



1996

Dead town dreaming -- a novella and selected poems

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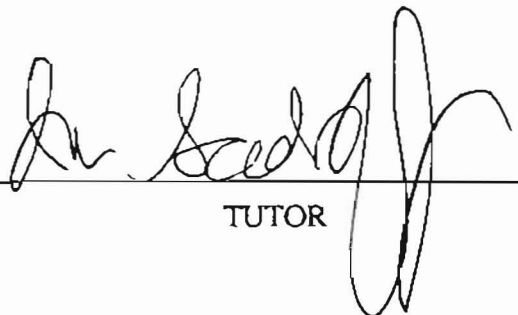
Dead Town Dreaming: a novella and selected poems

by Caleb A. Dolan

submitted in partial fulfillment of the Senior Scholar's Program

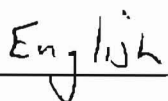
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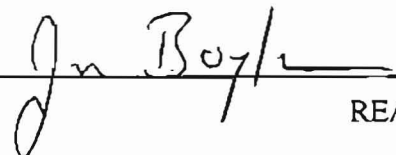
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Fall

We listen to the hunter's shots
regular as bells. Our gun, fired once,
destroyed a sick raccoon to protect the dogs.
I'd kill anyone who hurts my family,
and imagining how fury would release me,
I wish terrible things. They've caught a boy
who murdered his teacher: They've got the death
on tape; another boy held the camera. His arms
shook horribly, because the picture wobbles,
and fades, before the network returns to the anchor,
into a blue screen like the beginning of dreams
or the dusk from which the southern drunks
stumble after raking our woods for deer.

My Father Waking

He wakes in pain, dreaming the time
before wife, son, and house, when the words
that build his life were stones,

dense and cold to touch. His thoughts travel roads
he built for richer weaker men
and cross the river, where his father drowned.

He's amazed his father allowed this trickle
to drag him under. This river's nothing
but a tug on his leg, a child who won't let go.

He kneels beside the stove and his knees crack
and whine like timbers twisting in a hard wind.
It's nearly light and he needs to tear the barn roof down

before the day turns hot. The air's dead weight reminds him
of humid southern mornings, his mouth filled with sweat
and the last night's liquor, and the country club lawn

he watered, where the tall and splendid grass spread under him
like a bed of feathers or the soft fur on a man's chest
he found no comfort in. He kisses his son, asleep on the couch,
letting his lips linger in the forehead's pale flesh.

Between Seasons

I pass the women running,
a neon flash of pink and green,
like the colors inside my head
when I close my eyes, and try
thinking nothing. From this hill
at night, the lights in town shine on
the rain, and those sheets of water seem
to rise like stairs. I'd love to climb
the fire tower, and spy on another
man who walks a hill cradling
a cigarette, or journal, or hand,
but the tower's locked in spring,
before fire's a danger. The songs
of old men drift from my stereo
like smoke I inhale, hoping
my voice will become a tremor,
high and lonesome, to shake
the birds from these branches.

Layover

Yesterday,
The monsoon came loudly
flooded the hotel lobby.
and I knew the plane
would be late, that my luggage
was floating home.

Already,
I miss the last country
thick with omens; birds
fell dead in children's laps
and the orange
peels told fortunes.

Every dark road filled
with the bright eyes of cats.
the bandits without
guns left oyster shells
in my pocket as thanks.

Here, a croissant
flaking on my jacket,
the beggar bangs the window
calling for the second coming,
but stays mum about my fate.

There's no signal or sign
of the other world calling
me to play. Who would believe
events were once crowded
with importance and the planet
did not fall away with every step.

Anthem

I long to be graceful as a Greek
boy, sucking the salt water deep
for drachma. This dreamt of diver,
a brown fishchaser surfaces

beside me. A chain of lost diamonds
in his teeth he sings
to his country, a woman in the grape
arbor. He teaches me the words,

but I won't risk those sounds
on my crooked tongue. I'll slide
from a woman's mouth without praise
or thanks. Each time I moan I could

be telling a dirty joke. I speak
my country's language,
the stockbrokers mumbling, the gangs
howling, the mall kids screwing

in the linen section. I whistle
a lost love's name, and count
the seconds of held breath,
before speaking into empty space.

The Magic Girl Talking to the River

"It is precisely at the moment when they discover their voices, that they must speak it seems, only of separation." -calla jacobson

It is this first: a wing in a girl's hand
a wing she picks up at the river
a wing dropped by the old woman murderer
the hunter of sparrows, the choker of crows.

The old womanwitch carries the bird's bodies
in her basket. She saws the wings
from the breasts with a dead son's knife,
her dull work, turned brutal in crooked hands.

She sings to the river. Her fat mouth cries
over the water. The noise of her dying gut
frightens crows. This song calls the fish
to her nets, steals their memory of stones.

The brightest girl, a lost girl follows the trail
of blooded feathers and the strings of fat.
She hates the river birds, the ghosts that lie
in sparrows. But she can't let the wing alone.

This wing in her hand grows white
in the river and sun and the wing rises
to hurt her. She brings her mouth to the wing
to the white anger of the feathers. This chosen

kindness, the comfort she gives to dolls
to lost dogs; can't satisfy the wing the wing demands entry
it demands the girl take notice. It calls for transformation.
The girl's left arm is a wing. She stumbles half a flying

thing, hollow-boned and ground- clumsy. She falls
to the river the *flash of stones, the voice of snow*.
The water she drinks shatters teeth,
fills her lungs with ice but she won't drown

in her new feathers. She shines a reflected thing.
rising from the river bed. Sharp and newly made.

In Her Bed: a Memory

Naked with a woman I want to love and don't,
I slide to the foot of the bed and start up her again,
tracing the path of my mouth with my hand.
As a boy I always ran up the hill to my house
and when I collapsed wet and gasping on the front step
I refused the glasses of ice my parents offered
because I wanted nothing, not a cool sip or gentle touch
to interrupt the pleasure I found staring at the blank sky,
knowing my body could go no farther.
The same selfish pleasure I know now,
turning to the open window when I'm still inside her.

Gesture

I reach to smooth the face
of the woman dreaming beside me,
and gather instead her hair in my hand.

A smell of shampoo and grass,
this weightless mass, stretches between us
like the rope slung perilously over a river

that I refused to cross, fearing I'd not return
to the bank I left. If I pull these dark strands
loosely from her scalp, she feels nothing

but pleasure in touch, the gentle tension
of connection, but if the wind grows colder
or nightmare claims her sleep and she turns

from me, I would tear a thick clump of her.
How soundly she sleeps not knowing our position.
How easily my intended kindness becomes dangerous

as I've discovered myself cradling a stone,
beside a shop window, ready to rain glass on the street,
when headlights pass and I release the stone.

What keeps me from these alleys and roads of men,
where a desire to own what can be owned,
and destroy what can't, waits like a river rushing

under ice. A promise of spring and drowning.

Another Rock Song

The truck stop's hungover
from the Friday fights in the parking lot

of Shop-n-Save, where two hundred kids
piled in their trucks and mother's cars

to threaten each other with knives,
tire irons and a misplaced golf club.

This was about a girl, a kid said,
leaning against his car as the cigarette fell

from his clumsy fingers. The girl
gave head to the wrong guy at a party

and now the Pittsfield kids want to fuck
up the kids from Newport. Not a punch

thrown, but one kid from Newport
took a bat to his own car. He broke every window

and dented the hood to hell. No one
arrested him. He can drive to the ocean

and crash on the rocks if he wants. The stoned kid
flaunts his lottery tickets. He's got one dollar,

two dollar, and ten dollar winners, that he'll trade
for two joints and a bottle of wine.

Prologue: What Maps Don't Tell You

There are towns that struggle to become cities and fail. Melville was like that. In 1992 there were sixty thousand people in Melville if every trailer straddling the town line counted; good cities, even great cities have developed with far smaller populations. Melville wasn't great though; it was tough. It had survived the collapse of logging, the end of fishing, even the mattress factory shut down. It survived now, a sore thumb on the quick typing fingers of the electronic age.

In the early 80's a wily senator (now jailed for tax evasion) had brought pork barrel museums and office buildings to Melville. So now, the native sons of loggers and scallop draggers parked their trucks next to the sports cars of bureaucrats. The presence of a few yuppies didn't change a thing. Melville's teenagers carried knives and wished for guns, its wives wondered how long the new supermarket would take to arrive, and the old men spit their tobacco on the backs of newly washed Saabs. Melville could never become a city because no one ever chose Melville. No one searched through atlases to find a town at the mouth of a dried up river, facing clear cut hills.

In the fall of 1991 a trucker deposited the tall vagrant in front of the old Cleo Hotel. Melville was not unused to vagrants. In the summer the town was a nice stop on the way northeast for blueberry picking and a last breath of semi-fresh air for those heading south in the winter. What made this particular vagrant troubling was his apparent intention to stay.

Rumors sprang up that the vāgrant lived in the Cleo. The Cleo was a relic of Melville's first millionaires, former loggers who surrounded themselves with elegance to hide their workmen's pasts. But as rapidly as these men had come to Melville and made their fortune, the millionaires vanished. In the 20's they were lost to the easy joys of the southern cities, then the Depression wrecked most of the remaining wealth and finally the War convinced the rest that there was better money to be made elsewhere where things were happening. The millionaires and their friends left but the Cleo stayed, taking up space on the east side of Water Street. People in the town loved to drive by the hotel and stretch their necks to glimpse the supposed opulence of the hotel lobby

The architect modeled the Cleo after an Egyptian sarcophagus; it was meant to give people the sensation of being entombed in elegance. A hundred and fifty years after its building it was still possible to imagine legions of bellboys in red suits, and waiters in black ties making their way around the hotel.

The Cleo's architect, before he fled Melville, had walked through the unopened lobby of the hotel amazed that he had been able to build something so great. He might have spoken out loud, happy that even his small voice sounded good in the place he had built. He knew nothing about music but he managed to build a room with perfect acoustics.

The Cleo was the last symbol of Melville's old wealth. This made the town's authorities tremble when the vagrant took up shop in the old hotel. When the vagrant began to interrupt the silent downtown nights with the screech of saws, the Greater Melville Historical Society called for his arrest. When he painted all the windows black, three squad cars arrived, sirens blaring, to put the long-haired stranger in handcuffs. The police found him waiting outside with the deed to the Cleo in his front pocket. The name on the deed matched the name on the wrinkled social security card he handed to them.

The young cop asked, "What are you doing Mr. Michael Smith?"

"I've been told to build a stage," the man answered.

"Told by who?"

"God, or maybe the aliens. They both have deep voices. I have a hard time telling them apart."

Rusty didn't mind tossing drunks into the town jail so they wouldn't freeze to death. Sometimes the drunks would ask God for forgiveness but they never knew what God sounded like, and they never claimed that God had given them directions to Melville.

"Well, try to keep it quiet."

The next week the halls of Melville Regional filled with signs: "A New Music Emporium at the Cleo. Doors open Friday at 9. Music begins at 9:30. Tickets \$2." The first band was only a couple of dropouts from Wexford who could strum out Blackbird on acoustic guitars. They played to a crowd of six friends who left before the music finished. The next week the lobby started to fill, propelled by reports that you could ash your cigarette on the floor and that no one asked what you were drinking out of your father's thermos. It was an atmosphere perfect for dancing, drinking, and vandalism.

A month after the Lobby opened, the ten-foot high marble statue of Cleopatra was the only undefaced object in the room. The sculptor intended for his statue to rest in the center of a fountain. The Cleo's original plans showed the Cleopatra statue surrounded with strings of lights and smaller statues representing Cleopatra's servants. After Cleopatra's completion, though, the money disappeared. Some said financial ruin came with the end of whaling, others claimed the architect had fled with the owner's daughter. Now, Cleopatra's wide shoulders had become a favorite resting spot for the Lobby-going youth. Each night, three of the toughest, smartest, or coolest kids would assume their perch early in the evening and not relinquish it, even when the cigarettes ran out. The statue had become a mascot for the expatriate students who felt no connection to Melville Regional's Fighting Whales. In December, when some kids from Wexford tried to scratch their initials in Cleopatra's foot, they were summarily thrashed in the alley outside.

The Lobby's upstairs repelled kids with the same force that the statue attracted them. The stairwell at the back of the room led to a drained pool, a frigid sauna, and four halls of vacant hotel rooms. None of the youth of Melville cared much about the staircase and the floors it led to; their

attention ended at the stage. To discourage further exploration of the Cleo the vagrant hung plywood to board off passage to the upper floors.

After two months the vagrant acquired a nickname, the Bellboy. "Because of all the bags he handled," said one teen referring to the amount of pot the man presumably smoked. For one reason or another no one dared call him anything else. The name "Cleo's Lobby" became "the Lobby." Only those kids picked last in gym class or unable to open their lockers on the first day of school didn't pick up on the name change. By the end of the year when the Led Zeppelin tribute band from Portland arrived, every Melville resident under the age of twenty-five wanted to be at the Lobby on Friday night. Meanwhile, Melville's teachers shuddered at the sudden proliferation of tie dyed shirts and guitars in school halls. Parents complained at PTA meetings or drank more themselves. Sermons attacked the Lobby. Councilman poured over zoning ordinances to have the Bellboy thrown out. Still, a year later, like anything else that stayed in Melville the Lobby became a stitch in the fabric, a nail in the woodwork, an accepted evil.

Chapter 1: The Working Life

Outside the Lobby, Jerry shivered. The doors were open, but he was reluctant to enter, and face the crowd. The crowd that wanted him. Jerry was 21 and looked 21, that is to say he could look 16 or 28 depending on the day. His hair hung to his chin and was straight and red. He wore a Marlboro racing team hat that tamed his hair and gave him an air of quiet authority. Jerry wasn't standing outside to smoke. He didn't smoke cigarettes or drink beer or even curse all that much. He did, however sell most of the pot in Melville.

The Lobby was, for all intents and purposes, Jerry's office. It was the first weekend of March, but Jerry knew that tonight, like any other weekend, the Lobby was filled up with career potheads and kids eager to get stoned for the first time. No matter how good crowds were for his wallet, they tried Jerry's patience. The larger a crowd, the more talking Jerry needed to do, and the more he talked to people about bags, pipes, and highs the less he liked talking.

Jerry was just outside the doorway, and he couldn't yet see the stage or the crowd surrounding it. He expected to have his routine night at the Lobby. He'd sell pot, drink a few iced teas and daydream. He wondered if the sameness of his life, even of his dreams, had anything to do with winter. March was as cold and confining as the rest of winter had been, and the flakes of snow tumbling on his head showed the season had no intention of letting up. Jerry knew he should make his rounds through the crowd of eager stoners before he developed frostbite. He passed his

five to the Bellboy, drew in a last clean breath of air, and entered the room. Tonight, he felt disjointed, as if he couldn't remember what had brought him to this place and time.

All of Jerry's high school friends had been stoners. They were the only people who didn't mind his quietness. He was a regular at all the parties and always the designated driver. He even became responsible for carrying his friend's pot, so they wouldn't lose their bags when the evening reached the inevitable chaos of dancing, wrestling, and fire starting. Jerry had never thought about dealing pot until one night before senior year when he and his friends were stopped by a cop. They were coming back from a spring party at the lake.

