





## **Also by Kim Addonizio**

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...**B**ut the LORD was not in the wind: and after the wind an earthquake: but the LORD was not in the earthquake. And after the earthquake a fire: but the LORD was not in the fire: and after the fire a still small voice.

—I KINGS 19:11–12

**C**an't find heaven, I don't care where they go.

—SKIP JAMES, "HARD TIME KILLING FLOOR BLUES"...



my dreams out i  
the street

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On the San Francisco Muni bus, Rita sat facing a woman in a purple and yellow clown costume with billowy sleeves, and huge white shoes that took up half the aisle between her seat and Rita's; the clown's little girl picked up a Snickers wrapper from the floor and was about to put it in her mouth when the clown slapped her. The child wailed, the wrapper clenched tight in her fist, while her mother tried to pry her fingers open. Rita couldn't stand to watch. She got off at the next stop, several blocks early, and arrived at the shelter just after ten P.M.

The shelter's big double doors were locked up tight. Rita knocked and knocked, but nobody ever came to the other side of the doors. She stood for a couple of minutes, waiting, listening for footsteps or the sound of a kid acting up or someone dropping coins in the pay phone. But it was eerily quiet in there, as though everyone were asleep already, or dead.

Whatever they are, she thought, they're inside. Safe in their bunks, inside four walls and a roof, and I'm shit out of luck once again, which is the story of my life and will forever be the story of Rita Louise Jackson.

She sat down on the cement stoop. Someone had drawn a narrow, blue chalk heart on it and, next to that, a gun with a long barrel, pointing at the heart. It was signed TALISA '97. Rita listened to the wind rattling the dry tops of the eucalyptus trees bordering the parking lot and felt afraid of whatever was roaming the earth. A spirit, a demon, following her, judging her for the bad things she'd done.

On the bus, she had felt frayed and depleted, her head buzzing, motes of dust in the air swirling like gnats in the fluorescent lights. She hated being on the bus at night. Those lights were brutal—all the ugliness of people's faces coming clear, with sharper edges than in daylight. The face of the woman clown had been pinched and mean. Rita had felt the slap like it was her own face.

She'd imagined getting to the shelter in time, crawling into the bottom bunk that had been hers for the past week, falling asleep before lights-out. Now she forced herself to shift gears. Hell, it was early. No one should have to call it a night at ten o'clock. Old people, maybe. Sick people, and little kids who belonged in bed soon after supper. *Now say your prayers, honey, and I'll tuck you in.* When she was little, Rita had prayed for a doll that drank from a bottle and wet its diaper, for a bicycle with streamers, for her mother to be happy. Her mother was often sad or angry, closing her bedroom door, in bed watching TV surrounded by magazines and cigarette packs and pills that had gotten lost in the blankets. Rita had prayed not to be, as her mother put it, such an ungrateful little pain in the ass. After her mother's death, Rita had prayed for her mother's immortal soul, hoping it was in a place where prayers could do it some good. Maybe the clown on the bus would be nice to her girl later, saying, *I'm sorry, baby, I lost my temper.* Rita pictured the girl curled up under a pink blanket with a pattern of blue horses on it, her arm cradling a stuffed animal, and wanted to cry because she wasn't that little girl and the shelter doors were locked and her bunk would be empty, all because of a bitch in a clown suit.

All right. Next move.

She headed toward the splash of light that was a café. Outside, at one of the wrought-iron tables

a girl in a long flowered dress and combat boots sat across from a boy with thin blond hair and a clean black T-shirt and boots that matched the girl's, and they were both smoking and gesturing with their hands, talking excitedly. She hated to interrupt them, but no one else at the tables had a cigarette in evidence.

“Hey,” Rita said to the girl. “Sorry to bother you. Spare a cig?”

The girl looked about her own age. Rita wanted to ask the girl how she'd worked out her life so she wasn't alone and homeless at twenty-four, how she'd worked it out to be sitting in a café with a boy who looked like he was sensitive and sweet.

That could be me and Jimmy. We could be sitting there, having a fine time.

“A cig,” the girl repeated, a little disbelieving, like Rita had asked for her dress or something equally outrageous.

Rita shrugged. “If you can spare one,” she said.

