

I'd never heard of it.

"Sorry," I replied. "I'm still new to town."

"It's in Belltown on First. Jazz," he added.

I knew of Belltown. Like Capitol Hill, it was nothing like it was a decade or so ago. It was all high-rise condos and nightclubs now. Stiles had lived in Belltown. "It's like Miami's South Beach," he once told me. "Only soggier."

Deleted:

"I like the way you sing," Atzel said. "I'd like you to come down to the club sometime.

Deleted: Gott

We have half a dozen house musicians who play on Tuesday and Thursday nights. Maybe you could sit in with them. Let me know the numbers you'd like to do, you know, a few days ahead, and I'll see that they have 'em ready for you." He brushed the beads of mist off his raincoat and removed his hat and brushed the mist off it as well. "You'll like these guys. And I think they'll like you."

I thanked him for the invitation. "I can do that," I said, and getting excited, asked what day he would like me to come down.

"Today's Saturday, right?" He took his smartphone from the pocket of his raincoat and poked at it. As he did so, I looked across the lobby, saw Ian (the jazz violinist who'd performed right after me), and nodded to him.

Deleted: , and as

Deleted: ,

"Let's do this," Atzel said, "Send me your list of songs, half a dozen, by Monday. The guys can then have a little time to rehearse them, and you can come down on Wednesday and try them out on stage. Sound doable?"

Deleted: Atzel

"Absolutely doable," I said.

He then handed me his business card and said he looked forward to getting the songs.

“I really like how you sing,” he said again. “What a wonderful singer Bing Crosby was. I bet few people even know who he is anymore. And if they do, they don’t know what kind of singer he really was. How talented he was.”

“Sadly,” I said.

“Maybe we’ll change that,” he said, and we shook hands.

All the way home I thought of how to tell Lencie about this development. I figured I should downplay it, especially since there’d been no mention of money. This Atzel Gott fellow was probably just looking for talent to fill the off-nights at his club. He knew someone like me would be so flattered at the chance to perform at the Amethyst Club, they’d do it for free. But it meant exposure, and that’s what I needed. Plus, it meant singing with a real live band! The prospect thrilled me. It also scared the bejesus out of me. I would have to play it cool. I knew Bing’s music as well as anyone, but I didn’t play an instrument and couldn’t read music very well, which I knew was a deficit. I would have to take my cues from the real musicians—and not get too full of myself.

Such thoughts zigzagged through my head as I drove back to Greenwood. The car must have been zigzagging, too, because when I got off I-5 and was heading west of 85th, a cop hit his lights and pulled me over. I turned into a gas station, rolled down my window, and readied my license, registration, and insurance.

“Do you know why I pulled you over, sir?” the officer asked.

“Poor pitch?” I wanted to say. I was still in a pretty good mood about meeting Atzel. “No, I’m afraid I don’t,” I said instead. “Was I speeding?”

Deleted: ,

Deleted: -

Deleted: -

Formatted: Not Superscript/ Subscript

Formatted: Font: Not Italic

Deleted: ,

Deleted: Gott, owner of the Amethyst Club.

“You drove straight through the stop sign back there,” he said. He took my documents.
“Have you been drinking at all tonight, sir?” He aimed his flashlight onto the passenger side floor and then into my eyes. I looked at his badge: Officer Gwozdek.

Deleted: told me and

“No,” I answered. I wanted to explain that. I was simply jacked about getting the chance to play with a real band. Which six songs of the more than 2,000 songs Bing had recorded in his lifetime, would I send Atzel?

Deleted: , and

Deleted: how

Deleted: ,

Deleted: ,

“Okay,” he said. “I’ll be right back.”

As I waited for the officer to run my name through his databases, the paranoid notion suddenly came to me that Lencie’s ex might be involved in this routine traffic stop. Didn’t these guys have each other’s backs? Weren’t they all brethren? Couldn’t he have just put something out on the wire, or whatever it was law enforcement used to communicate with one another, to tip this cop off that I was someone to harass? As I glanced in the sideview mirror and saw the cop walking toward me, I readied myself for whatever sort of mistreatment he had in store for me.

“Here you are,” he said. He handed me my documents. “It’s a four-way stop back there.”

Deleted: and

“I must not’ve seen it,” I said,

Deleted: lamely

“Shelton, huh?”

I still hadn’t gone down to the Department of Licensing to obtain a new driver’s license.

“You’ve been?” I asked. Every cop in the state knew of the Corrections Center. Maybe he’d make some crack about it—“I’ve given a few guys bus tickets there,” that kind of thing.

Deleted: a

Formatted: Font: Not Italic

Deleted: was all

Deleted: and

“Can’t say I have,” he said. He let me go with a warning.

As I drove the rest of the way home, I thought about how if the gig at the Amethyst Club worked out and I became a regular, I might invite Officer Gwozdek and his significant other down to the club as my special guests.

* * *

Lencie was already three weeks into her dental hygiene program when I got the invitation to perform at the Amethyst Club. By then we had a routine, especially with Rory—because kids need routine. Dropping him off and picking him up at pre-K were my jobs since Lencie just couldn't do it. She had to leave the house by 7:30 to catch the bus so she could make her 9:00 class. When she got home at 3:30, we would take Rory to the park if it wasn't raining too hard. We'd sometimes have the Keogh kid over (or Rory would go over there), and we'd eat dinner around 6:00 or so. I did most of the cooking, trying out recipes from the *Epicurious* website, though sometimes, admittedly, it would come down to Stouffer's Macaroni & Cheese and steamed broccoli or maybe cube steaks and baked potatoes from the microwave.

I liked walking the five blocks with Rory to his school each morning. Other kids, with mom or dad trailing, would converge on the school from the surrounding neighborhood. Like a bunch of coyote pups, the kids would scamper around on the grass berm on either side of the school entrance. Eventually, several of the less raucous kids would go stand near the door. A few minutes before the bell rang, a teacher would step outside and from the top of the stairs tell all the kids to line up. Then the bell would ring and the kids would turn to wave goodbye to their parents, and the teacher would lead them all into the school building.

With the whole day before me, I would go to the café a few blocks away and read for an hour or so. Eventually, I would return to the house and drink some coffee (while checking email

Deleted: At 3:30 when she got home, we would take Rory to the park if it wasn't raining too hard, or maybe we'd have the Keogh kid over (or Rory would go over there), and around 6:00 or so we would eat dinner.

Formatted: Font: Italic

Deleted: mac-and-cheese

Deleted: ,

and Facebook), eat some lunch (leftovers usually), take a nap (no more than an hour), and then I would sing. I would start with vocal exercises that I remembered from high school choir and picked up from *YouTube* videos. (I once disassembled and reassembled a chainsaw just from watching *YouTube* videos.) The exercises helped me warm up, control my breathing, stretch my voice out, and move between different registers. Then I would rehearse a dozen or more Bing songs. By then it was time to return to the school and pick up Rory.

Formatted: Font: Italic

Formatted: Font: Italic

He would bolt from the doors with the rest of the kids, dragging his jacket by the sleeve, and I would scoop him up and give him a big hug. Then he would see one of his friends—maybe his new best buddy Stephen—and squirm loose from my arms and race off to join him. I waved to Stephen’s mom, and after a few minutes, we’d each call out to the boys and they’d have to say so long to one another.

One time as we walked home, Rory told me that he, Stephen, and another boy named Jared all had Hot Wheels, and the next day, they were each going to bring their favorite one to school.

Deleted: and him

“Which one are you going to bring?” I asked him. When we moved into the Seattle house, we arranged Rory’s bedroom just how he wanted it, which meant setting up the Hot Wheels track with its timer-triggered catapult starter and loop-de-loop track at the foot of his bed. He had a dozen or more Hot Wheels cars that went with it.

Commented [536]: According to M-W, the expression is “loop the loop,” but I don’t see a reason to change it.

“The red one,” he said.

He had three or four red ones. “The Camaro?” I asked. “With the racing stripe?”

“Yeah.”

We walked along for a few minutes without saying anything. It was a warmish afternoon, late September. I could see the Olympics down one street. Having grown up directly beneath them on the Olympic Peninsula, I felt like I was peering into my own backyard, which gave me a twinge of longing for Shelton.

Commented [537]: I'm unsure of what you mean by this. Maybe the Olympic Sculpture Park? This should be elaborated on because it currently sounds like he can see the sporting competition.

Deleted: tinge

A block from our house, Rory took my hand in his, which he sometimes did even if we weren't about to cross a street. He gave my hand a tug and when I looked down at him he asked, "Are you my daddy now?"

I didn't know what to say. His biological father—Lencie's ex—was pretty much out of the picture at this point. The divorce settlement gave him visitation rights (Wednesday afternoons and every other weekend), but these were basically voided by us living in Seattle. He certainly didn't seem interested in making the trip to come see his son. Rory, however, wasn't asking for my legal opinion. I made his PB&J sandwiches, cut his carrot sticks, sliced his apples, wrapped his Fig Newtons in cellophane, and put it all in his Hot Wheels lunchbox every weekday. I walked him to school every morning and walked him home every afternoon. I took turns with his mother bathing him on Sunday, Wednesday, and Friday evenings after dinner and scrubbing him down with a washrag on the other days. I regularly read to him at night before Lencie and I put him to bed. I also felt responsible for him and loved him like my own flesh and blood. What more was there to being a daddy? Yet, at the same time, I didn't feel right saying yes, not wanting to risk crossing out the kid's biological father in his eyes.

Deleted: our

Deleted: giving

Deleted: baths

Deleted: scrubbing him down with a washrag

"Well, Rory," I said, I fumbled for words and tried to sound wise at the same time. "I'm kind of your daddy. I do a lot of daddy things and I love you like a daddy. . . ." As I looked at him, he absentmindedly shredded a big yellow maple leaf he'd picked up from the ground. It was

Deleted: ,

Deleted: fumbling

Deleted: trying

Deleted: -

clear my answer was unsatisfactory, and that's when I let my daddy instinct take over. I said to myself, "Screw the ex."

Deleted: and

Formatted: Font: Not Italic

I put my hands on Rory's shoulders, bent down on one knee so I was eye level with him, and said, "Yes, Rory, I'm your daddy now." No hedging, no qualifying—no nothing. I knew I was making one hell of a serious pledge to a susceptible little boy, and just wished to God I could keep it.

Deleted: -

* * *

Lencie was excited when I told her about Atzel's invitation to play at the Amethyst Club.

Deleted: Gott

"You really are an amazing singer," she said. She looked meaningfully into my eyes before giving me a kiss. After putting Rory to bed that night, we made love on the couch in front of the TV, and the next morning, a Sunday, the three of us ate blueberry pancakes and sausage links before going to the Woodland Park Zoo. As we oohed and aahed at the lions and giraffes, I thought about how lucky I was to have such a stable, ready-made family life.

Formatted: Font: Not Italic

Deleted: ,

Deleted: looking

All the while that splendid Sunday, though, I was nervous about the upcoming Amethyst gig. What songs would I give Atzel? What if my lack of musicianship—true musicianship, beyond my so-called natural abilities—really showed itself? What if I were exposed as the buffoonish singer I sometimes feared I was?

Formatted: Font: Not Italic

Deleted: '

Formatted: Font: Not Italic

Deleted: '

I would just have to find out, I told myself, and on Monday, I emailed my finalized selection of songs to Atzel—all Bing covers, of course—including two of my grandmother's favorites, "I'm a Fool to Care" and "Keepin' Out of Mischief Now." Then I started rehearsing my selection. After dropping Rory off, I came straight back to the house. I first listened to the songs, plugging my old iPod into a pair of speakers. I hummed along to Bing's vocals to get in

Deleted: coming up

Deleted: was

Deleted: buffoon

Deleted: instead of going to the café

time with his rhythm, and then I harmonized with him, Finally, I sang each song on my own and then listened to Bing’s version again, I switched back and forth like that until I was confident I had his timbre, and every intonation down pat. I knew the songs sounded good and, in a moment of chutzpah, I genuinely wondered if, in a blind listening test, a person could distinguish my voice from his.

- Deleted: ,
- Deleted: and finally
- Deleted: ,
- Deleted: timber

That afternoon Atzel emailed me back saying the selection looked good, though he wasn’t familiar with half the songs, and was worried the band might not be either. So I forwarded him MP3 files for all eight songs, and he replied thanking me and adding that he’d already ordered the sheet music from an online distributor. I wrote back saying I looked forward to coming down to the club, and he replied saying I was welcome to bring a friend.

- Deleted: numbers

Lencie loved the idea when I told her and phoned the babysitter, a Seattle University student that Christine and Rob had recommended.

“I’ll have to study every minute between now and then,” Lencie said. She made arrangements with the babysitter, and went into the kitchen with her armload of books, while I took Rory to his room to play with his Hot Wheels.

- Deleted: let me know after
- Deleted: arranging
- Deleted: ,

Two nights later, we spruced ourselves up and headed downtown. She wore a hip-hugging, thigh-length blue dress—one I’d never seen before that looked great on her—and I wore a new white dress shirt (purchased the day before at JCPenney), a green and gold silk tie, and a light tan jacket—“Bing chic,” I called the look.

- Deleted: .
- Deleted: .
- Deleted: ’s
- Deleted: -
- Deleted: -
- Deleted: It being a Wednesday night,
- Deleted: Coho
- Deleted: C

Belltown wasn’t terribly busy on Wednesday nights. Lencie and I ate dinner at The Queen City Grill—appletinis and coho salmon. It made me happy to see her having a good time. Her program at SCC, was harder and more stressful than she’d ever imagined, and just one month

in, it was getting her down. When she was done with her first drink, she ordered another and asked if I wanted another too. I passed, though, since I had to sing.

Deleted: took a pass

When we were done, I helped Lencie with her coat and we walked the three blocks north on First Avenue to the Amethyst Club. It was a smallish place, basically a storefront in a 3-story brick building. The bar was on one side of the narrow room and the stage on the other, with tables the length of the room. It was dark, fitting for a jazz club, and each table had a flickering candle in a glass bowl. Framed photos of jazz legends hung on the wall: Dizzy Gillespie, Chet Baker, Billie Holiday, and even, to my surprise, Mildred Bailey, the little-known singer from Spokane who had been such a big influence on Bing's singing style.

Deleted: three

Deleted: with

Deleted: fluttering

Deleted: s

Deleted: s on each table

Deleted: —

It wasn't even eight yet, so the musicians were still setting up. A young woman carrying a tray of drinks saw us looking around after entering and told us to sit wherever we liked. I took Lencie's elbow and guided her toward the back of the room and away from the stage lights. Then I looked around for Atzel. When the waitress came over, Lencie ordered a Long Island and I got plain cranberry juice. The club was maybe a third full when a slump-shouldered, middle-aged d guy in a sweater sat down at the piano and started doing a slow version of "Take Five." It was a sweet rendition of the classic and seemed to put everyone in the mood for more music.

Deleted: and

Deleted: play

Deleted: on

Meanwhile, the other musicians quietly took the stage. The drummer was a woman with a purple Mohawk. As she sat patiently behind her trap, she rolled the sleeves of her denim jacket up over her thick forearms. The tall bass player, with a newsboy cap pulled low over his brow, leaned over his upright bass, which nestled into his shoulder like a dance partner. The three horns—saxophone, trumpet, trombone—stood side by side by side to his left. When the piano player

Deleted: -

Deleted: -

Deleted: -

Deleted: -

finished the Brubeck number, he acknowledged the applause from the twenty or so people in the club with a nod and pulled the microphone arm forward.

“Thank you and good evening, everyone. We’re so glad you could join us tonight at the Amethyst Club,” he said. ~~He looked~~ over the audience. “We’re going to keep with our tribute to the late great Dave Brubeck with one of my favorites, “I May Be Wrong.”

Deleted: ,

Deleted: looking

The whole band took up the number and was brilliant—smooth and syncopated, swinging and sophisticated. It scared me how good they were because I knew they would expect me to be just as good. The big city jazz club scene was new to me, a mill punk from Shelton with sawdust still behind his ears. Yet, I’d imagined it would sound and look something very much like this—though a lot smokier—based on the black-and-white photos of New York City jazz clubs I’d seen in old copies of *Life* magazine my grandma had stored in the attic when I was a kid. ~~Back then~~ I even dared occasionally ~~to picture myself as part of such a scene, though I hardly believed~~ it would ever happen. And yet here I was, not only in the audience listening, but waiting to sit in with the band and sing.

Deleted: back then

Deleted: believing

Lencie smiled pleasantly and swayed to the rhythm. The band was into its third Brubeck number when I saw Atzel come through the front door. In his sleek black overcoat and ~~black~~ ascot cap, he looked every bit the jazz impresario. I pointed him out to Lencie and she raised an eyebrow.

Deleted: a

The band picked up the tempo with its next few numbers. It wasn’t until they were wrapping up the set that Atzel, having removed his coat and cap, made his way to our table. Without speaking over the music, he shook hands with me, then Lencie, and sat down at the table

next to ours. Each musician in the band took a short solo, and when they finished, the piano player brought the piece to a close with an artful flourish back to “Take Five.”

“We’re going to take a short break,” the piano player, said over the applause. “Remember, show your waitress some love; tip generously.”

Deleted: he

Deleted: ,

With that Atzel pulled his chair up to our table and formally introduced himself to Lencie. I could see he was taken by her darling face, including her adorable cross-eye. He laid his hand on my forearm and said, “I’ll introduce you to Jerry and the band.”

Commented [538]: It doesn't seem like Chris could specifically know this.

For the remainder of the break, he kept waving the musicians over to our table to meet me, and finally Jerry, the piano player, came over. Atzel introduced me as the guy who’d sent the songs, who’d be singing with them after the break.

Deleted: another

“Hey, right on,” said Jerry, reminding me of Tony Bennett, the mellifluous way he had of enunciating his words. “The band played around with a few of those numbers on Monday,” he said, “and they’re good. I like your taste. I especially got a kick out of ‘Keepin’ Out of Mischief Now.’ I haven’t heard that one in years.”

Commented [539]: This seems a bit too high-brow for how he normally speaks. Could we replace it with "smooth"?

Jerry was a natural-born band leader. He had such ease and confidence. I knew I’d be in good hands when I took the stage.

Deleted: So

“So whenever you’re ready, kid,” he said. “You just step up when I introduce you.” He then told Lencie it was a pleasure to meet her, slapped Atzel on the back, and made his way back to the stage.

Atzel said he had some business to take care of, excused himself, and walked off to his office at the back of the club. When he was gone, Lencie leaned over and kissed me on the cheek. She was nearly finished with her second Long Island and was feeling it. I was glad I’d

Deleted: then

stuck with cranberry juice, because the preperformance jitters were coming over me. It was like the first talent show I'd done a month ago when I just didn't know what I'd gotten myself into. So I took several deep breaths and tried to relax. I thought of Bing. He would be puffing on his pipe right about now, looking calm and composed—Bing as Buddha—so I tried to take on that aura myself. Lencie could see that I was nervous, though, and jostled my shoulder. “Just do what you do,” she said. She kissed me again.

