

HONOURABLE MENTION

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THE GREAT LAKES

I PULL THE ECONOLINE off the highway and veer north past bald and wintry expanses, blanketed farmland cast in the sky's grey light, snow-poking twigs that somehow avoided the machines' great autumnal cull, until we catch a glimpse of water. Lake Huron is enormous, a fresh-water sea, purest black to the horizon except for the diamond tips that reflect light from the highbeams. Gill and I once lay down on a tiny lake and listened to the sound of monsters underneath the ice. But, like a bottle of gin in the icebox, the Great Lakes don't freeze.

"This is the middle of fuckin' nowhere." Brian keeps a tallboy pressed between his thighs and after every drink he sucks at the moat around the aluminum lip.

The roads roughen and shrink and the van lurches as it shifts gears. It wakes Gill in the backseat, frees her from the arms of Nez, and in my rearview mirror she's upright and squinting through her window, surveying the two-laned roads. Nez's face is still heavy with sleep. His arms absently grope for her and she smiles at his clumsy affections.

It would be easier if Nez were an asshole.

"Tell me this isn't the middle of nowhere." Brian upends his can, shakes out the dregs of lager, and flattens it under foot. We're curving with the edge of the lake and a treeline mostly separates us from the frozen beach.

Gill draws hearts in the fog on her window and rubs them out with the coarse sleeve of her sweater.

Soon there are streetlights, rows of aluminum-clad houses, mummified tools buried beneath blue tarps, cars blanketed in a clean layer of white. On the front porches are holes in the snow where the cigarette butts have melted through, a debt to be paid come the spring thaw. We reach a strip of chain restaurants, names familiar to every stomach in small-town Ontario.

Gill points us off the road and we find the venue's sign sharing the same awning as The Golden Griddle. The Econoline grunts to a stop and the amps in the back knock into each other.

“A fuckin’ pancake house.” Brian opens his door and spits.

“Hey, hey.” Nez is still groggy. “We don’t know anything yet.”

Our venue and The Golden Griddle. There is only one front entrance, a glass door with a sign that says OPEN COME ON IN. The lot is heavily salted and the ground crunches as we walk. Inside we are greeted by a large table of elderly people, a lonely middle-aged man reading the newspaper, a few awkward highschool kids whispering in the corner. They look at us like we’ve ruined the atmosphere, like we’re grubby musicians from the big city.

From the kitchen comes the booker, faded tattoo creeping out from under his polo shirt, thin gold chain, one tiny glinting stud in his ear, the general bloating of time. He is our future, the death of all musicians. He puts two plates of pancakes on the pick-up counter and walks straight to Gillian. When a woman fronts a band of men, the men are anonymous.

“Hey, I’m Nitro.” He pumps her hand and grimaces like he’s draining her life force. “Stoked you could make it. Stage is just on the other side, there.”

He points to a cloth partition along one side of the tables. Gill and I used to rent the living room of a shared house; a curtain circled our bed, our intimacy on one side and people watching television on the other. This is what the pancake house’s stage barrier looks like.

Nitro scratches his little paunch. “No soundcheck, what with everybody having dinner, but we can do line checks just before you start.”

He holds up one edge of the filthy curtain. Nine-inch drum riser he built in his garage, battered PA speakers on each side of the stage, four-channel mixing board on a folding card table. Our jam space is more elaborate than this, but Nitro looks proud.

We make our way back into the cold and unload from the rear door of the van.

“I’m not playing the fuckin’ Golden Griddle.” Brian, on cue.

Nez smiles, hands out, palms upturned. “It’s not the Golden Griddle, bud. Just attached.”

Brian ignores him, whittles down Gillian. “What’s next, our triumphant return to the Chicken Shack?”

Our third night out, a woman had crawled onto the stage of the Chicken Shack, sat in Nez’s lap, and licked his face. Gill refused to play until the woman was removed from the bar. The woman was the manager’s girlfriend. We didn’t get paid by the Chicken Shack.

Brian looks to me for support. “C’mon. They’re gonna pay us in pancakes, two free shots of fuckin’ syrup at the bar.”

“I don’t see anyone else booking the shows.” Gill walks away, carrying an amp. Nez follows.

The wind picks up. Brian’s standing in just a t-shirt. He pushes my shoulder. “Thanks a lot, chatty.”

“Do you think Nitro is his surname or given name?” I ask.

Touring. Strings rust after two sweaty shows, and replacing them means your guitar won’t stay in tune. Dirty socks. Bread for every meal, coffee every hour. Can’t shit, or can’t stop shitting. People and places without names, interchangeable. Hundreds of kilometres with no muffler, engine troubles immediately after a tune-up. Performance as revelation, shows as gospel. A thousand thirty-second conversations. The best and worst nights of your life. Less money than you were guaranteed. A stranger and her bed. Drinking, drunk, or hung over. Until one day you stop drinking for good.

