn’t sure where they were going, but he was led to a campfire next to a camper. Five chairs circled a fire. Janet was sitting in one, and next to her was a very attractive blonde girl. She smiled at him.

“Russell, this is Tara,” said Janet. “I think you guys are from the same town.”

Russell looked down. “You’re from Highland Park?”

“Oh, no, no, no,” she laughed. “I’m from Schaumburg. I don’t think Janet knows where anything really is.”

“Well, what I do know is that I should be making sure my son isn’t up to any other trouble,” said Janet. “You two get acquainted.”

Russell watched as Janet walked around the other side of the camper and stood there, somewhat nervous.

“Well, are you gonna sit down and have a beer with me?” She got up and approached him holding out a can.

“Sure,” said Russell. He sat in the middle chair and opened the beer. Tara sat down in his lap. She took her hands and placed them on his thighs then ran a fingernail over his zipper. She brought her face near his and he wondered what her lips tasted like.

Clayton awoke in a bedroom at his grandparents' house. He rubbed the sleep out of his good eye and winced when he touched the other. Outside of the window the trees reflected the moonlight and morning birds had begun to sing. He lifted himself up, cringing to the sound of the creaking bed, and tiptoed to the door when a sound made him stop. He put his ear on the door and heard his mother's muffled voice. He lifted the latch and walked out.

The upstairs hallway was short and narrow. Clayton's room was in the back. He walked past his parents' empty room. The door to Krista's room was closed. She was sound asleep. He went to the front window in her room. The van was in the driveway. The roof over the front porch hid the people standing there, but he saw two shadows sprawled out across the lawn. He eased the locks on the window and opened it quietly. "What the hell is *that* supposed to mean?" said Rita.

"I was jus," slurred his father.

"You were just drunk, is what you were. It's what you are. You know, you should really take a picture of yourself right now, Russell. Why do you think I never want to come here? I can't believe you walked home like this. What the hell . . . is that puke on your shirt? And smoking *pot!* What kind of example is that for your children?" She was yelling now, and Clayton stirred in a fright when Krista tapped him on the shoulder and knelt down beside him.

"She sounds pretty mad," she said.

"Dad's home," he said. "I think he's pretty drunk."

"Do you think they're going to get a divorce?"

Clayton looked at her and smiled. “Do you think we’re that lucky?”

Krista shook her head no.

“I won’t tell Mom about anything, I promise.”

“Thanks. I’m sorry about not stopping Louie sooner.”

“It’s okay. Do you think we’ll come back next year?”

“I don’t know. Maybe Mom was right about her family. I just want to go home.”

“Me too.”

Russell’s head hurt. His chest hurt. He was sure that he had given himself a new heart murmur and was already set on calling his doctor first thing Monday morning. The kids were both sleeping in the back seat as they crossed the line into Illinois. Rita had not spoken a word to him since she and the rest of the family returned from church. Even though she had made him sleep on the porch, and even though she was giving him the cold shoulder, he knew that these were only temporary signs of her anger. He had seen her react much worse to lesser offenses. The quicker things went back to normal, the quicker things could really begin. First things first, he was going to get back on that bowling team.



## The Tupperware Party

By

Luke Marsy

Sunlight spread like a fan under the bedroom door, over the hardwood floors and across the room. Janet roused, awakened by the sound of dishes clanking and drawers being opened and closed in the kitchen below. She sighed and tossed the blankets up in the air and onto her torso, exposing her tiny, ripped t-shirt that read “Frankie Say RELAX.” Her head throbbed and she vowed to stop drinking wine *and* liquor in the same evening. The room was still pitch black. She turned onto her stomach and blindly searched the wall for the switch. Just as she found it, her elbow bumped a bottle of wine, which bumped into another and one sent them both crashing to the floor.

“Shit,” she said, before groaning and hiding herself back under the blankets.

Within a minute there were two knocks on the bedroom door.

“Miss Janet?”

Janet cleared her throat. “Gloria? I said not to bother me before ten.” She pushed herself out of the covers and up against the large headboard, this time finding the switches. The black-out shades over the windows slowly rose.

“Mister Dyson phone twice already, Miss Janet. He say I am to have you phone him as soon as you are done with repose. Are you now done with repose? May I bring you breakfast, or would you just like coffee for morning?”

“Jesus, no. I don’t want any damn food right now. And quit with the damn clanking downstairs. I just want some coffee. Is Louie awake yet?”

“Yes, Miss Janet. He is in kitchen eating crunchy captain and watching cartoon. Is there mess in room? Would you like I clean up now?”

“Not until you bring me some coffee.”

Janet listened as the maid shuffled off. The short, squat woman returned and set a sterling silver coffee tray down on the dresser. Her graying hair shone in the sunlight as she bent down to sweep up the broken glass. Janet slowly got out of bed and tiptoed over to the coffee. A large cordless phone sat on the tray next to the sugar.

“Well, did he leave a number?”

“It is under phone, Miss Janet.”

She set the cup down and watched Gloria scoop the mess and empty the contents in the master bathroom trash. Then she quietly exited the room. Janet read the numbers and dialed. As the heavy footsteps faded down the hall she shut the bedroom door and put the phone to her ear.

“John Dyson speaking.”

“Hi, sexy,” she said. “I hear you’ve been stalking me this morning. Is there something I can do for you, or *to* you?”

“Come with me to Chicago?”

“What?” John usually travelled three to four days a week for work but had never invited her along. “There’s been some developments, and it looks like one of my partners and I am going to be doing some work in Chicago. I think we’re going to have to open up an office.”

She took a drink of her coffee. “That’s great, John. Why do you want me to come along?”

“How would you like to work for me again?”

“As your secretary?”

“Well, we saw where that got us. No, my sexy muffin, how would you like to be a real estate agent?”

Janet yelled back in the phone. “Really? How could we do that? Don’t I need a degree or something?”

