

# A STRANGER TO STRANGE FRUIT

## CHAPTER ONE

I strolled into our middle school's theater. Jayla sat on the edge of the stage. She wore a blood red slinky dress with cracked porcelain buttons from her navel to her neck. She straddled a saxophone and rocked side to side. Her hands gripped the back of her head. I smiled. Sometimes smiles were forced like kissing an ugly cousin's face whose breath stunk of garlic. I wondered whether my lips were too pinched. I had crooked teeth. Dad thought braces were for girls.

Her hands grasped her knees. Light reflected off the brass distracted me from her very pretty face made exotic by freckles flecked around her nose and a slit of a dimple in her chin. Her long slender fingers at play like the flutter of butterfly wings added an air of intrigue as if they stirred up a mystical dust. I wished they touched me where no girl had gone before.

"Well?" she asked.

A drip of thick sweat slipped out from under her sleeve. I wanted to suggest a better deodorant. It slid to her wrist with the speed of my embarrassment to know better.

"You're beautiful. In that dress," I said.

She shrugged it off. Jayla was tough. She didn't care what you said. She owned you. Her word mattered. What mattered to us was everything. In our drama class at Wingspread Charter School, everyone was special, could be; no, was as talented as Justin Timberlake or Beyoncé or Kristen Stewart. We must be admired and applauded and never scorned, and hell, could we put on a talent show or give a desperately sad musical like *RENT* a touch of glamor and glee. But no one ever pleased Jayla or dared to criticize her. Even if they believed she was not black enough like chewing tobacco or gluten free licorice. She could sing; coo God out of the most mundane lyric when she felt like it didn't matter if anyone listened. She had not grown up in Elfwood, Oregon—home of the Shakespeare Festival and the best place in the world to grow up. But in Slidell, Louisiana. A town as small and quaint as Elfwood, she confessed begrudgingly. At twelve she had run away to New Orleans where a madam in a whorehouse rescued her. She dressed Jayla in fancy, flashy women's gowns and made her smoke and drink whiskey and sing sexy songs to men who craved a touch of the untouchable. But one bastard wanted more. He grabbed Jayla, ripped at her, clawed. She stabbed his neck with a fork and killed him. He was a bad man. A drug dealer, Jayla explained. The FBI wanted him dead. The bastard's cohorts wanted Jayla dead. The FBI begged her to escape New Orleans. They sent her to Elfwood as if she was in the witness protection program. I didn't believe any of it. Where had Jayla been for the last five years? Why would they put her in a trailer in Pines Trailer Trash Park? I was not allowed there. Unless I hunted for an exotic pot brand like Dragon's Breath for Dad's Auntie Lu who had emphysema.

Jayla spread her legs. The saxophone dropped out.

Cell phone; shit. I answered.

"The line on the peanut butter jar, Billy," Mom said.

"Mom, please, not now," I replied.

"You didn't. I know you wouldn't."

Jayla leaned over and scratched the inside of her thigh with her knee.

"I did, dammit," I snapped. "A big glob of Dad's damn peanut butter. You lied.

It was great."

I believed it would be wonderful for a kid in deepest, hottest, driest Africa, who cooked with turds and swallowed more flies than grain, to have his first lick of ice cream. I'd put peanut butter right up there. I didn't have allergies. Mom had been convinced by a teacher I might.

"How much?" Mom asked.

"Does it matter?"

"It doesn't. I'm sorry."

I sighed. "Bye, mom."

Jayla bumped me as she passed.

“It’s raining, Jayla, you want my jacket?”

She stopped. Over the contour of her butt, her hand smoothed the rippled silk.

“What about you?” she asked.

“I’ll stay.”

“You’ll come with me.”

“Me?”

I smiled like never before. “You’re saying yes?”

“I’m saying you’re my only real friend.”

She threw back the door. She dived into the downpour like an Olympic swimmer. Her black hair quickly slicked back. I followed, leaped out before the door closed on me. It grew gusty. I tugged up the hood to my jacket. Jayla shuffled across the empty parking lot. An empty metal trash can tumbled towards her. She stumbled back to let it pass. I was emboldened by her vulnerability. I headed after her.

