

Jack lifts his head from the crook of his arm. Across the counter, he spies a bartender's face reflected in the mirror behind shelves of liquor.

The bartender reaches for a bottle of Makers Mark, catches Jack's eye, and winks.

Jack shifts his position on the bar stool. It has no footrest, and he struggles to stay upright on the hard, narrow seat, even though his long, thin legs almost touch the floor.

The bartender turns around. "Whoa, buddy, steady there. I don't have to cut you off already, do I? You just got here."

Jack detects a foreign accent and hesitates before answering. "I don't know. I'm not sure why I came in here. I quit drinking last summer."

"Ah, well, maybe you just need to talk with somebody. You know, women, they go to hairdressers. A guy like you . . . well, how about a soda, then?"

"OK, a Coke, I guess."

Jack looks around the room. He's the only person sitting at the bar. To his left a plate-glass window appears to cover the entire wall – ceiling to floor, left wall to right. In front of it hangs a heavy dark curtain in two shades of brown. The swirling pattern reminds him of one of his 70's prep school ties. The afternoon sun is fighting to find its way into the room, and the edges of the curtain seem alive, on fire. The curtain throws a cooling shadow into the corner of the room, and under its protection men sit alone at small round tables. The room is hushed and all thought and voice seem suspended, much like the dust particles hanging in the thin strip of light.

"Here's your soda, buddy. Do you want anything in it? Lime, lemon?"

"No, thanks, this is fine. Have I been sitting here long?"

"A few minutes, maybe. I didn't see you come in."

Jack sips his drink. The room is warm and condensation covers the glass. The ice is almost all melted, and the soda is flat. He's pretty sure it's not the "Real Thing" – just some rip-off cola syrup with no carbonation. He mutters under his breath, "sometimes all you want is a Coke."

The bartender reaches up to adjust the volume of the television set behind the bar. "Huh, what'd you say?" Baltimore versus California, top of the fourth, scored tied one to one.

Jack is oblivious to the game. A smile tugs at the corners of his mouth, and he begins to feel a familiar tug in his pants. "I said, 'sometimes all you want is a Coke.' It's nothing. Just an inside joke I used to have with this girl. Don't know why I thought of it. It's been more than ten years since I saw her."

"Yeah, great," the bartender mumbles. His eyes stay fixed on the screen. It's a packed house in Camden Yards, and a pan of the crowd highlights presidents and paupers.

"We used to pretend we were in a Coke commercial. You know, a cheesy one from the 50's. We'd go to the zoo with her kids, and we'd get a Coke. We'd go to the movies, and we'd drink a Coke. After sex, a Coke." Jack seems agitated. "And speaking of Coke, man, can I have another one? This one's flat. You got some bottled?"

The bartender takes his eyes off the TV long enough to squat behind the counter, open a small refrigerator door, and peer inside. "I've got one last Coke, and it's got your name on it." He reaches in, takes out the bottle, closes the door, and stands in one smooth and choreographed movement. He places a second napkin on the bar and sets the bottle on top of it. "Here you go, Jack."

Jack is startled to hear his name, but quickly shrugs it off. "

*Jack, "it's a generic name like "Buddy" or "Guy." At least he's not calling me
"dickhead."*

Jack looks up at the bartender. "How much do I owe you?" He reaches down to the right back pocket of his 501's, but it's empty.

For Christ's sake, did I leave my wallet at home?

Jack starts to check the left side when the bartender pipes up. "No worries. This one's on house."

Jack takes a sip from the bottle. It's perfect. Cold, tingling his tongue and the back of his throat, little bubbles dancing old memories alive.

"Ruby. That was her name. I met her at a New Year's Eve party, I don't know, about thirteen years ago. A friend from high school knew these guys living out on a farm south of Blanchard. Stephen and Mark had been leasing the farm a few years. Ruby moved in that fall. Actually, it was more like a hippie commune than a working farm. All three were divorced. They each had a couple of kids, so there was usually a mess of brats around and an odd assortment of animals, too. For breakfast every day, the kids gathered eggs. Stephen baked bread, and Mark made butter and cheese from goat's milk. Ruby's speciality was homemade granola."

