

CHAPTER 5: BED AND BREAKFAST

June 1st, 1993
FIVE YEARS LATER

JESUS was hungover. His back was a riot of bruises, and he couldn't really move his neck in certain directions. Despite this, he was feeling hopeful. He'd slept on a riverbank, and it had turned out fine.

The sky was threatening rain, probably. He couldn't see the sky, except in little grey eyelets between the branches of redwood trees, but it smelled like rain everywhere. The air was gummy with humidity and soil. He could feel the silver beer cans, arrayed around him, cans opened, cans crushed. All empty, too. He was naked, apparently. An almost-naked kid, much younger and wearing Batman briefs, was watching him. The boy didn't say anything and poked at a stinging nettle. Two piles of clothes, both equally neat, sagged and damped beside Jesus's head.

Jesus -- full name Jesus J. Martin -- was always good about keeping his stuff organized. The boy was imitating him and watched to see what Jesus would do. Jesus didn't do anything. He was too annoyed with himself, and he'd resolved that when he

Who was she? Full moon. Ha, ha. Nobody'd heard anything about anarchism. That's just strange. OK, her face. Spiky hair. Not intentionally, though. I think that was from the car ride. She slept. Long day at work.

Did we sing? Did I play something? Please let it not be "Redemption Song." It was. Wait! No, it wasn't! We were going to do that but then we just went swimming!

If I didn't play anything, that's really a missed opportunity. I showed her my IWW card.

She's an elf. Not ears, the whole face. She was tiny. When we were kissing I felt her curling up like a sprout.

did move, he was going to throw up. Plus, he hated disappointing the boy by doing anything too quickly. Kids like people who are visibly thinking, Jesus felt. They consider it suspenseful.

"The rest of your comrades went to the Coast," said a woman who had the kid's glossy black hair. She was wearing fancy jeans, advanced-degree field-work jeans. Her blouse was expensive, too, but the swimsuit beneath was a bargain bin one-piece, decorated with fuchsias. Jesus threw up on the other side of himself, where the bushes arched up accusingly. The kid laughed and put on his pants. Jesus put on all his dusty black clothes.

The kid's name was Ed. His mom's name was Lakshmi. She was collecting horsetails, which she used to make some kind of black market hippie toothpaste.

"Horsetails are everywhere, but they're half-petrified and contain silica," Ed told Jesus. "They're as old as dragonflies."

From the perspective of Jesus Martin, the woman's basket of raw toothpaste ore was inexpressibly sad. He decided this was the hangover. His brain was still experiencing widespread brown-outs as well as

Full moon spooning. No foothold. Lining up bodies. So awkward, like middle school. Everyone must have been there but we were way out. God, it was dark. Oh fuck. My foot. If that hurts for a week or something... Tragic. It's modern tragedy.

Her sketchbook. Not much in it, though. OK, I remember forgiving her, it's a prop. Grew up in Boise. Right! Dad does a little retail chain! Wait, why move here, then?

He gets that crooked look on his face. These are nice kids. Fundamentally...

...polite. Then nothing. Wow. That's like a big K-Mart sized nothing after my little seminar on quarters.

service disruptions in some areas.

According to Lakshmi, Ed was ten, which put him ten eventful years behind Jesus. There was also a wide gulf of temperament separating them. Jesus, for example, was well on his way to feeling sublimely happy.

True, the hangover was an unsolved crime, but Lakshmi was doing a lot to ease things. She shared a gouda sandwich with him. She knew where Jesus's new friends had gone. They were in Oberstville already, having failed at waking him up. She owned a bed and breakfast that sounded like it was thriving. It wasn't anything she said, it was how she talked. She bitched extravagantly, about little things, and resolved "to be more Zen." Jesus considered such complaints a luxury, one she evidently could afford.

Ed, however, was freaking out. Something was up with him, and when Jesus asked about it, Lakshmi told him that Ed was autistic. The boy spoke very haltingly, as though forcing each syllable into line. He jittered, and he measured the wind with his palms. Ed looked into the wide, shadow-steeped river, impressed. He told Jesus and Lakshmi that "the ice in the

HENRY MILLER! OK. We're back on the air! I'm talking to that guy about Henry Miller, and then I'm telling him about the trains. Ha ha, the whole thing.

