

Cris Mazza

One Night, Two Perspectives, Three Screwdrivers

March 1, 1980, San Diego, California

They'd known each other long enough, Cal maybe could've just turned the knob and walked in, since she expected him. But he didn't. He knocked. She answered by opening the door and walking away without looking at him or saying hello. "You ready?" he said.

"No." She was already in the bathroom, then came out holding a comb and glanced at him quickly. "Well, at least it isn't a *date*."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"You look better in jeans. Why d'you wear those disco pants?"

"These?" Cal looked at his legs. Marcello had said black pants, and these were what the store had in the category of *pants* and *black*. He wore them to every gig, just about every weekend. "What's wrong with 'em?"

"They're repulsive. We're not going to a *disco*, are we?" She was still in a bathrobe.

"You don't *have* to come with me." He tried to look somewhere else. Mail on the kitchen table. Albums left on top of a speaker.

She went back to the bathroom and started to brush her teeth, then came back to the bathroom doorway. "D'you think anything will happen?" A trickle of toothpaste ran down her chin. He moved slowly toward the bathroom, until he could see half the sink.

"Maybe. Things don't just *happen*, though, you've got to make them happen."

"I know that. Is it anything like where Rudy works?"

He put his fists in his pockets. "Oh, I forgot your Mr. Big works in a bar."

"A fancy one, with an expensive restaurant." The toothbrush in her mouth made her words blurry.

"Then don't expect it to be the same."

“What kind of people will be there?”

“Whadda ya think ... a club called *Macho's*.”

“Gays?” Then she laughed and sprayed toothpaste, not quite far enough to hit him.

“You wanna go to a gay bar?”

“Once was enough.” She turned back to the sink and spit her mouthful of toothpaste. “If something doesn’t happen tonight, *dang* I’ll go crazy, I swear I will, sitting at home and *thinking*.”

“Don’t think you’re the only one who ever sat at home thinking,” he said.

She looked over her shoulder, out the bathroom door, at him, then turned back to the mirror.

“Well, you could’ve *done* something, like I am tonight.” She rinsed her mouth again and spit. “So who’m I gonna find at this place?”

“A lot of sailors go there.”

“Thanks loads.”

“A lot of people. I never took a census.”

“But I bet you counted all the babes under sixteen.”

“Just the ones with long dark hair.”

“Good,” she said. She shook her head and her hair landed back in place. They’d both had long hair, in high school. After that hers was frizzy for a while. It was straighter now, and shorter. Now it was shorter than his.

She went into her bedroom, then called, “Do I need a purse?”

“You’ll hafta buy drinks.”

“Dang.” She closed the bedroom door most of the way. “Rudy always makes my drinks. He only lets me have three. Screwdrivers.”



See, Cal, if I could ever someday explain to you ... about that night in 1980 ... and also that time when we were sixteen. I know I was a mopey teenager, and even tried to tell you why, having to do with not liking things I was supposed to want. And you listened. And usually tried to joke me out of it. Then that one time, you ... well, you tried something different than a joke. And you wanted to call it love. A 16-year-old human male can't love any more than a feral wolf. And if love is expressed by jamming your finger inside someone— Dang, Cal, I know one of the ten-thousand times you apologized, you said you knew it must be wrong cuz I wouldn't stop bawling. I don't remember crying, before or after. But if I was, it was because it was the same day, or the day after, my dog was mashed by a car. I'd had Shep since I was FIVE. Anyway, understandably, our friendship had been getting more and more awkward since that time. But I always needed someone to talk to after my pointless non-relationships. With men, I mean, not dogs. A few men. Very few. Two. The real relationships with dogs so outnumber the men. The night in 1980 in that club with you ... I hadn't yet gotten another dog. I needed to talk to someone who already knew me, but how sick is this: I hoped you didn't know I was still a virgin.



She came back into the living room wearing gray slacks and a loose summer top with very thin straps across her shoulders, which were already brown, and it was only March. “But I can make one drink last a long time.” She rubbed lotion on her hands, hesitated, then took more lotion and rubbed it up both arms and shoulders, under the straps. Cal turned away.

“I just sit and watch him work. Everybody likes him best of the bartenders.”

Cal stood with his back to her, looking at his feet, where the bottom of his pants hid his shoes. She was right, the material was thin and shiny, clinging to his thighs, flaring at the ankles.

