

Rebecca Padgett

Thesis – Novel

April 2, 2020

1.

Cold beer tasted better when the weather was warm. Rylee took the last pull. In a corner pizza shop, she sat in a plastic chair, in front of a large window looking out onto the street. She selected this place because it was nearly empty, and the music was turned low like an afterthought. Ideal conditions to finish the song she had been working on for the past week. A writer's round at Belcourt Taps, loomed four days away and she was expected to have new material to share, but it was becoming apparent that today would not be the day. She needed to get to her other job, the job that paid. She dabbed pizza grease from the corner of her notebook and deposited a few dollars onto the table before exiting onto the street that was vibrating with the heat and activity of spring crowds awakening Nashville.

A group of rambunctious young men danced to the raps of a street performer whose drums were composed of plastic buckets in varying sizes. Sidestepping a rolling beer bottle, she noted one of the older bars was being renovated into country superstar Bennet Ainsley's new bar. Passing by Tin Roof, she exchanged nods with a guitarist she knew whose hands were occupied by the chords of Folsom Prison Blues.

Without an instrument, Rylee could be anyone. That's how Broadway classified you, musician or other. Jesse, the front man she had a gig with, preferred to be the only singer on stage with an acoustic therefore Rylee couldn't bring hers. Her sole roles included singing the female parts and collecting tips. She didn't bother to argue. Jesse was a magnetic performer equipped with a thick Southern drawl and a smile deserving of a Crest commercial. He drew a crowd, which drew money into all of the band's pockets.

Once inside the bar where she was performing, a bartender slid a bottle of water down the bar. Rylee knew all of the bartenders almost as well as she knew the band. She wouldn't go so far as to say these Broadway bars felt like home, but they were more than simply a place of employment. The feeling was most similar to her college experience; community-centric, drama-filled and rampant with alcohol. Bars were not highly regarded institutes of education for most, but for musicians there was no better schooling.

Broadway had its own language of song calls and key changes that could only be learned through experience. By taking any gig presented to her, she learned the lyrics and music to thousands of songs ranging from AC/DC to Dolly Parton to Waylon Jennings. Musician stereotypes were either alarmingly true or comically false. It had become just as natural to ignore the jeers and drunken slurs of lustful, lonely men as it was to belt out Shania Twain lyrics with the young women in the front row. In an industry that thrived off of tips and audience participation, any song could be called or changed at a moment's notice. She learned to drink along with the crowd, but pace herself just enough to perform without mistakes. Four hours at a time, she became who she needed to be based off of her audience. It was not an industry of comfort or stability, but she didn't crave either of those more than the irreplaceable sensation of performing. Every time was like skydiving, a thrill, but knowing she would land safely if she trusted her equipment.

The building wasn't wide, but it was long, with a bar that spanned its length. Rylee selected a bar stool at the back because patrons didn't typically congregate back there. She could enjoy the view before she became the center of attention. Derek, Jesse's gangly guitarist, lopped towards her. Derek's smile made him look a bit like a jack-o-lantern, a smile that had something to tell.

“So, did you hear the news?” he asked, practically panting.

“Uh no, what would that be?” she asked, assuming it was something insignificant like Jesse changed the set list last minute.

“Jesse got signed!” he said rocking back and forth on his boot heels with childlike excitement.

Her skin pricked with a heat that flushed her face. The room around her blurred and sound was suctioned from her ears. Rylee had never been good at hiding her emotions. What she felt, her face, more specifically her eyes told. She hoped her eyes expressed surprise because she genuinely was. Surprise that merged with jealousy.

“That’s great! Wow, really?” she said in a voice that was too high pitched.

“Right! He asked me to go on tour with him. Not that I expected him to pick anyone else, but you never know sometimes the label has other musicians in mind for the performer.”

“Of course, he would pick you! You’ve been his guitarist for years. When does he start touring?” she asked.

“The first dates are in two weeks, Atlanta and St. Louis,” he said.

He couldn’t stop smiling, which made her smile even if it was a pained one. She wanted to ask more questions but stopped herself because she was asking for selfish reasons. It really was wonderful for Derek. It was what every musician hoped for. She would process her thoughts on Jesse later. She reached up in an attempt to hug Derek, but their height difference was so significant that he met her halfway.

“I’m so happy for you. You deserve this,” she said.

All of the guys deserved it, but she knew what this meant for her. Her place in the band was made apparent from the start. She was the outsider occasionally invited in. She didn’t tour

with them on the weekends. She didn't know Jesse's originals. She was invited to join them twice a week to harmonize, to provide Jesse with breaks, and most discouragingly, be the pretty face approaching strangers with a tip jar. Some bands were much more inclusive of her and appreciated her as an artist, with Jesse that wasn't the case. She always suspected Jesse might view her as competition because they were both pursuing artist deals. He had won. As a touring act, they would be a party of four; singer, guitarist, bassist and drummer. She would lose this gig, but she would find another. What truly upset her was that she wanted exactly what Jesse had.

Rylee needed to get out of the bar and take a breather before getting on stage. Her eyes scanned the room for the sound guy, Pete, who had become somewhat of a father figure to her or what she imagined a father would be. It was maybe better to label him as a mentor, someone who had spent his life working in Broadway bars. He had witnessed those who played for tips and were now selling out stadiums nationally and internationally. He also saw those who never left; perpetually rotating from bar to bar, weathered and hardened by a loop of the late shift and functioning alcoholism. She loved his stories of bar fights, egotistic bands and the evolution of Broadway itself. Even more so, she found his interest in her career endearing. She spotted him, head bopping along to the music. She waved and swiveled her head in a motion towards the back door.

The heat of the alleyway was sticky with the pungent scent of stale beer and garbage, which was briefly relieved by the piney puffs of Pete's weed pen.

"Can I have some of that?" she asked.

"Are you serious?" Pete said, his face spreading into a smile filled with pride.

"I'm making an exception. I need this today," she said exhaling, watching the puff disintegrate into the heat. "Jesse got signed."

“Well that explains your sudden change in character,” he said taking the pen back from her and taking another deep drag.

““I mean I’m not surprised, and he deserves it. He’s talented and works the room so well. I guess I’m just a little jealous, if I’m being honest,” she said, leaning against the brick wall, it was rough and cool against her shoulders. The alley muffled some of the noise of the night.

“You’re just as good as him, if not better and you’re not a jerk. Your time will come, kid,” he said with a small smile.

She didn’t ask him to explain why he thought Jesse was a jerk. She was aware of how Jesse could do better by her. She was also aware of how Jesse treated the bar staff. He was demanding, short-tempered and expected everything to go his way. He knew how much money he made the bar and utilized it as a power trip.

“I just need to focus on my own stuff more. Maybe I’m getting too wrapped up in the drama of Broadway.”

““How’s that coming?” he asked, inhaling and exhaling once more, stuffing the pen into his front pocket.

“My management is working on maybe getting a small spot at CMA fest.” She felt a bit timid saying this. She was always hesitant to reveal opportunities because so often they hadn’t happened for her.

“There you go, girl! They better put you on a stage.”

Rylee could tell he was genuinely smiling for her, not as a side effect of the drugs.

“I just don’t know if my management has my best interests in mind. I put out quality music and nothing comes of it. There’s always something preventing it. It’s like hurry up and write and produce and then just wait.”

What Pete didn't know, what a lot of people didn't know, was that her mom was her manager. It was something she didn't like to disclose for many reasons, the main reason being that she hated talking bad about someone who not only handled her career, but also gave her life.

"Hang in there. You've been at this what three years? It's a process."

"I know, I know you're right. Patience."

"Speaking of getting you on stages, we better get you on this one," he said indicating the door back into the bar.

They exited the concealed solace of the alleyway and entered into the pulsating bar. The fresh air and pep talk put her emotions at a more reasonable level. The band before Jesse's was on stage finishing up their last few songs. Rylee knew each of them to varying degrees. She had played with the drummer and guitarist before. The bassist only ever played six to ten shifts because right after he would start his second job, as an Uber driver. The male and female vocalists were a couple that rumor has it, recently broke up, but remained in sync, at least on stage. Nashville was a big town, but also a small town, at least in the industry sense. If other musicians didn't know who you were, you weren't trying hard enough or worse you weren't impressing anyone.

Talking with Pete resurfaced the reality of the meeting tomorrow. Rylee wanted to manage her career on her own, but the reality of it was she needed her mom. Her mom was an entertainment lawyer and once had her own brief stint in the music industry. Rylee knew to be grateful to have a mom that so truly and passionately supported her dreams but couldn't help but to feel unsettlingly privileged when so many of her fellow artists and musicians were struggling for the money to afford a manager and connections to even get a foot in the door. Rylee didn't

necessarily need to play on Broadway, but she felt she needed to pay her dues on the famed street like the many before her.

The band had finished their set and was hurriedly packing away their gear as Jesse stood by attentively. He was adamant about being punctual with their start time. He knew that long stretches of time without music or performance led people to other bars. She knew the pressure of feeling rushed off stage. For this reason, she hung back by the bar. She had nothing to set up anyways. When she did hop on stage, Jesse exchanged the usual greetings to the band and nodded to them that it was time for the downbeat.

