

I, Elvis Tuschinsky

(Act III)

Dave Webb

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Cast of Characters

KYY, The Mighty Y Two

Mavis Ernstidin:	<i>owner of KYY, deceased</i>
Ernst Ernstidin:	<i>son of Mavis, current owner of KYY</i>
Elvis Tuschinsky:	<i>disc jockey at KYY</i>
Julie Tuschinsky:	<i>Elvis's spouse</i>
Karen Randon	<i>Julie's sister</i>
Rebekkah Storn:	<i>a classical pianist</i>

Raucus

Sarah Roan:	<i>lead singer</i>
Mandy Rohansen:	<i>keyboards; executive director of Strand Center for the Arts and impresario for the upcoming Edgeland Festival.</i>
Neil Rohansen: <i>Mandy's ex.</i>	<i>bass; owner, Vinyl Rohansen's, a record store.</i>
Carl Turner :	<i>lead guitar for most of Raucus's career.</i>
Edgar Cantrini:	<i>drummer</i>
Harry Kahn:	<i>Raucus's original lead guitarist</i>

Also:

Mr. Strook:	<i>Elvis's drama teacher in high school</i>
Serena Rohansen:	<i>Neil & Mandy's daughter</i>
Kip Anthony:	<i>Serena's boyfriend</i>
Kai Stebbe:	<i>Harry's son</i>
Darin, Rachel, Jenni Roan:	<i>Sarah's family</i>
Beth, Kwame, Nichelle:	<i>Carl's family</i>
Alphonse Milligrew:	<i>Carl's roommate in college</i>
Raina Wu:	<i>a Raucus fan who grew up in San Reyes</i>
Daniel Verrington:	<i>Raucus fan</i>

T u e s d a y , A p r i l 4 , 2 0 0 6

Chapter 1

I, Elvis Tuschinsky, being of sound mind and a body that will have to do, hereby declare radio station KYY to be my sole and utter domain. I am taking it hostage, if you will, commandeering its airwaves—pin whatever grandiose tail you want on this donkey's ass. Said occupation will begin ten minutes from now, at 5:45 am on a Tuesday morning, just before the first newscast of the day.

As a disc jockey in the employ of KYY for more years than you've got stubby digits, I know exactly what to do, when to do it, and why it must be done.

This is my story. Tune in if you want.

The station's screen door slams rickety behind me and I walk across the parking lot behind the station. The gravel crunches familiar, like the creak of your house at three in the morning, like the breath of your lover in sleep.

Across the far side of the lot beyond the dying lawn that Mavis never *could* keep green, I see my destination, my home away from home for the next good while. It looks like a cinderblock outhouse standing alone and apropos of nothing; actually, it is the entrance to KYY's subterranean bomb shelter. It sets on the corner of a big, fenced field where three horses sleep under a wide and dimming moon. In the center of the field high above the horses stands KYY's radio tower, some 120 feet in the sky. Three red lights —top, middle and low—blink eversteady, warning errant airplanes how close the ground can be. To the right, a line of houses sit quietly among a long curtain of tall eucalyptus trees.

My preparations have all been made.

I've never taken anybody or anything hostage before—I'm not remotely a violent man—still I imagine the takeover of KYY will take nerve, energy and probably the improvisational chops of a jazz musician. Not that I'm a musician—sore point, really—but I have programmed rock music on air these many years, and while I've never really delved into jazz with the intellectual verve the art form deserves, I have committed many a Jimi Hendrix guitar solo to memory, well past their initial surprise, venturing deeper and deeper into the man's improvisational genius to the point where, just maybe, there lies in me a retained understanding of how the new might emerge from the old, an improvisational instinct that may serve me well in the days ahead.

I look up at the moon, cast out still in the sky. The sodden field smells of recent rain. Dunno when I'll smell that again.

It might be a while.

I let out a long breath.

My flashlight wobbles light, don't need it. Morning light is just enough to find my way to the door of the bomb shelter, its red paint peeling, its lock that hasn't worked in years.

I imagine this adventure will require a renewed sense of self and, I'm sure, some raw luck. I've had more luck in my recent years than in my younger ones, which I take as a good sign. Generally speaking, the act of taking an institution hostage is that of someone younger and more desperate than myself, sort of like Al Pacino in *Dog Day Afternoon*: young gay guy married with kids needs money for lover's sex change operation. Now, *that's* a beefy bunch of motivation—that's no stroll with purpose; that's a balls-out sprint to a distant finish line that may not exist at all. A kind of despair I'd like to think lays an ocean's width away from me, although

I suppose I despair a bit at the way music isn't our national language, the common tongue, the understanding we all nod to.

I creak open the door and there are the nine stairs down into the dark; they are narrow and quite steep. Reach up and pull the light cord on, the naked bulb sways a bit; the creeping smell of mold, of dust is suspended by air that hasn't moved much. I forget how still it is in here, it always surprises me.

There's another door at the bottom of the stairs which I close and lock—it only locks from the inside—and I pause. Here's where I will live, alone and likely for a good while, in a bomb shelter now tricked out to serve as a full-service radio studio.

Look around. It's not much.

A small room, maybe ten feet by ten feet, with a bathroom off to the side. No windows. One chair, before the knobs and dials of the console; it is flanked by CD players and yes, oh yes, the record players. There's a telephone on the console. There are racks and racks of CDs and records, music I know and music I haven't seen in years.

Over in the far corner are my boxes of stuff, standing in a tall stack— things I brought in as preparation for long stay or short stint. Plenty of food to eat; water, juice and beer to drink; a pillow to sleep on, and various accoutrements to fend off attack. Taking a radio station hostage is not something undertaken lightly, on the fly, oh *I was just in the mood*. It requires forethought, prep time. Attention to detail. Admittedly, none of these are my forte, but there are new tricks in this old dog still, and I find solace in this ability to renew, a chummy kind of eternal youth: I can remake myself, even at this time when I can imagine the final act of *The Story Of Me* more clearly than I can recall Act I.

A spider is inspecting the box on the top.

From here, I will disperse over Santa Patricia the music that must be heard, if with occasional commercial interruption. I will do my job by the letter and no one will be able stop me. This, for reasons I have a boyish confidence in, if not a complete omniscient grasp of; for these last few days I have been in the thrall of a dim certainty that I will not be punished for this boldly subterranean act. Pretty sure I'm right. Didn't Pacino get shot? I don't remember, anyway: not gonna happen to me.

I mean, I will take KYY hostage and most people aren't even *going to notice*.

You watch.

It must be said that KYY is as much a part of Santa Patricia as the old gray sidewalks black cracked by summer sun, as much as the graceful white line of sycamores throwing shade these brief spring days, as much as the outstretched scratch of two-lane roads, the family-run restaurants, the record store that belongs to my good friend Neil Rohansen. KYY may be small by shirt-and-tie standards, but it commands a lot of ears in Santa Patricia and beyond, out into the broad farmlands of this valley and the neighboring towns.

People *do* listen, people I know well and people I've never met, people I've chatted with on the phone while taking their requests and people who wouldn't call if they could remember the name of a song anyway. They're out there listening even if they are faceless to me and I to them. That's the modern way of things, has been since we gave up face-to-face for the telephone then the radio then the television and on and on into this cursed world of iPods and satellite this and streaming that.

What I mean to say is *KYY will stand*. To this I dedicate myself, as sure as last night has fallen into this nervy morning. Such is my commitment, the one I made the minute I heard KYY was to be sold to some faceless corporado outfit out of Los Angeles. This may well be what I'm

remembered for; it may be the biggest event of this stage of my life, my Act III (the notion of The Three Acts being one of few useful lessons from a ruinous high school career).

Mavis would be proud.

I do all this largely in memory of Mavis Ernstidin, the founding father of KYY, my mentor, boss and friend. That's really where this whole thing began, at the funeral of Mavis Ernstidin.

Many people wonder why he was named Mavis, because Mavis Staples is a woman and Mavis Ernstidin is a man, but he always claimed Mavis was the kind of name that could stretch across genders, even species—he once named his turtle Mavis Racer Jr. during a period where he was particularly unhappy with his son Mavis Ernst Ernstidin Jr., who is called Ernst for the sake of reducing redundancy, but who as the current owner of KYY, is the villain in this story and will distract me unduly....Naw, let's stay on Mavis. The man lived in Santa Patricia his entire life and most everybody knew him. He was the founding force behind KYY; he saw it through uncertain beginnings—those early years when it was mostly an audio embarrassment—into those shy days of hell-let's-try-this and related idealisms—and then on, on, onwards, eventually coagulating into the essential cultural institution it is today.

He had the thickest white hair you ever saw. It was just gorgeous, piled up on his head like sculpted vanilla ice cream. He'd be sitting in a booth at Java Brew like he did most mornings and if there was a new waitress on shift—and Java Brew goes through waitresses like KYY goes through promotional CDs—the waitress du jour would take his order and get a little smile on her face. I saw this all the time—waitress after waitress would *pat him on the head*, they couldn't help but touch his hair and call him darling, this was true even for waitresses young enough to be his daughter. And he'd smile that slight smile of his, corners of his mouth lifted just a bit, never

showed much tooth, and his eyes would hang like a dog's on a too-hot afternoon, wise and tired—he wasn't one to take advantage of women, he was faithful to Eve in a way you don't see much anymore—and say “It's just hair, dear, and a poor substitute for brains,” although Mavis was one smart hooper, especially when people weren't looking.