Jimmy was her husband, and he was who knows where now. They had once had an apartment and everything, but they had sort of slipped down. They'd been evicted and were in a hotel room for a couple of months. Then he walked out after a fight, and Rita went looking for him but she got lost for a few days behind heroin, and when she made her way back to the hotel, their room wasn't their room anymore. That was in July. It was November now.

The girl flicked her eyes at Rita, granted her a half-smile and a Merit Ultra Light, and turned back to her date.

“Thanks,” Rita said to the girl's profile. “Appreciate it,” she said and moved away toward the corner before she lit up.

A cigarette was always the first move when a problem presented itself. A few deep drags and no matter what was wrong she was in control, having a smoke, a little time-out from not knowing what came next. She walked down Waller Street, turned on Clayton, back to Haight Street. The next move was obviously a drink. Having a drink was also a good time-out. After that she wasn't sure. Maybe she would try to make some money. Maybe she'd just get drunk. The rest of the night would have to sort itself out.

I don't care what I do, long as I'm away from Terrance.

After Jimmy wasn't at the hotel, she had spent a few days sleeping on the streets and visiting the places they used to go. She'd gone back to their old apartment on Jones Street. She'd gone every place she could think of they had been, but he wasn't ever at any of those places. Then Terrance came along with his two-bedroom apartment, a settlement from a car accident that left him with a metal plate in his brain and a kitchen stocked with alcohol. He had cable TV with a million channels. All he seemed to want, most of the time, was someone to listen to him while he rambled on about the state of the country under Clinton and the son of a bitch who'd run him down while he was peaceably standing at a bus stop. He gave her money when she asked. She took over paying his bills, which since the accident he had been unable to decipher, and buying needed household items. Every few days, she made the

rounds of the places where she and Jimmy used to go. Terrance never tried anything sexually with her but recently he had started, in his inept fashion, to get violent. This usually happened in the midst of some argument he started and carried on one-sidedly, until he turned to her, saying, "Don't you see what I mean?" followed by a wild swing that usually didn't land. When, a week ago, he had tried to make a particularly forceful point by attempting to push her face onto an electric burner on the stove she had gone to the shelter.

A bus stood at the corner of Haight and Clayton, pointed toward downtown. She decided to get a drink on Market Street. She slid into a plastic seat halfway back and closed her eyes against the glare of the lights and the bus driver's knowing, contemptuous look. He could tell she wasn't just a club-goer, in her tight black skirt and silver tank top, headed to meet a group of friends or maybe a boyfriend. He could tell that she was something else. Someone less than he was, who didn't deserve respect, who men could handle like a bar of soap, leaving themselves clean and satisfied and her disappearing down to nothing. She couldn't stay at the shelter forever. She needed to make some money, and this was the fastest way she knew. She hated how the men touched her, but it was like hating the small blotch of the birthmark on her cheek; it was a flaw she couldn't do much about. She always covered the birthmark with makeup, and she tried not to think about what she had been doing with various men for the past week.

She opened her eyes to slits to see if the bus driver was checking her out in the rearview; he met her eyes and smiled in a way she recognized. She pulled her black nylon bag onto her lap and turned toward the window. The reflection of her face floated there, pale and anxious. She leaned her forehead against the glass, looking instead into the city at night, the storefronts and restaurants, the bright neon bars where people were gathered. She could feel the indifference of those people, like some kind of particles in the air. The particles got into her skin and settled inside her with her other burdens.

Around two A.M., she got let off back in the Haight by a man in a panel bakery truck. The truck had wire racks filled with soft, fragrant rolls and cellophane-wrapped loaves of bread, but the man had smelled like meat—like raw hamburger. His face was the shape and color of an uncooked patty, flushed pink, his mouth a tiny effeminate bow. For a five-minute blow job in the back of the truck, he had given her eighteen dollars, a loaf of day-old rye, and a free pass to a movie at the Landmark Cinema of her choice.

The first time Rita had sex for money, she'd run away from her latest foster family in San Jose and hitchhiked to San Francisco. She took the cable car to the top of Powell Street and went into the Fairmont, because it was so glamorous—a stretch limo with smoked glass windows was parked out front. She sat in the lobby watching everyone, admiring the big vases of flowers and feeling self-conscious in her jeans and sweater. Nobody paid her any attention for a long time, but then a blond man in a gray suit offered to buy her a drink. She told him she was only seventeen, and then he just came out and offered her fifty dollars, *to go somewhere with me*. She knew what he meant by how he looked at her. She'd run off with a backpack of clothes and thirty-four dollars, so the fifty was hard to resist. And the man seemed nice; he had green eyes and smiled in a way that said he'd like to be her friend.