Deleted: -

Deleted: ,

I felt okay as the band started the second set. As the set continued, though, one number after another, I began to wonder if maybe Jerry had forgotten about me. That's when I heard my name announced and saw Jerry stand up behind the piano with a welcoming gesture. Lencie gave me a nudge. “Go,” she said.

Deleted: and

Deleted: As

Deleted: , I felt okay

I trotted up to the stage, shook Jerry's hand, and gave a nod to the other musicians. “You got this,” I heard the trumpeter say, smiling through his heavy beard as I stepped up to the mic.

As soon as I turned to the audience, Jerry began tickling the piano keys. The drummer came in with her steel brush on the snare, the bass player added a subtle bass line, and just like that I began singing "Keepin' Out of Mischief Now." and when the horns broke in midway through the first verse, I knew that, yes, I had this. It was freedom. I could feel my voice rising, gaining strength and control. And what a feeling to have a full band backing me! Such depth, force, and control. The instrumentation complemented and enhanced my vocals. After the second chorus, I stepped back, and the trumpeter stepped forward and took a solo. When he rejoined the other horns to the appreciative applause of the audience, I stepped up to the mic again. I don't know how I knew to do all this, to interact with the band so well, but I did. I guess it was all those years—decades really—of listening to Bing and performing to an imaginary audience in

Deleted: ,

Deleted: an

my bedroom back home in Shelton. My phrasing was perfect, and with “Really I’m in love and how,” I raised a hand to my brow and found Lencie though the stage lights’ glare. I looked over my shoulder at the band with “All the world can plainly see . . .” and with the crescendo— “Keepin’ out of mischief now . . .” one, two, three, we’re done.

The audience loved it. And so did the band. They were applauding right along with the audience. I bowed and mouthed “Thank You” to the band. The drummer pointed one of her sticks at me. The bass player kept saying, “Right on, right on.” And the audience kept applauding.

That’s when Jerry broke in to say that maybe the young man with the satiny voice could be persuaded to do a few more songs, to which the audience gave its approval with renewed applause. Then Jerry put his hand over the piano mic and looking at the band said, “My Blue Heaven.”

He looked at me. “Got it?”

“Got it,” I said. There was no doubt left in my mind, and without a moment’s hesitation, Jerry signaled the horns, which kicked the number off with a big brassy opening. And just like that, I was at the mic again crooning my heart out.

The song was a hit, and we did two more. When I returned to my table at the end of the set, people were still applauding and Jerry took the liberty of telling everyone I would be back on the Amethyst stage next Thursday evening. Lencie had tears in her eyes as she stood up and gave me an exuberant hug.

Commented [540]: I didn't initially realize this is a lyric. I thought it was a song title. I added the song title close to the beginning of this paragraph.

Deleted: of the stage lights,

Deleted: then

Deleted: . . .

Formatted: Font: Italic

Deleted: . . .

Formatted: Font: Not Italic

Deleted: ,

Deleted: ,

Deleted: and just

Deleted: ,

Deleted: when

"I never heard you sing so wonderfully," she said. I realized she'd never heard me sing to anyone other than herself and Rory. She had wanted to make it to one of the last two talent shows, but her studies had made it impossible.

Deleted: ,

Deleted: and

The room was nearly spinning as I sat down, and when the waitress came around, Lencie ordered another Long Island and I ordered a double scotch. I was so charged I didn't see Atzel approach.

"He's really something, isn't he?" he said to Lencie. He patted me on the back with one hand and extended the other to shake.

Deleted: as he

"Those guys are amazing," I said. "How'd they learn those songs so fast?"

"They're good all right, that's all I can say. A lot of credit goes to Jerry. He knows how to bring 'em along." He then sat down and turned toward me. "Listen, you heard Jerry just now. We want you to come back next Thursday. That's a better night for us anyway. So why don't you send another six songs. And we'll have you do a whole set."

"Six more songs?" I was a bit incredulous.

"That's right. You got that many?"

"Yeah," I said. "Of course." I could do the whole Bing catalog if he wanted me to. "No problem."

"The audience likes you." He turned to Lencie. "You could see that, right?"

"They loved you," Lencie said. She leaned in and pressed her cheek to my shoulder

Deleted: said Lencie and

"That tells me something," Atzel said.

Deleted: Atzel

I couldn't think of anything else to say, so I just said. "Thank you."

Deleted: ,

Deleted: was all I could think to say in response.

Atzel then walked back toward the bar and on his way stopped to have a word with the waitress. Jerry and the other musicians all came around to our table and congratulated me, and I thanked them profusely for making me sound so good. By that time, it was already well past when we'd told the babysitter we'd be home. As Lencie phoned her, I signaled the waitress over for the tab and she told me Atzel had taken care of it.

Deleted: So as

* * *

I listened to a lot more Bing than usual that week. I sent Atzel six new songs, and I rehearsed them over and over. But I also made sure not to overdo it since every singer, even the most gravelly, needs to take care of their voice. This is especially true for a crooner, who can't settle for anything less than perfect pitch. In addition to rehearsing each day, I did warm-up exercises, drank lots of water, and rested if I felt any scratchiness in my throat.

Deleted: ,

Deleted: So, in

On Saturday, Atzel emailed asking if I could substitute two of the numbers I'd chosen. According to Jerry, who'd been working out the arrangements, one had too extensive a string section for him to bridge with the piano and the other relied too much on a chorus of backup singers. I immediately sent him two new songs. It was also agreed during our email exchange that I would come in on Monday, when the club was regularly closed, to rehearse the whole set with the band.

Some Seattle musicians refuse to play on Mondays. It's their one day off. That seems to hold more for classical musicians than it does the jazz world, so all the musicians who'd been on stage the previous Wednesday night were back at the Amethyst Club for rehearsal. There was a guitar player and a clarinetist this time around as well.

Deleted: But that

Deleted: on Monday, the one night each week the club was closed

Deleted: Atzel appeared briefly but then disappeared, which made no difference to the rehearsal since it was Jerry who was in charge of the music.

“You’ve seen the arrangements,” Jerry said to everyone. ~~He gave~~ them the playlist and ~~nodded~~ in my direction. “These are *his* songs. So from here on, he’s calling the shots with them.”

Deleted: ,

Deleted: giving

Deleted: nodding

I stared at Jerry. Was he referring to me? Because if he was, I sure as hell was in no position to be calling any shots!

“You ready?” he asked me.

I looked at him and then thought, ~~“What Would Bing Do (WWBD)?”~~—and knew instantly. Bing would go with it, easy as you please. He’d be cool and relaxed and ready to make some sweet music. So I replied, “Ready as ever, maestro.” ~~I~~ turned to the band and said, “Let’s start with ‘Get Happy,’ shall we, gang?” and everyone laughed, perhaps picking up on how I was channeling Bing. I told them which key, and then I counted us in and started off with some scat.

Formatted: Font: Not Italic

Deleted: ,

Deleted: and

We worked our way through all twelve songs on the playlist, yet it hardly felt like work at all. We had to tweak our timing now and then, but it was no big deal for these talented musicians. Jerry was still the guy with the most experience and know-how, so when he asked if I would like to stretch a note another half beat or have the horns come in sooner or let the clarinet take a solo, I said, ~~“Absolutely, great idea.”~~ Plus, the more I went along with Jerry’s suggestions, the more I learned what making good music was all about.

Deleted: absolutely

“There was a lot more clarinet back when these songs were recorded,” he remarked at one point, “before the sax bullied it aside.” ~~The~~ saxophonist squawked his horn in response to Jerry’s remark.

Deleted: ,

Deleted: and hearing this the

That’s how the whole rehearsal went—serious and on point when it came to the music, but otherwise relaxed and playful. It only made sense. These musicians were professionals. Some of them had played together for years. Jerry had started out in New York, played in Paris (where

he knew Nina Simone), then came back to the states and settled in New Orleans for a stretch. He then moved to San Francisco and then up to Seattle, where his first gig was playing the old Jazz Alley in the U District. “Played with Ornette Coleman there,” he told me during our break. He knew I was basically a musical novice, so I appreciated his patience and subtle mentoring of me.

Deleted: before moving

Then he asked about me, how a kid from—“Where was it? Shelstein?”—ever got into Bing Crosby.

“Shelton,” I said, “My grandma. She loved Bing like no one’s business. She even hinted once she’d had a fling with him. A fling with Bing. But I don’t think so since she rarely left Shelton in her 87 years.”

Deleted: corrected him, and replied,

“I like that,” Jerry said,

Deleted: Jerry

“Wishful thinking on her part, I suppose,” I said, I explained how Grandma raised me and passed her love of Bing’s music on to me.

Deleted: ,

Deleted: and

It wasn’t until after the rehearsal when I was driving home that the story of my passion for Bing struck me for the first time in my life as really rather unusual. What kind of parent or grandparent raises a kid to be totally preoccupied with a once-great, nearly forgotten crooner?

Deleted: -

What kind of parent or grandparent brings the kid up to essentially become a clone of the crooner? Was Grandma just another self-centered stage mother? Was I living out some kind of Gypsy Rose situation? Instead of pictures of rock stars or athletes on my bedroom walls, I had pictures of Bing. Toward the end of her life, Grandma would special order video cassettes of all his movies, and we would watch them together in the basement where, as a teenager, I should have been getting wasted with friends while blasting Nirvana and Stone Garden.

Deleted: Indeed, what

Deleted: out

“You know, I never could figure out why everyone’s so nuts over Frank Sinatra and that Rat Pack group, while no one listens to Bing anymore,” he said after hearing my story. “Like they say, Bing was the first white guy to be cool. Sinatra could be brash. But Bing, baby, he could sing.”

“You and Grandma would have gotten along great,” I said, and with that we went back to rehearsing.

We kept at it for another hour or so, closing with “Nice Work If You Can Get It.” It was one of my favorites because it made me go more tenor than baritone, and the horns punctuated the high notes in Jerry’s arrangement. By the end of the rehearsal, we all felt pretty good and ready for Thursday night.

As I came off the stage, Atzel waved me over to the bar where he was sitting. He wore clear plastic-rimmed glasses that gave his eyes a kind of halo effect.

“You want a drink?”

I said no, and he placed his hand on a manila envelope on the bar and pushed it toward me.

“Here’s a contract,” he said. “It’s for every Thursday between now and New Year’s. So that’s four Thursdays before Thanksgiving and four after. Seven in all. Five hundred a night. Then we’ll see where we go from there.” He nodded at the manila envelope. “Look it over, and if it checks out, sign it and bring it back on Thursday.”

“Sounds great,” I said. I hadn’t expected anything more than maybe a few bucks under the table and free drinks like Lencie and I had gotten the first night.

“Also, did Jerry talk to you about the union?”

Deleted: ,

Deleted: , making

Deleted: with

Deleted: punctuating

Commented [541]: Shouldn't this be eight?

I shook my head.

“The contract says you have to be a member. Musicians Association of Seattle, Local 76-493.”

I was already familiar with unions. I was still a member of the International Woodworkers Union, Local 338, Shelton. In fact, my card was in my wallet as I spoke to Atzel. It had been there since I graduated high school and went to work for my uncle, because out on the peninsula, whether you worked in the woods or at a mill, you joined the union or else you didn’t work at all. That was a fact of life. There was a lot of history there and a lot of struggle—heads cracked, blood spilled, lives lost, all for the sake of organized labor—so it made no difference if your uncle owned the company. If you wanted to work, you joined the union.

“I’ll sign up tomorrow,” I told Atzel.

* * *

Lencie could hardly believe it when she saw the contract. She didn’t even know musicians had contracts—and for that matter neither did I. Her excitement amused me. But on the drive home, I’d already figured out I would make \$4,000 in two months, which wasn’t much in Seattle, where the cost of living was outrageous compared to Shelton. On the other hand, it would nearly cover two months’ rent, sparing me from taking it from my savings, which life in the big city was steadily whittling away. But, I also thought, did I really think I could ever possibly support myself—myself and Lencie and Rory, that is—on singing Bing Crosby songs? I knew I would have to get a day job eventually, as most musicians did. I figured I could probably get hired in the lumber department at just about any Home Depot or Lowe’s. But did I want to go down that road just yet? I thought about this most of the next day and finally answered no, I

Deleted: .

didn't. I would give myself these next two months at the Amethyst Club to develop my music and then if nothing more came of it, I would start filling out applications.

~~Meanwhile~~, Lencie's dental hygiene program was taking its toll on her. She studied every night at the kitchen table until midnight. She studied on the bus going to ~~and from~~ school, ~~and in~~ between classes with her various study groups. ~~She was really dedicated and really smart, so she~~ was doing extremely well in all her classes—even Dental Anatomy and Morphology, the one she cursed daily—but she felt forever harried by the next test or the next big due date.

Deleted: In the meanwhile

Deleted: ,

Deleted:

Deleted: , and on the bus back home

It was Wednesday evening, one day before my first official show at the Amethyst Club, and we were putting the dinner dishes in the sink to soak. Rory was watching TV in the living room. I told Lencie she could go join him if she wanted to, but she stayed in the kitchen.

"You've heard me talk about Cheryl, right? She's in my A&M study group."

I vaguely remembered. "What about her?" I asked.

"She failed the first major exam!"

"That's not good," I said. ~~I~~ started filling the sink with hot water.

Deleted: and

"It's terrible. It was 20 percent of the course grade. She's already talking about dropping out of the program."

To see the worried look on Lencie's face right then, the way she bit her lower lip and winced, would have made anyone think it was her and not her classmate who had failed the exam.

"How'd you do on it?"

"I got an A," she said with exasperation, as if she'd barely passed.

“That’s great,” I said. I turned off the water and dried my hands on a dish towel. “I guess you got a lot more out of the study group than Cheryl did.”

Lencie ignored this comment, as though she didn’t have time for such flippancy, and turned to unpacking her book bag. She set a textbook as big as a butcher’s block on the kitchen table.

“I’m just worried, is all,” she said. ~~She~~ sat down, opened the tome, and hunched over it with a highlighter poised above the page.

I went into the living room and watched the rest of *Fanboy & Chum Chum* on *Nicktoons* with Rory. In this episode, Fanboy and Chum Chum were burying their dead electronic pet in the Digital Pet Cemetery. It then came back as a digitized zombie to terrorize the neighborhood. At the commercial break, Rory asked me what a zombie was.

“Well,” I said. ~~I was often~~ by the near-impossible questions ~~four-year-old Rory came~~ up with. ~~They’re~~ people who come back from being dead.” Then I thought twice about this answer and added, “But they’re not real.”

“What happens when you die?” he asked. He was curled into the corner of the couch holding a pillow in his arms.

“This is a good question for your mommy,” I said. ~~I~~ craned my head over the back of the couch to peer into the kitchen. “Lencie, Rory wants to know what happens when you die?”

Lencie didn’t hesitate. “The cells no longer get oxygen, so accelerated autolysis occurs, which leads to chronic tissue necrosis. That’s why zombies have such hideous faces. Their flesh is disintegrating. We covered all that in the histology unit.”

Deleted: ,

Deleted: then

Deleted: and

Deleted: NickToons

Deleted: ,

Deleted: stumped as

Deleted: was stumped

Deleted: a

Deleted: can come

Deleted: ,

Deleted: they’re

Deleted: and

“Thank you,” I said, and then *Fanboy and Chum Chum* came back on and Rory returned to watching.

* * *

The live music at the Amethyst Club started at 8:00, so I arrived an hour early the next night. I was the first musician there, so I sat at the bar, sipping a club soda, and waited, watching each time as the door opened and someone new came in. I wanted a standing-room-only (SRO) crowd but at the same time, dreaded the thought that anyone at all would come. In addition to the poster in the window announcing that week’s performers, Atzel had put my name on the club’s website and Facebook page. He’d also sent out a reminder to his email distribution list. As I flipped through the *Seattle Weekly* at the bar, I also found my name listed under the music calendar. This sent me out to the corner to find a copy of *The Stranger*, the city’s edgy alternative weekly, to see if I was listed there as well, and sure enough I was, with a star recommendation no less, though on what basis I had no idea, given tonight was my first official gig.

Deleted: and,

“You’re not nervous, are you?” asked Tess, the waitress.

“Who, me?” I answered and made a twitchy face gesture.

She laughed and said, “You’ll do great. You look good, too. The bow_tie’s a nice touch.”

“I didn’t think you’d notice,” I said. I had Bing-ed myself up for my debut show. This included wearing a black bow_tie with white polka dots, my gray and black plaid tweed jacket, and a white cotton handkerchief folded with three points in the jacket's breast pocket. Plus, I paid Rory a dollar to put an extra bright shine on my black Florsheims. The real kicker—which had

Deleted: -

Deleted: -

Deleted: of the jacket.

Lencie in stitches when I came out of the bathroom—was my pomaded hair. I'd gotten a short, very tidy haircut the day before and now used hair gel to comb it straight back.

"Where's the pipe?" she wanted to know, and then laughed and said, "On the other hand, maybe you should stay clear of fire with all that grease in your hair."

Instantly, I began worrying I'd overdone it. Lencie made a crack about putting putty behind my ears to push them forward, but then must have seen the distress on my face and stopped teasing me.

"You look great," she said. "Really." She reminded me that it was my singing that counted, not how I looked, which left me wondering about this point. Could I dress as me and still sing Bing as well or as convincingly? Probably, I thought, but why would I want to? "I wish I could be there," she added. We'd decided not to spend the money on a babysitter, and she had to study anyway.

In the end, it was a shame she couldn't attend because the show was a smash. By the first chorus of the first number, my pre-show jitters dissolved, and the band and I sounded like we'd been playing together all our lives. Though maybe not SRO, it was certainly a full house, and I held them. There was none of the typical chatter at the tables, and no one got up to go to the restroom or duck outside to smoke. Tess stopped serving drinks for most of the set, while at the bar, Atzel sat watching and listening from first note to last.

At the break, several band members congratulated me on a wonderful performance. Tess brought me a scotch, and Atzel invited me to have a seat with him at the bar.

"You're better every time I hear you," he told me.

Deleted: ,

Deleted: anyway

Deleted: -

“It’s a great band backing me,” I said. I replied, with typical Bing deflection, ever so polite and self-effacing.

Deleted:

“Don’t be so modest.”

“I don’t know about that,” I said, still with the Bing shtick.

Atzel signaled the bartender for a refill on his coffee. “I have a feeling we’re onto something here,” he said. “A revival of classic crooning.”

Deleted:

I took a sip of my drink. In the past week or so, I’d started to see other aspects of Atzel, not just the music appreciator and club owner, but the manager and businessman as well.

“I’m not just talking about the voice here,” he went on. “It’s the songs too. All those fabulous songs. Berlin, Waller, Porter, Kern, Cahn, Mercer. Those guys knew how to write lyrics.”

I took another sip. Atzel was letting me in on his thought process, so I wasn’t going to interrupt him.

“Crosby had the phrasing like no one else. The lyrics and the phrasing. He married the music to the lyrics. The whole mood of those songs. Tender, romantic, sweet. Funny, too, some of them. I think people enjoy listening to that kind of music, I really do, even though most folks have never even heard it. But that’s only because it hasn’t been around. Not since the man himself sang those songs. But maybe it’s also because no else could do it the way he did.”

