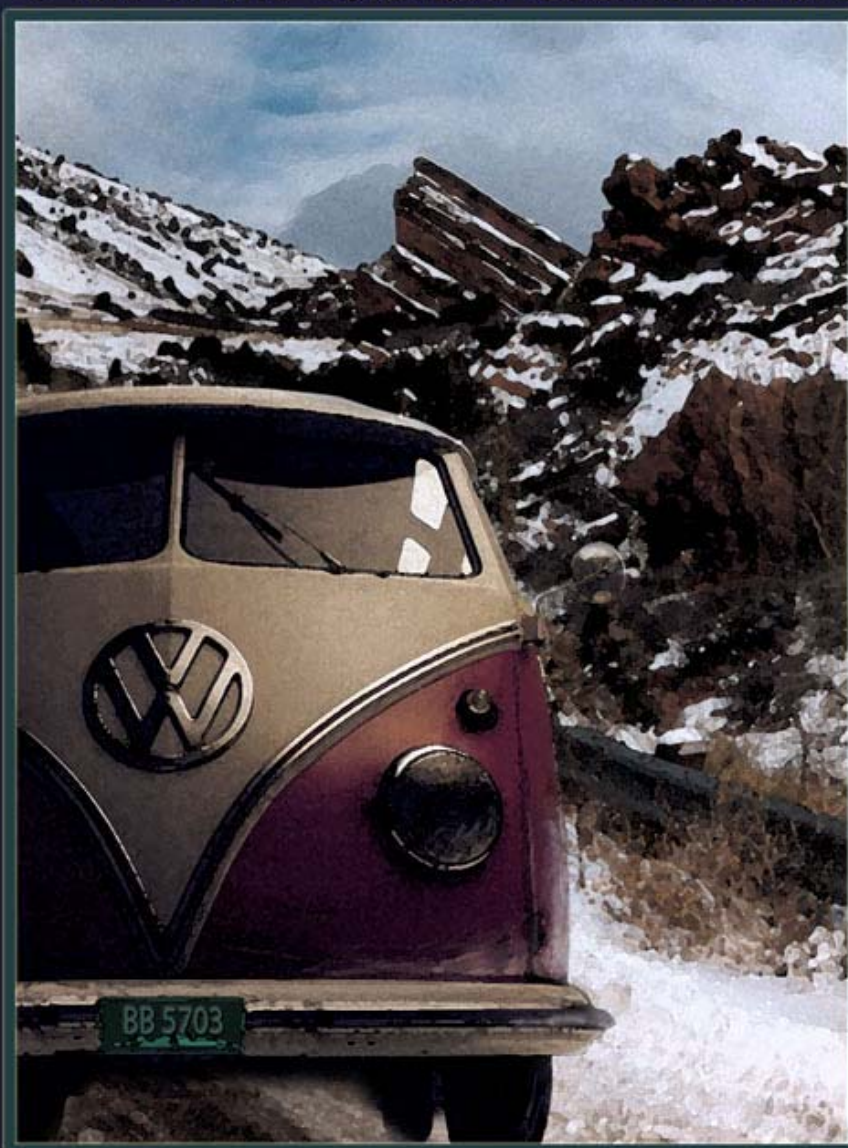


SHERRY MARIE
GALLAGHER

BOULDER BLUES

A Tale of the Colorado Counterculture



From the author of
Murder On The Rocks! and Dancing Spoons & Khachapuri

AISLING BOOKS

Copyright © 2009 by Sherry Marie Gallagher

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, or other electronic or mechanical methods, without the prior written permission of the publisher, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical reviews and certain other noncommercial uses permitted by copyright law.

This novel is entirely a work of fiction. The names, characters and incidents portrayed in it are the work of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events or localities is entirely coincidental.

Aisling Books is a subsidiary of Mediator Media. Aislingbooks.nl is registered with the *Stichting Internet Domeinregistratie Nederland*, Arnhem, The Netherlands.

For more information please contact:

MEDIATOR MEDIA
R. SCHUMANLAAN 73
4463 BD GOES
THE NETHERLANDS
T: +31 (0) 113 – 227133
E: info@mediatormedia.nl
W: www.mediatormedia.nl

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGUING-IN PUBLICATION DATA

TXu1-179-205

Gallagher, Sherry Marie

Boulder Blues - a Tale of the Colorado Counterculture / by Sherry Marie Gallagher

ISBN 0-9661518-4-4

Second Edition

Cover design: Rob Bitter, Mediator Media

INTRODUCTION

Likened to a neo-Roman Empire, a megalith of both monetary and military might within its mostly self-governing mass of unified states, America has remained a pipe dream of hope, resulting in mass immigration of the last four centuries – an immigration of those fleeing poverty and desperation in countries such as Ireland, which is only now in the new Millennium showing signs of economic independence.

The modern world is an entrée of varying cultures and differing worlds, commingling and colliding. Springing from genius or desperation, insanity or blind faith, the regeneration of shared experiences makes her rich beyond her own soil. And the country of the “American dream” is no exception. To outsiders this land is perceived as a cultivation of possibilities where one can work hard, make money and become rich. To realize this in action becomes harder in recent years than in the past. Yet, it is a tenacious dream that glints and gleams in the eye of every immigrant.

Boulder Blues focuses on youth from immigrant families of different life experiences. Chance, synchronicity and the madness of the North American counterculture movement brought them together. While parents and grandparents sacrificed whole livelihoods in making come true their personal visions of the American Dream, their offspring were caught up in civil unrest and self-destruction: in sex, drugs and rock'n'roll. This youth generation of Baby Boomers, lasted, as if in a blink of the eye, from 1965-1975 – a generation that thought it and its movement would never die....

*‘And we must extinguish the candle, put out the light and relight it; forever must quench,
forever relight the flames’ - T.S. Eliot*

ONE

“Whoosh,” went a toilet, its flush heard over a din of barroom chatter, milling people and clinking glasses. Shannon’s nightclub was a scene of hors d’oeuvres and cigarette ashes in ceramic trays alongside ice-chipped jiggers of amber liquid and pee-brown ale. The club employees had learned to ignore such banal sounds, which eventually got buried somewhere in their unconscious day-to-day thoughts. But to the amusement of others, especially the turnover of hired entertainers, such a flush proved an uncanny instrument of its own, seemingly synchronous with each musical pause.

“Unhhh! You sonofabitch!” Someone hitting the toilet, hitting the handle too hard caused another violent flush. A bit quick on the uptake. From outside the latrine it sounded as if a body had been thrown against a wall, its shudder adding yet another dimension to the soft-curved notes thrown out by the rhythmic pulse of the instrumental riff now being played.

The weeknight performer tossed aside copper tones of rippling hair that appeared to spin gold down upon her back. She yawned absently and scanned an audience amused by their own dull noises. Faces came together in a blur under neon light that rested beside mirrored glass, chipped and smoked black. The neon lit up the dark veneer with beer advertisements and gave the shadowed patrons an ugly glow. Again the performer heard the angry male voices, and with them came a sudden sound of gushing water. Perhaps a tap had burst open in the scuffle. Banging noises continued as sounds of a towel dispenser being ripped from a wall and thrown onto the hardwood floor echoed through paper-thin walls.