Chords and drumbeats and voices summoned patrons from the outskirts of the bar to the front of the stage. Throngs and clumps of passersby entered, lured by the kinetic energy of Jesse, Rylee and the band. Performing didn't leave extra room for thinking about anything except how her voice sounded, what her body was doing, and how the crowd reacted to both. There was the awareness of those with her on stage, but instead of being their human selves, to Rylee, they transformed into their instruments.

It happened every time she heard music. She didn't even have to be on stage to be transported. In childhood, she memorized all of the songs on her favorite cartoons. In middle school, she took her first music theory class. After this she couldn't help but to learn the parts to every instrument that played on the Top 40 songs. Her skin would erupt in pink welts from singing in the shower for too long. Transfixed, her mother called it. Rylee knew she was inside of the music. It was a safe and soft place even when the rhythm was hard or heavy. It was a space where the outside world couldn't reach her. She was cognizant of her audience; the swaying bodies and the glaze-eyed stares. She was aware that her performance was ultimately for them, but it was also for her.

The first hour of the set proceeded with songs they loved to play, song requests that were both expected and unexpected, and roves of intoxicated bachelor and bachelorette parties. She was only jolted into reality when Jesse spoke into the microphone.

“Alright everybody I know you’ve been enjoying our show because I can see you dancing and singing along out there. Our jar girl is going to come around so you can show us how much you really love us!”

She felt an unfamiliar prickling of defiance. How had she never noticed he called her the jar girl? More importantly the jar girl without a name. Not even Rylee the jar girl or better yet, Rylee the singer. She briefly envisioned herself throwing the bucket at his head. Instead, she took a deep breath and plunged herself into the crowd.

Jostling her way through the pungent and perspiring bodies, she greeted faces that either graciously gave, replied that they didn’t carry cash or the worst response, pretended to not see or hear her. She tried to nudge her way back to the stage, but the bar was so tightly packed that she decided to embody a fish and let the school of people surrounding her push her upstream. A firm body pressed against her, grabbing her backside in a handful. Plenty of people, had taken advantage of crowded spaces to touch her arm as they moved passed or have their hand linger a beat too long at the small of her back. This was different. This was brimming with aggression and intent. She turned on her heel as three men in their mid-twenties tried to hide their snickers.

“Who touched me?” she said as loudly. The men’s eyes widened at her voice. Others had turned to listen. People were always shocked at how such a small woman could emit such noise.

“Wasn’t us?” the tallest man in a backwards baseball cap said with a shrug.



“Who do you think you are? What would ever make you think that’s ok?” Her voice rose and she stepped closer to the men. She could feel others around her looking intensely. No one stepped in or spoke though, as if they wanted to see how this played out.

“Calm down. We said it wasn’t us,” ballcap said, backing away hands up in surrender, but on his face was still that small sickening smile.

“Calm down?” she said with a laugh. “Don’t you ever touch me or another woman in this bar.”

From the stage, she could feel Jesse’s eyes drilling into her. He made a small motion with his pointer finger, indicating that she needed to get back to the stage. Rylee felt the urge to say more to the men, but she did need to get back up there. A drunken cluster of people wedged their way through Rylee and the men to get to the bar.

“You ok?” asked a woman about Rylee’s age that was with the group. “I heard you telling off those guys but couldn’t budge through in time.”

Rylee felt a surge of kindness and kinship towards the woman, the only person who had attempted to interject.

“Thank you. I need to get back to the stage. Could you try to find a security guard? Tell them Rylee said to keep an eye on those guys.”

“Yeah definitely,” the girl said as Rylee turned to go. “Oh wait, by the way you’re really good. We’ve been here for about an hour.”

“Thank you,” Rylee said, wishing she had more time to talk with the woman. Rylee pushed her way through more aggressively than usual, propelled by anger and exhilaration.

“What took so long?” Jesse whispered as she deposited the bucket.

“Had some trouble with a few guys in the audience,” she replied while adjusting her smile for the crowd.

“Drunk dudes. What can you expect?” he said with a shrug.

Her smile grew slack. If they didn’t have exactly four seconds until the next song, she would tell him exactly what should be expected. For the next hour, she put on her best performance face and auto-piloted her way through the songs. In the span of an hour, audience members bought them two rounds of tequila shots, which Rylee gratefully downed. There was one more song until she would be sent off to collect tips again. The drummer wasn’t much of a drinker and hadn’t taken his shots. Rylee pointed to the tequila and then at herself. He nodded. Already feeling buzzed from the previous shots, she only took one. In the second of silence before Jesse could reach for his microphone and she could change her mind, she spoke into hers.

“How are we doing tonight, Nashville?” she asked raising her hands in the air.

The crowd erupted with sounds. They saw nothing odd about her doing this. The band’s eyes barreled into her, but she refused to look at them.

“Did you all know that we have a star in our presence tonight?” she asked.

A few people in the crowd looked around the room expecting to see a country music celebrity.

“Our very own Jesse Kirk was just signed to a record label. That’s right let’s give it up for Jesse,” she said finally giving him a glance. He was smiling out at the audience, who were showering him with congrats, but she could see the tension and annoyance present in his clenched fists, knuckles white around the neck of his guitar. He spoke a thank you into the microphone trying to divert the crowd, but she spoke louder into hers. He couldn’t have his show back yet.

“Because he’s going on tour soon, this could be one of his last shows here on Broadway. What do you say we send Jesse around with the tip jar and y’all show him some love? Give him your money and buy him some shots! I can take over for a few songs.” she said grabbing the tip jar and the drummer’s other shot and handing them both to Jesse.

As the crowd responded in wild agreeance. Jesse tipped the shot back and handed her his acoustic, glaring through a strained smile the entire time.

“Well if that’s what the crowd wants! Why not? I should personally meet my future fans, right?” he said jumping off the stage.

She took her place at Jesse’s microphone and turned to the band. The drummer was slack jawed with shock. Derek bashfully smiled at her in a way that made her feel proud. The bassist shrugged; it wasn’t the craziest thing he had seen on Broadway. While this was a turn of events, they were all seasoned musicians who were used to songs being called at random. They were all well-versed in the thousands of Broadway standards. She made the song call, “9 to 5” by Dolly Parton seemed appropriate.

It gave her a great sense of satisfaction to watch Jesse hustle his way through the crowd, trying not to flinch when people touched him and attempting to mask his general annoyance with the situation. Even more so, it felt incredibly fulfilling to have the attention of the audience on her. She swayed, sashayed and sang as hard as she could knowing she only had three songs to do so. The woman who had complimented her earlier in the night rushed to the front of the stage, cell phone out, recording Rylee. She pointed at the phone and winked. It was her final song, “Hit Me With Your Best Shot” by Pat Benatar, when she decided to do something she had envisioned herself doing ever since she was old enough to visit Broadway bars. She leapt from the stage to

the bar. Nothing in her life felt better than strutting the length of the bar, filling her lungs with song, above them all.

2.

The scent of the sea is a true and natural comfort. It's a scent you don't want as your own. You wouldn't bottle it and spray it, because it isn't truly pleasant. This scent was the first indicator of home. Craig knew the exact spot on Highway A1A to roll his window down and let it waft in. The sea and the humidity mingling and sticking in his nostrils, hair, skin, and lungs – cleansing and purging, but lingering.

He had nowhere to be until the morning, but he knew where he was headed. The pier parking lot was first built in the 1930's and hadn't been remodeled since. It was a perilous maze to a lifted F-150. His Schwinn used to swiftly glide right through. Maneuvering carefully into a miniscule parking space, he grabbed a tattered ball cap from his back seat and walked towards the pier. It was a late afternoon light. This was his favorite time of day, the golden hour, which made everyone fall in love or believe in the possibility of it. Champagne and rose hued light refracted off of the waves.

The memories of this place swelled towards him. Coronas concealed in paper bags and joints cupped within clammy hands to keep the sea breeze from extinguishing them. A girl's mouth tasting of Smirnoff and lip gloss; the artificial fruit scent still stirring something within him. Ginny Fernandez, the new girl at his high school whose parents were both from Spain, making her an exotic treasure he often dug around in the sand with. Her initials and his were still etched into the pier post. Somehow, his handwriting was more legible with a pocketknife. Of all the beach blanket rendezvous, buried cigarette butts, and breathless runs stumbling across the

sand at the first blue-red blaze of cop car lights, his most cherished moments here were spent alone.

He and mama anticipated Saturdays. She worked late at the department store on Friday night, but had Saturday mornings off. Saturdays were busiest at the auto shop where his father worked. Craig, an early rising child, would let her sleep, and he would ride his bike around town. Sometimes his route took him to the streets of crumbling, tropically painted inns. Other times, he angled his bike towards the chocolate factory on Beach Street. He would ride by inhaling the saccharine scents cooking up for the day's tourists. He ended by cruising the beach before the sand was obstructed with neon towels, bronzed bodies, dilapidated sandcastles, and tepid beer cans. On these mornings, he felt as free as the seagulls his whizzing bike scared off. He always seemed to arrive home just as his mother's slippered feet shuffled across the linoleum into the kitchen to fix them bowls of Captain Crunch. They would then watch the remaining hour of morning cartoons; make-believe worlds that they were both too old for. It was their ritual.

Baseball cap pulled low and sunglasses tilted just far enough down the bridge of his nose that he could view the sky without a filter, he sat in the sand and watched the painted clouds change from blush pink to navy. On his checklist of two things he had to do in this town, he had completed one, watch the sunset. He headed back to his tuck, half expecting his red bike, the beacon of his childhood to be there.

