

Backbeat the Waves (draft for Baker Artist Awards)

“The rhythm and chording work well together.
Did this guy have a sore throat when he sang the vocals?”

— Chuck Berry upon hearing
“Complete Control” by The Clash

Fear of Drowning

Trees dance and waterfalls stop!

From the moment that you realize
Most of this isn't real
To the moment that you decide
Shall we go out tonight
You'll swim from these island shores
Till there's a fear of drowning
A little old fear of drowning

Tonight I'll swim
From my favorite island shore
And all the money in the world
Won't help you now
The only way is down
There is a little fear
A little old fear of drowning

Tonight we'll swim
From our favorite island shore
And how long has it been
Since we have seen so beautifully
And how long has it been
Since you have seen so beautifully

Jesus fucking Christ, oh god no!

for Nixie Fossgrim

Words: Mercury Widdershins, 1985, *The Fiddlehead*

Lyrics and Music: Jan Wilkerson, 2003, *The Decline of British Sea Power* (Rough Trade)

That summer, I wore a terrycloth white bathrobe every day until it dirtied as brown as the sands of Tatooine. My mother bought it for me when I, quite unexpectedly, asked for a bathrobe, not the typical request from a thirteen-year-old in the summer of Slime, skateboards, and fire-breathing twenty-inch Godzillas. You never wore one before, she said. I shrugged. Besides, it's June, she said, it's already hotter than the hinges of hell. I dropped my chin to my chest and rested both hands on my hips, thumbs forward. She sighed, lit a cigarette, and gave me the once-over. Boys your age, she said, it must be total bedlam in there, and she nudged my head as she passed by toward the stairs. If I have a sec before the bar opens, she called back while descending, I'll run up to Epstein's and see what they have.

Later that morning, my mother brought back a blue-and-green plaid cotton robe with shiny black lapels.

"Mom, I said plain white, this isn't plain white at all," I cried.

"Oh, baby, you'll look very dashing in this one and it was on sale."

My body collapsed like a supernova. She gently lifted my chin with a finger curved into a pirate's hook.

"What's wrong, Merck?"

"I said white, it has to be white!"

"Voice." Stern.

My chin anchored itself again on my chest. I tried to growl a low rumbling sigh like Chewbacca, but it came out more like a fake belch.

“Besides, with your aunt and Nixie coming next week I thought you might prefer something a little more, decent.”

I kicked at a dust bunny that gnawed on the side of my Keds. I had forgotten how my aunt and cousin were coming to Pat City to stay with us. Where were they going to sleep in this small place, on the back fire escape? We only had two rooms with Mom in one and Jupie in the other; Jupie who used the fire escape more than the alley door (my mother preferred that we not use the front entrance during bar hours). I slept on the pull-out that sandwiched into a sofa in daytime. I frumped toward the small kitchenette in the back of the apartment.

“Fine, here’s the receipt,” she said, pinching a piece of white paper between middle and forefinger the way she holds a cigarette. “I tried, but go on back to Epstein’s and exchange it. I got to get Clarice going in the kitchen. Before you do anything, mister, get the produce from Mr. Connie when he comes through.”

Soon the old arabber’s call sailed through the back alley. *Holler, holler, holler, till my throat get sore. If it wasn't for the pretty girls, I wouldn't have to holler no more. I say, watermelon! Watermelon! Got 'em red to the rind, lady.* Mr. Connie sung about cantaloupes as if they were lovers, Silver Queen corn as if they were dreams, Brandywine tomatoes as if they were gems. Some summer mornings I would go down to the stables near the pier and help him and the other arabbers groom their horses, hitch up their painted wagons, and load produce off boats from the other side of the bay. Then they fanned out across town with horses named Jughead, Caboose, Miss Shirley, and Sparkle Pearl. Most of the Arabs put straw hats on their horses’ heads with slits in the top for long ears to fit through, but Mr. Connie bobby-pinned an old Elite Gulls cap to his horse, Curveball, matching the weathered one he wore from his days in

the Negro Leagues. *Awberries, redder than wine and just as fine. Awberries!* Bells around the Curveball's necked jangled in time with Mr. Connie's call.

"Morning Mr. Mercury."

"Morning."

"It's been awhile since we've seen you down to the stables."

"Yeah, I guess so."

"Can't teach you the trade if you ain't by more regular."

"Don't think I want to be an arabber."

"Hmm," Mr. Connie said, removing his ball cap to reveal coal hair dusted with ash.

"What is it you want to be then?"

"I don't know."

"Better figure her out, you getting big. By your age, I was already perfecting my curveball."

"Guess I'm not that perfect with anything."

"Oh, don't go saying that, Mr. Mercury. Everybody's good at something." Mr. Connie snapped open two brown paper bags and started filling them with corn and tomatoes.

I got the fruit and vegetables my mother wanted and took a timid minute to feed Curveball a sugar cube, the horse's leathery speckled tongue stretching out almost as long as my forearm. *Come dance with the Silver Queen, from Eastern Sho with ears so keen! Come dance! I've got co-horn!* As soon as Mr. Connie and Curveball continued along the alley, I tore up Broadway to Epstein's with the box containing the wrong bathrobe under my arm. Ms. Louise stood in the storefront window dressing a mannequin in a blue waistcoat with tails and

red-and-white striped pants, which bunched at the plastic man's ankles like an accordion, his lifeless hairless crotch announcing neither he or she. Still, for some reason it embarrassed me and I turned my head just as Ms. Louise spotted me and waved, so I worried that she thought I dissed her. I walked the length of the storefront past dolls sharing a picnic, a child mannequin flying a kite hooked by fishing line caught in perpetual wind, and a rainbow of towels stacked in a ROY G BIV arch.

"Morning Merck," said Mr. Epstein from behind the register when I walked in. A bell above the door jingled. "What's the good word?" he always asked.

"Nothing," I always replied, wanting to counter with something more clever like "gnarly," "copasetic," or "zoinks," but never able to think quick enough. "Where are your bathrobes?"

"Back and to the left between men's and the other bathroom items. Your mother was in earlier for one."

"I have an exchange."

"No problem, just bring it to me when you find what you want."

I zigged through a maze of tabletops and shelves stocked with hairdryers, socks, bleach, work boots, transistor radios, curlers, aspirin, Noxzema, Bromo Seltzer, model railroad gear, walkie talkies, kickballs, corn dishes with corn stickers, random mugs and dishes, and collectible mirrors with the names of rock-n-roll bands like Rolling Stones, Pink Floyd, and Grateful Dead. In the back of the store, I found another version of the blue-and-green plaid bathrobe that my mother picked out, along with burgundy silk robes, quilted robes in gold and black, moss green nylon tricot with celery green piping, and terrycloth robes in vivid stripes like sticks of gum

advertised by that psychedelic zebra: “Tickle your tongue with Fruit Stripe Gum.” Cherry stripe. Lemon stripe. Orange stripe. Lime stripe. Not one plain white robe. Then, over in women’s, I saw it: as simple as a pillar of salt and large enough to fit me comfortably, something a grandmother would wear, too long but otherwise perfect with matching belt. A rose embroidered over the left breast could be easily fixed. I took it and the box to the front counter where a fan oscillated breeze across American flags on pointed sticks, white-plumed pens like the one used to sign the Declaration, and a note on the register reminding customers that the state sales tax was now five percent.

“Now let’s see here,” Mr. Epstein said. He took the blue-and-green plaid monstrosity out of the box and hesitated while comparing it to what I brought to the counter. It looked as if he weighed a peacock in one hand with a polar bear in the other. “I take it this robe is for you?”

“Yes, sir.”

“But this robe is for women, Merck, see even it ties with right side over left, like a lady’s.”

“Um, what I mean is it’s for her, my mother. I don’t need a bathrobe, so I want to exchange it for one she needs.”

“Why that’s mighty sweet, but this is way too big for Donna. Let me help you pick out...”

“No, no!”

Mr. Epstein stopped in his tracks before emerging from behind the counter. He smoothed his moustache with a finger.

“I mean, she likes them that way, baggy, like a blanket.”

“Well, okay, we can exchange it, but you keep the new receipt just the same and come back again if you need to.”

Mr. Epstein rung up the bathrobe and gave me back \$4.50 since it was cheaper. “Don’t shy from bringing it back, we’re open through the weekend but not on Monday for the holiday.”