His hair looked good even in his casket, although he always parted it on the right but somehow they parted it on the left, at least for the viewing time a few of us had before the service. I mentioned it to the coroner, but I couldn't bring myself to go up again to the casket during the funeral, so I don't know if they set Mavis' hair right or not.

My wife Julie couldn't go up either. She knew Mavis even longer than I did—it was through Mavis that we met. The day we buried Mavis, if I was a mess, she was in hell. Her sister had just died a month before in an accident and here we were burying Mavis. I tried to console Julie, but I was beside myself, too tore up by my own grief to be much good for her.

Mavis's wife Eve died the winter before that, in 2004; hers was a different kind of dying. We all saw it coming; she'd been in poor health for years. Poor Eve. She had been a happily oblivious wife, the kind who finds the small right among all that's wrong and who had a motherly way of tending to the problems before her with patience and some competence, although sometimes she'd make mistakes that would drop your jaw.

Anyway, Mavis loved Eve like Eve loved Mavis, the kind of love that can hurry the death of the other after the death of the first. Still, even with Eve's passing, I thought Mavis would be good for an ambulatory decade into his nineties, easy. But naw. Pancreatic cancer took him faster than dawn. His last days were ghostly and painful. It's only been six months, but the hurt of it is still freshly dug flesh.

Why his son Ernst would undo his father's life work is a mystery to me. He's a coddled, spoiled kid, a boy I saw through his awful teenage years, and through his various re-creations of himself as a young man and now into his thirties, a man alone despite an appeal to women that I never could grasp, a dour moody wank who tagged alongside his father these last few years pretending to sell radio ads and spending way too much time telling me which songs to play (his taste is crap).

Because he is the son of my friend, I always accepted Ernst as one of my own. But that came to a brakescreech halt last week when he announced the impending sale of KYY to a faceless corporation located somewhere in Los Angeles.

It will not stand.

That spider is still over in the corner, sniffing my stuff.

I pronounce him friend.

I will call him El Hombre.

It's you and me, pal.

Just above El Hombre, on the far wall, is one rock & roll poster, my only window out of here. An old Raucus poster circa 1988, just when Raucus was taking off as a national thing, that one magic year when they were the band to know, the band everybody was talking about, the year when they were The Next Kickass Thing. Seeing the five of them on that faded flier, each of them my good friends, will be a solace of a kind, taking me into another time and place. My, we had a fire on then. A heady time.

I've seen them marry, divorce, bear children, hold jobs—life after rock and roll. Still, to this day, they belong back onstage; I've been telling them that forever. And that's exactly where they are going to be at the end of this week, at the Edgeland Festival. A rather arty gathering for

a rock band, but Raucus can fit in there aptly; their take on music always had an artful edge to it, perching as they do somewhere between the Grateful Dead and Talking Heads, except with more piano than either.

A lot of people are coming from all over to see them reunite on Saturday—it's a day many of us have been waiting for — but I doubt I'll be one of the cheering many. Missing the Raucus reunion is my only regret at starting this ball in roll: I'll be down here doing radio while Raucus reunites onstage. That I'll be broadcasting it live helps, but only a little.

Still, this must be done.

I do it for KYY, for me, but mostly I do it for Mavis.

We weren't always friends those long years. He was my boss, he wasn't above kicking my butt and not always fairly. But mostly we *were* friends, two guys who worked together, whose gears cogged well. I could have never built something as sustaining and responsible as a radio station, and he knew I respected him for it; he never could have built KYY without somebody like me to go on the air and make people listen, and I know he respected me for it tangibly, in a way I could *see*. He'd be going out the door to some goddamn Chamber of Commerce thing he felt KYY needed to attend—some round of handshaking and chicken chewing which typically grinds my eyes closed— and there he'd be, standing in the foyer of the station, I could see him through the control window of the studio through the two windows in Studio A, right to the front door of the station. Mavis would pause there on his way out into the world, and he'd be listening. And he'd smile at me when I had a song on air he hadn't heard in years, a song that surprised him somehow. Just that little grin that says he'd forgotten about Joy of Cooking, the shuffley way that band's piano trucks along and the way Terry Garthwaite could

own a song with that spare voice of hers, a little grin wondrous that I'd remember such a song after so much time has passed.

On some level, Mavis loved being a community honcho—he had to, because that's a fulltime job and somebody had to do it, especially for a radio station like KYY that was built not just by being on the air, but by being in people's lives. That said, he loved music deep down, he did, and he knew I did too. And we'd look each other in the eye sometimes, through three panes of glass and just grin. And at the end of the day, with Mavis in his wood box, that's what I remember best about him. And I don't have to explain that to anybody.

Not even to his son Ernst, who doesn't love music, doesn't love radio, doesn't know which way it is to next Tuesday.

I pick up the phone, I peck out the number.

To Ernst, something else must be said.

I don't care what time it is, I don't care if Ernst is asleep or lost in insomnia; sleeping alone or in the arms of a lover—he goes through them, I hear—hell, I don't care if he's in some kind of celibate loonyman phase worshipping the moons of Jupiter.

His voice answers, groggy, “What?” The guy wakes up cranky, it never stops in him, not even for sleep.

“It's me Elvis.”

“What time is it?”

“Five five-two am. I'm going on a little early this morning, Ernst. And tonight, we're staying on all night.”

“No we're not. You'll shut the station down at midnight like we always do, you crazy fuck.”

“No.”

“Then I’ll come down and shut it down for you. And then I’ll fire you so quick you won’t be able to say Jesus.”

“Wrong again. Because when you come down to the radio station, I won’t be in the control room. But I will be on the air, and you won’t be able to do a thing about it.”

“What time did you say it was?”

“Five five two in the AM.”

Silence for a second, a rumination dangling. “What are you doing, Elvis?”

I hang up the phone.

And with that, so much began.

Chapter 2

The drape of morning shadow over Santa Patricia. The sun yet to glint over the treetops. Harry Kahn drove with the window down, looking for Sarah's house, trying to remember her neighborhood, her street, which side of the street, what her house might look like nearly 20 years after he'd seen it last.

Wondering if she could still sing, if she and Raucus were still friends.

Wondering if the band still played music together, if they remembered playing with him.

Everything in Santa Patricia was so very quiet. All that about "the big city that never sleeps" was true and not unique, but small towns *do* sleep, deep and still and nothing was moving anywhere, save the crow drinking from a sprinkler puddle, or the man walking the sidewalk in front of dark houses, shoulders slouched under unknowable weight.

At the very least, today he'll be able to find the inimitable Elvis Tuschinsky, because Elvis was *still* on KYY—if that don't beat all— playing something moody and acoustic Harry didn't know.

If love is stronger, it's stronger than time

If love is stronger, it's stronger than time

I will wait for you, whatever you put me through

Until now I found no match for you

As was tradition, Elvis opened his mouth rarely, just once in awhile to say the time and the weather. The years hadn't hurt the warm baritone voice, as familiar as the smoke of a cigarette. Harry smiled to himself, he could almost hear it: "*KAY, WHY, WHY: The Mighty Y Two,*" the moniker of Elvis Tuschinsky, his beloved cliché. Maybe he'd say it this morning

while Harry was driving quiet streets with the window down. That would be almost as good as a cup of coffee.

Maybe he'd play some Raucus. That would just tie the bow.

Santa Patricia had changed. While its long main street was still called Main Street, it had more stoplights now—there had been only one at the corner of Russell and Main. The sidewalks were still clean and there were still a lot of mom and pop enterprises—restaurants, a shoe store, a furniture store— but there were more chain stores than he remembered. The Frontier, the divey bar where he had spent much time playing with Raucus was gone; it was now a Jamba Juice of stupid sheen and bright colors.

Harry had left Florida four days ago, stuffing clothes and everything else he needed—almost forgot the birth certificate— into two suitcases by flashlight. Around three in the morning he left as quietly as he could, his wife stoned asleep in the next room. He left no note. Happy to leave her and her brother and that stupid finger of a state, bugged as it is by hurricanes, bad money, old people and some strange ideas of what it takes to get by.

He had driven to California by night. The color of his car—a blue Impala—was chameleon as the sun went down, turning aquamarine in the fading light of dusk and then almost green under the strobe of highway lights. A car big in the old way, with a stealthy anonymity after dark. The facelessness of his ride and the thought that he was safer taking Highway 40 at night provided comfort.

And this was all about comfort now.

It had been a long drive. Too much time to think. Sometimes Harry would drive with the window down at 80 miles an hour, just for the screech of air; the noise of cars approaching was rawer that way, the engine surge, past and gone. The wind was formidable, blowing his blonding

hair back in a tangle. He'd ponytail it, holding the steering wheel with his knees. Don't stop unless you must. After rain in Texas, the earth rose to him, a woman's smell. He almost stopped in New Mexico just for the moonlight. Every time he saw a white van, he would clench the steering wheel and sink down slightly in the seat, a hunch in his shoulders.

He slept by day; sometimes by the side of the road, sometimes in cheap motels. Occasionally in a nice one because he could, not because he had to. He had rules about that.

He kept a constant vigil for the Econoline; it belonged to his wife's brother, the white van with the big dent over the wheel well.

Harry's tape deck was broken. The radio stations from Wichita Falls through east New Mexico had been not much. Many were Christian, most all played country. And yet music had made the car less lonely, keeping the swirl of thoughts from the drainpull down.

Listening to Elvis is a relief.

If love is stronger, it's stronger than time

If love is stronger, it's stronger than time

Every lease of life, every novelty

They don't last so very long

If you're sure your love is strong

Santa Patricia was an older town by California standards, still nestled into the farmlands of the northern state. Many of the buildings had face lifted their crumble away, putting apartments and offices over the retail stores; there were more buildings now in places he remembered as open fields. He remembered a Santa Patricia that would bake in the summer sun for lack of shade; now, a tall canopy of trees stood overhead, greening with spring.