Rita followed him down the street to an office building, along a hallway, and into a bathroom where he pulled down her jeans and fucked her quickly over the toilet. Then he left, saying he had to go get his wallet. She waited several minutes until it sank in that he wasn't coming back, and then she

walked back down the hall, past a desk where she felt the eyes of the receptionist burning into her with total knowledge and recognition of the bad thing she had just done.

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The next time a man looked at her that way and offered her some money, she said, *Pay me first*. wasn't as bad when she got paid; she was worth something, she wasn't getting ripped off like the first time. It was wrong and it was ugly but it was easy to fall into when she hit a wall.

Plus, by then she had discovered heroin. It helped to be high—to deal with the men, and life in general.

When I met Jimmy, I thought all that was over.

She could taste the lubricant from the condom the man in the bakery truck had worn.

Haight Street ended at Golden Gate Park. The park was scary at night—the blackness of trees and bushes, the small sounds coming from animals she couldn't see. She scanned the shapes of shopping carts and prone bodies, the neighborhood homeless camped out on the wide stretch of grass. Her throat felt dry and raw, and she wished she'd gotten some more alcohol before it was too late. She wasn't drunk enough to feel safe. She should have filled her flask when she had the chance. The fear rose in her, fear of the darkness, of the next few hours and the hours after that, and she tried to push it away.

The breeze was wet, filled with fog, silvery in a narrow path laid down by a streetlight. There was an old wino named Charles, who usually got his meals at the shelter, who she knew slept here. She went to find him, walking in a wide arc to avoid the other homeless in case anyone was awake. A car took the curve of street to her left, and a few bars of Whitney Houston's singing soared over her and Dopplered off while she stopped and stood still, feeling like a rabbit on the roadside. Then she walked farther in.

Charles was on the hillside, down close to the pond. He lay flat on his back next to his cart. His dog, Sally, a scraggly terrier, was curled against him. Rita slipped a rolled-up pea coat out from under Charles's head. Neither of them moved. They were both probably drunk; she'd often seen Charles feed Sally a Styrofoam cup of beer. Thinking of beer made her thirstier than she already was. She lay down a little ways from Charles, under his coat, and fell into an exhausted sleep.

★

“Rita, Rita, talk to me,” Charles said.

He was leaning over her. His long white beard, yellowed with strings of tobacco spittle, was the first thing she saw. His morning breath was in her face. In her dream, she had been petting a huge animal that looked sort of like one of the buffaloes that lived at the other end of the park, but also like a giant roach. Then she dreamed about her mother, lying dead in the bathtub in their old apartment in San Jose. It was a familiar dream. In real life her mother hadn't been killed in the tub, but in her own bed, by a man named Karl Hauptmann. Karl Hauptmann had started coming around a few months after Rita's father left. Her father had sold coupons door-to-door for Golden West Photography—*Professional Full Color Portraits Only 99 Cents*—and was gone from home for long stretches, until, when Rita was twelve, he just stopped coming home at all. Karl had made her mother happy at



first, but it didn't take long before they were yelling at each other more than kissing and dancing around the living room.

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Rita knew it was her own fault that Karl killed her mother. First of all, she had told her mother what Karl had done to her one day after school, and her mother and Karl had a really bad fight. And second of all, Rita had stood outside the bedroom door listening to them, instead of calling the cops or trying to stop him somehow. Just stood there paralyzed and afraid, while things broke and her mother screamed, *Get out*, and Karl yelled, *Fucking bitch*, referring to Rita or her mother or both. The phone was shut off again, so Rita would have had to go next door to Mrs. Morales to use hers, and Mrs. Morales might not let her; it depended on her mood. So Rita stood there until Karl came slamming out of the room and shoved her aside and kept going. And that was how things went from bad to terrible, and how her mother ended by lying there with her throat cut, and Rita ran away and came back and landed in foster care, and Karl went to prison and was still sitting on death row where Rita hoped they were going to fry him one of these days.

Charles shook her gently, his hand on her shoulder.

“Rise and shine,” Charles said. “Time to get a move on.”