Craig's bank account indicated he could have stayed in one of the posh resorts or condos that were prime real estate for pristine ocean views. He could have mingled with the men in their brightly colored Tommy Bahamas clothing and flirted with their tennis skirt clad wives. Some of them might have even recognized him. It wouldn't have suited him though. The side effects of growing up poor. Lavish wasn't in his bloodline and should he have chosen a five-star life, this

weekend in particular, it would have further defined his status as an asshole. This weekend, he needed to lay low, to be inconspicuous, especially here. Hence the bottle of Old Crow nestled between the hotel phone and plastic-like leather Bible. The Ocean Cave Inn was ideal. As the name indicated, it was cavernous and secluded.

He sat his duffle bag on the garishly tropical bedspread, realizing he was ravished with hunger. In his ten-hour drive, he had only stopped twice. On the first stop he consumed an energy drink and a Boston cream doughnut. That was all he had eaten all day. Key card slipped into his front pocket, he decided to walk to the convenience store a block over. It had a build-your-own hotdog bar and the best boiled peanuts. He once knew the man who owned it, after all this time, doubted he still did. He had likely turned the store over to his son or one of the many tourists now claiming this beach town as home.

Old Tom was still there. If the obnoxious bells on the door hadn't jangled and clanged, he would have backed his way out of the store, but they did so he pulled his ball cap snugger to his head and proceeded to the back of the store. It was as if his wrinkles had morphed and cemented him to the wooden stool behind the checkout counter. Craig slathered a hot dog with mustard and relish and a dollop of onions and cupped the spicy, steaming peanuts in Styrofoam. Walking towards the old man, he palmed two mini boxes of Captain Crunch.

He slid the items across the counter, feigning interest in a display rack of cheap sunglasses.

"I thought that was you," Tom said. "I'm glad you made it home, Craig."

Craig couldn't discern if his tone was honest or condemnatory.

"Yeah, me too. I just wish it had been sooner."

“She had a lot of people in this community that took care of her,” the man said with an unwavering stare. The look in Tom’s eyes held judgement that he didn’t need to express in words.

“And for those people I am grateful,” Craig replied, turning to leave before any more words could be exchanged.

The next morning, the greasy hotdog and zesty peanuts hadn’t proven as ample combats against the whiskey. The tendrils of sun whisking in dust motes burned his eyes. As he sat up, his brain pummeled the confines of his skull. Luckily, he was a musician and hangovers were a requirement of the job and an issue he was accustomed to remedying. Where a scalding shower and black coffee failed, the donning of an all-black suit and the prospect of the day instantly sobered him. He ate the Captain Crunch dry and it curdled in his stomach.

It seemed a lifetime ago that he last saw the facade of the brick Baptist church, let alone stepped inside of it. In his truck, idling in the mid-morning sun, he was thankful for his almost illegally tinted windows as he proceeded to take a swig of whiskey; hair of the dog. He produced a mini bottle of mouthwash he had extracted from the motel, swished and spit it into the once Styrofoam home of last night’s peanuts. The weight of it all rushed in, taking his breath from him. He felt choked and dizzy, but grabbed the steering wheel, forcing himself to inhale and exhale. There was still time to pull away unseen and pretend none of this happened or was happening. To avoid the faces of judgment, disgust and fake concern. Yet, the one face he wanted to see was worth it. It was the reason he was here or anywhere at all.

Pastor Evans had instructed Craig to arrive early. Pastor Evans was a dark cloud in Craig’s childhood memories. Flashes of images – the pastor raising his hands to the unseen heavens encouraging his congregation to recite “Jesus” louder and louder each time. The

warnings against the devil that lived in homosexuals, drug users, and drunks. Every few months he would ask Craig if he was ready to accept the Lord through baptism. Craig was never ready, but to appease his mama he had attended church with her almost every Sunday from the age of thirteen when his daddy left to eighteen, when Craig did. The brick and mortar of a church was her salve and catharsis. Or possibly an escape, an excuse to shed her past. Whatever it was, Craig didn't question. He went with her because he liked the history and soul of the hymns and the intricacy of the stories told by the stained-glass windows, but more importantly because she wanted him there.

“How's the music treating you?” Pastor Evans asked.

To Craig this seemed forced and an odd way to start a conversation. Being the last thing, he wanted to discuss, Craig changed the subject. “Can I see her, pastor? How long do I have?”

“Of course. That's why I encouraged you to get here early,” the pastor said, glancing at his watch. “We've got about twenty minutes.”

The stained glass held nothing back today. The sun illuminated the cerulean, jade, crimson and butter hues casting little, brilliant rainbows onto the oak casket. His breath caught, at how peaceful and beautiful she looked compared to the last time he saw her riddled with pain, gasping as she spit bile into the bucket next to her. Now, she was in the periwinkle dress she so adored and was adorned in the diamond earrings and necklace set he'd bought her. One of the many pointless gifts he realized were just patches covering up wounds he hoped to one day fix, but now would never have the chance.

He had offered again and again to get her out of the trailer and buy her a home she deserved. She always refused saying there was nothing better than living a walk away from the beach, even if it was a trailer. The trailer with the porch she smoked cigarettes on with her coffee



in the morning and her tea at night. The cigarettes which blackened, damaged, shriveled, and infected her lungs past repair. Like much else in her life, chemo showed no mercy. She declined a further round, instead opting to spend her final days in her favorite plastic lawn chair, tiny and birdlike, draped in crocheted blankets in the steaming Florida sun. The chipped garden gnome in the overgrown grass of her front yard was the only witness. She angled her chair so that she could just make out the glint of blue ocean across and down the street. His only comfort in it all, was that being her final sight.

He had planned to be there sooner. He knew she was fading but, hadn't known just how fast. Over the phone, through the coughs, she had masked her pain impressively. She insisted that he do the two-night tour in St. Louis, a city he would now forever hate.

Craig wished desperately that he could apologize. He needed to apologize for not being by her side when she closed her eyes for the last time. For the booze, the drugs, the women, the meaningless music that so often kept him miles and worlds away from her. For not being the wholesome, god-fearing man, she had wanted him to be. For not sporting a suit and tie every day, settling down with a loving wife with whom he could have given her grandchildren. For becoming more and more like his father.

When he shook this town fourteen years ago, he had made her a promise. He promised would use his voice to make her proud. He began to sing, filling his lungs in honor of the moment when hers had failed. Singing hymn after hymn, he continued even as the pews behind him began to fill and his voice wavered, choked by his own guttural sobs.

Craig sat in the back of the church during the funeral. He didn't digest a word of the message. His mind was on the call. He had ignored the first at nine in the morning. The phone rang again and then again. The frantic voice was his mother's neighbor, Ms. June. June had

found his mother, but it was too late. She cried openly and honestly, blaming herself for not checking in more often. Craig couldn't listen to this woman shame herself when his own shame was too burdensome. Ms. June sat five rows in front of him. He had to exit the church before she spoke to him.

He always knew he wouldn't attend the burial. They had disagreed about how one should part from this world. She wished to be buried in the ground and enclosed by a casket, and he preferred to be let loose to the wind. It paralleled their personalities in a way. She was grounded, always a home. He shrugged off anything that confined or restricted him, constantly seeking freedom. To witness her being lowered into the ground, firmly packed by soil would seal a reality he didn't want to face. Instead, he went back to the beach. Craig preferred to imagine her here – aimlessly strolling the shore, deciding to walk into the waves and swim to where the sky osculates the water.

Kicking his boots against his truck tires to shake the sand loose, he wondered if he would ever make it back here. He knew he would feel her presence without having to place flowers at a gravesite. For the first time in days, he turned on his cellphone. It surged with missed calls, texts and emails. In his career, Craig was constantly surrounded by others, but even so, he had never felt so alone. His heart thudded angrily like an animal trapped in the cage of his ribs. He began to perspire, and nausea gnawed at the back of his throat. His hands shook violently. All he needed to do was steady them enough to put his key in the ignition. Focusing on a task, no matter how miniscule was the only thing that ever made it stop.

It took one hand guiding the other to turn the key. The crank of the car soothed him enough to stop the shaking. With each big breath, he eased his truck towards the interstate. He was headed back to reality, the pattern of black and yellow lines that always steered him towards

Nashville. It wasn't until he'd past the Florida state line that he turned on the radio and began to sing along. He reached for the remaining mini box of Captain Crunch, in the passenger's seat, realizing that today was Saturday.

3.

A bar became a different place with its lights on. The confidence Rylee had an hour ago had seeped out of the bar when the crowd straggled out. Unease bloated the room as the band packed their equipment in silence. Rylee wanted to leave, but Derek was still counting their tips. He laid the final twenty on the stack and let out a hoot of excitement.

“We've never done this good on a Thursday,” Derek said.

The silence lasted. They all knew this could be attributed to the stunt Rylee had pulled. Jesse distributed the piles of money, dwelling on Rylee.

“Can we talk outside?” he asked.

She followed him out to the alley between the bars. It was clear he didn't want to be a spectacle to the band, security and bartenders still inside.

“How did you find out?” he asked running his hands through his hair. An action she noticed he did when frustrated.

“Derek,” she said.