"I rode out to the party on my Suzuki GS. Man, I loved that bike. A sweet machine – I'd ride her all year, even in winter. It was cold that night, but clear, no chance of snow. The party was in full swing by the time I got there. Everyone three sheets to the wind. Cigarettes on the front porch, pot in the living room. Neil Young, Frank Zappa, Guy Clark on the stereo."

Jack glances up at the the television. Bottom of the fourth, Ripken's at bat. He hits one into the stands. The bartender makes a fist and jerks his arm down Kurt Gibson fashion. "Yes," he drawls with an emphasis on the "s." "He hit a homer in yesterday's game, too. What are the

odds of that? Imagine doing it tonight of all nights.” The television is awash in orange and black and wide, open faces.

“I'm not much of a baseball fan. More into bike racing myself.” Jack sounds irritated as he continues. “I didn't know any one at the party except my friend, Terry. Not my usual crowd. Lots of arty-farty types and musicians. Ruby was in the kitchen, and Terry took me back to meet her. She was standing at the sink washing dishes wearing black tights, a white, frilly blouse, a red skirt and green cowboy boots. The perfect picture of Christmas. She'd tied some mistletoe in her hair, too. When she turned around and smiled, her face was lit up brighter than the ball dropping in Times Square. The instant I saw her, I knew there wasn't anything I'd ever wanted as much as her. We got to talking. I wasn't sure of the situation, so I asked her if she was going out with either of her roommates. 'Can you keep a secret?' she teased. She leaned over and whispered in my ear. 'I don't go out with either of them – Stephen and Mark both have girlfriends, but the first night I was here all the kids were gone, so we drank a fifth of Johnny Walker Black and fucked each other on the living room floor. I had 'em one after the other and both at the same time.’”

Jack takes another sip of Coke.

Man, why am I telling this asshole about Ruby? After all this time trying to shake her.

The bartender shrugs and wipes down the counter top with a worn white rag.

Without warning, sirens surround the building. Jack swivels on the bar chair to look out the window. The curtains now seem diaphanous, but nothing is visible behind them except the impossible afternoon glare. Jack blinks a few times and hazy blue dots dance before his eyes. The men at the tables have left, and all traces of their presence – shot glasses, cocktail napkins, swizzle sticks, cherry stems – have been removed.

Jack turns back to the bartender. “What's going on out there?”

“Nothin' that concerns me,” the bartender growls and turns back to the television. Top of the fifth, Angels at bat.

Jack stares into the bottle and persists. “She dared me to strip and go out to the sauna. So in the living room, in front of God and everybody, we took off our clothes. I was shocked when I saw Ruby's body. She had stretch marks that covered her entire belly. They ran above her navel to right up under her breasts. She could see I was staring – I'd never been with a woman who had kids. She slowly traced the scars with her fingers. 'They're your road map, silly,' she teased. Then she laced up some hiking boots, turned and ran like a wood nymph into the dark. The temperature had fallen below freezing, but I chased right after her. Man, I would have followed that sweet ass anywhere, that perfect upside down valentine tattooed with a shooting star and crescent moon.”

“Mark had built a sauna out back from plans he found in an old copy of *Mother Earth News*” – I guess it was about 100 yards from the house, not too far from the pond – and he had started heating the rocks earlier in the evening. We stayed long enough to get drenched in sweat, but by the time we got back to the living room, the heat was gone from our bodies. So Ruby pulled a old afghan off the couch and joked, 'I don't know if Grandma had *this* in mind when she knitted it.' She laid it on the floor in front of the funky wood-burning stove, and we stayed there by the fire while the party raged on around us – maybe it was ten minutes, maybe it was an hour, I don't know, it could've been an eternity.

