

Roommates

by Lis Anna

the Shepherd

The Clash plays full volume, every morning at 7AM. Rock the Casbah rocks the walls. In a former life his ancestors were shepherds and tended to flocks. In modern times he herds bad kids all night at the runaway shelter. His vocabulary is massive. He carries a baseball bat to work. His car is a motorcycle. He wants to be famous and giving credit where credit is due he does look like a young Peter Fonda.

Chicks dig him.

The last chick of the day is pregnant. The current chick is not. The roommates have been instructed to be quiet regarding this fact, feign ignorance, shrug, pretend to be deaf. Just whatever you do, don't talk to new girlfriend about old girlfriend. Seriously. The drama with the rest of the roommates is enough to deal with. The Shepherd has to get an operation. He is very vague with the details. *Exceedingly vague*. Post Op he sits with a bag of frozen peas on his crotch. Another roommate thinks it's a gonad problem. A rumor erupts. Gonad removal. We are sure.

The Shepherd eats my leftovers. When I confront him, empty paper carton in hand, he shrugs, tells me I eat at all of the good restaurants. Butt kisser. He tells me I'm not like the other roommates. He is trying to ingratiate, insinuate his way into my lo mein box.

I am not falling for this. Like I said, chicks dig him. There's a pregnant one downstairs to prove it. The shepherd does not clean the bathroom sink or vacuum but he does steal cigarettes if you leave your pack on the breakfast bar in Community Sector One. Community Sector One is a combo of the kitchen and dining area. Don't even think about leaving something in the living room. The coffee table is the Bermuda Triangle.

On weekends we go to really trendy bars, drink overpriced Irish whiskey and play fight club in the front yard until we are so bruised and stupid we can barely move. Our neighbor is the police department. Cops

come and go, day and night, at the Police Resource Center. The Shepherd is not concerned. All of his drugs are prescribed by people who went to go to college and have initials after their names. The Shepherd's father paid a lot of money for him to study psychology so he could pretend to have a host of disorders and get drugs. Legal drugs. One night over a bottle of 18 year Scotch that cost as much as our rent, he takes the drugs because he's a shepherd without a flock. The alcohol picks at his brain. I can see it. Chicks are his flock as far as I can tell but they roam. That presents a problem.

The old girlfriend is in the Shepherds room waiting for her appointment to terminate her pregnancy. The other roommates are annoyed by her presence. Her predicament proves life is messy. We all agree they must have been doing it to the Clash. *Rock the Casbah*. He tells us in a hushed whisper the old girlfriend still loves him.

I say, "If she loved you then she'd have your baby. You're delusional."

He buys her Chinese food after the termination. He says it's the least he can do. Collectively we stand in Community Sector One and roll our eyes. The roommates believe he only has one gonad left, thus diminishing future procreation abilities. Get it while you can. That's the prevailing sentiment. The old girlfriend goes back to the place where old girlfriends go. The new one arrives. We like her. She is sweet and demure and educated in Europe. We stand in Community Sector One with her and drink coffee until she asks us what we've been doing. A tension seizes the group. Um, uh umm uh, we say intelligently. The Shepherd herds her off to drink overpriced Irish Whiskey and not mention the baby that he didn't have. A few nights later he calls at 1 AM. He says he doesn't feel so good. His arm hurts, he's sweating, can't catch his breath.

Heart attack, I say.

No, he says. No way, he repeats. "I'm only twenty-six."

Heart attack, I say.

He does not believe me. Finally, he agrees to let me take him to the

emergency room which is horrifically ugly and bright. The most awful doctor in the world interrogates him.

Then the doctor starts in on me. Can I talk to you, he asks.

Sure, I say, to this totally clueless prick.

How much cocaine has your friend had, he asks.

What?

How much cocaine?

None.

I can't help your friend if you're not truthful with me. How much cocaine?

Fuck you, I say. He was at work.

The conversation is over. The power tripping MD storms off.

An hour later the Shepherd has another heart attack at the hospital and now they believe him. He stays for days. I sit next to his bed reading passages from *As I Lay Dying*, at his request. Finally a different doctor comes in and tells him the infection he had in his upper respiratory system moved to his heart.