“Are you mad that you didn't hear it from me first? I realized that on stage. You'll be losing this job and that really sucks, but at the same time you didn't have to do all that on stage,” he said his voice escalating.

“You know I'm trying to be an artist too and still you never let me sing and play on my own. Did it ever cross your mind that maybe if you let me we could have made more?” She felt the heat flaring in her cheeks and was glad that it was dark outside.

“If this is about money, I can pay you more for tonight. I always thought I was doing right by you. A lot of jar girls get cut way less,” he said.

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” she said laughing a bit maniacally, causing Jesse to look concerned. “Do you hear yourself? Jar girl? I don’t know why, but tonight was the first time I noticed you call me that on stage. I sing harmonies and female parts for you. I sing. I am a singer and a musician.”

He was looking at the concrete beneath them, shaking his head in agreeance.

“You’re right. Honestly, I’m lucky. You’re the most talented girl on Broadway by far.”

He said this with a smile she knew was meant to be encouraging, but she didn’t want to be the most talented girl on Broadway, she wanted to be the most talented person in Nashville. She twisted the turquoise ring on her finger and waited for him to say something else, anything else.

“I wish you would have said something sooner. I’m sorry it came to this. I had no idea,” he said.

“You’re right. I wish I would have too, but it’s also an issue that you had no idea that the roles weren’t evenly distributed. I know that’s pretty standard here, but why don’t we agree to be better about it in the future?”

“I can agree to that,” he said, thrumming a guitar pic against his thigh.

She had made him feel uncomfortable and cornered. She would be lying if she said that wasn’t what she had wanted. She also didn’t want to sever any ties. This town had a habit of holding nasty grudges.

“Ok, good. I hope you have a good tour. I’ll keep up with your schedule,” Rylee said trying to find a pleasant way to exit the conversation.

“Thank you. I’m sure I’ll see you out there soon,” said Jesse with a timid smile.

She could hear the voices of Derek and the others exiting the bar. She didn’t want to have to explain herself to them. On any other night, she walked to her car with the guys. Tonight, she was happy to be alone. As an only child, she was adept in aloneness. She made friends easily and was continuously surrounded by people in this industry that depended on group work. At the end of most days though, she often felt exhausted by the presence of others and longed for the solace of herself.

She passed by The Ryman, a sanctuary for the music that this city was founded upon. Even in the darkest hours before morning it exuded a certain light from within. She hadn’t believed a building could encompass religion until her first time stepping inside when she was only six years old. The divide between that sacred stage and the honky tonks was only a few hundred feet in distance, but vast in accomplishment and importance. The Ryman, to many, herself included, was one of the most revered stages to play upon. She knew that when she was invited to make music on that stage, her life would have fulfilled its purpose. She wasn’t sure in which ways, but she knew her life would unravel and stitch itself again and again before then. Impulsively, she reached out and touched a brick, knowing nothing at that moment except compulsion and the sanctity of aloneness.

Once home, sleep evaded her. The conversation with Jesse kept filtering through her mind. There was also the anticipation of the meeting tomorrow. She felt she had even more to prove. Her mind rotated to her own music career. Her music submissions were highly produced and professional. Where she lacked were performances outside of the comforts of Broadway or the stuffy corporate events that her management loved to book her for. To truly gain traction, she needed to perform on bigger stages, at notable venues, and at music festivals. With CMA Fest as

a possibility, this could be a meeting with progression and promise. At some point, she had managed a bit of sleep, awaking in the harshness of the afternoon, encased in sweat slicked pajamas and violet half-moons under her eyes. She hoped strong coffee and tinted moisturizer would be enough of a saving grace.

At the William Morris office building she could see through the glass walls that her mother, Leanne, was already there. Her head was bent as she intently read the newspaper. As Rylee entered, she hurriedly folded the paper in half and tucked it inside of her designer bag. Rylee had barely entered the room when her booking agent Beth, thrust a bouquet of daisies into her hands.

“Your mom said they are your favorite and I have good news. Double good news. Sit! I got you a latte,” said Beth ushering her towards a cushioned chair surrounding a too-long conference table.

Rylee sat, warming her hands with the latte, looking back and forth between the two women wondering who might spill the beans first. The news had to be good by the way they both tittered with glee.

“Not only will you be playing at CMA Fest as a songwriter, but we also got you a full band spot at Carolina Country Music Fest,” said Beth.

Rylee’s heart became a gymnast, catapulting and somersaulting as she tried to summon the right words. “That’s amazing. Thank you so much.”

The words didn’t encompass her excitement. Up until this point Beth hadn’t exactly pulled through with any worthy gigs, but now Rylee had two major ones. Rylee was still trying to bask in the happy warmth spreading from her center, but the conversation had already shifted to one of Rylee’s least favorite industry topics - defining a look. As the conversation progressed

into selecting a favorite brand of jeans, Rylee spiraled even further from the conversation. Her mind was whirring with how she would sound not how she would look.

“Rylee, did you hear Beth, she asked what you plan to wear to CMA Fest because Carolina Country Music Fest is the next week?”

“Consistency is key for a new artist,” Beth said nodding seriously.

“I have no idea. Sorry, I wasn’t paying attention. My head was already on setlists,” she said, feeling guilty about spacing out on the conversation that she should have cared about, but didn’t.

Leanne’s face held a look that was silently scolding her for daydreaming. From the time Rylee took an interest in a music career, it had never been a question as to whether or not her mother would be her manager. Leanne was not simply an invested mother, she was an entertainment lawyer who was once directly involved in the music industry. In the early 1980s, Leslie was a one hit wonder on country radio. Even though her music career had been brief, she once had a management team, recorded songs, and had to define a look. Her mother did know what she was talking about.

“I will figure that out by later today. I can even text you some pictures,” Rylee said trying again, with a response that appeased all. “I have musicians in mind. Mom, what’s the budget we are working with to pay them?” Rylee asked, taking the chance to redirect the conversation to the matters she found important.

Leanne pulled a calculator from her bag and began punching in numbers, calculating musician pay, and travel arrangements. Before the meeting, Rylee had gone in with the mindset of bringing up Jesse’s deal. It now seemed pointless to mention it as she had just gained two

major shows. Rylee was so excited that she tuned in and out of the conversation, only realizing it was over when her mother began to stand. Rylee came around the table to Beth.

“I want to say thank you again. I am so very grateful that you landed these spots for me. I haven’t been this excited about something in a while.”

Beth went in for an awkward embrace, practically shouting her good lucks and ending with the universal hand sign for “rock on.” Rylee had to stifle a giggle. This very same woman was teaching her to be marketable.

Outside, on the sidewalk, the sun was high and spring was heavy. Rylee was parked one way, her mother, another. They were currently at a standstill on how to proceed.

“What are your plans for the rest of the day?” Leanne asked while fumbling through receipts and Dior lipstick tubes to locate her car keys.

“I should probably start by putting together a set list then contacting musicians. Also, figuring out what I’m going to wear.”

“We could go shopping!” Leanne said wiggling her eyebrows in a conspiratory way.

“Don’t you need to get back to work?” Rylee questioned.

“I cleared my schedule for my favorite client.”

Rylee had no desire to shop, but her mother’s smile was so needy and searching that Rylee couldn’t have said no. Their schedules didn’t usually align; Rylee being a night owl and Leanne, a morning person. With Leanne being a single mother for most of her life, the two had been inseparable until Rylee’s senior year of high school. When the time came for Rylee to attend college, she chose Belmont University, which was only twenty minutes away from her childhood home in Brentwood. Leanne did not adjust well, but Rylee thrived on the small freedom of college. While she took to drinking whiskey straight and dating poets that thought



they were the next Ginsberg or Dylan, her focus remained on her studies. Graduation suited both Rylee and Leslie. She moved out of the key-coded confines of a dorm room and on to pursuing her music career. Leslie became the biggest proponent of the Rylee project.

Leanne had always loved shopping and viewed it as a hobby. Rylee preferred to do her shopping from the comforts of her phone. This shopping trip was different though. It was purpose filled. As she tried on and paraded outfits in front of her mother, her upcoming performances solidified themselves as strides a true artist would make. Her mother insisted on buying her the most expensive dress. Rylee knew better than to protest. Leanne loved having money and being able to spend it on her daughter.

It was four in the afternoon when Leanne popped the cork to the second most expensive bottle of champagne in the sushi restaurant where they decided to have a celebratory lunch. It was an extravagant gesture, but by the second glass, Rylee had forgotten to be embarrassed by the luxury of it. She felt light and loose, leaning into the plushness of the booth.

“Jesse Kirk got a record deal,” Rylee said.

“Remind me who Jesse is?” Leanne asked picking at a piece of ginger with her chopsticks.

“My Wednesday and Thursday Broadway gig.”

“Well that’s great for him, right?”

“Yeah, for him. Not for me. It’s my best gig. Also, it just puts reality in place for me. It makes me want to be more aggressive with pursuing labels,” Rylee said.

“These two shows are the right direction. I promise you, we are doing this the right way. You really need to build a fanbase first and the best way to do so is at major events like these. It’s how you gain a following, especially on social media,” said Leanne draining her glass.

“So, how did people do it back in your day?” Rylee said nudging her mother playfully.

“Smoke signals, carrier pigeons. There were also these crazy things called magazines and newspapers,” Leanne said laughing.

“I made Jesse run the tip jar last night,” Rylee said, silencing Leslie’s laughter which then resumed.