I thanked Mr. Epstein and dashed out, averting my eyes from half-naked Uncle Sam in the window with Ms. Louise kneeling before him, her cheek pressed against lustrous crotch while she fiddled with the striped pants’ waistband. Officer Bert stood on the corner with his cap pushed high on his forehead arguing with Sal the Bookie. Gus the barber swept hair into the gutter that caught a current of hydrant water down toward the harbor. Stevedores streamed into Quaker Cove for food and beer on their lunch-break from unloading stacks of aluminum ingots, bales of steel wire, and slabs of scrap iron. Deckhands working the tugs dowsed handkerchiefs in pails of water then tied them around their necks. A blue haze lingered that shrouded points across the harbor in a gauzy film. Folks crowded Broadway back down toward the cove’s pier and the bar, most of them I knew, but I did not stop to say hello to anyone. I needed to get back to the small apartment over the bar where we lived.

Entering the bar’s alley door I leaped up the backstairs without greeting Clarice, who paused from flipping burgers on a flat grill to say “Good day, Mr. Merck.” Upstairs, I took pinking shears from my mother’s sewing kit to shorten the robe by about twenty inches. I pictured the size of the fire-breathing Godzilla advertised on TV as my guide and chewed into the terrycloth leaving behind a shark-toothed edge. I slipped on the robe and pulled at the dangling threads left by the crummy hem job, snipping off a few strands with the pinking shears. Still the edges frayed. Standing on tiptoes to fully see myself in the bathroom mirror, I saw that

the robe's edge was a few inches higher on one side, so I returned to the kitchen table to even it up. Terrycloth pellets dusted the floor around me like snow. Back in the bathroom I re-evaluated my workmanship and decided, despite a straggly edge, job complete. I cinched the belt tight around my waist below my belly and bloused the lapels so that I did not look so fat. I thought some Liquid Paper might cover the pink rose, but that could wait. More important matters remained.

I dug through Uncle Jules's old army footlocker that I used for a toy chest, chucking aside a Slinky bent out of shape, hardened chunks of Silly Putty, a one-armed Steve Austin doll, random Lite-Brite pegs, a Vida Blue baseball glove, several torn and punctured ViewMaster reels, Evel Knievel mask from last Halloween. Checkers and marbles rattled to the bottom of the chest as I dug deeper until I found the yellow Wiffle Ball bat I stowed after the sewer sucked down the last of our wiffle balls. I held it aloft the way I imagined King Arthur lifted Excalibur, sliced the air with it like Zorro, and regarded it with the awe Luke Skywalker felt the first time he flipped on his light saber. Then the wheels started to turn: I ran to the kitchenette and emptied the junk drawer onto the Formica table, found electrical tape, and fetched the flashlight from under the sink. I emptied the flashlight's batteries, which rolled off the table onto the floor, and jammed the handle end of the Wiffle Ball bat into the empty cylinder. Holding the two pieces tight under my arm, I taped them together with several revolutions of black tape. With first test, a gentle ballestra and riposte, the Wiffle Ball bat wiggled inside the shaft of the flashlight, so more electrical tape went around and around.

Vern, vem, vem! Vern vern! Vem!

My light saber sizzled.

“Use the Force, Merck,” I heard while slipping the light saber into one of the bathrobe’s beltloops where it hung well. “Your father’s light saber,” Alec Guinness’s voice continued.

“This is the weapon of a Jedi Knight.”

I whipped it out—vern vern!—clutched the handle with both hands, and tore through the apartment with a battle cry somewhere between a rebel yell and a screaming Indian. The pillows on Jupie’s bed did not stand a chance. I whacked tubular crevices into paisley pillow cases. I dismembered a shirt from the corner clothes tree. Then I stabbed my sister’s Kiss poster right in Paul Stanley’s star eye, but the backswing when I went after Gene Simmons sent Jupie’s bedside lamp crashing to the floor. The complete swell of attack deflated by a broken light fixture. I ran back toward the kitchenette hoping to find Elmer’s glue among the junk-drawer contents still strewn across the table, but a Darth Vader shadow rose from the stairs.

“Mercy sakes, what’s all the racket up here?” my mother said. “What are you wearing?”

An image focused like a projection on a pearlescent screen affixed to the inside of my skull: Mercury Widdershins, rusty-haired and “big-boned,” splitting a woman’s bathrobe slashed so that it fell between bottom of shorts and tops of tube socks, wielding a yellow plastic stick. Red glow on face did not emit from a light saber. I handed her the four dollars change and felt guilty for bogarting the fifty cents.

“This one was cheaper than the one you got.”

“What did...why did you...I don’t,” she squeaked half-blurts of sentences like R2-D2. She tugged off an earring and massaged her earlobe.

“I was just...”

“Perfectly good robe ruined.”

“It’s like what...”

“I know what it’s like. Should’ve never let Uncle Jules take you to that stupid movie.”

“But...”

“Save it mister,” she interrupted. “Lunch crowd is thinning, we’ll talk about this later. Clean that mess in the kitchen and put my pinking shears back where you found them before you decide to alter the curtains.”

A sigh parted the staircase into which my mother disappeared. As soon as she left, I felt that screaming Indian well up inside me again. Shoulders straightened. Chest puffed. Eyes squinted. I leaned back and raised my light saber to my shoulder, posed like a Shaolin monk on “Kung Fu Theater.” That summer, I vowed, the universe would shudder at the might of this knight. Suited up, armed, and possessed by a mission, I only lacked one thing: a nemesis.

That, and the Elmer’s glue to fix Jupie’s busted lamp.

CHAPTER 3

Holidays buoyed the bar. New Year's Eve paid the bills until Valentine's, followed by St. Patty's, Easter, and Memorial Day. Labor Day's money barely stretched to Halloween, followed by holiday binges and cheer-fueled tips in November and December that led to a new cycle. The entire summer making it or breaking it hinged on the Fourth of July. Regulars and folks down for the fireworks packed Kweekweg's, the name my father stuck the bar with even though he did not stick around. No one gets the reference, my mother says she told him, a marinated English professor who moved the family back home from West Virginia to take over the family bar. "Lothario set sail, tacking away from the sun," she replied whenever people inquired, as they often did, men, especially after a few drinks. She majored in English; took his class junior year; got pregnant before graduation. My knowledge of family history ended there. Uncle Jules had no interest in taking over the joint—"I've weaned myself from flat beer and peanuts," he told me once, "in favor of more curious libations"—but over time I suspected that the return to Patapsco City coincided with further improprieties on campus conveniently addressed by my father's departure. A couple of years later, I figured, the cycle must have started again and he opted for the same course of action. I was just a baby; Jupie barely remembers him.

The bar filled up fast as the holiday weekend spilled into 4th of July Monday. Some folks planned to make a day of it by the harbor to catch the fireworks at night; others got an early start before heading uptown for the Herons-Tigers day game. Someone asked if we had the Patapsco Press sports pages so he could check yesterday's boxscore. Someone else offered up the score and winning pitcher. The morning paper featured the cartoon Herons mascot sweeping a pair of red socks into a trash bin, which I already clipped and pasted into my scrapbook of the '77

season. A voice called out for beer. Pearl started slapping the rusted reception bell signaling “orders up” and my mother carried food to tables. I stood frozen behind the bar wishing Jupie would show up from wherever she disappeared without Mom’s permission. She was going to catch it. The voice called again, more agitated, for beer.

Then Nixie materialized.

Clamor in the bar rumbled on when she walked in, but in my mind time stopped like an old Western when a man-with-no-name pushes through saloon doors, voices freeze, and poker chips lose their rattle. Didn’t folks at Kweekweg’s see what I saw? Nixie Fossgrim was the strangest kid I had ever seen. A bird-leg of an arm extended from one shirt sleeve; from the other...nothing.

Nixie only had one arm.

She stood in the doorway of the bar, a backlit silhouette dwarfed by the shadows of Uncle Jules on one side and who I guessed was Aunt Dot on the other. Sunlight turned her ears into orange and pink shells. Close-cut hair cast a barbed halo behind her head. Her legs came together like oyster tongs. I thought the light might come right through her like paper.

“Holy southpaw, Batman,” was the first thought that came to me. “You all not seeing this?”

But the crowd at the Kweg roared along celebrating the Fourth, day three of a stressful holiday weekend, an odd Monday suddenly made odder. As Nixie stepped into the bar and sunlight retreated behind her, I saw more clearly that nothing extended from where her right elbow should have been on down. Skin just below her bicep pinched into what looked like the end of a hot dog. A red tee with the words *Borrowed Angel* on the front dangled from her

shoulders like a shirt pinned to a clothesline. She wore long jeans that seemed more like denim skin. Nixie's legs tapered like new candles to feet in black Chuck's with ink scribblings all over white rubber.