“Not when you’re working for me.”

Janet’s excitement dropped. “But, what would happen to you and me?”

“We’ll be fine, babe. Trust me. We’ll talk all about it when you get here tomorrow. Listen, I’ve arranged for a flight and an escort for your son to your parents in Michigan, if that’s alright?”

Janet had forgotten about Louie. He had moved into Dyson’s house three weeks ago. Janet had given up custody of Louie in order to be with Dyson, but Louie’s father had suffered a breakdown and needed to be hospitalized. Her parents were dealing with their own illness at the time, but they had suggested the possibility of taking their grandson at the end of the summer.

“I’ll call my mom first thing this afternoon, dear.” She took a deep breath. “This is so exciting! You and I working together, living in the Windy City? How much money will I make? And how do we find the places to sell?”

“Listen, I’ve got it all set up. We’ll talk about it once you get here. There’ll be a car that will pick you up tomorrow. Try to pack up as much as you can, because I’m going to have someone else ship all of your belongings to Chicago as well.”

“So, you already have a place?”

“Well, no. But we’ll pick one out tomorrow and be ready when everything arrives. Trust me, darling. How’s Gloria treating you?”

“She’d be treating me better if she was living with your ex. How come you can’t just fire her and get a new maid? I find it very creepy that she used to work for her. I feel like I’m always being judged.”

“You don’t worry yourself about Gloria. She knows better than to do anything other than what she’s told to do. I gotta go to a meeting in a couple of minutes here, but I want you to call me tonight, when you’re alone and in bed. Wear the green teddy. I like to picture you in the green teddy.”

“Anything for you, my strong man. I love you.”

“You too. Muwah.”

Janet didn’t mind that he didn’t always say it back. He’d told her that it was a rough divorce, and that marriage was something he wouldn’t consider again for a long time. She’d felt the same about it herself, which is why she and Louie’s father had never married.

She decided to take a shower and prepare for the last day in the enormous house. Janet dampened a towel and brushed it across her face. Muted voices came through the floor, more doors being opened and closed. She heard her son laughing, and the fading headache came back in full force. She looked up at a picture of her and John in the rim of the mirror. When the water was warm she leaned into the porcelain tub and squinted at the burst from the showerhead. As it steamed against her back, her curly hair grew straight with saturation. She set herself down on and lay back so that her head rested upon the end of the tub. An image of handsome, mature John crept into her mind and she

closed her eyes and let her hand slip down between her legs. Her chest began to rise higher and higher, and then . . .

There was a knock on the door. Janet looked at the shadow of two small feet at the bottom and sighed. All she really wanted was for the other people in the house to leave her alone in the mornings.

“What do you want? It’s rude to interrupt someone when they’re in bathroom, you know? Do I come into the bathroom when you’re in there?”

“No,” said Louie.

“Exactly. Now what do you want?”

“Can I go over to Deanna’s and play?”

“Who is Deanna?”

“She lives across the street. They’re having a big party today. Is it okay if I go over and play for a little while?”

“Okay, but only for a little while. I want you back here and I want everything that you own in this entire universe packed and in the garage and ready to go before you get to bed tonight. Are you listening, little mister?”

“Packing for what?”

“Guess where you’re going tomorrow?”

He didn’t respond. She waited a few seconds.

“How would you like to spend some time with your grandparents?”

“Why?”

It irritated her that he had to ask. “Because your mom is getting a new job. It won’t be for that long, just a couple of weeks, and then we’ll see. Wouldn’t you like to see your grandma?”

“I guess. Can I go play with Deanna now?”

“Go on. Be back here in a little while, and I want you finished packing before bed. That’s twice. Don’t make me tell you again.”

His shadow disappeared and she heard him close the bedroom door. She got out of the shower and dried off. She grabbed a large suitcase from the closet and tossed a number of outfits John had purchased for her on top of it. One bottle of wine remained on the nightstand. The clock read eleven fifty-five. She shrugged and poured herself a glass. As she sat down on the bed she picked up the cordless phone and dialed.

“Hi, Mom. It’s Janet.”

The voice on the other end replied, “Hi, dear. You smell like a brewery. I can tell by your voice. Did you come to your senses and leave that old man yet?”

“Not going to happen, Mom. But guess who you’re going to see tomorrow night?”

“Well, good. We’re ready for you now. Your father just needed to get through that bout of walking pneumonia. I’m excited to see my grandson. I’m less than thrilled to meet this new man. He’s old enough to be your father, by the way. You haven’t let him do any irreparable harm to that boy, have you?”

“Well, actually, John and I aren’t going to make it. John has set up an escort to take Louie up to your house. Mom, you won’t believe this: he’s setting me up with a job as a real estate agent.”

“No, dear. I don’t believe it. What on Earth do you know about real estate?  
Honey, you haven’t even gotten your diploma.”

“Jeezus, Mom. John owns the damn company, okay? If he wants to hire me, he  
can do whatever the hell he wants. Can’t I just call you with good news and have an  
excited mother for once?”

“Janet, in the past six months you’ve told me you were leaving Greg—”

“I never married Greg, Mom. *God*, you know this.”

“Sorry. You left the father of your child for your boss, and then you asked us to  
take care of him for you.”

“If you don’t want to take him I’m sure Greg’s parents would be willing to.”

“Honey, Greg’s parents are in assisted living. Just calm down. We’re always  
happy to have our grandchildren stay with us. It would do him good to be around family.  
It’d probably do you some good, too.”

Janet set the receiver down on the pillow, muffling the voice on the other end, and  
filled her wine glass, spilling a little. She finished it in four gulps and then picked up the  
receiver and the voice grew louder as it neared her ear.

“...it’s just that sometimes you make the most important decisions of your life  
without even thinking about consequences. I know that he’s rich, and you’re living your  
dream life, but have you thought about what your future will really look like?”