“You what? Why?”

“I don’t know. I guess I was jealous of his deal and a little drunk. I took his guitar and he took the tip jar.”

“That’s kind of brilliant,” Leanne said smirking at her daughter. “It sounds to me though like you feel some unfairness on Broadway. I know how you feel about wanting to perform on Broadway, but maybe you should just focus on your songwriting and on booking other shows. If you do play there, do it with someone who views you as an artist or do it on your own.”

“You’re right. You’re always right. These are good steps. I just get impatient with wanting this so much.”

“How about this, we get through these shows and see how they go then we will go back to Beth about pursuing other labels,” Leanne said signing the food bill.

Rylee nodded. Earlier in the day, a new song had nestled in her mind. She was anticipatory to get to her guitar and invite the song out. The issue was, by drinking champagne so early in the afternoon she now felt hazy and groggy. Her mom sent her home in an Uber, which she took back to her apartment to lay in a hammock and aimlessly strum her guitar. She accomplished nothing except dreaming both awake and asleep.

Within a week of his mother's funeral, Craig had a new roommate. Her name was Charlie, legally Charlene. A name she hated. Charlie also happened to be his drummer and his best friend. Craig had known her since elementary school. This wasn't her first time as his roommate. After she came out as a lesbian to her extremely Baptist parents in high school, she had lived with Craig and his mom for over a year until they graduated and decided to move to Nashville together. Eight years ago, he bought and renovated a spacious old home in East Nashville, before it was the hip thing to do. When he moved in, he had a key made for Charlie. It made sense, they were always hanging out and he had a music studio in his basement that she often practiced or recorded in. Her presence was usually welcomed, especially when she supplied drugs or food.

Charlie had been at the funeral. She considered Craig's mom to be her own. They had briefly spoken before the funeral, her face puffy and pink from crying. She had respected that he wanted to sit alone, that he didn't want to attend the burial, but she hadn't expected that he would close her out afterwards. Upon arriving back in Nashville, he had turned off his phone and cut off all outside communication. He had just wanted to be alone for a while. To sleep and not be bothered. Charlie had understood needing 48 hours to himself, but after 72 she began to worry. She knew just how close he was to his mother, how unwavering their bond had been. She took matters into her own hands. She rang the doorbell several times and knocked in varying patterns of increased volume. Finally, she used her key to enter his home. What she found was his normally spotless home in a complete state of disarray. In anger and sadness, he had opened boxes of his mom's belongings that he had taken from her house. Photo albums, childhood toys, clothing, and more. There were many things he didn't know what to do with. Things he didn't know why he took. He didn't want to deliver her clothing to Goodwill, but it seemed odd to keep

them. He didn't have many toys as a child, and even if by some twist of fate he had his own children one day, he doubted they would appreciate matchbox cars with missing wheels and stuffed animals with patchwork fur. It was the photo albums that saddened him most. These squares contained all of the memories he had and reminded him of the memories he would no longer have the opportunity to make. They didn't have much, but his mother had always made his birthday special – meatloaf and macaroni, a homemade chocolate cake, streamers and balloons adorning the entire trailer. The two family vacations they took, both camping. These were the only photos he had of his father. These photos were the first time he had seen his father's face since he left many years ago.

The empty bottle of bourbon on the counter didn't help his case. He hadn't consumed the whole bottle in one night, but he did have a few glasses before taking sleeping pills. The combination of the two caused Charlie to pour water on him to wake him. Even in a fog and with the shock of being doused in water, he recognized the fear and anger in her eyes. He hadn't meant to hurt her. He had only wanted to be alone and to actually fall and stay asleep for more than an hour.

“What the hell, Craig?” she had said, hands on her hips, waiting for an explanation.

“I should have called or texted you back. I'm sorry. I just wanted to be alone,” he said, taking a pillowcase off of a pillow to wipe the water from his bare chest.

“Well, sorry about it but you're not going to be alone. You scared the shit out of me. Sorry about the water, but I couldn't wake you up. Thank God you were breathing so heavy or I would have thought,” she paused selecting her words wisely, “It was worse.”

“I drank and took sleeping pills. On an empty stomach. I know, I know, stupid, but I just wanted to sleep. The not sleeping was making me even crazier,” he said looking for his phone

within the covers, which revealed it was after four in the afternoon, and that he had more missed calls.

“Go take a shower then meet me downstairs. I can see your ribs and the starving artist look is not good on you. I’m going to make us a meal,” she said, pulling the covers off of him.

After showering, he put on a clean shirt and joggers for the first time in days. As he walked down the stairs the smell of garlic greeted him.

“Hope it’s cool I used the ground beef in your fridge, it was going to go bad in two days anyways,” she said while stirring a pot of spaghetti sauce.

“You’re going to make some lucky lady very happy one day,” he said with a smile, he already felt better having her in his house with the lights on and the scent of food cooking.

They pulled T.V. trays up to the couch and feasted on spaghetti with meat sauce and garlic toast while watching, *The Godfather*, which just happened to be on television and only seemed appropriate. As the next movie, *The Borne Supremacy*, came on, it became apparent that Charlie was staying the night. At some point during the movie he fell asleep. Charlie must have put a blanket over him before sleeping in a guest room. He woke to the smell of coffee. He had managed ten hours of uninterrupted sleep. They ate eggs at the kitchen counter. Charlie glancing around furtively and unusually quiet.

“What is it, Charlie?” he asked, adding more salt to his eggs.

“What if I stayed for a while? I’m not trying to move in. Just for a bit,” she said, pushing her eggs around.

He wanted to resist to say he still needed time alone, but he knew even if that’s what he wanted, it’s not what he needed. Alone, he would spiral into addictive habits, self-hate and

depression. Charlie of all people would know when to step in, but also when to give him his space. He couldn't deny the cooking was an added bonus as well.

"Truly, I don't know why you don't live here already? You know I offered it when I bought this place, but you kept shrugging me off. Besides, I have too much house and always wanted a personal chef," he said.

"You're just lucky I actually enjoy cooking."

"Take the bigger guest room with the attached bath. It's bigger than your apartment anyways," he said jokingly, about something that was actually factual. He didn't understand why she paid so much for such a small place. She claimed the downtown location was what made it all worth it.

"You're not exactly wrong," she said, finishing her eggs. "Also, you need to call Mike. He's worried about you."

Mike was his manager and had been from the start. Charlie was right, but he had dreaded talking business, and being immersed back in the world of music.

When you've known your manager for eight years, you both know the ritual of apologizing when you've messed up. Craig had messed up many times, and each time, the next day he would show up at Mike's office or house with a pulled pork sandwich slathered in Carolina sauce, a side of fried okra, and his tail between his legs.

Mike in his uniform black blazer, was on the phone as Craig tried to quietly shut the office door. He held up one finger, indicating he would just be a minute more. Craig took his usual seat on the leather sofa and picked up where he had left off in the never-ending coffee table book on the life of Freddie Mercury. As soon as Craig heard the receiver click into place, he spoke.

“I’m sorry that I didn’t answer your calls, texts, emails or Facebook messages. I’ve brought a peace offering,” he said pointing at the Styrofoam takeout box.

“I see that, but I already ate lunch. The sandwich will save, but the okra will be hopeless. Tell me, did you at least get the flowers I sent?” Mike asked, already eyeing the box.

“I did. Thank you,” Craig replied, assuming that one of the many floral arrangements rotting on his front doorstep were from Mike.

Mike settled into his leather chair across from Craig. The scene was much like that of a therapy session, which is usually what their time together turned into.

“How are you though, really? You know I’m not actually mad at you. I was just worried. We all were. Especially Charlie. She called me all panicked,” Mike said, opening the box and popping a piece of okra in his mouth.

“Yeah, I think she lives with me now. But I’m ok. Not good, but ok. I think Charlie being there will help” Craig said, deciding not to disclose that sleeping pills and alcohol abuse had caused his absence.

“That’s good. Hey, maybe you two will start writing some music together,” Mike said polishing off the okra and beginning to pick at the pork.

“Maybe,” Craig said. This had been a point of contention for Craig, the band and his management. Even before his mother’s death, he had been unable to write music that he considered good or was proud of. He had barely produced a hook that he even felt comfortable bringing up. It had been two years since his last album. It was time for another.

“Are you good to do CCMF next week? People would certainly understand if you cancelled” Mike said, his face filled with gentleness.

“Yeah, of course. I need to get back out there,” Craig said. He never cancelled shows. It just wasn’t who he was. If you promised to do something, you did it. That’s what his mother always instilled in him. You don’t give up or give in. He wasn’t ready for this show, but he had committed and would do it for her, for his band, and for Mike.

“I think this will be good for you. Take some time and prep for this show and even take a couple weeks after then let’s meet back and talk new album,” Mike said gathering the empty barbeque box and depositing it in the trash.

“Sounds good,” Craig replied, even though he had begun to get clammy just thinking about the prospect of a new album and writing music. Craig was lost in thought, when he realized Mike’s hand was on his shoulder.

“I know I wrote this on the card with the flowers and sent it in a million texts, but I’m truly so sorry. I know how close you were to her. If you need anything, anything at all, call me. You know I’m more than your manager, Craig. Don’t keep this inside of you. You don’t have to do this alone,” Mike said.