“They all talk to him like they know him, and it gave me this funny feeling in my chest because only *I* knew him. Or so I thought.” She stood right beside Cal, but he didn’t move. “I just sat there watching him, then he would come down to where I was, lean over the bar and whisper something, usually about one of the customers, but so everyone knew I was with him.” She moved in front of Cal and picked up a silver bracelet from the coffee table, put it on one arm and pushed it all the way up, almost to her armpit, then shook her arm until it fell back to her wrist. Cal was watching, but she didn’t meet his eyes. “They all told me I was lucky because Rudy was such a great guy.” Cal headed for the door. “Rudy hates that job. He can’t wait to finish accounting school. Maybe the church-thing will make him bookkeeper for everyone’s doorbell-hours, so he won’t have to associate with *worldly* things like money ... and perverts like me.” Something clanked. Cal turned. The silver bracelet on the coffee table. And she’d picked up a framed snapshot of a dog. “You know, that dog loved me more than ... well, than anyone deserves to be loved.”

Cal was already holding the doorknob, looking back at her. “You finished? Did that help?”

“No. Let’s make like a goalie and get the puck out of here.”

It was early. The parking lot was empty. He took his saxophone case out of the trunk but she still hadn’t gotten out of the car. “C’mon, hurry up.”

“Do I hafta go in *now*?”

“Unless you wanna pay the cover charge.”

“*Dang*, I don’t want it to look like I’m coming *with* you.” She was staring straight out the front windshield.

“Look,” he said, “after we get through that door, you’re on your own. I’m not gonna come to your table or even *look* at you. I’ll be looking out for myself, and I don’t wanna hafta worry about getting *you* home.”

She turned and met his eyes. A shuddering moment. And he thought maybe she shivered too. “Good. I just don’t want anyone to think I’m with the band.”

“Yeah, you’ll never get that funny feeling in your chest if people know you’re here with the skinny sax player.”

“The one in disco pants, that’s for sure.” She got out of the car.

They stopped at the service door where the employees and band members went in. He knocked. “You sure you wanna do this?”

This time she didn’t look at him. “I have to. I’ll go crazy otherwise.” A waitress opened the door. “Otherwise I might end up like *you*, dragging around, just getting older.”

“Thanks. I can always count on you to define my life.” He joined the other band members, setting up on a small stage.



All I know is it was too damn early for me to be ordering my first drink. I nursed it a long time, sipping it through the plastic straw that’s meant for stirring. Rudy had warned me not to drink through the straw because I would be affected by the alcohol faster. Could that asshole have been right? I sucked each ice cube, taking turns, letting them all shrink at the same pace, until each was a sliver, and yet your damn band was still setting up, saying “test” into microphones, twanging metallic notes, moving the drums around to make room for still more amplifiers.



He watched her. Nothing new about that. Whenever she was around. Even if she was throwing barbs. Sometimes she seemed to have no sense, no judgement, like the religious-nut she was nuts over. And now, as he watched, she actually left her purse on her seat and left her table. Cal’s amp and monitor were already set up, he was waiting for the final sound-check, seated on a stool at the back of the stage, his sax on a floor stand, his legs stretched out in front, heels on the floor, feet rocking slowly side-to-side. His glass of tequila in both hands, between his knees. He was carefully sloshing the contents in circles without spilling over the rim. Staring at that, but aware of her. She was coming toward the stage, then went around the side and stood on the floor, below Cal’s stool.

“When’s this damn thing gonna start?”

“What’s your hurry?”

“I’ve already had a drink. Three’s my limit.”

“What happens after three—you turn into a pumpkin?”

“Rudy told me three was enough.”

“For him maybe, so he wouldn’t lose control and find himself in bed with you.”

“Har-de-har.”

Another band member edged past the drums and brought Cal a jigger of tequila and a glass of beer. Cal finished what was left in his glass, then took the jigger.

“*Dang*, Cal.” She turned away while he emptied the jigger. He watched her lower one strap and rub her shoulder, slowly, squinting at her skin. “Hope I’m not peeling.”

“You’re not.”

She turned back toward Cal. He sipped his beer then wiped the foam from his beard with his palm.

“Know what? If you ever go bald—and it’s a good bet—you can just turn your head upside down.”

“Har-de-har back atcha.”

“Okay, then,” she said, “I guess I’ll fill my glass with water so it looks like a drink.”

When Cal laughed, she glared.

“What’s so damn funny?”

“Little Miss Sophisticated. And he called *you* a pervert?”

“Shut *up*. He never said that word. Just that it wasn’t right to *be* with me.”

“I think he was gay. A puritanical queer.”

She started to walk away, then turned around. “What about *your* excuses, Cal? How long has it been for you—what’re *you* waiting for?”

He watched her until she was back at her original table. She picked up her purse and, with her usual absurdity, the empty glass. When she came out of the restroom, sure enough, the glass was full again. Then she moved to a table even farther from the stage.