“Right at midnight, we're surrounded by music, noisemakers, cheering. Mark's out setting off fireworks in the field. Ruby lifted up her face and she kissed me. Stephen's sitting on the couch behind us. He looked down and said, 'Watch out, Jack, your toes are starting to curl.' He was right. It was like I was getting a whole body spasm. Ruby trembled, her nipples brown and

huge under my thumb and forefinger. We went upstairs to her room, and, well, you can figure out the rest.”

Hell, I dove between her legs, and I never wanted to come up for air.

The sirens seem closer and then wane. There's the sound of a commotion outside, and a man's voice sharp, quick, dictating orders. A woman recites numbers.

“What's that now?” Jack asks.

The bartender picks up an empty martini glass sitting on the counter and dips it into a sink of suds. “Dunno, accident?” He glances back to the television. On the wall of the B & O Warehouse behind the stadium's right field wall, the numerical banners change from 2130 to 2131. “Wow, that's really something, huh, Jack?” He turns on the tap and begins to rinse the glass under warm, running water. “They said Gehrig's streak would never be broken.”

Jack picks up the bottle and takes another sip of Coke. “Yeah, it's something,” he says, annoyed. “Fuck it, man, why do you keep calling me Jack?”

“It's your name, isn't it? What do you want me to call you? Dickhead?”

The crowd is on its feet. Bobby Bonilla and Rafael Palmeiro push Ripken out of the dugout.

“No, Jack's fine,” he sighs. He sets the Coke bottle back on the napkin and then straightens it until it's perfectly square.

Have I been here before?

Cal Ripken takes a lap around the stadium. The crowd stays on its feet, cheering. Jack rotates the napkin until it looks like a diamond. “We broke up cause Ruby couldn't take my drinking.”

The bartender wipes the martini glass with a white dish towel, slightly frayed at the edges. He reaches up and places the clean glass on a rack hanging just above his head.

Jack glances over at the window. The outside voices are softer, muffled. “Yeah, guess you could call me an alcoholic, but I could never get with the program. 'Hello, I'm Jack, and I'm an alcoholic.'”

Jack looks down. He's wearing an L. L. Bean polo shirt the color of summer cantaloupe. The arm extending through the short sleeve is tanned, sinewy and the skin around the wrist is several shades lighter.

What's going on with me. First my wallet and now my watch.

“What time is it, anyway?”

The bartender reaches beneath the counter and pulls out a cutting board. He pulls a few limes from a wire basket and rolls each one gently under the palm of his hand. He glances at a wall clock hanging above the door.

“Around six-thirty, but the clock's fast. Bar time, you know.” He pulls a paring knife from the block to the left of the sink.

Jack inhales a single deep breath. His mouth forms the shape of an “O” as he slowly releases the air. He begins to speak, then hesitates. His shoulders rise and he grasps the bottle with both hands.

“After that first night with Ruby, it was like I was obsessed with her, you know. I wanted her as much as I ever wanted a drink. But she didn't want anything exclusive. She'd just come out of a bad marriage and damned if she'd go through that again. She told me she and the guys never had another night like that first one, but Stephen had a habit of crawling in bed with her after he

put his kids to bed, and if Mark woke up with a hard on when she went to wake him up for work, well, she would just hop on up and give him a ride.”

Jack's words become his black and red bike, flying around in circles at impossible angles. He puts down the bottle and wipes his sweaty brow with wet fingers.

“Funny thing, I never felt jealous. In fact, the more guys she fucked, the more I wanted to be with her. After a while, though, Ruby decided to quit sleeping with Mark and Stephen. Things seemed OK at first, but then the vibe at the house in Blanchard started getting kinda weird. She said it was like they only wanted her around as long as she put out. One night in late March, the guys went out drinking in Norman. A little after midnight, Ruby heard the crunch of gravel and squealing tires. Mark's bedroom was downstairs, but both came clumping up the stairs, talking so loud she was afraid they'd wake the kids. She tried to lie still so they'd think she was asleep. It was a cold, clear night and she knew she was all lit up by the full moon shining through her window. She had her back to the doorway, and she could feel them standing there, laughing, jeering. They both got into bed with her again. But this time, Ruby wasn't drunk, and she didn't want either of them pawing her. Mark passed out before he could do anything, but Steve crawled on top of her and wouldn't take no for an answer. She tried to push him off, but”

“That sure didn't turn me on. I wanted to go beat the holy hell out of him. But Ruby told me to stay out of it, she could fight her own battles. Besides, by the time she said anything to me about it, she'd already moved out. She went to stay at her mother's, then later she found a small house in the city not far from where she worked.”