Oh, good. We sang "The Big Rock Candy Mountain." Combined with the train story, they all got it, I'm awesome.

At night the water's warmer.

She's not there but I think she knew where I was. It was fine, it was cool. Somebody tagging me, I'm it. But you can't be it if you immediately go ashore and nap.

water was green." Jesus saw what he meant: the border of the current. There was no ice, but there was the color of ice. Then the water quieted into stones and mud.

Jesus liked these two-lane highways, shaded by trees and lousy with swimming holes. He'd spent a year riding trains, doubled over with angst the whole time. His memories hurt like phantom limbs. He mumbled, which was new. The trains made you cynical about people. They were too fast, too heavily guarded. They were too far from the city centers where his old friends could be found, dragging out internships or waiting tables. It was tough to be decent to other riders, because your own ass was always in danger. He liked the trains better now that he wasn't riding them. The feeling that he had dust and grit in his hair was still there.

Jesus had reached, and passed, his decision point. He was definitely going to ask for jobs at the B&B, one apiece for him and his sister, who was in Phoenix watching their stuff. First, though, he was going to confide in Lakshmi.

Out on the road, he always tried to say as much about himself as

So I had my guitar? Maybe I can remember tuning up. Whose guitar was that? Where's my guitar?

People say they will call but they... penpals. Prison romance.

So much about Boise. Were there stars? It's thunderstormy today. Then her mouth. Her mouth talking about Boise. The cold and the taste of aluminum before the beer hits. Now I'm saying to that guy, we'd be idiots not to down this. Me talking about quarters. Quarters! Shut up you moron! Dammit!

Her name's Yvonne. She's proud of it. I'm telling her it sounds European. This I guess not my best part of the night, but our bodies are swaying together.

was right. Sometimes you didn't have to say anything. With Lakshmi, though, payment was due. She'd been straight with him about Ed; so had Ed, for that matter. Plus, Jesus definitely liked Ed's aslant sentences. You could superimpose his categories onto yours, reach common ground, but you'd still have no clue what was coming next.

"You're having a bad morning," Ed told him. "I'm thinking about this river but you're like the laugh that fell out of the tree."

Jesus told Lakshmi about his year taking lithium. About feeling himself slipping into numbness, swearing off the meds, crying for three days in a row. He told her about getting arrested in Canada.

Ed was mounting a frontal assault on the nettles. He was still shirtless. He welcomed them. He clutched at them, feverishly.

"What the hell is he doing?" Jesus asked Ed's mom.

"Oh, he has a theory that he can eventually get used to nettles," said Lakshmi, sighing. "Build up resistance to the allergen. He's trying to teach his body to ignore them."

No, YVONNE, it's NOT pronounced Hey Seuss. "What kind of a name is Jesus?" I don't know, what kind of a name is shut th-

Oh, boy.

Somebody. Memories of wartime?

So, fine, she's not originally from Boise. Too peaceful there. Wartime? Where? Where? Where?

OK now I just keep seeing this scene. Soldiers in a courtyard. I guess I was picturing, what, an old Spanish building? She's from South America!

Not the same person. Not the one I kissed.

Ed suddenly retreated, then ran for the water, yelling, a medium-sized cyclone of frustration, pain, and purpose.

Lakshmi stood up, planning to dive in. "Finish it," she said, waving at the remains of brunch.

"Is he succeeding?" Jesus asked.

"Not at all, so far," she answered. Then she turned, yelling like a second Ed. She sprinted after him, diving past the luminous divide, where the bank crumbled into swifter depths.

She's crying. Many years later, she was herded out of a national park by a man in a gas mask. Same mask as before, same uniform colors. Everything.

It was a false alarm. There was no danger in the park.

I can sleep here. Right here! It's fine! It's fine. I held her and there we were. See you tomorrow. What did I tell her?