Was alone the only way I thought I could function in a crowd? Alone, and yet not-alone because I knew you were watching me? And, somehow, therefore, safe ... because of it? I had no intention of leaving that club with a stranger! But no other intentions either. I don’t think. Which, at best, is coy. At worst ... well, dang, coy is bad enough. I couldn’t admit I thought it might be cool, you playing in a steady-gigging band with (what turned out to be) a big crowd dancing. You smoking and drinking which was so different than when we were teenagers. (Weren’t we wide-eyed bumpkins?)

When you guys finally started playing, there were still only about fifty people in the club, and only half of them dancing, a bunch of empty tables between where I was and them. It’s hard to remember but maybe I can picture it cuz it’s when I had to order my 2nd screwdriver. I was going to wait longer, but this waitress picked up my glass of water and stood waiting for something. Sorry, one of those jobs-you-do-in-college that I never did, I don’t have the proper reverence, and probably don’t tip enough. That night, did I tip at all? Did I ever pay? Who picked up my tab? You? If so ... dang, Cal, I am such a weasel. I won’t say bitch, that’s a female dog, and dogs are honest about ... well, love and such.

Anyway, you were right, Marines and young Latina girls. They had exaggerated eye makeup and flipped their long hair and kept it flying around like silky flags while they danced. The men didn’t have any hair to flip around. I remember, and probably also remembered it right then, at a gig in high school, when you jumped off the stage to dance and play the cowbell, how your long air ... well, didn’t exact flip, but was wild. Wild in the way tall dry grasses are wild. Is that an insult? I mean natural. Jeans and a T-shirt. You were so frank and instinctive—that kind of wild. Your band in high school played Chicago, Tower of Power, Blood Sweat and Tears, and The Doobies—which you always sang. But that band that night in 1980 ... yes, I was disappointed. The trumpet was out of tune, the drums too loud, so was the bass, and that singer attacked every note flat, then slurped up to find the pitch. They all sounded the same, even the pop songs I should’ve recognized, plus you didn’t sing anything. What were you doing in that crappy group? Maybe what I felt was helpless—powerless to get you back into something better. But I got that second drink to last through the first set.



When the band took its break, pre-recorded top-forty music came through the speakers. “Turn it up!” the girls called from the dance floor. There were a couple hundred people in the club, but she was still alone, blocked by 4 or 5 empty tables. She was staring at the tabletop, drawing something with her straw, as Cal made his way toward her, stumbling over a few chairs, but even that didn’t make her look up. So he said, “Hey,” when he was still ten feet away.

“What now? I thought you weren’t going to talk to me.” Then she glanced up, briefly, “they’ll think I’m *with* you.” Her eyes darted elsewhere.

“*They* don’t even know you’re here. Nothing’ll happen if you stay way back here.”

She leaned back in her chair but kept both hands on her empty glass, tipping it and tapping it on the table. “What d’*you* care?” She lifted the glass to drain a few remaining drops. Even the ice cubes were gone. “I mean, you trying to be my pimp?”

“Good idea.” He pulled a chair from behind him and sat backwards, accidentally rapping the chair’s back against her table. She grabbed her glass as though it was going to blast off. “Maybe I wanna see it happen. I wanna *watch* you leave with someone.” Or he *needed* to. If he could keep himself from jumping the guy and stomping his ass before ...

“You’ve known I’ve been with lots of guys.” She was looking down again, her fingers twirling the glass. When a waitress hovered beside the table, she wrapped her hands around the glass. So Cal ordered a beer and the waitress left. “You knew I’ve been with Rudy for ... these few months...” She raised her face and probably caught him staring.

“Otherwise known as six weeks,” he said, “and I knew nothing was going on.”

“You wish.”

“So why’d you break up? What happened, you had to ask if he had a prick?”

“Shut up. I keep telling you, he was in this kind-of church ...”

“What were the commandments? He couldn’t lay any pipe ‘til you converted?”

“He might’ve married me if I had.”

“So why *didn’t* you? Convert, that is.”

“It was ... I wanted him to see ... we could’ve been okay together, without *that*. That religion thing ... It was icky.”

“You *are* a pervert.” He stood, trying to laugh, and maybe he succeeded. “Trying to seduce a man away from church. Have you no decency?”

“A *weird* church, they didn’t even call it *church* ... But at least I’m not as wretched as *you*.”

He turned and walked back toward the stage, but stopped several tables away, started to go back toward her while he yelled over the music, “You’re crazy if you think I’ve gone this long without wetting my wick.”

“You bragging or complaining?”

The top-forty music faded. Cal wheeled and ran toward the stage.