Creepy.

He is discharged and made to swear on a stack of bibles that he'll leave red meat and cigarettes alone. Forever. After three days he is such an asshole that I threaten to perform CPR with lungs full of cigarette smoke if he doesn't get a patch. He buys a pack of Camels instead.

When we get home the Crazy Girl is crying, screaming, being a drama queen.

"What the fuck is wrong with her?" the Shepherd yells.

"She's crazy," I say.

None of us know what's wrong with her. A week later she tries to commit suicide. Her sister comes to pick up all of her stuff. She tells us the crazy girl is in an institution.

"Didn't see that one coming." The Shepherd rolls his eyes.

Now we have the entire downstairs to ourselves until my brother dumps his girlfriend.

The Shepherd and I go out for dirty, wet martinis.

"Have you ever been in love?" I ask.

"Why? Are you going to drink too much and tell me you love me?"

"No. I was wondering if you love someone."

He eats honey and bread. "Maybe."

"Maybe has nothing to do with love."

"How do you know?" he asks, flagging down a server.

I order a double whiskey on ice. Conversations about love are always on the rocks.

"I have something to tell you," he leans in, confessing.

"Are you going to drink too much and tell me you love me?"

"I took the job in Japan."

"Deserter. I can't believe you're leaving me alone with those lunatics."

"I knew you'd bring that up."

"So, what's your girlfriend going to do?"

"She says she'll wait but really she'll find a new boyfriend."

"And you?"

"I look forward to the madness of Tokyo."

"The Japanese are going to be terrified of you."

"All the more reason to go."

the Chef

On his day off Hank Williams Sr. blares from his crappy, plastic stereo balanced on a stack of unpacked boxes. His room is directly above The Shepherds. *Hey good looking* does not *Rock the Casbah*. The Chef is a shiny, dark Italian with gypsy eyes. He cooks Tortelloni alla zucca and Ragù alla bolognese at Del Cambio Ristorante. The first night I meet him he tells me he lived in a homeless shelter with his dad who'd had an aneurysm. A year later his dad was well enough to get a job. They got a trailer. The Chef got a girlfriend. Then the girlfriend got a girlfriend. So the Chef did the same. When she found out he'd screwed someone else the first girlfriend smashed his guitar. He took it like a man. He threw her clothes out the front door of the trailer. Eight months later he had a son. Then he met a nice hippie girl named Rose who dished out a sexually transmitted disease. Not the *keep your dick in your pants a few weeks* kind. The kind that never goes away. In exchange for free rent Rose left the Chef with festering blisters on his manhood. Then she blew out of town with no forwarding address. It's funny what people will tell you. The crazy girl has a crush on the Chef. We all know it. She walks around, saying, "We're not going to have any secrets in this house."

The Shepherd tells her to shut up. The Chef has stopped smoking dope and started reading. His inquisitive nature is unmasked. He wants to know everything about me. He walks from the shower to his bedroom naked. I'm pretty sure it's an invitation to stare. He shows me photos of his son. I have never considered having children. It is all so weird to me.

"You're not even old enough to buy beer," I say. Suddenly, beer is such a qualifier. No beer. No kids. How can someone who isn't old enough to buy beer have such grown up problems?

"I'm old enough to buy cigarettes," he says.

"That's reassuring."

"They'll be no secrets in this house," the crazy girl says.

The Chef cooks me dinner. Greens wilted in vodka, roasted Portobello mushrooms. The house is empty. It's weird. I drink my wine, twirling my glass between my fingers. I am thinking that people who are not old enough to buy beer should not be old enough to have kids.

"So what are we doing here?" I ask to change the subject in my mind.

"You make me feel so stupid," he says.

"You cooked me dinner because I make you feel stupid?"

"No, not that," he says, cryptically.

"Let's talk about something else." He tells me his ex girlfriend is trying to take his son away.

Because I've had two glasses of wine, I am sure she cannot do this. I am sure he must not let her remove his name from his son's life. I look at him in the candlelight of Community Sector One and wonder why he isn't hiking across a campus on his way to American Lit or eating a bowl of ice cream. *Why does he have such grown up problems?* How did someone not old enough to buy beer end up with such massive, life-changing decisions.