“I want to be wherever I’m happy, Mother. And I’m happy with John.”

“Okay. It’s your life. I just worry about your son. How long did you want to  
keep him with us?”

“I don’t know, Mom. There’s probably going to be a lot involved with this job, so if you could watch him for the rest of the summer, that’d help a lot. We could think about getting him registered for school up there in the fall.”

“Well, luckily I already thought about that. I called Mrs. Mattson down the street. You remember her? She’s the school secretary. Well, she got him all signed up, just need to get him in for shots. I kind of figured something like this was going to be likely after you and Greg split.”

“And what is *that* supposed to mean?”

“It just means that I know you, dear. And I know that you need a little bit of space to be happy, and if it means that we get to spend time with our grandson, then it makes us all happy.”

She rolled her eyes. “Okay, Mom. I gotta go.”

“Bye, dear I love you.”

Janet just hung up. She walked downstairs and wandered through the kitchen to the windows by the dining table. Through the trees she could make out a fence that separated this gated community from the one next to it. This was far from the city life that she had known for almost a decade: a five-bedroom mansion, expensive cars, a maid, and a jet-setting boyfriend. He was older, too, and she liked that about him.

She left the kitchen. Behind a pair of large double doors down the hallway was the entertainment room. Twelve enormous leather seats were arranged in rows of three in front of a projection-screen television. Janet spent entire days watching cable in there when John was away at work. She took the seat in the middle row, nearest the fully-stocked bar. She turned on a newer channel called MTV and danced around the room.



At the bar she grabbed a highball glass and poured a vodka and orange juice. The time passed quickly. She dozed off, and when she stirred the numbers on the VCR now read two thirty-three. She got up to fix another drink and spotted Louie. He was sitting half-hidden behind the rear chairs.

“What the hell are you doing hiding in here? You’re supposed to be packing your things together!”

“I’m sorry, Mom. I wanted to ask you something, but you were sleeping, so I was just watching TV.”

“Get out of here, for Christ sakes! You’re not supposed to sneak around like that. God, that’s creepy. Go outside and play in the yard or something. No, go pack!”

“I wanted to know where my box of stuff from Dad went. Deanna’s parents are having a tupper party and I wanted to give Deanna something before we leave tomorrow.”

“What? What the hell is a ‘tupper’ party? Tupperware? And what in the hell do you want to give her from your dad?”

“I was telling her about my dreamcatcher, how me and Dad had got it at the Indian place.”

“Christ, whatever. It’s in the garage somewhere. Now, get out of here and get your little ass packing.”

He didn’t say anything else. Instead, he bowed his head down and backed out of the room. She hated when he acted meek. She wanted him to be assertive. If he was going to be a pushover like his father then he was never going to get anywhere in life.

Anything in him that reminded her of Greg made her angry. She knew that it would be best for him to be with her parents.

She poured another drink and sat back down. There wasn't anything on television so she let herself doze off again. It was after four when she woke. She was hungry. The kitchen was empty, as was the dining room, living room, and foyer. She called for both Gloria and Louie, but there was no reply. She walked into the garage and both her jaw and her drink dropped, one shattering on the concrete. Five of their storage boxes had been opened and overturned. The contents covered two of the three car spaces; a dark-green Jaguar took up the third. She stormed out into the main part of the house, yelling her son's name the entire way. From the picture window in the living room she looked at the driveway to the house directly across their cul de sac. It was decorated with balloons and streamers. The road was filled with cars, and a large group of people were in the backyard. Janet quickly ran to her bathroom, freshened up, and made a beeline for that backyard.

In the time that she had lived there, Janet had not spoken one word to a single neighbor. The only time she had spent outdoors was arriving or departing with John, and even then she had not responded to the waves of any neighbors with more than a smile and a nod of the head. John had told her that his ex-wife was rather close with a lot of them.

Janet walked past the front entrance and across the lawn directly to the back fence. About fifty well-dressed people stood around a pool. Tables were piled with pyramids of Tupperware containers, as well as hors d'oeuvres and drinks. A few people

saw Janet and immediately looked away from her. A well-dressed woman in her mid-forties walked up to Janet determinably.

“Excuse me, this is private party,” the woman said. “Can I help you?”

“I don’t know if you live here, but I’m looking for my son. His name is Louie, and I believe he was coming over here.”

“*Right.* So you’re the mother of that little urchin. Well, he was here for a little while, but he and my daughter had a falling out and I haven’t seen him since.”

“Excuse me?” said an indignant Janet. “What did you call my son?”

“An urchin, dear. A street person. You don’t expect me to believe that you two come from affluence, do you?”

The woman drew a smug smile.

“Listen here, you bitch. I don’t know what you think you know about me, but if you say anything like that about my son again, I’ll come over that fence and break your nose with a croquet mallet.”

Two new women came up and joined the conversation. The three behind the fence turned and huddled together. The whispers turned to laughter and the first one turned back towards Janet.

“You poor thing. You really don’t have a clue, do you?” She smiled slyly and turned to each side for a nod of approval. “The only children in Johnny Dyson’s house are the young women like yourself. If you think that old man wants a child running around, well let’s just say that you might not be living in that house much longer.”

In a moment, Janet turned from anger into confusion. She thought about Chicago but dismissed it and gathered herself together. She looked at the crowd behind the three women. A large number of them watched the hubbub by the fence.

“What would you know about any of it?” Janet asked the woman.

“We’re all very close with his ex-wife, and if you think that you’re the only woman he’s had living in that house since their divorce then you’re sadly mistaken.”

Janet looked at the growing crowd of people now watching. She began to walk away. At the edge of the house she turned around. The three women were still laughing with each other. She clenched her fist and quickly walked back.

“Why in the hell am I supposed to believe anything you say?” asked Janet. “How do I know you’re not just trying to bully me around because his ex-wife is still bitter?”