Maybe someday we'll be trading stories and get it straight, or maybe it doesn't matter. Maybe we'll both forget it and get on with our lives. I mean, it wasn't that big a deal, was it? So, I honestly didn't know where I was going or what I was going to do after I took a leak, then sat at a different table, this time in the middle of a lot of other crowded, noisy tables. There were even several empty glasses at the new table, and an ashtray full of cigarette butts ... and why didn't I even care or wonder? I think I lay my head on the table for a second, but the smell of the cigarettes made me even more dizzy. Cuz by then I was already whirling a little, and I'd never felt like that at Rudy's bar. Like there, I was always more sharp than ever, keeping my eyes on Rudy as he laughed with the customers. His fingers never even touched the waitress's hand when he took change from her or handed her the drinks she needed. That's how much I observed and remembered. Not like what I remember from that night with you ... my head likely going back and forth from down on the stinky table to propped up in my hands. When someone asked me to dance, I might have just stared at him, but I can't remember what the hell he might have looked like or how long he stood there til he gave up and moved on. Marines, they all look alike, right? Amazing that a waitress even asked me if I wanted anything, but somehow I had another screwdriver. I didn't think I ever actually slept, but had a suddenly-woken-up feeling when the band stopped playing. Everyone seemed to be talking very loud, then they must've realized they didn't have to anymore, and the throbbing conversation settled. When the slurpy singer sat across the table from me, I couldn't figure out where I'd seen him before. Duh! It was the band's table! But ... did I do it on purpose, move to that table on purpose? I still wonder, and can't answer.



Between sets, a waitress was always standing at their table to get their orders. As usual they were all having beer and tequila. Hunched up and clutching her glass, she almost looked like a frightened monkey. Cal lifted one of her drooping straps and put it back on her shoulder, then sat beside her.

“What're you doing here?” he asked. “Why didn't you dance with that guy?”

“I dunno. He didn't give me a chance to answer.”

The trumpet player sat in the last empty seat, on her other side. He was wearing jeans, a white shirt and a red tie. Cal smoked and drank. He had a reed in his mouth along with a cigarette, then he crushed the reed in the ashtray and everyone at the table cheered. Everyone except her, of course. She leaned toward Cal. “Can I tell you something?” She giggled, suddenly even closer. “Can I tell you something personal?”

“It's a free country.”

“I mean, I hate your pants. I knew I could tell you, though, I mean, I figured you'd wanna know. What're friends for?”

“Good question.”

“But it's a two-way street, y'know. You can tell me something personal. C'mon, ask me anything.”

Cal put his cigarette out. No longer a monkey, more like an 8-year-old, she pointed her straw at the rising smoke and blew at it, then coughed.

“Okay,” he said, “why *did* you go to that gay bar?”

She was batting at the air as though smoke still lingered. “A girl in accounting class thought it would solve my problems.” She rubbed her eyes. “With men. She thought my problem with men *was* men.”

“So she thought you should be boffing women instead?”

“I don’t think a girl can *boff* another girl.”

“Whadd-ya think lezzies do together, sing campfire songs?”

“No, I jus’ mean it’s not, like ... *boff* sounds so hard, like a fight or something. With girls it’s ... softer.”

“How’d *you* know?”

“I’m a girl.”

“That doesn’t mean ... it can be soft with a guy.”

“Dang, didja hear what you jus’ said? Bragging about being *soft*?”

“You know I meant it different.” He finished his beer. “When it’s something that means something ... I mean it *should* mean more than... That’s when it’s ... better.”

“What’re you talking about ... please?”

The waitress was already putting down another beer. He pulled down half of it before speaking again. “That really is a good question,” he said, “what’re friends for.”

“Yeah. A miracle we’ve been friends so long.”

“Have we?”

“Haven’t we?”

He drummed on the table. “Except one time when we were more than friends.”

“*That* time?” Her lips tightened. “We were less than friends. Why doncha wear jeans or something?”



I probably couldn’t even tell you, it was the first time I got drunk. Rudy sure made sure I didn’t. My head felt like a brick balancing on a toothpick. Did I ever say that out loud? I planned to, whenever I felt like talking again. I remember I could hear the other band guys talking but couldn’t tell how many different conversations. Thought I was still laughing at the last thing I said but was also drooling on my arm. You smelled of tobacco and liquor and sweat—the smoking and drinking were new. And you looked serious and exhausted. Where was that boy I’d known with the crazy grin? I probably didn’t say that either. What I did say was probably a pile of sassy-ass bullshit. Why’d you like me so damn much?



“If you were in a different band, like a *better* one, maybe you could wear different pants.”