After an uncomfortable pause, I ask, "What do you know about the guy in the Basement?"

He thinks a minute. "Nothing really."

"How is it you can live in a house and not know anything about someone?"

"Because all I want to know about him is that he pays rent, on time, every month."

"How did you find him?"

"He answered the ad for a roommate."

"And that's it?"

"Pretty much."

"What if he's down there hiding body parts?"

"Makes no difference to me. Rent money," he adds, winking.

Eventually my two and a half glasses of wine go to my head. "I have to go to my room," I say.

"Okay," he says.

And that is that. I am sure I missed something. Maybe not. I am sure that was a date but don't want to be too assuming. I go to see a psychic. The psychic describes the Chef, says he lives upstairs from me and that I will hurt him. He says it's Karmic, that we have known each other in past lives

and that we will not fix our problems with each other in this life.

"That's cheerful," I say. Then the psychic tells me not to move to Texas.

Okay.

"Do not move to Texas," he repeats.

The Chef has no matching furniture, no matching sheets or clothes. Everything he owns looks like it was a hand-me-down. His room is messy, covered in cat fur. He keeps marijuana hidden in a drawer in his closet. Sometimes when he's at work I sneak into his room and sit on his bed. This spawns rumors in the house but I don't care. It's not what they think.

The Chef has the best view in the house. When you sit in the middle of his bed you can see the mountains perfectly through the windows that line an entire wall. Those crazy mountains. Weirdest thing to see. I grew up in Mississippi next to a wide crack in the earth filled with water.

I don't even know where I am when I look through these windows.

One day, I fall asleep. A simple, *I'll just close my eyes for a minute*, nap. Six hours later it is dark in the room. The Chef is sitting on the bed. Into the dark night, he says, "Are you okay?"

I nod, but it's not very convincing.

He turns to look at me, his dark gypsy eyes wet with tears. His soul is windswept.

The next day his son comes to visit. He is a dark haired replica of the Chef but smaller. He screams and screams, red faced, tiny fists clenched. The Shepherd begs me to go with him to the Tornado Room and drink whiskey. "I can't stand to hear babies cry," he says.

I roll my eyes, thinking of the last girlfriend. "I know," I say.

My brother breaks up with his girlfriend and she starts hanging out at my house. One night I come home and the house is quiet. No one appears to be home. While I'm downstairs I hear footsteps upstairs. Twenty-minutes later my brother's ex comes downstairs. "Where have you been," I ask?

"Out," she says.

"Liar," I say.

Three days later she is really sick. The Chef is strangely absent. I drive her to the health department. Five hours later I pick her up. She is crying. It seems the STD gift has been given again. Her fever is 103 and she is sweating profusely, feverish, delirious. The Shepherd takes care of her while I drive to Del Cambio Ristorante. I ask someone carrying crates of vegetables go in and find him. If I go inside I'll make a scene. He comes out and gets into my car. We sit in silence under the streetlamps. I can hear him

breathing. I am so mad I think that if I say one word I am going to explode, so I say nothing. Minutes pass on the digital clock on my dashboard. Each number replaced by a new one, a different one and you can't get the old number back.

Abruptly, I say, "Do you know why I'm here?"

I watch him, mentally daring him to do anything that will justify me slapping his face. His lips tighten.

After a few seconds, he says, "Just because I like you doesn't mean... I mean, we're not dating. I can sleep with other people. If you're not going to date me then you can't be jealous."

I look at him and say, "If you'd really been sleeping then I wouldn't have had to pick her up from the health department today."

The color drains from his face. Again, silence.

"It was so fast though," he says.

"It usually is. How many times?"

"Twice."

Now he looks at me. I see him in the moonlight, this person who has stood by everything I've done since meeting him and my heart softens a bit even though I try to resist.

"Does she know about me?" he asks.

"No. But I do," I say. "No one knows I'm here. I'm going to leave the rest up to you. You're going to have to work this out. You're going to have to do the right thing."