“I wish you could have met my grandma,” I said in that mildly wry manner that Bing had.

“I would have liked that,” he said. He sounded, like he meant it.

Deleted: ,

Deleted: sounding

I could just picture it. Atzel would come to Shelton, and Grandma, bless her, would cook him a big ham supper, with no notion that a guy with a name like Atzel Gott might not eat pork. Or maybe Grandma would have come to Seattle and Atzel would wine and dine her in Belltown and make her the guest of honor at the Amethyst Club for the night. Grandma would have enjoyed that.

“I was watching tonight,” he went on. “You could see it in the way people listened. Those songs spoke to them. People have been through some rough times lately, even the people who come to a place like this. And it’s not just their personal lives either, not just the economy. It’s the wars, the politics, the shootings. All of it. They just want a little sweetness back in their lives, some sentiment, a nice turn of phrase, a melody they can hum. And a voice that can carry it off.”

Atzel had been looking straight past me as he spoke, gazing through the front window to the wet street outside.

“Michael Bublé,” I said. “Like that?”

He turned to me. “*No*,” he said in disgust. “Not Michael Bublé. Not at all. Too much flash. No authenticity. I’m talking about you. You’ve got that voice.”

Was he for real? He seemed to be. And even so, should I buy what he was selling? I knew the songs I sang that night were good, but he seemed to be getting a little nutty. Was he saying I was better than Bublé? More authentic? The real deal? Was he saying I was the next Bing Crosby? I believed he was.

“This is just your first night,” he said, calming down a bit. “So we’ll have to see.” Then he clinked his coffee cup to my glass of scotch and said, “Cheers.”

Deleted: He was clearly into it.

Formatted: Font: Not Italic

* * *

My next two shows at the Amethyst Club were just as successful as the first. On Monday of both weeks, the band and I rehearsed. I felt as though I was inhabiting Bing's songs as never before. Each show seemed to confirm Grandma's instinct that I was, positively, just like Bing. I felt more confident working with the band and even occasionally took the liberty to make suggestions, such as opening a particular song a certain way or closing out another some other way. I also rotated in a couple of new numbers.

Formatted: Font: Not Italic

Jerry kept making suggestions as well. Sometimes these were directed at me, like, when he told me to hold a note longer on "I Can't Begin to Tell You," and sometimes his suggestions were directed to other band members, like, when he asked Kiran, the drummer, if she might try half time on "It's All Right With Me."

Deleted: as

Deleted: as

"We need to slow it down," he told her.

"But Jerry," Kiran complained, slumped on the stool behind her trap. "I can only count to four. I can count to four fast, or I can count to four slow. Do you want me to count to four slow?"

"Yes, darling," replied Jerry, who routinely let it be known he thought Kiran was the best jazz drummer on the West Coast. "Be a sweetheart and count slow."

I loved Monday rehearsals as much as the shows on Thursday. Atzel was rarely there for rehearsals, but he never missed a show. The Thursday crowd was growing as well, which he liked. He was working hard to get the word out, but the shows apparently were generating buzz all on their own, which was astonishing to me. By the third Thursday, I was out-drawing the better known musicians Atzel booked for Friday and Saturday nights. Tess confirmed that I was getting a following when she mentioned that some people had come to all three shows.

“Folks tip better at your shows too,” she said, which I took as a compliment.

The Amethyst Club would be closed for Thanksgiving, so I had a break coming up.

Lencie and I had promised our families we’d come home for Thanksgiving. It would be our first trip back to the peninsula since leaving. Back to Shelton. Back to the trees and peaks and rivers and fog and windy roads and still more trees—all of which I sorely missed after just a few months in concrete-swollen, car-congested, pedestrian-packed Seattle. Shelton might seem like a shabby town to some, but it was my town, where I grew up, and that fact alone, once I was away long enough, lent the town its greatest charm. Call it homesickness, call it nostalgia, but I was missing Shelton.

We left Seattle early Wednesday morning and passed Olympia well before noon. From the highway, I took the Route 3 exit and then turned into the viewing area at the top of the hill so we could take in the town, mill, and bay from above.

“It’s so small after living in Seattle,” said Lencie. We got out of the car and stood at the edge of the bluff looking down.

Shelton was small all right. A few new businesses had opened downtown over the years, and up on Northcliff Road, we had the community college and the hospital and a Walmart Super Center, but Shelton was basically the same as it had been in the early ‘90s when I would ride my bike from one end of the town limits to the other. It was also, and always would be, a working town. And a fairly poor town as well. Most residents made below \$30 grand, and a good many were on public assistance. The Simpson panel mill, right there at the heel-end of the bay, remained the main employer, and people always said that as long as smoke was coming from its stacks, they knew the town would be okay.

Deleted: after we

Deleted: had opened downtown

Deleted: 19

Commented [542]: I’m not sure if this is the full title or not.

Commented [543]: Is this a colloquial expression?

“Where’s grandma and grandpa’s house?” Rory asked.

“You can’t see it from here,” said Lencie. “But we’ll go there right now.”

Because we weren’t married, Lencie’s parents didn’t want us sleeping together under their roof, so the plan was for Lencie and Rory to stay with her parents and for me to stay with my aunt and uncle. Lencie agreed her parents were being irrational, but she didn’t want to quarrel with them about it—or with me.

We drove into town, ~~and were~~ both a bit surprised to realize how much our lives had changed in the past four months.

Deleted: ,

“Can you believe it!” Lencie said, ~~We~~ drove past the City Center Motel. “Did we actually stay there?”

Deleted: as we

“Best night of my life,” I said, ~~I~~ asked her if she wanted to stop at the DQ.

Deleted: ,

“Can we?” Rory shouted from his safety seat in the back.

Deleted: and

“We’re going to grandma and grandpa’s first,” Lencie told him.

Her parents lived in a two-story farm house on the outskirts of town. Its white siding seemed more chipped and mildewed than it had just a few months ago when we left, and the front porch seemed to sag more as well. Her father’s Dodge pickup was parked in the gravel drive. At the back of the ~~5~~-acre property, the rusted front end of a maroon Grand Marquis stuck out from a thicket of blackberries; ~~thorny tendrils overtook its back half~~. It had been the family car when Lencie was a kid.

Deleted: five

Deleted: ,

Deleted: its back half entirely overtaken by the thorny tendrils.

Since she had called ahead from the viewing area, her parents were in the yard ready to greet us as we turned into the drive. They were both in their late fifties but looked a lot older—a far cry from the well-~~heeled~~, athletic fifty-somethings jogging and cycling hither and thither in

Deleted: healed

Seattle. Lencie hugged her dad while Rory raced into his grandma's arms. Then they switched, and when they were done hugging each other, I shook hands with Lencie's father and gave her mother a peck on the cheek.

"It's so far away and we never see you," her mother complained, ~~She~~ led us into the house.

"It's not ~~that~~ far, Mom, and it hasn't been ~~that~~ long," Lencie said,

"Well, we're just glad you're here, and glad to see Rory again. He's grown so."

I had been inside their house only twice before, each time to pick up Lencie for a date.

The living room had a sofa and matching armchair, worn beige carpet, ~~and~~ an antique secretary stand, ~~Four~~ shopping center paintings representing the four seasons ~~lined~~ the wall behind the TV.

In the kitchen, the main gathering place, Lencie, ~~her father~~, and I sat at the light blue wood table, another holdover from Lencie's childhood, while Rory stood and watched the song bird clock on the wall, waiting for the American ~~robin~~ to chirp the hour.

Lencie's mom served lunch—split pea soup and cheese sandwiches—and most of the conversation as we ate revolved around Lencie's dental hygiene program and Rory's pre-K school. I knew her parents had no interest in my singing—"the whole Bing Crosby thing," I could remember Lencie saying—so I didn't expect them to ask me about it. At one point, her father asked me how my uncle was doing, and I said he was doing fine.

"I don't see him around much," he said.

"Working hard," I replied.

"Has a lot more to do since you left, I imagine."

"Any shed rat could do my job," I shot right back.

Deleted: as she

Formatted: Font: Not Italic

Deleted: Lencie

Formatted: Font: Not Italic

Deleted: ing

Commented [544]: Paintings of shopping centers or paintings bought from shopping centers?

Deleted: ,

Deleted: and four

Deleted: on

Deleted: and her father

Deleted: Robin

Deleted: -

Of course, this wasn't entirely true. When I started at the mill, I was assigned mostly grunt work, but as I learned the operation and became more adept at handling the machinery, my tasks became more difficult, requiring more skill. My remark was mainly intended to justify to Lencie's father—and perhaps to myself as well—my decision to quit the mill and move to Seattle to pursue my singing.

Formatted: Indent: First line: 0.5"

After lunch, I thanked Lencie's mom for the wonderful meal, shook her father's hand again, and said I'd be heading over to my family's place now. The plan was for me to have dinner there, spend the night, and then return the next afternoon for Thanksgiving dinner.

"Goodnight," I said to Lencie and gave her a big, mouth-mashing kiss right there in the kitchen for both parents to see. "See you tomorrow, tiger," I said to Rory and gave him a hug.

On the drive to my aunt and uncle's, I took the road north of town that led out across a high prairie area that early settlers once farmed. It was a large flat that now served various purposes. The airport, fairgrounds, motorsports park, water treatment plant, state trooper academy, and state prison were all up there. As one approached the prison, signs warned of no parking along the road. The whole compound was encircled by a double row of cyclone fencing with razor wire atop each and more razor wire laid on the ground between the rows. The one- and two-story buildings inside the compound were white with a sickly aqua-blue trim. Many of the buildings had a strangely decorative lattice design made of concrete on their exterior.

Deleted:

Formatted: Font: Not Italic

Deleted: parameters of fencing

"Brutalist with a touch of lanai," Stiles once said of the prison's architecture.

Deleted: as

Deleted: described

At each corner of the prison compound stood a guard tower. These were square columns topped with glassed-in lookouts. As I drove by, I could see a guard in the lookout of the west tower. He looked out across the prison yard where forty or so inmates in white jumpsuits were

milling about, playing basketball, or walking the fence line. I wondered if the guard was Lencie's ex, but I couldn't get a good look at him, and as I drove past the prison I realized just how much his threats toward Stiles at the tavern had been in the back of my mind in the days leading up to our return to Shelton.

Deleted: -

Deleted: threatening

Deleted: of

I felt better, though, when L&H Precision Lumber came into view. The mill's muddy yard, mounds of sawdust, stacked logs, metal office building, and various sheds were such a familiar sight. And a welcome sight, I had to admit to myself, realizing as I drove past that I actually missed the place. I knew that Uncle Lillis had likely sent everyone home at noon for the holiday, so even though I thought about stopping to look around a bit—I still had the key to the front gate—I decided to wait and headed straight to the house instead.

Their three dogs rushed me as I got out of the car, and I greeted Uncle Lillis and Aunt Sherrie on the front porch. It was wonderful to see them. Aunt Sherrie had baked a batch of oatmeal cookies and brewed a fresh pot of coffee, so the house smelled warm and inviting. We sat in the living room surrounded by Aunt Sherrie's abundant crafts: needlepoint pillows, wool rag rugs, and afghan throws. Like many peninsula women, she had the homesteading instinct in her. She also kept a garden, canned her own fruits and vegetables, raised and butchered chickens, and kept a freezer full of deer and elk meat that Uncle Lillis hauled home every hunting season. It had been a good many years since my grandma's passing, so the house was all Aunt Sherrie's now with the exception of a few pieces of furniture and a signed and inscribed photo of Bing Crosby that hung in the hallway. It was actually a still from the movie *Waikiki Wedding*, one of Bing's 75 movies. Grandma won it as part of a promotion. In the photo, Bing is wearing a white tuxedo with a black bowtie and a captain's hat with an anchor insignia. He's in mid-croon as he

Deleted: Walking through the rush of their

Deleted: standing

stands before the microphone. The inscription reads, “For Frances, In the Aloha Spirit. Best Wishes, Bing Crosby.” She was a teenager when she received the photo, and for the rest of her life, it remained one of her most treasured possessions.

When Aunt Sherrie saw me looking at it before dinner, she asked if I wanted to have it. I had to laugh. “You mean it’s not your most prized possession? You don’t cherish it?” “WeeeeIIIIII,” she said, trying to be delicate.

“That’s heresy,” I protested. “So maybe we should leave it where it is so we don’t offend Grandma’s spirit.”

By the end of dinner, we had all caught up with one another. Uncle Lillis and Aunt Sherrie thought it was great that I was performing at the Amethyst Club and wanted to know when they could come see me.

“Any time,” I said. “I’ll have three more shows before Christmas.”

“Are you going to do the Christmas songs?” Uncle Lillis ~~said,~~

“I’m not sure,” I said. “I haven’t been asked.”

Ah, the Christmas songs. They’re probably Bing’s only lasting legacy with respect to the general public. The only Bing movies you’ll ever see on TV are *White Christmas* and *Holiday Inn*. The only songs you’ll ever hear on the radio are “Silent Night,” “It’s Beginning to Look a Lot Like Christmas,” and “I’ll Be Home For Christmas.” And right there is the whole problem. His music has been ghettoized by dreary Christmastime cheer. And so even though Grandma loved having me sing the Christmas songs to her during the holiday season, privately I had maintained a moratorium on singing them ever since her passing. I wanted to expand people’s

Commented [545]: I'm unsure of how to handle this. My first instinct is to change it to "well" and leave a note about describing the action or sound instead of incorporating it into dialogue.

Deleted: wanted to know

Commented [546]: This seems a bit harsh. Consider cheapened and commercialized.

appreciation of Bing, not narrow it. I wanted them to recognize him for his full artistic breadth and versatility.

“Why don’t you give us a song,” Uncle Lillis said, Of course, he was being a real card with this request because he knew that I knew he could not care less about Bing Crosby.

Deleted: Uncle Lillis

“No Christmas songs before Thanksgiving,” I insisted.

“Give us one you do in Seattle then,” Aunt Sherrie said, “Or maybe one your grandma liked.”

Deleted: Aunt Sherrie

I took a moment to consider, then stood up, walked over to the fireplace, and put my arm on the mantle. “Here’s one that I do in Seattle *and* that Grandma absolutely loved,” I said, I started humming a few bars to find the right key. “It’s a little number called ‘The Nearness of You.’”

Deleted: ,

Deleted: and

A lot of singers have recorded this slow, lovely song. Norah Jones did an especially sweet version of it. But Bing’s version was the best. I liked to sing it at the Amethyst because Jerry’s piano accompaniment was always so great. As I sang the song for my aunt and uncle, I could see they were moved by it. Aunt Sherrie wiped her eyes with the sleeve of her sweater, and Uncle Lillis looked at me with admiration.

“Your grandma would be really pleased,” he said, Not a trace of sarcasm was in his voice.

Deleted: without

Deleted: when I

Deleted: done

I gave a polite bow and said thank you. And truly, coming from Uncle Lillis, the compliment meant a lot to me.

The next day, as planned, I spent the morning with my aunt and uncle and then returned to Lencie’s parents’ house for Thanksgiving dinner. After stuffing ourselves with turkey and all

Deleted: on

the fixings, we sat Rory down with his grandparents to watch Laurel and Hardy in *March of the Wooden Soldiers*, and Lencie and I went out for a walk. We walked down along Goldsborough Creek, the long, slithering stream that follows the railroad tracks for miles through the southwest portion of town before it empties into the bay. It was drizzling and the path beside the creek was muddy. Several wood ducks—the males with their forest-green caul, the females with their white-spotted eyes—swam in the creek. I told Lencie how I sometimes saw river otters in the creek when I was a kid. She then reminded me of the time years ago when a middle school girl was raped alongside the creek. She also mentioned that she'd spoken to her ex the night before after I left.

Deleted: -

Deleted: ,

“Does he want to see Rory?” I asked. This seemed the likely reason for his calling her, even though, as far as I knew, he hadn't expressed any interest in seeing his son for the past four months.

“No,” she said. “I called him.”

“Why?”

Formatted: Font: Not Italic

Her initiating contact with this creep made no sense. It was one thing for him to ignore his son and threaten to run me out of town, but why did Lencie have to go calling him?

“Do you want to see him?” I asked.

Deleted: her straight out

“Don't be an idiot” she said. “Of course not. But I did think he might want to see his son. Or at least know how he was doing.”

“It seems to me, based on every indication he's given so far, that he's more or less renounced all paternal obligations,” I asserted. “As well as fatherly affections.”

“That's harsh,” she said.

“Why harsh?” I came right back. “So now you’re going to defend the guy to me? That’s harsh.”

Formatted: Font: Not Italic

“Because he’s Rory’s father,” she said.

~~I recalled the~~ little conversation ~~Rory and I had~~ a couple of months ago while walking him home from school. “Wasn’t I Rory’s daddy now?” ~~I thought~~. Why should her ex get paternal preference over me? Just because he’d impregnated her? Maybe it had even happened during one of their photo sessions. When was the last time Mr. Bio Dad had made a PB&J for Rory’s school lunch or washed the poop stains from his Spiderman pajamas? I felt slighted, as if my role in Rory’s life had been reduced to little more than parental waterboy.

Deleted: The

Deleted: I’d had with

Deleted: came back to me

Formatted: Font: Not Italic

“Maybe that’s how you see it,” I replied, trying to imply that Rory saw it otherwise. I tore a switch off an alder and started whacking the tall sedge grass along the creek bank.

Formatted: Font: Not Italic

“It doesn’t matter anyway,” she said. “There was a lockdown at the prison yesterday and he has to work double shifts through Thanksgiving.”

“That’s convenient.”

Lencie ignored my sarcasm. “He said he wants to see him at Christmas, though.”

“Touching,” I said.

After that we walked back to her parents’ house in silence. When we entered, Lencie went straight upstairs to her bedroom, and I went into the living room where Rory and his grandparents were still watching the movie. Bo-Peep and Tom-Tom were fleeing Barnaby and had just entered the caverns of Bogeyland, where they ran into Ollie and Stannie. I sat down on the couch next to Rory to watch, ~~but~~ Lencie’s disappearance, as if it ~~were~~ me who had somehow done or said something wrong, left me stewing.

Deleted: yet

Deleted: was

“I’m going,” I said. I got up just as Barnaby was about to release his army of bogeymen.

Deleted: abruptly, getting

“Bye,” Rory said. He waved to me and then turned his attention back to the TV.

Deleted: ,

Deleted: waving

“Don’t you want some leftovers?” asked Lencie’s mother.

Deleted: turning

“No thanks,” I said. “I’ll have some at my uncle’s.” I grabbed my jacket and walked out of the house, intentionally not saying goodbye to Lencie.

I drove straight downtown to Bob’s Tavern, a one-room hole-in-the-wall where some of the folks from L&H sometimes gathered. I figured shooting the breeze over a beer or two would take my mind off Lencie and her asshole ex. It was Thanksgiving evening, so the bar was crowded, yet to my astonishment—Had I been away *that* long?—I didn’t recognize anyone. Nonetheless, I sat down at the end of the bar, threw back a shot of Pendleton and downed a beer, and then headed out again.