“Thank you. That means a lot, really,” Craig said, standing to shake Mike’s hand. As Craig walked through the monochrome office building with its stagnancy and narrow halls, he felt confined and anxious. He couldn’t remember the last time he touched a guitar.

## 5.

Rylee had prepared for weeks for this show, but it was an opportunity she had waited her entire life for. Leanne had rented a small RV for the occasion. Rylee stood in front of the mirror, in the cramped bathroom as the hired hair and makeup, spritzed and sprayed her. This was also Leanne’s idea even though Rylee felt perfectly capable of doing these things herself, yet, her mother had insisted. Rylee thanked them and waited for them to exit the bus before massaging



her hands through her hair to tassel the coiffed style and took a tissue to the bubblegum pink on her lips, instead applying a nude sheen. She liked things her own way but had manners. She twirled in the mirror, noticing the way her dress lifted ever so slightly. Enough to notice her thighs were tan with flecks of sparkle from lotion. She was now glad it was too hot to wear her ripped jeans. As Rylee stacked on turquoise rings, her mother entered, typing away on the phone that never seemed to exit her French manicured hands. Leanne Owens was proof that Rylee's generation weren't the only ones with technology addictions.

“I could have sworn the last time I saw you, you had pink lipstick on.”

Rylee was perplexed at how Leanne had noticed this without glancing up. The swoosh of an email being sent filled the room.

“I did, but it was too sticky. Not good for singing.”

“Huh,” Leanne said quizzically. “So, are you ready? The crowd is piling in out there.”

“As ready as I'm going to be,” Rylee said, trying not to sound as nervous as she felt.

“You're going to do great, I just know it,” Leanne said, sipping from a seltzer water.

“Thanks, mom! I'm going to go get some air and warm up.”

Rylee needed to refocus before ascending the stairs into the sun and people. She could only allow space in her mind for the music. There was something about inhaling fresh air that centered her, made her someone better than herself. It reassured her there was a power among us greater than all. Her father had been an avid outdoorsman and she assumed she had gained her love for nature from him. Hunting, fishing, hiking, camping, you name it, he did it. She had only known her father until she was five years old. She only retained a handful of substantial memories of him. One was a camping trip in the Smokies; his warm hands helping her roast a hotdog over a fire and seeing stars through the canopy of trees. The other, fishing together. The

rod got heavy and he helped her reel it in only to discover she had a turtle by the mouth. They released it, but still she cried. He rubbed her back as she cried into his flannel shirt that smelled like laundry detergent and dirt.

She had witnessed many preshow rituals, enough to learn you were either a hyper or a relaxer. After the show she welcomed music loud enough to pulsate behind her eye sockets and drinks strong enough to deliver goosebumps, but before, she took to breathing exercises and envisioning images of calm – a mountainscape, a coastline, perfectly fluffed pillows, petting a golden retriever, pages of scrawling handwritten words. Her breathing had evened, her eyes were closed and she was just conjuring the image of a babbling stream when she heard her name being called. She exhaled quickly and turned to see her guitar player motioning that it was time to go.

She had lost track of time, meditating for longer than she had even realized and had fifteen minutes before she needed to be on stage. She made her way past vendor tents and bar stands to the comfort of side stage, the rest of her band already waiting. Her mom was trying to catch her eye, to question why she was almost late. Questions she would never have answered, as Rylee was being prodded by the stage crew.

“Hey Rylee,” said a familiar voice that made her stomach drop. She looked over her shoulder to see Jesse. She had seen his name on the lineup and had hoped she wouldn’t run into him until after her performance, if at all.

“I just wanted to say good luck,” he said, giving her an awkward thumbs up.

“Thank you, you too,” she said adjusting her guitar strap.

“I was actually talking to your mom a few minutes ago. I knew it was her because you two look exactly alike. It’s pretty cool she’s your manager. I’m sure with her in your corner, you’ll have a deal in no time,” he said with a smile that Rylee couldn’t decipher.

He was the type of guy whose genuine smile and jerk smile were practically the same. She didn't have time right now to translate what he meant or how he meant it, but she knew it hit a nerve and stung.

“Right. Well gotta go though. Have a performance to do and all,” she said with a smile, happy to exit the conversation.

Performing in broad daylight was not ideal. The heat for one, but the ability to see the faces in the crowd could be detrimental to a new artist. In dimly lit bars, it was easy to ignore the faces in dark corners or crowded against the bar. Standing on the side of the stage, her band began the opening of her first solely written song to be performed in front of a crowd. Nervousness fled, and she remembered what she was here for. This feeling, the feeling music could give her and others. The feeling of being invincible. The feeling that nothing else mattered, but what she could do in this moment. Her boots met the wood of the stage and the bassline.

Rylee would be lying if she said she had never sung in front of that many people before. Hundreds of people filtered in and out of Broadway bars each night. But, she had never performed in front of such a large audience that congregated to listen to her music. She was not just the girl singer in the band. She also wasn't the lone singer/songwriter on a tiny stage at a writer's round, just the rawness of her lyrics and an acoustic guitar. She was the front woman with a band. Before the show, she was worried self-doubt would seep in, the crowd wouldn't react because she was unknown, she would forget the lyrics she had memorized years ago; nothing was impossible. Yet, it happened as it always did, the instruments around her thrummed through her body, she moved with them. Her voice found them and matched them. The atmosphere on stage synced with the crowd. She would never fail to marvel at the energy music could cultivate in a manner of seconds.

Four-hour shifts had a way of wearing a performer down, especially if the band wasn't tight or the audience was off. The allotted twenty-minute festival set was a tease, it left Rylee yearning for more. Her mind had been working so diligently to hit every key, to listen to herself and the band, to work the crowd with charisma, that the time passed all too suddenly. She felt a certain sadness as they approached the final song.

She was allotted five songs, which they had relentlessly practiced. She didn't know many musicians who would be willing to practice this much, but her mother had paid them generously to attend the practice dates. What Leanne didn't know was that they had been practicing a sixth song. A sixth song that Leanne and Beth had discouraged her to sing because it didn't align with the image they wanted Rylee to portray. It was a song about a party and contained all three of the no's: drinking, drugs, and sex. She was supposed to sing about pretty things and heartbreak. Those were a part of her life too, but more often than not people, including herself, escaped reality in substances and in other people. That's what this song was about. This what not the song that a sweet Southern girl was supposed to sing. Rylee hadn't committed to changing the song out with one of the others on the approved setlist. She said it would be a game time decision. She would raise her arms and point both pointer fingers towards the sky. The crowd was responding incredibly well to her and she was invigorated by their energy, by hearing them attempt to sing along to her songs. Her songs that they didn't know yet, but she wanted them to remember. It was the final song and she made the decision, knowing her decision was ultimately fueled by Jesse's comment. As thankful as she was for her mother, she needed to take the creative reigns like an artist would. Maybe it wouldn't be a career defining moment in a few years, but it was an act of resistance, an act of being true to herself.

It was a screw, you ballad inspired by an ex, a boy who she rarely ever thought of anymore, but every time she sang it, those feelings emerged. He had broken up with her for being too focused on her future and she went to a party that night and found companionship in a bottle of gin and a dark-haired man. She found something in herself that night that she hadn't known was there. The ability to let go and spiral. The crowd found something in it too, something more than in the other songs. The songs that were safer. The band gave it their all in voices and instruments, in bouncing around the stage and dancing. In that moment they felt more like a rock band than country musicians. She caught her breath as the audience whooped and hollered.

“Thank you CCMF. Again, my name is Rylee Owens. Thank you so much for being here and supporting live music,” she said blowing them a collective kiss.

Exiting the stage, she felt dizzy in a gorgeous way, like a child spun around with the colors, faces and surroundings pleasantly merging and creating a surge of blood in your head and stomach. Giddy and disoriented she found herself side stage taking off her in-ears and guitar strap hurriedly so she could hug her band. She had been lucky in securing such solid musicians with the help of her mom's checkbook. Brent, the guitarist, had agreed immediately saying he would even cancel another gig for hers if he needed to. Dean, a famed Broadway drummer that was loyal to no one man, had an open weekend. She reached out to a longtime friend from college for the bassist spot. He tended to do more studio work than performing, but she was more than pleasantly surprised that he performed on stage naturally, his skill on full display. Fortunately, they were all full-time musicians, which only made her set all the more impressive.

Her five-foot frame attempted to encompass the three men in a group hug. They laughed, instead surrounding her, almost lifting her from the ground.

“You killed it Rylee. They loved you,” Brent said.

“Loved us. This wouldn’t have gone off nearly as well without you guys. I don’t know, but I really felt what we were putting out and I think the crowd did too.”

“Aw, don’t get too emotional on us. Let’s get drinks. Also, solid move deciding to do that last song,” Dean said, giving her a high-five.

Rylee smelled her mother’s Dior perfume before she saw her.

“Hey, Ry, can I talk with you for a second?” Leanne asked. “Great job by the way, guys.” This statement came out as an afterthought.

By Leanne’s tone Rylee knew what was coming. She felt embarrassed by her mother’s strained pleasantries.

“Really great job up there. I mean that. You know that, but I have to ask, why did you change the last song? We talked about this,” Leanne said, her blue eyes turned silvery steel.

“It felt right in the moment and you can’t deny the crowd loved it,” Rylee said, already impatient with the conversation.

