

Chapter 2

We walk up on the food hut and open the door, a bell on the door announcing our arrival. Nobody notices. I feel like Bob Seagar. The place is busy. Everyone is friendly. The band and I make our way toward the counter where three well-fed workers are just standing up to leave.

Have a seat boys. We do. What'd ya boys want to eat? The waitress is standing over us staring down from the other side of the counter.

I'd like a burger and a chocolate shake please, ma'am.

Burger and a beer, Brad orders after me.

Same. Bob states absentmindedly. He is lost in thought. The waitress spins around a full turn and places our order before us. I take a bite of my hamburger and the ceiling explodes. Nobody notices. Bob and Brad take a swig off of their beers and the jukebox plays Pattie Page. Suddenly we're standing in the middle of the place performing. "Although I was dreading, the thought of losing you," I croon and my voice carries supremely through the open air. Bob and Brad sleepily keep Waltz time and the horns come in again from God knows where. Mother and Father are crying. Brad is too. I make a note to ask him about it later. Besides, the horns are too loud to shout over. Brad wipes his eyes with a napkin from the metal dispenser on one of the tables and Bob turns to the both of us.

Let's go find Betsy. We pay up and thank the waitress.

Alright Bob. I say, Let's go find her. The waitress looks up as we head out the door.

Save the last dance for me?”she calls out to us. Never look back. There is a university just up the way a bit. Bob gets excited.

Wichita State University is just north of Fairmont Park. And just beyond that, past two cemeteries and a drive-in theater lay a set of railroad tracks. Students are milling about but none pay us attention. A train approaching from the east slows to a stop just in front of us. A man in a red cap sticks his head out the door of the train.

All aboard!, he shouts, staring straight at me. Bob looks annoyed.

Oh come on John! I don’t hear him. I’m already on the train.

I’ll be back boys! There’s plenty of time for my return! The door closes behind me and the train lurches forward. I look out the window as I make my way past oversized reclining chairs. Bob and Brad stand frozen, on pause, waiting for the train to pass. “Send my regards to Betsy,” I think to myself as I settle into an empty chair in the lounge-car. The porter comes by and asks for my ticket. It’s in my pocket. I hand it to him and he punches an irregular shaped hole in it before handing it back. I feel lonely and wonder why I’m on this train. This train stopped for me, Hell, the ticket’s in my pocket. I forget about the band and start working on my solo act. Looking at my ticket I notice the destination, typed in red letters: “Home.” I pull out a book and begin to read as the train ambles it’s way down the tracks. I guess I’m going home.

How’s it going, John? The porter was back and sitting next to me. *Pretty far gone this time huh?* I stare at him. He is a stranger.

Fine, just fine sir. I reply. He is older with a kind face and eyes too tired to lie.

That’s good John. Your wife’s calling you. She needs help getting the kids to bed. And the music is too loud for them and the neighbors too. We’ll be home in a bit. Whatcha reading? I look down at the book in my

hands. It's the Bible. I've stolen it out of a drawer in a motel room. *The Good Book I see*, the porter answers his own question. I wonder why I'm reading the bible. I open it. Psalms 34 verse 6: "This poor man cried, and the Lord heard *him*, and saved him out of all his troubles." I pull my guitar out from under the seat and begin to strum it quietly and think about home. I am a poor man, I am troubled. The porter smiles at me. I feel melancholy. I don't want to go home. The train pulls into the bonus room and the doors open. I step off and look back at the Porter.

Thank you, Robert. I know his name. The train pulls away and leaves me standing alone in the room. The wife is calling me from the kitchen. I put my guitar down and walk out into the kitchen just as the kids are bringing their plates to the dish sink.

What was that last song you were playing John? I look back up at her.

I don't know. I reply, staring around the room like a stranger. Nothing is familiar.

Hi Dad! the oldest girl greets me as she passes. *Did the band leave already?* I look at her face and feel better. I know her.

Yeah, babe. They're gone. And then I remember where I left them. *They're in Wichita.* My wife looks over at me with worry in her eyes.

You aren't going to get them tonight are you? I don't answer. I don't know.