Around them and farther up the hill, people were sitting up and scratching their heads, rolling up sleeping bags or blankets or ponchos, lighting cigarettes and joints. Sometimes the police left them alone, but right now there was a campaign to clean up the park. They'd be rousted from one place and move to another, sometimes getting jailed for a night or having their carts taken away. The park was okay, as long as you got up early and sauntered down into the neighborhood for a while. People sat in doorways on Haight Street or on the steps of the Free Clinic or on the sidewalk, leaning back against a brick wall, and after the police made their sweep they would circle back and hang around the park all day, drinking and smoking and talking.

Sometimes during the day, Rita went to the other end of the park, to the Arboretum. The summer tourists were gone. She would walk along the paths looking at desert plants or trees from New Zealand or sit by the lake watching the turtles sunning and the swans circling side by side. Or she would go over to the small redwood forest and sit on a log bench, looking at the lilies and the light coming down through the tops of the trees.

“What's up with you?” Charles said. “You on the streets again?”

“Missed the shelter curfew.” She sat up, shivering.

“I prefer the great outdoors.” He straightened, threw out his arms. “Fresh air,” he said.

Charles didn't smell very fresh. He smelled like a Port-A-John that hadn't been serviced in a while. Rita moved slightly so she wasn't downwind.

In the shelter, some people had jobs and were trying to save for a place of their own. It took a long first month, last month, security deposit—and everything had gone sky-high because of the dot-com boom. People ironed their clothes at night and put them on hangers at the ends of their bunks and were off every morning to work. Others were headed the other way, from apartments that had burned up or houses they couldn't pay for, and they were scared that this was just the beginning of their troubles.

When the kids did crayon drawings, they all drew houses: boxes with two windows and a door, like eyes and a mouth, with bright flowers in the yard. The drawings were up on all the walls and made Rita think of store windows full of things you could look at and wish for but never have.

At night, she would lie on her bunk behind the faded flowered sheet she'd hung from the bed above her, listening to people talk in their sleep, to kids coughing, to a loose window jiggling in its frame at the slightest wind. She didn't sleep very well. She thought about Jimmy, and Terrance blasted out of his mind on Wild Turkey or tequila, and that piece of shit Karl Hauptmann. She thought of how she was supposed to believe in herself more. This was according to the counselor, Sheryl. Sheryl had told Rita to say to herself every night, over and over, *I am a good person, I deserve to be loved*. But after saying it a few times Rita got to thinking about other things instead.

What I have to do, she thought now, watching Sally frantically scratching behind one ear, is get some more money together and get my own place.

If I could just find Jimmy, everything would be all right.

Charles was whistling in between drags off his cigarette; it made Rita's head ache. She looked at his Safeway cart, filled with pots and pans and other kitchen junk. She checked the front of her underwear for her plastic Baggie of folded bills, making sure it was still tucked there. The morning was foggy, but she wanted her sunglasses. She didn't like people being able to look in her eyes. She put them on and the fog darkened a couple of shades, so it seemed almost like it was still night. People were shadowy, the tree trunks black.

She took out a sweater and jeans and fresh underwear, changed her underwear under the skirt and pulled the jeans up before removing the skirt. She combed her fingers through her hair a few times. I needed to be washed. She sniffed at an underarm and it smelled like sweat and the baby powder deodorant she used and Charles's coat.

I'll get a hotel room tonight. I'll start figuring things out. I'm twenty-five soon. That's a quarter of a century already. Time to get my act together.

Step one, no more shelter.

The tune Charles was whistling was "Zip-A-Dee-Doo-Dah." Rita's father used to sing that. There was a funny word in the song that used to make her laugh. Satisfactual. *Everything is satisfactual*. The mornings would be sunny, he'd be frying eggs. She could smell them, sizzling in butter. She stood on a red kitchen chair to help cook, gently working the spatula underneath so the yolk wouldn't break and spread all over. Later, she would help him in the garden, weeding and picking off snails and dropping them in a blue plastic bucket of beer. So they would die happy, her father said. She'd pull up carrots and pick mint leaves for tea and fill a white mixing bowl with the sweet strawberries that peeked out from under their leaves; she would pluck them and eat as many as she put in the bowl.