“Just think about it,” said the woman. “Wouldn’t Johnny have had children by now if he wanted them? But, if you don’t believe me, then go and ask your maid. I’m sure she knows all about Johnny Dyson’s dirty little secrets.”

The women all turned and stepped back to the party. Janet stood for a moment, a few of the crowd still eyeing her. She walked slowly back to the house. She went straight for the kitchen. Gloria was there, setting up cutlery and pans in preparation for dinner.

“Gloria,” she asked as she approached the refrigerator and opened the door.

“Gloria, I need to, I need to...”

“Miss Janet, Miss Janet, what is wrong?”

Janet fell onto her side, crying, and curled into the fetal position.

“I thought this was real,” she said through her sobs. “I thought this was a fresh start,” she cried out. Then she composed herself as best she could and looked Gloria straight in the eye. “How many women other women does he have? How many have been here? How many women has he had here before me?”

Gloria immediately grew somber and pulled herself up away from Janet.

“Miss Janet, you do not know what you ask me. Mister Dyson is boss. He pay me very well, and he get my family across German border. He do much for me, and I obey what he say. I not allowed to talk about it.”

Janet brought herself up into a crouch, and she asked the same question again.

“Miss Janet, I tell you that this is very important. You have very special boy, and you need to think about very special boy. Mister Dyson not like little boy. I say so you will care for him. I cannot when you are not here, so you must. Boy need father, too. Boy always talk about father. Father this, and father that.”

Janet looked away from her and stared at the tiles on the floor. Neither of them moved for a few minutes until Janet turned and looked back at Gloria.

“So he really doesn’t like Louie?”

Gloria bowed her head. “No, Miss.” Gloria walked over to the edge of the room. “Go talk to boy. He is in tree fort in backyard wood. He need mother now. You go talk to boy. No drink this time, either. He need clear head mother.”

Janet sat on the floor for a few more minutes, sobbing. She lifted herself up and headed out the back door toward the woods. She followed a bike trail a few yards before seeing the fort. A sturdy foot ladder was fastened to a large oak and it led to a structure that had been painted different shades of green and brown, blending perfectly with the

surroundings. Janet coughed, but there wasn't any sight or sound from above. She went up the ladder and poked her head through the opening. Louie was sitting in the corner with his head between his knees.

"There you are," she sniffled, wiping her eyes and trying to smile. "I've been out there looking for you. I had a bone to pick about the garage..." She hesitated. "This is quite the little fort you've got back here. Why didn't you tell me you were such a little carpenter?"

He kept his head down and remained still. She climbed up into the fort and scooted next to him. She put her hands on his shoulders and slowly rubbed back and forth.

"Honey, what's wrong? What's the matter, baby? Did you and your friend have a fight?"

"No," he squeaked out.

She picked up a green feather and sighed. "Is this what you wanted to dig out of the boxes?" He nodded yes. "I'm sorry, Louie." The feather had belonged to a dreamcatcher that Louie and his father had made while at Camp Hiawatha. Tears ran down his cheeks.

"I don't like this neighborhood anymore. I want to move back to the city and live with Daddy."

Janet took a deep breath, took her hands off of Louie's shoulders, and set her head against the wall boards. Louie kept his head down.

"Did you and your friend fight about the dreamcatcher?"

He lifted his head and stared coldly at her. “No. I got mad because she said that you weren’t allowed to come to their party. She said that her mommy called you a drunk bore, and I said you were not.”

Janet looked at him sympathetically. “Honey, you don’t have to stick up for Mommy. I don’t care what those people think about me.”

“It’s not fair. All of their mommies and daddies were there, and they were all buying stuff, but my mommy wasn’t allowed to come and my daddy isn’t here.” Louie spoke through his knees.

“Is that what this was about? Honey, we’re not like these people. We’re better than them. And we’re going to move away from here and everything will be better from now on, I promise.” She said it, but even as the words came out she had doubt.

“Is Daddy okay?”

“Honey, I told you before. Daddy needs to spend some time away so that he can fix some things. He doesn’t have room for us right now.”

“But I don’t want to go and stay with Grandma and Grandpa. I want to stay with Daddy.”

Her reply was stern. “Right now he can’t even take care of himself, so how would he take care of you?”

His sobs became more audible. “But I won’t be too much for Daddy’s plate,” he said.

“I know how good it sounds, but this is the way things are. We’ll visit Daddy someday soon, but right now he needs to fix his problems, and we need to take care of

ourselves. In the meantime, we just have to get our things packed and stay with my Mommy's parents until Mommy figures out what she's gonna do next."

She messed with his hair, but he still would not move to look at her.

"Now what's wrong? You just said you hated the neighborhood, so I tell you that we're leaving. You say you miss Dad, and I promise we'll see him soon, and you're still crying?"

"How's Daddy going to know where we are if don't tell him we're leaving?"

"Your father knows where you are. He knows you're with me. I tell you what: we can call him from Grandma's house when we get there." Suddenly Janet's face lit up and she smiled enormously. "And guess how we're going to get there?"

He looked up and wiped tears from his eyes. "How?"

"We're going to take Mr. Dyson's nice car, that's how!"

She got up and reached down to pick him up by his armpits. She groaned, "You are a big boy." She set him down and patted him on the butt. "C'mon, hon, let's get this show on the road." She pushed off of the seat and quickly stepped down the ladder.

Gloria was no longer in the house. Janet packed quickly, fitting as much as she could into the Jaguar. Louie was rummaging through the upturned boxes when Janet came back into the garage. She didn't pay attention to what he had packed but threw her own belongings on top of his and closed the trunk. She rushed Louie into the car and strapped his seatbelt on for him. As she opened the garage door she saw Gloria in the rearview mirror. She backed the car up and Gloria came to the passenger window.

"I left a letter for John. If he asks why I took the car, just tell him he can consider it my severance package."