“After a few months, with Ruby in her own place, we started seeing each other pretty much all the time. I even started liking her kids. The littlest one, Seth, was just learning to talk.

Mo-ho-hi-cle is what he called my bike, and it terrified Ruby, but Seth, he loved going around the block sitting in front of me. April was a doll, too. Prettier than her mother. Talked a blue streak.”

The sirens outside the bar resume their wail. The crowd in the stadium is still standing, cheering.

Jack feels dizzy, his breathing rapid and shallow. He pushes the bottle of Coke toward the bartender. “Hey, man, I don't feel so good. Could I get some water?”

The bartender grabs a glass from a dish rack on his left. “Sure, Jack.” He opens the bin to the right of the sink, fills the glass half-full of ice, pulls out the soda gun and fights to speak above the noise of the sirens. “Gas or no gas?”

Jack shakes his head. “What? Oh, Tap is fine, thanks.”

The bartender quickly fills the glass with water, picks up the knife from the cutting board and cuts a wedge from one of the limes. He squeezes some lime juice into the water and then places the glass of water on a fresh napkin in front of Jack.

Jack takes a long sip. The pain in his chest and the noise from the sirens lessens, and he sets the glass back down on the counter. “I've been jawing at you for awhile now, and I don't even know your name.”

The bartender picks up the white towel, wipes both hands and extends his right one. “I'm Martin. Sorry to confuse you about the water. That's how we say it in France. You feel any better?”

“Yeah, I'm better.” Jack takes the offered hand and gives it a firm shake. “Nice to meet you, Martin. France, huh? Ruby always talked about wanting to see Paris, but we never traveled far.”

Jack swirls the glass of water in his hand, and the ice sounds like tiny sleigh bells. “One weekend, when the kids were with their dad, we decided to go to Six Flags. I swear we fucked twelve times in less than twenty-four hours. On the way down, we couldn't keep our hands off each other, so after swerving for forty miles, we stopped and fucked in the first rest area we came to. When we got to Arlington, we checked into a cheap motel and fucked two or three more times. Then at Six Flags, as soon as it got dark, we fucked under some bushes on Skull Island. Back at the motel we started in again until morning. Shit, I thought my dick was going to drop off.”

“The next few months were amazing. Ruby would try anything. You know you can't buy dildos in Oklahoma, so we'd get cucumbers or big fat carrots and have a sculpting contest. Man, we did things I thought were only possible with porn stars.”

Martin unstops the drain. There's a soft sucking sound as the soapy water makes its way down the pipes.

The crinkles around Jack's eyes deepen as he frowns in thought. “But it wasn't all raw, raunchy hard-core shit. Sometimes our sex was – what'd she call it? – transformative.”

Martin wipes down the inside of the sink. “You a church-going man, Jack?”

Jack shakes his head. “No, I'm not. Can't even say I believe in God, though that's almost unpatriotic in America. But Ruby, Ruby's a true believer. I used to think it was funny she could be so sexual and so spiritual at the same time. You know, here in the Bible belt, sex is only supposed to be for having babies. It's never supposed to be fun. But Ruby had all her own ideas.

“Ruby could go on forever about the incarnation and how God redeemed everything by becoming human. Sleeping, dancing, farting, eating, snoring, fucking. 'Everything is sacred,' she'd tell me, 'God glories in our humanness.' She sounded like theological poet-vixen. 'Stretch

your limbs to the skies, savour the flavor of my lips and my thighs, come in me and on me – God likes that.”