An hour later, as I dozed in Uncle Lillis’ recliner with one of Aunt Sherrie’s throws over me, I heard my phone blip. It was a text from Lencie. She wanted me to know she was sorry. I texted back that I was sorry too, and added “i <3 u.”

Deleted: ,

Lencie and I rarely fought since getting together. It wasn’t much, yet it felt significant—to me at any rate—not only in my staking my place in Rory’s life but in laying claim to our little family unit, such as it was.

Deleted: This was the worst squabble Lencie and I had had since getting together.

* * *

The next day, I picked up Lencie and Rory and the three of us took a hike along the Duckabush River. The trail was wet and mossy, and the cedar and hemlock boughs soaked us every time we brushed against one. Even this late in the season, with the snow pack already building up at higher elevation, the river roared down from the mountains so forcefully we could

barely hear ourselves speak when we reached its banks. I carried Rory on my shoulders for most of the hike, and Lencie and I held hands now and then.

We met with my uncle and aunt for lunch at the Pine Tree Restaurant downtown. This was their only chance to see Lencie and Rory during our short visit. When we were done, Uncle Lillis picked up the check. Out in the parking lot he and Aunt Sherrie took turns hugging Lencie and Rory and saying how good it was to see them. They looked forward to seeing us all again at Christmas. They seemed to have forgotten about coming to see me at the Amethyst Club, which I figured they would.

Deleted: ,

Deleted: ,

Deleted: and out

Deleted: and that they

Then, after we got into the car and were pulling out of the parking lot, I looked across the road and spotted Lencie's ex, wearing his gray guard uniform, stopped at the intersection in his white pickup. He saw me, too—no doubt about it—and gunned his truck, turning the wheel hard and screeching up North First. Lencie, who was leaning over the back seat to adjust Rory's safety seat, didn't see a thing. I took a deep breath and turned left in the opposite direction, and all the way back to Lencie's parents' house I couldn't help wondering whether this encounter was pure coincidence or if he'd actually been following us.

After I dropped them off, I decided to track down Stiles. He hadn't replied to the email I'd sent him a week ago or the text message I'd sent on Thanksgiving Day, so I decided to look for him at the only two places I could think of. I went to Annabelle's Tea Room first, but it was closed. Then I went to the only place I'd ever known Stiles to live: the somewhat scary Demontet Hall apartments, just off of Railroad Avenue heading out of town. Once upon a time, the Demontet was probably an attractive building. But no more. The three-story, stucco-sided structure was shaped like a Chinese block puzzle, an assortment of squares intersecting with one

Deleted: ,

Commented [547]: I can't locate this complex. Could it have been renamed or demolished? Please also verify the spelling. You used "Demontel Hall" a few sentences from here.

another. It had once been painted white, but age and weather left it looking as dull and gray as the November sky. A few weeks earlier, while in Seattle, I'd been playing around on Google Maps, dragging the cursor around the streets of my hometown, trying to find Demontel Hall. The Google car guy had picked the perfect day for driving around Shelton, wet and dreary, but he never drove past Demontet Hall.

Deleted: , and tried

I parked on the street and walked up the chipped concrete steps to the double entrance doors. I checked the residence board for Stiles' name, but only half of the apartment numbers had names next to them. I tried the door, but it was locked. When someone came out—a Latino guy with a mustache, followed by his wife carrying a baby—I grabbed ahold of the door and went in. The hallway floors were linoleum tile, the walls scuffed, the staircase carpet stained and worn. There was an open window on the landing to the second floor with an empty beer bottle on the window ledge. I found 211, the apartment that for some reason I associated with being Stiles', and knocked.

Deleted: ,

Deleted: yet when

"Hey, Stiles, it's me. I saw the ex about an hour ago. I think he was following me." I knocked again. "You in there? Should I call the EMTs? Or the coroner?" I put my ear to the door but couldn't hear a thing. "Come on, man. I'm leaving town tomorrow." I knocked again and waited a couple minutes, but nothing. It might not have even been his apartment at all. So I tried the doors on either side and got the same non-response at one. but I got an old guy shouting at me to go away at the other. I then gave up on Demontet Hall and finding Stiles.

Deleted: and at the other an

The next morning, as arranged, I arrived at Lencie's parents' at 10:00. I loaded Lencie's and Rory's bags into the trunk, and as I waited in the car for them to say goodbye to the grandparents, I chewed on the stem of the pipe I kept in the glove compartment. By 10:30, we

were on our way. "So long, Shelton," I thought as we left the town behind. I now understood why such holiday visits always left people feeling so uncertain about their hometowns.

* * *

Back in Seattle, the period between the holidays was hectic. Lencie had finals, and I had a few new numbers I wanted to work into my three remaining performances at the Amethyst. When I showed them to Jerry, he said sure and suggested an additional song, one by Vince Gill, the country songwriter. I was doubtful at first. I wanted to sing Bing and hadn't bargained on expanding the repertoire to include anyone other than Bing. But Jerry assured me the Vince Gill number was one Bing would have loved. Bing was always willing to try out new songwriters. So I agreed to give it a go at Monday's rehearsal—and it was great. It fit right in with the Bing songbook: the sentiment, the phrasing, the tonality, everything.

"Do you think people will know it?" I asked Jerry during a break. I'd only ever sung Bing Crosby covers, songs that most people didn't know. Though written by others, they always sounded so original to Bing, and since most people today had never heard them, they also sounded original to me. So I worried that if I started throwing in a lot of contemporary numbers that people were familiar with—What next? A Beatles tune?—they would start thinking we were just another lame cover band.

"Not unless they're huge Vince Gill fans," he replied.

I then asked him if he thought Atzel would sign me to a new contract after Christmas, and he laughed. "Are you kidding? He's already told me you're our New Year's Eve act. And when you re-sign, make sure he gives you more money."

Formatted: Font: Not Italic

Deleted: ,

Deleted: understanding now

Deleted: leave

Deleted: that

Deleted: ,

Deleted: being

Deleted: as he was

Deleted: ,

This response was one reason everyone in the band loved Jerry so much. He knew how to make great music and he looked after his people. We did the Vince Gill number that Thursday and got a big applause for it.

The next Monday, Atzel showed up toward the end of rehearsal. Then, when we were done and everyone was packing up, he signaled me to the bar and pushed another manila envelope in front of me.

“If you want to sign it now before you leave, that’ll be fine. I’ll be back in the office if you have any questions.” He then walked away and left me there to read the new contract.

As I read through it, I had to look up periodically to process it all. This one was for a full year, beginning December 31. I would perform a minimum of once a week, Thursdays definitely, but also a Friday or Saturday now and then. For Thursday performances, I would receive \$700 a night, and for Friday and Saturday performances, \$1,000. Furthermore, I would have to be willing to travel to bookings in other cities, (these dates to be scheduled by Atzel in consultation with me), with all travel arrangements to be made by Atzel.

About halfway through reading the contract, I looked around the club. The horn players were cleaning and packing their instruments, joking among themselves. The bass player, Ronel, was still on stage, in his own world, improvising on his double bass as if in a slow dance with it. He tickled the strings with his left hand along the unfretted stringboard and slapped at them along the instrument’s belly with his right. Meanwhile, Jerry and Kiran were in tête-à-tête over drinks at a back table.

The next part of the contract really bowled me over. The terms stated that within the first six months of signing, I would record a full-length album in the studios of the recently formed

Deleted: .

Deleted: .

Deleted: .

Deleted: tickling

Deleted: slapping

Amethyst Records, with song selection and arrangement to be determined in consultation with Atzel Gott and Jerry Parrington. I would receive a \$1,000 advance on the album and 10 percent of all sales. In other words, I was going to be a recording artist.

Deleted: ,

The contract far exceeded my expectations, so I put away any notion of bargaining with Atzel for more money. The union, however, recommended members have any contract reviewed before signing it, so when I entered Atzel's office, I thanked him first and expressed how excited I was about touring and recording and performing more regularly at the club, and then told him I'd have the signed contract back on his desk by Thursday.

"That's fine," he said. "I think we're going to make a lot of beautiful music together."

Driving home on I-5, I can't say what it was, but rather than being excited about the new contract, suddenly something came over me and I was overtaken by a storm of doubts like I'd never experienced before. They came in the form of a monumental sense of inadequacy, a certainty that I was neither prepared for nor deserving of such a dramatic uptick in my so-called singing career. Mired in this mood, I drove past my exit and headed toward Northgate, then Alderwood, then Edmonds. Was this really happening, I wondered, or was someone (Atzel, Jerry, or someone else entirely, like my Uncle Lillis) playing a massive prank on me, taking me for the fool that I was? Success was throwing itself at me and instead of embracing it, I wanted to duck for cover. I even began to fear telling Lencie about the new contract. The trip to Shelton and the on-going ordeal with her ex still left me questioning, especially after our squabble, our relationship and what kind of future we had. Was it time for us to get married and for me to officially adopt Rory? Oddly, we'd never discussed either possibility. At this point in her life, it seemed like all that mattered to Lencie was her dental hygiene program. It seemed I was

increasingly relegated to the role of daycare provider, housekeeper, and academic cheerleader. But if I was going to accept this new contract with Atzel, things would have to change. By the time I reached Everett, I even started thinking I might be better off on my own.

I exited at Marysville, talked myself down while pumping gas into the car, and got back on I-5 South. "Easy there, fella." I told myself, channeling Bing. I thought every performer probably gets scared while also fantasizing about fame and fortune. You couldn't tell me Bing, anxious as he might have been upon leaving Spokane, didn't anticipate a glorious future for himself when he headed down to Los Angeles chasing his star. Maybe my voice—or was it his voice? I sometimes got confused on this point—would be my ticket to such success as well.

I started humming, then sang a little scat, then whistled some, and by the time I reached the Greenwood exit, I'd calmed myself down. It was just a mild panic attack, I told myself. I got overexcited, is all. Nothing I couldn't handle. I should absolutely go for it. It was now or never.

* * *

Lencie, of course, was experiencing her own success. She earned straight A's in every class, made the dean's list at the end of the fall quarter, and joined the honor society for community college students. When she applied for the supervised clinicals at public dental clinics throughout Seattle, she was one of only two first-year students selected. It was also a paid position. The only hitch was it meant we wouldn't be going to Shelton for Christmas, not even for the one day.

"They're assigning me to an emergency clinic," she said, "and it's open every day, even on Christmas. That's the whole point."

Deleted: how

Formatted: Font: Not Italic

Deleted: probably

Deleted: -

Deleted: to do

Deleted: What's more, the position paid

I didn't pretend to show much disappointment about not returning to Shelton for Christmas. While I would miss seeing my aunt and uncle, the fact was, if I never had to deal with Lencie's cranky parents or her unstable ex again, it would suit me fine.

"We'll have a wonderful Christmas right here," I said. It would be just the three of us, which would be great. We'd ~~decorate~~ a tree, hang stockings, drink hot cocoa, and open presents on Christmas Eve, and the next day, when Lencie came home from the clinic, I'd have a turkey dinner waiting.

Deleted: get

Deleted: and decorate it

"Will Santa know where we live now?" Rory asked when we told him we'd be staying in Seattle for Christmas.

"Of course," I told him. "Santa knows where every little boy and girl lives." I planned to get him the expanded Hot Wheels track that he wanted so badly and ~~to~~ also surprise him with a ~~5-~~gallon fish tank and half a dozen goldfish to put in his bedroom. It was going to be the best Christmas ever, I told him.

Deleted: five

* * *

The New Year's Eve show at the Amethyst Club was SRO. Atzel couldn't have been happier. The crowd was all sorts and ages—hipsters, professionals, ~~baby boomers~~, oldsters—and a lot of them were dressed to the nines. I wore a black suit with silk lapels and a black bowtie for the performance. I also put extra gel in my hair. The new numbers we added to the playlist sounded great. The band and I were in perfect sync with one another. Everyone's timing was on, and I never felt in greater command of my own voice. I owned the stage, and the audience could tell. ~~They~~, applauded more enthusiastically than ever. Faces were beaming, and some people even

Deleted: Baby Boomers

Deleted: It

cheered. Man, oh man, was I ever feeling it! I was in full Bing mode, becoming one with my crooning idol. I was on top of the world, reaching for that star!

Deleted: ,

My only regret was that Lencie couldn't be there. She had the night off, but finding a babysitter on New Year's Eve was impossible. Did she even know what kind of talent she was living with? I thought about that after the first set when I called her and wished her Happy New Year. Did she recognize the effect I had on an audience? She'd been to a couple of my earlier shows, but they were nothing compared to this. The New Year's Eve show marked a turning point.

Deleted: ,

The next morning—New Year's Day—I had an email from Jerry, sent at 4:37 a.m. All it said was, "You were great! We need strings."

Deleted: ,

He was right. I was great and we needed strings. Adding a couple violins, maybe a cello, had always been in the back of my mind. They played a big role in Bing's music. Jerry's arrangements were stupendous, but a string section, even a small one, would turn our little ensemble into an orchestra. And then Jerry could be a bona fide bandleader.

Deleted: then

Immediately, I thought of Ian, the jazz violinist from the handful of talent shows I'd been in. I got his number two days later from the union and invited him down to the club. As soon as Jerry heard him play, he was in, and Atzel, who remembered Ian from the talent show, concurred. Ian then recommended another violinist and a cellist, friends of his from the Thornton School of Music in Los Angeles, and Jerry talked Ronel into dusting off the horsehair bow for his upright, and by the end of the week, we had a genuine string section.

Commented [548]: His upright bass?

"Meet me at the first chorus," I said to the new band members. We were preparing to break out a new number at our first full rehearsal. It was one of my favorite lines from Bing, and

Deleted: as we prepared

I'd been waiting for the chance to use it. Plus, I was exercising my new-found confidence following the New Year's Eve show. I started singing a capella and the strings came in right on cue at the chorus. The new layer of sound was transformative.

It was the first rehearsal Atzel ever sat all the way through. He told the musicians afterward he was going to let us play together at the Amethyst Club for a few weeks to jell and then bring us into the studio to cut the album. He also mentioned a road tour in the spring to promote it. "So keep your calendars open," he told everyone.

"Man alive," I said to Jerry before going home that night. "This is real show biz."

Being the old pro he was, Jerry just smiled and closed the lid on the keys of his piano. "Rest those pipes, Shelstein," he said and went over to speak to Kiran.

When Atzel suggested a voice coach, given how much more singing I would be doing under the new contract, I immediately contacted the person he recommended. Up until then, I hadn't realized ~~that much of my technique was wrong, and that~~ I was ~~badly~~ straining my vocal chords, even as I tried not to. The voice coach taught me to open my throat and form my mouth to enunciate the lyrics more fully. She taught me how to breathe evenly and pump my diaphragm. She showed me how to support the notes, and had me practice scales, arpeggios, legato runs, and staccato runs until I was nearly ready to go all out bel canto. It was a lot of work, but after a few lessons my voice became stronger, my pitch improved, and my range increased.

We cut the album in early March. Atzel billed himself as producer, though it was Jerry who did the sound checks and mixing and taught Atzel how to operate the soundboard. It was a small studio in a former warehouse in Belltown, a few blocks from the club, which Atzel typically rented out to local bands wanting to make a CD on the cheap. Because we didn't have

Deleted: how wrong

Deleted: or

Deleted: how badly

to pay hourly rates, the band and I spent three weeks there perfecting the fourteen songs (all Bing numbers) to be included on the album, which would be titled *A Night to Go Dreaming*.

Then in mid-April, with two cases of CDs ~~and our bags~~ in the ~~tour bus'~~ luggage compartment, The Jerry Parrington Orchestra—featuring yours truly—went on tour. We played Portland, Ashland, Sacramento, San Francisco, San Jose, Fresno, Los Angeles, and San Diego. Each gig was typically a two-night stand, which meant we were on the road for nearly four weeks. The venues ranged from sophisticated to seedy, with a couple of college campuses thrown in. We drew good audiences, and the CDs, with Tess peddling them at every stop, flew off the table. Plus, the band played consistently well. Jerry, Kirin, Ronel, and a few others were road tour veterans. They came in, did their jobs like the consummate professionals they were, and retired to their hotel rooms. But to me, ~~Jan and his two friends from music school~~, it was a great big adventure. We went sightseeing through the big cities during the day and at night, after the show, hit a few more drinking establishments before they closed. At one college campus we played, we were invited to a fraternity party, which, after an hour of drinking beer from a red Solo cup and making small talk with ponytailed co-eds, had me feeling more middle-aged than ever before.

By the time the bus rolled back into Seattle, we were exhausted—happy but exhausted. By every estimate, the tour was a success. People came out, the CDs sold, and local papers gave us glowing reviews. Two of the reviews mentioned the Bing Crosby connection: one positively (“He channels the voice and the spirit of America’s greatest crooner”), which pleased me, and one negatively (“He lacks the sympathetic eyes and effortless charm of the original”), which

Deleted: on the tour bus along with our bags

Deleted: and

stung. But even the negative review applauded my overall performance and gave special kudos to Jerry's orchestration.

My time away from home, however, was a strain on Lencie, especially in regard to taking care of Rory. She had to rely on help from parents of Rory's friends from school, which she didn't like having to do. Her studies sagged as well. So when I finally returned, she was relieved. As for myself, I felt lost hanging around the house again. I realized I might have been a little depressed, coming down from the thrill of the album debut and road tour. I began to wonder again how long I could keep this up, what would become of it all, and whether it was all just a great big charade to showcase what a fraud I really was. Bing Crosby? Really? When was the novelty going to wear off? At what point would people say, "Okay, I get it, and go back to listening to whatever vapid pop album they were used to?" The doubts persisted, no matter how hard I tried to shake them.

The band had an eight-day break before playing the Amethyst again, yet Atzel wanted us to develop new songs during the break so we could go into the studio again in a couple of months. He talked about doing an album of contemporary songs, mentioning a Tom Waits song and a Lucinda Williams song he thought would work. I wanted to tell him the songs were far too edgy—Bing didn't do edgy. Furthermore, I was dedicated to doing Bing—and only Bing—and didn't want to fool around with anything different. The Vince Gill song was an exception, and I wanted to keep it that way. Meanwhile, no doubt, Atzel pictured himself as another Rick Rubin, producing his own version of the American series with Johnny Cash. Yet, I had about as much enthusiasm for doing contemporary numbers as I did for singing the classic Christmas songs.

* * *

Deleted: ,

Formatted: Font: Not Italic

Deleted: with me

Deleted:

Deleted:

Commented [549]: What series?

After a week or so, Lencie and I were back to our routine, which for me meant walking Rory to and from school. Feeling lazy one day (as well as perhaps a little sorry for myself, burdened as I was with this domestic duty), I decided to pick him up in the car after I'd been cruising about aimlessly for most of the afternoon. Once I had him strapped in, he asked if we could go feed the ducks at Green Lake and I said sure. First, though, I needed to get a coffee, so I pulled into the drive-through espresso stand a few blocks from the lake, and as the woman inside was finishing up with a customer at the opposite window, I studied the diamond-embroidered back pockets of her skinny jeans. Then, when she turned and came to our window, I recognized her immediately. It was Shakira.