He was turning onto Meadow Lane when the blue lights came on. Molly and Gary stopped making out in the back seat and launched into hyper-paranoid stoned babble. Scott, drunk and talkative in the passenger seat started to suggest ways to outrun the cops down side streets and back country lanes. Jerry pulled over onto the gravel shoulder of the road. There were three beers under his seat and an eighth ounce of marijuana in his jacket pocket.

He knew this was a Melville cop, probably Rusty, the young one who still read comic books in the supermarket check-out line. Jerry pulled the stash out of his backpack and stuffed it into pants so that the ziploc rested directly underneath his testicles. In Melville unless you were giving a sports physical no guy touched another guy's balls.

"Step out of the car please," Rusty said.

"Yes, sir."

"Have you been drinking?"

"No, sir. We've all been watching movies at a friend's camp," Jerry answered.

"How about marijuana, Jerry, are you high?"

"I wouldn't go near the stuff."

Rusty had Jerry walk the line and recite the alphabet. In the car Molly, Scott, and Gary watched nervously, as if this were the cliffhanger ending to a Die Hard movie. When the time

came for the pat down, the three of them witnessed and later attested to Jerry's almost frightening calm. Even when Rusty's fingers grazed his crotch, Jerry didn't twitch a muscle or break a sweat.

"Your taillight's out."

"I'll have it fixed first thing in the morning," Jerry replied.

The next day at school, Jerry could hear people talking about him around the water fountains. Only two months from graduating as one of the more anonymous members of the Melville Regional Class of 1990, Jerry was suddenly famous.

"Dude the cop grabbed his dick and he didn't freak. The man is cool. He's a pro."

The chatter in halls and locker rooms evolved into legends about Jerry's prowess in evading the law and obtaining narcotics. That Friday, in the senior parking lot, Wally Baker asked Jerry if he could get a bag of marijuana for the next weekend.

Jerry's first impulse was to run away from Wally to avoid laughing. Jerry never shoplifted, never ran red lights. The idea of dealing pot was ridiculous. Still, when Wally asked him, he liked the way it felt. The squirrely linebacker's voice implied that Jerry had authority.

Jerry thought of his cousin Elmore. Elmore was the bad seed. The kid who smashed Jerry's sand castles when their families took vacation trips to Bar Harbor. During holidays, Elmore always offered Jerry his newest drug of choice so he wouldn't have to buy gifts. Elmore would be an easy source for the pot that Wally Baker wanted from Jerry. Indeed Elmore had access to all the drugs that the kids in Melville would ever want. But dialing Elmore's number for the first time Jerry still thought of this as a one-time experiment. Jerry knew all about circles of addiction, loops of obligation, and cycles of fear that kept people like himself dealing drugs until their early deaths, but, for the time being, Jerry didn't care. It was a change. The change earned Wally Baker a paranoid night wondering if his cereal bowl was speaking and it earned Elmore the first link in his dreamed-of drug empire. That first time, Jerry earned thirty dollars and received a storm of phone calls from kids who wanted to get the best pot in Melville. At the end of his first summer as a high school graduate, Jerry used his savings to purchase a half pound of marijuana from Elmore.

Jerry straightened his hat as he stepped through the Lobby's door. He shook the snow from his boots and wiped the frost from his eyebrows. The elegance of the hotel's past was overwhelmed by the Lobby's present. At the back of the room the stage rested, an ugly black rectangle made from old bed frames and plywood. The stage was so tangled in electrical cords and duct tape that it looked like a monster captured and restrained with every available cord in Melville. A year's accumulated dirt and ash had turned the Lobby's thick red carpet into a dull black floor mat. The smooth plaster walls were rife with burn holes and pencil etched graffiti. Jerry strained to see where one truly gifted tobacco spitter had left his mark in the high dark reaches of the Lobby's ceiling. The Lobby was always dark. There were only a few lamps, and the stage lights. Jerry liked to work in the corner where the bulb was left unscrewed.

A sign hung on the front of the stage; "Open mike night: open to all comers." There were open mike nights at the Lobby whenever the regular bands had to pawn their equipment for a few weeks. These nights had their highs and lows; Jerry cringed when he thought of the kid from his shop class who attempted Doors' covers on his flute. Jerry could feel his hair curl and stand on end from all the static in the Lobby air. The Lobby crowd was never quiet, but Jerry couldn't hear a single spoken word. He made his way towards the stage for a better look.

A woman was at center stage tuning her guitar. It was a baby blue electric that looked like it should belong to a member of Elvis's band. Her face was thin and pale as any other daughter of Melville's winter, its features so white that her nose washed into her cheeks, her neck faded in to her chin. Her front teeth turned in different angles as if they were afraid of each other. It was only her hair, dark curls that spun in and out of her mouth like snakes, that possessed the same energy as the hands which busily tuned the guitar.

She stared at the guitar without a nod to acknowledge the crowd, packed shoulder to shoulder for rows ahead of her. She carried a pick in her mouth, and slid it back and forth across her lips, guided by her tongue. Her hands pulled the strings in all directions as if she were grabbing blindly for a butterfly resting on the guitar's body. The audience rose on their feet trying to catch the noise

that escaped her guitar. She mumbled to herself, and girls at the back broke the embraces of their wall-hugging boyfriends to get a better look.

If Jerry could have stepped back into the March air he might have found this silly, the crowd so intent on an awkward woman tuning her guitar as if she were confessing murder in a packed courtroom or talking about first sex with a new lover. He couldn't though. He couldn't have been pulled out of the room by a squad of riot police. She wasn't beautiful or even ugly enough to have a sideshow appeal. Still, Jerry could no more leave the room than turn his back on a snake handler or fire walker.

She began to play. The speed with which her hands attacked the baby blue body of the guitar frightened even the most out-of-touch denizen of the Lobby. Her harmonies interrupted themselves with shrieks of feedback. Then she started to sing. She sang too near to the microphone; it popped and whined during each verse. Her voice was like her playing, beautiful and discordant. The guitar seemed to carry her in leaps and contortions across the stage, Jerry moved forward anticipating her fall from the stage and subsequent strangulation in amp cords. Jerry watched as the most passive stoners began to thrash their heads back and forth.

Jerry had no idea what the song was about. He could make out the words "sonic" and "ass." Whatever the words, Jerry understood the song. The song felt like falling from a building; it was a horrifying, glorious descent into a single emotion. He tried to articulate how the harshest noise could twist itself into something this beautiful. The song asked the crowd to run through the streets and tip over trash cans. The song demanded people set their hair on fire. Jerry wanted a bottle of vodka and a pack of smokes.

Jerry's cousin Elmore listened to music like this. Elmore watched six to eight hours of MTV everyday; he was a library of facts about new music. Elmore said that bands with songs that ranted against parents and teachers would be making millions soon. There were a thousand phrases he used to describe the music to Jerry like "grunge," "thrash," and "punk," but they were only synonyms for loud and angry. Elmore wanted to discover these bands on their way to stardom, and get paid for telling the world about them, he told Jerry again and again how drug

dealing was the key to rock and roll stardom. The financial success of Jerry's dealings with Elmore gave Jerry an unshakable faith in Elmore's advice. Jerry knew Elmore still lived with his parents, and was probably eating glue to get high, but he still listened.

Jerry felt like a gambler drawing a straight flush or an old man getting bingo. Someday, people would stand in line for days to hear this woman scream and play guitar, and here, Jerry was hearing her at an amateur night in a logging town's dive. The kids of Melville would finally have music that fit their lives, music that was dark and angry instead of cheery hymns about peace and changing times. Even before her song finished Jerry planned their meeting, his proposal to manage her, and her first stadium tour. Jerry tried to imagine her guitar backed by drums and a bass. The extra musicians would be for looks more than music but that was all right; talent alone wasn't enough for anything.

The woman was holding the guitar low between her legs as she played. She looked like a crab thrashing inside the pot as it boiled. Her voice clung to the last note of the song becoming so raw and angry that people covered their ears. While that note was still burrowing into people's chests and popping open the tops of bottles, the woman did a curious thing. She looked up as if surprised to find that anyone was in the room at all. The open eyed surprise became full fledged dread. She held her guitar against her chest like a baby or a diary and ran from the stage.

Jerry could not move or think. He waited for the cheering, the screaming demands for an encore. He waited for the rest of the Lobby to acknowledge that they had watched a star's birth. But as rapidly as they embraced the new music, the Lobby's crowd rejected it, as if they were embarrassed by the enjoyment of a strange and exotic fruit. Kids, who moments ago had accompanied the shrieking guitar with their own screaming, flicked their lighters and complained.

"That sucked, she only played one song."

"It was like three minutes long. At least those guys who only played one song last week did a twenty minute one,"

"Yeah, they did that Pink Floyd song, the long one. I've never even heard the song she played."

“Just because she’s the Bellboy’s girlfriend we have to listen to her. That’s bullshit.”

Jerry hadn’t known the Bellboy had a girlfriend; it was a hard picture to conjure. The fact that this woman was connected to the Bellboy didn’t phase Jerry at all. The gossip faded into the back of his head, he was too busy thinking about her music. Jerry knew the spell her song cast was real, and couldn’t fathom why the crowd pretended what happened hadn’t happened. Perhaps they weren’t ready for punk, perhaps, he realized her potential before the rest of Melville, and it was his job to make them recognize the greatness right in front of them. There had to be a reason, he thought, that the song passed through them to land like an anvil on his heart. The thoughts were still heavy in his head, when the customers started to arrive.

“Hey, Jerry we need to talk tonight.”

He didn’t locate the boy’s voice, only its celebration of a freshly cashed check from a month of burger flipping. The check wanted to transform itself into a carload of stoned friends by midnight. Jerry tried to make himself return to reality as rapidly as the rest of the Lobby. He saw Billy, the afroed checkout clerk from the Stop and Shop step to the microphone. Billy had assumed the role of the Lobby’s MC without being asked. He did have a certain flair with his plaid pants and checkered jacket that was unmatched by the waves of tie dye and plaid that the majority of the Lobby preferred.

“Another big hand for ugh, did anyone catch her name?” Billy implored.

“Kim,” a voice replied from one of the darker corners of the Lobby.

“A big, big, hand for Kim,” Billy said.

There was an isolated clap from the corner and then a few boos from the crowd at the bar. Jerry was alone by the stage. The crowd’s favorite, Sugar Magnolia, took the stage. Sugar Magnolia was made up of four brothers, a dope-smoking version of the Oak Ridge Boys, whose entire set list was covers of Grateful Dead songs. They started on the familiar chords of “Ripple” to screams of encouragement. The customers were in the corners getting restless. Jerry’s evening had just begun, there was pot to sell, and debts to be collected. As hard as he tried he couldn’t stop thinking he had just caught a brief glimpse of Melville’s first punk rock star.

Two hours later his thoughts were filled with images of Kim on the cover of Rolling Stone. Mentally he opened to the interview where in bold print she thanked him for all her success. It was one in the morning and Jerry was sharing a Lipton iced tea with his landlady. Mrs. Sebastian was eighty-five, barely reaching five feet and in her own words "always foaming at the mouth". She was excitable, clear headed and funny. These traits allowed Jerry to indulge in his own quiet, murky thoughts as they talked.

Mrs. Sebastian had rented the apartment to Jerry two years ago even though Jerry was unemployed and warned her that he often received late night phone calls and belligerent visitors. Mrs. Sebastian shrugged, claiming that the company of young men was what kept her alive. She undercharged Jerry in return for his assistance with groceries and his promise that he would help dispose of her ashes so that her lying thief of a sister wouldn't get the chance. The discussion of funeral arrangements made up a large part of their day to day conversation. Mrs. Sebastian was in great health but loved to imagine elaborate funerals.

Mrs. Sebastian was talking about dead people she'd known and loved. She wasn't being morbid about it but the subject matter got to Jerry. He started to think of his life as a stalled truck with its hazard lights continually blinking. Only two years ago Jerry's life looked to have taken such a dramatic turn for the better. He had a substantial increase in income, status, and freedom. He had no financial worries, and no family ties to hold him back.

Jerry's mother had died in a mill accident when Jerry was four. After Jerry graduated from high school his father had gone to Florida to look for work where it was warm. He had asked Jerry to come but Jerry had already moved into his apartment and didn't feel right about leaving that quickly. His father wrote postcards stolen from the truck stop where he worked. He loved the beaches but hated the heat. He ended the postcards with a wish that Jerry keep out of trouble.

Tonight, Jerry thought he could smell trouble in every nook and corner of his life. There was going to be more trouble with the cops in the next few weeks. Some kid had squealed to the police that he had been buying pot in the Lobby and now the town council was up in arms to have it

closed again. To make matters worse, his cousin Elmore was hassling Jerry to start dealing more, or move onto acid or coke. There were more dealers in Melville now and Jerry needed to keep his turnover high if he was going to keep paying rent. He didn't think Mrs. Sebastian would kick him out but he hated to take advantage of her by staying on without paying. Jerry tapped his empty bottle and tried to focus on Mrs. Sebastian's story.

"I was twenty, maybe twenty one when I left for Oregon. I was going to marry a tree farmer named Brendan. He was beautiful, arms as thick as posts and the best kisser I have ever know," she began.

"How many men have you kissed Mrs. Sebastian?" Jerry asked, curious because Mrs. Sebastian had been married to the same man for over thirty-five years.

"I'm eighty-five Jerry. I must have kissed at least forty men," she said, "I kissed teachers, postmen, and loggers. I was quite a kissing fool before the war, and during the 50's there wasn't anything fun to do except for kiss, and well the 60's and 70's encouraged kissing. It wasn't until the 80's that kissing stopped being fun," she was taking obvious pleasure in Jerry's shock, "Don't be a prude Jerry, you need to get kissed and lighten up."

Jerry was surprised that Mrs. Sebastian knew. He had never told Mrs. Sebastian that he hadn't kissed anyone. Jerry thought that at least he looked like someone who had done some kissing. Remaining unknissed was the least of Jerry's problems but it consumed a disproportionate amount of his thoughts. Until tonight he had been well resigned to his state of unknissedness, he was too old for the high schoolers, too young for the housewives and waitresses, and plain scared of anyone else available in Melville. He was scared of Kim with the curls and the angry songs but his fear didn't stop him from wondering what it would be like to kiss her. She was going to be a rock star sometime soon. And rock stars were well versed in the art of kissing, constantly having their pick of fans.

His hope was tempered by the larger problem of not knowing how to find Kim. He didn't know who Kim was or where she came from. If a presence like her could have remained hidden

in Melville for this long, she might be impossible to find. He tried to turn his thoughts towards Mrs. Sebastian's story, hoping that it, at least, would have a happy ending.

"What happened to Brendan?" he asked.

"Turns out he was a spy for the Germans, fled the States right after Pearl Harbor, and was executed in France." she replied.

Jerry never cared to ask whether or not Mrs. Sebastian's stories were true. It was preferable to accept her life as she described it; her history made Jerry feel better than any history book he had ever read. He hated when her stories ended and she turned her attention to his life.

"Jerry when are you going to leave this town and find yourself a real life?"