Stevie glimpsed the bartender, who caught her eye and pointed to the fleeing figure she recognized as the club bouncer. Leaving his post at the door, the bouncer rushed over just as two men flew out of the bathroom door, one shoving the other backwards and smashing his head against a cigarette machine.

“Unhhh!” Another loud grunt. The two men cursed, faces flushing with broken veins as the bouncer and bartender managed to pull them apart and heave the twosome out into the street.

She considered the scene before turning back to aching fingers and straining on a bar chord. She felt not in full form this evening and pressed even harder for the impact of a clean, crisp sound. Then she stopped to momentarily retune the guitar, saying; “I want to play this last tune written by a favorite Irish poet of mine who lived in the 19th century. Perhaps you’ve all heard of W.B. Yeats? Anyway, it goes something like this:

“A weariness comes from those dreamers,” she sang, “dew dabbled, the lily and rose, ah, dream not of them, my beloved, the flame of the meteor that goes; or the flame of the blue star that lingers hung low in the fall of the dew.”

Stevie eyed the audience before her, changing tempo, singing: “For I would we were changed to white birds on the wandering foam – I and you.”

Reworking chords, she returned to the melody line, and lifted her voice. “I am haunted by numberless islands, and many a Danaan shore; where time would surely forget us, and sorrow come near us no more, soon far from the rose and the lily, and the fret of the flames would we be....”

She looked down at the couple sitting at the table directly in front of her before breaking loose and continuing; “Were we only white birds, my beloved, buoyed out on the foam of the sea.”

With tears trickling down into the folds of her neck, the beered-up woman in front smiled up at her and raised her glass.

She returned the smile with a nod of recognition, her grin lessening when the woman's partner, a bulbous-nose man, engrossed himself in loud conversation with a cocktail waitress. Glimpsing back at the strings, she closed with a rhythmic run up and down the guitar neck, adding; "And that concludes my set for the evening. Cheers and good-night, everyone."

Amidst distracted applause, Stevie hurried off stage to catch the bartender who smuggled drinks to her before he left on break, as she was still under drinking age. She wanted a double Jameson's and didn't want to miss him.

"Hey!" An unfamiliar voice grabbed her attention as she shot past. "Hey, wait up!"

Stevie stopped and spun round, eyeing a man in tight, green leathers and feathered hat. She burst out laughing. "Let me guess," she said, still laughing. "You're one of the Merry Pranksters, am I right?"

"Name's Rory O." He shoved his freckled hand into hers. "The 'O' stands for O'Callaghan, and my friend thinks you're gorgeous."

"How original. So where is this friend? Back in Sherwood Forest?"

He let out a long, low whistle. "Man, you're something else." Hazel eyes rested on the gentle rise and fall of breasts within her braless halter-neck dress. "You remind me of some of the chicks I knew back home. Queens, New York," he grinned, "not Sherwood Forest."

"I'm from LA," her stare unbroken, challenging. "The Palisades, ah...well, I guess you could call it a suburb."

"OK, LA lady. I'll take your word for it. So, you wanna meet him?"

"Not particularly. Is your friend anything like you?"

"Oh, much worse. He's a fucking gentleman."

"A fucking gentleman?" Tossing back her hair, laughing. "Oh, well then. That's different. This I've gotta see."

Rory led the way to a greasy black-stained table across the room. His steps were quick and catlike. When Stevie caught up to him he was already introducing her. "See, Mike. Didn't I tell you I'd get her over here? Meet the LA lady."

Getting up from his chair, the other man held out what Stevie noticed to be a firm, long-fingered hand with tapered nails. He immediately planted it in hers with a strong shake. But it was the deep, vertical carves in his smiling cheeks that unsettled her, thinking this man too good looking.

"Dynamite voice," he said. "Do you play here all the time?"

"A few nights a week. It's rent money." She felt her own cheeks burning.

Mike retained his smile, eyeing her closely; his interest piqued.

Her eyes tore away, resting on the bartender who was mixing crushed ice and liqueur in a blender. "I hate being rude," she said, "but I've a date with the bartender's blender." He laughed, nodding his head.

"Whassa matter, baby?" Another, shorter man rose from the table. He had jet-black hair pulled into a tight ponytail. "Ain't y'gonna play another tune on your gee-tar?" Just as quickly he sat back down and leaned over his mug, slurping up liquid while half of it drooled down his chin.

"I'm through for the night. And you look so too," she smirked, turning back to Mike. "Nice meeting you, really. Perhaps we could meet again, but another time."

He nodded. "I'd like that. Can I walk you to...the bartender?"

She smiled and nodded then looked over to the bartender who had already gone on break. "You can walk me to the dressing room instead." And she let him walk her down the short hall leading to the office she used to change into her street clothes.

"Bye, LA Lady." Reaching for her hand, he took it and kissed it.

The tips of his fingers were rough and worn, she noticed. "Either you're a carpenter or a musician too."

He grinned. "You must be psychic. Tell me then, are we going to see each other again?"

She smiled back. "The prediction looks good." As he turned to go, she studied him, noting an easy rhythm to his movement and let minutes pass by before taking a deep breath and slipping through the office door.

Stevie pulled a green tweed sweater over her head, yanking on her jeans. Her dress she stuffed into a canvas bag then picked up the blue case that held her Martin guitar. Before exiting, she gave the room a quick glance over, eyeing a paper-strewn desk that was larger than the smaller piece of walnut furniture in the far corner on which sat an ashtray overflowing with menthol cigarette butts. Switching off the light, she yawned then locked the door.

"Night, Brian." At the sound of his name, a man turned in mid-sentence, smiled and hailed her. His lean, hardened features were often challenged by underage patrons at the front door before learning the hard way that the easygoing bouncer had snakelike recoil. He turned back, completing his thought to a patron washing down his beer.

She breathed in the night filled with fresh wood smoke from neighboring household chimneys. The rawness of mountain air penetrated her lungs and seemed to whisk away all the club's impurities as walked, her steps echoing on brittle pavement. She quickened her pace and turned east. Her eyes scanned the mountain crags of the Flat Irons, very much a part of what she now called home. The stars embossed the blackness with their clear brilliance, making her involuntary shudder, realizing how far from everything familiar she really was. Gone were the cirrus clouds lazily drifting across the Pacific Ocean sky. Gone were temperate seasons holding her survival instincts in perpetual remission.

Sighing into darkness, she found herself mouthing the word, "mother," pining as a young child for the elder woman's tenderness, to be comforted in soft folds of a maternal bosom. Turning up the street toward an older section of town, she paused in front of a two-story wood and brick home. Hesitating, her thoughts formed a cloudy effigy of her father. Etched into the front door of his office high-rise was the image of his and her entire relationship: Angus Kelly, Attorney at Law. A man whom she barely knew, a man she felt she both loathed and admired.

A door opened at the sound of her knock. Running a hand through close cropped, peppered-gray hair, her greeter gave an expectant smile. "Hello there, hon."

"Hi, Jer," she replied in a half-smile.

Everything go okay tonight?"

