

Earthquake

I call it close enough on my homework and slide my textbook across the table as I push my chair out. I wrap myself in layers. After an evening of equations I like to walk and let my subconscious puzzle over the problems I didn't solve—and to perhaps let my surface thoughts drift to other forms of expression. I'm working on a prose poem. A memory: my dad the artist sculpting a figure in our front yard, a piece he worked on for years. I want to use the sculpture as a symbol of a mind, an evolving person; I've been walking to the rocks at night and asking them to inspire language. But my writing comes out abstract and intangible.

I cross the river and hike the hill to the rocks. I climb on all four up a jagged, weather-made staircase that leads up the formation. I'm on my way to a favorite overlook where the view of the city lights tapers into the black canyon. At the top of the staircase I slide between a tight passage and make it to the overlook.

"Hey," a voice scares the hell out of me.

"Hey."

"Sorry, didn't mean to spook ya." Someone is sitting on a perch tucked in the shadows. I take a seat on the moonlit overlook.

"Quite the view." I try to be polite, but plan for a quick departure.

"It's beautiful," he agrees.

"Yeah, it is." We sit in the quiet of the wind and the city below, a quiet I'd enjoy if I were alone.

Then it breaks as he says, "I love this town. Just look at this." I look at the hills across the canyon lit by the lights. "Every time I leave I forget what it's like here. Then when I come back—every time—I feel a deep beauty, something special here."

"Oh, you're not from here?"

"Nah, just passing through."

"Well, you found the spot." I nod out across the spine of rocks.

"Oh yeah, I've been to these rocks before. Spent quite a bit of time here over the years."

"Where you from?"

"I've just been traveling for a while."

"Where were you before this?"

“Arizona—town called Kingston. Have you heard of it?”

“Sounds familiar. Can’t say I’ve been there. You like it?”

“It’s alright. It’s got its own charm, just like anywhere.”

“Now you’re just passing through here?”

“Yeah. I usually come out here every year or every few years. Denver’s got one of the world’s largest gem and mineral shows, so that brings me to the area. That’s what I do; I sell gems and minerals.”

“So you’re out here for the show?”

“Well, not this year. I’m just looking around. Came out here tonight to enjoy the view. Brought my zero-degree sleeping bag. Might just stay out here all night.”

“Good call. That’d be one hell of an experience.”

Pulls of wind drag along the edges of the rocks like a voice in syllables. “Boulder’s got a big change for me,” he says. “I feel it every time I pass through. I mean a deep life change. Every time I pass through I just ask, ‘Is it time yet?’ and I’m just waiting.”

“How long have you been here this time?”

“About a week. I’ll tell you a story if you don’t mind my talking your ear off.”

“Nah.”

“I was coming out here for the gem and mineral show in Denver. Just a couple weeks ago—two weeks ago, I guess—I was driving my truck on some back roads looking for a place to park for the night. All of a sudden the road—it was a dirt road—made a perfect ninety degree angle with no sign or anything. I cranked the wheel, trying to skid into the turn, but next thing I knew I was tumbling out into a field. I got out of my truck and it was goddamn upside down, resting there on the crushed camper shell. I had to find a place to crash, so I walked a few miles back to the town.

When I got to my truck in the morning, I was looking through the camper, you know, to collect my gems and stuff. They were all gone. Someone came through there, took all my gems, they even took my pots and pans, and left me with a guitar that was busted in the wreck.

I went over to a little ranch house near the crash. I knocked on their door and asked if they’d seen anyone by the truck that morning. They said they saw some people out there combing through the dirt and they thought it was the people who owned the truck. Man, sixty-

fuckin’-thousand dollars of gems and minerals in that truck—this was the first year in a while I was really gonna have my shit together.”

“And the truck was totaled?”

“Yeah, and the camper shell, too. That’s where I was sleeping.”

“How’d you get out here?”

“Thumbed it. I thought since I was on my way out here I might as well make the rest of the trip. I had no reason to go back.”

“Man, you should be writing this down. That’s some story.”

“Yeah man, I don’t know.” The gusts calm, for a moment, quiet as the stars.

“So now you’ve been out here about a week?”

“A week—long enough to go crazy from the beautiful women. I met one about the second day I was here.”

“Met a girl in two days? What’s your secret?”

“I don’t know. It’s this town—so many women a few even check me out.” He’s in the shadows, so I can’t see him.