An erection rocked against the inside of my corduroy OP shorts.

"Come on from around there, Merck," my mother ordered. Earlier in the day, I had been hastily stationed behind the bar when Doogan called in sick and Jupie, who helped out during peak traffic, remained AWOL. I wiped malt-sticky hands on my shorts, which sprung my erection like a Bobo the Clown punching toy. I grabbed my terrycloth Luke Skywalker robe from a hook under the bar, slipped it on to cover my crotch, and stepped out. I slung one shoulder low and cocked a hip behind me to further reduce signs of the bulge, which made me walk across the room like one of Jerry's Kids.

Nixie's good arm bent at the elbow like a saw's tooth and ended in a bony claw wrapped around the cinched end of a duffel bag flopped over her shoulder. From her wrist, half way up the only arm she had, coiled handmade bracelets tangled together from what looked like pieces of yarn, frayed rope, rainbow-colored pipe cleaners, and string on which she lassoed pull tabs from soda cans, safety pins, and skull-and-cross-bone charms. I started feeling warmly aware that she noticed that I could not avoid looking at her other arm, or rather her un-arm, the pinched stump. Sure, the Admiral balanced on his usual barstool has one leg, but he was an old guy. People just lose things after awhile, the way Mr. Connie's sugar nipped away at his body. But my cousin, she was just a kid like me.

I rotated my hips and tried to jostle my stiffy into a more serene place, as if swishing to some invisible hula hoop. My mother glared one of those what-planet-are-you-from? stares that

she lasered my way more frequently of late, and said, “Take that rag off right now, mister.” She cleared her throat, grew a garden of teeth, and smiled at Aunt Dot. I shrugged the robe off and draped it over one arm so that it hung across my pelvis, like a fancy waiter prepared to take an order.

Aunt Dot and Mom quickly hugged while Uncle Jules stood with two small pieces of luggage under his arms and a suitcase dangling from each hand.

“Dot, you look gorgeous,” Mom said.

“Oh, I’m a plumb mess.” Aunt Dot nervously tried to smooth her floral dress wrinkled from the long bus ride as if she just entered a church rather than some old bar.

Noise around me faded like the end of a song as I continued to study my cousin. A leather gunbelt with a carved buckle rested on pointed hips, only instead of bullets pushed into the loops she carried pens and different colored markers. Rolled up paper hung in the holster instead of a Colt .45. I swear her eyes darted down to the robe over my arm, like she did not trust me, as if I concealed something loaded under it. We eyed each other for a moment, standing silent like cowboys on opposite sides of a showdown.

She drew first.

“I thought you said he was *younger* than me,” she said to her mother, “but look at the size of him, shoot far!”

“Good gosh, Nixie Mae, bite your tongue. Hello Mercury, sweetheart.”

“Hello, Aunt Dot.”

“My heavens, been so long since we’ve seen each other I didn’t think you’d remember me t’all. Sorry, sis, you know Nixie’s as tough as a pine knot.”

“Don’t fret,” Mom said.

Fret? Like guitar frets? I never heard her use the word “fret” before.

Aunt Dot leaned toward my mother and in a whisper loud enough to hear said, “These treatments, well, I think what they’re killing is her manners.”

Aunt Dot shared my mother’s voice, only her accent did not escape the *Appalachians*’ deep holler. She exhaled on words like “my” and “I” so that they drifted toward the bar’s ceiling like balloons, “mah” and “ah.” She used weird phrases and too many words than necessary. My mother worked hard as an English major on the other side of West Virginia, the side closer to real big cities, to strip her mountain talk like paint off an old trunk.

“Oh, I think it’s just a symptom with all kids nowadays,” Mom replied. I never heard her use a word like “nowadays” before either. “Say hello to your cousin Nixie, Merck,” and she nudged me with an elbow.

“Hello,” I obeyed.

Nixie paused, scanning me the way hired guns eyed Clint Eastwood. I adjusted the bill of my Herons cap and tugged at the tail of my t-shirt with the Fonzie decal, all the while keeping the robe curtaining my crotch. One tube sock collapsed limp around my ankle while the other one stretched to my kneecap. Suddenly, my turquoise corduroy shorts tightened again, but for a different reason. I felt too big for the space I occupied inside the bar.

“Hey,” she finally said, then her eyes darted around surveying the Kweg.

Remnants of last July Fourth’s decorations still lingered around the bar. An Uncle Sam top hat fitted over a gigantic plastic crab’s claw caught too much sunlight and had faded to brown, beige, and gray. A 1976 Patapsco Boy beer promotional poster depicted the iconic

drum-and-fife marchers only the fife player's head was replaced with the grinning-winking Patty Boy logo. In the window-front shrine, a dusty Statue of Liberty dominated a surreal menagerie with dime-store relics honoring each of the holidays: Santa Claus Elvis, Risen Disco Jesus, Mischievous Curly-Toed Leprechaun, hovering Cupid suspended with fishing line with his arrow dead set on Rudolph. Last year's bicentennial blowout took the wind out of my mother's sails and she stopped switching decorations from holiday to holiday. I watched Nixie's eyes absorb the surroundings. I guess you do that when entering a strange place, the way Bruce Lee does, immediately registering three henchmen over there, ninja lurking in shadows in the corner, window possible escape route up and to the right, that mop propped against a box might come in handy. Nixie was the strange place to me, so my eyes remained fixed on her. She looked edited. Once I watched Mr. Rollo, while he wrote feverishly in his narrow reporter's pad, flipping between fresh pages and previous pages, his eyes widening and squinting as new thoughts snaked from his head to his hands. He said he wanted to be a real writer, not just cover bail bondsmen, bootleggers, and baby-kissers the rest of his life. When he broke off to use the bathroom, I looked at his notebook: he wrote between lines, circled some words, struck through others with a slash that ended in a pig's tail, scratched out entire sentences and inserted illegible replacements. He caught me snooping and simply said, "That's editing. It's a messy business." Nixie looked like someone had edited her: deleted arm, scratched out bright eyes, inserted hallow sockets, cropped hair, wordiness of flesh stricken, her whole body written tighter over time. A messy business.

"Hi Nixie," Mom said hurriedly as grumbling raised from the bar and tables. Food orders backed up. Beers ran low. "You look great."

“I feel like blinked milk,” she said. *Blinked?*

“Nixie,” this time Aunt Dot used her elbow to give a nudge, “say thank you to your Aunt Donna.”

“Thanky.”

Thanky?

Clarice popped her dark netted head and aproned shoulders from the swinging door to the kitchen, which she rarely did, and called to my mother, “Miss Donna, them crab cakes done and other orders coming on.”

“Thanky ... *thank* you, Clarice, be right there. Sorry Dot, it’s just the holiday and all.”

Someone pounded a beer glass against the bar.

“Go, go, we’re fine. I’ll change and lend a hand.”

“Well, I’ll just get your things upstairs, shall I?” Uncle Jules said. “Be right back to help out until my shift.”

“Can I have some dope, Momma?” Nixie asked.

Dope? What’s wrong with this kid? Maybe it was me. I saw this *Twilight Zone* once when this kid fell from a ladder in a library and all these books crashed down on his head. When he went back outside the whole world had changed: familiar looking people stared at him as if he was horribly disfigured, red lights meant go and green meant stop, a woman bought groceries using sticks as currency, and a cop arrested a man for carrying a copy of *The Tempest* in public. The kid dodged across the town square frightened and confused at every turn, until he finally retreated back into the library, but instead of books on the shelves, the library was filled with body parts in jars. Folks lined up at the circulation desk holding jars to borrow a toe or a hand or

a whole head. He recalled all the people he saw out in the odd town and it dawned on him that everyone was missing a piece, even a little piece, of themselves. He screamed, and everyone in the body-part library turned toward him, mouths wide open, and although it was obvious to them, he became uncomfortably aware that he was whole. But this was real life, the Fourth of July in Patapsco City, the King of Rock-and-Roll played on the juke, the peg-legged Admiral perched on his stool. Fireworks would shoot off tonight like always. Suddenly, though, strange people used weird words and the Kweg transformed into a foreign place.

My head spun and blood rushed up to juice it, alleviating my previous problem down below.

“Merck, snap to,” Mom clapped her hands, “get back there behind the bar and get your cousin a Coke. Jules, would you mind showing Dot where she and Nixie will be sleeping?”