She stretched and yawned, setting down her bag and case. "Brilliant: dull crowd, too much smoke and too little attention. Oh, yeah," she said, "and there were these two guys having a row in the toilet."

His brow shot up. "Was David around?"

"Brian and that new bartender took care of it. No big deal."

Edging in closer, his voice softened. "Good." He reached for the small bare breasts beneath her sweater and cupped a hand over one of them. Fear flashed like distant lightning through her eyes then disappeared again. "You're cold. I'll warm you up with some brandy before I go upstairs."

"Thanks." She was suddenly weary and stepped down to the sunken living room, stretching out on the camel leather couch. So tired. Her eyes grew heavy. She felt her whole body falling into itself till reawakening, alert once more at her man's presence, his reappearance registering in a kiss on the lips. Jerry handed her a shot glass before heading back up the stairs.

Stevie took her time unlacing her boots, enjoying the warm liqueur taking effect. She contemplated this man she did not love who also happened to be the absentee owner of Shannon's nightclub. He had simply walked into the office one night and caught her off her guard. She had just opened a bottle of red barbiturates and panicked, shoving them into a frayed pocket of her jacket. They all ended up on the floor by his feet. Jerry eyed her, scooping them back into the bottle without a word while taking his time reading the label.

To her his silence was torturous. She fought back the urge to squirm and held her composure. Finely, she had had enough and held out her hand, glaring at him.

He took on the challenge and glared back, breaking her stare. "Surely a girl like you can do better than resorting to this cheap crap."

She lowered her eyes. "Am I fired?"

"David might fire your ass. But I'm not him, am I?" He handed back the bottle, his smile cool and collected as he walked out the door and shut it behind him.

"Don't bother getting up, hon." Jerry's voice startled her back to the present, shaking off clouds. He stepped down into the sunken room and sat beside her. "It will just take a second now."

She watched him pull a brass tray from beneath the thick coffee table of polished oak. Reaching into his silk robe, he pulled out a small glass tube of Dilaudid, two syringes, a monogrammed Dunhill lighter, and a small cotton ball. He placed one of the tiny white tablets on a silver teaspoon, opened one of the sterile syringe packets and drew water from a shot glass into the hypo. He squirted just enough to mix with the drug before igniting the lighter underneath.

Placing the cotton ball in the spoon, he then drew up the contents with each needle and lit up a menthol cigarette, inhaling deeply. "Tie up your arm, honey. I'll help you fire it in."

Such a sweet rush, the inner peace, the freedom from self. Stevie breathed relief, feeling the drug hit and splash through each and every vein. Jerry slowly undressed her. She barely felt his fingers slipping through her unbuttoned jeans, caressing her. It didn't matter anymore. He didn't matter. Nothing mattered but the soft cirrus clouds reforming in her mind.

* * * *

Awakening to an itch she unconsciously scratched, Stevie vaguely remembered how she had got upstairs. Last night was only a residue of memory now verging on headache. Jerry had risen early, leaving her to the noise of the cleaning woman's vacuum below. She knew he'd be already on the tennis courts playing a few sets as he always did before facing the rest of his day. He, a chain smoker who drank and drugged as much as he did, made such a fuss over keeping physically fit. She supposed it had something to do with his age, his way of coping with mid-life. She had seen similar behavior in her father when she was in her freshman year of high school. He, with his fluorescent tan and second marriage to his law books, was just about the same age as Jerry when he had suddenly taken up jogging. Her mother was beside herself with worry, thinking him any moment to have a heart attack from all the unnecessary exertion. Jerry, however, was in much better shape than her father ever was.

She rose, shaking away thoughts, and her eyes fixed on a Gorman oil painting. It was a work of a well-known New Mexican painter. He was especially famous for his rigid lines and clay colors that were distinctive to the southwestern area he grew up in. An area where Georgia O'Keeffe, the famous painter from New York, also spent her midlife, painting sun-bleached skull and crossbones against backdrops of sandy soil and stark blue skies. Jerry, however, used his painting to mask the bedroom wall safe in which Stevie was certain lay all his stash of drugs. Pondering the possibilities of that safe, she stepped into the washroom, first finding the medicine chest and downing two aspirin before stepping into a hot, steamy shower. The heat of the water cleared her sinuses, relieving the headache. And she let the water beat upon her skin, listening to the soothing pata-tat-tat rhythm it made as she turned her back to the streaming overhead spout.

Her ear tuned more closely to the sound the water was making, singing melody to its rhythm: "Let us go joy, joy, joy. Go we joyfully. Let us go joyfully into the world." She shook her head to rid herself of the ditty her mother sang to her as a child. She knew it was hopeless. She would never forget it and its silly little rhyme scheme that was drummed into her psyche forever.

Stevie turned off the faucet, towel-drying herself with one of Jerry's plump white terrycloth towels. Then she threw on her clothes and took the stairs two-by-two and entering the kitchen where she found a note tucked halfway under the coffee percolator. She poured herself a cup and read what was addressed to her and not the maid. Jerry was asking her to dinner her following night off from the club.

Scribbling an okay, Stevie smiled briefly at the cleaning lady as she brushed past to grab her handbag and guitar case before heading out the door. The morning air felt good to breathe in and hold against the acrid smell of coffee breath. She let it all out again - one big release before sprinting uphill - the heavy instrument swinging as she barely missed getting sideswiped by an inattentive motorist. She gasped for air, catching her breath before going any further. Tears fell. Why was she crying? No, these were laughing tears. Freedom from Jerry and his cold bargain: his drugs for her body.

It was then that she thought she heard music and let her curiosity follow its melody. It led her to the Central Park band shell where spectators and musicians crowded on and around the stage. A man played blues guitar, and he was exceptionally good. Moving in for a closer look, she drew in her breath and let out a short gasp of surprise. It was Mike onstage, the man with odd companions she had met briefly at the club the night before. And she saw with admiration his agile fingers doing intricate rhythm walks across the neck of his guitar.

"Déjà vu! So you wanna dance, LA lady?" Stevie again turned around to face the smiling man in green leathers. He was now making a mockery out of a basic step dance pattern she had herself learned as a child.

She laughed. "Well, if it isn't the Irish brigade sneaking up on me again." Then she pointed to the platform where Mike was performing. "He told me he played, but I had no idea he played like this. He's fantastic."

"Yeah, he's good alright. Fuckin' dy-no-mite."

"I'll say. So who is he? Somebody famous from Europe?"

"Nothing of the sort. Just an immigrant's son. Part of a lost generation like the rest of his motley crew of friends," he laughed. "My folks came from Cork. Jojo's still wet behind the ears, but don't tell him I spilled the beans. He hates sympathy," he said with a wink.

"What's wrong with that?"

"Nothin'. We just like giving him a bad time. He deserves it. You'll see."

"Well, don't worry. I don't even know him."

"Oh, you will, lady. You will. I guarantee it. But Blues Man is from Wisconsin. His dad came over and married his mother because she had a farm or something. I don't know. We only call him Blues Man because you see for yourself that he's got soul." Grabbing her arm, he started dragging her to the stage. "C'mon, he'll be glad to see you."