“Are you sure? Is three weeks going to be challenging for you?”

“It’s fine, Gill.”

“Nez’s a really nice guy.”

“Christ. I’ve known him a lot longer than you.”

“Don’t be a prick. I’m just saying. This doesn’t have to be awkward.”

“Nobody said ‘awkward.’ It’s fine.”

We load in. Nez’s drums are on the riser, along with the amps. The rest of us have to stand on the floor. Nitro sets up two microphones, one in front of Gillian and one in front of me. The rest of the sound is off the stage.

“What about the opening act?” Gill’s replacing her strings.

“Yeah, no.” Nitro laughs. “Terry got picked up for another DUI. I told that fucknut they were gonna catch him. Anyway, tried to get some other boys, but you know how it is.”

Brian looks at me, desperate.

I look in my wallet. Empty. “Any complimentary food or beer?”

“For sure! A free bottle for each of you, and ten percent discount from the menu. Gotta take care of my musicians.”

The waiting begins. Brian quickly puts back his first beer and I order him a second with my drink ticket. Nez and Gill share pancakes and read to each other from whatever book Nez brought with him. I drink water. On each of the tables is a little glass boat of syrup with sticky brown drool down the sides. Nez and Gill laugh.

Brian offers to buy me a meal. “Ten percent. Give me a fuckin’ break.”

I'm hungry, but I'm also proud. I sit on the drum riser and drink my water. Brian worries the label off a third bottle of beer. Nez and Gill are out of sight, laughing, laughing. I'd like to put in my earbuds and drown out the sound, but the left bud doesn't work anymore.

It would be easier if I still drank.

When it's finally time, Nitro throws back the curtain and turns the Golden Griddle into the Mean Grill, the premier indie rock establishment of Nowhere, Ontario. The grandmotherly party is still chatting away. A few other loners have straggled in for a late meal. There are a couple of tables with teenagers and maybe one table of adults that look at us. We have travelled hundreds of kilometres and we won't make gas money to the next city. I won't even see enough to buy myself a meal.

Brian clammers on the stage. "I can't do this."

"Will you shut the fuck up." Gillian says flatly. The mic catches her voice and it reverberates off the hard walls of the restaurant. The table of frosty heads looks at us.

I turn around and the lights on our amps are glowing. We throw the standby switches. We play.

I taught Gillian to play guitar five or six winters ago, holed up for a week in her family cottage next to Ash Lake, just the two of us eating and watching movies and having sex. Gill got a urinary tract infection and couldn't leave the couch, so I put the guitar in her lap, showed her the basics. "You are what you do," I told her. "If you want to be a musician, then commit to it." When she was feeling better she walked off the dock and onto the frozen lake. I crawled behind her and she laughed, told me that falling through a twelve-inch sheet of ice was unlikely. She said I should put my ear to the lake and listen to the monsters. I did and it sounded like distant footsteps and groans from giant beasts.

Years later, Nez told me how meaningful his first time was at Gill's cottage, how they lay down on the ice and listened. I told him he was a great drummer and should join the new band. He didn't know much about Gill and me, still doesn't really, has only a nebulous idea of our past.

When I pay attention next we're already three songs into our set. Words have been coming out of my mouth, harmonies for Gillian half the time, melody the other half. My hands move along the fretboard without effort.

The older ladies are holding their ears. The loners haven't looked up from their newspapers. Nitro stands in front of the stage with his fleshy arms

crossed and nods his head. A couple more teenagers jangle through the front door. One is a brilliant young girl, staring at me like she's in pain. This is a sort of attention I remember from the old band.

We finish a song and Brian leans into Gillian's shoulder. "Let's play the closer and get the fuck out of here, dude."

Gill speaks away from the mic this time. "People are just showing up."

I laugh, hard and mean and prolonged. Gill, Brian, and Nez all stare at me. I'm starving and I'm broke and I'm the sole desire of a teenaged girl. Tomorrow we're going to do this all over again in some other town. I laugh again.

There are plenty of bad nights, but this one feels emblematic, a crescendo of mediocrity.

We finish the set. I take off my guitar and lean it against the amp. Then I pull on my coat and toque and wrap my scarf tight. I need air.

"You are amazing." The teenaged girl is in front of me now, eighteen maybe, shiny hair, tight jeans, loose sweater. She has a nervous smile, looks lost and, like us, certain to hate her shitty hometown in the future. She holds her hands out. "These are from Nitro, one for each of us."

She's got two shots of something greenish and opaque. I look over at Nitro and he's giving me the thumbs up: go for it, a fruity shot and a teenaged girl.

It's an instinct. I pour it in my throat before she can say anything else. Muscle memory. It's been nineteen months since I've had a drop and the first thing I taste is the self-loathing.