Charles was squatting beside Sally, rubbing her behind the ears. "Hey, darling," he crooned. "Hey, honey darling." He had a pink bald spot on his head the size of a sand dollar and long hair past his shoulders. He'd been a longshoreman once, working on the docks in Oakland. He said. Everybody made up stories, so who knew. Everybody lied to and used everybody else, and women in clown suits slapped their kids silly for nothing and then looked at you with hate in their eyes like it was your fault.

and you wanted to pull the kid away from all that, but instead you got off the bus and missed curfew. It hurt her head even more, thinking about how life was, how people were. Sometimes they surprised you, though. One more pearl of fucking wisdom from Sheryl, the counselor. Sheryl was younger than Rita, and she was actually only an intern, an earnest, overweight girl in expensive jeans and sweaters. “I’ll help you figure it out,” Sheryl had said. “You’re not alone in this.” But two days ago she’d left to go back to some college down the Peninsula, without even saying goodbye.

“Time for breakfast,” Charles said. “Wanna come?”

“No thanks,” Rita said.

Charles sang, “The beer I had for breakfast wasn’t bad, so I had one for dessert.”

“Dessert doesn’t go with breakfast.”

“The hell it doesn’t,” Charles said. “Later, then. Good luck, baby girl.” He piled the pea coat and a military green rain poncho and a rolled sleeping bag on top of his shopping cart of junk. Rita wondered what he did with that stuff. Pots and pans and muffin tins and rusty steel graters and slotted spoons, and no kitchen. It was crazy. He went rattling off toward Haight Street with Sally leashed at his side.

Rita’s left hip and shoulder ached. She stretched a little, but it didn’t help.

Just about everyone who’d been in the park a few minutes before had melted away like ghosts. There was only the fog and the trees, the grass worn to bare dirt in several spots, damp McDonald’s wrappers and rings of cigarette butts and drained bottles of Night Train and Thunderbird. A police car slid around the corner. She started walking fast away from it.

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The Blue Door Deli was part of Rita’s daytime rounds, one place she and Jimmy had gone sometimes. She ordered tea, swirled the Lipton’s bag, and stirred in two packets of sugar. *EAT OUT MORE OFTEN*, it said on the packets. Rita always thought that was funny. *HAVE ORAL SEX MORE OFTEN*. Men never wanted to do that. They wanted to put it in your mouth, but most of them didn’t want to get their own mouths anywhere near you, except your breasts. They wanted a doll, a dead person. Usually, Rita knew how to go inside herself so she barely noticed them. But sometimes she had to pay attention to follow what they wanted. Or else she’d start thinking about Jimmy leaving, which always brought her back—from floating somewhere beyond the moon, her head on Jimmy’s chest and one hand playing with the few fine hairs on it, crash-landing back into reality. Then she’d smell their skin and their bad breath and hear their nasty words, and she’d feel panicked and trapped.

Late last night, after she’d been locked out from the shelter, she’d found herself in a hotel room in the Mission, her skirt pushed up, lying under a drunk black man who couldn’t get hard. He kept rubbing himself and trying to push it in, but his penis, damp and wormy, slid away each time. Blues was playing on a little clock radio beside the bed. Somebody singing with a slide guitar, and then a harmonica part. That called up a picture of Jimmy, sitting on their bed in the apartment on Jones Street playing his harmonica, and suddenly she was breathing too fast, trying to get enough air, but h

throat was shut tight like there was a wad of gum lodged there and she couldn't get the air to go past into her lungs. Then she was hitting and shoving at the sweating body above her.

"What's up," he said, rolling away. It wasn't quite a question. Like he wasn't surprised, and didn't really care.

She was already standing, grabbing her bag. The hall was empty, except for a rat exploring a red plastic dish drainer. The rat looked up as she passed, looking like it had something to say to her, but she didn't wait to find out what. She ran down the stairs and into the street. She kept going for a couple of blocks, then went into a bar, into the bathroom at the back, washed and put on clean underwear and threw up, then washed her face again. She'd had a few shots of Canadian Club by then and no dinner. She ordered a vodka cranberry at the bar and ate two bags of pretzel sticks. After that she walked for a while down Mission Street, and the man in the bakery truck stopped and offered her a ride.

In the Blue Door, she nursed her tea at a corner table, watching the room. People came in for coffee to go, for croissants and muffins. A slim, olive-skinned man in a gray suit and a Jerry Garcia tie, holding open the *New York Times*, smiled at her and she lowered her eyes. Maybe he was just being friendly. She couldn't tell. The rule of thumb was simple: With the rare exception, men will try to fuck you, or fuck you up, or both. She had learned this when she was a girl, and nothing since had contradicted it.

