

Winnemucca

I pounded on Nancy's door for several minutes before I tried the knob. The door was unlocked.

As I entered, a cold wind blew in behind me, pushing my skirt tight between my legs. I could smell creosote and sage. I pictured tumbleweeds rolling and bouncing, bullied by the wind.

I'd come to tell Nancy that Pepper was MIA. I'd just seen her fiddle for sale in the local pawnshop. I made a habit of checking the pawnshops because Pepper was always hocking something.

Without a fiddle, we didn't sound much like a country band. We had been gigging two weeks at Winnemucca's Te-Maok Casino. Nancy joked that Winnemucca was Indian for "where the fuck are we?" I didn't like being on the road. I had tried to quit it six months back, but here I was again, halfway across Nevada. When I'd left Kai in Berkeley, he said, "Why do you want to live this way?" All I could do was shrug, then kiss him hard on the mouth, as if that would hold him.

Nancy was sprawled on her stomach across the bed, like she had landed there after falling from a great height, white-blond hair fanned neatly across her bare back. She had her jeans on but no shoes.

"Nancy?"

Her room smelled of baby powder and puke. A tinge of mildew too. The puke smell could have been anything. It didn't mean she was bulimic or drinking, problems that had dogged her for years. She was thirty-five, still holding tight to the look of a late twenty-something.

The wind kicked up a dust devil outside the uncurtained window. I could see blue-gray mountains in the distance. This was high desert but not the pretty kind you'd find in Arizona or New Mexico. Nevada landscape in these parts was as underfed and scrubby as a coyote.

I stepped closer, then grabbed the cool heel of Nancy's left foot.

Nancy jerked awake and rolled over so quickly, I jumped back.

"Jesus, girl!"

Her face was swollen from sleep, a strand of too-blond hair stuck to her lower lip. A big block of mid-day sunlight fell through the open door behind me and lit up the mess of Nancy's room.

"You wouldn't answer," I said. "I was *pounding*."

"Sure, pounding," she said. "That's what drummers do."

"You all right?"

"I was writing." She glanced around for something lost, then pulled a t-shirt from the tangle of sheets. "You want to hear it?"

"We don't have time," I said.

Nancy was no song writer, but that didn't stop her from trying. Nearly every musician I knew was the same. Writing songs was like playing the slots. Maybe you'd get lucky.

"Everyone has time for a love song," she said.

"Pepper hocked her fiddle."

Nancy grimaced as she squirmed into her t-shirt. "She's such an asshole."

Other times, Pepper had hocked her turquoise-studded belt, her ten-gallon hat, her silver bangles or her diamond ear stud, even her back-up bow, but never her fiddle.

I used to think: *if I was band leader I'd never hire a flake*. But, now twenty-nine, I'd come to realize that most people are flaky. Pepper was a good player. She remembered the arrangements. She didn't have attitude on stage. But we were always running after her off-stage. Nobody has it all, that's the thing. No matter who you are, there's going to be a hole in your program. So it was with Kai. I loved him to death, but he was killing me. I was on the road because he couldn't pay the rent. He knew that. And yet he blamed me for going on the road.

"You've gone on like this too long," my mother told me on the phone that morning. "But it's not too late." Ten years before, when I'd refused a scholarship to the College of the Sequoias, I had crushed her dream. Unlike Mark, my older brother, I had no patience for classrooms. I'd never been able to keep my hands still.

"We're in a Recession?" she said. "And all you know how to do is drum?"

I knew plenty: how to tune up my antique VW van, how to make a killer cauliflower casserole, how to housebreak a basset hound, how to run 10 miles without choking, how to repair my wardrobe with needle and thread, how to build a bookcase with reclaimed pallet wood, how to speak enough Spanish to order the really good food from a taco truck, how to scour a flea market for collectible silver spoons.

See? Plenty.

Still, I held my hot, little phone to my ear and took it in, as I'd always taken it from Mom: "Think about it, Rainy—who's gonna hire you?"

Nancy would hire me.

I'd been in Nancy's road bands off and on for five years.

I said to Nancy: "You know it's the slots."

"Oh, fuck me." Nancy pulled on her boots.

* * * *

Nancy dry-smoked a generic cigarette in the passenger seat as I drove my VW bus to main street. "Downtown" was hardly more than a scatter of buildings hunkered by a shallow river. Across the river, Winnemucca Mountain rose from the scrubby desert. Treeless and craggy, blemished with white patches of snow, it was probably bigger than it looked. On the other side was the Sonora Range, huge and intimidating.

I-80 sluices straight through Winnemucca, population 7, 396. The flashiest part was casino row, a short stretch of neon enticements for fast food, gas, and gambling. There were nine casinos. By the time we got to the last one, it was 4:30. We were due on stage at 7:00. "Fuck," said Nancy for the millionth time. "Fuck, fuck, fuck."

When we found Pepper, she was with a man named Levon Little. He raised his Stetson off his head when Pepper introduced us. He was cowboy-lanky but pale as cake flour, with black hair that kept falling over one eye. His eyes were a dewy blue-gray and could have belonged to a kindergarten teacher. He said he was a chef at Te-Moak, though I'd never seen him.

Pepper wouldn't stop playing her machine, even as we talked. Her fingers were black from coins. She was down to a bucket of nickels. Pepper looked sixteen, even though she was twenty-six. She had straight black hair down to her waist and a wide doll-like face. Everywhere she went, there was a man in her wake. It didn't matter that back in Berkeley she was married and had a seven-year-old daughter.

"Gig starts in two hours," Nancy said. She was staring at the back of Pepper's pretty head.

“Right!” Pepper said, yanking the slot arm. She was fond of the old machines, which were easy to find in small towns like Winnemucca.

Nancy turned to Levon and said, “Why’d you let her hock her fiddle?”

Levon blinked in confusion. “I just got here!”

I said, “Pepper, we’ve got to go get your fiddle.”

She smiled sweetly at me. “Would you do that?”

“You’ve got to go with us,” I said.

“I can’t leave my machine,” she said. “It’s about to burp.”

“Fuck me!” Nancy said.

I saw Levon look at her with interest. Nancy turned to him and said, “Not talking to you, cowboy.”

“I’m a chef,” he said.

Nancy pulled Pepper’s free arm. “Ouch!” Pepper said.

“Come the fuck *on*!” Nancy said.

I said, “Give Pepper three more pulls, Nancy, then we’ll go.”

“Why three?” Nancy said.

“It’s an even number,” I joked.

Levon wagged a long finger at me.

I turned to him: “Did you say you were a *chef*?”

He nodded yes.

Pepper had a very fluid motion: coin-to-slot, pull-the-arm, wait-for-the-spin, then-coin-to-slot, and so on.