

S T R A W S

B Y L E W I S S H I N E R

HE HAD APPARENTLY spaced out for a second or two. When he came to, a large, annoyed woman was leaning in toward him. “Mister? Mister, are you even listening to me?”

He looked at the receding rows of fluorescent lights on the struts of the cavernous ceiling, the gleaming linoleum floors, the pallets of sale-priced plastic coolers and Special K and motor oil, and then he looked at the rack of merchandise at his back and understood that he was in a Wal-Mart, behind the returns counter.

He heard his own voice saying, as if by reflex, “Do you have your receipt?”

AT THE FIRST OPPORTUNITY, he locked himself in a bathroom stall and dug out his wallet. His driver’s license showed the right name, birthdate, and photo, but it had been issued by the State of North Carolina, and it listed an address he’d never heard of.

He scrubbed his face at the sink. It was him in the mirror, a tanned and healthy 56, hair mostly gray but still all there. He felt groggy, as if he’d woken prematurely. It was only the numbness, he thought, that kept the panic at bay.

If he didn’t push, he found he knew the answers to some questions. He was due to clock out in an hour. When he left the parking lot he would go under the highway, turn left, and merge.

HE FOUND HIS WAY to a battered white Toyota pickup in the employee section. The key in his pocket started the engine. He forced himself not to think too hard as he drove, taking the turns that seemed to have a certain inevitability. He wound up on a dirt road near someplace called Pittsboro, in front of a small brick house surrounded by high yellow grass, pines, and live oaks.

He parked next to a purple Nissan Sentra in the driveway, and tried the front door of the house. Inside, a woman sat watching TV in the living room. She was in her mid-thirties, plump, blonde, and plain. Her black polo shirt had a monogrammed logo for something called Harris-Teeter and a nametag that said JESS. She was young enough to be his daughter, but he didn’t think she was. She smiled when she saw him and it lit up her face in an attractive way.

“I brought some of that rotisserie chicken home,” she said. “Is that okay? We had some of those little red potatoes like you like.”

“Sure,” he said.

“You hungry? I could put it on the table right now.” She seemed a little nervous, a little eager to please.

“Sure,” he said.

TEN MINUTES INTO DINNER, after she’d talked about a host of people he’d never heard of, she slowed to a halt. “You’re having that memory problem again, aren’t you?” She had an accent that mixed a hint of

Canada with a Southern twang.

He wondered what she thought the problem was. "I guess maybe so," he shrugged. In fact his memories were quite vivid. They just didn't match anything in front of him.

"Aw." She came around the table and wrapped him in a hug. She smelled of cooking, but not unpleasantly. His body seemed to know her, to take comfort in the embrace. "It was that email from Murray, wasn't it?" she said. "I was afraid it was going to bring one of these on."

"Email?" he said.

"Aw, no. I hate this. I wish I hadn't said anything, 'cause now you're going to have to read it, and it'll hurt you all over again." She ran the back of her right hand over his cheek. "Could you at least eat a little more dinner before you go look?"

He shook his head and she let him go.

The computer turned out to be in the front bedroom, which also seemed to be his studio. He was shocked to see his guitar there, the gold-top Les Paul he knew so well, perched on a guitar stand. Next to it he saw a Fender Precision bass, a keyboard, and a Tascam multi-track cassette recorder that had probably been state of the art in 1986.

He perched on the edge of a battered love seat and picked up the Les Paul. It fit into his arms like a lover, like a piece of a lost world.

He looked up to see Jess in the doorway.

"I wish there was something I could do," she said. "I hate to see you this way. If you want to play guitar, go on ahead. It seems to help sometimes. I'll put your dinner in the fridge."

He returned the guitar to its stand and gave her a hug and a kiss on the cheek. It seemed the polite thing to do.

The computer was already on. He powered up the monitor and it blinked and showed his email program. Halfway down the screen was a message labeled "Your cat is on the roof" from someone named Murray Black. It read:

You will probably think me a coward for doing this in email. So I'm a coward already. The bad news is that Sugar Hill passed on PALOMITA. Yeah, I know. Turns out they're closing down their North Carolina office and consolidating all the operations in Nashville. The guy you talked to after the Local 506 show is no longer with the company, and is in fact leaving the business entirely. (Can't say I blame him.) This will be all over the Internet tomorrow. Jeff, I don't know what else to do. I would love to be your manager but the sad truth at this moment is, there is nothing here for me to manage. I don't believe it's the record, it's just the business. I know that doesn't help a lot right now.