Deleted: thru

“Hi, Nicole,” I said.

She leaned out the window to get a better look at me. Her hair was still blonde but not as blonde as it used to be. Otherwise she looked the same as when I saw her last, just not dressed so stunningly. Over her skinny jeans, she wore a Posies T-shirt with the elastic collar cut out.

Deleted: t

“Hey,” she said, seeming to only half-recognize me.

I reminded her of my name. “It’s Chris,” I said, and added, “The talent shows?”

“Oh, yeah. Hey, Chris,” she said, brightening up. “It’s good to see you.”

“You still singing?” I asked.

She shrugged, and said, “No, not so much.” Her face went kind of blank as she seemed to realize that instead of fulfilling her dream of being a singer—which I assumed was why she’d moved to Seattle from Idaho in the first place—she was a barista at a drive-through espresso stand. “So what can I get you?”

Deleted: thru

Deleted: espresso

“Let’s see,” I said. I ordered a double latte for me and a hot chocolate for Rory.

Deleted: and

As she made our drinks, I wondered if she would ask me what I'd been doing. Would I brag to her about the Amethyst Club, the album, the road tour? When she came back and handed the drinks to me, however, it was as if I was any other guy getting coffee. She didn't say a word as she gave me my change.

"Good to see you," I said and put a dollar in the tip jar.

"Thanks," she said, "you too," and with that she pulled the sliding window closed.

At the lake, Rory ran ahead as I carried our drinks to a bench near the swing set. When I lifted the latte to take a sip, I could smell a distinctive fragrance—not espresso aroma, but perfume, ever so faint. Somehow it had gotten onto the lid of the cup or maybe the cup itself. Perhaps this was a barista trick, I thought, one of those subliminal things. A touch of Chanel, or whatever, to trigger guys' pheromones and keep them coming back. If so, I liked it. I took another sip, inhaled the fragrance, and pictured Nicole leaning out the window to take our orders. Then as I watched Rory push himself higher on the swing, an idea took hold of me.

"Rory," I called. "Let's walk." I handed him his hot chocolate and began walking down the paved pathway around the lake. It was a sunny day, daffodils in bloom, rhododendrons about to burst open. We walked a good ways around the lake before Rory asked if we were going to feed the ducks now.

"Later," I said. "We have to go now."

He said he wanted to stay and feed the ducks, but I told him no, not now, and headed toward the parking lot. As I strapped him into his safety seat, I told him I had something important to do and then drove straight back to the espresso stand. There were two cars ahead of me, but eventually I pulled up and the window slid open.

“Back so soon?” Nicole said, ~~She didn't look~~ very surprised at all.

Deleted: ,

“How would you like to sing some duets with me?” I asked her.

Deleted: not looking

Deleted: ,

She looked up as a car pulled in behind me, and when she looked back at me, I gave her a short and fast account of what I'd been doing since the talent shows and explained how I'd been thinking of ways to develop the act and had always liked her voice. Then I wrote my cell phone number on a napkin and told her to call me.

“If you're interested,” I said, “we'll see how it goes.”

“Sure,” she replied, appearing to catch on finally to what I was proposing. “I'll think about it.”

And with that I pulled away from the espresso stand. As I drove home, I congratulated myself on the idea of trying out Nicole as a singing partner. She could bring new energy to the act ~~just like~~ the string section had. But at the same time I knew I was kidding myself. This wasn't the only reason I wanted to sing a duet or two with Nicole. I lifted my coffee cup, ~~inhaled~~ the perfume again, and then looked around to see if Rory was watching me. He'd fallen asleep in his safety seat, though, so I took another whiff of the perfume and started humming “~~Fancy Meeting You Here~~,” one of my favorites from Bing ~~and~~ his big hit with Rosemary Clooney.

Deleted: ,

Deleted: the way

Deleted: and

Deleted: —“Fancy Meeting You Here”—

* * *

Despite my doubts that ~~she~~ would call me, ~~Nicole~~ did so the very next day, and we agreed she would come down to the Amethyst for the next rehearsal. I said I would email her the lyrics of a few songs Bing and Rosemary Clooney had done, and ~~I~~ added she could download them from *iTunes*. ~~I told her we'd~~ try out the songs on Monday, and see how Jerry liked them.

Deleted: Nicole

Deleted: she

Formatted: Font: Italic

Deleted: We'd

Deleted: , I told her,

“Do you think he'll mind?” she asked with understandable apprehension.

“I think he’ll love it,” I said. I knew I was taking more of a chance with Atzel than with Jerry since Atzel always liked to be the one to initiate any big changes to the act.

I was also taking a chance with Lencie, I knew quite well, so I didn’t mention anything about Nicole to her just yet, having decided I would tell her after the duet was a done deal and Nicole was part of the act. I knew Lencie would be jealous—and she would have every right to be. I was jonesing for Nicole. I kept the perfume-scented empty paper cup and white plastic lid in the car. I could still catch a faint scent off them now and then. At the same time, I kept telling myself it was nothing. Nicole wasn’t interested in me. Why would she be? And if anything came of her audition and Nicole joined the act, I would tell Lencie about it forthwith—end of story.

Naturally, Nicole rocked the audition. Jerry and Atzel looked skeptical at first when I introduced her to them, and even more so when I told them we were going to do a couple songs together. But when Nicole stepped up to the mic, they could see the kind of stage presence she had, especially in the sleeveless, open back cocktail dress she wore. Atzel said he wanted to hear her sing on her own first, so she did a Lauryn Hill song, a cappella, which got the whole band paying attention. Then she asked Jerry if he might accompany her on Cole Porter’s “I Get a Kick Out of You,” and by the end of the song, she’d won everyone over.

“Thank you,” she said with an embarrassed smile. She placed the mic back in the stand.

“Very nice,” Atzel said. “You have a lovely voice, Nicole.”

I could see Jerry nodding his approval from behind the piano.

I then joined Nicole on stage.

“Is this thing on?” I said, tapping the mesh of the mic. No one laughed, though Jerry had a smirk on his face “Are you ready?” I asked Nicole.

Deleted: with the perfume on them

Deleted: ,

Deleted: able to

Deleted: -

Deleted: o

Deleted: as she

Deleted: nodding his approval

Deleted: ,

Deleted: ,

“Ready as you are,” she said.

I snapped my fingers three times for the beat and started in on “Button Up Your Overcoat,” a little ditty that involves a good bit of repartee between Bing and Rose. And Nicole was right there with it:

▲ “Hey, Nicole, would you like to tiptoe through the tulips?”

“Not now, thank you.”

“Well, would you care to hop a Chattanooga Choo-Choo?:

“I don’t think so.”

“Would you like to go out under the moon?”

“It’s much too early for that kind of action.”

“Then what do you want to do?”

“I just thought we might team up on a nice duet.”

And we were off to the races. Under Nicole/Rosemary’s energetic vocals and charming manner, I was thoroughly inhabiting the Bing persona. I’d sung the occasional quirky duet with my cousin Jennifer, of course, but that was nothing compared to this. This was pure magic.

After “Button Up Your Overcoat,” we slid effortlessly into “Singing in the Rain.” For texture, I let her take the melody (higher) while I took the harmony (lower), and on the second verse, for variety, I whistled along to her vocals. On the third round of the chorus, Jerry joined in on the piano, and Nicole and I really got into it then. We even improvised on the kind of playful gestures Bing and Rosemary had always made part of their act. Nicole put her palms out and looked up and shrugged, while I shook out the collar of my sport coat and pretended to open an

Formatted: Font: Not Italic

umbrella—and we went on singing. When finished, we gave each other an affectionate shoulder hug.

“Okay,” said Atzel. “Work up two more numbers and we’ll give it a try a week from this Thursday.”

Nicole and I hopped off the stage and went smiling to the bar to toast our success. I complimented her on being so well prepared. She said it was easy. “And what fun,” she exclaimed. She stayed around for the full rehearsal, and at break Joey, the guitarist, had a drink with her, which I tried to ignore. After the break, Atzel sat down with her at a table with paperwork to sign.

Deleted: , and after

When rehearsal ended around 10:30, I asked Nicole if she would like to go with me down the street to another bar for a nightcap and to talk about the songs we wanted to do on Thursday.

“Just a coke for me, though,” she said. “I’ve had my limit already.”

“Agreed,” I said, and I took her jacket off the chair and held it out for her.

* * *

I should have told Lencie about Nicole when I got home, but I didn’t. And I knew why. I was too attracted to Nicole to chance it. I knew that by telling Lencie, by putting everything out in the open, I risked negating my attraction for Nicole, and that’s not what I wanted—not yet at least. I would tell Lencie about Nicole eventually, I figured. I would have to. But for now, what Nicole and I shared on stage at the Amethyst Club—and whatever else we might share—was too enchanting. Telling Lencie about her would only break the spell.

Life for me and Lencie and Rory went on as usual. Lencie received a special honor for being in the top five percentile of her class. We went to an awards dinner at the college where

she was presented with a carved hunk of glass with her name etched on it. All evening long she thanked me for everything I did to help her.

“I hope it’s worth your while,” she said over dessert. ~~She~~ leaned over, placed her hand on my thigh, and inserted her tongue ~~into~~ my mouth while everyone else at our table listened to the keynote speaker.

Deleted: ,

Deleted: and then

“It is,” I said. ~~I meant it,~~ but I also ~~knew~~, there was something of an untruth in the way I said it.

Deleted: ,

Deleted: meaning

Deleted: knowing

Later that night, after sending the babysitter home and putting Rory to bed, we had quite the romp in the bedroom. I couldn’t remember the last time Lencie had been so into it, and so adventuresome, and afterward it occurred to me how ridiculous I had been to even think of starting something with Nicole.

The next week, though, Lencie began a new quarter at the college with a whole new slate of classes—two of which, she said emphatically, were crucial to her passing the state board exam at the end of the year—and just like that we were back to our routine and the low-grade exhaustion that accompanied it. During the same week, Nicole and I worked up a couple more numbers, both from Bing and Rose’s album *That Travelin’ Two-Beat*. The duet definitely added a playful element to the act ~~without the songs getting too cute or corny.~~

Deleted: ,

I finally told Lencie about Nicole after the second rehearsal. “It was Atzel’s idea,” I said. We were in the kitchen making supper. “I’m not so keen on sharing the stage, but he thinks it’s good for the act.”

“You’re not sleeping with her, are you?” Lencie asked. ~~She didn’t look up~~ from the potato she was scrubbing at the sink. I couldn’t tell if she was joshing me or not. I suppose she was and wasn’t.

Deleted: without

Deleted: looking

“Not yet,” I said. ~~I put~~ my arms around her waist and nuzzled the back of her neck so she wouldn’t see me blushing with guilt and embarrassment ~~from~~ her question.

Deleted: and

Deleted: at

“When can I hear this new duet?” she asked and turned the water off.

“Thursday, if you want,” I said.

So on Thursday, Lencie found a way to put her studies aside for a night, and we dropped Rory off at the Keoghs.

The show that night at the Amethyst went great. With advance notice, Atzel got our regular fans to come out in force and pack the club. The band and I opened with a set. We mostly did our favorites and, to appease Atzel, we added a version of Tom Waits’ “Alice,” a sweet, tender ballad rearranged by Jerry that made me realize Tom Waits was basically an old sentimental crooner himself. I was a little uncomfortable singing the song, just as I’d been when I first did the Vince Gill number, but I just kept picturing Bing in my mind’s eye, his willingness to try new things—such as the duet he did with David Bowie on “Little Drummer Boy”—and soldiered through it.

Toward the middle of the second set, I announced to the house that I wished to invite a very special lady up to the stage to join me for a couple of songs. I watched then as Nicole, standing in the back near Atzel’s office door, removed the shawl she was wearing and made her way to the stage in a brilliant white dress with a swooped-out neck and a long sweeping hemline.

It was as if she'd stepped straight out of the movies. She was no longer Shakira, as I used to think of her. She was Rosemary Clooney in all her hometown loveliness and poise.

I took her hand as she stepped onto the stage and into the lights. The house applauded, mesmerized, it seemed, by the sight of her. We wasted no time.

▲“Well, how do, Nicole?”

Formatted: Font: Not Italic

▲“How do?” she said. She tossed her hair over her shoulder.

Deleted: right back and

▲“Don't you look lovely this evening.”

Formatted: Font: Not Italic

▲“Thank you. It's a very special night.”

Formatted: Font: Not Italic

▲“It is indeed.”

▲“And look at all these fine people in the audience.” She swept her arm out and there was

Formatted: Font: Not Italic

more applause.

▲“Only the best for the Amethyst,” I quipped. ▲“So why don't we sing a song.”

Formatted: Font: Not Italic

▲“I would like that.”

Formatted: Font: Not Italic

Formatted: Font: Not Italic

We bounced right into “Button Up Your Overcoat” and then “Singing in the Rain,” and from there, to close the set out, we did our two new songs. When we finished, the applause and whistles from the audience were all we needed to know the duet was a success. The applause kept up so long that I had to promise the audience Nicole would be back next week.

▲“So be here,” I said and gave a wink to the audience, “or be square.”

Moments later, back in Atzel's office, Nicole giddily swirled about the room with her hands on her head. “That was amazing,” she said. “Wasn't it?”

▲“You were great,” I told her. She was great, too! ▲We were great!

Formatted: Font: Not Italic

“Thank you soooo much for asking me to sing with you.” She could hardly contain herself as she paced about the room.

“Thank you,” I said. “They really loved you.” Then I remembered Lencie still out at the table sitting by herself. “Would you like to join me and Lencie for a drink out front?”

“Yes, yes,” she said. “But let me calm down first.” She took a deep breath to show she was trying to regain her composure. “You go ahead,” she said, letting the breath out, “and I’ll join you in a few minutes.”

* * *

After the debut with Nicole, things got crazy. Atzel changed the schedule and had us playing the Amethyst every Thursday and Saturday night. And even with this added night, there was no letup in the people coming out to see us. The Facebook and Twitter comments were glowing, and on a whim, Atzel took us to Spokane and Vancouver, BC, for a couple of Tuesday night bookings where the response was just as positive.

The only let-down to all this excitement came a month into our shows in Seattle. A columnist for *The Stranger* penned a piece calling the act a throwback to a period of “genderist dualities” when women were “playful kittenettes” and men “knuckle-dragging sadists.” It came out on a Wednesday, and the band had a good laugh reading it aloud before the show that Thursday. Kiran kept jokingly calling me a “knuckle-dragging sadist,” and finally we agreed the writer of the piece didn’t know what he was talking about, especially given he didn’t say a word about the Bing Crosby–Rosemary Clooney connection. Three days later, the TV show *Evening Magazine* came to the club and did a spot on us that aired the next week, and it was so flattering the stink from *The Stranger* review was quickly forgotten.

Formatted: Font: Not Italic

Deleted: ,

On the Monday following our debut, Nicole quit her job at the espresso stand. By then I'd been around her enough to know that the perfume on my latte cup had most certainly been hers. On top of the six-month exclusive contract she signed with Atzel, he dropped \$1,000 on her to enhance her wardrobe. She told me she could hardly believe everything that was happening, and for the first few weeks, she thanked me profusely every time I saw her. We worked up a few more songs, and before long our duet made up half the act. We even talked about her doing a couple of songs by herself, perhaps "Come On-a My House," Rosemary Clooney's biggest hit.

One morning after Lencie had already left to catch the bus and I'd walked Rory to school, I went to the café with my laptop and did some research on Rosemary Clooney. She'd ~~experienced~~ her share of troubles in life: ~~drugs, mental health issues, and~~ a rocky marriage to José Ferrer, according to Wikipedia. But she eventually pulled through it all. She really did remind me of Nicole: pretty, blonde, an appealing smile and amazing voice. ~~More importantly,~~ there were two sides to Rosemary Clooney just as there were two sides to Nicole: the strong, determined side, and the sensitive, vulnerable side. I could see this in Nicole after each performance when she would let her guard down and, while sipping some wine at the bar, tell me about growing up near Boise, Idaho, in a small redneck farming town, which frankly sounded a lot like growing up in Shelton.

I also found websites for two Rosemary Clooney fan clubs: ~~one in America and one in~~ Japan. The Japanese loved Rose almost as much as they loved Bing. I clicked over to my email and sent a message to Atzel with links to the Japanese fan club for Clooney and the Japanese fan club for Bing, and at the bottom of the message I wrote, "We should go to Japan!"

Deleted: had

Deleted: —

Deleted: But more important than these features

Deleted: ,

I then logged off, went home, did my voice exercises, and took a nap. When I logged back onto the computer a few hours later, there was a message from Atzel that said simply, “Yes!” So I wrote back, asking, “Seriously?” and within seconds he replied, “I’m looking into clubs right now. Checking the schedule.” So I looked on Google Translate for some Japanese phrases and replied, “*Hee, sore wa yokatta ne,*” meaning “Wow, that’s great!”

Commented [550]: Could we confirm this? It might be helpful to insert the actual Japanese characters as well.

When I told Lencie that the band might go to Japan, I made the point of saying, “I’m sure we can work it out so you and Rory can come too.” Dinner was over, the dishes done, and Rory was in bed.

“There’s no way,” she said, *She pulled* three textbooks out of the roller suitcase she used for hauling her books to and from the college. She dropped all three onto the kitchen table with a thud.

Deleted: pulling

“How come?”

She opened the dental terminology book and looked at me sternly. The director of Lencie’s program at the college had recommended to her a specialist in strabismus, and in January, she’d started doing more extensive physical therapy to strengthen her right eye’s rectus muscles. *Since* then her cross-eye had become almost non-existent, making her appear much more serious.

Deleted: .

Deleted: and since

“Because it’s not going to happen,” she said. “That’s why.”

“I thought you might like going to Japan,” I said. “What other chance will there be? All we’d have to do is pay for the plane tickets.”

She calmed down some and said, rather plaintively, “I just can’t ditch my classes for that long, I’m sorry.”

At first I worried Lencie wouldn't want me to be alone with Nicole for such a long trip, an ocean away and free to romp around with her as much as I liked. But that wasn't her concern at all. She was more concerned about finding childcare for Rory while I was gone. Since I shouldered most of the childcare duties, even an overnight to Spokane put her in a pinch. If I went to Japan for two or three weeks, she wouldn't be able to study so hard and her grades might decline ever so slightly. She might even miss a class or two. I was annoyed and felt like telling her, So what! But I didn't. I didn't want to fight with Lencie. In fact, I wasn't so sure I even wanted her to come to Japan.

Formatted: Font: Not Italic

"You're such a great student," I said, I tried to reassure her instead of quarrelling with her. "Your professors would understand."

Deleted: ,

Deleted: trying

She then started to cry and I walked around the table and put my hands on her shoulders. She rubbed her sleeve across her face, trying to laugh it off.

"I'm sorry," she said. "It's just very stressful."

"I know," I said and kissed the top of her head.

"I'm so close, and the state board exams . . ." And just the mention of the state board exams started her crying again.

"I don't even know if this trip is going to happen," I said. I did know that once Atzel set his mind to something, it got done. "And if it does, maybe your mother could come over and help with Rory."