“Jayla!”

She strode off.

“Wait!”

She glanced back. Wind cleared the rain from her face. She was gorgeous—gone were eyes, lips, the scar on her cheek—only love.

“Come with me,” she said.

I shivered. I wanted to cry with joy. She marched off into our community garden. I hustled after her. I leaped over the trash can. Between dead, stiff tall corn stalks, she swayed sideways. Shredded leaves ripped off buttons. She whipped around and walked away from me. I flung off my heavy *North Face* jacket—a hand me down from a dead lady at the foster home my folks ran. I plowed in after her. Stalks battered my arms, scraped my face. Her laughter hit me with as much pleasure. Mud got thicker. Stalks drooped, fell over. I got closer. Jayla cleared the corn. She tripped over the handle of a submerged wheelbarrow. She fell flat. I stared at what was exposed. She lay like a musical pause when the next word she sang stopped your heart.

“Jayla, you okay?”

The rain settled into steady, scattered drops against puddles around her. They reminded me of a drum played slower and slower like heartbeats after an orgasm.

“Get up,” I said.

The fury of my words met her rise. She leisurely lifted herself and turned. The rain stopped. Sky pulled back the clouds. Sunshine could not cool my lust. Mud, off her chin, flooded her bra. She shivered. I charged. I kissed her. She kissed back. The mud I tasted electrified with skin. It clawed away the boy and let loose the man. I lunged. She shoved me. I stumbled back. I tripped over the handle and slammed onto my back into the mud I now loved.

“Fuck you,” she said.

“But Jayla.”

She approached. She tugged up her dress and straddled me. Her knees tugged up my T-shirt. Her soft heat against my bare belly.

“Whatever you want,” I said.

Her hands gripped my neck.

“You going to strangle me?” I joked.

She squeezed.

“Why Jayla?” I choked.

Her eyes, her smile, shoulders—all or nothing, it made no difference.

“Because I can,” she cooed.

## CHAPTER TWO

Richard Pryor, a groundbreaker, grew up in a whorehouse. Billie Holiday did too. Might have been a whore herself. But Jayla. She was all the lies I endured to love her. I was a stupid kid, and horny, and I let her call me Charlie when my name is Billy. After our romp in the mud, I got expelled. Jayla stumbled into the office all disjointed. I didn't protest. Why would I? I was in love. I transferred to Elfwood's public middle school. Dad was gloriously happy cause he saved money, which was a blessing beyond the chance Jayla might fall in love with me. I guess I was more like Richard or Billie than Jayla. I grew up in a foster home for old ladies. Our home was more like a whorehouse run by my Dad. Ladies came and went with the frequency of whores who run off, get too old, or die from an overdose or a beating by their pimp. No lady ever made a fuss, never fought back. They sank into a recliner and watched TV no matter what was on. Unless it was the TV show, Maude. They'd nibble food, mostly frozen, soggy, too salty, and nearly cried whenever they faced limp asparagus and shriveled hot dogs. They never rushed from the table. Meals often stalked them to the toilet where what they shitted stared back like what had been on their plate. They never dared complain. They seldom lifted their head—read from a book full of anguish. Dad was no kind madam. He was a bastard, a dictator, an all-around SOB, who whipped me with switches like the ones I heard Pryor's grandma used. Mine could be verbal or an occasional slap, or like what happened when I was seven. Dad had clogged up a shop vac he used to clean up vomit. He ordered me to clean it out. I balked and ended up all night on the front porch. In a flannel nightgown of Mrs. Chanel's who had died prematurely after her husband fondled his much younger girlfriend's butt in front of her, I couldn't shudder off the frost. Icy cement forced me to tap my feet as if readied myself to flee. Shit, I believed I had nowhere to go any better, or safer. Across the street from me, on the sidewalk, Mrs. Bottles walked her silly Pekinese by. She stopped. They wore matching Christmas sweaters.

"Good evening," she said cheerfully.

I was too cold to reply.

"Didn't you hear me?" she snapped. "I said good evening."