“We—me and this woman—we went out the night we met. I bought her some drinks and we started getting to know each other. We went back to her place and didn’t even have sex. We just stayed up all night talking. She was awesome and it seemed like we had a lot in common. Then, the next day I went out to try to make some money, and now I don’t know what the fuck because she won’t answer my calls. That was the last place I showered.”

I pause at this. “You need a shower? I got a shower if you want to use it. I live right down the hill.”

“No shit? I can take a shower at your place?”

“Yeah,” I answer. I pause again, not quite long enough to hesitate my way out of offering, “You can crash there for the night if you want to.” I’m surprised and partly want to take it back.

“You mean it? Ah, I’d really appreciate that.” There’s spontaneous happiness in his voice.

“I promise I’m not a freak, and I don’t steal—well, I may be a freak, but I don’t steal.”

I laugh. “Nah, I trust you. You seem like a real nice guy.”

“Why, thank you,” he says with deep sincerity in a syntax too classic to be this century. “I really appreciate it. I don’t have much to offer—”

“Nah, I don’t want you to offer anything.”

“I don’t know much about much—except a little about rocks.”

“Oh yeah? Do you know how these rocks were formed?”

“Couple of things about it: These rocks are jutting up from the same forces as this whole mountain range. There are all kinds of forces deep within the earth that push on the crust. They’re always pushing. They’ve been pushing for millions of years—billions even. They twist and turn the land over the ages, and the mountains that seem frozen in front of you are the result of these forces. The mountains keep changing, too, as the forces do, and in the wind and rain. Actually, mountains like these are usually formed by earthquakes. Pressure builds up along fault lines, and something—who knows what—finally sets it off. Boom! The ground shifts and next thing you know it’s a different landscape. I was actually, just before you came, I was thinking of what it would be like to be sitting up here during an earthquake—not that I was giving it any energy or anything, just thinking how huge it would be.”

“It’s getting a little chilly,” I say. “Want to head to my house?”

“Ah, man. Thanks again. I really appreciate it.”

“Hey, my pleasure.” I get up carefully and mind my steps across the ledge. I make my way to the trail at the base of the rocks. He climbs down carrying his sleeping bag. I get my first look at his face as he steps into the moonlight—handsome enough that I’m not surprised the woman scoped him out. He reaches his hand to me.

“I’m Ken, by the way,” he says.

“I’m Dan,” I answer. He smiles gratitude with curiosity. “So how do you know all this about rocks?” I ask as we start walking.

“Well, I’ve been collecting gems and minerals for as long as I can remember, and I’ve just been around, just talking to people, picking up books. You’ll see. Whatever you’re learning about, one of these days you’ll know a lot about it.” I give a pensive chuckle. We walk down the trail as it wraps in front of the rocks. They reach skyward, glowing in the light of the moon and the city. We pass two people coming up the trail. They cheer something about the Red Socks, and Ken cheers back, “Alright man, happy everyday.”

We walk across the parking lot at my apartment building. “Nice place,” he says. “You’ve got the location. That’s for sure. How much do you pay for this?”

“Well—I guess I’m not sure. My dad pays the rent. But I think it’s about six hundred a month.” I turn on the light as we step inside. I meet his youthful, but leathery face and his honest eyes. He meets what of me I bear upon my face.

I take off my shoes. He sets his sleeping bag down and follows my lead. “You hungry?” I ask. He nods with wide eyes. I open the fridge and look in. “You can have anything in here you want. I think I’m gonna have some toast.” I grab the bread and put two slices in the toaster. I put the peanut butter and jelly on the counter. “Don’t be deceived by the empty space in the fridge. There’s a lot you can do with the food in there. Have any clever combination you can come up with.” He picks up the soymilk and shakes it to gauge its fullness.

“Can I have a glass of this?”

“Sure, man. Have more than that. You’re probably fuckin’ hungry.” I hand him a glass and look into the fridge to find more food for him. He pours a small amount and starts to put the milk back. “Nah,” I grab it from him and fill his glass. “You like chocolate milk?”

“Yeah,” he says. I reach into the cabinet and pull out some meal-in-a-powder mix and put a scoop in his milk.

“That’s what I usually have for breakfast,” I comment. He looks at my dish rack for something to stir it with, reaches over. “Use a fork. It’ll stir better,” I say as he pulls his hand back, already holding a four-pronger.

“That’s what I was going for.” He smiles huge, and I laugh. My toast pops as he stirs. I smear the goods on, and he takes a drink. “Umm,” he says and pulls an outstretched arm to his chest as if pulling in the nutrients of the world. He finishes the glass while I’m sitting at the counter working on my toast.