Sleep. I need sleep. Toys everywhere. Nothing worth more than a few pennies and running out of space. Space. I need space. People everywhere. My van is still in the front yard right? Do I still own a van? Did I ever make it to the beach? What happened out there? I walk over to the curtains, behind the couch full of kids, and pull the drapery back to look out in the yard. It's still out there. My real companion. My sage. I look over at the door and then at the wife. Her. Staring at me. We had gotten middle-aged at some point and me still with all these silly

dreams. I step over toy trinkets in various states of repair strewn about the floor. The television screams at the children. What does she want now? Why is she worried all of the time. I blame her mother. The kids are fine. They have youth and newness. But me, I stagger. I mumble. Unaware and uncaring. I used to be so optimistic. I need...something. Sleep? Escape? To where? Where does one go without money? It's dangerous out there. The wife still staring. I turn toward her and smile. She knows. She does not smile back. I walk back towards the kitchen, past her. She runs past me before I can get to the door and sits down in front of it. We are silent. My scars yell out to me in pain. I lift my shirt. They are pulsing. I let my shirt fall back down, muffling my pain. I leave the wife and walk back to the den where the kids are watching television. The wife is on the couch with her arms around the two youngest. The boy is leaning all the way into her. I look back at the door where I left her. She was never there. They are happy. I feel unstable. She looks up at me.

Practice sounded good, babe. I smile.

Did you guys leave me any Chinese? I manage.

It's in the fridge, Dad. The boy stands beside me. I reach over and tussle his hair.

Thanks buddy. That boy. Always looking out for me.

Everything is concentric circles. That tree over there, look closely. Look through it, not at it. Let your eyes blur and clear your mind. See them! And that area between each circle? That's the annulus. That's where I live. I make circles out of lines. I sit in the annulus day in and day out throwing circles in the air. The circles grow in diameter with each passing moment. I grab a line from the pile, make it into a circle, and throw it in the middle of the last. Me, measuring time by the expanding diameter of concentric circles. Me, jumping from one to the next, first up and then down. Slipping dimensions. I'm talking to myself. The wife and kids are still on the

couch. I'm pacing back and forth in the kitchen. The kitchen is the heart of the house, if this house can be said to have a heart. I am unhappy. I think of the boys in Wichita.

God-damned, mother-fucking Wichita. Suddenly I was mad.

Honey. The wife calls patiently from the den. *Please curse quietly under your breath if you have to curse. You know the kids hang on your every word.* I look up from the groove I've worn in the floor to find the boy swinging from the word "fuck" in the hall just off the den.

Now your just getting carried away, I holler at him. Letting go of the letter "K" he falls to his feet in the hall before making a quick turn and darting into the bedroom he shares with his siblings.

It's time to take my medicine. Thank God for pain killers. 103 pills left and there is no way to get more. Take them four at a time, and catch a buzz until I run out or wean myself off, one at a time? I twist the child-proof top and pour a handful, from which I pick four, and pop them in my mouth, chewing them into bits so they hit harder. In 20 minutes I'll feel better; good almost, I might even play guitar.

All the shit I've had to quit. What a cliché. Cigarettes and booze, drugs and women. I feel like nobody, pacing around the kitchen, waiting for the pills to work. The credits roll and the children rub their eyes. The boy has to be told to pee. I was the same way.

The phone rings, grows wings, flies off the table and out of the kitchen, exploding over the living room. The youngest two think it's great but the oldest knows better. The wife is silent. I grab my bootstraps and throw my boots into the abyss. There is a rut around the kitchen table that I walk until it gets cold. I remember my jacket hanging on the coat rack where I left it on the last cold day of last year. I think about the lack of ceremony when I hung it up, where it would sit for months, unneeded, and I'm reminded of the time I had to clean up a restaurant that had