Lips nearly frozen smiled grotesquely frigid. Mrs. Bottles dragged her Pekinese away through rotten apples. I jumped up to dash after her and explain. But Dad rapped on our picture window. He had a job for me. Mrs. Arbour had walked off and sat on her suitcase a mile away from the foster home. I ran up to her. "I won't go back," she told me calmly. "Harold called, and told me to wait here. He's got a new Packard, and we're off." I didn't have to ask. Her son had dropped her off 11 months ago and never returned. At dawn, I led her back. She wept on my shoulder. Every day, she walked there. It wearied her. I carried her suitcase. Dad thought I was stupid. "But not as stupid as that old bitch," he said. He loved how it meant one less lunch and sometimes dinner. "Money in our pocket," he said and sneered. It was a different sneer after Laura showed up when I was thirteen. She was lanky and big busted and quite lovely. She was gay. Maybe 36 years old. After a horrible, prolonged discrimination lawsuit she brought against a university in Elfwood where she taught the science of sex, she got fibromyalgia. It broke her. Colleagues, supposedly her friends, betrayed her. They sided with the student who claimed Laura had fondled her. It never happened. The alumni wanted her out. In Elfwood, they threatened to stop any funds to a gay support group Laura had fought for. They paid the student to lie. How did I know? Laura told me. Dad joked it was too bad Laura was a dyke. If not, he'd divorce mom and marry her for the huge settlement she won. So he charged her more and let her stay. Laura seldom left her bed. If she did, she wore a silk shawl crisscrossed over her breasts and a long skirt. She stayed up all night. She took heavy doses of opiates. She slept till noon. At night, she forced herself to laugh at YouTube videos. If I walked by—she never completely closed her door—she slammed her laptop shut. Must be porn, Dad told me, and chuckled. No, Dad, I wanted to protest, she watched a dog caught in a kitty door, or a mockingbird splashing about in a water bowl to the dog's angst. But after a few weeks, I had to know. I woke up to a blustery wind that slammed hail against my bedroom window. I heard nothing from her room. It was 4:18 AM. I got up and tiptoed over. At the slit of her door, I whispered, a little too hoarsely.

"Laura?"

Louder, I trembled.

"Laura?"

Dad groaned from somewhere. He snored, I told myself.

“Billy?” Laura asked.

“Me?”

Hail turned to rain and slid off the roof and dripped into earlier puddles. I imagined Laura peeing.

I edged back.

“Billy.”

Did she want me to wipe her? I thought about stuff like that. She clutched my arm. Her hand, warm and gentle, pulled me in. She was naked. Light glared against nipples, four pimples on her breasts, the flabby wrinkles around her navel, her pubic hair speckled with pink lint, her toenails long and jagged. She took my chin and lifted my head. A tear struck my cheek and slid over my lip. Her fingertip smeared it. She could have touched me there. I edged back.

“Billy. You understand.”