He looks at the ceiling of my car, reaching for the door handle. "I have dinner orders piling up inside."

I watch him walk underneath the warm buttery glow of the street lamps and my heart breaks in a way I can't ignore.

Three days pass. I check his room. I call his work.

Sick, they say.

Yeah, right, I say.

On the fourth day the Chef appears and makes dinner for everyone.

"What are you doing?" I demand.

"The only thing I know how to do," he says.

"You don't seriously think preparing food is going to fix everything, do you?"

He stares at me. Finally, he says, "I didn't know I was going to meet you. I didn't know I was going to love you." His eyes brim with tears. "This just wasn't what I planned."

I am so mad. I hold my breath, grind my teeth. Just to get some air,

I say, "This is so unacceptable."

He follows me into Community Sector One and lays his hand on my shoulder.

"Stop," I say.

"Mistakes. That's all I seem to make," he says.

"Have you lost your mind?"

He shakes his head.

"What are you going to do?"

"What can I do?" he shrugs.

"I don't know. Fix this."

Neither of us says anything. We just stand there listening to the guy from the basement and the shepherd playing fight club outside.

Finally, he says, "What can I do." A resignation. Not a question.

"I can't undo this," he says, matter-of-factly.

"Then what? This is just another imperfect day in paradise?"

"You're acting like someone has done something to you. "

Anger flushes into my cheeks. "No. I'm just asking why."

"Why?" he repeats, raising his eyebrows. "The why is easy. Lonely people do dumb things."

"So, lonely people commit random acts of stupidity. That's how this happened?"

"I begged her to let me wear a condom..."

"You're not even old enough to buy beer," I scream.

The front door swings open, banging against the wall. I turn.

The guy from the basement jerks his thumb toward the driveway. "The crazy girl took a bunch of pills and washed it down with a bottle of tequila."

The chef and I run outside. A siren wails in the distance. The crazy girl stumbles around, incoherently in the front yard. Her shirt is down around her waist, exposing her breasts. The guy from the basement runs over to her, then grabs his nose, backing away.

"What?" I yell.

The crazy girl reaches for him.

Basement stumbles backyards. "She rolled in dog shit."

She turns around, like a dog chasing it's tail, to look. Her back is smeared with a dark brown goo.

The ambulance turns into the driveway, screeching to a halt. A Medic jumps out. The crazy girl spins again, but this time she goes down for the count. The lights from the ambulance flash over her breasts, bulbous and

strange, surrounded by grass, as she lays on her back, staring blankly at the stars.

the guy in the basement

No one knew anything about the guy in the basement. Including me. All I knew was that every morning there was some guy in the kitchen making a pot of green tea and oatmeal. He'd smile and say, "Good morning."

"We have a basement?" I ask.

"Yeah, it's under the house," the crazy girl says.

The Shepherd has the most information on the guy in the basement because the door to the hall that leads to the stairs that lead to the basement connects through the Shepherd's room.

"What's he doing down there?" I ask.

"He makes Zen pillows and goes around to all of the dumpsters at night to get food the stores throw out."

"There's a guy stuffing Zen pillows in the basement?"

"As far as I know."

I turn into Sherlock Holmes. I ask all of the roommates about the guy in the basement. No one knows. I sneak down to the back of the house. I am sure it is a grim, dark place full of dragons. No such luck. In fact it's not even a real basement with dark, dank corners. It is actually the first floor of the house. It is ground level with windows on two sides. I peer through the windows like a peeping Tom. It's actually kind of cheerful.

I walk back inside and knock on the Shepherds door. "I want to see the basement."

"Sure." He points his baseball bat at a door across the room. I open the door and descend into the basement. From where I am standing on the staircase I can see a neat little palette of blankets on the floor with a heater next to it, stacks of Zen pillows in various stages of creation and an extremely bright, tidy dungeon.

Basement walks around the corner and looks up at me. My cheeks flush hot.

"Hey," I say.

He smiles. "Hey."

"Do you live in the basement?"

"Yeah."

"What do you do down here?"

"Think. Stuff pillows. Write down ideas. I've been making some really cool sculptures."

"Really? Can I see them?"