"Well, hey there." Mike glimpsed her, his smile inviting. He wrapped up a jaunty, but intricate bottlenecked riff as he flirted with her, not missing a note.

"Blues Man?" she teased.

He nodded. "But I can play an Irish jig too."

"So I've heard from your ethnocentric friend."

Picking through a reel, Mike stopped and laughed. "He's been called worse."

She laughed back. "I don't know about you."

Jumping offstage, Mike took her by hand. "I don't know about you either, but I think I'm in love." Then he pulled out a bottle of cheap whiskey stashed inside a stage amplifier. "C'mon, let's take a walk." She took his arm, letting him lead her to the creek bank where they sat and uncapped the bottle.

"Now," she said, "you try convincing me just how you think that you can be in love with someone you don't even know."

"Hmm, that may be difficult to put into words. Maybe we can start by you telling me about yourself and then I'll tell you about me. That way we'll at least know each other's histories."

"And there you have it." She took the offered sip and grimaced.

"Indeed you do," he said, taking a swig himself.

“Now, I know Rory O. is some degenerate leprechaun. I mean, who wouldn’t be with a name like that.”

“You got him pegged.” He laughed.

“Those ditties you just played? I know them by heart, from childhood. Oh, and did you catch the drunken two-step your friend was doing while you were strumming away? He’s really something, all right.”

“Definite article, and he swears he’s lived most of his life in New York, which is not exactly the old sod. I’m from Wisconsin myself.”

She took the bottle from him and took a drink. “That’s what he told me. Well, what he said exactly was that your father came over and married her for her farm.”

“He said that?” He laughed, shaking his head. “I’ll have to talk to that boy. Truth is I worked the family farm with my dad until he died and we moved to the city.”

“Oh, so you’re a farm boy.” She took another drink, feeling this one going down very smoothly.

“Used to be. It was a short-lived experience, unfortunately. Dad was born and raised in Connemara. Have you heard of it?”

She shook her head, no.

“It’s in the west of Ireland. I’ve only been there once, visiting cousins. It’s beautiful enough with its peat smelling up the shoreline with such an earthy smell to it. But it’s a land full of rocks. So I guess we were lucky with our farm. The Wisconsin soil is black and rich. You can grow just about anything on it. We grew a lot of corn because we had a dairy farm. It all seems like a dream now, another lifetime. Dad died when I was pretty young. I wasn’t quite twelve, and we couldn’t hold onto the farm without him. It was just my ma, sis and me. So we sold her, packed up and moved to the big city.”

Stevie hiccuped, laughing. “Never could hold my liquor. My grandparents came from Donegal, and my father was born there. That’s all I know, because they never wanted to talk about anything but American stuff. They always corrected me if I did things that they thought looked like a peasant. Once I held my knife and fork together and Grandma had a fit. She said I looked like a farmer’s wife. Like I was someone from the old country, she said.”

Mike raised a brow.

“I’m serious. That’s what she said. And the way she whispered it to me I’ll never forget. It was like some great shame. But the only thing Irish I did was learning to step dance. The rest was taboo, except for my mother’s songs. My mother sang light opera before she married my dad. But she knew a lot of the old songs because she’d learned them from her own mother. Unfortunately, her mother died young. Too bad. I think I would have liked her. Anyway, no matter how much my dad’s mom chided her, she never stopped singing them. Once Gran told me that it was important to go on and not look back. Otherwise, I’d turn to stone like in the Bible.”

“Pretty harsh,” Mike said.

She nodded in agreement. “I guess there was a lot of fear there too. Who knows? I just stopped asking. And, as for me, I’m just a wandering, so-so musician.”

“Ah, I knew I liked you for some reason.”

“Then you’re either ethnocentric like your friend, or your deaf. Oh, I forgot. You’re in love. Well, here’s to love.” She toasted him and took a swig. “Cause love is blind.”

He took the bottle back, saluting her. “And thank God I’m not deaf.”

Stevie watched him take another drink, the liquid sliding down the gullet of his long, slender neck. He had been in the sun, his tanned neck and face making him appear even younger and healthier than the night before when he was shrouded in neon. “I suck as a musician,” she said. “After hearing the way you play, I know you know it too.”

Mike shook his head. “That is so...well, not so.” He wiped his mouth with the sleeve of his soft cotton Pendleton shirt. His smile was wry and contagious. “But when it comes down to it, aren’t we all just a bunch of travelers running from the law?” Then he broke into song: “Down the road, down the road, down the road.”

“Let me guess. You’re a draft dodger, right?”

“Absolutely not. I’m a patriot. I did my time.”

“Hmm, you don’t look the criminal type.”

“We never do.” He raised the bottle in mock cheer. “And you?”

“Oh, nothing special really, but I’ve had a long night and do need to get home.” Stevie rose to leave, but Mike gently took hold of her arm, motioning her to stay.

She sat back down again, her eyes catching his in play. “What? What do you want from me, farm boy?”

He shrugged. “I just like sitting here with you and shooting the breeze. Don’t go. Why ruin it? Why go away?”

“All right, I’ll stay, but not too long.” She sat back beside him and took a stiff drink.

Mike drew in closer. “Good. Now where was I? Oh yeah, my farm boy days and me. Where I grew up in Wisconsin, it’s called Stevens Point. Do you know Stevens Point?”

She shook her head, no.

“Got the best damn beer in the country. It’s a small college town like Boulder. My ma grew up there too and first met Dad while sitting on top of a chicken coop when he drove up to buy some milk. As the story goes,” Mike went on, “the milk was never purchased.”

Stevie said; “Your life sounds so...so Rockwellian. I’m honestly jealous of you. Mine’s more like a Hollywood soap opera.”

Her eyes met his, and she thought them beautiful, sky blue in color, like crystal ships that for some reason brought to mind a line from a Door’s song: ‘The crystal ship is being filled - a thousand pills, a thousand thrills.’

He took back the bottle, swallowing several gulps. “Dad’s American dream ended in a heart attack while riding on his tractor. You know, back to the farm and working the land. I always got off on the smell of soil, myself. Rich, black Wisconsin soil. Even as a kid, I’d just roll around in it for the sheer joy.”

“I’ll bet you were one of those mud-pie making kids too. Weren’t you?” she laughed.

“Squishing it all between your toes.”

“Yeah, that was me all right. Funny just how good it all felt, especially after a warm spring rain. It’s hard to explain, really.”

“Oh, I don’t think so. You just strike me as someone attune with his senses. I did a lot of horseback riding, myself. My girlfriends and I would ride into the hills not too far from our houses. We’d ride for hours with our saddlebags full of snacks and drink, and we’d pretend that we were exploring some unpopulated but exotic land. Sometimes we’d jump our horses and ride them hard enough for me to never forget the smell of horse-sweat mingling with our own. That was when the hides became itchy and course to the skin. But to me it was a great smell, the smell of my own freedom. And, of course, we always had to turn our reins back toward home in time for dinner.”

He winked. “Of course.”

“Those were good times though, not like now when everything seems so disconnected.”

“I hear that.”

“I didn’t have much of a relationship with my father, not like you did with yours.”

