Segue

9: Fall 10

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Yacht Club

I met her in a guitar shop. I became aware she had been there a while and never got too far away in the big store, that she was actually listening, that we had become aware of each other.

Attention is a strange thing. You can feel it. You can sit in a restaurant full of people with your eyes on your guitar and tell which direction it is coming from. If you look up without thinking about it too much you will find yourself looking right into the eyes of somebody looking back at you. And feel a certainty the music you are playing is being heard for what it is, and so is the joy you take in it. When that happens you know your life and your art are a complete success, at least in that one little perfect moment. You feel lucky you dared to do such a ridiculous thing, being there, doing that.

I was picking Martins out of the hanging racks and trying them out, taking my time, looking for that special one. The one that felt like we already knew and understood each other. The whole this is the one thing may be a delusion, but it seems real enough when it happens. I had already come back to one particular guitar three times. I already knew it was the one and I was going to buy it. I was just trying to be reasonable and rational about it, since I had driven 300 miles to come to this shop and was going to spend over $1500, on top of my $1200 trade in.

Which was silly, because I was actually there to correct my own misguided rationality. I had bought the guitar I was trading in as an effort to accommodate my limitations. It had a little wider neck to make a little more room for my lack of precision in the tiny movements of picking the strings. I had been playing it for two years by then and I knew it didn’t matter. No amount of tricks or special exercises or hours of practice or a wider neck was ever going to make me any faster or overcome this bit of clumsiness. And because I had sat in restaurants and art galleries and had those perfect moments, I knew it didn’t matter. What mattered was that I really meant it, being there, doing that. I didn’t have to be a master guitarist, I never would be a master guitarist, I just had to mean it. Fingers doing the best they could. Wood vibrating against flesh and bone. No lies being told.

When I first started playing professionally, a guy I knew told me the secret was just to be yourself. He wasn’t a master guitarist either, but he had been playing in bands and in bars for a long time. He was like me, musically competent but nothing special, except for loving it enough that he kept at it all those years. You could see it when he played, that he did it because he loved it. He worked in a grocery store for thirty years and played rock and roll in bars on the weekend. He probably knew when he said it that I didn’t have a clue what it really meant, but I might understand some day, and that it was especially important for me because I played solo. Just me and my guitar and mostly my own compositions or arrangements. I didn’t sing or tell jokes or wear a funny outfit or have any sort of act. I did like to improvise, and I was even good at it occasionally. But you have to be at ease to do that well. You have to be willing to let things happen and to screw up once in a while. Not get all serious about some imagined thing you have to be or ought to be or wish you were but you aren’t or that you think people will demand of you. You have to be yourself, just being there, doing that, which is harder than any of those other things at first, but easier in the long run.
Four years later I understood that. I understood what it meant performing music, and I was starting to understand better what it meant in life, this mysterious secret of just being there, doing that. So I was in the guitar shop to trade in for a Martin, which had always been the guitar that felt the best in my hands, and the one I really wanted to play.

After about an hour she finally walked up and introduced herself. She said she had promised a friend she would entertain at her wedding reception at the yacht club. She said she sang and had many songs of her own, and played the guitar, but not nearly as well as I did, and a little piano. She said she liked the way I picked up on the guy at the other end of the building, when he was trying out a synthesizer, and jammed along with him. She wondered if I’d be interested in doing the gig with her.

I said I lived three hundred miles away, but it sounded interesting.

She said she couldn’t pay me, she wasn’t getting paid herself, it was a favor she owed an old friend. But she had a guest room and would feed me and she thought my style of playing would go really well with her songs and that it would be fun. She said she had all the sound equipment we’d need. I could come down and we could rehearse a few days and I could go to the beach and it would be like a vacation.

She was an attractive woman. Not like magazine photo-shoot air-brushed attractive. Like forty year old grown-up real-life woman with no make-up attractive. It mattered that she was a woman and I was a man, but not in an overtly sexual kind of way. The natural affinity of genders was like an extension, some added spice and energy, to the affinity of two people with a musical connection. That was plenty seductive all by itself. And it was novel. And flattering. Nice to be wanted. Nice to get some beach time. Nice to get away from all the usual people and usual things and do something a little weird. And play at a yacht club for people who had no idea how many peanut butter and jelly sandwiches I ate or how many thousands of hours I practiced or that I was fulfilling a childhood dream every time I got up in front of people and played a tune I had written myself, even though I would probably never break even.