“Gimme yer poke.” Aunt Dot took Nixie’s duffel bag and followed Uncle Jules upstairs. Mom snatched some dirty dishes from a nearby table and disappeared into the kitchen to catch up on orders. Mr. Rollo floated a straw in a glass and placed it before a customer at the bar, then tossed a bar towel at me and said, “I’m punching out, kid. There’s a thousand stories in the naked city and I gotta cover them. Good luck pulling them draughts, now.”

Nixie hovered at the end of the bar while I grabbed a soda from the cooler and popped the cap.

“Glass?” I asked.

“Nope,” she said.

I slid the bottle of Coke down the bar to her. As soon as it launched from my hand I wished I could have reeled it back in. I tried to reach out for it fast, but my “fast” was the Bionic

Man in slow motion and it was too late. What the heck was I doing chucking a bottle at a one-armed girl? Nixie stood motionless, chiseled like a boat's figurehead with an expression that I interpreted as "You are the biggest spaz I ever met." The glass bottle skated down the bar past Mr. Rollo gathering his pens and notebooks, Officer Bert paying his tab, crazy Miss Phyllis waving her feather boa, and finally the Admiral. *Please, God, don't have let me push it too hard.* It parted two ashtrays, ricocheted off a coaster, hit the lip of the bar, and hurled itself over the edge where it floated for a moment as if gravity took its time to decide what to do next. Suddenly, like Steve Austin or I guess in this case a one-armed Jaime Sommers, Nixie's left arm shot up like a copperhead and snatched the Coke bottle in mid-air, and in one continuous motion she put it to her lips, sipped long and hard, and wiped her mouth with the back of her hand.

"Good dope," she said through a burp. "Shitty slide, but good dope."

Everyone along the bar laughed.

"Fine catch, lass," the Admiral said.

"Herons should give you a contract," Mr. Rollo said as he left.

"Bright days, that sook's only got one claw," said Miss Phyllis puffing through boa feathers.

I walked toward her feeling my face warm up. "Why you call it that?"

"Call what what?"

"Coke 'dope.'"

"All the folks in my parts call pop 'dope.' You don't know why? Coke ewsta have coke-cane in it, you dope."

“Kid, kid, kid!” came calls from down the bar accompanied by empty mugs pounding wood.

With Mr. Rollo leaving, I needed to move double-time. On the job for only a few hours and I was blowing it. Mom hated the thought of me behind the bar, but she had no choice. She knew Doogan was hung over, not sick, and when she normally fell back on Jupie, my sister left unannounced on Friday to spend the holiday weekend in Ocean City with her boyfriend Gash. Both situations steamed her up, one irresponsible and the other plain rude, but in the heat of the rush bottomline she was short staffed behind the bar on the biggest weekend of the year. The one time Mom asked Clarice if she could come out front to help, the cook made a face that said either “not this Christian woman” or “not for those damn crackers.” So Clarice stayed in the kitchen, even on days when orders ran slow, reading *Roots* or mending clothes she brought from home. Although any number of regulars would have willingly volunteered to help my mother, seeing how many of them hit on her so much, she decided to put me behind the bar. A half hour before Kweekweg’s opened, with only the Admiral in the bar and against her better judgment, she taught a thirteen-year-old how to pull draughts.

“Here, give it a shot,” she said.

I placed a pint glass under the Budweiser tap and tugged. I had seen enough over the years to know that much. The glass filled quickly with foam and not much else. From the other side of the bar, the Admiral winced and tipped his Greek fisherman’s cap while scratching his scalp with three fingers. Mom puffed, which stood her bangs at attention, then she grabbed the glass and tossed the froth in the sink. She knew the holiday promised a busier than usual Monday. A thirsty crowd, many down to Quaker Cove from the suburbs just for the fireworks,

would go a long way toward balancing a cash-drought summer. But not if the service sucked, not with dozens of other watering holes in Quaker Cove.

“Why *today*?” she said.

My mother wrapped her arms around my waist, her breasts pushing into my shoulder blades. She grasped both wrists and maneuvered me like a marionette.

“Here, like this,” she whispered, her ear dancing above the corner of my eye. The J’ai Ose she wore rose up smoky like a campfire. When she talked, I smelled the Kents on her breath.

“Forty-five degrees, pull the tap, and as the glass fills slowly twist your wrist counter-clockwise and level it until you only got a thin layer of foam. Then push the tap back, careful not to spill. There, perfection.”

“But I’m left-handed.”

“For bartending, too? Then hold the glass in your other hand, works either way. It’s easy honey.”

“Looks easy because you’ve been doing it so long,” I said.

“Well, folks pay for beer, not foam. Practice again. And concentrate, don’t go floating off. Here you go, Admiral, on the house.”

“I only drink Patty Boy,” said the Admiral, wrapping his fingertips on the wooden stump inside his pants leg. The nervous habit ebbed as the day drew on and a sea of beer flooded his belly.

“But you’ll turn down a free Bud?”

“Okay, okay, obliged, Donna.”

Mom headed toward the kitchen past Rollo Benitez, who stopped at the Kweg daily to unwind from a night covering cops or to fortify himself for a day covering city hall. “Bit young to have the boy back there, don’t you think, Donna?”

“Need the help, unless you’re going to sling your ass behind the bar.”

“Just thinking about Bert and the boys, if they come in this afternoon.”

“Look, he’s a big kid for his age, nobody will say anything.”

“Bert knows how old Merck is.”

“And we know most days he has three Patty Boys with his crab cakes. Not sure the Pat City Police would like to know that or that your bosses at the *Sentinel* would like to know that *you* know, and haven’t written about it.”

“Fair enough. Just don’t want you to risk losing the license, that’s all.”

“Jesus, I’ll worry about losing my license, you worry about losing your liver.”

“Cheers,” he said holding up an empty glass.

“Ask Merck to pull it,” and she disappeared into the kitchen.

Mr. Rollo stood on the brass foot rail to get a better look at me wedged between the wooden bar and the back wall lined with bottles. I self-consciously pulled up a tube sock so that it matched the other. The Fonzie decal on my shirt caved in between a heavy chest and round belly, so I tugged at the tail to straighten it out. Beer muck from the floor already darkened my bright yellow valor Keds. A black-and-periwinkle Herons cap with the menacing cartoon bird covered a tumbleweed of Irish-orange hair from the Fossgrim-side of the family. The Herons PR guy, who often drank at the Kweg with some players after ballgames, told me that the team color was officially periwinkle, not light blue and certainly not purple. I liked knowing that, and kept

it like a secret. I stood and waited, examining freckles marching across the white dunes of my forearms. Mr. Rollo shook his head and sighed.

“A sight only a mother could love. A Patty Boy, kid.”

I went to work and haven’t stopped hustling since.

“Jesus, kid!” soared another yell. “Kid! Get your head out of your ass.”

“Ahhhhhhhh,” another one teased pointing at my t-shirt. “Can the Fonz get me another fucking beer?”

My mother whisked between tables balancing plates in her hands and on her forearms, but detoured to swing past the bar. “Don’t talk to my son like that,” she said, but then shot me a pick-up-the-pace glare. I sat a glass each under three taps and pulled pulled pulled while searching for Pikesville Rye and something called Beefeaters. I felt something brush by me subtle like a ghost so that the hair on my neck stood. While my back was turned the draughts foamed up and trickled down the sides of the glasses, so Nixie stepped in and with one twig of an arm one two three pushed the taps up.

“Consarn it,” she said, “you *are* terrible at this.”

“I know how to do it.”

“Then dump them pitiful ones here and stay keen on the taps. And have your uncle check them lines down below, that one there is cloudin’ up,” she pointed to the Patty Boy tap.

I focused hard on how my mother taught me to pull the draughts, angling the glasses just right and slowly twisting my wrist as they filled up. One two three decent pulls and I smiled at getting the hang of it, but when I looked up for approval the gang at the bar sat silent with their mouths swung open like coal doors. They stared past me, so I turned. Nixie had already

prepared three drinks—something brown with a cherry in a squat glass, something that looked like iced tea in a tall glass, and what I thought was ginger ale with a lemon floating on top. She scanned the rows of colorful bottles lined against the back wall, plucked a clear bottle filled with clear liquid, and with one hand flipped it in the air, caught it by the bottle’s neck, poured over ice she had waiting, flipped a second time so that the bottle completed another somersault, snatched it again, and slipped it back into its original slot among the other bottles. She tucked the glass under the stub of her right half-arm, squirted a shot of tonic, then placed the glass in line with the other three. She pinched a lime wedge from the tray of garnishes and, from three feet away, tossed it dead center into the drink with hardly a splash.

“Blimey,” the Admiral said.

“Manhattan, Long Island, Seven and Seven, g-n-t all up,” she hollered.