gone out of business in the same unceremonious way and how I'd found plates of food left unscrapped in the dish area and chicken and rice left in the stove a year after they closed, like everyone had just dematerialized. The wife calls from the other room. I climb out of my rut just in time to hear a knock on the door. It's a man in a suit selling suits and I'm in the market and the one he has fits like a glove and I pay him \$300 and it's a great deal because now I'm going to wear a suit everyday and people are going to notice it and reward me with offers of money and friendship and more, and it's the more that I'm really after. I make my way back into the bedroom to find the wife reading to the children. She looks up long enough to notice I'm wearing a suit. The two youngest laugh because I'm all dressed up and wearing a suit to bed is funny. The oldest knows I'm not going to bed and looks toward her mother for comfort who responds by calmly continuing to read. The oldest slides even closer to her mother. The bathroom door is open and I can see myself in the mirror. I look good though I am barefoot and my feet are caked in mud. I walk into the bathroom and close the door behind me. Being careful not to get any mud on my suit I remove my clothes and hang them on a hook in the wall and stand before the great mirror studying my body. I am a short man, an inch shorter than average, with a hairy chest, scarred abdomen, and a tramp stamp tattoo. My feet turn slightly outwards like a duck's and I have a bone spur in the big toe on my right foot. My head is extra-large. I have been cutting my own hair since I was a teenager. I can grow a full beard in two weeks. My eyebrows are thick and have a scar splitting the one over my right eye. Looking at myself I think about nudity and Adam and Eve and God and how when I was a kid I wished Adam had never eaten the apple because if he hadn't, everyone would be naked, but then again, in that case, nudity wouldn't tempt and I seem to like sinning. I turn on the shower and wait for it to get hot. I use my stiff big toe to drag the scale out from under the towel rack and step on it. The digital numbers

pretend to calculate before flashing the results: 125 pounds. I push the scale back under the towel rack and wonder if I'm getting sick. I decide to be happy. The shower is hot and I'm safe and I don't have to go anywhere and if anything happens the dog will bark so as long as I can't hear children yelling or the dog barking everything is okay.

Turn off the water. She's telling the children it's time to turn off the lights. I dry off and wrap the towel around my waist. She's at the door. Maybe I can take her aside and remind her of our youth. I don't. I grab my suit and walk out of the bathroom before heading down the hall toward my room. The hallway darkens as she turns out their light and I know she's heading toward me.

They asleep? I ask to break the silence.

Yeah. Mimi's getting crazier every night.

She wasn't tired yet. She napped all afternoon and you try put her to bed an hour after she wake's up? We're off. I know better but I'm pissed. I'm always pissed. Nothing weighs like a death sentence.

I don't see you jumping in to help. She's willing to argue tonight. Most of the time she ignores my criticism, sometimes she bites.

How can I? I don't parent like you. I quip, knowing exactly what I'm doing. I feel like leaving. There is a bus to Mars in an hour.

You don't parent! she's getting louder. I'm still in my towel and sitting on the edge of the twin bed that occupies the room we refer to as the kids room.

If what you call parenting is planning their every waking step, then you are right! I don't parent. I'm really getting going now. I take a few breaths and consciously calm down. Her job is impossible. She is right. I don't do any of the tactical parenting. I don't make them brush their teeth, I let them

watch TV for hours, and fast food is on the menu with me more often than it should be. I think about the bus to Mars. 45 minutes and I'm gone...to outer space.

The argument drags on. By the time we tire it is decided that I am a dick. The bus to Mars is right on time and I spend the next week walking around the Martian capital looking for a judge to sign off on my name change. By the time I get home she has gone to bed with the kids in the master bedroom leaving me the silence of the house and the twin bed in the "kids" room. I look down and notice that I haven't changed out of my towel; my new suit lying in the chair where I'd left it, before the name change. I decide to go camping. I build a fire and sing songs to the wilderness. At twilight the fire fades and I need to eat. I stop singing love songs. The sun changes color near the horizon as the air cools and the moon turns everything white. I cannot hold tomorrow in my hand, or yesterday, but I know they are there. The descendants of Cain are marked for death but those of Seth fair better. Our entire existence seems to have been sown up in the actions of the first three humans, and they got it wrong. Adam and Eve eat the apple and God fills our days with sorrow. Cain murders Able and we get marked for death. But Seth and Enos. Thank God. A shot at redemption. With these two begin men who aren't cursed and it's to this bloodline I yearn. But my blood, tainted by my own hand, over and over, as I choose to murder my brother again and again.

Just a little trek through the woods and I'm in the bathhouse. Passing families, I miss my own. I can't think of them now. The floor of the bathhouse is the same cement slab it's been since I was a kid. The stalls, the sink, the door, the plywood ceiling, the hole cut out for ventilation and the wire mesh windows are reminiscent of the work of the Civilian Conservation Corp. Like a school bus or the YMCA, the bathhouse in the State Park has that institutional feel. I brush my teeth and watch the moths dance epileptic around the light in the corner. I think

about the school bus and all that happens on it. There is a gap between the ceiling and the wall separating the sink area from the toilets. I rinse my toothbrush and walk out into the night. I head back toward the van but the wind calls me deeper, into the woods.