Sometimes people who would spend more in a weekend than I made in a year would tell me they enjoyed it and leave me a nice tip. Sometimes people said I made it look easy, one of the best compliments of all. I got a kick out of being around wealthy people, up on a stage while they ate their dinner or looked at paintings and sculpture, making it look easy. It made me feel like a secret agent subverting the powers of darkness. Showing them something money couldn’t buy. Being there, doing that.

Oh yes, it was plenty seductive even without any suggestion of sex or promise of money.

We talked about it some more. I said let me think about it. We exchanged contact info. She said she’d send me some samples of lyrics and music. We said we’d be in touch. I bought the Martin and got it set up to my liking and drove three hundred miles back home. I wondered if I was just being stupid, or if her song lyrics would be awful, or if there was really something to the feeling I had that she meant every word she said and we might really do a little art we would be proud of. At a yacht club.

She sent me a tape with a few tunes and some copies of her lyrics with chord changes scribbled in. I liked her poetry a lot. It was moving and honest. It had an understated psychological power. Some of it was eerie and dark, full of pain without a shred of whining. The sort of thing that
made you suddenly realize you had stopped breathing while you read it. It was not awful. It was better than any poetry I ever wrote. Better than most of the poetry I ever read.

One of the songs on the tape was a train song. God knows how many train songs have been written since the steam engine was invented. It’s not hard to understand why. What else captures so well the feeling of being swept along by something too powerful to resist? Her song was about losing things she loved, losing all but the sadness and the memories, and still being on that train of hope, because she just couldn’t stop it. It made you want to cry and laugh for joy at the same time because you were rolling with her. There wasn’t any smoke belching from the stack or any chug-chug or woo-woo. It was just hope barreling down the tracks in your heart and your imagination. Rocking you along to wherever it was going and you were glad to be on it and you never wanted to get off.

I played it about ten times in a row. I was stunned. There was no way I was going to pass this up. I gave up a gig and cancelled some student lessons. I not only would not get paid, I would give up money and buy my own gas. How many chances would a guy like me get to work with someone like this?

The wedding reception was on a Sunday. I told her I could be there late Wednesday afternoon, ten days before the gig, and we’d have plenty of time to get ready. Meanwhile I would work on what she had sent me.

Deal.

I found her house a couple of weeks later on a quiet residential street not far from the university district, a few blocks from the nearest busy boulevard. When I pulled up in front I saw a very big, newish-looking pickup truck parked in the driveway next to a small travel trailer. Behind them was a heavy steel gate on wheels and behind that was a silver Airstream trailer and a two-story detached garage. The house was small and looked like it had been built in the 1940s. The front yard had a few coastal desert plantings, but they and the house looked kind of neglected, like nobody payed much attention to them unless they had to.

She showed me around the place. I would stay in the Airstream. The music studio was in the garage. There were amps and microphones and music stands and stools to sit on, though I had brought my own. There was a half bath. There was a baby grand piano and several acoustic guitars and piles of sheet music and magazines.

Her room was above the garage, one big room she liked better than the house, she said, because it was small. The back yard was surrounded by a wooden fence eight feet tall. All you could see of the neighbors was the roofs of their houses. In the center of the yard was a pond full of tiger lilies and a fountain that didn’t work. On the side of the garage was an outdoor shower that did work. It had no walls or curtain around it, but it didn’t matter because of the fence.

In the house was a small kitchen. Chipped and cracked formica and linoleum, a stainless steel coffee maker, a stained sink and faucet that dripped, a modern double-door fridge with sprouts and vegetables and fruit and expensive cheeses and organic bread inside. An almost unbearably cramped and uncomfortable built-in nook to sit and eat, with the local underground/punk newspaper spread out on it.