“I’d keep an eye on that one there, Donna,” Bert said. “Someone that familiar means trouble.”

“What?” Mom asked as she pulled up to the bar. I held a serving tray while Nixie placed the four drinks on it one by one, and I handed it to my mother. “Thanks, sweetheart, did you...?”

I nodded my head backward and let my eyes roll toward Nixie leaning against the back bar. She huffed on her nails and polished them on her *Borrowed Angel* t-shirt.

“What are you running here, Donna,” some guy asked, “A.A. Day Care?” The guy’s friends laughed, which got the rest of the folks at the bar back to jawing.

Aunt Dot came back downstairs in shorts and a tank top, the way I suspected she dressed most of the time back home in West Virginia. She and Mom caught up on food orders and made sure Clarice in the kitchen was in good shape. As instructed, I stayed keen on pouring draughts

and got good enough to earn a wink from the Admiral. Nixie not only continued her cocktail circus act, but got ahead on rinsing glasses and refreshing the garnish tray. Uncle Jules checked the beer lines in the basement, cleared out the one from the Patty Boy keg, but soon left for his shift at the toll booth. Eventually the food rush slowed down, several tables squared up their checks, and a lull settled over Kweekweg's.

“Finally, a breather,” Mom said lighting a cigarette and mooring herself to a barstool. “It’ll pick up again closer to the fireworks.”

“Got rooster-busy in here,” said Aunt Dot.

“We got things down here, Merck,” Mom said through smoke, “Why don’t you show Nixie where she’ll be sleeping?”

“I don’t know where she’s sleeping.” My face warmed again.

“I’m sharing the pull-out with you so that Nixie and Aunt Dot can have my room.”

“Okay,” and without waiting for me to say “follow me,” Nixie was halfway up the stairs. I grabbed my terrycloth cloak and by the time I caught up to her she stood by my sister’s stereo.

“Play me a record,” she said with her one thumb tucked into the gunbelt.

“That’s my sister’s, I’m not supposed to.”

“What you so fuckin' skittish about? I know she ain’t here.”

“Okay, but I got to use my records.”

“Fine, go fetch ’em then.”

I went to the footlocker where I kept all my stuff, stashed the robe, and returned with a handful of 45s.

“What kind of music you like?” Nixie asked.

“I don’t know. These are all right I guess.”

I put on “Convoy” because the singer sounded like a hillbilly trucker and I thought Nixie would like that. We listened for a few moments while I stared at my one untied tennis shoe. If I thought hard enough, I thought, I could tie my shoe telepathically by using the Force. Anything to distract me from looking at Nixie.

Yeah, we definitely got the front door, good buddy. Mercy sakes alive, looks like we’ve got us a convoy.

“Oh mercy sakes alive, that is some hurtful noise!” She put her hands over her ears, but of course she only had one hand, so she cocked her head so that the pinched end of her right arm reached up to plug her right ear.

“This is what I like,” she said tugging at her red t-shirt.

“Borrowed angel?”

“What? You don’t know Mel Street? And you supposed to be all fuckin’ educated. Look here, he gave me this shirt and signed it up for me when I was in the big hospital over to Charleston.”

She tugged the back of the shirt over her shoulder to show me a squiggly black mark that might have been an autograph. The move lifted the tail of her shirt up to expose a jagged hip pulled over tight with smooth blue-and-white skin that looked like the inside of an oyster shell.

“He’s only the most popular country singer in the goddamn world and his kin’s from my parts.”

“What?”

“Grundy. Shit, ain’t you never been to your mamma’s own place?”

“Nah, we moved from Morgantown when I was a baby, but I don’t even remember it.”

“That’s where my momma says your momma met your poppa.”

“Don’t remember him either.” Stories about my father floated around Quaker Cove like buoys, how he saved the neighborhood from being wrecked by the highway, how he almost ran for mayor, how he held court at Kweekweg’s with a book in one hand and a bourbon in the other. Stories that led to other stories that I wasn’t sure were true or not. The hometown boy who left Pat City for more schooling than necessary and came back trying to play prodigal son, but with a wife and two kids and no clue as how to run a bar. Old-timers familiar with the Widdershins family supposedly took bets on how long he would last until a delicate situation would only be resolved with his moving on. “One thing’s same about all them Widdershins, lay their pricks out like chum.”

We gonna roll this truckin convoy ’cross the USA. Convoy...Convoy. The song was close to ending. I fought an urge to fade the volume out and start a voice over like when I played DJ by myself whenever Jupie wasn’t around.

“Some say your momma got all bigitty and took on to the state college, first of her kin to do so, while rest stayed on with mining. That’s what *my* momma did, married a miner.”

I shrugged, remained focused on my shoestring. “I only know this place.”

“Then your momma fell in with her professor and along comes your sister, that’s what I hear.”

I looked up. I did not like Nixie knowing more about my family than I did, and me not knowing anything about her and her’s. “Convoy” ended and the stylus scratched at the 45’s inner circle that made a sound like bacon frying.

“You got better?”

“My mom’s got a lot of Elvis on the juke downstairs.”

“That’s more right, him really being country and all.”

“We could play DJs.”

“Huh?”

“Disc jockeys. Pretend we run a radio station and talk to our listeners between songs. I can only do it when my sister’s not around or she gets sore.”

“A fuckin’ radio station?”

“Yeah. I’ve never done it with someone else.”

“Why in hell would I want to pretend that?”

“I don’t know, it’s fun I guess.”

“Cow hockey.”

“You talk funny.”

“You *look* funny. Momma says you younger by two years, but you are twice the size of me.”

“You’re 15? Look older.”

“All the kids who got it look old. Now you’ve plumb wore me out, so go away while I rest a spell.”

Nixie unbuckled the gunbelt with pens in the loops and paper in the holster and laid it gently at the foot of my sister’s bed.

“What’s that for anyway?” I asked.

“Never know when a poem or a picture might hit, gotta be ready. Don’t you write stuff down, draw pictures?”

“Nah.”

“I always done, but now they say it helps me. But I ain’t doing nothing different than I always done.”

“Helps you how?”

“Cope, that’s what they say. I don’t think they knew I was writing before so writing now ain’t no change. They’re just looking at me harder nowadays.” She fingered the gunbelt’s bronze buckle, a carving of five playing cards. Ace. King. Queen. Jack. Ten. All hearts. “What are the odds?” she said.

“I don’t know how to play cards.”

“Big whoopy surprise. Now scoot, I said I was tired.”

She lay on my sister’s bed. Dark lids fell like Robin’s mask across her eyes. I did not like Nixie bossing me around in my own house, people sleeping in the wrong beds, me just a kid working the bar. Like that *Twilight Zone* episode, everything changed in a blink. *Blinked* milk? I took the 45 off the record player and tuned the stereo to WKTK. Manfred Mann’s Earth band sang “Blinded by the Light.”

“Cut that racket off,” Nixie said before falling asleep. Her flesh arm crossed her phantom arm on her belly. For only the second time since she walked into the Kweg was I able to keep my eyes trained on her. Her long eyelashes curled like caterpillars. Her lips cracked like a sidewalk. Her one whole arm looked like a Wiffle Ball bat. How could such a thin body carry around the same insides as me, bones and blood, liver and lungs. I read some of the scribblings

that stained her tennis shoes, “Never again” around the toe and “I’ll call my borrowed angel to ease the pain once more” along one side. Some markings looked like strange equations: Life = Sux, Me – Me = 0, 86’d RIP ☹ MEL, $\Omega / \infty = \bullet$. I wanted to touch her hair to see if it felt as sharp as the rest of her looked. I watched her for a moment until I saw her slight chest rise; otherwise, she could have passed for dead.

CHAPTER 4

How Nixie could sleep in the swelter of a second floor bedroom with heat rising from the kitchen and hot noise boiling up from the bar I'll never know, but she darn near slept until happy hour. When she descended the stairs she looked like little more than a damp rag, sweat on her skin and wrinkled t-shirt from her powerful nap. She had put the bandolier studded with markers back on and was eyeing two pieces of paper held in her one left hand. The crowd picked up for pre-fireworks drinks with new faces mixing with the regulars. A place like Kweekweg's was a throwback in Quaker Cove as the oldtimers died off and young college grads with business degrees swooped in with their upscale pub grub and \$1.50 draughts. At Kweekweg's, the Patty Boys still cost 35 cents and the only options were in a can or from the tap. More frequently in the early mornings big trucks blocked the way along narrow cobble-stoned streets unloading crates of frozen patties and racks of rolls for the masses who wouldn't know claw meat from backfin. All Mom could do was smoke and shake her head as she turned from the window to finish a modest list for Pearl to take to the fishmongers and butchers down at the market and a produce list for me to give Mr. Connie when he came around. Just trying to stay afloat, she often whispered through a plume of smoke.