I don't remember if I nodded. We found her dead of an overdose at 12:18 PM. Accidental, Dad told the authorities. Accidental? Like love, I shouted into my pillow. How can one live without water, without rain, without tears? Without that memory? How many years should it take me to forget? I began to try as I struggled to become an artist. At seventeen, I painted with fury. Oil paints, as thick as blood, or as light as mist, colors flowed as if semen erupting from a celibate monk. Daffodils, orchids, columbines trembled as if shaken by a stampede of buffalo across a deserted plain. Red tail hawks, swallows, hummingbirds ripped out as if a blade thrust into belly of a master by his slave. I taught myself about color. I clutched a scorpion and the brush. With delicate strokes, I painted through its strikes. Pain showed me the intensity of red. But bright blue, clear, of a sharply hot sun stung me like the hornet I cupped in my hand. Green, its luxury, a praying mantis on the back of my hand. As if fingers were blades of grass swayed by a breeze, brushstrokes tiptoed about like the mantis. But yellows discouraged me like kernels of canned corn spilled onto a urine-soaked lap. Orange kept me from my paintbrush like the frozen carrots vomited onto the floor where we found Laura and where Dad placed a fancy rug for Mrs. Dotter. God, how I hated Mrs. Dotter. She got meaner as she got farther from sanity. Dad moved her into Laura's room next to me. That way I could keep an eye on her. Dad had a full house now that the recession made it difficult for many to pay for a more expensive home. Anyway, it was the summer, Dad told me, you've graduated, and I need you to serve Mrs. Dotter. If I pushed her to the bathroom or took the remote she refused to learn how to use, she scratched, bit me, spit, kicked, threatened to have her son, she claimed was a Gestapo lieutenant, kidnap and torture me. Burn out my eyeballs, you little gypsy, she snarled, peel off my skin, jam that cell phone up my rectum. Maybe, I don't know, I might never have tried to be an artist if not for Collette. For seven years, she had been the funniest, loveliest, most beautiful lady to ever grace our house. She played the piano and sang French ballads. She winked at me like she knew what sexy ideas I had after I mentioned Jayla. She had a deathly fear of snakes. She loved how I teased her about it. She watched soap operas. “Just fuck her!” she'd yell. Mrs. Dotter, who cowered before Dad, hated Collette more than me because she stood up to Dad. Collette became my hero. I wanted to be like her; not like Martin Luther King or Muhammad Ali or Gandhi. She inspired me to be more like Spartacus—the gladiator who led a revolt against the Romans and freed thousands of slaves. She forced me to be a better artist. She took away my paints. I drew on sheets of watercolor paper without pencil, or charcoal, or brush. I had only the memory of my strokes and what images I left. A cat leaped up and missed a crow by a breath. By the flick of its tail, a squirrel escaped a car tire as it crossed the street. A bee swollen with pollen struggled to take flight. I recalled what image graced what paper. With few words and grand expressions, I showed Collette what I had drawn. It almost made her happy. By then, she no longer watched soap operas. Every time a man decides to fuck someone, Collette shrieked his cock was a snake. Sometimes a water moccasin, cobra, or a coral snake, she whimpered. I could not joke her out of it. Dad sold off the piano. I inspired her to play the piano without any keys. We tapped our fingers on thighs, on the dinner table to the ire of Dad. It quickly became difficult for me to follow. The tunes had such beauty, harmony, soul. To the end of spring we played. Until Dad's Aunt Lu died of emphysema. He inherited her recently deceased husband's '67 Chevy Camaro. It leaked oil and to catch the drips, Dad used my blank sketches. One fluttered out from under the car and chased Mom's kitten, Sweetie. I caught the sketch and wanted to clutch Dad's head and shove his face into the flames of our gas stove. I'd burn off all those stupid sneers. I rushed back into the house. A bottle of beer clinked against another after Dad bumped the rickety TV table. I peered into the living room. There were five beer bottles on it. He was not drunk enough to kill. He lunged out and kicked Mom after she lifted off a bottle half filled. She drifted by me. On her frail bare

shoulder, scalloped collar of her blouse nearly ripped off, Sweetie purred into her ear as if she was Patsy Cline—the way Mom wept through her smile to me. I turned to comfort her. Dad leaned his burly body, freshly scrubbed with *Lava* soap, over my back. Its scent like a punch from a boxer's glove to the face.

"Collette, she's givin' up. Be dead by morning. If you want to see her," he said.

I wrenched around and struggled to push past him. I busted free.

"You're always be a pussy," he snorted.

I stepped beyond her doorway. An unfamiliar baby blue cotton thermal blanket bundled around her feet. On her back, Collette was naked. Light gagged by dusty sunlight draped her body with the hint of death. Most old ladies who choose to die never say another word. They are here, but already away. They turn their chapped lips from a wet sponge. No water, no food, no way; Collette would never give up. What had Dad done? No, what should I have done?

Toe caught in weave wiggled free. I smiled as if my lips were severely chapped. She was alive. She had stayed alive to say good-bye. I wept.

"Garçon stupide."

I walked, I trembled, I approached, as if the bones in my legs vibrated with the hoarse voice of those last performances of a worn-out Billie Holiday. Eyes rose out of her stupor like an alligator's out of mud.

"You will not forget me."

I nodded.

Her thicker breath clutched my soul.

"He killed me. You will kill him."

I shook loose years of anger. Her chest collapsed. Breasts scraped by fingernails had clawed her body free of a nightgown I stood upon.

"Dad."

"Go."