The owner of the Blue Door was a big, scary-looking man, six feet and over two hundred pounds, and Rita knew for a fact he was gay. He used to own the deli with his boyfriend, who would talk to Jimmy about blues musicians they both knew of. The boyfriend was a skinny man in a wheelchair with red hair and sores on his face, and he looked half dead, but he always perked up once the music conversation got going. Rita could never quite keep straight the names of the people they talked about. There seemed to be a lot of Little Someones. Little Walter was one she remembered. And Sonny Boy Williamson. There were a lot of Sonny Someones, and Blind Somebodys, too. There had been two Sonny Boy Williamsons.

She was sad now that the boyfriend wasn't there—he had gone into a hospice around the time Jimmy disappeared, and then he must have died. At least she could have talked to somebody who had known Jimmy, who knew who Rita was. She was still Jimmy's wife, even though she didn't have the ring anymore, or the blue and white paper that said "Marriage Certificate, State of California, County of San Francisco." It had their names on it—Rita Louise Jackson and James John D'Angelo—joined in marriage on November 30, 1994, in the presence of Matthew Chumley and Diane Johnson, and it was signed by the justice of the peace above the words, "Signature of Person Solemnizing Marriage," certifying what had happened three years ago and was supposed to last forever. Rita had looked at the marriage certificate a lot after that terrible day when she got back to their hotel and Jimmy wasn't there. The manager had saved it for her with a few other possessions. Then it got lost, somehow. Like everything else precious.

"Fags and foreigners," a skinhead boy at the counter said, looking at the man with the Jerry Garcia tie. "That's what's ruining America." He said it quietly, though, and not like he was mad about it. He looked at his companion, a big, overweight girl whose hair, like his, was shaved to a shadow on her skull.

“That’s exactly it, Slam,” his girlfriend said, nodding a little too vigorously, so that for a second she looked like one of those dolls with their heads that wobbled on springs. Rita felt sorry for her. She could imagine the girl in high school, sitting alone in the cafeteria hunched over two pieces of cake on her lunch tray, ignored by the rest of the kids.

“Why don’t you two get on your way,” the owner said.

“Sure, man,” the boy said. “But only because we feel like it. It’s a free country, right?”

“Right, Slam,” the girl said. Nod, nod.

“At least it was last time I checked,” Slam said.

They walked to the door. Rita watched them go without being obvious about it. You didn’t want a skinhead to notice you, because skinheads would mess you up for no good reason except their own hate. Rita would never walk past a group of them; it was better to cross the street or just go back the way you came. Outside, on the sidewalk, the boy turned to the window and gave a Nazi salute, and then they clomped off arm in arm in their heavy black boots.

“Stupid kids,” the owner said. Rita smiled at him, but he didn’t notice. She wondered if he remembered Jimmy, but she didn’t want to ask him, in case he said, *Jimmy who? No, he would say, I don’t remember any guy like that. Dark hair, Saint Christopher medal, played the harmonica? Nah. I know how many people come in and out of here every day?*

She set the tea bag on a napkin on the table, put a couple of sugar packets and the Styrofoam cup into her bag, and left.

In front of a closed liquor store, she tore a piece of cardboard off an empty box from a pile, then asked people passing for a pen until a young woman with a baby in a back carrier stopped. Hungry, Please Help, Rita wrote on the cardboard. The baby grabbed at its mother’s hair and then stuffed its fist in its mouth, drooling, watching while she wrote. The mother gave Rita a dollar and wished her luck.

She sat down in front of the store with her sign. It was a good spot; the bus stop was right there. People were more likely to give you money if they had to look at you for a while, rather than if they were just walking past. They’d stand gazing down the street where the bus would be coming and then glance around, catching Rita in their gaze and moving their eyes away, trying to pretend that she was the same thing as a milk crate or a trash container. They’d step off the curb and look down the street again or turn their backs to her, but usually if they had to stand there long enough they’d turn around again. Finally somebody might finger the change in their pocket or reach into their purse. Usually they’d wait until the bus was coming, then hurry over and drop something into the cup.