She asked this question every time they talked. It wasn't meant to be mean, but each time she asked Jerry felt the question stick like a dart in his forehead, a sensation both painful and humiliating. He never had an answer; he didn't think about leaving that much. Melville was slow, sometimes hellish but he never imagined anywhere else being better.

Tonight, he wanted to take on the wide world, negotiating with record companies the same way he talked to pot heads. He would handle business and Kim would make loud, beautiful music. In this way both their fortunes would be assured. First, he had to find her, then he had to get her away from Melville where no one would ever recognize her worth. Everything would be easy if he had a car. New York, Los Angeles, Seattle would all be his doorstops if he had a car; with a car he could drive while Kim strummed out tunes. They would drive south until they got to a place where spring wasn't another month of ice and snow but was, instead the flowering of summer.

The desire to be with Kim was overpowering, the kind of desire that made him look up with an embarrassed smile as if the sheer power of his thoughts made them open to Mrs. Sebastian. The desire to be somewhere else was so strong, so tangible, that he felt his hair blown back by a wind he couldn't see. This was the hundredth time that Mrs. Sebastian had asked him if he would leave the town and for the first time he answered her.

"I'll leave as soon as I find someone to leave with me. As soon as I find someone who needs me to go places."

Mrs. Sebastian took another long sip from her iced tea and chuckled.

"Jerry, it takes a lot more than love to get out of Melville."

Chapter 2: The Job Hunt

PJ wanted to trip in the worst way. Of course he also wanted to get laid, rich, and famous, but tonight only one of his dreams seemed possible. His chemistry lab partner's sister knew the name of a dealer and PJ was trying to find him. This dealer was one of the few kids in Melville who dealt, and the dealer's age was important to PJ. All the dealers PJ had ever met were old hippies who came around his mother's house with Led Zeppelin bootlegs and balls of hash. He hated how they smelled like trailers and his mother's incense. PJ slid his head back under his hat, slipped his walkman into the kangaroo pocket of his State Police sweatshirt and entered the Lobby determined to find a man named Jerry.

The Bellboy was at the door as always with his ink stamp and paper bag full of money. He hoped the Bellboy was using the stamp of the cannabis leaf. PJ didn't wash his hand for a week after his last visit to the Lobby so he could show the green blob to all of his old friends who were still in junior high.

This was his first visit to the Lobby since last weekend's traumatic visit with his father. The moment PJ climbed out of his mother's car his father had marched him to the bathroom for a haircut. The chin-length bangs PJ had been cultivating since spring lay in his dad's sink; he looked like a little league shortstop with a nasty coach.

Tonight, PJ carried fifty dollars in his wallet. He had shoveled sidewalks during the last two snowstorms, begging old men to leave their snow blowers inside garages so that he could earn this money. He held a twenty out to the Bellboy, happy for the first time not to be paying with scrounged and stolen quarters.

"Don't you know what a small bill is?" The Bellboy asked.

The Bellboy's voice shocked PJ. The Bellboy hadn't spoken to him before. It was the lowest voice PJ could imagine, and it frightened him. PJ hated how he looked when he was frightened. He'd watched himself in a mirror once while listening to his parents fight, and that image stayed with him. His eyes were too big and he looked like an animal caught in headlights.

"There's a line behind you," the Bellboy said.

PJ tried to muster a suitably angry and sarcastic tone, one that he might use for his parents or the minister who ruffled his hair.

"Sorry," PJ answered.

"No problem. Don't make it a habit," the Bellboy replied.

Somewhere there was a woman singing and PJ couldn't see her. PJ hated the 60's music in the Lobby; it reminded him of his parents singing along to their records.

This music was different though; PJ wouldn't have used the words terrible or raw because those words didn't belong to kids like him, they belonged to teachers and kids who went to theater camp in the summer. He was speechless certain that this voice could speak his dreams. She sang about his desire to throw his father's Bibles into the stove and put out cigarettes on the kitchen counter. He knew music existed other than the country and classic rock that filled the town but he never believed that music would come to Melville.

"There isn't anything so cruel as a beautiful song."

The Bellboy stood behind PJ staring at the stage; PJ didn't know if he was the object of the Bellboy's speech or the old man was talking to himself. PJ knew that beautiful music meant harps and long-necked women with violins under their chins. He decided the Bellboy must be crazy.

PJ remembered when the Bellboy had come to town. He spoke foreign languages to people he met on the street and went to the library asking for books no one had ever seen. PJ knew there was more to this man than his aging hippie image but he didn't want to find that out. PJ looked for an opening in the crowd to get lost in, but the crowd moved away from the stage as soon as the music ended, and the rush of people carried PJ backwards until his face pressed into the Bellboy's chest. He stared again into the sunken eyes and matted beard of the old man. The Bellboy's wide blue eyes looked full of purpose, as if he were searching PJ out from the rest of the crowd.

"Yo PJ, I know where Jerry is."

His friend pulled on PJ's arm as he spoke. PJ walked away from the Bellboy. He had never noticed how tall the man was. Walking away was like walking away from a mountain. He turned to look back at the Bellboy but the man had already returned to his place by the door. Beside the door the Bellboy looked as harmless and kooky as he always had.

PJ rubbed his eyes. The next band was now well into their set and the kids next to the stage were bobbing their heads in stoned delight. Beck was weaving through the crowd. PJ struggled to keep up. They were moving to the darkest corner of the Lobby where the light bulb was always unscrewed. The people they passed by or bumped into could have been anyone. PJ imagined that the squat man stumbling past him was his father or that the tall shape they were approaching was the minister in his father's church.

PJ couldn't remember the day his parents had decided to divorce. There were a thousand days of his childhood similar to it, fight-reconciliation-fight, his mom's car jetting out of the driveway or his father's bike struggling to reach speed before roaring down the street. It was the day of his father's conversion that he could recall perfectly.

"You've accepted who as your what?" his mother screamed.

PJ was in his room arranging the new posters he had bought that morning. He had stuffed John Elway and Larry Bird into the back of his closet and was carefully taping a Grateful Dead

poster so that the cheap scotch tape would remain hidden behind the wall-length image of skeletons on a boat.

PJ turned up the volume to drown out his mother's yelling. His father opened the door.

"Son, turn the music down— we need to talk," his father spoke in calm measured tones that frightened PJ immediately. He stopped Jimi Hendrix in mid-solo and sat down on his bed. His father sat down beside him, leaving PJ no way to exit the room, except busting through the window above his bed like an action movie hero confronted by the partner who has betrayed him.

"Son, when the world ends, will you be saved?"

He could remember when the Deathstar destroyed a planet in Star Wars and not even Luke Skywalker had been able to save it. He didn't respond to his father, suddenly wondering where his old lightsaber had disappeared to. PJ noticed his father was clean-shaven and combed. His teeth seemed to have lost some of their yellow nicotined tint. The frightening details piled on top of each other.

"Son, I have been a bad father. I have used drugs, profanity. I have played no role in your education or moral development. I want to help you accept the Lord Jesus Christ into your life."

It had only been six months since his father's conversion, only three since his parents had begun battling over custody. Every other weekend he spent attending church services and Christian rock concerts with his father. During the week he fought with his mom about grades and jobs. Her motherly concern seemed as fake as his father's newfound religion.

Instead of studying, PJ spent hours listening to bands whose songs contained guitar feedback and obtuse, angry lyrics about getting high and mooning authority figures. He spent weeks saving for the hallucinations, that would splash against his dull reality like a can of paint thrown against a wall. He used all his Christmas money to buy a bass and amplifier. He played along with the tapes, devoting all his energy to recreating the songs note for note. He knew the effort he put into the music infuriated his mother. He called her a hippie tramp behind her back and unplugged his father's refrigerator at the end of every weekend they had together.

PJ shuddered. Thoughts of his parents made him nauseous. He steadied himself against one of the pillars at the room's edge. He stared back at the bright stage and swaying crowd. Even a short distance away the security of the crowd was inviting.

"We have to be cool," Beck said.

"We are cool," PJ replied, stepping deeper into the shadows.

He was trying to muster up all the false confidence that Beck lacked. He knew that whoever Jerry was, he wouldn't want to deal with nervous kids. PJ concentrated so hard on moving confidently that he almost ran into a tall man with red hair.

"Sorry," PJ said and started walking again.

"PJ, this is Jerry," Beck tried to whisper but it came out in a squeal.

The red haired man didn't seem to notice either of them all that much. He kept glancing back into the crowd as if he were expecting an answer to come from that direction. PJ ran his hand over the money in his pocket and began to speak.

"We'd like, I'd like to make a deal."

"For what?" Jerry asked.

PJ expected more intrigue to surround the whole business. He had taken a book out of the town library that described the daring life of DEA agents. He had practiced all his code words, and he knew all the slang. Confronted with a direct question he wasn't sure what to say.

"We want some groceries from Super Mario land," PJ said.

"Some what?" Jerry asked.

Jerry seemed for the first time to be paying attention to PJ. PJ glanced at Beck who was so nervous that PJ worried he might start asking for his mom.

"Campbell's cream of you know what without the cream."

Jerry seemed to pay complete attention to PJ now as if he were trying to figure out a complex riddle.

"I want to buy some smurf houses," PJ implored.

“Mushrooms, you want mushrooms, is that it?” Jerry asked, excited as if he had won a prize on a game show.

“Yeah, how much does an eighth bag cost?”

“Thirty-five dollars.”

PJ pulled the cash from his wallet and Jerry put his hand inside his jacket. They exchanged the cash for the bag, shook hands, and Jerry moved back into the center room quickly getting lost in the crowd.

“Shit, that wasn’t hard,” PJ said, surprised by his own composure.

“Dude we scored ‘shrooms. I can’t even believe it. Wait until we tell Joe and Rodney. They are going to be so stoked. I was telling Sue that we were going to do this and she didn’t believe me. Is she going to have to eat shit or what?”

Beck showed no signs of slowing down his monologue. PJ hardly cared to listen. The bag felt heavy inside his coat pocket. His head felt heavy, as if the drugs were a weight he was dragging within his forehead. It was Friday. His mother would be at home watching a video with her boyfriend, and his father would be at a church meeting, planning a softball league or a bake sale. The kids who crowded in the lights of the stage seemed distant, like sails that would always be on the horizon. PJ wondered if these were the sort of thoughts he would have if he ate the mushrooms in his coat pocket.

“Drop your beers, the cops are here,” Billy announced from somewhere in the back of the room.

The cops were making one of their bi-weekly crackdowns on the Lobby. The band’s music faded under the ringing of bottles against the floor and the slosh of alcohol pouring into trash cans. PJ turned to ask Beck what they should do, but Beck had already run away.

“We have a warrant to search the premises for illegal narcotics,” Rusty announced.

The house lights came on. Light reached every corner of the room except the corner where PJ stood. He saw Rusty and one of the nameless state cops make their way through the crowd. They seemed pleased, perhaps they had found a newly lit joint in the hand of one of the metalheads they

hated. The Bellboy was nowhere to be seen either. He had disappeared, presumably to hide his own stash in one of the back hallways.

PJ scanned the room. He was paralyzed by the acuteness of his perception. PJ had never been in trouble with the cops. He performed the usual mixed bag of petty vandalism, smashing pumpkins and throwing eggs, but now he was in possession of a felony level narcotic. He tried to remember what the penalties were for possessing hallucinogens. He was sure that they sent juvenile offenders to boot camps. He had seen the boot camps on some talk show. Only his father would be allowed to visit him. PJ would end up reading the Bible for weeks on end. Out of sheer frustration he would burst and find himself singing hymns and knocking on doors, asking to talk to people about the end of the world. PJ needed desperately to take action.

He wished that he could take off in his mother's Mustang. He wanted to leave a trail of sprayed slush and frustrated cops behind him, but his mother wouldn't let him take driver's education until his grades improved. The half a pack of cigarettes that PJ smoked in a day made running more than ten yards almost an impossibility. He thought of all the words that would surround him if he were arrested, the crime show words like *evidence*, *incrimination*, and *plea*. Rusty was threatening to fine a blond haired girl for having an open container of whiskey. PJ could hear her telling Rusty to go bother the potsmokers in the back of the room. PJ knew that Melville cops were excited to bust someone for possession of marijuana. They would be positively giddy to find him with mushrooms.

PJ made his way to the front of the room with the practiced stealth of someone who had been evading curfew for years. He decided to crawl behind the stage, eat the mushrooms, and then be on his way home without a shred of incriminating evidence.

He wedged himself behind the stage and tried to remember what his health teacher claimed were the immediate effects of hallucinogens. PJ worried that it might be possible to trip from touching mushrooms. Walls of flame would surround him, furniture would speak; it was exciting just to think about it. His heartbeat was so loud that the cops would surely locate him by sound alone. He drew in a breath and realized that the pounding wasn't his heart; it was feet clanging up stairs.

He had never noticed the stairs behind the stage even though all that hid them was a sheet of plywood and some canvas.

Holding back the canvas, he saw the Bellboy walking up a wide staircase. The Bellboy turned as if he knew he was being watched. PJ's attention wandered away from his possible arrest. He would have been content to stare at the Bellboy and the stairwell for hours if he hadn't heard the clicking boots of the cop. PJ wiggled under the canvas. He was running up the stairwell, imagining himself in the slow motion shot the movies always use to show escaping heroes. This image would have made PJ feel better if he weren't losing ground to the Bellboy with each step.

There were two flights of stairs. At the top of the second flight PJ entered a room. An empty pool dominated the room. Melville was a town rife with empty pools but those were concrete, leaf clogged bath tubs. This pool was a tile and marble masterpiece. The unvandalized opulence scared PJ. He began to check the room for Roman emperors and lions that might be let loose to mangle him. The Bellboy, who had stepped into the room only seconds before, was nowhere to be seen.

There were four hallways leading away from the pool room in each cardinal direction. The hallways were unlit, and as much as PJ strained, he could see nothing down them. The pool room was lit by five or six giant bulbs that resembled old fashioned street lamps. The lamps lit the room unevenly, leaving plenty of shadows for PJ to shy away from.

The pool was the only uncluttered space in the room. Around it there were piles of old beds, ice buckets, and coat hangers. PJ surveyed the junk accumulated from a hundred years of forgotten belongings. There were boxes of children's toys; trains, dolls, and balls that must have rolled under beds as parents pulled their screaming children from rooms. The clothes ranged from the simplest of rain coats to the most grotesque leather and chain lingerie concoctions. The books were the standard stack of traveler's pulp mixed with thick black bound encyclopedias of insects and sailor's charts.

"This room is the one room I haven't cleaned," the Bellboy said.

PJ had forgotten the man he was following. The Bellboy emerged from behind a pile of mattresses. His voice was soft but it carried authority.

Theme music from The Shining started running through PJ's head. He wondered what the Bellboy would look like with an ax raised above his head. He wanted to leave; he was sure that he couldn't have freely chosen to be here.

"You could use a job."

"I shovel driveways," PJ replied.

"A *steady* job will keep you out of trouble," the Bellboy said.

"Who said that I'm in trouble?"

The Bellboy smiled. PJ looked down and realized that he was holding the bag of mushrooms. He wondered how long he had been holding them like a bag of chips, whether he had intended to hand the hallucinogens to the cops to save them the trouble of even patting him down.

"I'm not saying that you are in trouble. I'm acknowledging an obvious circumstance," Bellboy said.