"I took them downtown to have them fired but I'll get them back in a few days."

"Where are you from?"

"San Francisco."

"You're from California?"

"Yeah. Where are you from?"

"I guess I'm from a lot of places but I moved here from Chicago. How did you end up here?"

"I went to the airport and bought a ticket for the next flight leaving. The ticket agent said Altamont, NC. So I bought a ticket, went home, packed up my stuff and came here. What are you doing here?"

I shrugged. "I was having an affair."

"Are you still having an affair?"

I shake my head.

"Why not?"

"Because it was so convoluted. Married guys can never get their act together."

Basement laughs. "Are you telling the truth?"

"Of course I am. It's too stupid to make up."

"Why do you think people cheat?"

"Because they're afraid to be alone so they hold on with one hand and reach out with the other. What about you? What are you getting away from?"

I expect him to hesitate, stutter, lie.

Not basement. He looks me directly in the eye and says, "My dad's a total mental case."

"Like annoying nut job or certifiably crazy?"

"More certifiable. He thinks people are watching him."

"They are."

Basement laughs. "I don't know. Maybe."

I sit down on the stairs and we talk for hours. I learn loads of information. I learn his favorite childhood toy. Fischer Price record player. Favorite color. Dark purple. Favorite food. Caramel apples. Anyone who eats caramel apples can't be that bad. Two days later the Crazy Girl starts screaming and wailing. "Tell that bitch to shut up," the Shepherd yells, pointing his

baseball bat at her. Because I can't take the madness I ask her what's wrong. She hugs herself tightly and tells me that boys don't like fat girls.

I go to a Sufi dream workshop. Basement comes with me. The workshop is on the top floor of a brightly lit yoga studio. In a room full of strangers we reveal our dreams, the hidden symbols locked deep in our psyche. We meditate, breathe, descend, explore, examine, rise. I look around the room. The winter afternoon drifts. It is serene, quiet, dreamy, so cold outside that I want to fall asleep. Day turns to night and we leave. Beauty exists. I am sure of it. The world is so quiet, the streets so vacant, like the



city has been abandoned. We drive back to the house unwilling to undo the silence we've built. Stars shine in a cold night.

"Thanks," Basement says before he descends the stairs. "I would have never known about that without you."

Immediately I recall a passage from Rumi. *"My soul is from elsewhere, I'm sure of that, and I intend to end up there."*

A few days later Basement is making green tea in his glass pot. I stagger sleepily up the stairs and around the corner to find him there. He is so cheerful in the mornings. I am moving in a thick, dim haze trying to make coffee. I was out late rocking the casbah.

"How did you sleep?" he asks.

I look over. "Okay. It's so damp here."

"San Francisco is wet and cold. It's not too different."

I grunt in agreement.

"The Chef likes you," he says, grinning like a goofy lunatic.

The mention of something so silly wakes me up a little. "The Chef has a pile of personal problems," I say, willing my coffee to brew faster. "I don't think he'll be adding me to that pile anytime soon."

"I see the way he looks at you. It's quite impressive."

"Impressive how?"

"Because I'd like for someone to look at me the way he looks at you."

"Like what?" I press.

"Like he loves you and he is afraid to say it."

"So you want someone to love you and be afraid to say it?"

He laughs, then points out the obvious. "Your coffee is ready."

After tea and coffee are poured and sipped he says, "My statues are

ready. Do you want to go with me to pick them up?"

I nod.

Basement stacks boxes of seated Buddhas into the back of his truck with the rebel flag painted across the tailgate. I wait in the front seat, thinking about how I arrived here in the first place.

the narrator

The big question is: what am I doing in this house full of roommates. Everyone wants to know how I ended up here? I met the Crazy Girl at a party. That's how. My lease was up on my apartment and I was wandering...

But wait. Back up. There's this really important thing that happened before. Dr. Murphy made me take a test. It was the only test I'd failed in my life. It flat out scared the crap out of me. I was sent to the Health Department because I failed a tuberculosis test. Long, putrid green corridors led me to an elevator that descended into the bowels of the establishment. I failed three tests. I was sent for X-rays. A mean spirited nurse informed me that if any spots showed up on my lungs I'd be quarantined and forbidden to leave.