At eleven, a man showed up to unlock the padlock on the iron gate across the store. As he slid the gate open, Rita felt the rasping sound of the metal inside her head. She moved to the next doorway for a while, but now the street was filling up and a steady stream of people separated her from the ones waiting at the bus stop, and hardly anyone noticed her. She dumped the cup of money into her purse without counting it and headed back toward the park. Charles would probably be there, and maybe a few other people that knew her, people who, like Charles, ate at the shelter sometimes. They weren’t

her friends, but they were more likely to look at her and see a person, not a beggar on the street or a piece of ass. Her head was starting to really throb now, and she remembered she'd woken with a headache, that Charles's whistling had set it off. She'd have to spend some money on Tylenol.

I better find Jimmy soon.

She wondered if he'd take her back.

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At the Piazza di Spagna, south of Market Street, the lunch rush had begun. Every table was full, and several parties were waiting at the bar, drinking white wine and sparkling water and martinis and Cosmopolitans, and the sound of all their voices rose into the large airy space above their heads and mingled with the clinking silverware and glasses being set on trays and chairs being hitched closer together. Jimmy came from the clatter and yelling of the kitchen, out through the swinging doors and into the dining room, carrying orders of Fettuccine Alfredo and Spaghetti Carbonara. He liked it best when it was busy like this, when he didn't even have time to think, just move from one table to another and back to the kitchen, carrying plates and baskets of bread and bottles of wine he would hand out to customers, then open and pour a little and stand waiting while they tasted it. He knew by now how to taste wine. You swirled a little in the glass to release the flavor, then sniffed, then took a sip. He didn't really drink wine, he preferred beer or Jim Beam, but he knew tasting it was something you should know how to do.

He set down the pasta orders in front of two women who looked somewhere in their thirties, pretty women with short straight shiny hair and soft blouses, small leather purses slung over their chairs. They'd been leaning in close to each other, talking, and now they sat up straight and waited for him to go.

“Careful, the plates are hot,” he said. “Anything else I can bring you ladies?”

“Ladies,” one said. “I thought ladies were old women. Blue-rinsed hair and heavy rouge. Do you have to call us ladies?”

Jimmy felt his face flush in anger. He forced himself to take a long breath, a technique he'd been trying lately. He'd gotten it from a self-help book, *Don't Let Your Moods Rule You*, that he'd found in a Borders bag someone had left beside their chair. Ordinarily he'd have turned it in, but he'd been in a mood of deep depression that day and decided to take it home. Besides depression, the other mood he'd always had trouble with was an immediate desire to hit someone when they looked at him sideways.

Then he realized that the woman wasn't making fun of him. She was flirting; she smiled, a frank smile that said she liked how he looked.

He had just been promoted to waiter a couple of weeks before. He had started off as a lowly dishwasher, a miserable month of scalding water and endless plates scraped into the compactor. After he made busboy, he spent only two days bussing tables; his boss seemed to notice Jimmy for the first time since he'd hired him and gave him this job. Jimmy was nervous about making a mistake that

would send him back to the kitchen permanently.

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“Would you two beautiful young women like me to bring you anything else?” he said, and smile back.

“How hot are these plates anyway?” the flirtatious one said. “Are they as hot as Tom Cruise?”

“Oh, please,” her friend said. “Tom Cruise is a Scientolo-gist.”

“I’ll have another glass of Chardonnay,” the first one said.

He turned and walked toward the bar. “What do you think,” he heard her say to her friend, “brie or boxers?” He was tempted to look back over his shoulder, to let her know he’d heard. Better not, though. He wanted to be professional. His job was to serve the customers, not flirt with them. There was a fine line between being friendly and overdoing it. She might decide to get offended if he said or did the wrong thing.

“Loach,” he said to Chelsea, the bartender.

“Sit tight,” she said. “I’m jamming here.”

DeLoach was the house Chardonnay. If they asked for Chardonnay, you gave them a choice of that, or three others. If they wanted a drink you asked if they preferred it up or on the rocks. If they wanted to order something that wasn’t exactly the way it came on the menu, you told them the chef would be happy to accommodate them. You took the food back if they didn’t want it, even if they didn’t have a particular reason. You smiled when you first approached the table and told them your name—his name here was James—and asked if you could get them something from the bar. Jimmy had picked it all up quickly, watching and listening. He was good at keeping track of things in his head, like who ordered what and who was ready for another drink or the check. He would get into a rhythm as he worked, and the time would fly by.