I dried glasses with a rag while Mom and Aunt Dot ran orders between the kitchen and tables. Mom was still steamed at Jupie, nowhere to be found and me little help behind the bar. As the fancier bars filled up the overflow stumbled into Kweekweg's, all loud and sloppy already, which riled the Captain. "Pace yourself," he advised one jock who sidled up to the bar. "Fireworks still four hours off."

My eyes floated in pudding the next day, baked in sparks and smoke from last night, tapioca spots hovering whenever I tried to open them. The party went late into the night, long after Nixie and I traipsed up to bed. The first thing that came to mind was milk.

With great effort I donned the terry cloth robe and slipped the flash-light-saber through a belt loop. Half blind, I stumbled down the stairs while the bat slapped against each post of the railing, clacking like a baseball card in a wheel's spokes. Guided by instinct or The Force, I weaved through chairs and tables still in disarray and pushed the swinging door into the kitchen. I found a glass and the fridge handle with similar memory. The glass turned cold in my palm as milk filled it to the rim. It washed down in three gulps and I wiped the milk mustache off with the sleeve of my robe. Another pour refilled the glass halfway.

I scuttled slit-eyed back through the door just as a carnivorous growl clawed from a dark corner of the bar. The glass slipped from my hand and hit the floor with such force that a stream of milk shot straight up into my face. Wide eyed now, the form in the corner came into focus. A heap, a man covered in a dark blanket slumped across a table. He growled again, his back arched, and air rippled through his lips. Snoring. I approached slowly, my weight splitting a creak in the floor, and he rocked backwards. Dressed in white, the blanket now a cape, he looked like an Imperial Stormtrooper. His head leaned against the wall and his mouth swung open, but the snoring stopped. I wondered whether I just witnessed his last breath. I crept closer and my eyes adjusted even finer. He was a trooper, some sort of military man, dressed in a uniform. His hand rested on the table next to an empty bottle of rye and a shot glass on its side. The stitching above his shirt pocket read "Mellor."

I was afraid to get too close to him, especially if he was dead. So I slipped my lightsaber out of its loop, a gingerly prodded him in the shoulder with it. No response. I recalled a scene from the movie, and said aloud in a robotic voice: “Let me see your identification.”

Then, in what I attempted to mimic as a high-brow English accent: “You don't need to see his identification.”

Robotic voice: “We don't need to see his identification.”

English butler: “These aren't the droids you're looking for.”

Robot: “These aren't the droids we're looking for.”

Obi-Wan: “He can go about his business.”

Stormtrooper: “You can go about your business.”

I poked him harder with the lightsaber, and in one motion he coiled his arm around the Whiffle ball bat, snatched it from my hands, sprung to his feet, and held it aloft like a club, like that crazy monkey with the bone at the beginning of that *2001* movie. I thought he was going to brain me.

“Fucking hell,” he said. The blanket-cape fell to the floor.

I shrieked.

“I could have bloody mashed your head in boy,” he said. “Don't go poking people while they're sleeping.”

He lowered my lightsaber cautiously. Milk still ran down my cheek.

“What the bloody hell is this?”

“A lightsaber,” I said.

“It's a fucking cricket bat fucked into a torch handle for Christ's sake.”

“Whiffle ball.”

“Whiffle what?”

“It’s a Whiffle ball bat.”

“Go on, take it.”

I slipped it back into a belt loop. He staggered and fell back into his chair, picked up the blanket and bunched it in his lap. “Fucking hell,” he moaned and pressed his palm into one eye. With the other eye, he stared at me. “You look like a two-quid geisha, mate.”

I didn’t understand.

“The robe, mate, it doesn’t suit you, certainly doesn’t flatter you.” He sounded like a combination of Alec Guinness from *Star Wars* and Bert from *Mary Poppins*, simultaneously refined and crude.

“Luke Skywalker.”

“Who Fuckwater?”

“*Star Wars*.”

“Listen, I’ve been at sea for seven months, speak English please.”

“Science fiction. It’s a new movie. Um, Alec Guinness?”

“*Bridge-on-the-River-Kwai* Alec Guinness? I don’t think he’d lower himself to science fiction.”

“What are you doing here?”

“What are *you* doing here, in a pub at the wee hours, there are laws I imagine.”

“Mom kicks everyone out after two.”

“Mum? Aye,” he looked me up and down again. “You must be the man of the house, then, Mercury.”

“How did you know my name?”

“Talked about you quite a bit last night, we did. In fact, I thought it was going to get me into your mum’s knickers. Normally a bloke won’t listen to a pile of rubbish about little wankers and their stepping out fuck-all fathers, unless there was something in it for him. Know what I mean? Bit surprised I woke up here being prodded by a baby polar bear rather than with my cheek pressed against her cunt.”

I was too confused to respond, and it must have showed.

“Aye,” he said, “sorry I shouldn’t speak that way in front of her own tyke. But I was tacking back and forth between the manly sailor shite and the sensitive man shite that I felt sure I’d be mooring in her harbor, know what I mean?” He stretched a leg out and gently tapped my shin with his foot, but I did not know what he meant. “Right, perhaps not.”

Bruises of dirt smudged his white uniform in spots, and a red streak possibly blood possibly ketchup ran down one leg. Black scratches scuffed both of his white shoes. Sewn to his shirt on each shoulder was a blue patch embroidered with golden thread, two stripes and a rope coiling around an anchor. Disheveled hair fell across his forehead in a series of commas. I saw a hint of a tattoo beneath one of his short sleeves, on his right arm, just about where Nixie’s was amputated.

He noticed me taking inventory, stiffened a bit, and said, “Bit of a tussle last night.”

My mother descended the stairs with a cigarette already smoldering between her fingers. She wore a blue #19 jersey that dropped to mid-calf but no pants or slippers. “What going on down here? Why is there milk all over the floor?” She paused. “Oh, you still here, Nigel?”

The sailor stood up, brushed both shoulders, and combed his hair back with one hand. “Morning Donna.”

“I thought you’d let yourself out in the middle of the night.”

“Not very gentlemanly to leave without saying goodbye.”

“What you were proposing was not very gentlemanly.”

“Aye.”

“I threw a blanket over you.”

“Ta.”

“Mom?” I said.

“I see you met Merck,” my mother said.

“Indeed, but not formally.” The sailor saluted me then extended his right hand. “Leading Hand Nigel Mellor, Her Majesty’s Royal Navy.”

Calloused fingers wrapped around my spongy hand; he did all the shaking. My arm flopped like a bluegill on a hot pier.

“Right,” he said, “we’ll have to work on that.”

“Merck, run and get a rag to clean up that spill,” my mother said. “You want some coffee?”

“Tea?” Nigel replied.

“Offer’s coffee.”

“That would be lovely.”

My mother and I walked into the kitchen. She doused the remains of her cigarette under the faucet and flicked it into a trashcan. She pointed under the sink where X kept rags and I got one. We kept two double-pot coffee makers going, one in the kitchen and another at the bar. She washed out the dregs from one pot, filled the maker with water, poured grounds into a white filter, and set the machine to brewing. When she turned, she looked surprised to find me still standing there.

“Well, get on, before that puddle turns to cottage cheese.”

I stood.

“What?” she said.

“You like him?”

“Who, James Bond out there?”

I did not laugh.

“What do you think? You know where you found him.”

“You always clear the bar,” I said, “even the flirts.”

“It was a wild, well, long night.”

““You don’t have to go home but you can’t stay here,” that’s what you always say.”

“Nigel has...some complications it seems.”

“What kind of complications?”

“Nothing too serious I don’t think,” she said, “just things I thought he should think on some more when his head was clearer.”

“Is he staying?”

“Enough with the questions Joe Friday.” She poured two mugs of coffee and turned to leave the kitchen. “Get on that spill now”

“Maybe you should put some pants on,” I said.

“Get!”

I removed my lightsaber from the robe’s belt loop, untied the belt, and draped the robe over the back of a chair. The sailor stood as my mother approached with the coffee. I dropped to my knees and began to corral spilt milk with the rag. They both sat down at the table where Nigel has spent the night.

“Sorry about last night,” Mom said. “Rollo, he can be over-protective sometimes.”

“No worries,” Nigel said as he sipped coffee. “He likes you.”

“He’s a nice guy. Works hard, drinks hard, but a nice guy.”