"Listen." Her again. "I'm not normally so, you know, direct, but—"

"Jesus, please don't." My saliva tastes like liquor. In one smooth arc I walk to the pick-up counter, swipe a forty of bourbon, and head straight for the door. Brian and Gillian are bickering too much to notice, but Nez escapes from Nitro and catches up with me.

"Hey, bud." He holds his arms. "You okay?"

I don't say anything, don't even slow down. The bells above the front door tinkle behind me.

Outside the air is crisp and mean. The snow is not fresh and each footstep crunches through the icy outer layer before sinking into soft powder. I veer away from the streetlights and trudge a new path down the hill, toward Lake Huron, passing through the treeline where the artificial light does not.

The snow reflects the moonlight, casts everything blue-white, above it a cloudless sky saturated with stars. The air draws a deep, dry cough out of me.

I should be able to hear the water from here. I stumble down to the beach and, surprisingly, the water is frosted into little peaks, as though the waves turned to ice while cresting to shore. I had no idea that the Great Lakes could, in fact, freeze. I walk onto the ice, bottle dangling from my hand. A breeze moves across the frozen waves and throws up tiny crystals. I huddle into my coat and scarf, uncomfortable and sweating, miserable. It's perfect.

I can hear nothing but the bottle.

My boots fall through micro-layers of ice, down to the thicker sheets. I'm forty or fifty feet out now, and I have no idea how deep the water is beneath me. It could swallow me up; it could be a sandbar. I lie down with my ear to the ice, facing the shore. In front of me is grey-blue snow and then an impenetrable black wall of trees.

It's dark enough that flecks of stimuli appear and disappear, visual noise, a shimmer in my periphery that vanishes when I move my eyes. They look like figures, phantoms bursting from the treeline. Faintly now I hear a moan through the ice, a low and dangerous accompaniment. I squeeze the bottle.

The first time I cheated was during a prairie tour. It was as simple as attention and boredom. Gill was back in the city. I was drunk.

Ghosts flicker on the shore, leave no footprints in the snow. My toes are going numb. If I vomited now, I could get most of it out. I want to get wasted and fuck that girl. Under the ice, a shudder.

It was like learning how to play guitar. As soon as I knew I could do it, I couldn't stop. A warm bed is always nicer than the van. It was a practicality. It was as much a part of drinking as clinking glasses, as the hangover. It was the easiest thing in the world.

I see something near the treeline, black on black. Blink, rub my eyes, but it's still there, one apparition that won't go away. Monstrous lurching through the ice. The forty, waiting for a kiss.

The drinking followed me home from tour. We fought, Gill and I, and then we didn't fight at all. She moved out of our curtained-off living room. Sometime later I told her about the other women. She took it matter-of-factly. It was me who took the guitar to the wall. It was me who broke up the old band. And it was me who didn't drink anymore.

It was she who suggested we start a new band.

I'm not sure how long my eyes are closed. When I open them there is a figure in the darkness. A ghost. My nose is running and the hand wrapped around the bottle neck is frozen.

"Hear anything?" Gill sits down on a frozen crest. I join her, tuck the bottle under my arm. Beside me she is small and human.

"Why do we keep doing this?" I'm cold and clammy.

"What else would we be doing." Not a question.

"No one cares. Fuck, Nitro cares. That's almost worse."

"Brian cares. Nez. Me. How about you?" She's wearing a toque she knit at her family cottage.

"Do you know what it's like when everything wrong is your own fault?"

She smiles. "Are you asking for pity?"

We're just a dark smudge on the ice of Lake Huron.

I clear my throat. "Where are we tomorrow?"

"Sudbury. Remember Pots?"

Our last show at Pots was solid. There was a crowd. We got fed and paid and everybody but me got drunk. For our encore Nez played drums and Brian rapped while Gill and I watched from the bar.

"One drink. It doesn't have to mean more than that." She stands up and walks toward the shore. "You are what you do. If you want to be a decent human being, then commit to it."

I consider the monsters in the ice underneath me.

I leave the bottle on the frozen wave. I follow her inland.

The Econoline is idling in the parking lot. Nitro waves at us through the locked doors of the Golden Griddle and seems unaware of the stolen liquor. The brilliant young girl is gone and I can only hope that she makes it out of this town in one piece.

Gillian opens the passenger door on the van. "I found pissypants."

Nez hops out of the Econoline and brings me in for a hug. "We're cool, hey."

Brian opens the passenger door, but doesn't get out. "Dude, you can't steal my fuckin' thunder. I'm the loose cannon."

I climb into the captain's chair and throw the van into drive. The shot is just a faint vapour in my sinuses, a metabolized memory. Gill climbs into the backseat and nestles into Nez for warmth.

"How much did we get paid?" I ask.

Everyone laughs. Brian cracks open a can. I drive north.