Someone said, “Hey, wa’chit.” The table jolted. Ice cubes rattled.

“I don’t care what you think of my pants.”

“Well ... if you were wondering why you never score—”

“It’s nothing to do with my pants.”

“Okay.” She closed her eyes and drained what was left in her glass through the straw.

He said, “We already established your love life isn’t a raging success either.”

She pushed her glass away, stacked her fists end-to-end on the table and rested her forehead on the top fist. “That much I know. He wouldn’t even hold my hand in public. His church, or whatever it was, said it was a sin to be with someone *worldly*. Anyone not in this church-thing was *worldly*.”

“Asshole.”

“Yeah. This is weird.”

“What is?”

“I think Rudy was making my screwdrivers a little weaker than these.”

“What was a churchy-asshole doing as a *bartender*?”

“It was where he worked.”

“You sure he put *anything* in your drinks?”

“Maybe not.” Her fists collapsed and her head fell to the tabletop. Everyone’s drinks jumped. “But at least they were free.”



I think I'll send you a postcard. Cuz I know someday, and someday soon I think, I should explain. A person's first time drunk at 22? Pathetic. The whole thing wasn't tragic or anything, just pathetic, and if I could explain ... It's just that right now I don't know what I would explain. Everyone always wants to explain. "Let me explain!" Don't they mean justify? Don't they mean "I didn't listen to you but now you have to listen to me"? But I'll send you a postcard. Maybe I can tell a whole story on postcards. One or two a year. The story of my life (if I ever have one) since the story of that night.



2008, El Centro, California

He’s been a man for a lot of years now. In 1980 a younger one who hadn’t yet acted out of wretched acquiescence and got himself married to someone else. (*Wretched* in 1980 was jargon for *horny*, by 2008 had returned to its original meaning.)

Spring came in February in the lower California desert. A bird pecked at the windows of his house, sitting on the sill, tap-tap-tapping, painting the sill with purple shit. Two, three, four different windows, all day, rat-a-tatting. One morning, Cal was cleaning window screens, because the major form of precipitation here was dust. He also washed the sills, a job not tacitly included in the screen-cleaning task that had been not-so-tacitly requested of him (admittedly, when he asked for a chore). But it would have been difficult to ignore the plum-and-black splats of shit and pretend the duty was complete. The screens were drying propped against the garage door, the windows cranked

open, so the bird achieved its life's wish. It was finally in the house. And, inside, realized this was not what it wanted at all.

Cal caught the bird in a sheet, put it in a cardboard box. He drove it 20 miles away, into a state park in the desert. When he opened the box, the bird, wings somewhat tattered from its hours up against the window glass, flew instantly, gone in a fluttering second, the force of its departure knocking the box out of Cal's hand. Gone so fast he barely could follow the directional line of flight. But thought, perhaps, it was—by accident, just fluke—the route back to town.

Later, the screens back in place, the windows shut, the bird returned, tapping, not knowing why it so fixatedly wanted this thing it wanted, this thing that has frayed its feathers and bewildered its instinct, this thing that upon achieving led to imprisonment, darkness, and miles of flight, only to return and want it again.

He looked it up. It was a male brown-headed cowbird. Instead of spending its time with a mate, building a nest and making hundreds of trips back and forth with bugs to stuff down the pre-fledglings' throats, the male cowbird had time to spend pecking at windows because the female, producing up to a dozen eggs a season, laid them into the nests of other, usually smaller, birds. Industrious sparrows, dove, towhees, catbirds. The cowbird hatchlings grew faster, frequently crowded the bio-kids out of the nest and occupied the step-parents' time and resources. Why wasn't it the duped, dutiful sparrow or dove pecking with aberrant wretchedness at his window?

In the extra room where his step-daughter, and later step-grandson, used to sleep, Cal got his saxophone out, sat on the bed fingering the keys, but didn't put the mouthpiece between his lips.



Yeah, I'll send a postcard, everything out in the open, even the mailman can read it. Nothing to hide. I was a silly messy stew and slopped it over onto you. (Dang, could I write the whole thing as poetry like that?) I actually think you probably won't even remember. We were stupid kids. Weren't you kind of blitzed too?



March 1, 1980, San Diego

"Well ...," he said, looking into his glass, like maybe some black-and-white guy in a movie, or a vodka ad, "free drinks are good, but being strong enough ... that makes all the difference." His hand, his left hand, was on the table between them. When had she sat up again? He only knew the warmth, the buzz, the jump of energy, the neon, the flash of heat into his gut, and lower, when she put her hand on his. It was a feeling that said he needed to be, and could be, even *would* be more than he was, if he was with her.