“Severance?”

“Yes. He’ll know what it means.”

Gloria smiled then looked down at Louie. “You be good for your mother, okay? You very special boy, and you remind me of my own boy when he was little.” She patted him on the head and looked up at Janet. “He is doctor now, in West Berlin. I was not good mother to him. You be good mother to boy. I tell Mister Dyson that you leave him, and that you take car.”

Janet said thank you. Gloria stepped away from the car as it backed out of the driveway. Louie was staring at the decorated house for a moment, then turned around and flipped the dial on the radio. “Walking On Sunshine” by Katrina and the Waves was playing. Janet and he looked at each other, smiled, and bounced their heads in rhythm.

Two hours later they were driving through Pennsylvania on Interstate 80. Louie had fallen asleep and she had long since turned the radio off. She took the exit for a small town called Mooresburg and drove to the first motel she could find. After she checked in, she told Louie to go play arcade games while she carried their bags into the room. While Louie was gone, she went to a payphone and made a call.

“Janet, why are you calling me collect?”

“I left him, Mom. We’re in Pennsylvania right now, and we should be in Michigan in a day or two.”

“Oh my God. Is everything all right? Is Louie okay? How are you getting here? Oh my God!”

“Mom, calm down. I have a car. I actually called because I needed something from you. Do you by chance have the number of the hospital where Greg is staying? I did, but I guess I might have left it back there with some of my things.”

“Left in a hurry, eh? I think you made the right choice. Hold on, I’ll go and get the number for you, but why do you want that?”

“I think that my son needs to see his father, and I think his father needs to explain to him what’s going on, because I sure as hell can’t.”

“Well just hold on a second, and I’ll go get that number.”

“Wait, Mom?” Janet paused for a moment.

“Janet?”

“I love you, Mom. I just wanted to say that.”

“I love you too, dear.”

Back in the room, Janet sat on the bed and ruffled through one of her bags. She pulled out a fifth of vodka and stared at it. The door was closed and she waited for a moment to see whether Louie would walk through. It stayed shut. Sunset was coming up and the ice machine down the hall was broken. She tore the plastic off of a bathroom cup and poured the liquor into it. John would eventually track them down, she thought. He would probably want his car back. She wished she would have thought it through a little more before dashing off. Then she put the bottle to her mouth and took a large pull.

## The Café Player

By

Luke Marsy

Overtured garbage cans spilled litter into the street, and drunks and teenagers alike celebrated the Yankees newly acquired pennant. The closer I got to my watering hole, the more I craved a cool mug. With each step down Avenue B I began to brightened up and when I stepped inside the café I smiled. Then I saw a stranger in my chair. He was a kid—maybe twenty-one, twenty-two—his buzz-cut head buried in a notebook. I stood beside him for a moment and waited but he kept his head down.

“Hello?” I said. “Excuse me?”

I reached to tap him on the shoulder, but put my hand on the bar instead. He remained entrenched in the book, scribbling. I cleared my throat again, but he ignored me. My finger tapped loudly on the counter until he put his pen down and turned to me.

“Can I help you?” He asked.

“You’re in my seat. That’s *my* seat.”

“I’m sorry,” he said, getting up and inspecting the top of the chair. He shrugged his shoulders and sat back down and spoke without looking at me. “I didn’t see a name on it.” He picked his pen back up and went back to his paper. I clenched my jaw. I was about to knock a chair over when Shane burst out of the kitchen.

“Well I see our newest employee has met our orneriest customer,” said Shane.

“Greg, meet our new servant and errand boy, Jeff.”

Shane put a mug under the Pabst spigot and then went over and gave the kid a pat on the shoulder. They both laughed. The kid composed himself and extended his hand. I didn't really want to shake it, but I did.

"I'm really sorry," he said. "I just got into town a couple days ago. My mother knows Shane and he gave me a job, but he told me the first thing I had to do was give you a hard time about the chair." Shane laughed hysterically, but the kid tried to conceal his smile. "My name is Jeff. Here, you can have your seat back. I was just playing around. No hard feelings, I hope?"

"No worries, Kid," I said. "This guy is an asshole. He's lucky I give him any business at all."

"And where the hell would you go?" Shane asked as he straightened up and wiped tears from his cheek. He turned to the kid. "This old man comes here every day, but doesn't say a word to anyone unless it's to complain. 'Fucking bums over here, rich crooks over here, yuppie-druggies over there, yadda yadda yadda.' This old man here hates most of Manhattan. And I guess I would too if cleaned up their trash."

I shook my head at him and lit up a smoke. Shane went back into the kitchen and the kid went back to writing in his book.

"So, what drags you to this cesspool city?" I asked.

He smiled and looked up. "I came to whore myself to the music industry."

"Really? A musician, eh? It's a good place to be then, if you're good. Are you good?"

“Well, that’s not a question I can answer yet. To tell you the truth, I’m here to learn and grow. This is where Robert Zimmerman became Bob Dylan and Lou Reed is God, so. I figured I’d come and try it out.”

“Good luck, Kid. I hope you got the drive, because unless you’re willing to give up everything else, you’re never going to make it as a musician.”

“Don’t listen to old mope-sy there,” Shane said as he came out of the back. “He claims that he was on the path to rock stardom once, but he’s never proven a single word of it.”

“Thanks for those kind words,” I said before I finished my mug. “Now get me another beer and go back to whatever that god awful smell is in the kitchen.”

The kid laughed, but Shane didn’t.

“My food smells better than you, trash man,” and he slammed my mug on the counter. “Now c’mon back here, Kid. I’ll show you the kitchen.”

I chose to go to Seo! because of the convenience. It was on my way home from work and rarely crowded. Most of the customers minded their own business. I especially enjoyed the quiet aspect of the place. There was a P.A. system with a tape-deck and four speakers, but Shane had shut it down years ago after a short almost burned the whole building down.