"We'll call whoever you want to pick up your car," she said, sucking down the last of her diet Coke.

There were no spots on my lungs and I was allowed to leave.

The next day I went to the movies to see *Moulin Rouge*. I was Satine. At the end of the movie she dies of tuberculosis. I felt cast adrift from what I'd known before. Now I was in this weird little Southern town acting out parts of movies.

So I meet the Crazy Girl at a party and when I need a place to live the Crazy Girl says I can come stay at her house. She has a huge room that we section off and share. Under normal circumstances I wouldn't agree but since I have TB it doesn't matter anymore. The Chef moves all of my furniture. My rent is officially eighty dollars a month. I am cold all of the time. The cold in this place is never ending. The Crazy Girl begins to cry because the Chef is ignoring her. One night The Chef puts his arms around me in Community Sector One and she sees us. She slams the front door on the way out.

This makes me mad and I follow her out, yelling across the front

yard, "What's wrong with you?"

She stops at her Volkswagon convertible. It is so dented you can't imagine how it was ever whole. She watches me a minute. Her dark hair shines in the moonlight. Her ass is so big it covers the shadows.

Finally, she opens her car door and yells, "We were going out before you came along."

"Who?"

She points at the living room window. I turn and see the dark silhouette of the Chef watching us.

"Oh, Christ," I say, walking back inside. "This isn't junior high."

I slam the door. The Chef is ten feet away. "Are you going out with her?"

"It was only sex. Before my problem."

"You had sex with her?"

He regards me seriously a moment. "Are you going to hit me?"

"Why?"

"Jealousy?"

"What would I have to be jealous about? She's crazy."

"Come here," he says.

I walk into his arms.

"Come watch the moon rise over the mountains with me," he says.

We walk to his room carrying a bag of blueberry muffins and a bottle of wine. At first he plays love ballads on his guitar that make me smile. I lay in his lap and the warmth of his chest so broad and strong and the glaze of the wine makes me tell him my secret.

"You're dying," he whispers, leaning forward to see my face.

"Maybe," I say.

"How do you stop it?"

"I don't. The drugs didn't work."

It is so quiet. The room is awash with blue light from the moon.

That night a fine white powder drifts down from the sky. I wake, still in my clothes, next to the Chef. Outside it is a winter wonderland. We drink bottles of Pinot Noir and read Rumi's poems in the moonlight.

"You should stop smoking," he says.

I raise my eyebrows. "Really? What's the point now?"

He shrugs.

I begin driving to the top of a mountain every night after midnight to listen to the BBC. If I'm going to die then I want to get pissed off at all of the political bullshit I tried to accept before. I want to stand up on top of a

mountain and get mad. For the first time in my life I wonder what it would be like to be in love. Really in love. Under a cascading spray of moonlight, I think about true love. Wonder and awe descends upon me. I listen to the sound of the rain, to my heartbeat, to the sounds of crows calling from tree to tree. I am crushed beneath the sorrow of leaving this magnificently sparkling, bent, beautiful, honeysuckle filled world behind.

epilogue

The night before Basement goes back to San Francisco him and the Chef and I take acid. A cold February night darkens the edges around us. Together we place squares of acid on each others tongues like members of a secret club. We hang around the house until the walls begin shrinking. Basement is terrified he'll go insane, that he dive over the edge and forget how to get back. I tell him that he'll be okay. He asks me to hold his hand. I do. We are watching *The Matrix* in the basement when the ceiling begins breathing and Nemo steps out of the television. I am distracted by a toilet in the back corner of the basement. No partition. No curtain. Just a toilet.

I ask Basement if he ever uses it and he says, "Sure. All of the time." I'm certain that to use a toilet you must also close a door. "Not so," he says, "young grasshopper. I am proof." We discuss the toilet until the Chef comes looking for us.

The night is so dark. I have a copy of *1984*. I read passages aloud until we are sure the end of privacy is near. We drive high into the mountains to escape the think police in my shiny new, red car that I will bequeath to my brother when I am dead. Our altitude is determined solely by how far I can drive. My headlights bounce across the road like a disco. I pull off of the road on a grassy shoulder.