PJ didn't exactly know what the Bellboy was saying. He seemed to imply that PJ's imminent arrest and incarceration were not worth worrying about.

"You won't tell will you?" PJ asked and then cursed himself for saying *tell* like a little kid.

"I can't say that I am too friendly with the law of Melville. They have not been a welcoming segment of the community," the Bellboy said.

"No shit," PJ added.

The Bellboy did not seem to approve of profanity very much because he shot PJ a look of annoyance. Until now PJ had never worried about talking too much.

"In return for not using you as a bargaining chip with the greater Melville Police Department, I want your assistance."

PJ had been through ten years of lectures about the evil of strangers. He expected the Bellboy to ask him to dig up bodies in the town cemetery or to assist in the filming of movies that involved sex acts with animals.

"You misunderstand me. I need someone to help me with this place. I don't have the time or the energy to run errands and it seems you have plenty of both."

PJ couldn't hide his interest. The idea of never having to pick up a shovel and argue about the use of snow blowers appealed to him. Not only would his shoveling days be at an end, he would be working at the Lobby. He would be able to throw out the junior high kids who tried to sneak in, to demand beer instead of cash as payment for entrance, to show the senior girl in his history class the secret rooms upstairs from the Lobby.

"You can't bring anyone up here, that is one of the only rules of your employment," the Bellboy said.

"What other rules are there?" PJ asked.

"Rumor is that you can play bass. If that is true, I want you to practice here. If you're good there might be other work available."

PJ was still expecting the plot twist where the Bellboy asked him to dig up graves in the cemetery and fill the old pool with decayed limbs. Instead he was, in a round about way, getting asked to play in a band. The longer he stood in the middle of all the elegant junk, the more PJ felt drawn to the Bellboy's offer. At the very least, working in the Lobby would give him the chance to turn his amplifier up as loud as it could go. Even if he were forced to perform strange experiments with electricity and sewn-together bodies, it would be a job that involved dangers other than frostbite and the complaints of old men.

"What will your parents think?" The Bellboy asked.

The question pushed PJ into the hands of his new employer. He filled up with immense pleasure at the very thought of spending every night away from home. He gushed at the idea of avoiding visits to his father's because of *work*.

"They'll love it," PJ answered.

"You're a liar but that doesn't bother me."

"Where do I begin?"

"Here. All these things need to be sorted, placed in new piles, and rearranged until they take a proper shape. I want the trash removed, the valuables pawned, and the furniture sold at yard sales," the Bellboy said.

"What do you want done first?" PJ asked in an annoyed, slightly whiny tone. It was, he thought, the first time the entire night that he sounded like himself.

"Acquaint yourself with the magic of the broom and mop."

The Bellboy started to head towards the northern set of hallways. PJ prepared to head back into the Lobby. PJ wondered for a moment if the Bellboy was a trick his father was playing to prove once and for all the full extent of PJ's evil. The Bellboy turned and smiled as this thought entered PJ's head.

"You probably should get started tonight. At least that way you won't get yourself into any trouble," the Bellboy said.

PJ started to respond with something along the lines of "Blow me, I'm not working on a Saturday night," but the ominous echoes of the Bellboy's voice convinced PJ that there were worse things for him to be doing. The Bellboy reached behind a stack of records to pluck out a broom.

It was nearly three in the morning when PJ had scraped the last dust balls from the corner of the room. The Bellboy had left the room hours ago, presumably to fall asleep in one of the old suites. PJ made his way out through the now empty Lobby onto the snow dusted street. He forgot the bag of mushrooms somewhere in his cleaning, but he didn't turn back to retrieve them; his thoughts needed no assistance tonight.

Chapter 3: Labor and Love

Jerry felt light walking to the Lobby. There were a couple of eighth bags in his pocket but he wasn't weighted down with the usual ballast of Ziploc bags and green buds. A plow truck passed Jerry, spraying a wave of slush towards the sidewalk. Jerry still wore the black wool trench coat that his mother had given him for his sixteenth birthday. It was, he thought, the only item he owned that made him look like a drug dealer. Now speckled with muddy slush, he looked like a model for detergent commercials.

Spring was its usual glorious self in Melville. The third week of March had begun with the third snowstorm of March. Yesterday, Jerry sat in his apartment in a sweater and three blankets because he didn't want to pay for heat. Today, rather than spend another day in similar isolation he decided to seek Kim out. He was beginning to feel a little strange about having all these plans without having spoken to her.

The snow had locked Melville's populace inside its houses on Thursday and Friday. The forty-eight hours of sitcom-induced oblivion promised to make Saturday wild. Jerry's most profitable periods followed snow days. Spending that much time in a small space with their parents drove most Melville teenagers to lust for drugs. He hoped that by going to the Lobby in the early evening he would find Kim while the Bellboy was busy with customers.

If Kim really was the Bellboy's girlfriend, Jerry would have to find a way to avoid him. If the Bellboy were just another guy, that might not seem so daunting, but the Bellboy was different. The Bellboy looked like a stoner but he never bought dope from Jerry or anyone that Jerry knew. He didn't say a word to any of the drunks and wannabee thugs that populated the Lobby, but no one started trouble. The Bellboy's authority had nothing to do with his physique or his job title and that made him a strange and unsettling opponent.

Jerry arrived at the Lobby around seven. There was no one waiting outside the Lobby. Presumably there was a basketball game or party somewhere that was occupying the Lobby crowd until later in the evening when the bands started. Inside the foyer, instead of the Bellboy selling tickets, there was some kid who looked at Jerry vengefully. Jerry recognized him but could not remember from where; he looked too young to be a customer.

"Is the Bellboy here?" Jerry asked.

"No," the kid replied.

"Do you know where he is?"

"Yes."

Jerry was not prone to getting angry but this kid was aggravating.

"Is Kim here?"

"Kim who?" the kid replied as sarcastically as possible to imply he knew not only who Kim was but her location and mood as well.

"What band is playing tonight?"

"One of the dumb bands. Sugar Magnolia again or maybe that one with the cheerleader."

Jerry tried to remember if he had ever in his life been so full of attitude as this kid was. He wished he were as capable of sounding rude and insulting because then he wouldn't feel so overmatched by the conversation.

"Have we met?" Jerry asked.

"Unfortunately. You're the prick who overcharged me for 'shrooms the other night and neglected to stick around when the cops showed up. Probably a narc for all I know."

Jerry wished he could turn narc on this kid. He imagined with great pleasure the prospect of walking past the kid while he mowed cemeteries for his community service.

"I guess in all the excitement I missed your name."

A guitar's whine interrupted their conversation. The first beats of a drum followed the guitar. No one played guitar like that except for the bucktoothed angry Medusa who had been the sole inhabitant of his dreams for a week. Jerry dreamt so much about that guitar that hearing it made his legs wobble.

"Who is playing guitar?"

"I don't hear a guitar."

"Who is playing drums?" Jerry said as he tried walking past the kid into the Lobby.

"It is a secret. Anyway did I mention that we aren't open until nine," the kid said placing himself in Jerry's path.

Jerry didn't pay attention. The music seemed to be seeping through every crack and hole in the Lobby's plaster. He almost pushed himself and the kid into the Lobby.

"Tell me where she is," Jerry said, trying as hard as he could to sound tough.

"Tell you where who is?" the kid asked.

"Tell me and I'll cut you a deal on a bag," Jerry said.

Pieces of plaster were starting to tumble down on Jerry and the kid's heads. Jerry looked at the kid who seemed a little panicked by the steady stream of white dust raining down from the foyer's ceiling.

"I don't know which one of them is crazier," the kid said under his breath.

"What was that?" Jerry asked trying to pick up on the mumbled clue.

"Oh, nothing," the kid replied.

Both he and Jerry had stepped back from their near argument to ponder the potential collapse of the building. While they enjoyed a guitar induced snow storm, outside the first true rain of March had begun. The roads were already contemplating icing over and the snow congealed into

large dirty piles of slush. Inside the guitar let loose a squeal and all the lights of the Lobby blinked and burnt out.

"Shit," the kid muttered.

Jerry used the pause in the conversation to burst into the Lobby. The Lobby's total darkness obscured the drama of Jerry's entrance. The speed with which he entered left him short of breath and balance. He stopped moving and began groping for a solid object to steady himself against. He could hear the kid behind him, and the clicking noise of an apparently empty lighter. There were other people in the room because he heard breathing and stumbling, and someone continuing to play a guitar that sounded forlorn without its electricity. Jerry rested his hand against a flat surface and tried to catch his breath.

A light came on above Jerry's head. He turned to see the Bellboy's face revealed in the beam of a flashlight. Jerry's first thought was that the Bellboy was floating near the ceiling, but he realized the Bellboy was standing on the stage behind a drum set.

The Bellboy was grinning widely, and the flashlight pressed against his jaw made his entire face glow pink. The Bellboy laughed like a schlock horror movie vampire but whoever he was trying to amuse didn't respond. The Bellboy waved the flashlight around the room, illuminating the kid still struggling with his lighter, then Jerry, and finally letting the beam fall on Kim.

In Jerry's long week of dreaming about Kim her face always appeared out of darkness. In his dreams, her teeth hadn't been quite so twisted, her face hadn't been so plain, but these incongruities were unimportant to Jerry. Kim stood illuminated with her hair waving, and her hands strumming a guitar.

Jerry, in the midst of his rapture, tried to get Kim's attention. He scanned the hazy room for ideas. The Bellboy's face kept rising in and out of the darkness as he apparently struggled to light a lantern and keep the flashlight on Kim. The kid looked upset that he couldn't keep a cigarette lit now that his lighter was working.

Jerry knew he had to speak. He tried to untwist his tongue and deliver an impassioned speech about his dream of delivering Kim to stardom, but in the criss-crossed wiring of his thoughts the

only noise he mustered was “Yeah.” A noise that with the accompaniment of twenty thousand other fans might have sounded great but alone sounded like a stalling car.

The noise seemed to catch Kim’s attention. She squinted to make out Jerry’s face. Jerry took a step towards the stage. Kim shuffled, and in the dimness Jerry thought she was coming to him. His imagination took control. Certain she would leap from the stage, he stretched his arms to catch her. She stopped playing and let the guitar sway across her body like a pendulum. Jerry was tempted to think that she smiled at him. He tried to linger in her line of vision. It was strange to be in the Lobby without a crowd surrounding him, strange but wonderful to have Kim to himself. If he could soak in a little more of her presence, he would be able to tell her everything.

Dread filled Jerry up like a swamp. His jaw locked, and his tongue swelled. Kim took one small step towards him, as if to offer him a final chance at communication. Then she disappeared into the darkness behind the stage.

Her disappearance disrupted the private reverie of both the kid and the Bellboy. The kid fumbled his cigarette, spraying ashes onto the floor. The Bellboy dropped his flashlight, and reaching for it, snuffed out his lantern.

“Who is he?” the Bellboy asked.

“The dealer who overcharged me last week,” the kid answered.

“What is he doing here?”

“He wanted to see Kim.”

Jerry was intrigued that this conversation could go on without him. He would have allowed them to continue discussing his purpose but he needed to find out about Kim.

“Where did Kim go?”

“Why do you want to see her?” the Bellboy asked.

Jerry was certain he could detect jealousy in the Bellboy’s speech.

“I smell smoke,” the kid said.

“Shut up PJ,” the Bellboy said.

“Not my problem if her amplifier explodes and this whole place burns down.”

"If you're interested in listening to Kim play. It will be a long wait. She's not fond of audiences," the Bellboy said to Jerry.

"I want to talk to her. She's great. I think she'll be a star," Jerry replied.

"She doesn't want to be a star. She's fine right here. She doesn't appreciate weirdoes interrupting our practices," the Bellboy said.

It was clear that besides being Kim's protector, the Bellboy was also her drummer. This was another obstacle for Jerry. He was certain Kim would find him more romantically appealing than the Bellboy but he lacked musical appeal.

PJ, which was clearly the kid's name, climbed on stage to pick up the flashlight. He shined it towards the back of the stage. The light gave substance to the thick smoke that enveloped the stage, adding an ever murkier tinge to Jerry's perception. Finally the beam fell on Kim's burnt and smoking amplifier.

"Shit," PJ exclaimed.

"How does she expect to practice?" the Bellboy asked, seemingly addressing no one in particular.

PJ and the Bellboy's despair seemed to focus on the gaping hole in the front of the amplifier. Whatever was burning in the amplifier also caused it to buzz as if able to express its own pain. Jerry would have found this funny if the cause of the hole weren't so readily apparent. The hole formed a rough facsimile of a boot; a boot he was sure belonged to Kim.

"She's a star all right. A star at fucking things up," PJ said.

"You need to learn the importance of quiet," the Bellboy said sternly in PJ's direction before turning to face Jerry, "I don't think Kim wants to see anyone, until I've talked to her."

Jerry was relieved by the Bellboy's rebuff. He knew he was unprepared to see Kim. He had come without any evidence that he was worth an instant of her time. He backed blindly towards the door.

"Right then, I'll be back in an hour," Jerry said.

"I'm suggesting she may not welcome you back at all," the Bellboy said.

At the moment Jerry was inclined to agree. He would have whimpered out a final farewell but instead some strange pocket of hope answered the Bellboy.

“All right. Next week then.”

Jerry was back out on the icy sidewalk before he could hear the Bellboy’s reply. The walk back to his apartment was long and cold but it gave him time to think. For the first time in his adult life that was something that Jerry needed desperately.

Jerry had no clothes on. His nudity was hardly by choice; he had forgotten that by not paying for his heat he would lose his hot water as well. He was so consumed by thoughts of his previous night’s meeting with Kim that he began his grooming routine without a thought. He’d stepped into the shower, letting the heavy drone of the pipes pour over his voice. He was singing Kim’s song but he had the curious feeling that he was singing words that were his own.

The water had shot into his chest so hard and cold he thought for a moment someone was stabbing him with an icicle. He jumped from the shower, managing to knock down the rack of toothpaste, shampoo and mouthwash. The grit stuck between the bathroom tiles had started to run out in the spilled Plax. If Jerry hadn’t been so cold then he might have stood and watched the blue rivers carry away the history of his bathroom.

The twenty second interlude of pain was all it took to drain whatever minor confidence Jerry had gained from his encounter with the Bellboy. He was wet without being clean, and he was cold without a place to go for warmth. There was nothing Jerry could do except examine himself. He watched a drop of water make its way down the bulge of his stomach past the curls of his pubic hair before dissolving on the loose skin of his thigh. He was so thin he could imagine if he pressed hard enough he would be able to fondle his inner organs. Kim would not even bother to say hello to him, she would reach straight through the space between his ribs to pluck out his heart. She would toss the piece of red pulp back and forth in her hands until she grew tired of its weight. Jerry stepped out of the bathroom to his bedroom, still too traumatized to pull on a towel.

He dripped on his room's brown carpet and the Rolling Stone that lay on his floor. The magazine opened to a picture of Madonna who looked at Jerry without an ounce of lust.

Until today, Jerry had never opened his blinds. He thought the dull light of the apartment improved his ability to navigate the Lobby. It was this morning, in a fit of excitement he threw open all the shades the moment he stepped into the apartment. The only additional light was the dull shine of rain, but it was enough light to make Jerry's skin look pale, as if he were being washed away. He threw open his drawers, pulling on underwear, pants and a shirt in a few swift movements.