Far overhead, the black violet sky was lens like, slowly focusing into luminescent blue.

In ancient Japan, green and blue were the same word.

Today, he'd re-enter his old life—Elvis, his friends in Raucus, Neil and Mandy, Edgar.

And Sarah. Beautiful Sarah.

He remembered she lived in an old part of town, that her house was one of those ancient Victorians, ancient and enormous. But somehow nothing was looking as he remembered it. The landscapes were all different, the houses hued different colors.

Twenty years ago, he had left Santa Patricia suddenly. He had wanted something edgier, not in a way he could articulate, just something he had gravitated toward, something dimly needed and unrealized. He had hurt the band, and Sarah worse. But those were old wounds, and while he anticipated some heat at his return, he didn't anticipate fire. Twenty years, give or take, is twenty years.

He was in flight, true. From, and to.

If Sarah weren't in the old Victorian, somebody, somewhere in town would know where she was. It was an even bet she had stayed in Santa Patricia. While he wanted to see her the most, she would be the hardest person to see. The rest of Raucus would be much easier although he wondered what kind of ex's Neil and Mandy had become. He'd heard they'd had a kid. Maybe he'd finally get to meet Carl, the guitarist who replaced him in the band; he'd only seen his picture in *Rolling Stone*.

When he thought of Sarah, he would think of her first as a singer. That had been how they met back when, playing an open mike at The Frontier. She came on after him and his band, it had been just her and her guitar and she had smoked them, no contest. She was that good. Because when Sarah sang onstage and the song was right and sad and slow, and the light was just bright enough to catch her hair long and careless and every note she sang was not gotten to

too easily, she could get you to a place where you couldn't move, all you could do was stare and listen and watch at the way she looked at an audience, so calm and certain, her hair dirt blonde and something of innocence, her eyes knowing full well, and the sad at the heart of her song would grab your heart up into it and you sit there still once this happens, you can't even lift your beer up, that would introduce something wrong into the room.

That image of Sarah who could surely sing had stayed with Harry all these years. Back then it had taken him into her band as lead guitar, even though her music wasn't his thing—Raucus was a chick band and till then he'd had rules about that. And it had taken him into her bed even though she had other men in her life, men ahead of him in line for her but he found a way to do it, she so much younger than he.

And that was all fresh and alive in his mind, as if time had not etched away at that as it had at everything else.

There were no ex-lovers in his life anymore. A consequence of cutting off, of constant movement. He wondered what happens to the electricity between lovers after years have passed. Is it conserved? Does it store up somewhere, do the wires still hold that charge, can it still move? Is that for men, not women? Does it spark—is that only in the new? —or does it flutter out, briefly recognized, and in that moment is that a sad thing or just the gray shrug of inevitability?

He honestly didn't know and hadn't had an interaction in his adult life that could answer the question.

If Sarah was here, he'd find her and then he'd know.

Elvis was playing Dylan, Harry laughed a little. Life and its soundtrack.

*Cloud so swift, the rain falling' in
Gonna see a movie called Gunga Din*

*Pack up your money, put up your tent in the wind
You ain't going nowhere*

Back when, twenty years ago, he would go to the radio station with a six-pack of beer and he and Elvis would sit in the control room of KYY and drink. Elvis would spin records and they would talk music, or the wandering paths of their lives back then— Harry had bailed Elvis out of trouble more than once, back before KYY when Elvis had trouble keeping jobs. Money, always a problem for Elvis, was never such for Harry. At the same time, “Harry, you bullshittin’ me?” was a question ever out of Elvis’s lips. Whatever version of Harry was being offered— he had many— Harry knew Elvis would never let him get away with much.

*Buy me some rings and a gun that sings
A flute that toots and a bee that stings
A sky that cries and a bird that flies
A fish that walks and a dog that talks*

Still, he knew that there’s no knowing what will come at you when you return to a place you left in a hurry. Memory is such a liar. Driving west for four days, he had boiled it down and it was simple enough. He was returning to Santa Patricia, a place of normal folks: folks who tend towards self-control and respect, towards a kindness beyond self and family. To people who, simply put, tend towards the glow of the right thing (and that is brighter is not over thought). And Harry still knew the right thing when he encountered it, even among the many worlds of wrong, as if the right thing was a lost acquaintance he could still pick out in a crowd of unfamiliar faces as one not altogether distant and other.

*Whoo-ee! Ride me high
Tomorrow's the day
My bride's gonna come
Whoo-ee are we gonna fly
Down into the easy chair!*

Back east, when he and the brother-in-law and the crew in the Econoline had work, they would move all over the country. Cities small and teeming, rural counties with outhouses and weather bent steeples, long roads through farm fields, cattle runs. Unlike those, Santa Patricia hadn't stayed in his mind as tired restaurants or fallen apartments or fadepaint buildings where you park out back and wait. No, this town had been good to him and the memories of here had people in them, good people. Their faces were still vivid.

This, he thought, was a fundamental difference between him and the crew in the Econoline. The glow of the right thing meant nothing to them; if it didn't help them get what they wanted—and so often it didn't—it was irrelevant, a crutch of simple people. Fear had kept all of them—Harry too—sharp and focused and careful. That had been the useful part of fear. The downsides? When fear spikes it pulls your heart into your throat where it throbs in constricted space. Fear unsteadies the hand. There were times driving the night on Highway 40 Harry could barely hold the wheel.

It was fear, probably, that lead Harry to become a man of rules. Rules existed for him because Harry needed order, some kind of pathway through the fears and passions of the moment. Anger can't assemble a life, rage cannot. Seething only leads to confrontations that never end good. He couldn't explain all his rules to other people. They were his rules; Harry abides.

In relationships, Harry leaves first. In his work, Harry doesn't mention his past. When dealing with the police, Harry is always relaxed and polite. In his car, Harry changes the oil every 4000 miles. Harry won't use a blowtorch ever again. In a motel room, the wallet and keys go on the bedside table on the left. When watching a dangerous house, every detail must register on a deliberate mental level. In a motel room, Harry empties the suitcase first and stashes it in the closet. When fucking, Harry resists urgency. When drinking, Harry never shows his drunk. When firing the rifle at a distant target, Harry remembers everything his old man taught him about the wind. Harry always tips 20% in a restaurant. Harry never shoplifts.

There are more rules, each warm as blankets. Harry is never cold.

He had to remain on guard against his brother-in-law and the crew in the white Econoline van, a guardedness that he could not let slip. There had been all the years together; Harry had married the sister, had a kid named Kai, but now he had left. They were searching for Harry because they think he has something that belongs to them. It does not. It belongs to Harry now. A disagreement, unmediatable. The brother-in-law, the old man, the redhead, the white Econoline: they were dogged, they were very good. He had to think two steps ahead of them.

What now belonged to Harry was Harry's.

He wanted to feel fear eddy out of him, just drain away. He hoped it would be like that, and then the muscles in his legs, his arms, his neck would uncinch. He could imagine that but he couldn't feel it, not yet. He knew that he might never.

They would kill him if they found him.

Harry will never mention them by name, not ever again.

He was fairly certain he had seen the white van near Amarillo two days ago: the enormous dent over the left rear wheel, the rust on the back door. He couldn't be sure.

The radio crackled, “Bob Dylan at his catchiest, ‘You Ain’t Goin’ Nowhere.’ It’s six-forty-seven on a Tuesday morning. And a quick reminder—you’ve heard it before—the Edgeland Festival starts Friday at the Strand Center for the Arts, with performances by Rinde Eckert, Kronos Quartet, the legendary Cheb Diab and the reunion, fifteen years after their last performance, of Raucus, Santa Patricia’s favorite sons...and daughters. Good friends all.”

And then Elvis played a rock band, upbeat, something Harry didn’t know.

But Raucus was reuniting.

If that don’t beat all.

Chapter 3

Knock, knock, knock.

KNOCK, KNOCK, KNOCK.

“Elvis, you crazy fuck, what are you doing in there?”

KNOCK, KNOCK, KNOCK.

Let Ernst knock.

He can knock all he wants.

There are deeper reasons for my sly takeover of The Mighty Y Two, reasons that go beyond my square off with Ernst Ernstidin.

I believe in good music and the necessity of spreading it far and wide; I believe the dispensing of good music over the airwaves is a serious and humbling responsibility. It’s what I do best, what the world needs from me; as the song goes, it’s what the world has way, way too little of.

I believe these airwaves belong to all of us—they call it ‘air’ for a reason, air is what we breathe, air is what we can’t live without. Julie says it’s the only air I need and she doesn’t know how I lived without it before I went to work at KYY.

I believe that KYY— a privately-owned radio station with community tendencies rare in this day of computerized radio where your average disc jockey has about as much choice over the music played as he does over his race, his tribe, his DNA; over the impact of corporate excess or the nutcase prancing of George W. Bush, of...where was I, anyway, KYY is exactly the right medium for letting the dogs of art run free. I have done precisely that at KYY for 23 years and I see no reason to stop.

And yet I believe that KYY’s sale will end that forever.

I believe the sale of KYY is not in the interests of my community, good music or me—
it's in the interests of nobody but Ernst.

And shame on him for disrespecting the legacy of his father. Shame.

Like they say on NPR: this I believe. I don't like NPR, they talk too much. And I can't
stand that Lake WhatTheFuck guy.

No, I love music like nothing you love in this world.