"Yeah," she said, "maybe." She scooted her chair closer to the table and leaned over the terminology textbook.

Deleted: flatly

Deleted: ,

Deleted: and

This response felt like a brush-off to me. “Don’t make like I’m abandoning you,” I said. “I have responsibilities too.” I was already picturing me and Nicole between the crisp white sheets of a bed in a high-rise hotel in Tokyo, sipping sake and feeding each other sashimi.

“I know,” she said. She, uncapped her pink highlighter.

* * *

Can you call it infidelity if you’re not actually married? It’s such a harsh word, infidelity, like something from the Old Testament, something a Canaanite or Hittite would be accused of, turning the person guilty of infidelity into an infidel. I prefer unfaithful, but even that has overtones of religious zealotry. My affair with Nicole hardly lives up to either label. Betrayal perhaps works better. Lencie trusted me, and I betrayed that trust. Point blank, I cheated on her.

The affair started in Portland. We did a Friday night show at The Polynesian, a club where they served mai tai drinks. The band members wore leis. I brought out my ukulele (which Lencie had given me for Christmas), and did a Hawaiian number with Nicole, who placed an orchid in her hair and did a swaying kind of hula dance beside me. The Portlanders ate it up.

But it was the mai tais that really got us. Before the show was even over, Nicole had exceeded her self-imposed two-drink limit, and after the show, I lost count of how many we downed together. The band all left after packing up, leaving Nicole and me to close the place down. We staggered out of The Polynesian and wandered about the Pearl District and down to the Chinese Garden where I tried to climb the wall and tore my pants. Eventually, we made our way back to the hotel just on the other side of Burnside, and once there, it was on. There was nothing discrete or reserved about what happened next. In the entryway, Nicole grabbed me and stuck her tongue down my throat. I ran my hand up under her coat and caught her ass and

Deleted: and

Formatted: Font: Not Italic

Formatted: Font: Not Italic

Formatted: Font: Not Italic

Formatted: Font: Not Italic

Formatted: Font: Not Italic

Deleted: -

Formatted: Font: Not Italic

Deleted: -

squeezed. When we got on the elevator, we kept at it, and after we stumbled into her room, we took a few swigs from a bottle of white wine she had in the small fridge and then tore one another's clothes off.

It was easy for me to justify what I was doing every time Lencie crossed my mind. Look at how much I did for her, how long I'd supported her and her kid! Look at what I'd accomplished in just a few months! Bing had his share of affairs (though never with Rosemary Clooney). It came with the territory, I told myself. Bing wasn't perfect, and neither was I.

The next morning Nicole and I were both abashed. At 10:30 a.m., we dragged ourselves down to the lobby to catch the bus Atzel had chartered for us. We gave each other wan smiles, and she brushed her hand across my forearm in recognition of our adventuresome night. a We rolled our luggage out to the curb and climbed onto the bus. As the other band members boarded, no one said much to either of us. Jerry paused between our two seats, looked from one to the other, and said, "That was a great show last night, guys."

"Thank you, Jerry," said Nicole.

"Yeah, thanks," I said. I was certain he knew about Nicole and me sleeping together. I was certain everyone in the band knew.

On the ride back to Seattle, I tried to sleep as much as my aching head and uneasy conscience would let me. Nicole and I kept quiet the whole ride, and when a band member—as a joke, no doubt—asked us to sing a song, we both grumbled and said absolutely not. Four hours later, outside the Amethyst, Nicole and I parted company with little more than a "See ya later," which left me believing (and partly hoping) our fling had been just that—one night only, as they say in show business.

Deleted: ,

Deleted: nd then we

Deleted: ,

Deleted: ,

Formatted: Font: Not Italic

It wasn't, though. A week went by, long enough for me to pretend everything was normal at home. ~~L~~encie did not suspect anything—or at least ~~she~~ wasn't going to voice her suspicions. ~~After~~ the following Saturday night show, Nicole and I hung around the Amethyst sipping ~~pinot grigio~~, and at around 2:30, ~~I~~ told Kyle, the bartender, we'd be glad to lock up for him if he'd let us hang out ~~a~~while longer. Kyle wasn't keen on the idea, but he could see we weren't going to budge, and since he wanted to go home, he said he would lock the doors from the inside and all we needed to do was pull the front door hard so it locked when we left.

Deleted: and

Deleted: But after

Deleted: Pinot Gris

Deleted:

"It's a deal," I said. ~~I bumped fists with him~~,

Deleted: and gave him a fist bump

"Don't drink all my Pinot either," he said and tossed on his coat. "Also, I set the alarm, so don't try going out the back."

"So many rules," I whispered to Nicole. ~~Kyle checked the cash register one last time before he called it a night~~.

Deleted: as

Once he left, it was odd to be sitting in the club alone, just the two of us. The only lights were a small one over the bar, another over the stage, and the two ~~exit~~ signs in front and back.

Deleted: Exit

"To us," Nicole said. ~~We~~ clinked glasses.

Deleted: , and

"And to Bing and Rosemary," I tossed in.

Deleted: we

We each took a sip and Nicole leaned over to kiss me.

"Well," she said.

"Well," I said back, and we both laughed. "I don't suppose you would like to sing?"

"Hmmm," she hummed and looked at me quizzically. "Do you mean a duet?"

"No," I said. "A solo."

"Really?"

“Yes,” I said. “Sing that Lauryn Hill song you did when you first came in.” I remembered it as being quite lovely—and sexy.

“Alright,” she said and put her glass down on the bar and went up to the stage. The power to the microphone was off, but she held the mic anyway and started humming in a soft, sensuous way. The song was called “Sweetest Thing,” a hit for Lauryn Hill years ago. Nicole moved into it slowly, her voice becoming more soulful with each note. I glanced out the front window and saw a guy in a dark jacket and Seahawks cap on the sidewalk peering in. When he moved on, I looked back at Nicole. She came to the third verse and started humming again, becoming more sensuous, and when she resumed singing she’d segued effortlessly into “Killing Me Softly,” the devastating Roberta Flack number. I was floored, and all I could do was hang my head, and when I looked up Nicole was smiling, knowing good and well what she was doing to me.

As she put the mic back on the stand and stepped down from the stage, I gave her a slow, lingering applause.

“Did you like it?” she asked.

“Yeah,” I said, “I liked it.” I stood up and kissed her. I then took the bottle of wine off the bar and led her to Atzel’s office and the leather couch he had back there.

* * *

Sex with Nicole became part of my routine. Sometimes we’d go to her new apartment in the Cascade neighborhood, a short drive from the club. Sometimes we’d get a hotel room downtown. Sometimes we’d hook up before the show, sometimes after. The whole time, I still made sure Rory got to and from school and was fed and put to bed on time, which gave Lencie plenty of time for studying.

Deleted: ,

Deleted: ,

Deleted: and

Deleted: from

Deleted: while,

Deleted: giving

It was at the end of May, while ~~he~~ was still arranging the Japan tour, that ~~Atzel~~ received a phone call that got everyone in the band buzzing. The call came from New Orleans, from Harry Connick, Jr.'s manager. According to the manager, his man—"Mr. Connick"—had gotten hold of our CD and was blown away by it.

Deleted: Atzel

Deleted: he

"I tell ya, man, I was just blown away by it," said Joey, our guitarist, doing his best Harry Connick, Jr. imitation, presumably based on the singer's stint on *American Idol*. "Honest, it just ~~blew me away~~. That's exactly what I told J-Lo and the skinny tattooed guy from Down Under, Keith something his name was, you know, married to the skinny chick from Down Under. I told 'em, I said, 'It ~~blew me away~~.'"

Formatted: Font: Not Italic

Formatted: Font: Not Italic

It was Monday night, and we were all in the club, getting ready to rehearse.

"The gist of it is," Atzel went on once the laughter settled down, "is that Harry Connick, Jr. is flying up to Seattle next weekend to hear you play—and hear Bing here sing." He pointed to me. Lately, he'd been calling me Bing a lot more, almost sarcastically, and I wasn't sure why.

"They're scouting us out," he added. "They might want us to open for him at the Paramount. He has a date there in September."

"How 'bout that," Joey said and gave Jerry a high-five. "We've arrived."

Nicole smiled at me. It was a proud, congratulatory smile.

That evening everyone played with a little extra verve, and I went home after rehearsal feeling good. Harry Connick, Jr. was coming to hear me. We were, after all, brethren in the fraternity of nightclub crooners. Who knew? Maybe he and I would become buddies, maybe he'd invite me down to New Orleans, maybe we'd do a duet together, like Bing Crosby and Frank

Sinatra...“Is that what you’re sayin’? Well, did you evah! What a swell party this is!” I could picture it clear as day.

Formatted: Font: Not Italic

When I got home, Rory was sick, throwing up badly. He couldn’t stop and so Lencie and I called the emergency clinic. The doctor asked a few questions. When did it start? What was his temperature? Had he had any other illness recently? And so on. Then she said it was probably a stomach virus. She told us she would phone in a prescription for anti-nausea suppositories and also recommended an over-the-counter electrolyte fluid, and if these didn’t work, we should bring him into the emergency room. So while Lencie kept a cool washrag on his forehead, I dashed out to the 24-hour pharmacy. After the poor kid sipped some the grape-flavored fluid and his mother administered the suppository, he began to settle down and before long fell asleep. It was nearly 4:00 a.m. by the time Lencie and I got to bed.

Deleted: Emergency Clinic

Deleted: Emergency Room

Three hours later, I called Rory’s school to let them know he’d be absent that day. I assured Lencie that I could take care of him when he woke up and let her take the car to the college, then made a pot of coffee and pondered the whole situation. I knew I couldn’t keep going on like this forever. The duplicity was killing me. I wasn’t cut out for leading a double life. I had to either leave Lencie or stop sleeping with Nicole—one or the other. Leaving Lencie would mean leaving Rory, though, and that was a thought I couldn’t bear. Look how much the little guy needed me. And how much he meant to me. Besides, did I really want to leave Lencie? Was I in love with Nicole—as I knew I’d been, at least once upon a time, with Lencie? Was it Nicole I was attracted to or Rosemary Clooney? How delusional had I actually become in pursuing my Bing obsession? How much was I willing to sacrifice for it? What, I asked myself, would Bing do?

Deleted: -

I knew I wasn't going to be able to sort it all out on just three hours of sleep. I suddenly felt paralyzed. I needed to get away, I told myself, to get some time to myself to sort out what I was going to do. So that afternoon I called Atzel and left a message that I had a family emergency in Shelton and wouldn't make it back for the Thursday show or maybe even the Saturday show. I knew it was a chancy thing to do to him, disappearing on him and everyone else for two shows like that, but I didn't know what else to do. I was desperate.

"Let me know if there's anything I can do," he said neutrally, perhaps suspecting I was lying to him about the family emergency. "We'll see how Nicole does on her own," he added.

The next day Rory was feeling well enough to go to school and I arranged with the Keoghs to pick him up the following day. I also rented a Zipcar for Lencie, and before she came home, I went to the Whole Foods and bought several bags of groceries, including a bunch of ready-made meals, so the kitchen would be well stocked.

"I need to go home and talk to my uncle," I told Lencie that evening. "I should be back by Saturday."

"What about?" she asked. My sudden announcement that I was going to Shelton surprised her.

"He's making out his will"—a total lie—"and he wants to consult with me."

"It can't wait till the weekend? Can't you just call him?"

"It's kind of sensitive, I guess. I don't really know." I said this with some irritation in my voice to get her off my back. What I wanted to say was, "I need to get away so I can figure out how to end the affair I'm having with my beautiful duet partner—that is, if you want us to stay together. Maybe you'd understand if you weren't studying all the goddamn time. Maybe if you

Deleted:

Deleted: ,

Deleted: surprised by my

Formatted: Font: Not Italic

Formatted: Font: Not Italic

used me a little less like your nanny, you'd recognize that I have a life too and you wouldn't be so oblivious to the fact that I'm cheating on you."

"Okay," she said finally. "I hope everything's okay. Tell Lillis and Sherrie hi for me."

* * *

It was total freedom to hit the road the next morning. I decided to take the scenic route and caught the ferry from the Seattle ferry terminal to Bremerton. I always loved riding the ferries, especially on a weekday morning when being on one seems like such an escape. You know you should be someplace else taking care of all your responsibilities or whatever, but instead, you're standing at the deck railing, facing into the strong cold wind, and gazing up at the Olympics as the steel bow of the green and white behemoth plows through the entrancing waters of Puget Sound.

Deleted: -

Deleted: -

For the duration of the crossing, I tried not to think about either Lencie or Nicole. Instead, I thought about Uncle Lillis. I felt bad about my lie to Lencie, which probably had the insinuation that he was terminally ill or something. Uncle Lillis had in fact, over Thanksgiving, indicated that he needed to revise his will. But he certainly was not dying. He wasn't even sick. He was planning, though, to retire eventually. So I began to wonder what would happen to the mill when he did. Would he put someone else in charge—certainly not Roger, the mean-spirited millwright—or would he just sell it? Uncle Lillis really was a great guy, far more like a father to me than an uncle. He had his own way of doing things, made his own decisions, and that's what I always liked about him. When a couple of guys a few years back tried to recruit him for the Tea Party chapter they were forming in Shelton, he told them he was a coffee drinker.

“That’s not what it’s about,” one of them said. “It’s about getting the goddamn government off our backs. You know better than anyone what all the government regulations do to business, Lille. It’s about taking our liberty back, the way the founding fathers intended. It’s about the constitution, for Christ’s sake.”

Deleted: , not picking up on his sarcasm

Deleted: ,

Deleted: c

“I know what it’s about,” Uncle Lillis shot right back at them. “It’s about a buncha old grouches trying to get out of paying their taxes. Well, I do my job and pay my taxes, and I don’t whine about it.”

When he told me this story, I could hardly believe what I was hearing. Was this really my Oorah-shouting, NRA dues-paying, Republican-voting uncle? Yes, it was. Because if there was one thing certain about Uncle Lillis, it was that he was his own man, and I admired that about him.

As I drove off the ferry into Bremerton, I laughed, wishing I could have been there to see the look on the faces of those Tea Party dudes. I’d left a message the night before to let Uncle Lillis and Aunt Sherrie know I was coming to Shelton, and when I reached Oak Bay I called the office at L&M to see if he would let me take him to lunch at the Pine Tree.

“Can’t,” he said. “We have an order to deliver by Monday. We’re at full throttle.”

“Put me to work,” I said instantly, knowing that nothing would feel better than to throw on some work clothes and a hardhat and put in a day’s work at the mill.

There was a pause at the other end, and I figured he was wondering whether I would be more help or hindrance. It had been ten months since I’d last worked at the mill.

Deleted: after all

“Okay,” he said at last. “Come on by. I’m sure we can find a broom for you to push.”

I knew I couldn't expect to swoop in and just climb onto the wheel loader or start scaling logs. I respected the guys at the mill too much to pull something like that. Sweeping sawdust suited me just fine.

When I walked into the front office, Carli, the office manager, was there. The place seemed awfully quiet but only because everyone was hard at work, either out in the yard or in one of the sheds operating the saws.

"It's a big order all right," she said. "Everyone's working extra shifts. I don't know where your uncle is. You want me to call his cell?"

As she said this, Uncle Lillis charged into the front office. He clearly had a lot on his mind. "There's my favorite nephew," he bellowed. I was his only nephew, of course. "Did you hear about Jennifer?" he asked enthusiastically as we shook hands.

I hadn't, I said, and felt bad about being so out of touch with my own family. "Tell me."

"She's finishing up her master's degree at the UW in Tacoma as you know—"

"That's great," I said. I hadn't really thought much about my cousin since moving to Seattle and had forgotten all about her degree program.

"And she got a full scholarship to Stanford. To get her Ph.D. Can you believe it? In economics."

"That's crazy!" I said.

"We couldn't be prouder," said Uncle Lillis. "We're going to have to call her doctor from now on. Can you imagine?"

Now there, I thought, remembering my duets with my cousin, was someone who had their shit together. Why couldn't I be that together? I made a mental note to email her with my congratulations.

Formatted: Font: Not Italic

“So I bought this new side by side with a bucket attachment,” Uncle Lillis went on, changing the subject. “It’s kickass, which is why I got it. But it’s also small and maneuverable. Gets into places the backhoe can’t, like the planer shed. I want you to get on that thing, get a feel for it, and go through every inch of this place. We’re buried in sawdust and mill ends around here. There’s a mound back along the fence. Dump everything there for now. There’re some overalls and gloves in the back. And don’t forget your safety gear. I have to haul ass to Aberdeen to see about a trailer.”

Deleted: -

Deleted: -

He ducked into his office, came out with his briefcase, and slapped me on the shoulder. “Now get to work,” he said and was out the door.

Carli had a spreadsheet open on her computer, so she wasn't about to ask me for a song. So I went to the back storage room and found the overalls and gloves, along with a pair of steel-toed work boots, a hardhat, and goggles, and went out into the yard to find the new side by side.

Deleted: and

Deleted: -

Deleted: -

It was a sweet little ATV, and I got the hang of it right away. But contrary to what Uncle Lillis said, it didn't fit everywhere and I ended up using a large scoop shovel and push broom in most of the sheds. Clearing out all the sawdust and mill ends took the rest of the afternoon, but I hardly thought about Lencie, Nicole, or even Bing. I just did the job and felt good about it afterwards. And that night, after a wonderful dinner of beef stroganoff and strawberry pie that Aunt Sherrie made, I slept better than I had in a good long while.

Deleted: or

Deleted: , the whole while

In the morning I called Lencie to make sure everything was all right, that Rory was feeling better and she was managing okay, and she said it was and thanked me for calling. We didn't have much else to say to one another after that, which felt kind of awkward, so we just hung up. Then I headed out with Uncle Lillis in his pickup truck to retrieve the trailer he'd bought the day before in Aberdeen. When I asked why he hadn't brought it back with him yesterday, he didn't answer, but instead asked me if I'd ever worked a boom and grapple.

Deleted: and

"No," I said. The guys who delivered logs to the mill always unloaded their own trailers. Teamster rules. He knew that.

Deleted: , answering honestly

He then told me how for the past twenty years he'd been sitting on a two-thousand-acre parcel adjacent to Forest Service lands near the small town of Matlock, and was now going to start harvesting on it. He planned to do the same on another two thousand acres he'd been able to lease on the cheap from the feds.

Deleted: ,

Deleted: ,

Deleted: as well as

"Jennifer got us a grant from one of those environmental groups down in Portland that's all about selective harvesting and minimal scarification and riparian this and riparian that. It's their money that bought this trailer we're picking up. They're also going to find us buyers for the lumber we haul out of these two lots."

I was impressed. Uncle Lillis doing business with any kind of environmental group was not something I would have predicted. But then again . . . he was his own man. Plus, I figured my cousin Jennifer must have really worked to turn his head around on this deal.

"That's her whole thing," he said as we crossed the bridge over the Chehalis River into South Aberdeen. "Forestry economics." He glanced at me, and I just laughed.

"Word better not get out you're consorting with tree huggers," I told him.

“Or that my own daughter’s one of ’em.”

“Did this group help you buy that new ATV as well?”