The relief from the cold and nakedness was temporary. He stepped back to look at himself in the mirror that hung next to the bathroom door. The sweatpants were red. The Melville High whale stretched down the inseam. The underwear were his only pair of briefs, and they tightened unbearably against his already shrunken testicles. The shirt, however, was the crowning glory of his ensemble. It was light blue with navy lettering that spelled his name. The shirt was a remnant of Jerry's one day of honest work, a day spent pumping gas and making change at the Irving's truck stop on Route One. That night he had washed, folded, and put the shirt away in his drawer. Then he went to the Lobby and sold his first eighth of mushrooms to the principal's son.

He pulled his clothes off. Buttons popped off the shirt and fell on his bare feet. He was naked, rummaging through all his clothes and possessions for anything that might convince Kim of his toughness. He wanted a sign, that at heart, he was something different than a freezing boy living alone, unkissed and unnoticed by anyone but small time potheads.

He slid into the jeans and shirt he had been wearing for a week. Then he wrapped himself in the comforter Mrs. Sebastian had given him for Christmas. There were so few ways to change his life without changing careers. As things stood now, he broke even by the barest of margins. If the cops did get tougher, if the obnoxious kid from the Lobby started spreading narc rumors, if he continued to think only of Kim, then it was all too likely that breaking even would become a fond memory. Jerry needed money. He needed money to woo Kim. He needed money to buy clothes

that didn't make him look like the spindly kid picked last in gym class. He needed money to make his shower hot.

Jerry knew there was more money to be made in a month selling acid and coke than could be made in a year of selling pot. Getting the drugs wasn't a problem. Elmore was a pharmacy that delivered. Once the drugs were there the money would follow. Every week Jerry fended off requests from some Lobby-goer who wanted to coke up or trip the light fantastic. Who was he saving by not taking their business? Once the money was in his hands he could buy all the things necessary for spiriting Kim away from the Bellboy and into the stardom that awaited them. She would need a new amplifier, maybe some dental surgery. Jerry would need a car.

Jerry picked up the phone to call Elmore. He wasn't supposed to call Elmore any time before the sun had set. Elmore pictured himself as a creature of the night who did no work before most of the country had gone to bed. Jerry called anyway.

"Miller residence," Elmore's mother answered in a high, polite voice that could have belonged to Betty Crocker or Donna Reed.

"Is Elmore there?" Jerry asked.

"Is this Jerry? Jerry it's your aunt Sally. We haven't heard from you in ages," his aunt began to shoot off a series of comments about Jerry's father, Jerry's job prospects, and his generally poor showing in the race to write Christmas thank-you notes.

Jerry was used to enduring aunt Sally's inquisitions for twenty minutes or more. She was unafraid to tie up phones for hours explaining the failings of her extended family. This time Jerry couldn't wait.

"I need to talk to Elmore, Aunt Sally; could you put him on?"

"Certainly," Aunt Sally replied curtly enough, that Jerry believed he had actually offended her.

"What the hell is your problem Jerry? Is Maine in a different goddamn time zone than Massachusetts? Call me back when you get a brain in your head," Elmore yelled into the phone, apparently unafraid to let everyone in the house in on their conversation.

"Don't hang up the phone Elmore. We need to talk about the," Jerry paused, unsure of what was safe to say over the telephone. When no alternative word or code appeared to him he finished. "The acid."

There was silence at the other end of the line. Jerry waited for the line to go dead, and the hum of the dial tone to arrive. Instead he heard Elmore's shallow, mucousy breaths. Elmore had smoked almost everything there was to smoke in the eastern seaboard and his lungs made more noise than the engine of Mrs. Sebastian's El Dorado.

"I didn't expect you'd want in on this. Here's the deal. I can sell you ten sheets but this is crazy good shit, and expensive," Elmore said.

"I can sell it. There won't be any problem with selling it," Jerry replied.

"You sell this to every idiot kid who has heard about acid watching MTV and you'll get some fourteen year old, convinced he's the Incredible Hulk, trying to stop a semi with his ring finger. The first shit that happens will be the shit that brings down the law on top of your head," Elmore concluded with a dramatic attempt at a wizened gangster's voice before he stopped, coughed, and spit. Jerry wondered if his cousin spat onto the carpet of his living room.

The scenario Elmore presented didn't bother Jerry. He wasn't terribly scared; the only thought running through his mind was the equation that converted those sheets of acid into money.

"How soon can I get the sheets?" Jerry asked.

"I'll mail them Monday to your landlady. You'll have them by next weekend. There won't be a return address. Send me the money soon. Two weeks is as long as I can wait."

Jerry hung up the phone. The rain hadn't let up yet. All the roads in Melville would be skating rinks tonight. There were two weeks left in March. He wondered if two weeks was all the time it would take for his dreams to take shape.

Chapter 4: The Road's End

There is a strange dislocation that comes with the end of vagrancy, the dislocation of having a name after years of namelessness. I don't believe any weirdo who spouts off about the freedom of the open road or the joys of living without a roof over your head. There is no joy as useless as the joy of eating Wonderbread and Velveeta in a bus station.

Long before I was the Bellboy, I traveled the southern panhandle with a crazy who insisted that each time he took a new name he needed to be baptized. Traveling the way I did, it is important to have plenty of names. No one can blame you for the crimes of Jon Redburn if your name is Jake Blue. You can imagine the effort needed, the near drowning during every Pentecostal baptism. I learned my lesson. When I had a chance to take this hotel and this name, even if it is a useless nickname, I took them, and if I don't always answer when people call to me, I blame a lifetime of never expecting that people would call me anything.

I keep my beard thick and my hair loose down to the small of my back. A sixties refugee I sat with on a beach in Galveston told me that Buddhists from high Tibet don't cut their hair in order to remain close to God. I feel the same, as if my hair were the tether connecting me to the more penitential life I've left. I hold conversations with celestial objects, and know how to say hello in

fifty languages. Old habits are hard to break. In this little town I scare old ladies but I'm not the one who will steal their daughters. I too want to grow old and quiet here.

I own this hotel, each empty room and cigarette scarred carpet. When I won the Lobby from the millionaire's son I didn't expect anything would come of it. I was a good gambler because my face is blank most of the time, too used to looking inward. We were in California; stopped on our way to San Francisco in a bar. The ugliest, drunkest, worst -tempered guy in the place wants to arm wrestle. I'm thin as a butter knife but I've been baling hay in Washington for the summer. Those are the muscles that don't show, just strength from the fingertips to the shoulder. I looked scared and then beat him for a beer. It went downhill from there. I kept winning drinks, so by the time I won possession of an old hotel in central Maine, I was too drunk to wonder if it was real. The bastard handed me the deed and then tried to punch me. He missed and passed out under a stool.

When I sobered up I found the deed in my pocket. I couldn't help but feel hopeful. If it was real, then for the first time since my Triumph rolled into the ocean, I had a possession larger than my backpack. I sold my old logging boots to get bus fare, and arrived in Maine.

The town's no worse than any other mining logging mill town I've seen, but it's peculiar. Something about facing the ocean, with the hills in back gives me some kind of vertigo, the sensation that I'm about to fall off the face of the earth. I don't think I'm the only one who feels this way; when I pass people on the street it looks like they walk on their tiptoes, struggling to stay balanced.

I moved into the hotel. I expected I'd have a day or two of good lodging before the powers that be sent me on my way. The funny thing was, the deed turned out to be legal. When my wish came true I didn't know what to do with myself.

It felt wrong to use the Cleo as a hotel. No one who came to Melville could pay for a hotel. I didn't even like hotels; having never been allowed into a hotel farther than the lobby. With all this space I thought, why not start a bar. I realize, there's no way I could afford a liquor license or

liquor for that matter. I thought of only one thing that I can afford to provide, that the people of Melville will pay for. Space.

The Lobby is nothing more than a room and a stage for the kids to do with what they will. It is funny to make a living this way, out of nothing, like conjuring a rabbit in an empty hat. My plans are growing. When the money is made, I can have a real bar, dart boards and pinball included. I might even start a restaurant, small at first, nachos and burgers. Plans come so naturally with love.

Twice blessed is how I've come to think of myself. First, I win the Cleo and then I find Kim. Kim, who's crazier than any of the thugs and schizophrenics I knew, but gentle as cotton when I touch her. I can't help but feel like a lion tamer. The first time I kissed her I was surprised she didn't bite my tongue off. Instead her lips slid across mine so slowly I felt like we're both in the same dream.

The first glimpse I ever had of Kim, she was banging on an out-of-tune acoustic outside of her father's trailer. I was wandering the town looking for cheap ashtrays, and table cloths for the restaurant in my head. In Melville the trailers at the edge of town are filled with this kind of stuff; a warehouse burns down and the people buy everything they can't steal. Someone tells me about a trailer way at the edge of town with more junk than I could ever want. I found Kim in that junkyard.

She played ugly music. Ugly that showed the world for the ugly place it can be. The guitar was loud, none of the words made any sense, and her voice reminded me of a rabid dog growling. I heard her voice, and didn't even look at her, I closed my eyes and imagined I was a sponge soaking up every note.

I stayed in a shack once with a junkie blues man from Mississippi. He moaned and howled his way through songs so sad my heart hurt, not the metaphysical heart but my heart, the muscle. When Kim finished my heart felt cleansed, swept pure by someone else's sadness. Kim's music hurt like rain slapping against my face. I fell on my knees and swore I'd love Kim forever.

Of course she didn't hear me. She was deaf to the world while she played. I ran back to the Lobby. I was afraid she would hate the sight of me. I was afraid I was, in her mind, another lecherous old man. For three days, I holed up in the smallest room in the Cleo drinking Old Duke. I considered leaving the Cleo and Melville behind. I contemplated finding religion. Then, in the midst of that horrible bath of wine I realized I needed to see her again. I returned to her collapsing trailer. In the middle of blackberry brambles, I sat while she played for hours.

Each week I listened to her play a little longer. After months of quiet, desperate, wait I decided to bring her to the Lobby. I bribed her, but a bribe is nothing to be ashamed of. I decided to lure her to the Lobby with promises. I would worry about keeping them after she was there.

I stepped out of the bushes. My legs were scratched and bloody, but I was absolutely calm. She looked ready to bolt. I started talking, confessing every thought I'd had about her and every sin I'd give up for her. I crushed a pack of smokes under my boot heel to prove my devotion. My voice sounded like a preacher's voice; a voice that people trust against their better judgment. The more promises I made the closer I got to her. I promised to buy her things I couldn't afford, and take her places I'd never been. After I swore to buy her a guitar and velvet sheets she let me take her to the Lobby. After her first terrified performance she nearly destroyed the guitar. It has taken all my tricks to convince her to try again.

Kim doesn't talk much these days, and it's a gamble as to whether or not she'll make sense when she does. I gave her a suite, the largest room in the whole hotel. I lie at the foot of her bed and watch her sleep. I know she loves it here, she sleeps like a dead person with no dreams to disturb her.

I'm learning drums so I can keep her calm when she's in front of an audience. I found this kid to help me out with the Lobby so I can spend more time with Kim. He and I can never keep up with her music but we try, and sometimes that satisfies her. I can't imagine what my and Kim's children would look like, but when I think about it I laugh. My laugh is a deep sound that I have a hard time believing comes from my own thin body.

Chapter 5: Scraping Bottom

Jerry walked down Water Street towards the Lobby. He carried two sheets of acid in his coat. There were forty tabs on each sheet. If he sold them all tonight he would have at least four hundred dollars in his pocket by closing time. He stopped across the street from the Lobby to catch his breath, and plan.

A green Datsun rested on the sidewalk near the Lobby's door. Jerry guessed that the car slid off the road, and the driver, appreciating the good parking space, left it there. The car looked precarious with its wheels hanging over the steep curb. A half dozen guys were pushing the car into a better position, or flipping it over. Jerry couldn't tell which. The rest of the waiting line pressed into the Lobby's foyer to avoid the rain and ice.

Jerry didn't know where to begin. He didn't know the first thing about selling acid. He was wearing the coat he wore every time he came to the Lobby. The deep inside pockets made it a great coat for holding drugs and money, but it was a lousy coat for staying dry. He was thoroughly drenched and nervous. He looked up to see the green car flip onto its roof. The pushers exchanged high fives and shouts of congratulation. The line began to move. The doors to the Lobby were open.

When he entered, Jerry went directly to the members of Sugar Magnolia. He walked between Hank, the thick lipped guitarist, and the girl Hank had cornered near the stage.

"We need to talk," Jerry said.

"Not now man," Hank said.

"Either you want in on what I have now or you get nothing," Jerry spoke as slowly and deeply as he could.

"Fuck, all right. Hey, I'll find you after the show, Susie," Hank tried to sound confident but the girl was already lost in the crowd.

"I have some amazing acid, and you guys have first dibs."

"I don't know if we want to deal with acid. Just keep setting us up with some sweet pot and we'll be fine."

"Hank, you think that this is easy stuff to come by? If you don't want any I can't promise to provide you with anything so special again."

Hank's brother, Hector plugged in an amplifier. Jerry knew that Hank would need to tune up soon. Jerry had to make the sale before he left. He thought of what Elmore would have said to Hank. Elmore would talk about ecstasy and the rapturous encounters with the divine that came from his trips. Jerry had watched Elmore trip once. The acid had given Elmore a superhuman stamina for watching cartoons.

"This acid makes you feel so good you can fuck for twelve hours straight. I swear to god it is the same stuff that Jim Morrison used to use." Jerry paused, "Trip with this shit and you'll be an orgasm producing machine."

The look in Hank's eyes assured Jerry that the sale was nearly complete.

"I can only buy ten tabs but maybe the rest of the boys can chip in and buy a few more," Hank said.

"You give me the money and I'll drop the tabs behind the stage."

Jerry spun away from Hank, hoping that his exit would add force to his words. Jerry was certain that most of the acid would be sold by end of the night. Jerry wondered what the lives of

millionaires were like. He wondered what he would look like if he were a millionaire. It would be strange to wear expensive well-fitting clothes, to walk into stores knowing anything could be his.

When his mother was still alive and the mill gave out Christmas bonuses, he remembered a day his parents spent wrapping presents. It was the first and only Christmas that both Jerry's folks were employed. His parents bought presents for every relative whose name they could remember. They sent jars of maple syrup to second cousins in Iowa and great aunts living in Florida. The bulk of the extravagance had been saved for Jerry. Jerry's stocking nearly split along the seam it was so full. No one gift stood out because the gifts kept coming in boxes of all sizes and shapes.

Jerry walked to the back of the crowd without noticing a single face or a single note of the music. He felt that sometimes people were mazes or obstacles like the walls and ditches that the horses jump during the Olympics. Kim could have passed behind him and thought he was nothing but a body to avoid.

"Jerry, Hank says you want to talk to me."

It was Billy whose falsetto voice was, to Jerry's ears, clamoring for hallucinogens. Jerry was pleased by the speed with which information crossed the Lobby.

"I've got four sheets of acid, and I can get more. Do you want in?" Jerry said.