“It didn’t just feel right in the moment. You clearly practiced that song. It was annoyingly perfect, which makes it hard to be too mad. But there’s a reason you have a management team, Rylee. You’re not at the point in your career where you can just take risks. You need to listen to us.”

“I don’t see why it was a big deal, but ok, mom. I’m going to go hangout with the band, so they actually want to work with me again in the future.”

“If you say or do or show too much too soon, that’s how you lose that future,” Leanne said in a biting tone that Rylee had only heard mother use twice before.

Before Rylee could say anything, Leanne was walking away. Back with the band, Rylee put on the face of having a good time, tipping back drinks and dancing to the music of other bands, but she couldn't shake her mother's words. This performance had gone incredibly well, better than she had imagined, but it was one performance. A relatively small one compared to the crowds that amassed for the later performers. She didn't even have a deal yet, let alone any prospects. Without her mother's huge investments of both time and money Rylee wouldn't have performed here today, she wouldn't be able to pay her booking agent, and she wouldn't even have a toe in the door of the music industry outside of Broadway. She needed to stay true to herself, but maybe she could do so more cautiously at least until she had the promise a recording deal. She could make the edgier, genre-bending music in the comfort of her apartment, but it would have to stay tucked away for now, until it was time for the big reveal, whenever that may be.

The night was heavy with humidity and Rylee was just beginning to relax into the effects of her second beer when she realized she didn't have her guitar strap. She asked the guys about it and they said they hadn't seen it since she was on stage. Pushing her way through the crowd, she prayed it was still side stage. It was handmade and genuine leather, her name etched into it woven through wildflowers. She had received it on her fifth birthday with her first guitar. Both were too big for her then. There was a photo of it; her smile with two missing teeth, the guitar around her neck in a lopsided way that threatened to topple her over and father kneeling beside her. He had made it for her. It was the only thing she had left of him that both of their hands had touched.

Craig was sweating too much to be so close to the Carolina sea breeze. He willed himself to focus on that breeze, which meant the ocean was nearby. Growing up on the beach, water always calmed him. He summoned the scent of suntan lotion, the spicy sips of rum. Maybe, he needed another drink to cut the edge, and to dial him down a bit. From the VIP Artist tent, he made a b-line to the bar, Charlie trailing him.

“Come on Charlie, you know I need at least a few drinks to knock the edge off before I get up there. You can even monitor how much the bartender pours.”

He ordered two Bacardi and Cokes, both for himself and a vodka soda with lemon for Charlie.

“Don’t be like that. You know I’m just looking out for you since it’s your first performance since...”

They both knew how the sentence would have ended. He’d stopped listening anyways, his ears perked towards the voice emanating from the stage behind them. It seemed impossible that such a big voice could come from such a petite woman. Her voice was deep and strong, full of a distinct yet biting flavor. Her voice was like bourbon. It was a sound that didn’t belong to this era. He palmed his drinks and tranced towards the siren song. God, she was young. She was all energy and light and vibrance. She glowed. She captivated. She performed. She was new to this and had yet to see the ugly slinking around the corners. It was still about music for her. He envied her, wanted to be her. To feel that way about music again.

“She would probably give you an autograph after the show,” Charlie said smirking over the lip of her drink.

“Do you know who she is?”



“Apparently her name is Rylee Owens. You and every other man is googly eyed over her even though she’s practically a nobody.”

“We were once nobody openers. Now look at us, kind of somebodies, almost, but not quite headliners. You ok? You don’t normally get jealous of openers.”

“Yeah, sorry. I’m just feeling off. It will pass. It’s just my first gig back in a few weeks. My boss laid me off,” Charlie said, back to her usual quick-witted self.

He smiled and for the first time looked around. Charlie wasn’t wrong. Everyone around them, men and women were in some state of attention. Looking at his watch, he realized she was at the end of her set, this was likely her last song, and he was a bit disappointed he hadn’t left the bus sooner to watch these early performers. As she drew out the final note, Craig along with everyone else in attendance, found himself clapping in a wild, booming way that would have seemed excessive if it hadn’t been warranted. The elation was only temporary. Where he should have been inspired by such talent, instead he was made self-conscious and anxious. There were new and more talented artists on the scene every day, and they were changing the way people thought about music, both for better and for worse. Craig felt it was hard to keep up and keep true to what he viewed as his style. In the past two years he felt the heavy dread of being left behind, of becoming irrelevant. Much of this had to do with the fact that he had seemingly lost the ability to write what he considered to be a good song. This was partly due to increasing pressures to sound like what was on the radio in order to get any airtime. He hadn’t felt connected to his music since long before his mother passed, but now it only exacerbated the problem.

Soon, another band was on stage that had a new hit single on the radio. He had only ever heard that song. The band was tight and had dynamic stage presence, but Craig found all of their

lyrics to be cliché and a bit forced. He never wanted to get to the point where anyone thought that about his lyrics. He needed to talk to someone. To get out of his own head for a while. He was in a tent full of people in the music industry and the last thing he wanted to talk about was music. Fortunately, his bass player had just exited another conversation and was walking towards him. Jeremy, for such a laidback dude, was someone who could talk about anything. His opinions were endless. Craig was grateful that their conversation landed on fishing. They were debating the best lures when Charlie indicated that they should head to the stage. Their instruments were already perfectly tuned by the sound tech. Craig just needed to warm up his own instrument, his voice. He went through the classic warm up of scales and then proceeded to his own, a mashup of songs by Johnny Cash, Queen, The Rolling Stones and Chris Stapleton. When he looked out, a large crowd had already formed in front of the stage, under the setting sun.

“Crowd looks bigger than last year,” Craig said to no one in particular although his band stood nearby.

“All the more reason to rock it,” said his guitarist.

Charlie gave him her most encouraging smile before she stepped foot on stage. His band had their show down so innately that it was instinctual. Craig loved a long intro. He loved to keep the crowd waiting, but even more so, he wanted to show off the talented musicians in his band. Sometimes he thought they deserved more than him. Charlie was hitting hard, the guitarist was shredding it and the bassist was grooving along. It all seemed too loud, too much. From side stage he looked at the crowd of smiling faces, and his vision contracted. He stopped hearing the music. He felt himself sway. He had never fainted before but knew this is what it must feel like. The gasping happened in long, luscious gulps like a fish starved of oxygen. He crouched down,

bending his knees and placing the palms of his hands on the stage. The floor was the only place that felt safe and centered. It was the feeling of the music reverberating through his palms, that revived him. His vision cleared, like adjusting a telescope that was focused on Charlie's face. Her eyes wide and filled with concern. The band had been filling the space, waiting on him. It was not enough for the crowd to take notice, but those thirty seconds of fill-time were a saving grace for Craig. Had it only been about thirty seconds? The clenching and the breathlessness seemed like its own vortex that made seconds feel like forever. His band had stepped up for him, he needed to do the same for them. He filled his lungs and took the stage yelling and clapping along to the beat. He was a performer after all.

He knew the crowd could not discern that his insides were churning, and his heart was darting to his throat, threatening to choke his lyrics. They sang his words back to him and lifted their drinks in the air as a salute to the good times he was providing them. It was a power yet a betrayal to be able to trick them in this way. He had to admit the band sounded great, even he sounded good for someone who had barely exercised his vocal cords in weeks. The song was reaching its crescendo. The music was so loud the stage quivered. The crowd exploded in a wave of sound that sent an amplified electric current through his veins. The music felt good again.

In his peripheral there was a mirage of movement. Suddenly he was struck by something hard and fast, barreling him backwards and towards the ground. The last thing he saw before his head connected with the stage were mouths agape in horror and agitated dust rising as people ran. The sound was louder than he had ever imagined sound could be. It was the sound of metal and terror. A sound so loud it shocked your ears into deafness and disabled your senses. All at once, they came back in small sensory details. He had closed his eyes in defense and as a reaction to the closeness of the noise. He heard screams and commotion and scraping. He was

unharmd, but his chest felt heavy and weighted. There was breath on his neck, and a strand of hair in his mouth. He opened his eyes to see a flurry of blonde hair. It was the woman who performed earlier.

“You’re ok,” she said as on top of him, her heart collided into his.

She moved from on top of him and sat beside him. He sat up slowly, his head and body ached with strain. Charlie ran from side stage to him. He felt her hands navigating his arms, legs, and head checking for injury. When she found none, she held him and sobbed into his shoulder. In a heap of steel and shattered glass, the lighting rig that had been forty feet above the stage now lay where Craig had stood moments ago.

Although the festival had been cancelled, the grounds still buzzed with the reels of news crews and media who had either been on site or were alerted of the story. Faulty construction was to blame as the leading culprit. Audience members retold their stories of the ground that trembled and the absolute terror and miracle of witnessing an event that likely could have caused deaths but didn’t. Press and the public waited outside of Craig’s tour bus, hoping for a chance to talk to the band, but even more so, the hero, an up-and-comer named Rylee Owens. Two paramedics were on the bus assessing the band, Rylee and a sound technician. Craig sustained a large, purpling bruise on his elbow and a headache that they ruled out as concussion, but otherwise everyone was given a clean bill of health and was told to report to a doctor if they experienced any pain or symptoms later. Charlie poked a finger through the blinds and peered out.

“The leeches are still there,” she said, looking at the paramedics. “They are going to ask you questions. Just say everyone is fine because that’s the truth.”