And I know music like you never will.

I play music on the radio for all to hear.

Listen and learn:

Mike on, "That was The Strokes on K ... Y... Y. Eight-five-oh on a Tuesday, good
morning" mike off.

Then, suddenly, everything shook to the strange gong:

BROOOOOOOONNNNNNNNNNGGGGGGGGGGGG.

So loud, so sudden; it's overhead, street level. Like an asonorous bell, enormous and of
cheap metal; the bomb shelter is shaking as if it's been slapped.

Then just as suddenly everything stills and there is only a low growl above. Muffled, the
way you hear voices from the back bedroom when your head is under the pillow and blankets.

And the growl gets loud, then suddenly soft, loud then soft, the growl of an engine
revving up and down and then fading away from me.

Then I can hear it, a slow, petrol-driven crescendo like some operatic voice rising to The
Big Aria, coming right at me.

This is no car. Sounds like an open engine.

And then the whomping thud from above, the horrific clang BROOOOOOONGGGGGGGG. The walls quiver again slightly, the light dims for a second. I stare up. Then again, stillness; only the sound of an engine in pause, as if a motor could stop and think, and then the deep growl softens, as if the engine is backing away.

I can't imagine what kind of ...*vehicle* it is. The entry to my bomb shelter stands like a burly gray phone booth between the station building and the big field and there's no road for a car to drive, although I suppose if you don't mind driving across an old lawn or a roadless field it could be done. Watch out for the barbwire fence.

Then a surge of engine and BROOOOOOONGGGGGGGGGG the thud the clang, this bell of ugly din, and everything shakes again.

Somehow, I don't think I should go out and face this with Ghandian resolve. To fold my legs and sit in front of the bomb shelter, raising my hands, "I, a man of peace." I would be rammed assflat dead.

Because, I suspect, Ernst is ramming the top of my bomb shelter. Which is built like, heh, a brick shithouse. He's ramming it with a tractor, I'm thinking that blue one he uses to mow the lawn.

What an idiot.

I better turn on the mike, my listeners need to hear this.

"Welcome back to Radio Occupation, with Elvis Tuschinsky," and I paused because I knew that the thunderclang was coming and BROOOOOOONNGGGGGGGG it did and the lights dimmed and the walls quivered again and then the low urrrrrrrrr of the tractor doing its moment of contemplation. It's receding back away again, better talk fast, "That sound you hear is The Mighty Two under attack from some kind of ramming device," and I pause for the

inevitable BROOOOOOOOONGGGGGGGGGGGG “probably a tractor or something, ramming
the entry of my Studio Subterranean,” urrrrrrrrrrrrrr BROOOOOOOOONGGGGGGGGGGGG
I have to talk faster, “asIliketocallit. YesI’mbroadcastingtoyoufromourunderground
studioatKYY,” urrrrrrrrrrrrrr BROOOOOOOOONGGGGGGGGGGGG “which is in fact a
bomb shelter, and I suspect the owner of KYY, my erstwhile employer, in fact a little known
named Ernst,” urrrrrrrrrrrrrr BROOOOOOOOONGGGGGGGGGGGG “Ernstidin, that’s right,
first name a strange subset of the last, is trying to get me out of here so,”
BROOOOOOOOONGGGGGGGGGGGG urrrrrrrrrrrr “so he can get on with his plan to reduce
The Mighty Y Two to a pile of musical mush. I hope some of you can come on out to KYY,”
urrrrrrrrrrrrrr BROOOOOOONGGGGGGGG “and witness this foolishness, maybe commit it to a,
uhhhh, video recording device so I can see it later for myself, because frankly, it”
BROOOOOOONGGGGGGGGGGGG “sounds like Armageddon down here, although I’m pretty
sure it’s just Ernst, being a sore,” urrrrrrrrrrrrrr BROOOOOOOOONGGGGGGGGGGGG
“loser.”

Mike off.

There. I’ve announced it.

The sale of the station is now public.

Sort of.

What did I just say?

I hear the engine backing up, and up and up and now there is silence.

Ernst: he loses so easily.

Where was I?

Yes: what does broadcasting from a bomb shelter have to do with protecting good music?

That one is simple: Ernst can't get to me down here, as that last attempt proved so aptly.

But, less apparent: why a bomb shelter, in this day and age?

Short answer, and let's be direct: radio stations predate this day and age by a good bit.

You will recall a time when the world armed itself to its collective teeth with nuclear weapons, pointed them at each other and hoped for the best. Hope is maybe too strong a word—I recall being told to get under my school desk as a young boy in preparation of a nuclear attack, at which time I would crawl under my desk, close my eyes and grimace as if my face was being shoved nose first into that of the Creature of the Black Lagoon, the monster my brother had as a painted model by his bed, a monster who surely wheezed swamp slime breath foul from deep in his chest, ambling after me in my nightmares -- he was one fast ambling mothah-- scaring hell out of me during my latter pre-Kindergarten years with more frequency than I care to recall, even now.

That's how scary nuclear weapons once were.

Looking back, I accompanied the rest of the human race into ridiculousness. As if a grimace and a desk could protect me from having my skin melted off by idiots who couldn't reach some amiable agreement about economics.

While I never could embrace nuclear weapons as a hard truth an adult must own up to, however unfathomable the downside, I have to admit that it worked pretty well. I mean, oh *good*: the happy yeehaw for the 20th Century is that nobody went mushroom up after Nagasaki. Except the whole enterprise taught me a kind of primal fear as a young boy and I have been pretty jumpy ever since.

Now I would not describe my standoff with Ernst in such dramatic, overarching terms. Missiles do not point at each other in some kind of Orwellian skyline. No. And besides, Russia was pretty smart while Ernst Ernstidin has no central intelligence to speak of. In Cold War terms, my occupation of The Mighty Y Two is brotherly akin to Fidel Castro strolling into Miami, putting up an electric fence around the perimeter and Nixon not noticing for a couple of months.

I have been known to interrupt the world to deliver a history lesson. Let us resume with current affairs, those leading up to me being in a friggin' bomb shelter.

Radio stations were given the responsibility in the early days of the nuclear age to tell the world to crouch under its desk should we fall under nuclear attack. Somebody had to do it, and radio was the preferred media just after WWII—it would be years before there would be a TV in every home—and that's why, to this day, you will periodically hear a quote test of the emergency broadcast system, a rather disruptive squeal that no doubt interrupts your listening pleasure. That squeal still strikes a kind of dumb fear in my heart, does so every time I have to play it on the radio.

Given this fundamental if ridiculous responsibility, it's not uncommon for some of the older radio stations to actually have a bomb shelter on the premises, fully equipped to face a nuclear incident. All paid for by the government, as I recall.

I take a queasy professional pride in knowing that, had the world blown itself to hell, the only people left in the horrid thereafter would have been presidents and disc jockeys. And, had we needed to vie further for rule of the radiated world, I was always confident I could kick Richard Nixon's ass in a fair fight of fists.

And anyway, true to our own peculiar traditions, KYY had a fully equipped and functional bomb shelter on the premise. Complete with a working control panel, turntables, cart

machines (for commercials; KYY is probably the last station in the country to still use them), air conditioning unit (fit to filter out nuclear debris), electricity (by way of a generator, plus the usual land line) and many of the other basic amenities of survival. As with everything radio, here at KYY we do the bomb shelter our way. Mavis kept it more or less intact, even after the Soviet Union was no more, even before 9/11 brought bomb shelters back into vogue. This, because Mavis had a lot of theories about the end of the world. He feared viruses in birds, viruses in meat, viruses in genitals, alien attacks, Christians with a stoned glint in their eyes, Muslims with a stoned glint in their eyes, floods, rogue terrorists with Russian bombs, government mind control, random mutations in the insect world, floods of biblical proportions, asteroids, even earthquakes, which I found quaint—at least one of his phobias was rooted in current day California reality, even though hell if I can figure how a bomb shelter aids and abets anybody during an earthquake.

Anyway, KYY's bomb shelter remained a going concern, all the way up to the time of Mavis's death.

It's hard to think about Mavis too much, this early in the morning. I can't let my mood go on the air, that's a line I don't cross. This is radio, not therapy.

Ernst continued to BROOOOOOOOONGGGGGGGGGGGG for another ten minutes or so. I put in my earplugs, I just played music. No reason to subject my listeners to any more industrial din.

And then it just stopped.

A few minutes later, the phone rang.

“Hi, Elvis, this is Captain Raymond Dirkson, Santa Patricia Police, how are you?”

“Fine sir you?”

“Excellent. Wondering if I could come over and have a word?”

“Well, sir, it’s awfully early in the morning for chat and I’m sort of busy. And I’m locked in a bomb shelter, as I’m sure Mr. Ernstidin has made abundantly clear.”

“Abundantly. He just called me, saying you’ve taken the radio station hostage and are resisting all efforts to return the station to him.” The man sounds weary to me, but Ernst will do that to you.

“Mr. Ernstidin has not asked me to leave the bomb shelter, if that’s what you mean. Although, I believe, he did ram me with a tractor.”

“*A tractor?*”

“Sir, I didn’t see it—I was down here doing the job I’m paid to do—but I suspect he was ramming the bomb shelter with a blue tractor. As I would imagine he would have imparted to you?”

“*A tractor?*”

I pause, to let the wonder of Ernst settle in on the captain.

“Yes sir, it’s blue, it’s kept in the garage by the bomb shelter, check it for scuffs?” Love crime dramas on TV. Just *love* them.

“Why are you locking everyone out?”