She would even tell me Bible stories in bed, like Christ’s transfiguration. We’d fuck our brains out, and I’d lay back exhausted, but she’d pretend to be God yelling, “This is how it’s done. Pay attention.” So then I’d be Peter begging, “Yes, Lord, please let me build an altar and stay on this mountain forever. Oh, and can I get a Coke with that?” Jack laughs.

“I used to ask her how she could reconcile fucking Saturday night with getting up for church on Sunday morning.” Jack looks down to avoid the sharpness of Martin’s blue eyes. “But she’d nuzzle into my shoulder and whisper, ‘It’s all the same, Jack. Sex, spirit – they’re two sides of a coin.’”

“Yeah, that girl had it all worked out. She almost had me convinced we can’t have one without the other. Like I said, I’m not a believer, but I did go to church with her a few times. Sometimes, when she was next to me praying, she could enter a trance, you know, and it almost seemed like she was coming. And there were times when we were fucking it definitely felt like a prayer.”

The building starts shaking. Martin grabs the edge of the bar to steady himself. Jack looks toward the window. The light is dimming. The sirens, ever present but hardly perceptible, like Musak on an elevator, mix with the applause of the still standing crowd until they become a song.

“What the fuck is that?” Jack chokes, his breath coming in short, garbled bursts.

Martin replaces the remainder of the limes in the wire basket without cutting them. “It’s the train, Jack.” He glances at the clock on the wall and then reaches up and turns off the

television. "2131 straight games. Amazing accomplishment, huh, Jack?" Martin slips a CD into a stereo sitting next to the liquor bottles. Van Morrison drifts through the speakers.

"Down the mystic avenue...."

Martin closes his eyes, concentrating on the lyrics.

"And all the girls walk by."

Jack pauses in mid thought. "Train, huh?" A cloud passes across his eyes.

"Knocking with your heart."

Jack takes another long sip of water. The ice and the sound of the bells are gone. "That pretty much sums it up. It was scary, man. Didn't realize I could want someone so much."

Jack notices an uncomfortable pressure in his chest and he imagines he's being squeezed by an anaconda the color of the limes on the counter. He sets the glass back on the counter, his hand shaking. Once again he feels unsteady on the bar stool and as he moves to adjust his position, the glass tips over. Water spreads in thin rivers across the bar.

"Sorry, Martin," Jack mutters.

"Good thing I cut you off," Martin teases. He quickly wipes up the water with the white bar towel.

The pain in Jack's chest intensifies. He reaches up and wipes his brow.

An ethereal voice pleads: *"And the angel of imagination"*

"You want some more water?" Martin reaches into the rack on his left for another glass and quickly fills it with ice and water.

"lit your fiery vision bright."

Jack nods. "Yeah, thanks, man."

Martin places another square napkin on the counter in front of Jack and sets the glass on top of it. Once again, Jack turns the napkin so it resembles a diamond.

“But it seemed like when everything was going great, I'd disappear for a few days to get drunk. I kept promising to quit, but I didn't. It all blew up in August. She came over one afternoon with her kids. I'd been on a bender for a few days. I think we were supposed to go somewhere and I never showed. The phone rang and rang. I never answered it. I guess she got worried. I lied and told her I was on antabuse. You ever hear of it? It's a drug that's supposed to help you quit drinking by making you sick. Imagine your worst hangover and multiply it 100 times. Headache, nausea, chest pains, vomiting. You can actually go into congestive heart failure and die.”

Jack picks up the glass and drinks without breathing until only ice remains.

“So when I didn't turn up and I didn't answer the phone after a few days, she came over to my apartment looking for me. I was so fucked up, I didn't hear the doorbell. I didn't hear her knocking. I didn't hear her call my name. I was in my bedroom, looking at a *Big Butt* magazine, jerking off. April and Seth stood behind her in the doorway. High, little voices crying, 'Mommy, what's wrong with Jack?' She was afraid they'd seen me, so she shooed them back. 'Jack's sick,' she said and closed the door.”