The name Seo! (pronounced “sew”) means “Here!” in Gaelic. Shane opened the place about ten years earlier when he emigrated from Ireland. He employed a few people over the years but they’d mostly been Irish immigrants. The café didn’t make a

whole lot of money, but I never recall hearing Shane complain. To him it was a place to make friends, not profits.

The kid started working full-time for Shane. The old Mick had a soft spot for drifters and down-and-out types, but the Kid didn't really fit into either. He liked to mingle, and he liked to sing. Whether he was serving or cleaning, he would hum something or another. He was distracted by it during conversation, but he still heard every word you said. By the end of the first month he knew more of the regulars than I did and he would set our drinks down before we ordered them. He was a regular too, so I noticed the first time I showed up and he wasn't there.

“Where's your lackey?” I asked Shane.

“Oh, he's got some gig at one of the coffee shops down the street. Cornelius Street, I think. He said that if he can get more gigs like that then he won't need to keep working here.”

The kid didn't show up until a couple of nights later at one of our poker games. Six of us usually played: me, Shane, and four previous employees of his.

He was working hard that night. It was getting late and everyone else had left the bar except for us and the kid. He came up to Shane and asked, “Would you mind I sat over on your stage and played a song or two?”

I'd never thought of the little elevated area by the old dumbwaiter as a stage. I'd seen some people dance on it over the years, but it looked like a place to stack chairs. Shane shooed the kid away with a flick of his wrist. The kid just stood there. He looked at the cash-pot in the center of our mugs. We had about four-hundred dollars in it. He walked behind our stools and glanced at our cards. Then he walked behind the bar and

tried to look at Shane's. The old man covered his cards the way a Rottweiler covers his bone.

“Do you like your job?” he growled to the kid.

“Just let me play my guitar, and I'll bail you out for this hand,” the kid said. He glanced up and smiled at the rest of us. “I know what their cards are, and I know that you don't have a single pair of anything in your hand. So, now I'm just going to go and set up and play some music for a little bit. Is that okay?”

Shane knocked and the kid didn't wait for an answer. I was the next to bet. I figured I'd try my pair of jacks and so I dropped a fifty dollar bill on the pile. Each person after me folded. When it came back to Shane, he laid down three fours. The kid was already moving chairs around for his first performance in the café.

It didn't blow us away. To be honest, it just drowned out in the background for the first few songs. He didn't sing. He sat down and strummed some tunes, most of which we didn't recognize. We couldn't have. They were his, and they weren't finished yet.

Shane let him play on Monday night the next week, let him keep any tips that came his way. His set-up was a small amp, a microphone duct-taped to a stool, and an electric guitar that didn't have a name on the headstock. After a short attempt at the first song, he got up, walked out the door and emerged a couple of minutes later with a Martin acoustic guitar. He sat down in the chair and placed the amp in front of him. A couple of quick plucks to tune the strings and he launched into what I still consider one of his best songs, and an unnamed ditty based on a G-chord.

Monday nights turned into his regular gig. He was good. I eventually made an effort to get to know him. I wasn't used to starting conversations with anyone other than Shane, so it took the right opportunity. One night I waited until everyone else had left and the kid was busy sweeping the floors.

"You're not banking on this being your one and only gig in town, are you?"

He set his broom down and came and sat at the stool next to me, grabbed my box of cigarettes and lit one. "To tell you the truth, the others haven't been going so great."

"What's the problem?"

"I'm not sure. I love to play, but when I go anywhere else there's people hovering around me trying to tell me what I should sound like."

"I tell you, this is one hell of an industry you're trying to get yourself into."

He took a long drag of his cigarette. Then he looked me square in the eye.

"Did you really play in a band?"

"Yeah."

"Shane told me that you were a drummer. So why did you stop?"

"The band broke up."

"Were you guys big?"

"We toured with Tom Petty in seventy-nine."

"Nice. So, why didn't you keep drumming after you broke up?"

"Because it was the *band*. We weren't really shit without each other."

"So you were a shitty drummer?"

"Hell no! I was a natural on the skins. That was my home."

"So, and I hate to keep asking, why the hell did you stop?"



“Cause it ain’t no fun drumming by yourself, especially with a newborn at home.”

I had only told Shane about my son, and I had told him never to mention it again. I surprised myself by mentioning it to the kid.

“You’ve got a kid? No shit! How old is he? Or she? Where does it live?”

I laughed and finished my drink before signaling for another.

“He lives somewhere in the Midwest.”

“Where?”

“Not sure. It’s a long story, Kid. Too long to finish before closing time, and I probably won’t want to pick it up tomorrow.”

He looked away from me.

“I didn’t know my dad.”

I spit a little of my beer out.

“Really?” I asked.

“He died when I was seven. He was a musician, here in New York and everything. He never really made it that big, but he toured in the seventies.”

“What happened to him?”

“He overdosed. I met him once, when I was six. He and my mom were only together briefly. Why don’t you and your son keep in touch?”

“I don’t know anymore. I stayed away for so long that at some point it felt like too much to try to restart something.”

“How old is he now?”

“I believe he’s,” and I actually had to think. “He’s twenty-two.” I felt a tinge of shame so I turned to my beer and stared.

The kid put his arm over my shoulder and spoke softly. “Everyone gets a second chance, you know? You’re son is out there somewhere, and I can tell, just by the tone of your voice, that you want to talk to him.”

He pulled his arm back, patted me on the shoulder, and picked his broom where he’d left off.

More people began showing up on Monday nights than ever. When ten o’clock rolled around, his voice could be heard out on the street. The kid purchased a nicer guitar and amplifier. He played in the corner of the room. The only barrier between him and the audience was a table. We tried to arrange the tables so as to give him a little more space but people would just go around them. Shane had hired more workers to help out.