“Well, I’m executing my labor rights and trying to maintain the integrity of KYY. It’s mostly a work related disagreement and certainly not a matter for the fine young men of law enforcement.”

“I’m probably old enough to be your daddy, Elvis.”

“That would make you well past the age of safe driving, Captain. Better turn in your badge.”

“Really. You sound like a young man on the radio.”

“Young in heart and voice. But crafty as a geezer and roughly that wizened.”

I heard the captain laugh. Wondered if he was on the phone alone—hard to believe Ernst could stay quiet this long. “Elvis, that bomb shelter doesn’t belong to you.”

“I feel safer down here, Captain. It’s a perfectly suited place to do radio and I’m quite ready to stay down here and do radio for a long time. I’ve got food, I’ve got drink, I’ve got a functioning restroom, I’ve got more records than a record store—the good stuff, Captain, I’m taking requests and I’ll take yours—and I’m prepared to operate this radio station within its legal mandate for the foreseeable future, including playing all commercials we are contractually obligated to play, reading all due FCC notices as required by law and I most certainly will refrain from any unprofessional behavior that might somehow cross any federal or state regulations. But as to whether I do radio out of Studio A or down here in the comfy confines of a nuclear immunized facility, I don’t see that as a matter for the law.”

“Ernst says you and he are having an ample disagreement, Elvis. But you don’t own the radio station, so I don’t really see that you have any leg to stand on here.”

“Well Captain, our disagreement is a family affair, between me and Ernst, don’t you think? Meanwhile, nothing I do will in any way adversely affect KYY, you can assure Ernst of them apples. I mean, the radio public won’t notice anything is amiss.”

“So why can’t I come in there and talk with you, Elvis, if you’re going to be so proper and all?”

“Hell, Captain. I just don’t have all that much to say.”

And with that, I hung up the phone.

Julie always said I had a problem with authority and that's why I got along so well with Mavis, who could steer me this way and that without my thinking he'd taken the wheel. It was just something in his manner, something in the way he explained himself to me. Something Ernst can't touch. But I think Julie would have approved of that interaction with the law. Captain Dirkson seems like a nice guy, and he didn't seem in any hurry to knock down the door of the bomb shelter and haul me out of here in a straitjacket.

Captain Dirkson and I should get along fine.

It's Julie who I'm more worried about.

Chapter 4

Now, every story must take place at a fixed point in time, even if you are a contemporary musewhacker who doesn't believe in fixed points in time. What I mean to say is even James Joyce had to sit before a blank page on a given day in a given year, and so there it is: we are all fixed in time, get used to it.

And here am I, Elvis Tuschinsky, age 50, immersed somewhere in the story that begins Tuesday morning, April 4, 2006 and ends who knows when. Four and a half years after 9/11, when the slam of airplanes into buildings bore a rationale for not just one war but, moronically, a second; wars that have sucked young American men and women into military careers they never would have chosen otherwise; wars that provided young Muslim men and women of a certain fundamentalist stripe ever more rationales to fly ever more planes into ever more buildings or whatever the good goddamn; four and a half years after that dumbstruck day that made Bruce Willis movies all too harrowing because not only do Muslim men and women of a certain fundamentalist stripe know their terrorism, they know their Hollywood.

Hard to believe that was over four years ago.

Time turns its back on us all and walks up the beach in flip-flops: hell, it's been three years and some months after anthrax showed up in the mail (two years and some since we forgot *all about* anthrax).

Some six months after we put Mavis Ernstidin in the ground.

Three weeks after Ernst Ernstidin said he was going to corrode my erstwhile life by selling KYY.

Determining where exactly I am in this escapade will be your problem, not mine. I tend to jump around a lot—a function of brainwire— whether I’m telling a story, remembering the past or hell, trying to complete a sentence. Deal with it.

This Saturday is a day a lot of us had been looking forward to for a while. It’s the day Raucus is to reunite onstage. And I want to be there, largely because I had been bugging them for a number of years to get together again and play.

Now I used to be in Raucus, but that’s a sore point, because I was their first drummer. And I got fired.

But that story will have to wait, because Captain Dirkson has returned.

I always thought the police and I were good together. Stayed out of each other’s way. I’m not that troublemaker known to the law, I’m not the kind of guy the police discuss with menace between doughnuts. The police listen to my radio show just like other people in town do, they nod hello to me when I broadcast from the county fair in the summer.

And so when Captain Dirkson had called the first time, I wasn’t surprised that he was so familiar with me. Even friendly. And because I knew the Captain would eventually check in again, I was prepared to be relaxed with him over the phone.

However I am, admittedly, a little surprised he dropped by.

I turned off the mike after reading the weather and started up an old chestnut, “Mona” by the Quicksilver Messenger Service, the glissando of that bass guitar melts me still, and then BOOM-BOOM-BOOM, a loud pounding on the door to the bomb shelter.

Startled me good.

“ELVIS? MAY I HAVE A WORD?”

“Captain?”

You bet I'm nervous, and I bet it's in my voice.

"It's just me, I'm alone."

"So nice to hear from you again, sir. Is it a nice morning out there?"

"Elvis, just between you and me—what the hell are you doing?"

"I'm defending the radio station, sir."

"From *who*?"

"From its owner, sir."

"It's *his radio station*, Elvis."

"I'm acting in the public interest, sir. In the interest of Mighty Y Two fans everywhere, sir, and if I may note, they are legion. Numerous. They dot the local countryside. If there were shareholders, I'd be acting in *their* interest. I'm defending the radio station from deluded, capricious, arrogant, uninformed, lugubrious leadership."

"*Lugubrious*?"

"Sometimes, sir, the powers-that-be need a good, robust buttkicking to reposition their wits where they belong. I'm providing a service, really. A rising from below, a defense of what should be, sir, it's so...*Murcan*." Running out of bullshit, better turn the corner, "Mostly, I'm just doing radio as usual, sir. I mean, nothing's amiss. The commercials are getting played, the weather is getting read, and the music is great. Ernst can put the rest of the air staff on vacation." I search for my deeper earnestness; it's down there somewhere. I put it in my voice, as if I am reading the evening news and the news is important, "Sir, I've *got this under control*."

I swear I hear a chuckle through the door.

"Elvis, you know I can ram down this door anytime I want to."

“Sure I do,” I say, but I don’t think so. It’s a thickass door, a fact I’m keeping to myself for now. Still, my heart starts to pound a little.

“And you know you’re in the newspaper this morning? Front page?”

“Not a surprise, sir,” I say, which isn’t exactly true. A reporter from the Santa Patricia Democrat, a woman I’ve never heard, did call yesterday afternoon and asked some questions. I didn’t say much, but I made it clear that I had an issue with Ernst and it wasn’t going to interrupt the radio and thank you for calling. It’s a daily paper, so I imagined that they’d make some fuss more or less imminently, but I didn’t think it would be this *imminently*. Slow news day, I guess. Though the reporter –she sounded pretty young— said, “KYY is starting to heat up on the Internet, has been since this morning,” like I give two hangs about that.

“Yep, nice picture of the front of the radio station and all.”

“We look as good as we sound. Sir.” Sometimes the mouth moves but the mind knows not why.

“But I do understand that you are not inflicting any financial harm on the radio station and...” Dirkson’s voice lowers, “Mr. Ernstidin has refused to press charges against you.”

“Really.”

The Captain’s voice remains low, “Really. Make of that what you will.”

“Ernst bugging the shit out of you yet?”

Another chuckle. His voice gets a little louder, “Elvis, it’s my duty to inform you that Ernst thinks you should get out of that bomb shelter right now.”

Here it comes. I brace myself, maybe he’s not alone, maybe he has one of those big ol’ ram things that cops use to knock down doors with. I move back three feet from the door and speak louder, “Is that as far as your duty goes, sir?”

“For now.” Another chuckle.

Ahhhhh, *good*. “Your duty is complete then, sir. Good work.”

Another chuckle. “Ummm. Elvis?”

“Sir?”

“Would you play ‘Martha My Dear,’ by the Beatles?”

“Your wife’s named Martha? That’s a nice name, you don’t hear it much anymore.”

“Play it in maybe ...ten minutes?”

“My pleasure, Captain. And I promise I’ll make *no* mention of your wife on air, sir. Let’s keep that between us. ”

Another chuckle. “Alright Elvis. You take care.”

And so my second encounter with law enforcement comes to an end. Al Pacino needed a bullhorn; all I needed was The White Album.

I used to play songs for Julie all the time, in my early days at KYY. The songs of our courtship (“Tupelo Honey”), the concert we’ll never forget (Richard Thompson solo, right after his divorce from Linda). Then I stopped—this was maybe a year or two after we married—because, over dinner, I’d ask her if she heard the song I played this morning and she’d roll her eyes at me, as if our little joke had gone for one punch line too many. Years later, I started up again, playing songs for her right after her sister died in a freak accident, just before Mavis’s diagnoses. Dunno why I did that, it was an instinct. We were all inconsolable, I had to do something.

Anyway, I have to work my way over to “Martha My Dear,” which is tricky, because “Mona”, the drug-drenched alteration to the immortal Bo Diddley beat, was a ways afield from the proper piano strains of the Beatles.

Why wasn't Ernst pressing charges? Clearly, ramming me with a tractor won't work. Cheerful negotiations got him nowhere. If he was pressing charges, I imagine Captain Dirkson would just come on in and do some cop shit with mace and whatall. I am, technically, breaking a law. I must be. Some law somewhere must stop employees from doing whatever they want with their boss's assets, otherwise young men would drive the cement mixer home to Mexico, or gray-haired pilots would fly the 747 to the resort of their choosing.