“He was a good man who shouldn’t have died. I still remember the day that he did. We’d just planted several rows of corn. One minute Dad was there, and the next he was gone.”

“What a shock. I can’t imagine.”

“My sister Maggie and I helped all we could to lighten Ma’s load, but it just wasn’t enough. After the big move my life changed. I didn’t do a whole lot more than go to school and fool around with my guitar, garage bands and the like. When I got a little older, I was hired on by a local contractor, doing everything from cleaning up scrap to nailing trim. Got pretty good at it too. I’ve always been good with my hands.”

Stevie laid her hand on top of his, and he turned his over, palms facing as they absently compared the difference in size. “They’re beautiful hands too,” she said, “long and firm.”

"I used my first extra money for a Fender guitar. I was real proud of that one. Nice acoustics. Had a Sears Best before that."

She laughed, passing him the bottle. "Didn't everyone?"

He smiled back. "Most likely."

"So, did you go on the road with your Sears Best?"

"When I could keep it in tune," he laughed. "No, I'm sorry to say that I married the contractor's daughter right out of high school. I thought I'd be exempt, but I was drafted a few weeks later. Did my training in Louisiana and got to go on leave to New Orleans and listen to a lot of hot jazz. Then I got shipped off to Vietnam and spent some time in Saigon." He took a drink.

"That's pretty exciting."

"I wouldn't call it that, but compared to a lot of GI's, I skated over there. So I'm lucky, I guess."

"I only know from the sidelines, but I've heard some stories myself. It's a mixed feeling I have. And right after they put the draft lottery on TV, a friend from school with my same birthday had his number come up as ten. We lost track of each other after that, but I wouldn't doubt that he's overseas right now. Maybe not if you believe in astrology. If I were him, I know where I'd be. I'd be AWOL in Canada."

"We don't have any business in this war. The Communists should fight it out amongst themselves. They're no threat to us. None that I can see anyway. And I don't think we have any business overseas, except for a chance for some American banks to make some big bucks." He lit up a Camel cigarette and offered her one, but she shook her head, no. He took a drag and exhaled. He had that far away look again. "I went in green, I mean, really green. Yeah, that was me, one patriotic punk."

"But you said...and you aren't anymore?"

"Aren't what? Patriotic, or a punk?"

She laughed, feeling the alcohol. "You know what I mean."

"The whole time I was there I felt cheated and lied to. Who was our enemy? I sure as hell didn't know anymore."

"I had a girlfriend in high school whose brother was a POW. He's in the nuthouse right now, but when he first came back I could get some kick-ass dope! He was so cool, but every once in awhile he'd get the shakes, stop whatever he was doing and pour himself a stiff one. Then he'd just smile at me and his sister and say that it was really good to be back home."

"Sounds like BT Bob."

"What does the BT stand for?"

"It's short for 'Booby Trap.'"

"You mean that he's like one of the 'Weathermen'?"

"Him? Nah, he's just a bit, you know." He raised index finger to temple and made a twisting gesture. "Scrambled eggs. He was a paramedic when he enlisted, but I think all his chemistry experiments were done in Nam when he escaped capture from the Viet Cong. His only overt dementia now is that he's this major clean freak. He hates germs."

She eyed him sidewise.

"Once he saw a bunch of us hanging out on the creek bank and threw fifty bucks in the air, telling us all to take a bath. You know what we did with that money?"

Stevie took another swig. "I can only imagine, but you don't smell bad to me."

"Well, I'm not saying that I'm the one who needed it." He laughed. "Yeah, BT's pretty got a screw lose, all right. But most all I did in Nam was maintain buildings at an Army base. My main action was in painting ceilings, hanging doors. That sort of thing. When I came back to the States I felt I'd dodged a bullet. Yeah, okay. We had a few scrapes, but that's war for you. It's never pretty."

"No, it's not."

Mike took a drink, smacking his lips. "I arrived home safe and sound...well, that is if you don't count being spat at by protestors when I got off the plane. Yeah, one guy yelled 'baby

killer' right in my face, and I punched him out. Laid him out and then walked away from the whole situation. I went later on that march in D.C. It felt good to be with other vets, watching some of them fling their medals onto the steps of the Capitol building. That felt good. But those stupid fucks at the airport didn't even seem to realize that we'd been through hell and back, even though we didn't much like being over there either."

Stevie grew silent. She was thoughtful as she took a drink and handed it back to him, letting him talk.

"They should've saved all their phlegm for that scum, Kissinger. If it weren't for him buddying up with the South Vietnamese President Thieu to increase the war effort, I think it would've all long been over by now."

"At least they wouldn't have started bombing bordering countries."

"Oh, you know about that, huh?"

She gave him a look, shaking her head. "Not only can she sing but she can read the paper too."

"I'm sorry. I deserved that."

"You certainly did!"

So I didn't win any Purple Heart, and I didn't like my homecoming very much. To top it off my wife Lynn surprised me with the fact that she'd made sure she wasn't lonely while I was gone. Loneliness I can understand, but my coming home didn't resolve it for her...nor me." Pressing the bottle to his lips, Mike swallowed.

"That must've hurt."

"I left her, but it wasn't a clean break by any means. Her father had already taken me under his wing. He's a WWII vet and said us fighting men should stick together. He let me help him run his construction business. It was great work. Lynn liked my fattening wallet, but I'd had enough."

"I can't say I'd blame you. Who wouldn't? What happened after you left?"

"Actually, it all happened before I left. I'd mentioned the 'd' word and she came right back at me, saying she didn't want a divorce. She left only to return with the family lawyer. I knew her father had spoiled her. I knew that when we married. I was just so taken by her, me being the old farm boy and her to me this beautiful, wild filly. But I'd never thought she'd stoop to getting some guy to smack her around a bit before pressing charges against me."

"My God! She did that? But why?"

"Alimony." He gave Stevie the near-empty bottle. "That's all she ever wanted, my money. She knew I was a hard worker. I guess she was just counting on a free ride."

"That's cold." She gave him back the whiskey. "And I think I drank too much."

"And I'm talking your ears off." He set down the bottle.

"Not at all. I find it very interesting."

"So what about you?"

"Oh, I don't know. I'm drunk," she laughed. "What else is there?"

Reaching over, Mike kissed her. "How do I get to know you better?"

"What you see is what you get. Don't complain and don't explain. That's my motto."

"Uh-huh, and what else are you doing here besides singing your heart out for peanuts and free drinks?"

"Hey, you know us musicians always getting the backdoor treatment," she said. "A lawyer, merchant and a musician knock on the Pearly Gates. Saint Peter lets in the lawyer to counsel troubled saints, and the merchant too. He's let in straight away to nurture their needs. 'Oh,' says Peter when he sees the musician, 'to the rear and unload your gear through the service entrance.'"

Mike laughed. "Well, at least the poor bloke got in."

"Backdoor is better than no door. Okay, you want to know about me? Really?"

He raised his chin up and down.

"Let's see, I got busted on a drug charge about a year ago and spent a few days in jail before my mother bailed me out. My father has this knack for making me feel worse in any

given situation, and he would have let me rot there if it weren't for her. Did you know that law school requires a frontal lobotomy as pre-requisite to required ethics courses?"