Within a few weeks celebrities started showing up. They weren’t so bad, but they always brought an entourage. It annoyed Shane that most of the entourage never ordered anything.

The kid was a natural. The crowd would hang on his every word. He would apologize for a mistake in a song, a mistake I don’t even think the most sensitive critic could have pointed out. He liked to be in the moment, and when random people would try to snap a picture, he would yell, “Put your fucking camera away, okay? Let’s just be here.”

Whenever he needed a break from the people he would ask over the microphone, “Shane, is there anything you need me to do?”

Before Shane could even get an answer, the kid would don an apron and go from table to table. He’d wipe them off and empty the ash tray. People would try to chat him

up, but after four months of playing his demeanor had changed. He wasn't the same cigarette-bumming, sit-down-and-have-a-beer-with-you kid that had been there at the start. He would help out for about twenty minutes, disappear into the kitchen with Shane for a few more, and go back to his little stage and his songs.

His voice was something to marvel over. We heard the first versions of cover songs he loved to sing in French. He'd play Dylan, Zeppelin, the Stones, the MC5, and anything else that interested him. Then he started singing what I call "the exploding vocals." He had channeled something; that's simply the best way I can put it. From somewhere he soared out and over us. When it came out at its strongest, at its highest, it would send us back in a wave. His gift was that he could drop it back down low in a split second, and then into a soft coo with lullaby precision before finally coming back up again into a full army of fury. His songs were dynamic. Never any excess.

The songs were constantly being modified; some were even banished. My personal favorite was only played once; he didn't like it so he put the chords in reverse. I watched him do it right in front of me. He was growing as a musician much faster than anyone else I had ever seen. I remembered going through it, but at my very best I was never as good as he was getting.

One night after I'd come home from Seo! there was a knock on my door. I looked through the peephole and a young man stood outside.

"Hello?" I asked through the door. "Can I help you with something?"

"Uncle Greg? It's Clayton, Rita's son?"

The title threw me off. Rita was my ex's sister, but I'd never married her so technically he wasn't my nephew. I opened the door and let him in. He looked pale and out of sorts. There were bags under his eyes and he turned down everything I offered except a beer.

"So what brings you here?" I asked.

"Here as in your place, or here as in New York City?"

"Both," I said.

"I've been here for a year. I was doing an internship at an accounting firm."

"Good for you. What brings you to my place?"

"I quit my internship yesterday. Grandma Doris told me that you lived in the city and that if I ever needed anything that you'd be a good person to see. So, I came to see I could spend a night or two with here with you?"

"You haven't got any friends or anything?"

"If you don't want me to stay I can..."

I stood up.

"No, please. Clayton, right?"

"You can call me Clay."

"Okay. Don't call me Uncle Greg. I find it kind of weird. You can stay here as long as you like. I've got a spare bedroom, but all I've got is cot or couch?"

He chose couch. I hadn't had a guest in years. He brought his bags in and we sat at the kitchen table for a few moments before Clay broke the silence.

"So how can you afford this place? Aren't you a garbage man or something?"

“Still am,” I said through a laugh. “It’s rent-controlled. I knew the previous tenant.”

I watched as he stared at his beer.

“Uncle Greg?”

“Eh-hem.”

“Sorry. *Greg*, can I ask you a question? I know we’ve never actually met...”

“I was there when you were born. Lou—your cousin was just a little over a year old. I remember him wanting to hold you, and your mom freaking out.”

“Well, then I guess that’s what I want to ask. How come you haven’t tried to keep in touch with Louie?”

I got up. Clay stared at his beer as I walked past him into the living room, grabbed an ashtray and returned with a lit cigarette.

“It’s a long story, Clay. Much longer than anything you might have heard.”

“I heard that you had a breakdown,” he said. “Everything else I’ve ever heard sounds like bullshit, because from where I’m sitting you don’t seem like a bad person.”

“I was. I couldn’t handle fatherhood, and I pushed Janet and Louie away.”

“You seem fine now. Why not make a phone call?”

“Because it’s been a long time, and maybe it’s better this way.”

“You have no idea,” he said. “I grew up with my crazy mom and all of her issues, but at least my dad was there. Don’t you think that Louie could have been doing better if you had stayed in his life?”

“Listen, Clay, I regret many things, with both Louie and Janet and everyone else in my life. But I can’t take those things back. I’ve made peace with the past, and if you say that Louie is doing well, that makes me happy. So, how is Janet doing these days?”

He sat back down and took a drink of his beer. “Well, Janet’s still a drunk.”

“What’s new?” I asked.

We both had a good laugh and the conversation simmered. We talked about his plans for the future. Clay had recently met someone from Wisconsin. I asked him if that was why he had quit his internship, but he only smiled. By the time I looked at the clock it was nearing three a.m. I didn’t have to work the next morning but it had still been a long night. I turned in and told Clay to help himself to anything.

I woke and walked into the living room and the blankets were already folded. On the couch was a note saying thank you. A phone number was written at the top with the name “Doris” below it. I put the note in a drawer and went back to bed.

The kid continued to play on Mondays but worked fewer nights for Shane. We started to talk about him when he wasn’t there. A lot of new patrons—mostly eavesdroppers—would ask us all sorts of benign questions like. “Is this where that one guy plays guitar?” Maybe it was our looks or our lack of response, but they rarely stayed for more than one drink. It didn’t really matter, because we knew that in a city as cramped as ours it was only a matter of time before our resident artiste would have to move on.

The audience broke all the rules, all the niceties we’d had created. They approached him while he was playing with questions and suggestions: “Have you ever

tried recording professionally?” or, “I know this great agent. He is just the best and you must talk to him.”

The kid rarely acknowledged their remarks with anything more than a polite smile. I'd seen the agents and talent vultures back in the day. He was a big, fat dollar sign. I shared more than one sympathetic glance with him when they were around. The kid was too big not to draw a crowd, and that that crowd soon started to follow him, to harass him, and the anonymous path he'd cherished became impossible.