Maybe Ernst has actually comprehended that the station is being run more or less normally. It is, nothing's amiss.

I'll have to think about this.

I find the Beatles in the CD rack, and I remember when I decided I was not of the Beatles.

Rather, when Raucus decided I was "not their Ringo."

For I was the first drummer in Raucus and they fired me as their drummer and it hurt like a mothah. It was the late period of my Act One; we were all friends—Neil, Harry, Sarah, Mandy. It was Harry who had the testicular presumptuousness to do the deed and fire me from a band that I had attended to at birth, over beers at The Frontier, a bar in San Reyes that burned down sometime during the cigar jokes of the Clinton Administration. Back in Act One, the Frontier had tall ceilings and high walls adorned with any beer mirror they could talk out of a brew company, The Frontier was all cheap brown paint and barstools with rips in the red seats and bathrooms always a little dirty and rife with the ghosts of drug deals, drunken groping and too much cheap beer getting out however it can, and The Frontier was falling down before our very eyes and as such it was a redemptive place to sit, drink beer and contemplate what might be someday later.

I miss The Frontier still.

Neil and Mandy were arguing over the kind of music they would make. They were both pretty good musicians, Neil on his bass and Mandy on her Fender Rhodes. Neil was self-taught, Mandy had had lessons on the piano from a knee-high time, and both of them had played in this band and that. They were just getting romantically involved then; still in the nervous stage of sidelong glances, awkward silences, all that. Long before marriage and Serena.

This was the early 80's sometime and the musical firmament was curious. It was maybe a couple of years after *Rolling Stone* published photos of all the big bands of the day, making the chucklepoint that nobody recognized which rock star belonged in Foreigner or Journey or Styx. They all had coiffy hair like the yuppie women of today and their music was crap and we didn't care for it. But we didn't fully understand punk yet either; we were a little slow into it. The punks clearly were pissed about something and, I mean, there was plenty to be mad about, not the least of which was Ronald Reagan and James Watt and the Styx version of *Lady*, a song that took drippy into new arenas previously populated by *She's Having My Baby* (what a wonderful way to say 'I love you,' ya wanker) but my eternal love for Joe Strummer was pretty fresh then and the same for Neil and I don't think that Mandy ever got Joe or the Clash.

I know what I can play on the air to get me from "Mona" to "Martha My Dear." I can play Raucus, "Tore Down The House," it's got the Diddley beat but more contemporary production values what with some arty ethereal piano from Mandy—the song uses piano as the rhythm instrument instead of the guitar, it's kinda cool that way, the whole band was kinda cool that way— and a bassline I've never heard on anybody's Bo Diddley; from there, I can go to something else with the piano, dunno what, and then segue onto "Martha."

But “Mona” is almost over and I have to get the Raucus CD into the player fast and I dive across the room over to the wall of CDs behind the console, the big shelf of music—over one thousand CDs I’ve brought down here— and “Mona” is starting off into the stupid part of the drug culture where you can wander for days just wondering where the brownies are and I *hate* doing that to my listeners, I think the young people in particular hear that music and wonder how their parents ever changed their diapers while being *that* stoned and where *is* Raucus, I had these CDs filed in alpha order by band and no one sees the franticness of radio when the song is running out, is it misfiled in the S’s? In the P’s? Maybe I didn’t file it and it’s on the console, no: nobody knows how fast you have to move to be a DJ, we could win the Olympics if they’d only reduce the 100 yard dash to five or six feet *there* it is, *pull* open CD container, *pry* CD out, pull *out* the last CD from the player, push Raucus *in*, select track 5, fade “Mona” down, and *out*, push play on CD and there, there, there is Raucus.

*They tore down the house where we first made love
It’s a warehouse now, it’s a parking lot
And fresh paint marks the parking places
Now.*

God, I love Sarah’s voice.

And so there we were in The Frontier, Mandy, Neil and I discussing the folk music which we loved and the two of them clarifying to each other in emerging consensus how you could still improvise music like the Grateful Dead, bring a little more jazz to it—well, Neil called it “jazz”; Mandy called it “art”—shorten the thirty minute vamps on “Not Fade Away” which, like “Mona” could extend beyond one joint into an entire lost weekend and anyway such a music

could conquer the world one fan at a time, if they could only find a bar like The Frontier except with cleaner restrooms (Mandy's concern) and a stage with a decent PA (Neil's priority).

Thus Raucus was born. I was there. I was the first drummer. They recruited Harry, my friend of many years who was older and the guitarist everybody knew. He and I had met at a concert just after I joined KYY in 1983; he was an impressive guitar player then, if a little full of himself but what guitarist isn't? Sarah was Mandy's best friend; otherwise I don't think she would have played with Raucus, because she could play with anybody. Her songs were great, and her voice better still. And anyway we practiced for a couple of months.

It was Harry who did the deed.

It was two weeks before our first gig. Harry drove me home and it was raining, the wipers pounding time and Harry said "you have some problems keeping the beat as steady as we need so as to, y'know, cohere."

To which I rejoindered "well, I'm coloring the beat, Harry, I'm providing a textural..."

To which Harry imparted "you are playing all around the beat and you get lost without..."

And then I implored "I don't see why the drummer can't interpret as broadly as the guitar player, because if you want to talk about playing all around the beat, we should talk about *you* and how..." and at this point Harry got pissed and said "You're not our Ringo, and you are no longer in the band."

We finished the drive in silence, and I damn near broke a snare head pulling my kit out of his car in the rain, the tapa tapa of raindrops on the drumhead each a further insult on my still-young musical career and I hauled my stuff into the house without a word to Harry, and the very next day I adopted the stagename Johnny Notringo (pronounced NahhhTRINGohhh, with

flourish) and I didn't see Raucus play again for a year, fuck 'em. They hired Edgar as their drummer and that was that.

Harry brought beer into the studio two weeks later and apologized, but I wouldn't talk about it. Never did, not once. And I didn't see a stage again as a drummer, either. Not ever. Despite the rather cool stage name, none of the other local bands had a spot for me.

I am, for the record, a not-bad drummer. I have facility and while not. . . chopsy, I am, in my considered opinion, *inventive* in an interesting way.

It was just after this that Mavis introduced me to Julie. Sheer accident: he was in The Frontier having a beer at the bar, I came in just on a coincidence and then Julie came in looking for a couple of nurse friends who never showed. She was the nurse for Mavis's doctor. We three had a beer together and got along mostly because we both liked Mavis so much, but we were eyeing each other a little and I was still on the rebound from Raucus and so, as we were parting ways, I made my overture: "why don't you come over to my house and I'll play the drums for you?" which I thought was most gentlemanly and appropriate but Mavis, a twinkle in his eye, said, "Why don't you show her the radio station?" and I didn't understand the significance of his slight grin until a year later when I *did* play the drums for Julie and she *promptly* said "you so *suck*" so yeah, Mavis was, evidentially, fairly attuned to Julie's insensitivity to the rhythmic arts. He said later the idea came over him, over that beer in the Frontier, that Julie and I could be a good fit. When Julie almost broke it off three months thereafter, he nudged us back together.

*If you kept your memories in buildings you've lived in
Would you look them up whenever you're in town?
I was thinking of you I drove up to see.
Somebody tore that Victorian down*

Anyway, that was the end of my drumming career, after which I shifted focus to (then) turntable and CD and airwave and exhaustive knowledge of all things rock. And if you tell me that so-called joke *Q: what do you call somebody who hangs out with musicians? A: The drummer*, I have been known to throw a punch.

Anyway, Saturday was to be the day that Raucus reunited after a 15-year absence. And even I can't stay mad for 15 years.

*Fields and houses and orchards are gone,
Just traffic and stoplights everywhere.
There's no valley oak at the end of this driveway,
There's just a warehouse worker; he returns my stare.
They tore down the house where we first made love. . .*

Friends are coming from out of town, because word has traveled in the press, or so I'm told, and across some radio stations (for that I can claim credit). Hell, I imagine word is traveling across longtime friendships both well established or set adrift. Raucus was a biggish deal back when, picture in *Rolling Stone*, the whole parade for a year or so, after which they started to fade bit by bit, imploding as bands usually do.

But with people coming from out of town and the whole band onstage together again—Sarah, Neil, Mandy, Carl and Edgar—the only key players not in attendance this Saturday will be me and Harry, who disappeared years ago to take his penchant for growing marijuana in a more professional direction. Despite the fact that Harry fired me from Raucus, he remained a good buddy—I just can't stay mad at the guy and, all bullshit charisma aside, the guy was a loyal friend to me right up to the moment he left town. He'd loan me money when I needed it,

gave me good advice when I didn't want it, hell, he even was astute enough to peg me and Julie as a good fit even before I did.

*I'm watching the sun set over the parkway
A sprinkler waters a perfect lawn
There's something that I'm trying to remember
But it's gone.
They tore down the house where we first made love.*

I can just imagine Raucus taking the stage, the way they always did at big gigs, walking out single file, Sarah first, so shiny and enigmatic, she always gets to the mike with a modest wave of the hand; then Carl, who always carries his guitar onstage with him, always in shades, always the cool cat; Edgar next, drumsticks raised, then Mandy the smiler, then the ever-nervous Neil, who insisted the bass be waiting for him when he gets onstage.

There they'll be.

I'll likely be here, in my bomb shelter. Unless Ernst finds a way to end this thing, I'm not ending it. I don't know where it's going, of course. But that's not my problem.

Why isn't Ernst pressing charges?

And how can I get from "Tore Down The House" to "Martha My Dear" in one song?