He loved totaling his tips at the end of his shift, leaving his job with the concrete, daily evidence that he had earned something for his efforts. The only trouble with having cash in his pocket was that he tended to spend it pretty quickly, usually on drinks somewhere. When he worked until closing, he would head to the Kilowatt on Sixteenth Street to unwind. The lunch shift was better, because then it was early enough to go downtown afterward to the old boxing gym—he’d wrap his hands and put on gloves, hit the heavy bag, the speed bag. Or he would run over to Dolores Park, past the tennis players and homeless people and gay couples on blankets on the grass, past the Frisbee players and stoned conga drummers. Then he’d go home to his studio apartment in the Mission, but it always felt too early to be there, sitting inside alone while things were happening in the world. So it would be the Kilowatt again, drinking shots and beers and shooting pool, or Café du Nord on Market Street where they sometimes had blues bands. He’d get drunk and stop at a taqueria on the way home, the food cheap and steaming and delicious, thick chips fried in lard, spiced meat and beans and tortillas to soak up the alcohol in his blood. Eat it fast from a red plastic basket under the bright light, pitiless on white tiles streaked dirty from mopping. Then climb three flights, sit on the couch, and play harmonica in front of the TV, the sound off, the images flickering into his brain.

Twice, he’d met women and gone home with them. Women were always coming on to him. If h

wanted to, it wasn't that hard to find somebody. He would roll off them and think about Rita. How he had walked out on her that night after telling her she was dragging him down. Into heroin and self-pi and her pain that no matter what he said or did could not be solved. He left her at the hotel and stayed on his friend Chumley's couch, and the next day he and Chumley spent drinking with a friend of Chumley's named Rudy, and that night Rudy had the brilliant idea to rob someone as the three of them came reeling out of the Blue Lamp at closing. Instead of talking Rudy out of it or just walking away, Jimmy had let his mood rule him—a mood comprised of emptiness, rage, and regret that led to mentally popping what he thought of as the Fuckidol pill. As in, fuck it all and let the shit fly. The guy was in an expensive suit and looked like an easy target, but there their fortune ended. Unfortunately, the guy had a scream to wake the dead, which he demonstrated right after Rudy took his wallet, and also unfortunately, a patrol car they were too high to notice happened to be sitting right across the street. The cops had laughed at them when they arrested them.

Jimmy tried to call Rita from jail when he got his phone calls. But there was no phone in their room, and he could never get an answer at the front desk, which was manned by a young coked-up East Indian who spent his time talking on his own phone, one of the cell phones that were popping up all over the city along with the big SUVs. The desk clerk, when Jimmy finally reached him, told Jimmy that Rita had been and gone, that there were a couple of boxes of Jimmy's things he was welcome to come and get.

Rudy went off to state prison for a year, while Jimmy and Chumley got three months in jail as accessories. When Jimmy got out, he told himself he would find Rita as soon as he got a job, an apartment. But now he'd gotten the job and apartment and somehow he still couldn't look for her. Maybe she was better off without him. Maybe, instead of helping her, he would just be pulled down by her again. He was free now, from jail and from Rita, from the burden of their relationship.

He was so fucking free he felt hopeless.

“Wake up, James.” Chelsea set a full glass of wine on the chrome bar. A full glass at Piazza di Spagna took up exactly half the glass. “Sorry it was so long coming,” she said.

Jimmy realized he'd been daydreaming and felt a sickening rush of adrenaline at the thought he might have fallen behind. He picked up the wine and hurried to the table and set it down, hardly glancing at the women, then walked fast toward the kitchen again.

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Rita could remember some things like they'd happened just the day before, like there was only the small space of a night between then and what was happening now. Riding in a red van down Mission Street after they got married, Rita leaning out the window and yelling the news at strangers. The cedar smell of the cabin in Tahoe where they had spent the two nights of their honeymoon, staying in bed or walking around with blankets on because it was cold and drafty and the heater didn't work very well. Jimmy naked on the couch in their tiny apartment on Jones Street, playing something slow and sad on his harmonica, or the fast shuffle that began and ended with the long, two-note sound of a train whist that always got the dog upstairs howling. He had a leather pouch where he kept all his harmonicas in different keys. His tattoo and scars and the two dark freckles close together, one a little bigger than the other, right near his navel. How he'd shoot up (only once in a while, though; she was the one who



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