A tiny bathroom off the hall. Another small room with paints, brushes and an empty easel. Art books, baskets, pieces of cloth, pottery, an assortment of things you couldn’t tell if they meant something or had just been put down and forgotten.
The living room had a big TV and stereo, a couch and arm chair, bookshelves with books and art objects, a threadbare rug, dusty curtains, a pile of shoes by the front door. An oil painting of her that had all the intensity of her poetry and a van Gogh quality of relentless observation mixed with madness. I didn’t ask if she painted it. I thought I knew the answer. If it was by her own hand or someone else’s didn’t seem to matter. Either way it was her self portrait.

Where the money for all this came from was not apparent, though I did get some clues eventually. What was apparent was that she was an eccentric, intelligent, highly creative person... and fascinated with herself above all, which didn’t seem unusual really, I think most people are. So far, I would agree she had more to be fascinated with, and more inner focus to bring to the task, than most. But I was also beginning to think she might be a little crazy and I should be cautious. She never asked me anything about myself the whole time I was there.

After I got moved in we played music till around midnight. She wanted to do some of her own songs and some standards from old musicals and the big band days. She had cheat books. I had cheat books. We talked about what we already knew and what we might learn. She said there would be a piano at the yacht club. She could do a little bit solo. I could do a little bit solo. We ought to be able to fill two or three hours without much trouble.

She sang consistently a little bit flat. Lots of people wouldn’t even notice it. I have a good ear for pitch and that sort of thing usually bothers me, but in this case it didn’t. It was like it was just enough off to be, like a style, something done deliberately to draw you in more completely. It made everything sound like the blues.

She got a phone call and went up to her room for a long time. I went to bed. The next morning I made myself breakfast and worked by myself for a while. She appeared around noon and asked me if I wanted to go to the beach. She disappeared into her room for another long phone call. When she came back we headed out.

She drove the big pickup with competence and relaxed concentration, changing from one lane to another, one freeway to another, and passing nearly everyone with the smoothness of a limo driver.

I’m not a guy who likes to hang out at the beach. A little bit of people watching and wave watching is all right, but what I want to do is get in the water and swim. It didn’t seem like the singer and I were even there together, which I guess we weren’t. She brought me because it was part of the deal. I swam straight out to sea until the people were dots and the buildings above the beach were like little boxes. I rested there, rising and falling in the swell. You wanted strange. You got strange. I swam back and sat in the sun drying off.

A young woman came down to the beach from one of the condos on the hillside. She spread a big towel in the sand and started doing some exercises. She had a great tan and long, gleaming black hair. She was about seven months pregnant. She was wearing a thong. Strange but beautiful.

The singer came back wet. She picked up her dress from the pile of our belongings in front of me and pulled it over her head. She squirmed out of her one-piece bathing suit and dropped it on the pile. She got a pair of panties out of her beach bag and pulled them on. The sinuous motions were very sexy. It seemed like a performance just for me. Not for me the person, the man...for me the audience. The one who, more than any other, at the moment, was paying complete attention and was fascinated. Strange but beautiful.
I had the feeling by now that the only real meeting ground between us was the music, and my fascination. It was disappointing, disturbing, that she had so much awareness of herself and so little awareness of the rest of the world. No, that’s not right. Driving the truck, she was aware of everything. Playing music, she was aware of me as a musician. On the beach, she was certainly aware I was sitting six feet away watching her get naked. More than naked. There was just this kind of remove, of isolation, of being untouchable, as though nothing in the world was quite as real as herself. As though all the world was composed of objects to be managed and an audience to be enthralled with her siren song. Strange but beautiful.

When we got back to her house we cleaned up and had something to eat and then worked on music until around midnight again. It was going pretty well, we worked well together. We gave each other a boost and it was all very lively, satisfying and fun. We made some of the choices about particular tunes and put some others on the table for consideration.

The next day, Friday, was much the same, except she told me about being in prison. She was pulling a horse trailer full of marijuana with her previous big pickup truck and got busted and did two years in the women’s correctional facility. She said when she was processed into the prison she set two goals for herself—that when she got out she would still be able to walk and still have all her teeth. She said she had even organized her prison mates in a cell-cleaning effort at one point, which got them better privileges. Apparently, her charisma worked with women too.