“Charlie, leave the gentlemen alone. Their job is to take care of other people and I’m sure they can take care of themselves,” Craig said, from his place reclining on the couch. Her worry was making his headache worse.

The paramedics and the sound tech got up to leave and Charlie shut the door behind them quickly, as a murmur of questions slipped through from reporters. In the commotion of being poked, prodded, and questioned Craig might have forgotten Rylee was there because she was so quiet, except for the fact that he couldn’t stop stealing glances at her every few minutes. Each time, she was staring off, somewhere distant, which he was grateful for. She hadn’t left with the others likely because she didn’t want to face any questions. He was glad she hadn’t. She sat at the kitchenette table, her forehead resting in the palm of her hand.

“You’re a lot stronger than you look,” Craig said, adjusting the pillow behind his back to better look at her.

“Thank you,” she said, smiling slightly. “It was completely reactionary. I saw it start to sway and I knew there was no way you could hear. I don’t know what came over me. I just knew I needed to get you out of the way.”

“Well, you saved my life. Thank you,” Craig said.

“I guess I now know I’m fight not flight,” she said with a barely audible laugh.

“Yeah thank you. Really, from all of us,” Charlie said, in a way that suggested she no longer thought this woman was “practically a nobody.”

“Why were you side stage?” Craig asked, realizing she had performed two hours before him.

“To get this,” she said, holding up the guitar strap he hadn’t noticed was sitting in her lap.

She examined it as if it were her first time seeing it. Craig noticed that her eyes were gray.

“That’s just trippy. You being there at the right time,” Charlie said looking at Rylee and then turning to Craig. “I felt it. I had an off feeling before we played. Remember Craig? I told you I was feeling off and now I know why. I could tell you felt it to. That’s why you were kneeling down before the show right?” Charlie asked while rubbing her right elbow as she always did as a way of comforting herself.

Craig simply nodded. He knew the panic attack had not been caused by what loomed in his future, but by the hauntings of his past. A knock punctured the moment. Charlie, the self-nominated bodyguard, looked out the window.

“It’s a blonde lady. She looks a lot like you,” Charlie said, pointing at Rylee.

“That would be my mother,” Rylee said, standing as Charlie opened the door.

She had only walked two steps before her mother enveloped her in a hug and began patting her daughter’s hair. She asked again and again if she was alright and expressed how terrified she had been when she saw it on the news from her hotel and then couldn’t get ahold of Rylee whose phone had died but was now on Charlie’s phone charger. Rylee was flushed and her answers were clipped. She seemed to be embarrassed by all of the attention. Craig found this moment to be incredibly endearing. A pang of jealousy nestled in his chest. If his mother were alive, she would have been watching the news. She would have reacted in much of the same way. He got to his feet, blood surging to his temples. Mrs. Owens looked at him like she hadn’t realized anyone else was in the bus.

“Mrs. Owens, I assume?” Craig said extending a hand to the nodding woman. “Your daughter is a hero. I don’t know how much I deserved saving, but I am grateful.”

“I don’t know why she risked her own life like that,” Leanne replied seeming flustered, catching herself in the reaction and then proceeding. “I guess we should just all be happy everyone is ok.”

Rylee had gathered her purse and guitar strap and handed the phone charger back to Charlie as she directed her mother towards the door. She gave a small wave and a meek smile as she reached for the door handle.

“You’re incredibly talented, Rylee. I saw you perform. Well, I saw your last song at least. I thought that even before all this happened,” Craig blurted out, realizing this is what he had wanted to say to her all along.

“Thank you. You weren’t so bad yourself, all things considered,” she said, her small smile doubled in size and then she shut the door.

“Jesus, why didn’t you just propose to her already?” Charlie said laughing.

Craig chucked both of the throw pillows at his band’s smirking faces. Charlie had given Craig a wet washcloth for his headache, which he pulled over his eyes and pretended to sleep until he heard the band go to their own bunks. It was only a little after seven at night. He took a sleeping pill knowing he would still be up at a reasonable enough hour the next day.

His eyes, behind tinted lenses, watched her emerge from the waves. It was Rylee. The water must have been frigid, but in the refreshing way that once it met the summer heat created pinpricks of goosebumps along the skin her bikini didn’t cover. She made her way across the sand towards where he lay. Her bronzed thighs were straddling him, toned, the muscles flexing around his waist driving his mind to the ways in which he could watch them contract. Her face was close, near enough to study the eruption of freckles like fireworks across the bridge of her nose. He reached his hand into her long, blonde hair made paler by the sun. It was brittle at the

ends, dipped in saltwater. He took the nape of her tangled hair and pulled her mouth towards his. Her eyes widened, primal and concerned. She began to violently cough, lungs quaking as sand spewed out of her lovely mouth.

Craig woke with a start, sticky mouthed, and his skin filmed in sweat. He ached with the stupor of the sleeping pill and the pain of being thrown to the floor less than 12 hours before. Dreams of his mother, the beach and coughing had plagued his sleep recently, but never had they dragged in an unrelated person, especially one he barely knew. His anxieties always manifested in dreams. How odd to mingle sex and death. Pleasure and pain. At least the optimism of pleasure had begun to slither back in.

Standing a bit unsteadily, he made his way to the kitchenette of the bus. It wasn't in motion. It was early, just before sunrise. The bus driver and the band were still asleep and would be likely until the afternoon. He started the coffee pot. As the coffee percolated and immersed the air with the warm brown sweet and bitter smell, he reflected on the dream.

Craig hadn't particularly believed that dreams held any relevance until he was recently plagued by them and haunted by them beyond the realm of his pillow. In deciding not to attend the burial of his mother, he felt he held a bit of control. That his mother could still float freely. He had always been against burial. It felt too definite, too cold, and too alone. One day, he would be cremated and have his ashes spread on an island. Even if there was no reincarnation, he would feel he had become a part of something beautiful and meaningful. Now though after relentless weeks of dreams, he felt if he had attended maybe she wouldn't still be haunting him. It's possible she had expected him to be there and to see her off into the next world, the heaven she so adamantly believed in. He felt guilt for this and many other things. For never showing up. For never being fully present – his mind clouded with booze, drugs, rushing thoughts, and the past.



Drinking certainly made him fall asleep or more accurately, black out, which solved the issue of being unable to sleep. Because of his father, Craig knew that alcohol would never be the solution, it was only a salve.

Where the dreams alarmed him, he also welcomed them. It was a way to see his mother again, but also, he felt they contained messages for him. That they held some larger meaning. What did Rylee's presence mean? She was attractive, but there were hundreds of attractive women. Every now and then he remembered women because they had a great sense of humor or were highly intelligent. Those were the women that captivated him. They were always his undoing. Rylee though, she had saved him, and selflessly so. Who did that anymore? Especially without knowing him or having an ulterior motive. More so, it was her talent or more specifically her presence that appealed to him. He was rarely impressed, and in a single song, she had impressed him. She then continued on to protect him from harm becoming the most intriguing woman he had even encountered.

He drained his coffee and nestled the mug amongst the ever-growing stack of dishes. Now, to find his bus keys, which knowing him, had endless hide and seek possibilities. He found his keys next to his toothbrush. It took him longer to find a pen. He wrote a note to Charlie on a truck stop receipt and taped it to the inside window of the bus. He didn't want Charlie to worry about him. He also didn't want her to come looking. He put on his hat and his sunglasses, descended the bus stairs, locked the door and walked towards the hotels lining the beach. Rylee had to be staying in one of them.

As he walked in a labored way through the thickness of the sand, he realized this wasn't a solid plan. There were at least six hotels in sight. Even if he checked all of them, it wasn't like the front desk would give a shoeless stranger the hotel room number of two women. The sun was

just starting to rise and most sensible people were still asleep at this hour on a Sunday morning. Even if he did find her and she was awake, he didn't have a conversation planned. He had just wanted to see her again. This impulsiveness always sliced through him, stabbing through his hopes of creating something based in reality. This mission was a fool's errand. Instead, he would just take a walk and enjoy a beach sunrise, which were two of his favorite activities. A luxury Nashville didn't offer. At first, he thought he imagined the voice.

"Craig?" a voice yelled in question.

He turned, shielding his eyes against the sherbet dollop of sun. From the second-story balcony of a seafoam green hotel, Rylee was waving at him. He ran further up the beach to stand directly below her balcony. As he neared, she became cognizant of her appearance, having just rolled out of bed to watch the sunrise. He noticed she crossed her arms over her chest to conceal the fact that she wasn't wearing a bra.

"I see you're an early riser. That's odd for a musician," Craig called up to her.

"I've lived in Nashville my whole life. It's not often I get to see a beachfront sunrise. It inspires me," she said holding up a notebook.

"So you do live in Nashville? I figured as much. Anyone with talent does or should. If that's the case would you want to write some time? I meant what I said, you're really talented," he said feeling nervous.

He hadn't felt nervous talking to a woman since high school, when he was a different person. He was grateful for that spiral notebook. It was the prop he needed for this conversation and a possible access point to seeing her again. If anything, she was talented, young and passionate, he needed that energy if he was expected to release a new album.

“I don’t usually write well with others,” she said pushing her sea breeze blown hair out of her face.

“Neither do I. We sound like the ideal duo,” Craig said, as the sun rose, alighting the joy on his face.