"I know, Cal. I know how you feel. See, once I was waiting for him in the bar's entry, after his shift, and he came out and put his hand on the back of my neck, under my hair ..."

"Like this?" Cal slid his hand up her neck.

"No." She went even more limp. "But that feels good."

He stroked her neck. It felt so thin. Then slid his hand around to the other side of her face, used both hands to turn her so he could kiss her. She leaned against him. He lowered one of her straps and groaned as he pressed his open mouth on her shoulder. His mouth moved up her neck, buzzing against her when he said, “I shouldn’t be doing this. Why am I?” Then she opened her mouth as he kissed her again. He hoped the beer had washed most of the cigarette taste from his mouth. His hands slid over her shoulders and down her arms.

“Good question. And why aren’t I minding?” she laughed, holding onto the table with one arm as he was pulling her closer. “It must be the booze,” she gasped, maybe still laughing, “That’s what Rudy said once when ... things started to ... get going, so to speak. I’d stayed at the bar till he was off, then he had a drink. When he kissed me, when he unbuttoned my shirt ... he blamed the booze. Very flattering ... doncha think?”

Cal moaned, his face against her neck, his hands under her blouse, moving up her back. “Oh baby,” he mouthed her earlobe, “Shut up.” She was warm and soft and supple, but he took his hands out of her blouse, held her head and kissed her again, then kissed her cheek, one eye, and her temple, holding her face next to his.

“But’cha know what?” she said. “I always seem to find guys who give me just the opposite of what I want ... or think I should want.”

His mouth against her ear, he said, not too loud, “I was always ready to give you what he wouldn’t.” He put his tongue in her ear. She giggled, then shivered.

“But, you didn’t listen, ... when you wanted to, I *didn’t*—” She lifted her chin, her head falling back, stretching her throat as he kissed it.

He held her neck in both hands, stroked her cheeks with his thumbs. “But I always wanted to. And you stayed friends with me. Just to torture me? What *did* you want? *Anything?*”

“That’s what I dunno.”

They looked at each other. “Maybe now you’ve figured it out?”

“The thing is ... it’s something I’m sposta want. And I don’t. Not enough. But maybe—”

He pulled her close again, her chair tilted, almost fell over. Someone was laughing. “Showtime.” That asshole Marcello. “Save some for later, man.” The other guys were finishing their beers and leaving the table. Cal moaned, more like a whimper, and stood.



I know one last thing, one last thing I think I know, that waitress, the last time she wanted me to order something, all I said was something like “Get them to play some Doobies.”

And I was probably laying full out, the top part of my body flat on the table. I know by then the dance floor was packed, the last set and all they wanted to do was dance ... dance the night away ... How many songs have that line anyway, and did you play one of them? Van Halen, Leo Sayer ... could your band’s singer do that disco-mouse voice? How could anyone tell? The girls shrieked and the men shouted out the lyrics. They stomped their feet and seemed to move faster than the music’s tempo. Many of them dancing with beer mugs in one hand. So that must mean I had at least one eye opened. The speakers and the dancing feet made the

room rattle so the table actually shook and my head vibrated, along with the ashtray and a few pennies left scattered near the edge. One fell and rolled away. It seemed to roll slowly, for a long time, in a wavy line ... maybe it would go straight across the dance floor and out the door, across the parking lot—



She sat up when Cal stood behind her chair. “How’re you doing?” He put his hands on her shoulders. The singer was speaking into the microphone, his voice boomy and incoherent. “C’mon, I asked him to play something with no horns so we could dance.”

“No ... everyone’ll think I’m here with you.” She turned and leaned against him.



Yeah, I know more than just one more thing. There are a few more things. Like your shirt was that slippery nylon. And a few more things than that. Did I stand on your feet while we danced? I can’t remember touching the floor. No, it’s not one of those you-lifted-me-off-my-feet moments. Just that how could I have been dancing? Cuz it’s not something I do, or ever did. You were strong and solid. And smelled real.



The only tune left in the band’s repertoire that didn’t have any horn parts was “After the Lovin’.” It wasn’t even scheduled in the last set til Cal asked for it. Not that he thought she’d like it (actually he knew damn well what she would think of it) but it was the only way to get out there with her. The dancing couples stood pressed together, rocking back and forth. Cal held onto her wrist and tightened one arm around her shoulders, working his way to a clear spot on the dance floor, right below the stage. The loudest part of the song was the bass. She practically stood on Cal’s feet and held onto him while he did all the dancing.

“Our *parents* would like this song,” she said into his shirt. “Get a new band.” Her head, her face, came only to the middle of his chest. “You’re better than this.”