Saturday was similar, except she said my Speedos were corny and out of style. She was right of course, if looking trendy at the beach was your goal, but I wanted to swim.

During rehearsal we had a disagreement about our repertoire. She suggested a movie tune I really didn’t like. Ballrooms and diamonds and champagne and some stupid fake romance. All glitter and no guts. She said she wanted to do the tune because she thought it would please the old folks who would be at the wedding reception. Remind them of the good old days during World War Two I guess. You know, Pearl Harbor, Hiroshima, Guadalcanal, the firebombing of Dresden, death camps, all that. Some fond memories.

I said if you’re going to sing you ought to make it mean something real and your own songs are better than that. She looked at me like I was missing the point, and maybe I was.

I began to wonder if I had not completely mistaken everything. I wondered if her songs were just accidental products of a talent she didn’t even value herself. The art was just something that happened, it didn’t really mean anything, it was all an illusion. It became like a contest of wills between us, but ended before it got out of hand because we had to go to a party.

The party was the second anniversary of the death of an old boyfriend of hers. She said he had been beaten to death in a parking lot late one night. Some kind of drug turf rivalry or something. No one was ever prosecuted for the murder, but she thought she knew who did it. Friends and family would be there.

I’m not anti recreational drugs really, or prescription drugs either for that matter. I think they can all be abused and have casualties and victims and profiteers and so on. I’m less open-minded about physical violence. The psychological violence we all have to contend with every day can be damaging enough, but at least we can still walk and still have our teeth.

On our way to the party she put in a tape of Charles Bukowski reading his poetry. I had never heard Bukowski speak, but I had seen some of his poetry, many years earlier. I didn’t recognize the poems so much as recognize the intoxicating bleakness, the dark perception, the
drunken humor, the…wastedness. One of those unexpected moments when immediate impressions and long gone memories meet and spit out a name and an image of something you knew was true but not the life you wanted for yourself. Brought to you by this dark woman in a white pickup truck on the way to celebrate death. You wanted weird. You got weird. Way to go.

The party was boring and depressing. A few people were passingly courteous. Most either tried to give me cocaine or ignored me completely. Somebody, somehow, owned a whole hillside of little houses above the beach, an enclave gathered around a long set of stairs. In the little house at the top lived the dead guy’s mother, to whom I was introduced because that was how things were done there. You paid your respects to the matriarch. The entire setup had the same dusty, neglected look as the singer’s house.

I thought what I guess anyone would think who wandered into a scene like that. Old money, but not vast, liquid amounts of it, and mom still had her hand on the bank book. In all the conversations I overheard, nothing sounded like what people did because they were actually interested, had a career or a vocation or any kind of goal other than amusing themselves and making money. Nobody was talking about the dead guy. I suppose there might be people in the family who were a little more, I hate to use the word, normal. Perhaps they didn’t come to the parties. Perhaps they had moved to another state or another country or another universe.

It was almost like it was scripted, her playing the tape on the way over, the opening scene with voice-over that established the mood of the story to come. The tape ends. You get out of the truck and walk right into the smiling black despair.

On the ride back to the singer’s house she talked about moving to India. She said she knew some people there who had a little hotel that hippies and other tourists stayed in and she could do her music. What would I think about doing something like that?

I kept my mouth shut because I was no longer in any doubt about her craziness or my stupidity. I did not want to get into an argument while she was driving and end up in a car wreck because the whole thing was already a train wreck and I wanted out. You wanted weird. You got weird. How do you like it buddy? It was not seductive any more. Still fascinating in a way, because it was all so intense and surreal, but way too creepy to be appealing. Like, picture Bukowski looking deep into a murky glass of booze and seeing his face reflected in there and just diving right in it was so goddamn fascinating, and inviting you to join him. No thanks.

And I did not want to say what is wrong with you people? What is wrong with you? You have a great talent and you just use it to further self-destruction? Yeah sure, I have my little fantasy about childhood dreams and being a secret agent and I’ll never break even but I’m not trying to be nuts. I’m not courting doom and making pacts with other people so we can be nuts together.

I was mad. I was not doing this…whatever it was.