"So, I take it your father's a lawyer."

"To a lawyer like him it doesn't matter if you've just released an axe murderer back into society. What matters is that you've played a clever hand and won. Anyway, I just couldn't take being back home feeling cursed if I do and cursed if I don't. I jumped bail and came out here with a friend of mine."

"Where's your friend now?"

"He couldn't handle drug-free living. So he went back and turned himself in."

"And you?"

She shrugged her shoulders. "Just hanging out and feeling like a round peg in a triangular hole that can't seem to fit anywhere."

"A lot of us don't." Mike pulled her close as she opened her mouth to his, feeling the sweetness of his lips against hers. He pulled back and studied her, smiling as he stroked one of her arms with his fingers. But he stopped short when he saw fresh needle marks, his eyes clouding with sudden questions.

Stevie drew up her arms and pulled down her sleeves, swearing lightly under her breath.

Reaching in his shirt pocket, Mike took out a pack of Camels, taking a cigarette and tapping it atop his knee before light it up and taking a long, slow drag. "Tell me, what's going on with you now?" He pointed to her arm, inhaling smoke. "I don't know about all this."

Her voice dropped to a whisper, shaking. "Look, don't get me wrong. I think you're a nice guy. A really nice guy. But my business is my own." She rose and brushed away dead leaves from her jeans. "I'm sorry."

He tugged at her sleeve. "Hey, it's okay. You're absolutely right. Nothing to apologize over."

Stevie cleared her throat, no longer able to look him in the face. "I'm sorry," she repeated. "I don't mean to be rude, really. Oh, and thanks for the whiskey." Then she rushed off.

TWO

Voices rose and mingled with the increasing amount of alcohol consumed. Lips moving, phrases mixing. To Stevie's mind they all were saying: "Peas and carrots." She found herself screaming out songs above the din, her voice growing hoarse and her body claustrophobic. "Peas and carrots. Peas and carrots." Why bother?" she thought. It was Saturday and a popular night for clubbing. A lot of customers were still pouring into Shannon's. Crowding into the narrow entryway, they fanned out into the densely tabled bar area and onto the dance floor in front of the small stage in back.

Stevie's left arm constricted as a shooting pain traveled from fingers to shoulder and neck area, causing her grip to slacken and her to miss a few notes she was running through. She was playing one of her favorite O'Carolan's, inspired by Mike's Irish ditty's she'd heard that morning. Other than the musical slips, she played flawlessly. And nobody noticed but her, as the piece itself was quite rhythmic and moving. Yet, between the smoke and the noise, she had had enough. She rose from her platform chair, swearing lightly under her breath and cutting short her performance time.

Again, the crowd was unaware of anything out of the ordinary in the midst of their applause and demands for reordered drinks. Nor did they care that Stevie was now hurrying down the hall, driving her boots into the ground in quiet rage.

"LA Lady, wait up!" She stopped and her irritation collided with a warm grin. Mike looked as if he had dressed for her, his embroidered blue work shirt starched and pressed, clean jeans and oiled Tony Llama boots. "Wild group tonight." He was still grinning.

"Yes, isn't it just. Holiday time." Mounting discomfort caused her to turn her head from him. "You okay?"

She replied with a nod then shook her head, no. "I'm really not cut out for showbiz," she said with a smirk.

"Need a lift home?"

"No, you needn't bother. I don't live that far. I can walk."

"I'm sure you can. That's not why I asked." He cleared his throat. "Stevie, about today...."

She cut him off. "Don't worry about it. I'm cool."

"Well, I'm not. I talk too much. Actually, I'm not that much of a talker. It's just that, well, I like talking to you."

She softened, breaking into a smile. "It's not that at all."

"What is it then?"

"It's just that, well, my nerves are shot and I'm calling it a night."

"That's too bad," he said. "I came to ask you to a party."

"Some other time then."

"What if we just go grab a bite somewhere? Maybe you'll feel better afterward."

"You really don't understand, do you?"

"Probably not, but that doesn't mean much." He shot her a crooked smile. "I don't understand a lot of things, but nobody's perfect."

Her voice dropped. "After you saw the tracks and everything?"

"Oh well, a lot of jazz musicians were into that stuff, you know." Hesitating, he added, "I mean, if you just don't want to go with me then I can understand."

Stevie let out a sigh. "Of course not."

He picked up her guitar case. "Then it's settled, and I won't take no for answer. I know this great Chinese place down the block. You hungry?"

She smiled again. "Actually, I'm starved. But do me a favor and order takeaway, away from the crowds. We can eat at my place. It's opposite the campus."

Mike slid his hand into hers. "But we're not walking. My van's just around the corner."

After picking up the meal, Mike bought a pint of Saki. He also surprised Stevie with a single rosebud. It had a flush of pink on all its petal tips, and he gave it to her wrapped in tissue. "Is grá liom thú," he said.

His voice warmed her ears and melted the day's hardness from her face. She touched the soft petals then fingered an auburn strand that fell off his broad shoulders. "What was that you said?"

He lifted her chin, kissing her gently on the lips. It felt as if the petals themselves were kissing her. She wanted more, but he stopped then said; "Is grá liom thú. It means 'I love you' in Irish. 'For the love that is purest and sweetest has a kiss of desire on the lips'. It also means 'I love you' by one of my favorite poets, John O'Reilly."

"For an outlaw farm boy you're full of surprises."

His eyes rested on hers. "So you live on the Hill, you say?"

"Just off it, across campus. You can take a right on Broadway."

Mike road up the boulevard and Stevie watched him drive, working the gears and steering the wheel easily. He looked a man at home with machines and tools. Yet his mind was filling with questions. Yet he found himself no longer wishing to speak. So they rode in comfortable silence till the van turned off the main road and parked in front of a small rooming house. Once inside, Stevie headed for the kitchen, returning with two emptied and washed jam jars.

Mike poured the clear alcohol into the glasses, raised his and clinked hers. "Banzai!"

"Another Irish blessing?"

"The Eastern part of the family."

She swallowed hard. "Whew! Sure this Saki isn't poteen?"

"Dig it!"

The mood broke suddenly when keys were heard rattling at the door. In walked a man, scratching his scalp through long, dark ringlets of overgrown curls. He looked up, somewhat surprised at the company.

Stevie raised her glass to him. "Hi, Jared." And then to Mike, "My roommate, not my lover."

Mike raised a brow then rose, extending a hand.

"Mike is a blues guitarist," she said, digging into the chow mien. "We met at Shannon's the other night."

Jared reached to shake the other man's hand. "I was just listening to Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee this morning."

Mike continued with the brotherhood handshake, up to the elbow and back again, smiling when Jared knew the exact moves and went along with him. "Terry's got to be my all time favorite harp player."

Jared smiled warmly before lifting his wire-rimmed glasses and rubbing his eyes. "Sorry, but it's been a long day at school. Think I'm gonna turn in. Nice meeting you, Mike. Night, Steph."

"Likewise." Mike watched him exit down the short hall and into one of the two adjacent bedrooms before reaching for an egg roll.