He hoped that he sounded confident about his supply. Certainty was so important when dealing with Billy, who was known to flake out about even the smallest exchange of pot. Someone claimed that it was the hair that made him such a stress case. Others thought it was his showman's personality. Jerry knew Billy's stress came from being on parole for robbing a supermarket's beer cooler. If he got caught with drugs he might go to jail. Billy had confessed this to Jerry one night after Jerry had reluctantly consented to sell Billy enough pot to roll one joint.

"I'm in. Fucking right, I'm in. I haven't tripped since '89. Do you remember that summer when I followed the Dead? I must have tripped every show," Billy said.

Now, Billy talked quickly and nervously and showed no signs of stopping. Jerry wondered if Billy had been experimenting with medications again. Because of his parole, Billy was almost

fanatical in his attempts to gain highs from legal substances. Jerry wasn't certain that Billy would remember anything if he were speeding from half a dozen crushed Vivarin.

"Can you get the money? No bullshit payment plans on this stuff. I want all of the money as soon as I hand you the tabs."

"No problem. I'm so flush right now. My sister just got her severance pay from the insurance office. We're going to party forever," Billy said, wandering off into the crowd.

Jerry watched him go. Billy talked to anyone, everyone, at every opportunity. Jerry guessed that by the end of the night there would be only a handful in attendance who hadn't spoken to the speeding MC. Melville was small but Jerry didn't know everyone. If someone smoked pot or drank tea in excessive quantities then Jerry would have encountered them, otherwise he spoke to few people. His parents' old friends might wave or ask Jerry about his dad but even they seemed to lose track of Jerry, to forget exactly what he looked like. Jerry realized his life in Melville was a contradiction; the longer he stayed the less people seemed to know him.

Jerry sold two sheets in the space of an hour. He spent the whole evening circling the Lobby like the sharks or wolves in nature shows who pluck weak members from a pack and herd them to their dooms. The stalking tired Jerry out. Jerry wanted to sit down. He wanted to gather his thoughts before seeing Kim.

Jerry had a gift for Kim. In the front pocket of his coat, where he usually kept the eighth bags, were three packages of guitar strings. He carried them as delicately as he would have carried carnations. He had joined Mrs. Sebastian on her weekly trip to the Wexford Mall to make his purchase possible. She hated driving and convinced Jerry to drive her whenever she could. For a year now, she'd been trying to sell him her El Dorado. With tonight's profits he could finally buy it.

At the mall, Mrs. Sebastian bought Easter decorations, while Jerry spent an hour in the music store choosing between packages of strings. He took pleasure in pretending to be knowledgeable as the salesman rattled off terms that Jerry had never heard. On the way back to Melville, Mrs. Sebastian interrogated him unmercifully about the purpose of the guitar strings. Mrs. Sebastian

reminded Jerry not to wind up like Harold Winerbee. Harold was the only citizen of Melville who had gone to California searching for rock and roll superstardom. He left Melville, able to recreate note for note every Eagles song ever written, and he returned a year later, half deaf from sitting next to amplifiers at concerts.

Mrs. Sebastian was vehement that Jerry never learn an instrument or how to sing. He assured her again and again that the guitar strings were for a friend and he hadn't the least desire to play a guitar. She talked for so long that Jerry pretended he was deaf, and concentrated on the wide lanes of the new highway connecting the Wexford Mall to Melville.

Sugar Magnolia played their third consecutive dramatic drum-roll, guitar-squealing finale. This looked to really be the end though, because Hank took his guitar off and started combing the crowd for anyone willing to sleep with him. The crowd was waiting for Neil, the other guitarist to perform his dramatic falling-on-the-knees, exhausted concert-ending guitar lick. Jerry was impressed that the brothers could pull off this act, considering they would spend the rest of the night drinking, smoking, and chasing women. The entire band got up each morning before light, to work on their family's dairy farm. The farm was the last farm in Melville, though Jerry, like everyone else, had heard the farm would soon be sold.

Neil collapsed to the stage. The guitar lay across his chest as it dribbled out the song's final note. The crowd cheered and tossed bottles at the stage. Jerry felt briefly nostalgic for the first months when the Lobby had been the greatest thing to ever come to Melville. He couldn't picture his life without this room full of darkened faces. His life was changed forever by Kim, he hoped that the Lobby would remain for others. He hoped people would always return here and weave through a crowd of people they recognized but would never know.

People were beginning to leave. They paused for a moment at the doorway. The first breeze they felt was an unbelievable relief from the sweaty heat of the Lobby, but they paused, knowing that that moment's wonderful breeze would be painfully cold and wet seconds later.

There were few stragglers. Even the most devoted Lobby-goer thought of the Lobby like a giant beautiful pumpkin, perfect for smashing until closing time when it reverted back to a coach too exotic for any of them to ride in.

Jerry was almost alone in the back of the room. He saw PJ begin sweeping the stage. The ragged broom let out more dust than it captured. Despite the futility of his work PJ looked engrossed by it. Jerry could tell PJ hadn't seen him.

Jerry watched the last drunk stumble out the door before counting his money. The night had gone better than he thought. Rumors about the acid had spread through the Lobby faster than gossip about the principal's affair with the shop teacher. Instead of a few trippers buying in bulk there were dozens of kids begging for a few tabs. Jerry was startled; perhaps the kids were tiring of pot and were willing to try anything new. Whatever the reason, Jerry was five hundred dollars richer than he'd been three hours ago.

This was enough money to buy Kim a new amplifier and put a down payment on the El Dorado. Jerry knew that when Kim's career hit high gear this would feel like small change, but now the cash felt like a new muscle. The clank of footsteps interrupted his accounting. The footsteps were PJ's. He was gone from the stage leaving only a broom tilted against an amplifier.

Jerry counted: one one thousand, two one thousand, before following PJ up the stairs. Visiting the Lobby's second floor made him feel like a spy infiltrating a dangerous foreign country. Jerry hoped he'd find Kim alone and explain his plan. He would speak softly so as not to frighten her. He wouldn't sound desperate. At the top of the stairs he slid his hands down his coat, taking comfort in the familiar cloth. Then, he poked his head into the room.

An empty pool lay at the center of the room. What rich and whimsical people the Lobby's builders were to have put a pool on the second floor of their hotel. Around the pool there were lamps of all shapes and sizes plugged into long tangled extension cords. There were piles of old books, furniture, and jewelry. It looked to Jerry like the occupant of the room was engaged in a dozen tasks. On the other side of the pool, next to a cabinet of china, was Kim.

She stood up so that her back was straight. Jerry hadn't realized she was quite so tall. She looked about five ten or eleven to his five nine. She was wearing a long black dress dotted with white flowers. Her hair flew out behind her head like smoke escaping a fire. She could have been a prom queen at a high school for freaks.

Jerry couldn't see the Bellboy or PJ. Despite his hopes, he hadn't expected to find Kim alone. He didn't think the opportunity would last long. He walked along the edge of the pool until he was next to her. His feet moved so assuredly he could have walked a tightrope.

"I'm Jerry," he said, extending the guitar strings toward her like a bouquet.

She stared at his outstretched hand. Her nose wrinkled, and he wondered if she was sniffing to identify his gift. She began rocking on her heels like a pendulum his presence had knocked into motion. At the moment when his confidence was about to collapse, she grabbed the guitar strings and smiled.

Jerry was dumfounded. Whether it was this first display of his own courage or Kim's response that released his words, he didn't know. Instead of luring her into his plan piece by piece, he let loose with the whole story.

"This town is nothing for you Kim. You deserve a city where you can sing for thousands of people, and make records. We can go to a place where people will play your songs on the radio. None of this five bucks a pop to see you, shit. People will scalp tickets to your concert for a hundred dollars," Jerry paused, wondering if the passion of his speech frightened Kim as much as it frightened him. "I can handle everything. You don't need to worry about driving, booking, or bills. Just throw your guitar and clothes in the trunk of my car."

She hadn't stopped smiling since her hands wrapped around the guitar strings. Her smile assured Jerry that his plan sounded concrete and foolproof.

"This isn't bullshit. I can put money behind us. I'll buy you a new amplifier to prove that I'm for real. Next Saturday I'll leave the car across the street. When the concert is over bring your things down to the front door. Don't tell anyone. The Bellboy wants you to stay here and play to

hicks for the rest of your life. I can bring us to Boston. We can stay with my cousin Elmore. He knows people in music.”

Jerry had to close his eyes while he talked to keep his thoughts straight. He only opened his eyes when he paused to take a breath. In his brief pause, he was dazzled by Kim’s wide and crooked mouth.

“Can you be ready? A week isn’t much time but we can’t waste much more time,” he said.

“Yes,” Kim said.

It was the first Jerry had heard Kim speak without a guitar playing. She could have talked gibberish or preached about the end of the world; all that mattered was that she spoke to him.

She extended her hand to him, and opened her fist. A light blue guitar pick dropped into his waiting palm. Jerry felt closer to Kim than he’d felt to his second grade blood brother, after they’d sucked the red bead from each other’s fingers. Jerry had no desire to move. He wanted to bask in the glow of his own courage. His reverie was broken by the Bellboy, who came from one of the side hallways, and stepped between Jerry and Kim. The man’s bony frame was like an unwelcome cloud.

“The concert is over. When the concert’s over you leave the Lobby,” the Bellboy said.

“I was just talking to Kim,” Jerry said.

“He just wants to talk to Kim. That must be exciting. She has so much to say,” PJ said, appearing from behind a cabinet.

Kim grabbed a cup from the cabinet at her right. She sent the cup flying at PJ’s head. He made a show of ducking as if Kim’s launching dinnerware at him was a regular occurrence. She followed the cup with two plates and a crystal vase that shattered on the bottom of the pool. The clatter of two then five then ten plates shattering was almost too much for Jerry to bear. Jerry was frightened; he even looked to PJ for comfort. The kid was staring angrily at Kim and offering no word of explanation to Jerry. Jerry didn’t move; he hoped if he ever faced a fire squad his legs would hold him with this much resolution.

“You still missed,” PJ said, glaring at Kim.

"Shut up PJ," the Bellboy said.

"You're telling me to shut up while the banshee over there smashes china. I'm the one working myself to death. I make sure this place doesn't collapse while the you spend the day bringing flowers to the freak show while she destroys the place," PJ said.

Kim stopped throwing things. She stood so still Jerry feared her heart had stopped. He wondered if PJ was telling the truth. Jerry wanted to beat the Bellboy away from her and cut out PJ's vicious tongue. Jerry felt more like Kim's savior than ever. He only wished he didn't have to wait a week to take her away from here.

"If you worked as much as you talked, PJ things might really be getting done," the Bellboy said.

Jerry couldn't tell if the man's tone of menace was real or imagined. He wasn't scared, but he didn't want to cause any trouble. He knew the foundations of his plan were too fragile to withstand attack.

"I told Kim I'd buy her an amplifier. I'll bring it next week," Jerry said.

"Wow what a champ. He must be using the money he gets from overcharging for mushrooms," PJ said.

"You don't need to buy Kim anything. I'll see to it Kim has what she needs," the Bellboy said.
"Kim doesn't need sleazy dope-dealing hangers-on."

Jerry didn't argue. He mumbled a sorry and backed towards the stairs. He made sure his eyes avoided Kim. He could feel the dark and angry eyes of the Bellboy on his back when he turned to go down the stairs.

Outside, Jerry looked to the shaded windows of the second floor. He knew the guitar strings he'd given Kim would soon be plucked by her callused fingers. He knew his retreat was a prelude to his victory and escape, an escape he wouldn't perform alone.

Chapter 6: Songs for a Dark Heart

Because I am a witch's daughter I land in other people's dreams. When I am playing guitar and singing I start to wander in other people's heads. I don't know why my magic captures some people and passes through the rest. Maybe, my magic is only for the lowest people, whose dreams are hopeless. Maybe, it is the song wandering into the most open places, the most welcoming souls. It is no accident that people compare singing a song to casting a spell. They are the same thing, one the slow sister of the other.

I sang lullabies to my grandmother who was too old to speak, and those soft watery stories carried me into the old woman's dreams. I was never frightened by my grandmother's dreams. They were so faded, nothing like the dreams of the people I sing to. Their dreams are loud and anxious. Even when I am lost in the world of my guitar noise, their dreams reach me. Entering a dream is not like rifling through a closet; it is like listening to a man talk to himself on the street or watching a woman wander by herself in a garden.

My gifts of perception come from my mother. Nothing explains my gifts but my mother's witchcraft. My gifts are not the only proof of my mother's dark heart; there are all the men she charmed, including my sad, foolish, father. And since magic is illusion, what is more magical than my disappeared mother. Before our house at the edge of town became this half trailer/half

shack at the edge of the paper company's land, I can picture my mother with her guitar lying on the front steps of our old house. She sang songs that called birds to our porch or men from the bars. Even though I was so young, a girl whose light curls had yet to blacken, she taught me songs, let my hands pull at the strings of her guitar. In the house my mother cradled an old Santana album she claimed to have sang on.

On the day I turned nine my mother left with her guitar, her album, and all the spells I'll never have a chance to learn. She called my father a spineless dog, flaunting the new coat she wore. It belonged to another man. To me she glared and spit out; "Idiot. I hope you rot here." She left and we all were left to our own thoughts.

When she left I forced her away from my dreams. I dreamt vaguely. I squashed the colors and faces from my sleep into a wad of cotton. If my mother came to haunt me I wanted her to wander alone through my dreams, with no one, not even myself to share the sloping tunnels I built in my head. I knew I would fail. There was no charm, no rooster's head or rusted hubcap that could keep my mother from dancing through my dreams with her sly smile.

I worked constantly, hoping I'd forget her in my exhaustion. I made pots of soup to feed my father's family. I picked up bottles from ditches for the five cents each one paid. I sold the vegetables from our garden to whomever would buy them. I worked until I collapsed, and still I dreamt my mother's smile. The thoughts couldn't have been my own. My mother haunted me with her desires. They were so strong they took the shape of animals. Badgers would fight under my mother's dress, trying to claw her thighs. A bull would spear the grocer's sons, who leered whenever I came for milk.

When I started to sing I grew scared. Finding my mother's dreams inside my head was frightening, but when her songs rushed from my throat I felt cursed. First, I covered my mouth with my hand, but the words ran through the spaces of my hand. I taped my mouth with the thick black tape my father used for binding electrical wires together while they snapped and popped. The songs broke through the tape like arrows.

When the Bellboy came to our house I had already sang for years. The Bellboy caught me by the woodshed where I had brought an extension cord for my mother's old amplifier. I stopped, afraid that he was the police finally come to take away my things. I was ready to send him away, when the Bellboy told me he knew where I could find a new guitar if only I would come with him.

He could have offered me anything else and I would have chased him back to the road with a hatchet, but the offer of a guitar pulled me to Melville. The Bellboy guided me onto the Lobby's stage, and laid the guitar in my hands. The guitar was wonderful and loud. The guitar was so wonderful I've forgotten how to speak without it. Each day I played near the empty pool above the Lobby.

I was so caught up in the guitar's magic I didn't always realize the first time I played in front of a crowd. The dreams that reached me were so jumbled I didn't know if I was surrounded by one mad person or a hundred. I realized the Bellboy tricked me when I stared out at the faces and watched their dreams return to them like doves falling to their nests.