Now he laughed. “No, no,” he said. “That’s just a little something I picked up for myself.

The bucket makes it a business write-off. Unhitch it, though, and it’s a great little vehicle for getting up to the deer camp come fall.”

Just south of Aberdeen, there’s a place called Cosmopolis, a company town built around the Weyerhaeuser pulp mill, which closed a number of years back. There isn’t much town, other than some small houses and the equipment dealer where we were headed. The trailer that Uncle Lillis had bought was a 23-footer, with a boom and grapple hook folded up and latched down to its front section. The dealer had to install a hitch plate in the bed of Uncle Lillis’s pickup, but an hour later, we were pulling the trailer off the lot.

We drove the back county roads most of the way to the Matlock property, where a week before two guys from the mill, using the feller skidder that was now parked off to the side, had left a rack of logs in a landing area behind a screen of trees alongside the road. Uncle Lillis positioned the trailer into place for loading, and we donned our safety gear and got straight to work. He started off at the hydraulic controls, swinging the grapple hook about, grabbing a couple of logs, and positioning them onto the flatbed of the trailer. After he’d loaded a dozen or so of the big trees, he let me get behind the controls. I didn’t have his light touch with the grapple hook, though, and nearly slammed my first log—a fir six feet in diameter—into the cab of his pickup.

“Easy there,” he called out from a safe distance.

Deleted: really,

Deleted: -

“I got it,” I called back and tried again, really concentrating this time, until I was able to lay the log gently on top of the others stacked on the trailer.

It felt good to be in the woods again: the light slanting through the upper canopy, the rich scent of pitch and loam, the dense undergrowth of sword ferns, salal, ground moss, kinnikinnick, and Oregon grape. I missed it all. In the time we’d been living in Seattle, Lencie and Rory and I had gone to Discovery Park a few times. We’d strolled the well-trodden paths through the woods there, but it couldn’t compare to being in the forest on the peninsula. These were real woods. Maybe it was just the knowledge of being surrounded by vast tracts of forest—and not city streets—that made the difference.

With the logs secured to the trailer, we headed back to Shelton. Uncle Lillis drove the winding roads with great care while pulling such a heavy load. Everyone who’s grown up on the peninsula has seen a log truck overturned and lying at the bottom of a gully or along an embankment after the driver took a curve too fast. So Uncle Lillis wasn’t taking any chances.

Deleted: Pulling such a heavy load,

As we made our way back to the mill, he explained these logs would have to be kept separate from the others. “They’re certified,” he said. He sounded, a bit snide about this fact. A few minutes later, though, taking a more serious tone, he said, “I’m going to need someone to manage this property. The deal is this grant involves a lot of monitoring. The harvest, the slash piles, everything. Jennifer needs good records so she can file her reports with the Portland people.” He glanced at me to make sure I was listening, then added, “The job’s yours if you want it.”

Deleted: ,

Deleted: sounding

I realized then that he’d been playing me this whole time. Bringing me along to pick up the trailer, going to Matlock to load the logs, having me work the boom and grapple, telling me

all about Jennifer's grant . . . it had all been a set up. And I appreciated it, I truly did. But I was a bit stunned, too, and didn't know how to respond. I removed my cap and rubbed my brow.

"Does your head hurt?" he asked. "There's some Advil in the glove compartment."

I put my cap back on. "No, Uncle Lillis," I said. "My head's fine."

"Then what?"

I could almost feel myself tearing up, like I was on the brink of breaking down and bawling outright. He had always looked after me—the father I never had. Better than a father really, because he didn't do what he did out of some heavy sense of parental responsibility or obligation. Rather he acted out of love, plain and simple.

"I appreciate everything you've always done for me, Uncle Lillis," I said, trying not to choke on my words. "God, I really do."

"So what's the deal?" he asked. "Is it the singing? I know your grandma would be proud of all you've done with your singing. She would be so proud."

His mentioning grandma did me in, and I let out a short gasp and quickly laughed and tried to wipe the tears from my face. "I guess that's part of it," I said and took a deep breath and looked out the passenger-side window at a marsh where two red-winged blackbirds clung to the stalk of a single cattail.

"It's more that my life is really screwed up right now," I said.

Uncle Lillis kept his eyes on the road and stayed quiet, guiding the truck slowly through the next set of curves, letting me take my time to say what I needed to say, to explain why my life was so screwed up. And that's what I did. I told him everything.

He listened, said things like “Well” or “Really”, but mostly just listened. When I was finished, he let me sit there a bit while he pondered what I’d told him.

“I can’t tell you what to do,” he spoke up finally, “but you need to do something.”

I didn’t say anything, letting my silence be my consent.

“You need to do what you think’s right,” he went on, and after a pause added, “I can tell you this much . . . It’s not right to keep sleeping with this Nicole and deceiving Lencie. Isn’t fair to either one of them.”

“I know,” I said as we reached the outskirts of Shelton.

* * *

That evening, I met Stiles at the Harbor Tavern. He’d learned to moderate his gaming habit and was back to his old self, including responding to my text messages. He had a new look; he wore, one of those black Norwegian seaman’s caps, and his ponytail came out from under it in back. He’d also shaved off the soul patch. We got a pitcher of beer and shot a game of pool and then sat at the bar. He said he was still playing the Xbox he’d stolen from the ex’s place—“Just not as much.”—then remarked how the console’s functionality was not up to date and he wanted to upgrade.

“I’m thinking of going back to see if the guy’s got the newer version. Wanna come?”

“That’s funny, Stiles,” I said. I refilled my glass from the pitcher. I caught him up on everything happening in Seattle, a shortened version of what I’d told my uncle a few hours earlier.

He wanted me to describe Nicole to him—“In detail,” he made clear—but first we each downed a shot of Fireball whisky.

Deleted: ,

Deleted: wearing

Deleted: with a

Deleted: coming

Deleted: and

Deleted: e

When I was finished describing her, he said, “She sounds like the blonde chick in *The Wicker Man*. You ever seen that? I saw it the other night. It’s this fucked up Brit flick from the seventies. The blonde’s the innkeeper’s daughter, drop-dead hot. She dances around buck_naked in her bedroom singing this corny siren song, caressing all these phallic talismans she has on her dresser and windowsill, and driving the cop in the next room into a frenzy. They’re all pagans on this island off of Scotland, and the cop shows up to solve a murder, and in the end they make a human sacrifice of him.”

Deleted: -

“Who’s made a sacrifice?” I couldn’t quite follow what he was talking about. It seemed Stiles was getting loopier every time I saw him.

“The cop, you idiot. This Nicole you’re banging sounds like the blonde from this movie.”

“Do you think Nicole’s a pagan?” I was getting a bit drunk now too.

“I didn’t say that,” he said. I refilled his glass from the pitcher. “But she could be. Didn’t you say she was from Colombia.”

Deleted: and

“No, I said she looked like Shakira.”

“Fuck,” he said, confused now as well. He took out his smartphone and started punching it with his thumb, and an instant later declared, “Britt Ekland! That’s the actress. God she was hot.”

He had another shot of whiskey, but when he offered to buy us a second pitcher, I told him I was done, I had to leave. He turned a little sullen at that and I felt bad, as if I were abandoning him. When I asked him if he’d seen the ex lately, he said no.

Deleted: yet

“But,” he added, “I’m ready for him if I do.”

I didn't ask him what he meant, and as I put my jacket on he slumped over the bar. I wanted to say as a precaution. Just don't shoot him, okay? but I knew Stiles wasn't that crazy, so I told him instead to just steer clear of the guy.

Formatted: Font: Not Italic

Deleted: I wanted to say as a precaution

"Hey," he said as I stood beside the bar and downed the rest of my beer. He looked at me a little sheepishly. "Listen, if you and Lencie break up over Britt Ekland, put a good word in for me, will ya? I might ask Lencie out."

I slapped him on the shoulder. "I don't think so," I said. The idea of him pursuing Lencie repulsed me. It wasn't just the idea of him, Stiles, being with her—gag me—but of Lencie being with anyone else other than me. I then asked him if he wanted a lift home.

He got up and said he had to use the can first and he'd meet me outside. I then left a few dollars on the bar and headed for the door.

It was a gentle spring night. There was the sour-sweet smell of wood pulp in the air—lignin and cellulose, the magical compounds in every piece of lumber ever produced. I filled my lungs with it, the smell of home, and looked up at the scattering of stars visible through the shifting clouds. My conversation with Stiles about my situation hadn't been very productive, but what did I expect? If I was counting on Stiles to be my Obi-Wan Kenobi, all the worse for me. I got a kick out of hanging out with him, and that was good enough.

I stood outside the tavern waiting for him when a white pickup pulled up to the curb at a 45-degree angle like it might careen right into me, its high beams blinding me. I heard the truck door slam and then, "Hey asshole!"

I stepped out of the glare of the headlights and saw the ex coming toward me. "What's up?" He shoved me with both hands hard against the front wall of the tavern. He was probably a

Deleted: ,

Deleted: I got out before he

head taller than me, and a lot heavier. He wasn't in his uniform either. He had a gray hoodie on underneath a canvas Carhartt vest, a camo cap on his head, and a stupid-ass goatee and mustache on his jowly face.

Deleted: ,

Deleted: y

Deleted: and

Bing Crosby was never a fighter—nor was I. Neither of us had the build for brawling, much less the inclination. Blood and bruises just weren't our style. In his movies, Bing would throw a punch from time to time, and as Father O'Malley in *The Bells of Saint Mary's*, he approves of fisticuffs among the inner-city ruffians at his school. But even then he's bested by Ingrid Bergman (Sister Mary Benedict), who proves to be the better corner man. The point is, I wasn't going to fight Lencie's ex. So I tried to take Bing's tried-and-true approach, (even though, admittedly, I was scared shitless of the guy), play the mild-mannered peacemaker.

Formatted: Font: Not Italic

Deleted: —

Deleted: —and

"Come on, dude," I said. "It's a big misunderstanding. Let me buy you a beer."

"Fuck that," he shouted back. He was now glaring hard at me, and I realized I wasn't just in a movie—that I was probably about to take a beating. "First you steal my shit, now you try to steal my son from me. What do you even know about—"

In the next instant, he collapsed to the sidewalk. His limbs tensed and twitched, his eyes squeezed shut, his whole body went limp, and a low moaning came from deep inside him.

Deleted: And in

Deleted: ,

Deleted: his

Deleted: tensing

Deleted: twitching

Deleted: and finally

Deleted: going

Deleted: coming

Deleted: -

Deleted: -

Formatted: Font: Not Italic

I looked over and saw Stiles standing there holding some kind of black and yellow device in his hand. It looked like a TV remote, and he was pointing it down at the ex. Then I saw the blue electric arch snapping between the electrodes and realized it was a stun gun.

"You've just been pwned, bitch," Stiles shouted down at the semi-unconscious ex. "Res judicata." He turned to me and said, "I got him right in the neck. He'll be down for a good 10 minutes."

I didn't know what to say. It seemed to me the ex had been about to say something I might have needed to hear.

"Thanks, I guess," I said.

"You're welcome," Stiles replied. We both stepped around the ex's lumpy body.

"Remember what I said about Lencie," he said as we walked to my car.

* * *

I left Shelton the next morning. The encounter with the ex had left me rattled. Stiles' intervention might have kept me from getting my ass kicked, yet I wished the whole scene could have turned out differently—though I wasn't sure how. Could the ex and I have talked it out somehow? Not likely. But then again, was tasing him the answer? Wouldn't the situation just escalate now? Once I passed Olympia and had an entire inland sea between me and the incident, I stopped thinking about it, more or less. I turned my thoughts instead to Uncle Lillis' offer from the day before. After we'd gotten back to the mill and had stacked the logs in the corner of the yard designated for those trees, he said I could take a few weeks to make up my mind, and I told him I'd let him know as soon as I could. Why I didn't outright decline his offer and tell him, No, my star was rising in Seattle and I was going to ride it straight to heaven . . . I had no idea. Maybe I knew my star had ascended as high as it would. It might take me to Japan but not much further. And just maybe the thought of returning to work on the peninsula held some appeal for me. Just maybe.

As I drove I didn't weigh the pros and cons of Uncle Lillis' offer so much as try to simply talk myself into making a decision about it one way or the other. But I couldn't. I was a wuss, and thinking about what Bing would do, WWBD, didn't help me any. My whole act—

Deleted: ,

Deleted: and we

Deleted: s

Deleted: s

Deleted: a

Deleted: s

Deleted: to

from the baritone to the pomade—began to seem more and more like a joke. "What was I thinking?" I asked myself as I looked out the driver's side window at downtown Tacoma in the distance. "Grandma," I thought. Was this all her fault? I pounded the steering wheel, angry at myself for even thinking such a thought. It's my fault, I knew. I was the joke. A total buffoon. Crooning sentimental songs from a bygone era had nothing on an honest day's work in the woods or at the mill. That's all there was to it. Bing Fucking Crosby! Who the fuck was I kidding? Maybe there was a reason he'd been forgotten—and maybe I needed to think about that.

Formatted: Font: Not Italic

Formatted: Font: Not Italic

Formatted: Font: Not Italic

Formatted: Font: Not Italic

Once past Tacoma, I pulled out my cell and called Lencie, just to hear her voice and tell her I would be home in about an hour. As her phone rang, I told myself I had another week, but by this time next week, I would make a decision and it would all be settled one way or another: Shelton or Seattle, Lencie or Nicole, L&H or Amethyst. However, when Lencie answered, that planned week of deliberation instantly dissolved. I said hey and before another word could leave my mouth, she came right out and asked if I'd been sleeping with Nicole.

Deleted: ,

Deleted: would give myself

Deleted: that

Deleted: —

Deleted: —

"Yes," I said.

I couldn't do otherwise, not after talking to Uncle Lillis, who had more integrity than anyone I knew, who made it clear that deceiving Lencie was as bad as the affair itself.

Deleted: ,

There was a long pause on the other end. The tedious stretch of freeway I was driving between Fife and Sea Tac seemed like the perfect analogy for my life: neither here nor there, something to be gotten through, with the last-minute option of exiting at the airport and catching a flight the hell away from the entire mess.

Deleted: -

Deleted:

Then I could hear Lencie crying.

“I should’ve known,” she said through her sobs.

“I’m sorry,” I uttered. It was a feeble thing to say, I knew, but it was all I had.

“I don’t want you coming here,” she said. ~~I could hear her blowing her nose.~~ “Ever.”

Deleted: determinedly, and

What could I say? I couldn’t argue with her. I had no defense. I couldn’t even plea for understanding or forgiveness. I was a big chump, and I deserved whatever I got.

The highway topped the crest overlooking Kent Valley—Mount Rainier at one end, Southlake Mall at the other.

“Okay,” was all I could say. ~~Her end was silent~~ for 5, 10, 15 seconds, until finally I said, “Are you there?” and realized she’d either hung up or the call had been dropped. In either case, she wasn’t going to call me back. So I hit redial and when her voicemail picked up, I left a message saying how terribly sorry I was and that I hoped, maybe, at some point, we could talk.

Deleted: .

Deleted: and then nothing, silence from her end

I got off the highway in Tukwila and found a cheap roadside motel, bought a six-pack of tallboys at the gas station across the road, and in a total ~~daze~~, drank all six on the bed in my room flipping through channels. That’s when I decided to reclaim my life, to stop kidding myself and man up, as Uncle Lillis might say. Sitting in that crummy hotel room, half-drunk, headachy, getting up to pee every half hour, debating whether to go back across the street for another six-pack or not, the property near Matlock appeared to me like a vision, my road to redemption. I

Deleted: stupor

would put up a wall tent, haul out a generator and ~~porta-potty~~, ~~and~~ build a lean-to where I could set up a cook stove and portable sink. I would work ~~sun~~ up to ~~sundown~~, ~~and become~~, the best woodlot manager there ever was. ~~I’d master~~ the art of selective harvesting, riparian setbacks, and whatever ~~else~~ it took to secure certification for Jennifer and Uncle Lillis. And by this means I would earn back some modicum of dignity for myself.

Commented [551]: Capped if brand name. Otherwise, let’s use portable toilet.

Deleted: -

Deleted: -

Deleted: being

Deleted:

Deleted: .

Deleted: mastering

I would also ditch Bing. I had to realize Grandma, in her Bing Crosby fanaticism, was somewhat crazy. Some people might even say that as a surrogate parent she was even a bit abusive, not unlike Bing's abusive behavior toward his own boys, two of whom would commit suicide as adults. I also had to realize that Bing's era—my grandma's era—was long gone and past. And good riddance. While he was a talented singer who soothed people's worried hearts during difficult times, he was also a sop, a golf-playing dandy who merchandized himself to absurd lengths. I could remember seeing a mousetrap in a display case in the Crosbyana Room in the Crosby Student Center at Gonzaga University with his smiling image on the box. A mousetrap! I felt like I was caught in that trap.

I woke up the next morning to knocking on the door of my room. "Housekeeping."

"I'll be out in an hour," I hollered back.

"Okay," a muffled voice said.

I laid in bed another half hour, trying to recover my resolve from the night before—Go to woods. No more Bing. Finally, I picked up my phone and called Uncle Lillis to tell him I would accept his offer.

"But I need a couple weeks to get my life in order," I said. I didn't know what that meant exactly. I knew it involved Lencie and Rory, and Nicole I suppose, and also Atzel and Jerry and the rest of the band, but that's all I knew. Uncle Lillis offered to lend me any help he could, more time, some cash, a truck, one of the guys from the mill to help with the move.

"Whatever you need," he said.

His tone made it clear he believed I would be moving back to Shelton with Lencie and Rory, and as I said goodbye, I didn't mention that I might never see them again. Then, after

Deleted: lay

Formatted: Font: Not Italic

hanging up, it was that thought—how utterly heartbreaking it would be to never see them again—that totally crushed me. I started weeping. I saw Lencie’s gentle face, her mild cross-eye, her soft hair. I remembered her sweet kisses, her laugh, and how genuine she was about everything she did. The thought of Rory gone from my life ravaged me as well. The night before I’d left for Shelton, he’d asked me to read to him after his bath. He was in his pajamas, his hair still wet, his skin flush with the towel rub-down his mother had just given him, when he climbed onto my lap and snuggled against my chest. I would do anything, I realized, if it would mean having those two back in my life. I loved Bing and I loved my grandma, but I loved Lencie and Rory more.

Formatted: Font: Not Italic

Then the sheer lunacy of such an equation, that I would weigh one against the other, disgusted me more than I could handle . . . and I reached for the wastebasket and retched out my guts until all I had left were dry heaves.

Deleted: -

* * *

After checking out of the hotel, I went to a restaurant on the SeaTac strip that I remembered stopping at with Lencie during one of our house-hunting trips to Seattle the year before. It was dark inside and had absurdly tall booths upholstered in padded brown vinyl. I considered ordering a Bloody Mary, knowing it’s what Bing would have ordered, but I’d made up my mind I wasn’t going to do what Bing would do any more. I was going to do what I would do. The problem was, once I discarded the Bing persona, I still needed to discover what it was I would do—as me, which essentially meant figuring out who the hell I was. So to start, I ordered a turkey club and chocolate milkshake, both of which sounded really good to me in my hungover state.