Stevie said, "I met Jared at a CU music festival not too long after coming to town. We got to talking and became instant friends. When the other guy he was sharing this flat with graduated, he asked if I was interested in moving in and splitting the rent. No strings attached."

"Hey, I wasn't worried," adding with a cough; "I'm not the jealous type."

"Well, I couldn't ask for a better roomie, and with him studying all the time over at the library, and me and my weird hours, we hardly ever run into each other."

"Anyone who digs Brownie and Sonny T is okay by me."

"Really? Who are they?"

"Only the greatest Chicago blues stylists you've ever heard."

"Thanks for this." She motioned to the boxes of unfinished chow mien and rice. "I am feeling better. Sometimes I just forget to eat."

He drained his glass and set it down. “No problem. So if you feel up to it, it’s about party time.” Then he ushered her out the door.

Stevie climbed into the van’s passenger seat, glancing over her shoulders as she did so and noticing the neatly built-in mahogany cabinets. “Did you build these?”

“Yes, ma’am. The ax is my life, but I’m also pretty good with a hammer.”

She laughed. “You’re funny.” Then her eyes wandered to a mat and goose down bag on the back floor. It was covered with an old Army blanket and several assorted pillows. “Do you live in this thing?”

“When I’m on the road and have the gas money.”

“There’s always a glitch. So, where’s this party?”

“Boulder Free School. Do you know the place?”

“Can’t say that I do.”

“I teach there part-time: folk music, blues, blue grass...a little jazz. I always seem to know a few riffs for just about everything a paying customer wants, especially if sheet music accompanies it. Or, if they can at least hum a few bars.... That works fine too.”

“You know you’re very talented.”

Mike shrugged. “I just enjoy playing.”

“Well, you put me to shame.”

“What? How’s that?”

“I grew up with a lot of things handed to me,’ she explained, “but I always felt pushed into performing. My brother and I aren’t that far apart in age, and he and I used to step dance together when we were little. That is, until he walked offstage one day, refusing to wear the shoes that he said his friends called girls’ slippers. My grandmother, of course, stepped in and agreed. And that was it for Sean. So I danced solo,” she said, her mouth slightly upturned. “My problems start when I tie up my sense of worth in my performances. Then I no longer enjoy them. To tell you the truth, there are times when I feel nothing but contempt for the people I’m playing to. It’s as if I’m a puppet on a string that’s been yanked one too many times, and I don’t want to play anymore. I just want to pack up my guitar and go away. But I do like the money. We all have to live.”

“Somehow I think that you got robbed.”

She said, “More like gyped.”

“I couldn’t ever imagine myself without my ax. It’s just so damned cathartic. Now these friends of mine you’re going to meet, they love to rock’n’roll. So we thought up this jam session tonight and decided to throw a kegger on the side. No one cares, not as long as we don’t get too wild and trash the place. The only people I’m worried about are the STPs. Now THEY can get down.”

“STPs? What do they play?”

“Ha, that’s a good one! I’ll have to tell O’Callaghan. They’re into motorcycles, playing with whips and chains mostly.”

“Mike, I’m not sure about this party. I’ve met a few of your friends, and they seem so...so....”

“Derelict?”

“To put it bluntly, yes.”

“That’s why we have so much fun. Ah, don’t worry. They’re harmless enough. Just a bunch of crazies who like having a good time. I’ll take them over the straights and their mainstream bourgeois crap any day. ‘Bourgeois man in the bourgeois town’,” he sang, asking; “You know the street version of Ledbelly?”

She nodded, her voice singsong, mumbling: “Don’t want no hippies hanging ‘round, ‘cause I’m the bourgeois man.”

“You got it down!”

Her thoughts flashed briefly to Jerry, and it was as if dry ice had suddenly dropped down the back of her red sweater, bleaching it white. It was her heart that seemed to bleed the

color back in. She shuddered, conscious of Mike again and brightening into a smile. "Okay then. Rock on, Blues Man."

* * * *

They strolled into a small auditorium and both caught sight of a man with crimped brown hair tied back with what looked like an eagle feather secured by a leather thong. He was hunched over a small sound system and arguing out of earshot with someone backstage, while madly twisting knobs and appearing as a lunatic quarreling with himself. Onstage it was set up with instruments and amplifiers, and offstage people were setting each other up with cans of beer, joints and jugs of wine.

It was then Stevie noticed a rather collegial looking man in the corner of the room. He was flagging them down, his waving arm protruding out of the sleeve of a corduroy jacket that appeared too long for the fit until he lowered his arm again. "Hello, Blues Man. And who is this beauty?" The man's eyes took her in and admired her. "You look familiar."

"Dr. Chas, meet the best entertainment at Shannon's." He moved in closer, edging Mike out till he put his arm around Stevie's waist, gently pulling her back into their own intimate circle. "She plays there," he added; "maybe you've caught her act."

"You don't say. Now that's something I wouldn't mind catching."

Stevie shook his extended hand, but he gave hers a squeeze before letting go.

"Doc's one of us," said Mike. "We lovingly refer to him as the Hippie Doctor."

"At your service, milady." He bowed, long and low, the mane of his tightly bound ponytail flopping over his head, turning his collegial look renegade. "I'm at the Free Clinic any time you need me." He then excused himself, wandering over to a cluster of women chatting nearby.

"LA Lady!" bellowed a male voice from another corner of the room. "How's it hangin'? You two ballin' yet?"

Stevie blinked her eyes in disbelief.

Mike said, "And I'm sure you haven't forgot Jojo, the one slobbering over his beer at the club. He's also known as Oshkosh, another Wisconsite, but will no doubt tell you he's your Moon Brother. At least that's what he tells all the girls he likes. You don't want to know what he tells the others."

She cringed as the figure approached. He was indeed the dark-haired man from the previous night at the club, the one drooling into his beer at Mike's table.

"Hey, nice meetin' ya again, LA Lady. Just call me your Moon Bro."

"I'd like to call you something else," she replied flatly.

Mike grinned, and she refrained from further comment.

"Thanks for the compliment."

She rolled her eyes. "Is that an off-handed compliment?"

He smiled and grabbed her hand. "C'mon, the 'O' wants to see you."

Looking back to Mike, she saw him turning from her to join another musician motioning him onstage with the bow of his fiddle.

He glanced back and encouraged. "I'm gonna play a few tunes with Fast Larry, here. Now don't worry. We'll catch up later, I promise."

"Yeah, c'mon, LA," coaxed Jojo. "I don't bite. Well, maybe a nibble."

"You do and I'll bust your bloody teeth in!" But Mike was smiling when he pulled his guitar out of its case and checked its tuning.

Jojo raised his hands up in the air. "Only kidding. Only kidding."

Stevie looked again to Mike, and he shot her back a confident smile. She no longer resisted, letting the Moon Brother lead her to his friends. She felt a growing sensation much like abandonment, though she knew it wasn't true. It was a feeling that she set aside while trying anything passed to her until Rory worked his way through the clustered group and tore a huge brown jug from her mouth.

He whistled. "That's Orange Sunshine you're chugalugging."

"Do you mean that this is laced with acid?"