His arms tightened. “Nothing’s better than this.”

“No, this band, it sucks. You should be playing, I dunno, with what’s’s’name ... Maynard ... Mangione ... who is it you like so much?”

“Yeah ... Basie hasn’t called me yet.” One of his hands pressed her head against his chest. “Right now that’s okay.”



That last chord ... a long shimmering out-of-tune noise. And yet people clapped. You were moaning and groaning—or muttering—you said something, but I couldn’t hear it cuz another song started. Did I fall down when you let go of me? Cuz you suddenly jumped onto the stage. What did I do? Maybe that one was the last

song, or else it took me an awful long time to get off the dance floor and back to the table, cuz why do I remember that by the time I got there, the trumpet guy was already sitting on his instrument case drinking a beer, the drummer lighting a cigarette, and silly you standing there holding my purse, looking around, your eyes watery blue.



She walked, or staggered, into his embrace. “I was afraid you’d gone home with someone else,” he murmured.

“Don’t remind me what a failure I am. A big zero. An X-ed out name on the living-it-up roster.” Her words muffled but hot against his shoulder.

He picked up his case but kept one arm around her, heading for the exit, then he put his mouth against her head and mumbled into her hair, “What should we do about this?”

“This?”

“You know, what’re we gonna do now?” He opened the door and the air was surprisingly cool. The breeze was slightly salty and a low fog was drifting in from the coast.

They stopped at the car. “*Now?*” she said. “Now ...? I guess we go home ... and on with our plans ... you know, for our booming-with-potential lives. Becoming a famous sax player for you ... For me ... a dork at a desk.”

He was listening, but his mind flying ... not *that* far ahead, just to the next minute, or hour, or tomorrow. He unlocked her door then hurried around the back of the car, and he’d gotten into his seat by the time she sort of crumpled into hers. As soon as she was there, he tried to gather her in his arms, pulling her halfway across the stick shift, kissing her throat, her ears, her mouth. She relaxed, sighed, parted her lips, closed her eyes. He could feel a hum from her throat buzz against his mouth. Wasn’t everything exactly right, exactly in-tune, in rhythm, in sync, mellow and harmonious, sweet and rich and overflowing yet still swelling ... shouldn’t he have just left it the fuck alone? But no, then he did it, popped it, broke it, ruined it ... he should’ve kicked his own damn reckless ass for always having to blabby-bab *everything* ...

He spoke against the side of her head, into her hair, “How’s this for a plan... why don’t we move somewhere else. There’s this jazz combo that wants to add me, out in the desert. I could get some other job too. You can do anything you want. You can have a dog, two dogs, however many dogs ... we would ... it could be ... Oh damn, it’s what my life should *be* ...” He lifted her over the stick shift into his lap, his face buried against her neck, his voice refusing to shut up. “Oh god, I love you, I love ... I’ve always loved you.” His hands and arms were shaking. “Let’s go away together and start *over*, forget everything else, we could be anything, do anything—oh please, I’ve wanted to ever since ... I love you ...”



You even thought to add the dogs ... Don’t think I didn’t notice.

Okay, yes, I remember the other parts too, what you said ... I hope you didn't mean you couldn't succeed without me. That's absurd.

I don't remember if I bumped my head on your car's ceiling, but it felt like it when I sat up—suddenly enough to make my brain spin even more. But, spinning, how the hell was I able to notice my feet, in sandals, with my toenails painted pink? When had I done that, and why? I'd never done it before, and won't again.



She rose, straddling the gearshift. Then moved back to the passenger seat. “Let’s go home.”

“Wha’s wrong? You feeling sick?”

“No. Yes. I dunno.”

“Hey, wha’s wrong? Did I do something wrong?”

She sighed. “You *should* join that jazz combo. You’re better than this shit.”

“But what about ...?”

“Lemme go home and wake up yesterday so I can ... I dunno ... change my mind?”

In the next silence, the car began to feel too warm. “About what?”

“I dunno. Something, everything...what I thought I wuz doing ...”

“You mean ... that’s *it*?”

She didn’t look up, didn’t move except to clench her toes, her voice steady enough but suddenly soft, and not as slurred. “No one ever said stuff like that to me. Not even you, way back when ... Why can’t I ... Why couldn’t we be meeting for the first time right *now* ... tonight ... What I mean ... Why can’t this be the first time I ever saw you? Cuz you might be—” Sweat trickled down her temples. “Dang. Let’s just go.”