Chapter 5

Neil lights a cigarette and draws in, back in the office of Vinyl Rohansen's. Out front on the stereo, *Lenox Avenue Breakdown* is in between songs.

Neil gets to his record store around 7 am--three hours before opening, two hours before any employee shows up—and puts on the right music and goes into the back office where he could just be.

For just a second or two, there's no music. Stillness lines the walls of Vinyl Rohansen's and hangs up by the lights some 15 feet in the air, a stillness that crowds out conversation, a stillness only music can break. Vinyl Rohansen's used to be First Western Bank of Santa Patricia; the walls are thick cement, painted a cream yellow. It didn't echo, this room. People looking through the bins for this CD or that record would hear the stillness in between the ever-present music on the stereo. Neil heard it all the time.

Neil sighs, and Black Arthur Blythe and *Lenox Avenue Breakdown* resumes: the tuba insisting the groove and Black Arthur stating his case—furtive here, cocky there, a saxophone let loose in uncertain territory. Coffee to go from Java Brew, Marlboros from Sage Willy's around the corner, a music of exceptional dissonance on the stereo... On any given morning, all this could be more reassuring than love in bed. Not that he had had any love in bed to compare to as of late, but let's not dwell.

Now is now and it's not bad.

These days, Neil found himself assembling small things that carry peace; quiet and weightless things brought close not by way of a hoarding motion and for once not as a matter of sheer practicality. Things valued silently and to himself. A few moments alone with nothing but

smoke and coffee. The long afternoon walk with the dog, on the dog's time. The chair in the back yard beneath the line of sycamore trees. They were deeper things, he supposed, not meant for anyone else's scrutiny.

Even with this late night rehearsal schedule with Raucus, these morning reveries had risen from experiments to routine; they had taken hold. Neither luxuries nor guilty indulgences: these days, they were requisite. Anticipated. And no one gets in their way.

He was a divorcee in a long patch between girlfriends and he owns his own business and he could build life around such moments.

And he had.

It wasn't always reflective time, sometimes it was moments of nothing. Nothing at all. He liked those moments, of time ebbing and ebbing. Let it, just let it.

The slight yellow walls are richly adorned, posters of bygone days (The Band) and the hip right now (Ghostface Killah); a mosaic of album and CD covers signed by the artist lines up the wall and down. A trio of electric guitars is bolted on the walls in permanence, one signed by Jerry Garcia, another by Robert Horraro, local guitar hero who made good for one record before disappearing from view, one by a guy who Neil had forgotten. There is room up against the wall for two couches and an old upright piano; it was even in tune, with two green plants atop, vines dangling down to the keyboard, which was generally closed. Almost twenty bins of CDs fill the room, shoulder-to-shoulder, organized well enough; every kind of music is carefully represented. Used CDs are increasingly an important part of his business; he is even finding a bit of a market for vinyl again.

Not like that would be enough.

There are nights now when he lay awake and worried.

These days, you take the business wherever you can find it. There isn't as much as there used to be, no doubt, with people starting to buy music digitally, starting to steal music digitally...maybe it was better when they were stealing CDs from *him*; at least they had to come into the store for that. Times are harder, and the future is a road heading off into a fogbank.

That not being a thought he wanted to follow too far, or too closely right now. The day would begin soon enough.

He sighs again. Peace is a fragile state.

The music drifts in and around, Arthur Blythe is so intense. Whoever tells that saxophone joke (Q: "What's the difference between a lawnmower and a saxophone?" A: "Vibrato") has never heard *Lenox Avenue Breakdown*.

The music breaks again, and Neil could hear a pounding on the outside door. Fervent, exasperated, as if the pounding had been going on for a while.

There is his daughter, Serena. He'd forgotten she needed money, but there she is, staring in at him and shaking a no, no, no with her blonde head. She has Mandy's eyes, big, round and brown. And right now, she has Mandy's impatience with him—mother and daughter could tag team that one. Behind her, the boy du jour, Kip. Tall, thin and a little slow for her. Mandy didn't share his opinion.

Neil got up and walked to the front door, pulling his keys out as he walked. Pulling the door open, he gave Serena a kiss on the forehead.

"*Dad*, we have to have a signal for when you are playing music too loud and I need to come in the store."

"We do have a signal. You call the store on your cell phone."

“*Daaaad*,” she pulled a phone out of the backpack and pecked two numbers, how is she so fast at that thing, and ... no sound of phone ringing. He smiled rueful. He had turned off the store’s phone last night. Serena’s eyes turned up to the ceiling, flashing the t’was-ever-thus intolerance of the not-yet elderly by those not-yet-old-enough-to-drink-beer. “Sorry, dear. What up, Kip?”

“Not much.” Kip has thick black bangs that curtain his forehead and make Neil think of Columbine. “Neil, why do you get here so early in the morning?”

“Well, on this particular morning, if the bank doesn’t open early, my daughter goes to school without lunch,” Neil walks over to the till, pulls out a ten and writes a note to himself. Serena was the only reason he ever pulled money out of the register for anything but business, he hadn’t bought so much as a coffee for himself out of petty cash. But Serena? Oh *my*. Whatever she wants. Would he have been this kind of father if he hadn’t divorced?

Serena went over to the New Releases bin and started thumbing through CDs, with Kip peering over her shoulder. “Dad, how was practice? Mom was gone by the time I got up this morning.”

“Bad. That’s why the phone was off, we were recording last night. But we don’t need to record to know it’s bad. On that, your mom and I agree. ”

“What are you going to do?”

“Oh, I think we’re going to get up onstage and suck in front of two thousand people, to the eternal embarrassment of our daughter and her friends.” Neil paused. “And *our* friends.”

“Mom said Carl was the problem.”

“Lead guitarists are always a problem,” said Neil. But yeah. Carl was the problem.

“I think Mom should cancel Raucus.”

The thought made Neil laugh. “Oh?”

“It would be better for her. She’s so completely nuts, Dad. I mean, it’s baaad.”

He lifts his coffee cup to his lips, “You think Raucus is too much for her, maybe?”

“It’s all too much for her. I mean she loves being buried in *too* much, I’ve decided she doesn’t just tolerate it, she *loves* it. But this time, I mean she left everything out on the breakfast table this morning, everything.”

“So put the milk away,” Neil said patiently, as if he still lived there and hadn’t moved out when Serena was a year and a half.

“She left her *bra* on the breakfast table, Dad. Her *bra*. And the milk, the cereal. And the coffee pot was left on. Again.”

“I don’t think your mother forgot to put her bra on this morning, Serena.” Mandy can get nuts, but... Then again...”What color bra?” And he was aware Kip was smiling at him.

“It was just a normal bra, Dad. She’s not seeing anyone.”

Neil shrugged. Neither was he, let’s call that race a tie, “Well maybe she was going to the gym later?” He tried to sound hopeful.

He wouldn’t show it to Serena—hell, he had tried not to show it to Mandy at the time—but while staying late last night to work out a part with Mandy, when it was quiet and late and nobody from the band was around, goddamn if he hadn’t gotten angry at Mandy in the old way, the way it was when they would work on a song and disagree and Neil would take it personally and Mandy would roll her eyes. They had been working on an arrangement after the band had left, singing a little, her on the piano and him on his bass, and he had an idea, fell committed to it and she trashed it and he was still pissed. Why? He was so beyond caring what Mandy thought of him—his ever-changing social life, his *still* owning the *same* record store, one that wasn’t

doing as well as it once had—how could anger still arise? Love had come and gone for them quickly back when, first falling in love on the road up to rock and roll stardom, then having their marriage and Raucus fall apart at roughly the same time. He had had enough drama with Mandy to last a lifetime.

And here, douring at him, was Serena. The Result.

More pounding at the door. Today, reverie is coming in a distant third.

There at the front door of the store stands a guy with a haggard face and gray streaked blonde hair; long, in thick strings. He leans in to the door's window and looks right at Neil. His eyes are wide and grayish green, and then they are darting around the store, looking; his face narrowed boney down to nodule chin. He looks familiar, handsome in a roadworn way, but then Neil knew most of the homeless in town; this guy wasn't of them.

The man straightens slightly. Neil could see a Hawaiian shirt beneath a beat black leather jacket. The man raises his hand; his fingers split between middle finger and ring into the Vulcan salute. The eyes grin a little less sadly.

Jesus, thought Neil. It's Harry Kahn, peering into Vinyl Rohansen's like he never left, like he is dropping by to bum a smoke yet again.

Now? He shows up *now?*

"S'cuse me guys," said Neil, "I think I'm seeing a ghost." He starts towards the door, pulling the keys from his pocket; he looked back as Serena, shook his head and smiled. She was looking at him glumly, another adult who makes no sense.

Neil could barely recognize Harry: he was always a handsome guy, Mandy always said so and Sarah had done more than verbalize *that*, but Harry had never been gaunt like this, with his face worn by lines that had come too soon and had too much time to furrow. Even his eyes

seemed a decade or two beyond his years. Harry was always an older soul on some level that wasn't physical, but now the body had caught up with the rest of him.

Neil opens the door, "Oh *man*, Harry Kahn. Oh, *man*," and he bear hugs him; Harry felt to Neil like a wisp beneath the stark crinklesound of the leather jacket. "Man," said Neil, "To be honest, I didn't know whether you were dead or alive."

Harry's grin wans slightly, and his eyes dim a bit. "I get that a lot." Harry stands back, regarding Neil, "Now where's the Jaco hair, man? You're looking Chamber of Commerce."

Neil grins. He *is* Chamber of Commerce.