"Yeah, is that gonna be a problem for you?"

She panicked, her voice slurring. "I don't do acid."

"Shite!" he said, turning to Jojo. "Why didn't you watch her better, ya effin' grape stomper?"

"Lay off, ya... Hey, wait a sec. Maybe Doc has reds. They'll bring you down, LA. That's him, over there putting the make on that blonde chick." Tugging on a ragged blue and white bandanna tied across his forehead, he cocked his index finger, pointed and shot at the smiling Chas. Then he snatched the bottle from Rory, and finished it.

Stevie leaned on Rory's offered shoulder, and he walked her over to the doctor while she kept swallowing saliva, attempting to settle her stomach and not heave its contents at him.

"Hello again," said Chas, smiling at her.

Rory told Chas how he'd just rescued her from the last of the acid-laced drink and how she had never done psychedelics before.

The young doctor shot her a look of concern. He didn't hesitate to slip her a few barbiturates yet made her promise to see him in the morning. Thanking him, she turned to go but was instantly seized by a vivid image of her body transforming into a stovetop popcorn maker. Fear mixed with fascination as she watched her senses give way to tiny kernels of exploding corn, making her feel, taste, see and hear everything as if she were a starving dieter on a binge.

In what seemed like light years later, Stevie found herself wandering as a child down a narrow hallway. Guiding her was a metallic, whining sound like that of a tin whistle. It was then that she realized it was a sound made by Mike sliding the neck of a whiskey bottle across his guitar. She felt him then reach for her hand. But how could that be? He was still playing music. And he smiled, his smile breaking into a thousand prisms - color after color of unfiltered light splashing on, in and through her. She laughed, feeling drenched with pure energy. Then she laughed again for the pure joy of it. She wanted to catch it all and put it in a box, to keep it and never let go. It was then that her world went blank. When she regained consciousness, Stevie was behind a potter's wheel in one of the free school's art rooms.

Blinking, her eyes focused on Mike. He was standing in front of her as she looked down at her hands, pondering. She wondered what exactly she was doing. Her hands seemed foreign to her now, so disconnected from the rest of her body. Lifting them to her face, she pressed them there and breathed in the aroma of wet clay before removing them again and studying the sticky dark substance clinging to each finger. She put a finger to her mouth, closing her eyes and tasting mud, mineral and salt.

"Mm, it's very...very...."

"Earthy?" Mike said softly.

She continued kneading the wet clay. "I feel like I'm creating the universe. Isn't that bizarre?"

"Sounds like a beautiful experience."

"I'm tripping, aren't I? It's not so bad, I guess."

"I guess not. Think you'll be all right now?"

Everything merged silently into a single sound, a sound of the wheel spinning round and round and round. Suddenly it stopped. Stevie's eyes glued to Mike's. She left them there and shivered. "I'm okay," she said, breaking the spell. "What happened?"

"Chas told me what happened. He didn't let you out of his sight until we stopped playing. We do throw a damn good party, don't we?"

She looked at her muddy hands, smiling. "Yes, you do. So now help me out of this mess." He led her to the sink, helping her as she cupped the water in her hands and watched it run out and into the basin. Suddenly she glanced up at him. "What time is it getting to be?"

"Oh, about three in the morning. You tired?"

"I don't know. I feel more confused than anything."

"Shall we call it a night?"

“My place or yours?”

“Oh mine, definitely,” he told her.

“And where is that then?”

“Anywhere my wheels will take me.”

“I can get into that...I think.”

“Then let’s blow this Popsicle stand.”

Mike locked the school doors and drove Stevie up Canyon Boulevard, heading west. He pulled into the drive of a secluded meadow and parked the van at its end in front of a low wooden gate with a no trespassing sign. Beyond that she heard the soothing sound of water, forming into a creek from the run-off of mountain snow.

“Feeling any better?” Mike asked her.

“Mmm, much. Nice place you have here.”

“Then join me in the captain’s quarters.” He climbed first in back and straightened out the large down bag. Then he quickly undressed and slipped inside, opening the flap for her to join him. She took a deep breath then slipped off her heavy woolen sweater as Mike hugged her to him, calming her shivers and chattering teeth. He held her and kissed her till she stopped shivering. Then he cupped breasts, circling her hardened nipples with flicking tongue and sucking hard.

Stevie warmed instantly and pressed her tongue further in his mouth. He ran a trembling hand up her thigh. She gasped, moving her body in harmony to his slow, methodic rhythm, becoming one with it and making it her own. Her hands clasped together behind the strong of his back and she kissed his forehead, feeling the beads of sweat forming on his brow. She wiped them away, smiling. Then she ran shaking fingers through his hair and gently touched his ears, stroking their lobes in circular patterns.

Mike moved about, uttering soft, pleased gasps. Pulling her closer, he slipped himself gently into her body, groping for her lips and kissing hard as he thrust himself in and out in heightened tempo. Stevie quivered and gasped, letting go and falling, abandoning all to the fall. Mike struggled against his own desires, trying to pace himself, to hold onto and savor the moment as long as he could. He felt so in tune and unwilling to release himself. His momentum only increased till he cried out in release before collapsing his weight upon her.

They relaxed in each other’s arms and soon fell asleep, clinging together for hours before breaking apart.

Stevie awoke to watch the first rays of sunlight filter in through drawn, tie-dyed curtains. She knew such peace, and it was indescribably different than anything she had known with Jerry. Being together felt with Mike like she thought it should be. Like there was nothing more normal and natural, and to describe it any other way would lose itself in the attempt. So she simply enjoyed the sensation. With a yawn, she propped an elbow on her pillow and studied the handsome-faced man sleeping beside her. The feeling of love, of pure passion, scared her somewhat. It shook her out of her comfortable niche. For if she wasn’t with Jerry, where would she find her drugs? It had all been so easy up till now. Fear crept in as her thoughts drifted further. Was she falling in love with this man, this Irishman? She thought of silly rumors that she’d heard of the madness of the bloodline, her bloodline. Didn’t her visiting Donegal cousins often tease that they were all schizophrenics? Didn’t they warn her not to date Irish men? That they all drank too much and would lead her to ruin? And just who began such silly rumors anyway? Rumors rooted in fear and conjecture, as all rumors begin. But what was all this to her anyway? She shook her head, thinking it rather hypocritical to worry about an Irishman who drank too much. And she had more pressing things of her own to worry over than schizophrenia and the Irish.

Yet Stevie could not deny that she had let Mike enter her private world, entering in as a new factor to the equation, a factor that she hadn’t considered before. She was admittedly smitten. But when she thought of Mike becoming her boyfriend, she had to face in shame that it was just too damned inconvenient.

Frantically searching for her clothes, she pulled them on and quickly dressed. Then she stopped, unsure of herself again. She lingered. When had she become so cold that she could leave love so easily? Especially after stumbling unto what she had never had before. Suddenly she toyed with the idea of cleaning up her act, throwing away the past and starting a new life. Mike turned over in his sleep and let out a snore. Stevie bent down and kissed his cheek. He mumbled something inaudible as she quickly finished dressing and left him there to snore in peaceful slumber.