We're a team the, Chef says.

Okay, we're a team.

We stay together, he says.

We get out and find a path that runs along the steep face of the mountain. With only moonlight to light our way we set off into the wilderness. The path is narrow. I stop and sit on the ground. I don't notice that it's cold. I don't notice that I'm not wearing a coat. I only notice the face of the night I am staring into. I look back toward my car and that's when I see it. A man crouched down in between me and my car smoking a cigarette. His

profile glows in the moonlight, ominously. The profile of a man. He turns, looks at me, his eyes narrow. I know I will have to pass him on the path in order to get back to my car. I have forgotten about the others. I listen for the golden embers burning on the end of his cigarette. I listen for the sizzle. A cold dead silence fills the air. I need to get back to my car. He is blocking my way, waiting like a big cat waits. I can't remember how long I've been here. It feels like minutes but could be hours. I have to get back to my car. I have to get out of this place. I can fight him if I have to. He is not real. I can get past him. He begins to fade. He is not real. The burning ember of his cigarette becomes a house light far in the distance. I turn back to the mountain that drops down to the bottom of the earth. Indians rise up in the mist, bare-chested, with war paint, and feathered headdresses. They rise. They are ethereal, light, released from the soil. Each one rises, lingers in the cold air, like an army. I stand up on the trail. The Indians watch me. I look back to my car. The man has completely disappeared. The Indians break up like smoke, their images pulled apart, disappearing. I look around, listening.

When I hear nothing I call out, "Where are you?"

I hear a giggle. The Chef says, "Over here."

"Over where?"

"Up the trail. Beyond the rise."

Our voices echo in the odd still air.

"What are you doing?"

"Building a fort," Basement says.

"I think we should all be together," I say.

I hear footsteps on the path, then they crest the top, moonlight shining down on their faces. I look back and see that the Indians and the man are gone. The psychedelics are leaving my bloodstream. The three of us sit on the path and talk about the lies the media pushes. Now that I can drive we get in the car and drive all of the way to the top of the mountain. A sapphire blue light glows in the east. A dark valley, sprinkled with lights, spreads out beneath us. We have been listening to Kid Rock all night. A song plays on the car stereo. The doors are open. Kid Rock is taking us to the river. The Chef thinks it's the best song he's ever heard. His face is practically glued to the speakers.

Finally Basement says, "Let's make a pact to take over the world. The three of us."

I let out a loud southern girl whoop and say "Let's do it."

The Chef joins in.

Basement's eyes flicker in the naked dawn.

After our pact we get back in the car and drive back into the valley. Basement picks up his suitcases. He's leaving. Going back to San Francisco. Back to where he came from. He's done with the mountains, the basement, the Zen pillows, the Buddhas and the rebel flag.

We pile into the car. Team Psychedelic. I miss the exit for the airport and drive 125 miles per hour down the highway trying to get him there before his plane takes off. Even 125 MPH can't make up for the time lost. His plane leaves without him. We are outlaws. Real Outlaws. The kind that ride into sunrises.

The airline puts him on the next flight out. He hugs me, tells me how much I rock out loud. He is going home. This place is not home for any of us. I get in my car and pull away from the curb. Basement walks up to the sliding doors and disappears. I know I'll never see him again. It is 7:54 AM. A cool blue light shines from the East. I look out at this magnificent world. I imagine that we are the only ones that exist, that we have come to this planet at this very moment when the sun is rising. We are here digging deep down into our souls while colors assemble around us. We have been on a journey all night. There is so much in this moment. I am not the only one who feels it. The silence of the cold, still, winter dawn is stunning.

The house is empty when I arrive. A letter with a Japanese postmark is on the breakfast bar. I open it, make coffee, read. The entire note is written in Japanese. The only English is the closing, which reads: *Live long and prosper, the Shepherd*. Prosper, yes. Live long, maybe not. I never told him my secret. I lean back in my chair and think about skipping town. I imagine the stories people will tell. They will make up details. They will romanticize these days and nights. They will tell their friends that one day I just disappeared. It will be the truth.