“Do you want some more water?” Martin reaches his hand across the bar for the empty glass.

“No, I'm fine, thanks.” Jack hands the glass to Martin. “I should probably get going. Like I said, I'm not sure why I stopped in here. To be perfectly honest, I'm not even sure where I am.”

Martin sets the glass next to the dish-rack on the counter. He puts a stopper in the sink and turns on the hot water tap.

“I've only seen her once since then. About a two and a half years later, in March. It was Ash Wednesday, and Ruby drove down to Norman to go to her old church since they had an early morning service. Afterwards, just on a chance, she stopped by my apartment to say hello.”

The water splashes against stainless steel sides, filling the sink like a baptismal font.

“She looked great. She'd cut her hair short, really short – almost a man's cut, and she'd lost some weight. She seemed tired. Started telling me about her job. She'd been doing some volunteer work at the City Rescue Mission, too. Believe it or not, she was even thinking about going to seminary. She wasn't dating anyone, and she joked about her self-imposed stint of celibacy since she still believed sex was good for body and soul.”

“Martin, man, I don't know what came over me.” Jack begins tearing the paper napkin on the counter into half-inch strips. “She was sitting there so prim and proper with that fucking black cross of ashes on her forehead, and all I could think about was how much I needed to be inside her. We were sitting next to each other on the couch, and she was still in mid-sentence when I grabbed her shoulders and pressed her down. Ruby's eyes grew wide, but she didn't scream. She just sort of whimpered. 'Jack, you don't want to do this. Jack, please don't do this.' But I couldn't stop myself. She was wearing a skirt and it was easy enough to get it above her knees. Then I reached up and ripped off her panties. Almost without realizing how it happened I had my cock out and I forced her legs open and pushed into her. Ruby's breath was quick and shallow, but her pussy wasn't as sweet and yielding as I remembered. The only thing wet was the tears on her face.”

Jack takes the torn napkin scraps and reassembles them into the shape of a diamond.

“She never said a word to me after I finished, just picked up her things and left. Later that year

she moved to California, and I never saw her again. I guess I've wasted the past ten years of my life just trying to forget her.”

Jack stares at the white napkin in front of him on the counter. In a moment the image blurs until it dissolves into the white diamond tile of the backsplash in Ruby's small kitchen. She's standing at the stove, and Jack hears the sizzle of ground beef in the cast iron frying pan. He smells onions, peppers, garlic. Ruby's singing along with the radio. *“What's my line? I'm happy...”*

Through the doorway Jack spies Seth playing on the worn brown carpet. “Vrrrroom. Vrrrroom. Mo-ho-hi-cle.” April sits next to Jack at the formica kitchen table reading *“Frog and Toad Together.”* “One...” “What's this, Jack?” April asks. Jack looks over at the book. “Morning.” April continues in a stilted sing-song voice, “One morning Toad sat in bed. 'I have many things to do,' he said.”

“I'll see you...” The tempo of the music quickens. *“...when my love grows.”*

Ruby interrupts, “Dinner's almost ready, just need to drain the pasta. Think you two could clear and set the table?” Jack stands up and stretches to his full six-foot height. “Sure thing.” He takes two steps, stands at Ruby's back and puts his arms around her waist. She tilts her head to the right and he nuzzles her neck. “Happy?”

Ruby turns, wooden spoon in hand. She softly kisses his cheek and drips tomato sauce on the front of his white t-shirt.

“I'm a working man...” The room crackles and pulses with music. *“...in my prime. Cleaning windows.”*

The sirens are silent. Martin comes from behind the bar and stands next to Jack. “Time to go, Jack.”

Jack stands and turns to his left. Everything in the room disappears – the window, tables, chairs, bar, glasses, and clock. Now the expanding space is alive with light.

“I thought I'd always have the chance....”

Martin places one hand on Jack's shoulder and they step toward the sound of the oncoming train.