Then Jerry came to me. Jerry comes to me with gifts. His dreams are so loud and anxious they move my mouth to speak. He wants me to run away with him, and I can't say no. He promises me a car, and an amplifier, and a life filled with music. I want to leave the Bellboy behind for these things. The Bellboy's convinced that I'm the end of his loneliness. He's convinced he is the end of my madness. He watches me every night from the foot of the bed, and we fight when there's no music because his love and lust follow me like dogs biting at my heels. Leaving the Bellboy and his devotions for Jerry and his plans leaves me no better off then where I began. There has to be a way to leave Melville without carrying all these hopes on my back. The only boy whose desires aren't endless is PJ. PJ's dreams are simple. They are all futures where he has no parents and no need to lie. His dreams are like mine were, before my mother left her darkness to me.

There's this song I made up yesterday that moves so fast I burnt through a string playing it. The Bellboy says he's seen a thousand broken guitar strings before but never watched one played so hard it caught fire.

If I could stop these songs I would. I wish for the day when my fingers don't hurt for the guitar. The Bellboy smiles, and his hands shake in the palsy that always accompanies his laugh. He tells me as we practice that I am the explanation, the reason that he came here. I think he is crazy and his craziness sounds beautiful, like the beautiful sound a string makes before it snaps. He tells me that soon enough my songs will be better than any magic my mother had. I don't believe him, but I keep playing.

Chapter 7: Patricide

PJ dreamed that his father was chasing him down a long dirt road throwing baseballs that got nearer and nearer to his head. At the end of the road, the Bellboy waited like a gunfighter. Before PJ could be sandwiched between the two men, he woke up to a singing alarm clock.

The dream about his father was a small relief. In the two weeks since he was hired by the Bellboy PJ's dreams had all been about Kim. He dreamt of kissing Kim, but not in the way that he dreamt of kissing the girl in his chemistry class. In that dream he and Millie shed their clothes and had sex on a lab table. He dreamt of kissing Kim the way he imagined kissing occurred in fairy tales. He would kiss her, and suddenly something within him would change. He would be tall or strong or blessed with new parents.

PJ was tired of dreaming. He didn't have the energy to deal with Kim and the Bellboy all night at work and then all day in his head. Life was hard enough now that his father had won the custody battle. PJ's father had threatened to fetch PJ's belongings as soon as he finished remodeling the cellar into the "perfect boy's room." His father wanted to enroll PJ in Christian school by the first of April. Losing custody of PJ didn't seem to upset his mother too much. She'd collapsed on the couch with a beer, as if a lodestone were lifted from her back.

It was morning, in the interim hour after PJ's mom left for work and before he was supposed to be in school. His mom had taken a second job to help pay for the court hearing. That was what she claimed, but PJ thought the extra money was to provide food and beer for her fat new boyfriend. He fell back under his sheet trying to find comfort in the last few days of his slacker's life. He was sure Christian schools didn't allow kids like him to straggle into class after ten.

The only event in his life that offered hope or solace was the concert. Tonight was the big night. He and Kim, and the Bellboy would take the stage at ten. Kim would scream through songs while PJ and Bellboy struggled to stay with her. PJ knew the Lobby would be filled. Melville, like any other town in America with cable, was experiencing a dramatic shift in the listening tastes of its youth. In the last month kids in the Lobby began talking about how tired they were of all the "fucking hippie music." In his rare appearances at school PJ watched kids argue about nose rings and whether Nirvana was punk. Between the sets played by Sugar Magnolia, a Pearl Jam tape was played, and the crowd made more noise for the tape than they made for the band. PJ heard rumors that Sugar Magnolia was considering a name change to Teen Spirit. PJ felt abused by the ease with which everyone adopted the music and attitude he had spent so long acquiring.

PJ rolled off the bed, pulling blankets across the floor in his wake. He was glad he slept in his clothes; he didn't need to spend any extra effort dressing. He wanted to be at the Lobby soon. He started packing his duffel bag. The bag filled quickly with clothes, tapes, and magazine cover photos of his favorite bands. PJ pretended he was packing for a long trip; one that he might not return from.

He knelt on the duffel bag to force the zipper closed. The phone rang. PJ couldn't resist the chance to piss off one of his mother's friends by answering, "Hello, Joe's House of Smoke and Sin."

He didn't need to hear the voice at the other end to recognize who it was. The labored breathing was his father's. PJ prayed that he wouldn't be recognized but he knew that prayers rarely helped.

"Is that you Prairie Joseph?"

PJ's father hated the hippie name that he had given to his son. Only PJ's worst moments caused him to use the name. It was fitting, PJ thought, that his parents had given him a name more useful for humiliation than anything else.

"You are supposed to be in school, PJ. I do not know what sinful ideas your mother impresses upon you. I do not know what perverse values you gather from that disgusting group of friends you have, but no son of mine will avoid his duty to attend school," PJ's father said.

PJ knew his father could yell for hours without tiring. If he was going to lose his freedom in a week, why endure a sermon? Why not admit that he hated his father, mother, and God? PJ flipped through the book in his head containing all the things he'd ever wanted to say to his father while his father rambled on.

"I'm coming over right now to remove you from that pit your mother calls a home. If your humanist school can not imprint upon you the value of education then there are church schools which will. A life without discipline is a Godless life."

"Dad I hope that as long as I live I never have a shred of discipline and that when I'm buried they write; 'He lived a godless life' on my tombstone. Fuck off," PJ said and hung up.

He stared at the phone as it rung again. He lifted the receiver twice and set it back in the cradle each time. On the third ring he pulled the phone out of the wall. It lay on the floor like a red insect whose shell had been cracked. PJ didn't have time to admire the effects of his anger. He knew his father would try to get to the house before PJ left. Perhaps his mother on the way back to the mill would pass his father screaming down the road in search of PJ. Maybe they would glare and condemn each other as the worst of parents.

Strewn blankets, a broken phone, and a spilt cereal bowl lay behind PJ like a vandal's bread crumbs. Seeing the cereal bowl leaning on the edge of the counter, he knocked it off. Then he picked up the duffel bag forgetting to finish the zipper. A pair of underwear and two tapes went flying across the room. He didn't pick them up.

PJ had no illusions about his future. The most optimistic vision his mind contained was of one drunken night in the Lobby before his parents or the police retrieved him in the morning. Flush with the triumph of screaming down his father, that future sounded fine to PJ.

By the middle of the afternoon PJ's euphoria had worn off. He hadn't set foot outside the Lobby for fear his father would pluck him off the street and into the arms of a nasty minister with a crew cut. On top of that, the possibility that Kim might brain him with a teacup made his previously careless days seem distant and impossible.

PJ did not understand how anyone expected a concert involving Kim to go off without a hitch. He didn't understand how or why she had agreed to do it. Kim was immune to all the forms of persuasion that PJ knew. Intimidation and false promises meant nothing to her. She might sound, at times like a tantrum-ridden child, but she was not fooled by the Bellboy's smiling assurances that only nice people would come to see her play. The Bellboy's veiled threats to take away her guitar didn't scare Kim at all. She wanted to do something, or she didn't do it. PJ wished that he could stop speaking and become a great guitar player so that he could live a willful life too.

PJ looked out the dark windows of the second floor rooms. Every car was potentially his father or mother waiting to catch him. He didn't expect to survive a life in hiding. A life in hiding was for terrorists and bank robbers.

PJ untangled cords and swept the stage one more time. PJ guessed that the Bellboy was passed out in the pool room. He was exhausted from the effort it took to drum, depressed by the fact that Kim no longer came to him in the middle of the night. The Bellboy blamed Jerry. The Bellboy and PJ didn't agree about much, but they agreed that Jerry was nothing more than a low-life groupie. PJ doubted that Jerry had any idea of how to make Kim famous.

Hidden behind a china cabinet, PJ had listened to Jerry propose to Kim. Jerry seemed to think Kim was agreeing to leave the Lobby. PJ couldn't imagine she would willingly leave, but he didn't think Jerry was above kidnapping. Even though he despised Jerry, PJ half-wished he were

the object of Jerry's efforts. Kidnapping seemed a delightful alternative to life in Melville or education in the Church of Light Reform School. Jerry thought he had such a wonderful secret, but PJ knew all about the El Dorado parked across the street, waiting to take Kim away.

PJ looked up, and Kim was there. Her clear eyes suggested she could see straight through him, like the Kim in his dreams. Face to face with anything or anyone strange or incomprehensible, PJ fell back on his first defense, sarcasm.

"Aren't you supposed to be in bed, resting up for the big show? Maybe I can give you some paper cups to throw at the audience. Those don't hurt as much."

Kim was an easy target for PJ's sarcasm because she seemed unaware of his meaning; but she was also capable of striking back. PJ started sweeping nervously because Kim stalked towards him until the space between them could have been filled with an envelope. PJ was sure he could feel her breath on his neck. In a similar position, with almost any woman in the world, this would have given PJ an erection and acres of embarrassment. Kim's presence had a far stronger, stranger effect. He talked.

"When you play tonight everyone will love it even though they hated you a month ago. I don't get it. I don't understand how people can change so quickly. There's this girl who comes to the Lobby every week. She always stands next to the door, doesn't dance, doesn't talk to anyone. She smokes a pack and a half of Menthols a night and walks home by herself. Last week she's standing right in front of the stage with her hand under some guy's shirt, singing right along with the band.

"It's like a dream where my mom's face starts changing until it looks like a fish or Jerry has the head of mule. The problem is people are like that. In real life they change at the drop of a hat. Everyone but me changes. I'll live in the Lobby until I have a beard down to my knees. I'll live in Melville until I'm on my knees begging for my father to convert me. Jerry will take you away, and it will be me and the Bellboy sharing cold tea and whiskey for dinner. I'll wind up like those kids who get locked in cellars for their entire lives; I'll be scared of daylight and open space."

He finished, out of breath. His face had come dangerously close to Kim's. He imagined that this was the angle from which people's mouths collided into kissing. He wanted to hang in this position until he caught his breath and could think again. If he had wanted to, he could have counted Kim's teeth. Her open mouthed grin might have disgusted PJ at another time, but now it seemed to praise him, as if he finally understood something she had been trying to explain. He didn't know why he felt that way, since she had not said a word.

"I want to leave, and I don't know how," PJ said.

PJ's back was at the edge of the stage. He couldn't recall how he had come to such a precarious position. Kim could give him the smallest shove and he would smack into the floor below. The things he said and thought kept surprising him; even if it wasn't entirely possible to be surprised by yourself.

"Steal," Kim said.

PJ didn't need to ask what she wanted stolen. Kim didn't want jewelry shoplifted from JC Penny's. She didn't want cases of beer or new dresses at her feet. Kim wanted a boat, a plane, a balloon, a vessel to carry her away from the shipwreck of Melville. Kim needed a car.

"I can steal Jerry's car," PJ said, answering an unspoken question.

Kim's teeth clamped down like a gavel at the end of a trial. She turned without another word or gesture and ran upstairs towards the pool room. PJ started collecting his piles of dirt onto the dust pan. He could hear the trees on the street shaking in the March wind. He couldn't believe the night had just begun.

Chapter 8: Graduation

Jerry was having a terrible time getting Mrs. Sebastian's El Dorado out of her driveway without running onto the muddy lawn. His hands were shaking. Today was his last day in Melville, and Jerry couldn't help but be excited.

He swung the wheel hard to the left and the rear wheels strained for a hold on the narrow strip of Mrs. Sebastian's driveway. One perilous foot farther to either side and mud would capture his wheels until May. The traffic was steady enough that he couldn't gun the mint green cruiser out onto Main Street. Luckily at the corner of Harpoon and Main a Toyota Camry hit a patch of ice and slid through its stop sign. The Camry slid into the side of the Melville House of Pizza delivery car. The ensuing pause in traffic was all the time Jerry needed to slam the El Dorado across two lanes before heading north towards the Lobby.

Jerry was eight hundred dollars poorer. If his wealth were weight then Jerry was light enough to float through the roof like a lost balloon. He didn't mind that the price of having a shot at real wealth was temporary poverty.

Mrs. Sebastian was probably still waving to Jerry from the kitchen. He'd told her that he had won big on a scratch ticket in Wexford and was finally ready to make her an offer for the car she

didn't need or want anymore. He had taken pride in being able to pay a little more than the car was worth. He figured it would make up for the times that Mrs. Sebastian had let him slide on rent.

Jerry laid on the gas. The car was the crowning glory of his plans. He would ride out of Melville with Kim sitting shotgun. There was room enough in the back seat for her guitar and amplifier. He'd sent her the new amplifier only a few days before. Billy had delivered the amplifier in exchange for more tabs. Billy also delivered a note Jerry had written. The note detailed where he would park the El Dorado, and what she should plan to bring. He asked she give him a sign that she was willing to go. Billy returned, holding another blue pick with Kim's name carved on it. It looked to have been done with her fingernail. Jerry took this effort as a testament to her faith in him. The vision of their shared future seemed glorious, and stranger than that, it seemed possible.

Yesterday on the phone, Elmore agreed to set Jerry up with his friend at the record company. Jerry would come with a tape of Kim's music. He'd leave Kim in the hotel room; there was no sense in scaring the man before he heard her music. Tonight he would make the tape and then slip away with Kim in the after-show chaos.

It was another day of rain. The wipers were old, and streaked the windshield each time they passed over it. Each spring was drearier than the last; he didn't understand how he had been able to take it before. People lasted through thirty or forty or fifty years of Melville. Jerry didn't understand how it was possible. It was surprising that everyone didn't wind up like Kim, unable to speak without the help of a guitar or shattering plates.

Jerry turned the corner onto West Road. He'd driven to the high school by mistake. The Melville Regional High building sat in the middle of a field like a square brick barracks, lonely and far from the front lines. There were kids in the parking lot crouched behind a van, sharing a cigarette. Jerry felt wistful, almost teary, thinking about the days he'd spent huddled in back seats and behind bleachers watching his friends smoke.

He slowed the car down to a crawl. Smoke from the chimney hung above the roof and then danced away in a gust of wind. It was an ugly, ugly building, and he couldn't remember a happy

moment that he'd spent there, but to look at it for the last time was a little sad and scary. There were no cars coming in either direction so Jerry took his time making a three point turn and returning downtown.

He didn't want to park in front of the Lobby for fear that the Bellboy would see the car and guess instantly at his plans. Jerry parked in front of Ray's Smoke and Gun Shop. He guessed that no one would disturb the El Dorado for fear that it might belong to one of the pistol-wielding old men who shopped there.

Jerry started down the sidewalk before backtracking to the Smoke Shop. If he were to speed out of town like a bank robber, then he ought to be smoking a cigar to celebrate. He bought the fattest, most pungent cigar he could find and slid the glass tube into the pocket of his coat.

It was rumored that during spring, the hours of light in the day increased. As far as Jerry could tell that was malicious gossip. It was the last weekend of March, and barely four in the afternoon. Already the clouds seemed to have ushered the sun away for the night. The Christmas lights that hung around the Lobby's sign were brighter than the dirty street lights. The Lobby had never had a sign as big as the one advertising tonight's show. "Harpoon: two hours of the hardest punk ever to hit the stage of the Lobby, bring ear plugs and proper mosh attire." Moshing, Jerry had learned from Elmore, was the new name for brawling to music. It was something that would come easily to the youth of Melville.