I turned and stormed to the door.

"Billy?"

I stopped. How I loved how she said, Billy.

"I've seen what you've done. A great artist. Will be," she said.

If I killed the man, what will become of me? Did it matter? At the wall across from me, nicks, punches, brushes of blood, from canes, foreheads, elbows, had been meticulously covered up with paint from bucket after bucket I had lugged. Could I paint over what Dad had done to Collette? His pencil with an eraser worn down scraped across one of my sketch papers. Was he ready to die? I clenched my body like a fist and marched to the kitchen. At the doorway, I paused. This would be easier than walking away from Jayla, or dabbing a cut on Mom's forehead with peroxide, or burying Rascal, the pup he promised me. To kill the bastard. He sat, slouched over a tiny computer desk. His thick mop of black hair wet with fluorescent glare. Suds crusted around his ear. A rip in his threadbare T-shirt revealed a mole scratched off. Blood oozed into the edges of the tear. Go back, I warned myself, cut a piano wire, come back, and strangle him. But no, he sold off the piano. Think, you stupid shit. I looked away. Steam rose off a boiling pot of sweet potatoes. A spider fell off its web inside the range hood and landed on the knife Dad had set across the pot. I should grab the knife, yank back the head, slash the throat. Spider revived itself to slip off into the water. Better yet to thrust the knife into the back and cut the spinal cord. Disable the bastard. Potatoes scalded to the bottom of the pot. Dad rose. He stumbled to his right. Charge, dammit. I leaned forward. Shemales jerked off each other on his computer screen. I backed out of the doorway. I was a coward. I ran out of that house. I kept running. I ended up in LA. Years and miles have tried my patience to be the artist Collette wanted me to be.

## CHAPTER THREE

On the third floor of Shirley's ratty studio near Santa Monica Pier, I heard Billie Holiday outside. From an internet stream, an *iPod*, *Walkman*, a record; maybe even Billie herself I briefly imagined. A voice to carry out the murder of Dad I could not commit—a song, a tragedy she had lived for me, an excuse to let me believe the act had been done. Billie, I wish I could thank you. For the sorrow, for the fight, for the compassion you lived for me. It let me get on—walk the streets of LA, by gangs, the homeless, by those who have and those who never will. It fooled me into thinking I loved Shirley for last night. That I was the good guy for going home with her. We had worked as cashiers at the *WHOLE FOODS MARKET*. But she had worn a wrinkled soiled blouse. They fired her after her first day. She was 19, broke and scared. I found her in the audience at a championship beach volleyball tournament. She had been a striker for the UCLA volleyball team. But she had been raped on campus after a sprained ankle held her back. It defeated her will. As if she viewed a lynching, it warned her of her vulnerability. She cowered before every ball. We talked, flirted, I convinced her she could get a job at *Whole Foods*. Like an exquisite pebble, a pearl, under a murky pond, I believed I could save her like all the others I had painted. Make her feel better by bringing out her beauty.

I leaned over and pulled back the sheet. She lay naked on her back. On her skin, perfectly pale, as if the moon drained of sky, I hunted for the perfect color on my palette. It eluded me. I waited. Light, brighter, burst into the room like the volume of Billie's voice accidentally turned up. A pimple appeared under her breast. It was too much. I squatted and tucked one of several sketches I made of her under her mattress. I got up and turned. I walked out. I felt badly I had not shut the door. It was LA. I went back and closed it. I was no hero. But I was not an asshole either. I might love her. But if I cannot paint her, I cannot be with her.

## CHAPTER FOUR

It's a trick. A folly? To think you know your soul.

What if you disliked the Beatles and worshipped the Rolling Stones? Or Bob Dylan against Jimi Hendrix's version of *All Along The Watchtower*?

Would that make you a rebel?

What year were you born?

Would you care? My Uncle Jack would. He lived with one hand on his wrinkled cock and the other on the first bare tit he mauled in 1967. Charlene's, he often groaned.

"You're a pansy, Billy," he said. He scooted to the edge of the rocking chair I found on the corner of Florence and Rosecrans in Compton. Its back blasted with random target slugs. "You paint like the damn pansy you paint."