“Scrappy, too.”

“I think he might be feeling a bit sorer than you this morning.”

“Aye, sorry about that.”

“Don’t apologize, he started it.”

“I’ve never celebrated the Fourth of July before. It’s quite jovial, despite its origins.”

They chuckled. Chuckled! Mom put another cigarette in her mouth, but before she could reach her lighter Nigel snatched it and lit her cigarette for her. She cupped his hands in hers to steady the flame.

CHAPTER 7

{does Nigel come along on this trip?}

Uncle Jules' friend had a friend. Uncle Jules' friend had all sort of friends. Uncle Jules' friend drove us in his fancy Lincoln to the edge of a derelict pier up in the Inner Harbor, the deepest westwardly port along the east coast. Activity at the port had been in decline for years, but ships and ferries still anchored at the other piers, unloading crabs and tin, whereas this one off to itself had rotted into a thick plank of splintered wood. When we stepped out of the car, the scent of cinnamon and nutmeg from the spice plant across the harbor drifted over us. At the end of the pier, a submarine bobbed in a pool of fuel that the sunlight turned into a shining rainbow. The only structure nearby on land was a corrugated tin shack sporting a torn 1976 Patty Boy poster by the door, over which a wooden sign read "seafood," and an orange neon OPEN sign in the window.

"Where's the studio?" I asked, looking over toward downtown.

Instead, Uncle Jules's friend pointed to the submarine and said, "Gentlemen, and lady, Narwhal Studios." He made his way cautiously down the battered pier, avoiding holes and soft spots like landmines.

"That ain't not no recording studio," Nixie said. "It ain't barely a boat."

"Submersible, my dear," Uncle Jules' friend corrected. "Come along."

The three of us walked down the pier even more cautiously than Uncle Jules' friend did.

The rusted submarine listed against the dock like a dying whale. In fact, someone had painted on its side, near its "snout," a giant white eye with a dark pupil that looked like the Patty Boy character's eye, only with a solitary tear gleaming in the corner. As we got closer, we

realized that someone had turned the vessel into some sort of crazy sculpture. Beneath the eye, rising from the water, curled a fishy grin with human teeth, one of which was gold capped with the initials NR etched into it. Streams of painted color flowed from an unseen blowhole down the whale's face to mix with the rainbow oil slicks spiraling out on the harbor's surface. A long swath of metal folded over the sub's side made it appear that the thing actually had a fin, to which the sculptor affixed a large hand-shaped appendage forged from busted refrigerators for fingers and hubcaps for rings. A long surfboard stuck out from the third fridge like an extended middle finger. From the front of the sub, a long metal rod coiled out straight and erect, like the horn of a unicorn.

It was not seaworthy. Waves lapped the sub against a brick bulkhead, and I imagined that from inside it must have sounded like the hammering of a gong. Nixie and I shared a look of disbelief. "Ain't nothing but them wharf rats in that ole tin can," she said.

Uncle Jules's friend balanced elegantly on one foot, stretching over the water, and rapped on the side of the sub in a pattern akin to Morse code.

Bong-bong-bong-pause-bong-pause-bong-bong.

Nothing.

"Told you," Nixie said.

A second later two raps, a pause, and two more quick raps came from inside. Uncle Jules's friend rapped back fast bong-bong-bong. The hatch atop the sub's tower unlocked and opened, a plume of smoke escaped as if something ancient had been unsealed. A long-haired head poked up and as the body rose the hair continued to unfurl. He appeared like a burnt out

Rapunzel. Even though it was overcast, the man wore sunglasses as he took us in for a few seconds. “Liberace,” he finally said.

When he spoke, the long mustache over his upper lip billowed.

“Ahoy, Christopher,” Uncle Jules’s friend answered back. “And don’t call me that.”

“And don’t fucking call me ‘Christopher,’” he called down. “Ain’t cops are they?”

“They’re kids,” Uncle Jules’s friend replied, stressing the word *kids* to accentuate the obvious.

“And him?”

“A friend.”

“Jules,” Uncle Jules volunteered, waving his arm high like he was flagging down a taxi.

“Christ, great, like I need two of yous in a boat shaped like a giant dick.”

Uncle Jules’s friend put his hands on his hips. “Well, can we come aboard? You said now would be an okay time.”

“Never’s okay a-time,” he said and hooked a thumb toward the rear of the sub. “Rope ladder tied aft. Don’t fucking fall overboard.”

The man’s torso turned circles as he descended inside the tower’s shaft. We found the rope ladder and Uncle Jules held it taut for Nixie, me, and his friend. Even with one arm, Nixie had better balance than me, her left hand darting from rung to rung while she steadied herself with her feet. My heavy center of gravity and short limbs promised to spin me off the ladder at any moment, but I shakily made it to the submarine’s deck. Uncle Jules’ friend took the ladder with three quick steps without using his hands. Once we were on board, Uncle Jules deftly swung himself onto the deck like Tarzan landing right beside his friend.

“Me Jane,” Uncle Jules’ friend said.

“You Liberace, apparently,” Uncle Jules said, sounding a bit miffed.

“I’ll take the plunge,” Uncle Jules’s friend said inspecting the ladder that ran from the deck up along the length of the tower. He paused at the top rung and peered down the hole into which the long-haired man had disappeared. “Dark,” he reported back over his shoulder. “Here goes nothing.”

“On up you two,” Uncle Jules said.

Again, Nixie scampered along the ladder as if instead of having one arm she had eight legs like a spider. I pulled myself up after, struggling to lift a leg over the lip of the hatch, pinching my thighs as I scuttled over the edge, and wedging myself down the shaft. It was dark, and close, with Uncle Jules pressing behind me and Nixie checking the distance between us with a hand extended against my belly. A voice said “This way” and “Mind the beams,” then a door opened, through which buoyed light and music and smoke and voices, so much weightlessness that I thought it would lift the sub like a blimp.

Nixie stepped into this world, and I followed her.

Running the ceiling, trouble lights strung together with extension cord dangled from their hooks. The interior of the sub was outfitted with couches, beads, coffee tables with sub-shop wrappers and half-eaten hoagies, and book shelves crammed with albums. A couple of black girls and a white dude sprawled on one couch passed around what looked like a genie’s bottle and pressed their lips to it. A moment later, they exhaled, glanced at us, and fell back into their own conversation. Posters from some of the coolest concerts I ever heard about lined the walls: Yes, Civic Center, November 23, 1971; Pink Floyd, Lyric, April 21, 1972; Led Zeppelin,

Merriweather Post Pavilion, May 25, 1969; Aerosmith, Painter's Mill, March 30, 1974; Johnny Winter, Capital Centre, May 22, 1976.

"Jupie would love this joint," I said.

The long-haired dude thwapped me on the head with his finger. How he could see inside the sub with sunglasses on I don't know. "Stop gawking, come on."

"You went to all these?"

"Went? Shit, kid, I ran the sound. And made some serious coin on bootlegs. Now stop pussying around."

Nixie and I followed him into a small chamber where Uncle Jules and Uncle Jules' friend already stood. Once inside, he closed and locked the hatch by turning a wheel in the middle of the door. The five of us crammed into a space no bigger than one of Uncle Jules' tollbooths, the music muffled to a hum inside the tin container.

"To what do I owe the pleasure?" the long-haired dude asked.

Uncle Jules' friend started, "You see, Chris—"

The dude cocked his head slightly.

"Right, Apollo—"

"God of music, poetry, and truth, baby."

"Apollo, our young friends here want to hear something that's recorded on cassette."

"This look like a Radio Shack?"

"It's music, from England, it doesn't seem to work on the cassette players I've tried."

"Let me see."

"Merck," Uncle Jules' friend instructed.

I pulled the tape Nigel gave me from my pocket. Apollo snatched it from my hand, held it up to the one trouble light illuminating the chamber, and inspected it. “Homemade. Home taping is killing music, kid, you need to know that. Okay, what’s it worth to you to hear it?”

Uncle Jules’ friend stepped in immediately, “Bartering in front of children seems, uncivil. You will be compensated.”

“Ah huh,” Apollo said. I saw Apollo eye-ball Uncle Jules even through his dark lenses. “This way.”