IT WAS THE THINGS he *did* remember that made him feel like he was in free fall. He knew *Palomita*. It had come out on Warner's, and had won a Grammy for Album of the Year.

He put his name into Google and came up with a home page. The site had his photo and a list of his homemade CDs for sale. They were the albums he knew. He clicked on the Bio link and read the three skimpy paragraphs there.

Nothing he read matched his own memories, which were vivid and detailed and indisputably authentic. Like his first night in L A in June of 1970, barely 20

years old and driving up into the foothills to pick out the letters of his name in the infinite recession of lights. Opening for Linda Ronstadt at the Troubadour in the summer of '71, retreating from the onslaught of celebrities and kingmakers to the bar, where he met an amiable kid from Texas named Don Henley. Then sitting on the balcony of his Laurel Canyon apartment that December afternoon in '75, watching the breeze stir the eucalyptus as Henley offered him the lead guitar slot that Bernie had just vacated.

There had been the craziness at the end of the 70s that had culminated in his hanging off the wrought iron grill of a hotel balcony by one hand, ten floors above the Champs-Élysées, scaring himself into changing his life. His first day back in the studio, two years sober, laying down the first tracks for the first solo record. The day he saw Kathleen for the first time, walking out of the surf at Laguna, August 22, 1990, orange hair, orange one-piece suit, the sunset exploding orange behind her, knowing that she was the one. Playing the final mix of *Palomita* for her in the front room of their house in San Miguel fifteen years later, the voices of the street kids and the smell of jacaranda floating in the windows.

He grabbed the phone and dialed his home number. On the third ring a man's voice answered in Spanish. Yes, this was the right number, yes, San Miguel de Allende. No, and he was truly sorry, but he'd never heard of a Jeff McCoy and knew no one named Kathleen.

THE WEBSITE HAD SAMPLES from *Palomita*. He was surprised by how similar they sounded, even with him playing all the instruments himself, to the studio versions he knew.

He pushed the chair back from the computer and looked around the room. It had a musty odor, the smell of mold growing in the back of a closet. The wooden floors were stained and dented, the rug worn through in the center. He let himself, carefully and tentatively, try to imagine what it must be like to live here.

There was a framed, autographed photo of Don Gibson on the wall, and just as he knew the way from Wal-Mart to this room, he knew why the photo was there. Gibson, after failing at three different record labels, had washed up in a trailer park north of Knoxville where, in a single afternoon, he'd written "Oh Lonesome Me" and "I Can't Stop Lovin' You" back to back, the songs that revived his career and went on to sell tens of millions of copies.

To cling to that dream of a Don Gibson moment, as each year the odds grew longer, seemed a nightmare beyond endurance.

Somebody had told him once that if you could see your hands in a dream, you could take control of it. He looked at his hands and whispered, "I'm ready to wake up now. I'll count to three. One. Two..."

JESS WAS ASLEEP when he finally came to bed. He'd played guitar for a while after all, and nodded out on the loveseat. But when he woke up he was still there, in a tiny house near a town called Pittsboro.

HE WAS ON REGISTER 3 in the morning. A young guy kept staring at him as he rang up three pairs of socks and two pairs of running shorts. "You know who you look like?" the guy said. "You look like this singer named Jeff McCoy."

"Yeah," he said. "That's me."

“You’re kidding! I can’t believe it. You’re working at Wal-Mart? I saw you at the Cradle last year. You were incredible. I thought you were, like, big time.”

“Yeah,” he said. “Me too.”

SOMETIME AFTER LUNCH he felt the numbness begin to wear off. He hadn’t realized how much it had been protecting him until it was gone. But now every minute, every second, was agony. Scanning candy bars and girdles and plastic leftover containers, feeding checks into the printer, cracking a roll of quarters over the drawer. Staring at the clock, willing the time to pass. What in God’s name was he doing here?

How much longer could this go on?

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