"Then you don't see," I replied.

"Get up. We'll hold hands and skip through the tulips."

"Fuck you."

"Yea, right, fuck me. I should know. I was there. In a jazz club with Miles Davis. The only white kid in the fuckin' place. That music's in my blood. It's soul. Jazz. Gospel stripped of Christ."

His dark, disfigured features like the bark of an old, giant Douglas fir softened as if soaked by rain. How could I not love the man? The few bucks he gave me allowed me to work less hours at *Whole Foods*. As a tree trimmer, he was not a rich guy. He claimed he came to visit me but this time he wandered up and down Hollywood Boulevard for hours. "Billy," he had moaned as he massaged his dislocated shoulder, "I can imagine I hear The Doors playing at Whiskey A Go Go." He talked about how hot cars cruised the Boulevard like the whores in Tijuana who were lovely and sweet, and you didn't worry about getting mugged. Hell, he shouted, you could get drunk and walk over the bridge back to San Diego. In the damn fog, he dreamily sighed. Oh, he always added, Charlene was the only girl he ever loved.

Jack stumbled out of the cramped bathroom and bitched about how the cracked toilet seat pinched his butt. He reluctantly sat down on the rocking chair.

"What's that you paintin' Billy, boy? Must have cost a fortune."

I turned back to the huge canvas I had bought with the money I kept illegally from ladies who tipped me after I lugged their groceries into every *Mercedes* or *BMW* on earth. A fly wiggled free of the nipple I had painted that had revealed itself as if a crocus melted free of snow. I tried not get mad.

"No one gets it these days," Jack said. "Race back then was like whether you chose a *Hersey Bar* or an *Abba Zaba*. Who the fuck cares? It's what you like. We just wanted to have fun. Take me. I got this Syrian buddy I meet in junior high. He was in and out of heroin at eleven. In the slums of New York. Got a best friend. Gets in fight. They put his upper on the curb. Stomps on his head. Jam his teeth into his brain. His family moves around here. Goes to a black school. Gets beat up every day. But makes black friends there. They take him to a jazz bar. Called Shelly's Manne-Hole. In North Hollywood. Far from anything I ever knew, he lets me tag along one night."

His broad, choppy phrases, like Van Gogh's brushstrokes, stumbled into a kind of wisdom. They calmed me. Shit.

"We walk down steep stairs. Dark as hell. Much darker than the two big bouncers at the bottom. I hear it. A low trumpet. I think. Billie Holiday must have sounded like that during an orgasm. They let me pass without a word. Into a cramped world with no walls. Only music."

Jack had over a hundred jazz albums from the sixties. His cousin's boyfriend had worked at White Front—a store like Costco. Every night he dumped armfuls of albums into the dumpster. After work, he pulled them out and gave them to Jack. Yea, those were the days, he told me, Bonnie, the stupid bitch, Jack had fumbled about with the words, unusually strange for him, a virgin at the time, believed the guy was in love with her. Like too many boyfriends after that—three husbands too, goddammit, a pedophile, a coke dealer, and finally a man Jack believed was a gigolo but turned out to be good to her. The albums stayed in boxes. Jack believed jazz should be listened to "live." Artists like me stunted the soul. Our images were stagnant. Once there, always there. Like a bad note recorded. Jack could be stupid.

"My buddy must have paid the cover," Jack said. "But funny. We had to order two hot apple ciders. To be able to stay. Fuck, I would have drunk piss if I had to."

Jack coughed—dry, hoarse. Too much sawdust and chips inhaled. I'll get him a drink of water and tell him to go.

"Sit down," he said. "Got more to tell."

I sat back on the stool.

"The Syrian girl my buddy set me up with. Rich one from Palo Verdes. Big tits, skinny legs, cute face—like a child in a mosque for the first time. Took her to Shelly's. Gabor Szabo. That guitar of his. What it did for her. For us. I could have had her blouse off before we left. Then I did after I drove her home. I could have. But her brothers would have killed me."

"Killed her," I said.

"What?"

Jack needed to leave. I tired of his banter. To be polite had strained my patience. I turned back. Bright light against the canvas scalded out the blue I wanted from her eyes.