Deleted: -

Deleted: , that is

Formatted: Font: Not Italic

When the waitress, a woman in her forties with full-sleeve tattoos on both arms, brought my shake, she looked me over and said, “Aren’t you the singer I saw a couple of weeks ago? The guy who sounds like what’s his name?”

I had my lips around the straw of my milkshake, yet it was so thick I couldn’t get any into my mouth. “I could be,” I said, giving up on the straw. “Which guy do you mean?”

“I don’t know,” she said. Her voice was light, with a buoyancy to it, though the rest of her was heavy-set—her arms, chest, waist. “I went with my boyfriend. A club downtown.”

“That was probably me,” I said finally, giving in, feeling a touch of nausea return. Then I sat up, reached for her hand and started crooning. “Would you like to swing on a star / carry moonbeams home in a jar.”

“That’s it,” she said as I released her hand. “Who is that?”

“Bing Crosby.”

“That’s right. I remember my boyfriend telling me that. I enjoyed your show.”

“Thank you.”

She smiled sympathetically and asked, “You want me to bring you some Alka-Seltzer? You look kind of pale.”

After the milkshake, Alka-Seltzer, and club sandwich, I began to feel better. I thanked the waitress, left a ten dollar tip, and drove straight to the Amethyst Club.

Atzel was in his office. He looked different. He was clean-shaven and wearing a light blue cardigan. I hardly recognized him. It was like he’d transformed from General Zod to Mr. Rogers. Yet his manner hadn’t changed. While typically the model of poise and composure, he’d always had a steely side to him, and right now it was coming through in the cold way he greeted

Formatted: Font: Not Italic

me. He sat behind his desk and gave me a cutting glance that stopped me in the doorway. Maybe he was sore that I'd bailed on the Thursday and Saturday performances, which no doubt left him in a lurch and probably cost him a few bucks as well. I stood there awkwardly, said I was sorry about last week, and asked him how everything was going.

"We'll see," he answered. "How's everything back at the family farm?"

"It's a mill," I said. "My family owns a lumber mill." I knew it didn't make a scrap of difference to him. I asked, "Are we rehearsing tonight?"

"Tonight," he said. He typed something into his laptop while I stood there wondering if I should just turn and walk out, just not tell him I wouldn't be at tonight's rehearsal, that I was quitting the band, leaving Seattle, and moving back to Shelton to work at my family's goddamn lumber mill. But before I could do anything of the sort, he stopped typing, folded the screen down, and crossed his hands on top of his computer.

"Bad news," he said. "I spoke yesterday to Connick Jr.'s manager's associate assistant secretary, or some such asshole, and they're opening with someone else, some nineteen-year-old guy from Moose Cock, Canada, or some such place. 'He's a cross between Pavarotti and Mel Tourmé' is how this lady put it. Whatever the fuck that means."

I wasn't surprised. I never did like Harry Connick, Jr. Too full of himself. Thinking he was some kind of national treasure. When I'd mentioned him to Stiles in the Harbor Tavern, Stiles said Harry Connick, Sr. had been a hotshot prosecutor in New Orleans, who had also been really full of himself.

"What about Japan?" I asked.

Deleted: corrected him

Deleted: , and so

Deleted: and

Formatted: Font: Not Italic

“I’m still working on it,” Atzel said. “They’re still dealing with all that tsunami shit and radiation and whatnot. It’s hard to get people to respond. So don’t rush out to learn any more Japanese.”

In all the time I’d worked with Atzel—nearly a year at this point—I’d never heard him curse so freely or speak so cynically. Between his weird new look and this crude manner, I didn’t know what to make of him. There was no way I could stand there and announce that I was quitting the act, effective immediately. I’d email him the news after I left.

“So I’ve been thinking,” he went on, changing the topic. “Nicole did a great job when you weren’t here. I’m going to give her a few solo numbers. Maybe have her open the second set.” He looked at me in a way that said an executive decision had been made, end of discussion.

Yet, rather than protest, I was happy to go with this plan. It would make my departure that much easier. “That’s a great idea,” I replied. I now had my pretext for breaking our contract, which Atzel had failed to modify when he signed Nicole. “She deserves it,” I said.

“Good,” he said. He stood up and took his leather jacket off the coatrack in the corner. “I have to get somewhere. So you’ll excuse me.”

“Right,” I said. “No problem.”

I backed out of his office and he followed me to the bar. He told Kyle, who was polishing bottles, that he’d be back after a few hours and headed out the front door. I watched as he beeped his Audi, parked at the curb, and then got in and pulled out. I turned to Kyle and said, “I like Atzel’s new look.”

Like any good bartender, Kyle knew when to keep his mouth shut. He nodded and went about his business polishing bottles.

Deleted: was all

Deleted: and

“Later,” I said and left the club.

As I walked to my car, I started wondering . . . Why was Atzel giving Nicole such a big slice of the act? Had she really been that good singing solo, or had he come to the conclusion that my act was played out? This was, after all, the age of tenors and boy band altos. After the initial curiosity, baritones tended to creep people out. In fact, based on some of the comments on my Facebook page, Bing himself sometimes creeped people out.

I crossed the Aurora Street Bridge and made my way north to Nicole’s newer, bigger apartment near Northgate, about twenty minutes from downtown and not too far from my own house—or what used to be my house until Lencie told me never to come back. I wanted to tell Nicole what Atzel had told me about giving her a steady solo portion of the act, and then inform her I was quitting the act and leaving Seattle. If she wasn’t home, I would just wait for her. Yet as I pulled into the parking lot of Nicole’s apartment building, the first thing I saw was Atzel’s Audi parked next to her Honda. As I looked at their two cars side by side, practically like catching them in bed together, it dawned on me that in changing his appearance, Atzel might very well be trying to Bingify himself. Of course, I couldn’t say for sure whether they were sleeping with one another. But it didn’t matter. It was clear to me that she was in it for her career, and that she and Atzel had something going on that didn’t involve me.

So be it, I thought. Nicole and I were through. Atzel and I were through. Bing and I were through. The various elements of my so-called singing career were falling like dominoes. It was all very liberating. I pulled out of the parking lot, realizing that I was now free to haul myself back to Shelton.

Deleted: .

But first I had to pick up a few things at the house and leave Lencie a note and perhaps write her a check so she wouldn't have to worry about money. I prayed that I could keep it together when I saw Rory's toys and socks strewn about the living room. I walked into the bedroom Lencie and I had once shared.

Deleted: —and just pray

Deleted: and

* * *

Since it was Monday, I knew Rory would be in pre-K and Lencie would be at the college. I let myself into the house and found it a mess. In taking on full childcare duties since the previous Friday, on top of her studying, Lencie hadn't had time to do dishes or fold laundry or tidy up all the stuff I usually did which made me feel terrible. I thought about cleaning up the house but decided that wouldn't be right. She might see it as a cheap ploy to try to get back into her good graces. Then I imagined her and Rory together in the messy house. He'd ask her where I was and when I was coming back, and Lencie wouldn't know how to answer. so she'd tell him they'd talk about it later. Then she'd go to our bedroom and cry.

Deleted: ,

Deleted: .

Deleted: Which

Deleted: and him asking

Deleted: not knowing

Deleted: and telling

Deleted: ,

Deleted: and then going to our bedroom and crying

That's when I decided to walk over to Rory's school. It was the kind of move that, taking into account any number of factors, could get me into trouble. It hadn't been 24 hours since Lencie told me not to come back, however, so I figured the parental order was not in full effect yet. I also told myself I wanted to make sure he was all right and that someone was going to be there to pick him up and take him home. I was simply being a responsible adult.

The walk to and from Rory's school each weekday had become one of my favorite things. It was therapeutic, filling me with a sense of well-being and community, the kind of feeling I got from singing to people, from my grandma to the audiences at the Amethyst Club—but perhaps even more so. When I reached the school, I realized I was early. There was another

Deleted: and

45 minutes before the final bell, so I walked several blocks to the nearby café and got a latté to go. Then I hung about the front of the school drinking my coffee as the other parents began to arrive. I knew most of them by sight, a few by name, and we shared some small talk, as we usually did. It was clear to them, just as it was clear to me, that I belonged there.

Deleted: -

The bell rang and kids poured out the door, and as soon as Rory saw me, he rushed up to me and hugged my legs. I lifted him into my arms and said I missed him, and as I set him back down I saw Lencie walking toward us. I knew she wouldn't want to make a scene, but nonetheless, the look she gave me was punishing and severe. I'd never seen her face so taut, as if she were clenching her jaw. Her eyes were unblinking. This was anger of another magnitude.

Deleted: saw

Deleted: clinching

Deleted: ,

Deleted: or her

Deleted: so

Deleted: , and as

"Come on, Rory," she said. I put him down and she snatched his hand.

I still held his book bag. "Can I walk with you?" I asked as she led him down the sidewalk.

"Do whatever you want. Isn't that your M.O.?"

Rory glanced back at me, picking up on the tension between us. In all our time together, Lencie and I had argued so rarely, and we never once had an argument in front of Rory.

Deleted: had so few arguments

Deleted: that we and never

Deleted: did we have

Deleted: one

Deleted: To Lencie,

Deleted: ,

I said, "I quit the club."

She just kept walking.

We must have looked like any perfectly normal young family: mom and dad walking their child home from school. Rory started telling me about what he and Stephen and Jared had been up to lately. It involved Hot Wheels, but otherwise I didn't hear him. My attention was on Lencie.

She then told him to be quiet. "Mommy's talking to Bing Crosby," she said.

We kept walking, though neither of us said anything more. I could see the tattoo on the underside of her right forearm—a toothbrush with a swirly dab of toothpaste on the bristles.

Right after Christmas, she'd mentioned wanting to get one, so on her birthday in March, I took her to a tattoo parlor in the U District and treated her to the tattoo. On the same visit to the tattoo parlor, I thought about getting one of Bing in his hat, smoking his pipe. But I didn't, not wanting to steal attention from Lencie's birthday tattoo—and now I was glad for that decision.

Deleted: toothbrush and toothpaste

"What else?" she said.

Deleted: ,

"The other thing too," I said. "It's over."

Deleted: to me

Rory tugged at my hand. "What's over?" he wanted to know.

"That's between your mommy and me," I said. His head swiveled toward her as he tried to puzzle out what was going on.

Deleted: ,

Deleted: and his

"Uncle Lillis offered me a job," I went on. "I told him I'd take it."

This seemed to get Lencie's attention. She looked at me. Her cross-eye was effectively gone—just a trace, barely noticeable, yet still adorable, still part of the girl I loved. She kept looking at me, and she could see I was serious.

When we reached the house, I followed her and Rory inside without either of us saying anything. We ate graham crackers and Nutella at the kitchen table, and when Rory asked for some milk, Lencie asked me if I wanted some too and she poured us each a glass. Then I said I should probably get going—to where, I didn't know, probably a cheap motel on Aurora—and she said okay.

The next night, though, after exchanging text messages in the morning, I was back at the house for dinner. Then afterward, after watching some TV with Rory and putting him to bed,

Lencie and I sat on the couch and talked. We talked some about Nicole and the Amethyst, but not a whole lot. I made clear that both were done, and she seemed to accept that. So instead we talked about us. We considered where we—she and I—might possibly go from here if we were to stay together. I told her I loved her, and Rory of course, and she quietly said, “Me too.” We agreed, however, that it wouldn’t be easy. She said I would need to give her a lot of space to get over the hurt I’d inflicted on her. To begin with, she wanted at least a few more days, or maybe a week, before I came back to the house. I said I understood. We then agreed that my taking the job with Uncle Lillis was a good idea, but that I should ask if I could have a few months before starting. That would give Lencie time to finish her program and take the state boards. She said she’d been in contact recently with a dental office in Olympia that was interested in hiring her. This came as news to me, but I didn’t say anything. She had always said she wanted eventually to move back to Shelton, so it wasn’t that big of a surprise really. Finally, we agreed to use the remainder of my savings to get us through the next several months and that I might even get a job at Home Depot or Lowe’s—and then the three of us would pack up and leave Seattle.

Deleted: of

“And you can still sing,” she said and looked sympathetically at me. “Rory and I love your singing.”

I just shrugged. At that moment, the thought of singing, even at home to my own loved ones, turned me off. “We’ll see,” I said.

Then Lencie and I kissed, tentatively, for the first time since Friday morning. As we sat on the couch, both dazed by everything but overall feeling good about our talk and our plans, I began to recognize how big the changes before us were. They were bigger than even our decision to move to Seattle in the first place.

* * *

De-Binging myself was not easy. I went cold turkey for the three months before we returned to Shelton. I didn't listen to Bing, and I didn't sing Bing. When Rory asked me for a song, I gently told him I wasn't in the mood and offered to read to him instead. I stopped having my hair trimmed every other week and threw out the hair gel, and sometimes I went days on end without shaving. I also hauled a lot of the clothes I wore for my act, which now seemed more like a costume, down to the Goodwill. And when I wasn't working at Home Depot, having picked up a part-time job there, I threw myself into household chores with renewed vigor. I made beds, folded laundry, and mopped the kitchen floor once a week. I also cooked as never before. Lencie knew I was making up for my transgressions, but she was grateful just the same.

"What's in this chicken sauce?" she asked one evening as we ate a new recipe I was trying out.

"Tandoori spice, plain Greek yogurt, and a few other things," I said. "Do you like it?"

"It's delicious. Thank you, Chris."

"Yes, thank you, Chris," Rory chimed in.

Although Rory didn't know what had gone on between his mother and me, it was clear he sensed that something significant and possibly scary had transpired—and that things were okay now. On his birthday a few weeks before we were to move, I made him a triple-layer chocolate cake, and we had a few of his school friends and their parents over for a small birthday party.

It was hard in some ways to leave Seattle, our little house, our cozy neighborhood, our routines. But we were also glad, as Lencie and I kept reminding one another, to be going home. Only when we were back in Shelton, settling into a large bungalow house that rented for half of

what the Seattle house had, did we finally breathe a giant sigh of relief over everything we'd been through while away. That's also when it occurred to me how much I'd been white-knuckling it in denying myself Bing for those final months in Seattle. So to ease the pressure, I started listening to him on my iPod while unpacking boxes in our new house. I also caught myself unconsciously singing scat under my breath, and that's when, realizing I was slipping, I decided to seek professional help.

Obsessions, it turns out, can be tricky things. Anyone who's ever had one knows what I'm talking about. When the obsession becomes out of control, like a runaway log truck, is when the real trouble starts—and by definition an obsession is always out of control. That's what it means to have OCD, according to Dr. Ivanovic, the psychiatrist I began to see.

"It's like a musical scale," he said, using the analogy for my benefit. "Just as there's often a fine line between one note and another, there's often a fine line between enthusiasm and obsession, obsession and compulsion. It's all about the degree to which you're out of control."

Dr. Ivanovic put me on Anafranil, a kind of antidepressant specially designed to treat an obsessive-compulsive disorder—which he diagnosed me as having after a couple of sessions.

"A Bing disorder?" I asked facetiously.

"The object of the obsession is essentially irrelevant," he replied in his Serbian accent. He was tall and lanky and wore colorful ties designed by his abstract artist wife. They lived in Olympia, and he worked two days a week at the Mason County Behavioral Health Center in Shelton, where I would see him. "If the obsession interferes with your life, then it's a disorder. It's quite simple."

Deleted: -

I've been taking the Anafranil since then, and I've gotten better. The good doctor also had me do some cognitive-behavioral therapy, beginning with writing down all my Bing-related behaviors—a list that when completed I found rather disturbing. We also talked about my grandmother. Before getting all this care, I could hardly go an hour without singing a Bing number in my head, but in time, with the medicine and the therapy, I could go a whole day, then a weekend, and then a whole week. Eventually—and quite miraculously, to my thinking—I started to lose interest in Bing altogether.

Which gave Lencie increased hope that we might have a real chance. She and Rory, after all, were the reason I went to Dr. Ivanovic in the first place. Once back in Shelton, I didn't want to risk losing them as I almost had in Seattle. Certainly not on account of some asinine obsession with a long-dead crooner that my crazy dead grandma had instilled in me. I needed to change for good, I realized. I needed to be Bing-free.

Deleted: over

Lencie and I are now planning to get married. She loves being a dental hygienist, and my own teeth have never been cleaner. A couple of weeks ago she told me that there's a new bachelor's degree in dental hygiene at Pierce College in Tacoma, indicating she might be interested in applying to it. She thinks she could commute there via the Tacoma Narrows Bridge without it being too hard. I told her that if that's what she wanted, we would make it work. Of course, it really helps to have her parents and my uncle and aunt to fill in now and then with childcare for Rory.

The ex, thank God, transferred to the state prison in Monroe and is now living over there. Lencie told me she'd heard through the grapevine that he's been seeing a woman there and that she's pregnant.

“How wonderful for them,” I said, unable to check my sarcasm. I was just glad he was out of our lives, including Rory’s. Since the episode in front of the tavern, when he was zapped with 900,000 volts, the ex had, totally abandoned his efforts—pretty weak to begin with—at having any contact with his son. Thank you, Stiles.

Deleted: has

As for me, I’m working for L&H Precision Lumber and wouldn’t have it any other way. Maybe someday when Uncle Lillis retires, I’ll take over the mill from him. It could happen. The grant for harvesting the lot near Matlock has another two years to go, and Uncle Lillis and Jennifer couldn’t be happier with how I’m managing the property. I kid my uncle and cousin that I’ve become a regular silviculturist. When I’m on the job, I’m either in the woods or at the mill—two of my favorite places—and making solid union wages.

This past year I joined a group of carolers Aunt Sherrie organized to go from business to business in downtown Shelton on the Saturday before Christmas. We sang “White Christmas” and “Silent Night,” of course, and the next time I saw Dr. Ivanovic, I asked him whether this was some kind of relapse on my part. He just laughed and said my obsession, in his estimation, wasn’t an addiction. Total abstinence wasn’t necessary, he told me. So it was fine if I wanted to sing now and then.

“Even Bing Crosby songs?” I asked him.

“Even Bing Crosby songs,” he answered, and added, “In moderation.”

So once a month now I go to senior centers and retirement homes across the Olympic Peninsula—from Shelton to Port Angeles to Aberdeen—and entertain the oldsters. They remind me of my grandma. They’re tickled to hear me sing Bing, and we have a good time, and then I go home.

Deleted: s

Acknowledgements

Residencies at the University of Washington's Olympic Natural Resources Center in Forks, Washington, and the Icicle Creek Center for the Arts in Leavenworth, Washington, gave me invaluable research and writing time. I also received help on this project from the Friends of Fort Worden, the Jefferson County Historical Society, and the Artists Trust Edge Professional Development Program, all in Port Townsend, Washington. The working manuscript benefited immensely from critical and editorial feedback from Alyssa Barrett of Third Draft Creative, poet and friend Ann Douglas, Elizabeth Wales of Wales Literary Agency, and the incredibly talented and hardworking editors at Ooligan Press. Finally, without the unflagging faith and encouragement of my dear wife, Susan, this book would not exist.