Jerry spun the keys in his hand, unwilling to relegate them to his pocket. He had a hard time believing that the irregularly shaped metal in his palm was all he needed to start a new life. He wanted to run upstairs to show Kim but his success depended on remaining calm. Jerry smiled and walked towards his apartment. He tossed his keys and caught them in the air, marveling at their lightness.

Chapter 9: Harpoon

Half the people in the Lobby were tripping. Jerry could hardly believe how quickly the acid had made its way through the Lobby. In one corner of the room, three friends swatted the air to beat away imagined bats, and near the stage two girls giggled as they waved at each other with hands that had turned into lobster's claws.

The half of the Lobby that wasn't experiencing hallucinations seemed intent on breaking something, whether it was chairs, the floor, or their own bones. Fifteen minutes before Kim was supposed to play, the crowd was packed to the back of the room. People cursed as they shoved closer to the stage. They practiced the dancing they had seen on television by passing the drunkest or most daring kids above the crowd. No one was dropped because at any moment a dozen hands were holding the person up. In the front rows, the biggest guys began to jump and ram their shoulders into the thin boys with earrings. The thin guys threw their own bony elbows into the chests of the meatheads. Not only was retaliation possible; it was expected and encouraged. Sometimes the thick-necked farm boys slapped hands with the thin boys, impressed that the geeky drama kids could fight back.

Jerry couldn't have dreamed a better night. The crowd's energy was so intense that country music would set them screaming; Kim would drive them to riot. Jerry was content to watch the

show from his usual corner. Customers stopped by for their bags and tabs. Jerry rushed the sales. He wanted to be rid of his entire stash before the band began to play.

"When are you going to start?" Jerry yelled to PJ, who was struggling through the crowd, his bass in hand.

"A couple of minutes," PJ yelled to Jerry. Then as he got closer, he whispered, "Kim's nervous. We're worried she might not go on."

"Not surprising. There's a ton of people here. Who wouldn't be nervous?" Jerry said.

"I don't even know how she knows you from any of the other lead heads around here, but she keeps asking for you. She says she wants something of yours, a shirt, a jacket, something for good luck," PJ said.

Jerry smiled triumphantly. He pictured Kim, struggling to find the words she needed to describe him. He smiled because the snotty kid was depending on Jerry to save the concert. He smiled because she said his name, because Kim had thought of him before she would play. He thought her wanting him was something like love.

"She can wear my jacket. I'll get it back afterwards," Jerry said, handing the trench coat to PJ.

"I wouldn't give her a damn thing of mine and expect it back. Your problem though, not mine," PJ said diving back into the crowd.

Jerry stuffed his hands in his pockets and wished he could talk to Kim. His nervousness was overwhelmed by the sensation of power, that somehow Kim's performance would be his doing. He felt like a conductor, who could swing a thin baton and make an orchestra appear. Billy stepped on stage, and the crowd silenced.

Jerry wondered who had gone crazy with Billy's hair. The usual ball of hair atop Billy's head had been transformed into a giant black globe. He was certainly tripping. He giggled as if the crowd in front of him was a tremendous joke.

"Is everybody happy?" he asked.

The screaming and stomping that answered him seemed to say yes. Jerry knew people were more than happy tonight. It was easy to be happy on a Friday night in the Lobby. There were no

snobs from the federal building passing you with upturned noses, no teachers warning you of your imminent failure, and no parents with their worn out frowns cursing your loud music. People were happy in the Lobby the way thieves were happy in the sanctuary of monasteries. It was the happiness that knows unhappiness waits at the door.

Tonight, there was something added to that temporary happiness. People were excited and nervous, as if things were really going to change. Jerry's own heart was beating fast. He reminded himself that this was all prelude to the night's real event and that the success of his flight was assured. Jerry's dream picture of him and Kim peering through the El Dorado's windshield at the long dark road was interrupted by Billy announcing the band.

"Ladies and fools without further bullshit, the punk ecstasy of Harpoon," Billy said, his voice oscillating between a bass and a falsetto.

Kim stepped to the front of the stage. The Bellboy's drumbeats began, and the first guitar notes sent the crowd into a fit of screaming. The light washed out her pale face, so that it seemed that her voice emanated from the thrashing curls. Jerry checked to be sure the tape recorder was on, before sitting down on the table beside him. He tried to memorize the songs as she sang them. Tonight, when they pulled onto the interstate, Jerry wanted to have every song Kim sang clear in his head. From the crowd's feverish reaction, he was sure most of Melville Regional would be hearing Kim's voice in their dreams for months to come.

Chapter 10: Farewell to the Wide, Wide, World

The timing was perfect. Someone had lit a small bonfire by the side of the stage. As Harpoon launched into their final song, clouds of smoke poured onto the Lobby's stage. The song continued on, somehow louder than before. Kim faded into the smoke, and the last Jerry saw of her was a small fury of sparks as she snapped all six strings in the song's final riff.

Jerry tried to remain calm. He resisted the temptation to dive into the smoke after Kim. The fire was only a prank. The broken chair legs and paper cups that littered the Lobby were too tempting for a vandal to pass up. Kim was in no danger. She was probably using the confusion to avoid contact with her legion of new fans. Jerry relaxed, despite the nagging sensation that he was swirling in a dream he had no control over. He contemplated lighting his cigar in the bonfire, but celebrating so soon was asking for bad luck.

The crowd pounded the floor and demanded an encore from Harpoon. More chairs were thrown in the fire, and the room rang with the sound of broken bottles. The approaching fire engine sirens added to the jumble of sounds. All five of Melville's cops and twenty of its firefighters poured into the Lobby. Jerry contemplated recording this chaos at the end of his concert tape. The noise would encompass what Kim was capable of.

A fist passed by his chin. The punch was aimed at one of the passing firemen, but it missed, and the puncher stumbled to the floor. There were three or four fist fights across the room between the crowd-members, the firemen, and the police. Jerry wasn't sure why the crowd was so taken with the fire that they fought to keep it burning, but they fought hard. Two shirtless kids, with stringy dark hair down to their shoulders pulled the hose out of the firemen's hands and tossed it on the fire. Jerry could remember selling them six tabs of acid each. Rusty and another deputy handcuffed the kids and were showered with a barrage of plastic bottles, and spitballs. A kid beside Jerry, who couldn't have been more than fifteen, started to swear at the cops.

"Motherfuckers," he yelled.

Rusty, who had been walking stone-faced through the trash thrown by the onlookers, turned towards Jerry. Jerry didn't move away. Every bud and tab was sold; he had no worries. He stayed to see the kid's reactions to arrest up close. Rusty didn't blink as he passed the fifteen year old, and grabbed hold of Jerry's arm.

"What did you say?" Rusty asked.

Jerry didn't know what to say. Half a dozen times he'd avoided arrest in guilty circumstances; facing arrest as an innocent was a new experience.

"I didn't say anything officer," Jerry answered.

"The hell you didn't. You long haired freaks can't mouth off, and expect to get away with it. Let's see what you're carrying," Rusty said.

The procession of the two hose burners was halted so two of the cops could search Jerry. Rusty took hold of Jerry's wallet, and flipped through it. He pulled a package of breath mints from Jerry's pocket.

"These could be amphetamines. We'll need to send them to the lab," he told the other cop searching Jerry.

"They're fucking mints," Jerry said, unable to conceal his disbelief.

"Watch your mouth. You've earned one citation for disrespecting an officer. I'd love to write two," Rusty said.

Jerry was stunned as the handcuffs circled his wrists, and a cop grabbed each of his shoulders. The police escort gave Jerry the sensation of being separated from everything that was happening in the Lobby. He longed to cheer on the kids fighting, but the handcuffs seemed to prevent his speech as well as motion. Near the doorway Jerry slowed his pace until the policeman had to drag him. He wasn't ready to be torn from the Lobby. He twisted to get a final look and saw PJ hurrying past the stage with a guitar case in his hand. He hoped PJ would release his usual venom on the authorities entering the Lobby. He lost sight of PJ as the firefighters turned their replacement hoses on the fire, sending up a burst of steam.

Outside, Melville's usual fire-watching crowd was already there. The accident-watchers pulled from their televisions, mingled with the still screaming throng of Lobby goers. The firefighters were alternately cheered for saving the Cleo and blamed for shutting down the show. The desire to see the outcome of the fire, and the near riot, helped people to ignore the cold, though most of Melville Regional would probably develop colds from standing sweaty in the frigid night. Jerry looked at all the people shivering, and wondered where his own jacket was.

The thought of Kim waiting and freezing beside the car was more painful for Jerry than the handcuffs. He tried squirming his hands out of the handcuffs like he'd seen in a hundred movies, but the handcuffs didn't slide off. He considered ramming his way into the crowd, and disappearing, but outside of the cramped Lobby the crowd seemed too small to get lost in.

There were two cops and three city councilman surrounding the Bellboy. Jerry guessed that they'd already drawn an ordinance up to close the Lobby and prevent future property damage. Jerry wasn't cheered by the possible arrest of the Bellboy; even if it meant the man would have no chance of halting Jerry and Kim's escape. Instead, the sight made him sad. The Bellboy looked disgusted by the world outside the Lobby. He looked like a lost old man.

"There's nothing to see here folks. Go home," Rusty spoke through a staticky bullhorn.

There was, Jerry thought, a lot to see. The legion of tripping teenagers spread through town, leaving broken windows and skid marks in their wake. One kid was perched atop the Lobby's sign tossing fire crackers above the street. All the cops were too engrossed in the remains of the

fire and the potential arrests to worry about the bursts of light and noise. The firefighters turned their attention to the car flipped over on the sidewalk. It was an absurd twist of fate that Jerry watched, for the second week in a row, a group of men struggle to flip over the same green Datsun.

Abruptly, Jerry felt the officer release the handcuffs. Jerry was afraid to turn around and discover they were being replaced with stronger manacles.

"Am I free to go?" Jerry asked.

"Hardly. We're just out of handcuffs, and the chief thinks the lunatic is more of a threat than you," the officer replied.

The Bellboy was growing louder in his protests. He was invoking God, demons, and dead rock stars to curse the Melville authorities.

"I'm not crazy you but if you don't let me see Kim you are all dead. I know how you've plotted to take the Lobby away from me. You can't have Kim too," the Bellboy yelled.

The onlookers looked completely confused by the Bellboy's tirade. They were fighting against the imminent shutdown of the Lobby, and the end of their party. Kim's absence from the scene was secondary to their concerns. But Jerry's stomach sunk as if he'd eaten hot lead. If the Bellboy spoke the truth, then Kim was arrested. Or worse, Jerry thought, a demented fan had abducted her while she waited next to the locked El Dorado. He scanned the packed police cars for any sign of Kim. The remaining crowd seemed full of menacing tattooed men who might have kidnapped her.

"Free the Bellboy. Fuck the cops. Free the Bellboy," the crowd began to chant.

Their angry rhythms heightened the policemen's fears. The louder the noise grew the closer they bunched together around the Bellboy. This left Jerry well out of arm's reach of the nearest cop. Being forgotten by the police didn't bring Jerry happiness; instead he bolted towards the Smoke Shop. Jerry wove through the crowd like a halfback or a dancer. Until this desperate moment, he had never felt graceful.

The El Dorado wasn't there. He was nauseous when he checked all his pockets to discover the El Dorado keys weren't there. Slowly, he dug his hands into the pockets of his shirt, then his jeans, even checking his shoes to see if he'd hid his keys, and forgotten them. He stumbled closer to the curb. There were skid marks; someone had pulled away quickly as if they were being chased. A guitar case lay in the center of the parking spot.

It was Kim's guitar case. It was a sign that she was waiting for him. Perhaps the car had been towed. Kim must have panicked, and run back to the Cleo, or into a convenience store. She was hiding out until he came. If he could find Kim this night would only delay their plans, nothing more.

He stepped off the curb. The way the guitar case rested, reminded him of a coin balanced on its thin side to show both faces. He supposed all guitar cases looked this way. Perhaps it was a good omen that he had only now thought of this certainly lucky image. He flipped back the hinges on the case. The guitar stayed snugly in the case. He ran his hand over the guitar. It seemed fine, unharmed except for the broken strings. He lifted it out of the case. A wad of money, and a torn piece of paper fell on his feet.

He counted the money. There was at least a hundred dollars. All of it was in tens, fives, and ones. He counted the money again, amazed at this surprise fortune. Only when he was certain of the one hundred and thirty five dollars did he read the note.

Jerry,

Here is Kim's guitar and some of the receipts from the show. Probably you'll stay sentimental about the guitar, and build a shrine around it. I don't know what obsessed guys like you do when you get screwed over this way. I suggest that you pawn the guitar, with the money it could cover the car.

Can't say I liked you much, but I think we'd all agree stealing a guy's car is a pretty lousy thing to do. I don't know where Kim and I are headed, but it is nowhere you or anyone else will ever find us.

sincerely.

Prairie Joseph Conroy

PS. Don't ever leave your keys in your jacket.

He closed the case. The image of PJ and Kim driving away together left Jerry stricken beyond anger or grief. He had the horrifying feeling of standing on a dock, while a boat left port with his luggage. He knew PJ hadn't the strength to kidnap Kim; he was too scared of her. Kim had to have chosen to leave with the boy. Jerry prayed that this was a hallucination, a terrible side-effect of handling so much acid. He ran back towards the Lobby hugging the guitar like a buoy.

"It is him. He's the one whose taken her. He's the kidnapper." screamed the Bellboy.

The Bellboy's bony finger lingered for a moment on each member of the crowd. He was accusing everyone and anyone of stealing Kim. Jerry wished he could tell the Bellboy that they were both losers in the battle for Kim's heart. He wanted to speak before the Bellboy was sent to jail or committed to the hospital in Augusta. Instead, he backed away, afraid of being re-arrested. The Bellboy stared at Jerry suspiciously, but seemed to have truly forgotten who he was.

"Don't think you'll get away," the Bellboy cursed Jerry, as he finally disappeared into the police car.

The police car pulled through the crowd. The kids pummeled the car with their fists and boots, but they couldn't prevent the car from breaking free to the road. The police's departure left the kid's with nothing to fight. Even the most heartbroken youth hadn't the energy to taunt the firemen, who were already boarding up the Lobby entrance. Jerry wanted to ask the firemen for a ride, to his apartment, to his dad's house, to the bus station. Anywhere away from here would be a start.

A few cars sped by, but no one stopped. Jerry could not begin to search for Kim until summer, until he could buy another car. Jerry had thought that summer in Melville would never come again for him. Now, summer's heat felt like another weight poised to tumble on Jerry's

head as soon as he turned the corner. In hours the sun would rise on April. Jerry turned down the street and hoped that Mrs. Sebastian hadn't rented his apartment.

The desire to damage something filled him up. Every trash can on the street had already been tipped over or tossed in the river. All the street signs were battered down. He opened the case and took out the guitar. The broken strings seemed to sprout from the guitar, like shoots from a plant. He raised his foot to snap it, but then stepped back. He left the guitar on the road for someone else to break, or steal, or play. He held onto the money. It was best to have something in reserve for the days to come.