Harry looks around the store, "Don't mean to interrupt. Been driving for days."

"Why the trip?" Neil felt his eyes sharpen slightly, taking Harry in. He was a ghost, that was true: a ghost of his former self, with gaunt replacing fit; a ghost of his youth, wrinkles replacing the year-round-tan and stains of gray in the ever-present moustache; a ghost of the guitar hero he once was: he looked homeless to Neil, charismatically homeless, okay, but still like a guy on the side of the parking lot with a sign. And, like most ghosts, Harry had vanished. Sudden as a fingersnap. Raucus was just starting to kick, the songs were coming together, the band was forming its sound. In the very moment when losing the lead guitarist could kill a band, Harry just took off. Disappeared. Left Sarah, too; hurt her bad. Called Elvis from the road; asked him to tell the band he was gone.

That was Harry.

Neil looked at him, wondering if he can still get mad at Mandy over a song, could he still get mad at Harry for a wrong that was almost 20 years old?

He didn't know, blanked his face.

"It was just time to go," shrugs Harry. "As it so often is."

Harry looks over at Serena and Kip, “This your boy?” he asks.

“This is my daughter, Serena, and her friend Kip,” said Neil. Serena’s face went blank the way it does when grownups are grownups. Kip stepped forward and shook Harry’s hand uncertainly. “This is Harry, he was lead guitarist in Raucus, before Raucus had Carl,” said Neil.

“Hunh,” said Kip, nodding too much. Everything he did was gawky, from his handshake to his enthusiasm, “You look like...a musician...like you’ve been on the road for years, who you play with?”

Harry smiles at Neil, and then at Kip. “Everybody.”

“You gonna play with Raucus?” asked Kip.

Harry glances at Neil; Neil’s face stays blank. Leave it to a teenager to give the elephant in the room— and yeah, it was one big elephant— a firm kick.

Harry shrugs, the non-committal look. Neil knew that look, it was the way Harry indicated impermeable indifference. Which had been maddening, once upon a time.

“When did you stop playing with Raucus?” asked Serena.

“Before they were married, before you were born. Hard to believe it’s been that long.”

Serena was regarding Harry, her face could be Mandy’s when she’s making up her mind, “So you weren’t at their wedding?” asked Serena.

Harry shook his head no. “I read about the wedding in the newspaper. How old are you, Serena?”

“Junior. Sorry. But. Dad, we gotta go.” She glances at Kip, sidles up to Neil and kisses his cheek, turns and nods, “Nice meeting you, Harry. Kip?” And she heads for the door. Kip nods his head too emphatically and follows.

The door to the record store closed, the final strains of Arthur Blythe faded. The store's silence, descending.

"Sorry about that, she's ...that age." Neil walks over to the CD player, which rests on a waist-high bookshelf filled with CD's. "What about you, married, kids?"

"That comes and goes. I've got a son. He's...seventeen. With his mom."

"Where's that?" Neil turns on KYY.

"Not sure." Neil watched Harry's face turn down and go distant, it's like his eyes blank into a steel blue cold, ringed in gray. Harry used to do that all the time, hint at a deeper story but not give it up. He used to be funny, irresponsibly so; manic, unpredictably so. A charmer, always. He was older than Neil by maybe five years; back in his twenties, that was a real gap. But after playing with him for a year, it was clear to Neil that Harry's wisdom only came in gusts: he had an undertow that was of darker water.

The wrinkles around Harry's mouth crack, and the smile is sure, "It's good to see you," said Harry, nodding. "Your daughter is beautiful, she's got Mandy's eyes and your hair. Which is awfully short for a record store owner." Neil grins again; Harry's gaze lifts and narrows over Neil's shoulder at the store stereo. His mouth straightens into a line. "What are you playing?"

"This is KYY. Elvis. The Strokes, I think."

Harry smiles, "How the hell is Elvis?"

"Still doing the morning show.

"Does he still call himself El Tuschinsky?"

Neil grins, "Naw I haven't heard that one in years. He calls the show different things, depending on his mood: *Caffeine* with Elvis Tuschinsky, *The Shower Report*, with Elvis

Tuschinsky. Last week,” Neil laughs, “it was *Something Just Moved In My Cereal*, with Elvis Tuschinsky. Note the commonality.”

Elvis kept the beat up in the mornings, more or less. Now, The Strokes, *And me, I'm never gonna understand ...*

“Do you know the Strokes?” asks Neil.

Harry shakes his head no like he couldn't care less.

“I like 'em. Elvis said it right, he told me the band recycles early Talking Heads, although Talking Heads wanted mostly to make art and The Strokes want mostly to meet girls.”

“I remember those days,” says Harry. He smiles.

“Yeah,” says Neil. Yeah. “You here long?”

“I don't know.”

Neil let the silence just sit there between them, thinking maybe awkwardness might prod Harry better than he can.

Harry met Neil's eyes, “I just had to get away, it's a long story.”

“Where were you?”

Harry looks away, back out the front door of the record store. “Vermont. Had been there a long time. Some good gigs there, actually.”

“Not growing pot?” asks Neil. That had been, purportedly, why he had left Santa Patricia. To pursue agriculture back East, which seemed counterintuitive to Neil, ever the Californian.

“Growing pot was a long time ago,” says Harry. He wasn't grinning; there's a slight tic in his eye that twitches twice and is still. “It's been mostly music.”

“Who you play with?” asks Neil.

“Everybody. Played blues for a good while. Big names and small.”

“Which big?”

“Koko Taylor.”

“No shit.” Neil was genuinely impressed. “She used to work as a maid, man. A *maid*.”

Harry glanced out the windows of the store, to the street.

“I’ve just worked here at the store, barely been playing at all until just lately,” said Neil ruefully. “Vinyl Rohansen has been forever now.”

“Glad you kept the name,” said Harry, grinning brighter at him now. “I remember when The Pogues came in here and signed records.”

“And then we opened for ‘em.”

“And then we opened for ‘em. We were in completely over our heads, remember?”

Neil laughed, Harry laughed. Back then. It had been a gig in the auditorium in New River, a big barn of a room. Raucus knew how good The Pogues were from listening to the records and—from the records—thought they could stand on the same stage as them. But nobody from Raucus had ever *seen* The Pogues before and had not the slightest idea how good The Pogues were in front of an audience. They found out that night, after slinking offstage to scant applause and then hanging around backstage and watching the adults play, or so it seemed on that awful night: each of them except Harry in their early 20’s but feeling 12 years old, licking wounds. Sarah in particular had been morose, and nobody could either blame her or console her. “We got our ass kicked,” said Neil laughing.

“And everybody knew it,” smiled Harry.

“Yeah, well.” The two men grin at each other, as if time didn’t matter even though time heals these things well enough.

“Did you bring your Strat?”

Harry paused, “Yeah.” Then he shrugged. “You know, playing with Koko was fine, but young is better, sometimes. Like we were then. The younger bands, just starting, they don’t pay, but...” his voice trailed just slightly, “something about the hope of making it. It’s young and urgent. Dunno,” he sighed.

Up until that moment, it was as if the skin on Harry’s face had been holding tight, and Neil saw it had relaxed, softened. Harry snorted a small laugh, shaking his head, “I’ve thought about Raucus a lot, driving out here. About our being young, you know,” he smiled sad, “And urgent. And you guys are still doing it. That is ...completely great.”

“We haven’t played much. And we’re not playing well. ”

“When’s the gig?”

“Saturday. And it’s not *next*. It’s *first*. Since 15 years ago.” It had been Neil’s doing, this reunion of old friends, of once renowned rock stars, unquote.

“Still practice in the same place?”

Neil shook his head no, “We play here, after 10 pm. After all the other stores are closed, we can make all the noise we want.” Noise being the problem with Raucus right now: too much noise, not enough music. And they were running out of time; if their performance at the Festival on Saturday bombed, he knew he was the architect.

“I knew that you guys hadn’t played in awhile, but I didn’t think it had been *that* long,” Harry looks amused. Shakes his head, looks around the store. “You still smoke?”

Neil nods, “when the store’s closed,” and takes out the pack of Marlboros from his shirt pocket. The two light up.

“How’d you know we weren’t playing together any more?” asked Neil.

“Sarah told me.”

“I find that hard to believe,” said Neil quietly.

“We swapped postcards now and then,” said Harry. He raised his head, blew smoke, his eyes hard on Neil. “Say it, if you got it.”

“You know it already,” said Neil.

Harry lowers his chin, looks around the store. “It was just time to go,” the tic in his eye warbles, “As it so often is. Didn’t mean to piss you off.”

“Why didn’t you just pick up the phone and tell one of us? Tell...Sarah.” Harry not only left Raucus abruptly and called from the road; years later, Mandy told him that Sarah had almost quit the band after that. Harry was one charismatic sonofabitch.

Harry just shook his head, his eyes still hard on Neil. In the old days, this would wear Raucus down, the stony eyes of Harry. No longer.

“If apologies are due,” said Harry slowly, “Consider them given.”

Some absolutions only go so deep.

Neil hadn’t been sure Harry was alive, never thought he’d play with Harry again, wasn’t sure he could be forgiven for the ache he had caused. Still, taking inventory, anger wasn’t welling up in him. So it is. He shook his head, and looked Harry right into his old eyes, “Raucus isn’t playing particularly well,” Neil decided not to name Carl by name, “and here you are, showing up for the first time in 15 years. Your timing is amazing.”

“Amazing timing,” Harry said slowly, staring off as if the thought owned him, “happens rarely to me.” And he let a small ring of smoke fly, it rose slowly towards the ceiling.