One day in April, six months in, he didn't show up on Monday. I wasn't worried because I had sensed it in the songs that something was amiss. Shane didn't mind either. He had never advertised for the kid. The word of mouth factory had spread around town enough, and Shane had still never paid him. I know he'd been tempted to. The kid had bought an extra amplifier because the crowds were far too big, and Shane was going through beer faster than his distributor could keep up. The energy was growing in the audience, but we were getting tapped out.

For the next few weeks reporters from different music magazines snooped around. We asked them to keep us updated; we were far more clueless. They told us that they'd been to his apartment. His landlord said he'd recently moved out, no forwarding address. The kid had denied every record contract thus far, and that's where their knowledge ended. I thought that he must have headed back home, maybe to recuperate, maybe for good. I was proud of him. Sycophants were on his heels, and he could have turned around and swallowed their promises. Instead he disappeared.

Early the next fall he showed up at the café. His hair had grown out and almost covered his eyes and he smiled from ear to ear.

“I signed a contract,” he announced.

We all congratulated him. The record company was independently-owned and out of Memphis. A bigger company was paying them to distribute his album. The kid found a back-up band and for the past three months they’d been rehearsing in a house along the Mississippi River.

“I’m in the city mixing the album right now,” he said. “Guess what?”

We all shook our heads.

“They’re letting me record a live album. Guess where?”

Again, nothing.

“Here, you saps! Right here, at Seo!”

That night we drank with him. We talked about what his future was going to be like. He had brought his mom along with him, and she told us how the kid talked us up to her endlessly. We discussed how many people he wanted to have in the café for the recording (not too many), and whether or not Shane should open it up to the public or not (not).

The following week the recording engineers were the first people to show up. A lot of familiar faces came, mostly former employees and their friends. Ten people attended from the record label. Three of them were the guys behind the boards who loved the music. The rest were businessmen there to make sure that money wasn’t being wasted.



The kid played for about two hours. He played calmly through a couple songs we'd already heard dozens of times. Then he played his first new song. Some of the other guys say said they had heard it before but I had not. He seemed larger, like he and his voice had grown. It had a newfound girth. Simply put, it was breathtaking. I caught no less than half of the suits bobbing their heads at one point. I almost offered them a beer. Almost.

We all laughed and hugged, and then the crew packed it all up and left. The kid said that he had to get back to his hotel because they had an early meeting. Shane opened up the bar for actual business at midnight, but no one else came. We sat around and smiled and didn't really talk much. A couple of days later his mother stopped in and told us that he'd already flown back to Memphis to do some additional tracking for his album. They were finalizing the tour and she promised to keep in touch with updates.

The notice took my breath away. Shane stood there and breathed deeper and deeper. I didn't want to look up at him. If he cried, I knew I would. Then I realized I already was. I just stared at the article and watched as the words on the newspaper slowly blurred.

Two days earlier, it read, an up and coming musician had taken a break from recording to go for a swim in the Wolf River near his studio. He and a recording engineer had taken the short walk to a park, where the musician had entered the water fully clothed. A young boy and his mother witnessed this and even overheard the man singing. Moments later a river ferry drove by and after it had passed the musician was gone. After twenty-four hours of searching, the body was discovered two miles downriver. The article stated the medical exam came back clean on a full chemical and

blood analysis. They listed accidental drowning as the cause of death. The story closed by mentioning that the funeral was going to take place in three days near the kid's childhood home in Tennessee.

We sent one letter and a large arrangement of flowers. We all wanted to attend, but I convinced them that funerals are for family. We were co-workers, patrons, fans, and maybe even friends—but not family. There's still a box at Seo! with all of the letters that we didn't send, because we just couldn't decide what we wanted to say to his mother. We lost him, but he was never really ours to lose.

The letter we did send must have moved her. A month after the funeral the kid's mother showed up at the café. She carried a box full of tapes. The kid had told her that we helped him find his voice, and that he constantly talked about his days and nights at the café. In the box, she said, are his recordings from his apartment in the city. He had planned on giving them to Shane.

“He said that you'd probably never put another penny into a sound system,” she told Shane, “and since he had all these tapes someone should put them to use.”

We all laughed out loud and the tension dropped. The gift shocked, flattered, and saddened us. She said that there was going to be a posthumous release of his album. The record label had put her in charge. The café performance would come out shortly after the album. After a drink and a longer-than-usual lull in the conversation, she got up to leave. We all stood up at once, and she laughed. We all went to shake her hand but she gave us hugs.

When she'd been gone a few minutes, Shane started pulling tapes out of the box. He got to the bottom and there was a large group picture, one taken on the night he'd

played the live recording. We were all in it, and to my surprise, even the recording engineers were there. Shane grabbed the tape closest to his hand and put it in the player. We all looked up to the small speakers on the ceiling. I'm sure I wasn't the only one smiling, but I had my eyes closed as I heard that strumming begin, and I couldn't hold back tears when I heard his voice again.

When I got home and I went into my drawer. I picked up the note Clay had left. In the kitchen I set a chair below the phone and after a half-hour I dialed the numbers.

“Hi. Is this Doris?”

“Yes it is. May ask whose calling?”

“Hi, Doris. You might not believe this, but it's Greg, Louie's father.”

“Oh, gosh. My goodness, Greg. Why we haven't heard your name in years.

How are you doing? I hope everything is okay?”

“Things have been better,” I said, realizing how true the statement was after I made it. “I don't mean to be a bother so late, but I was actually calling to see if you could help me?”

“Well, I'm not sure what I could do for you, but I'd sure like to try.”

“Great. I'm actually trying to track down my son, and I was wondering if you knew where or how I could get a hold of him?”

“As a matter of fact, I do.”

I sighed and let out a little bit of relief, and I felt my grief subside with it.

## Works Cited

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