"Fuck."

"Your dad," he said.

The word like a blustery, icy wind punched me. I worried if I lifted my fingers from the paintbrush I gripped, skin peeled off. I wrenched around. Jack brushed off bits of tobacco from the thigh of his cut off Levi shorts. *TOP*, of course; the only loose tobacco brand for Jack.

“He wouldn’t tell me why,” he added.

I looked back to the canvas where I felt safe. The hand that trembled fisted, then did neither, did both, did not know what to do.

“But he didn’t send any money this time.”

The brush stabbed a navel too far away from where it should be.

He forced himself to laugh. “Fuck, you thought it was me.”

I turned around.

“Jack?” I got out.

He stood up. He groaned too loud for me.

“I never really liked ya kid,” he said. “But you’re family.”

He smacked the back of my head as he strode to the door.

“Just kiddin’, Billy boy. You might have what it takes.”

Thick cigarette smoke settled around my neck like the grip of his hand.

“I can’t give all this back,” I said.

“You already have. You left,” he replied.

I stared back at the canvas. I had perfectly painted the fine blonde hairs that tickled her ear and made her smile.

“Billy?”

I loved what I painted. I would never give it up. I’d fix the nipple. I’d whore myself to continue. Drink piss if I had to.

“I should have killed him,” Jack said.

In the flat surface, lips emerged like the flare of a wolf’s nostrils in arctic air. I was a better man now—stronger—the bastard, the Dad that could not touch me, had let go of the clutch around my soul. I was free of the bastard. I dropped the brush and staggered around.

“Mom?” I asked.

Jack tugged out a weathered leather wallet patched with oil and sawdust and duct tape smeared with phone numbers in blue ink.

“All I got, Billy. Don’t go back.”

Thick bills stuck with sweat and grime were lifted out like they were a drowning man. Jack smiled feebly. What he did next might save the man.

“Stay here. From me,” he said.

“Mom?”

He had Collette’s look moments before she died after I promised I would not kill my father. The doubt in her eyes I believed from what awaited her.

“Jack?”

He set the bills on a table. He tugged on the lamp’s chain. He stared at the lamp. After each tug without light, he counted a bill.

“Jack.”

He backed up into the old man he was—soul of the sixties lost forever.

“I loved her too,” he said.

Sunlight warmed a tear on my cheek. I felt her fingertip, never a full embrace from her, never from Mom who was like a frightened child afraid to love me too much, too strongly.

“How?” I asked.

Jack ducked into a silence, a sorrow, as if he fell a tree that crushed a man.

“Slapped her,” he mumbled.

He did not have to explain. Enough, too much for Mom to endure. Was it better for her to be dead than to have no will to fight back? Was she like a baby seal, bloody and fatigued, battered by a turbulent sea, unable to climb onto the cliff, who fell and floated into the bliss of a serene sea? My arms should have heaved her up onto the cliff. I turned to the canvas as if it was her. Its whiteness between navel and nipple became her belly



that clawed up to her dislocated jaw, the shattered bones, bruises, limps, splintered eyebrow, bangs crusted to the blood. Whatever moments of recovery allowed a trembling hand to slice a banana for me were gone. Those *Cheerios* the slices set upon. They were without milk; always would be. Dryness choked me.

“Mom,” I whispered.

Jack hummed hoarsely. “Walkin’ After Midnight.” Patsy Cline. Jack. He wept.

I charged around. “Don’t you dare!” I shouted. He did not see me. “Fuck you! You could have!” I cried and my elbow punched the canvas behind me.

He wanted to explain but tears flushed out an anguish I had never seen in any man.

“An accident. It was an accident. Like all the others,” I said. “Wasn’t it, you mother fucker?”

Jack nodded.

“You nod? That’s all you got,” I said.

With his one longer fingernail, Jack clawed off a drop of red paint dried on the lampshade.

“Take the money. Stay. I’ll take care of it.”

“You won’t,” I replied.

“I will.”

“I will.”

I joined Jack at the table.

“Billy, you got everything to lose. I already have.”

“I have nothing.”

“He’s nothing. Don’t let him to do this.”

“He’s everything. I have to.”