What was she going to say he might be? The *answer*? while Cal drove she had her feet pulled up, her arms wrapped around her shins and her forehead on her knees. Several times he almost reached to touch her, then pulled back. Would it have made a difference? He eased up to the curb a few doors down from her apartment, then did reach for her while he shifted to neutral. But despite having remained motionless the whole way there, by the time the parking break rasped, she already had the door open and was halfway out. He was wrestling with his seatbelt, but when the fuck had he even decided to strap himself down?

Not yet all the way out of the car, she hesitated, looked back at him. “See ya.”

“Wait, can’t I come in? I won’t ... Please, can’t I just come in and stay ...? I’ll just hold you, I promise.” He caught her wrist. He was lying sideways across the gearshift halfway into the passenger seat, still holding her wrist, and she was on the curb. He couldn’t see her face. Then she yanked her hand away.



I'd never seen my neighborhood when it was that quiet. I hadn't lived there long before that night. That kind of quiet, it amplified the sound of my footsteps, made it sound like I was hurrying down the sidewalk. Maybe I was.

Maybe I should admit I was. And I could hear you getting out of the car, slamming the door, and then behind me saying, "Please ... please"

But I didn't turn around until my door was unlocked and I was inside. You were still on the porch. Nothing between us but a half-closed door. That's when. Yes, I saw it. Your disco pants making it more explicit. And I'd never seen an erection before. Not even that time when we were 16. But ... it didn't make me feel anything. As the door closed a little more, you leaned against the jamb. I know it seemed that the door lingered still partway open for a moment, or more than that.



September 2009, El Centro, California

When the cops got there, they found the TV room furniture a little askew with dirty dishes and food scattered on the carpet. In the kitchen, carnage of the turkey was strewn on the floor, with more dishes, even one of the crystal goblets—from broken to chipped to downright rubble—and the poultry-knife standing upright, its point buried in the wooden serving platter. They also found Cal on the front lawn, locked out of the house. The officers, male and female, took turns, one inside, one outside, asking the same questions. "Are you okay? Are you hurt anywhere? Do you want her arrested?"

Yes, no, and no.

"How'd she get a 200 pound man out the door against his will?"

"I didn't fight back."

"Good idea."

"Yeah, I just went the direction she was pushing me. I knew she'd calm down."

"What was the fight about, sir?"

"I won't send any more money to the ... kids."

"You can decide not to press charges, but if it got worse, you can't stop us from arresting her."

"It was just food, and ... I moved my horns down to the shop."

The cops, of course, didn't understand that.

He walked around the block, 8 p.m., temperature still in the 90s. When he got home, the kitchen was cleaned, the garbage taken out to the cans at the side of the house. Virginia was making ice cream sundaes with root beer.

"A mother's instinct is fierce," she said, "but I don't mean the things I called you."

"Yeah."



I said I'm sorry, didn't I? If not, I meant to. Before I shut the door.



March 2, 1980, San Diego

She was sunbathing before noon on the courtyard, a textbook over her eyes. How long had she been outside? He'd called at eight, let it ring ten or fifteen times. Same thing at nine, and again around ten. He cleared his throat before he was within twenty feet of her. She didn't move. His heartbeat was as thick as his throat when he swallowed. "Imagine meeting you here," she said from underneath the book, and he cleared his throat again.

"I wanted to make sure you were okay."

She sat up and reached for her robe. "I wasn't that drunk."

He was staring at her flowerboxes. Or trying to. "Oh." He rolled a pebble under his foot. He was wearing white tennis shoes. "But maybe *I* was drunker than I thought."

"Oh?" She moved into the shade after tying her robe around her waist.

"Yeah." His whisper was raspy.

It would have been a quiet morning, except the birds, lots of them, squawking, screaming and singing.

"But don't worry about it or think that we can't even be friends anymore," he said, "... 'cause ... I didn't mean it."

"Didn't mean what?"

He could see that she shivered. The shade was considerably cooler than the sunshine.

"You know."

He put his fists in the pockets of his jeans. Their eyes only touched once, then they looked away again.



And before I was ready to send the first postcard, you beat me to the whole get-on-with-your-life thing. Maybe I'm still not ready, but I'll give it a try.



<p>Dang, Cal ! May 7, 1981 Good talking to you. Almost like old times. And <u>that</u> was a quick change of plan -- a whole new family!(??) My plan, for now, keep my nose in the accounting books and don't think about tomorrow ... or yesterday. Cards like this are a great idea, only enough room for what needs to be said. Maybe just tell a joke. Try this one: A girl and a jazz sax player walk into a bar ... signed X</p>	<p>PLACE POST CARD POSTAGE HERE</p> <p>D23422</p> <p>Post Card</p> <p>Cal Tonnessen 7512 W San Diego Ave El Centro CA 92243</p>
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