When we got back to her house I said I was leaving and started packing my stuff. Those were the last words I said to her. I don’t want to do this. I’m going home. During the few minutes it took to gather my things and put them in the car I saw one of the most amazing performances of my life.

It’s good to have a few friends who know things you don’t. Not just think they do, which is very common, but actually know something and tell you about it. I had a friend who told me about the codependency triangle. She drew it on a piece of paper and described it. Victim-Rescuer-Persecutor. I guess she thought it might be helpful to me in some way to know that.
In five minutes the singer worked the possible combinations, trying to find the one that would do the job. Me as Victim, her as Rescuer. Me as Rescuer, her as Victim. Me as Persecutor, her as Victim. I’m sorry, I left one out. Her as Victim becoming Persecutor, me as Rescuer being turned into Victim.

It didn’t work because I recognized it. It just made me more determined to get the hell out of there. But it was awesome to behold and utterly pointless to contest. Just get away while you can still walk and still have your teeth.

She reached in fast and snatched the keys out of the ignition. I caught her wrist and started prying her fingers loose. I was holding on hard because I knew it was going to get even weirder if she got away from me. I pictured her tossing my keys away in the dark, up on a neighbor’s roof, into a backyard, into her underwear, down a street drain, somewhere I could not go to retrieve them.

I had not and was not getting into a screaming match with her. I was not going to brawl with her, there in the middle of the narrow residential street, in the middle of the night, or anywhere else. I had another key, hidden in the wheel-well. It was the extra time it would give her that worried me, if I had to get out of the car and find it. Time to start grabbing my stuff back out of the car, kicking headlights, whatever crazy thing came into her head. This was my one and only chance to use my strength advantage and I wasn’t letting go because I was leaving.

I got the keys away from her, started the car and drove away. I left her standing in the street, being and doing something I wanted no part of.

Close one.
Author Notes

Dean Kisling is a high school dropout who learned to type when he was 47. He has been a soldier, laborer, taxi driver, welder, carpenter, performing musician, acupressurist, fractal artist, mountaineer, trail runner and fool. He writes what happened and also makes stuff up. He lives in America and is very happily married. More of his work is available at his website.

About the Work

My aspiration is to write the story of us. Fiction has the potential to tell that story more completely because fiction includes the subjective. The story of us is not simply the objective facts, but also our discovery and experience of the facts, how we interpret them and what we choose to do about it. We struggle with the dualities in our own natures, struggle with love and hate, courage and cowardice, pride and shame, freedom and slavery. We try to be more than beasts. That struggle is the story fiction can tell, why we claim fiction can tell the truth. I think a large part of human dignity is in the fact that we keep trying to become better than we are.

A story is told from the interior of someone. Or several someones. For example: even in a story with only one character, the protagonist, narrator, and author might each have a point of view. They might interact with each other, compete, cooperate and connive for the reader’s empathy and trust. They might all become the characters of the story. They all have personalities, histories, opinions, desires, fears, things to hide and axes to grind. Each one wants us to understand the story in a certain way. It is their interiors telling the story, maybe arguing about it, contesting how it is being told or what really happened, demanding a fair hearing or last rebuttal.

Written words can get inside the people living and telling the story in a way that is unique to literature. In a story, you can be told more about someone than they know about themselves. In a story, a variety of perspectives can tell a truer tale. The story of us is better told by many voices.

I enjoy the challenge and the chance to speak from these multiple points of view, to try to tell a more true story. I think these layers of voices are the basis of the tradition of irony in literature. Irony requires some distance, some degree of separation from its object. Of course, the irony of telling the story of us is that all of us are one of us, and no real degree of separation is possible, believe whatever you like.

In a first person story, the protagonist and narrator are the same person. Part of the action of the story is that person changing, realizing something, deciding something, becoming this person now speaking to you as the narrator.

Sometimes the first person narrator is the conscience of the protagonist, or his dark side, or his apologist, or his main booster, could be anything, the attitudes of some authority figure now forever internalized...the point being to differentiate between his two characters: the protagonist he started out as and the narrator he became. In one sense, that is the real story, characters being changed by engaging life.

Dean Kisling on the Web

pneumerology.com