Apollo turned the wheel of the opposite hatch and unlocked the door. The other half of the sub was a world entirely different from what we had just walked through. Tubes of fluorescent light ran the length of each side of the hull. A large sign with a silhouette of a cigarette slashed through by a red circle hung near a vent that drew air out of the cabin. The first part of the sub was humid and smoky, but this side was cool and clear. Foam pads that looked like egg cartons lined the hull’s interior. Recorders, amplifiers, and monitors crammed every inch of space. Guitars rested on stands like a mini-field of corn. Microphone stands formed a flock of heron legs. All sorts of horns hung from hooks like stalactites in a cave. Two synthesizers grinned at each other. Even a baby grand piano was wedged into one space. Reel-to-reels slowly twirled and lights blinked red and green and white in a universe of electronics. A soundboard the size of an arraber’s wagon blocked access to the far end of the hull. A man hunched over the board gently pushing channels and adjusting knobs. And on the other side of it, a woman sang inside a glass encased booth padded with ridges of foam. The tall woman had long black hair parted in the middle that swayed slightly as she sang, hands cupping each side of earphones, eyes squinting behind round tinted glasses.

Ain't gonna let it bother me today

I been workin' and I'm too tired anyway

But it's all right 'cause it's midnight

And I got two more bottles of wine

“I can't believe it,” I said.

“Me neither,” Nixie said.

“Apollo. Is that a Mara recorder and Burson amps? And that's a Kush parallel equalizer.

RCA Crown.”

“State-of-the-art Dolby” Apollo said.

“And the board, a Toft?

“32-fucking-channels. You know your shit, dude.”

“This is insane, Nixie!”

Nixie's face remained frozen, wide-eyed.

“Nixie? What's wrong?”

“I can't believe my ears.”

“What?”

“I wanna be her.”

“Who?”

“Dontcha know who that is? There, in the booth.”

“No.”

“Emmylou Harris. Emmylou Goddamn Harris. I'd know that voice anywheres.”

Apollo interrupted, “A producer and a talent scout? Are you spying on me, Liberace?”

“Emmylou who who?” I said.

“You numpty! *Sleepless Nights. Grievous Angel.*”

“Borrowed Angel?”

“No, no, no. Not, Mel Street. Gram Parsons. If you wanna be a DJ, you gotta know this shit, Merck.”

“Who are you?” I asked Apollo.

“How do you know Emmylou Harris?” Nixie asked.

“Your spies ask too many questions,” Apollo said, tapping the man at the console on the shoulder and motioning with his hand to wrap it up. The man flipped a switch and spoke into a microphone: *Take five, Lou.*

The singer glided out of the booth and squeezed herself between the Toft soundboard and the padded wall of the sub, stopping a few inches from Nixie.

“Oh, Miss Harris, I’m such a fan!”

“Don’t bother the talent, darling,” Apollo said.

“That’s okay,” her voice sounded like a more grown-up version of Nixie’s accent with most of the twang whittled away. “Always glad to meet fans whenever, *wherever.*”

“What are you doing in a submarine in Patapsco City?”

“Narwhal Recording is a highly respected enterprise,” Apollo defended. “Little Feat, Bonnie Raitt, shit, Robert Palmer snuck Sally right through this tin can.”

“Long story, but Apollo’s a friend and my folks live not too far away.”

“Can I have an autograph?” Nixie thumped me in the ribs with her stump, and for the first time the singer noticed that the girl didn’t have an arm.

“Sure, sweetheart.”

“Paper, Merck, pen...”

“For Christ’s sake,” Apollo provided a pen from somewhere.

“Here, just do it on my t-shirt thataway I won’t drop it and lose it.” Nixie turned around and bent over a bit, and on her right shoulder the singer wrote *Ain’t gonna let it bother me today* and signed her name all in wavy cursive.

“Good luck and keep listening, sweetheart,” and the singer disappeared through the hatch.

“Okay, I can die now,” Nixie said.

“Don’t say things like that,” I pleaded.

“If anyone gives a shit I think I can play this cassette on this here Toe-Sheeba motherfucker.”

Apollo slipped the tape into one of the deck’s two cassette bays, fiddled with some knobs, and pushed play. Silence. Seconds passed. Needles on the deck started to gyrate, but nothing came through the speakers. “Oh, shitsticks, Rodney switch the output over to D.”

First, a heartbeat rhythm blasted over us, lyrics chanted rather than sung, an urgent bass line, and a declaration of love:

He’s in love with rock’n’roll, woah

He’s in love with gettin’ stoned, woah

He’s in love with Janie Jones, woah

He don’t like his boring job, no

Then, the earthquake of guitars and shouts broke through that lifted the heels of my Keds.

“That is not radio friendly,” Apollo said.

“Doesn’t sound much better than the screeches we heard earlier,” said Uncle Jules’ friend.

“What are they even saying?” Uncle Jules added.

“It’s different,” I said, “never heard anything like it.” Even Nixie’s head bobbed a little.

“Because it’s crap,” Apollo said.

The second song started with a cheerier beat and a different type of singing from Nigel’s brother, but half-way through, he released this agonizing *and so you’re punk!*

When the third track’s chorus chimed the band’s sick-and-tiredness with all-things-U.S.A., Apollo slapped the cassette deck’s stop button.

“Hey, I want to hear it all,” I said. I felt angry, like Nigel’s brother in the songs.

“I’ve got real music to make, kid,” Apollo said.

“I’d like to hear the whole tape, too,” Nixie said, waving her stump to get Apollo’s attention. Her plan worked.

“We’re also not a charity, but, shit. Rodney?”

“Yeah?” the nam at the console had tuned into the demo as well.

“We got any blank C30?”

“Yeah, somewhere I guess.”

“Okay, I can dub it onto a cassette that’ll work with whatever you got to listen to it on. You all get the hell out of here and wait for me top-side on the pier. Just close that hatch before you open the other one. Get get.”

“Thank you, Christopher,” Uncle Jules’s friend said.

“Yeah, yeah, expect an invoice Liberace.”

“Thank you, Mr. Apollo,” I said and extended my hand, which he reluctantly shook. He swung his arm to give Nixie a shake, too, and when she took his hand with her left-hand, he said, “Oh, shitsticks you all get going out of here.”

Back outside, the humid August breeze felt refreshing compared to the smoky rear-end of Narwhal Recording. Uncle Jules and his friend brushed at their clothes to dust the stink off them. Uncle Jules mumbled about who would ever set up a studio in the belly of a submarine made to look like a grotesque sea creature. Nixie and I kicked at chunks of rotten wood splintering off the pier. I liked it, I whispered to her, and she whispered back that she needed to hear more. Then I whispered back what I liked about it most: it wasn't Jupie's music, my mother's, my uncle's, or even Mr. Apollo's. It was our's.

Uncle Jules and Uncle Jules' friend retreated to the car where they could run the air conditioner. Nixie and I waited on the pier. In about half an hour, the hatch to the top of the sub's tower's open up and Mr. Apollo appeared. He fake tossed the tape to get ready to catch it, then flung it down to us. As I reached up, Nixie's snake-like left arm struck first just as it had in the bar on the first day we met. She handed my the dubbed tape.

“Mind if I keep the original?” Mr. Apollo asked.

It was no good to us and Mr. Nigel did not want it.

“Okay,” I shouted up.

“Say, Reds, how'd you recognize that gear in here?”

“I got stacks of catalogs back at home that I look at. Lafayette, Olson, Concord, Korvettes.”

“Shouldn’t you be reading *Archies* or something?”

“I like playing records. I might want to be a DJ someday.”

“Might?”

I hitched up my shoulders.

“When I was your age, I knew. Good luck to you, Reds. Lefty,” and he tipped an imaginary cowboy hat in Nixie’s direction before circling back down into the sub.

We walked back to the idling Lincoln and I stopped by the driver’s side door. Uncle Jules’ friend opened the window, which lowered gracefully with a soothing hum. I giggled the dubbed cassette tape in front of his face so that it rattled a little.

“Thanks Mister...” I started.

Uncle Jules’ friend looked at Uncle Jules, who simply shrugged.

“My mother named me Sinclair,” he said, reaching out and placing his hand on my shoulder, “but my friends call me ‘Sinky.’”

I shook the tape again. “Thanks, thanks a whole lot Mr. Sinky.”

Punk rock was my first girl
She left me a scar, so I have her still
She's not young, but she's not old yet
We share the same sun, but her's never sets

Silver lining shining for you
Dark clouds always waiting for you

Weightless, and tumbling through space
I remember her voice, but not her face
Floating, but she's always near
She wants to stay, but she can't stay here

Frozen in window displays
Where did you hide all those days we'd waste?
Fading, but I see her still
She'll always be my punk rock girl

for Nixie Fossgrim

Words: Mercury Widdershins, 1999, *Gargoyle Magazine*

Lyrics and Music: Miles Kurosky, 2001, *The Coast Is Never Clear* (Velocette Records)