“Eat some more,” I say. “Get good and full.”

“Nah, I’m fine. I’m still taking in the milk. That’s all I need.” He sits down by my guitar. “Mind if I—” he nods at the instrument.

“No, go for it.” He fingerpicks a tune around a D-chord.

“Nice guitar.”

“Nothing special. It’s got a good sound, though. My dad gave it to me for my fifteenth birthday. I learned to play on that one, then just this year he gave me a new one. It’s over at my

girlfriends right now.” He sings a quiet song with a clear voice. I finish my toast. “So listen man, I’ve got to be in class by ten tomorrow, so I have to leave by nine forty five. I usually take a shower at night, so I guess I’ll do that now. You can get on the internet with that computer if you want.”

“Yeah, alright,” he says. I walk over to wake it up.

“Just have to double click on this icon.” He seems comfortable with the machine. I hop in the shower.

I slip on some sweat pants and a T-shirt and grab a towel. I walk to the other room. “Here’s a towel for whenever you want to shower.”

“Alright, thanks. I’ll probably shower in the morning if that’s alright.”

“Yeah, sure.”

“Hey, will you read this e-mail? I don’t know what else to say.” I lean over the computer and read the screen. He’s writing to the woman he told me about. Inside the e-mail template it reads:

Hey, Kristin. I havent been able to get in touch with you. I thought we had a connection. I thought we had an awesome time together. The things I told you are true. These arent feelings I have for every woman I meet.

?!?!WHAT THE FUCK HAPPENED?!?!

You arent answering my calls. I thought we had something. I thought you felt it too, that we were going to move in together and make something of this. Dont just fade away. If you feel something, let me know.

I’m impressed by his English. I didn’t know if he’d stumble over spelling and punctuation. But he leaves apostrophes off. I can’t tell if it’s stylistic, or if he gets possessives mixed up with plurals, or doesn’t know where to throw it in a contraction, so to avoid the confusion he just doesn’t deal with it. “Yeah, man. I’d say you’re letting her know how you feel.”

“Guess I’ll send it.” He clicks, “send message.” “I just don’t know what she’s thinking. Why the fuck isn’t she talking to me?”

“Maybe she’s been tied up.”

“Maybe.”

“Well hey, you can sleep anywhere you want. You can sleep right here.” I point to the strip of floor between the computer and the guitar. “Or you can sleep in here.” I walk into my bedroom. My bed is on a loft. I like to read and take naps under it. “You can sleep under there if it would be more comfortable.”

“Uh, out here is fine.” He walks back to the other room. “I’ll just sleep here.”

“I actually don’t know if—” I look in my closet for an extra pillow. “I don’t think I have any more pillows.”

“Oh, I’ll just use my jacket. That’s no problem.”

“Alright, well, I guess I’m gonna go to bed now. I’m not much of a morning person, so I usually get up about nine twenty five and leave by nine forty five.”

“Okay, man. Hey, I appreciate this.”

“Goodnight.”

“Goodnight.”

Laying in bed I’m wondering how he makes money. Does he beg? If he had a guitar at least he could sit downtown and leave the case open while he played. I’ve got two. I ought to give him one. He could make some money. And he could get his feelings out. I saw the bold “WHAT THE FUCK” in the e-mail. But my dad gave me that guitar—my first guitar. Can I just give it away? Would he even have a place to keep it? It might just be a gift into a bottomless pit, sold or broken right away.

I hear Ken get up and start the shower. I check my clock. It’s only eight fifteen. I turn to fall back asleep thinking that if he leaves before I get up it will remove the guitar decision.

The radio sounds as an alarm. I climb down from my bed and walk to the closet to get dressed, then to the other room three quarters expecting him to be gone. He sits up quickly in his sleeping bag. “Morning, brother,” he says. “I already got up to shower.”

“Oh, alright. Want some breakfast?” He gets out of his sleeping bag and zips it up.

“Ah, fuck,” he says. I look over to see him holding the mobile part of the zipper separate from the part sewn to the bag. “Ain’t that just about par for the course.” He packs the sleeping bag into its sack and lays his jacket on top. I fix myself a drink like the one he had last night.

“I’ll just have a little milk,” he says.

“Want some of this stuff?” I tap the jar of powder with my fork.

“Nah, this is good.”

“You sure? There’s tons of stuff in here. Want some cereal?”

“No, I’m okay.”

“Banana?”

“Will you feel better if I take a banana? I’ll take a banana.” He puts the banana in his pocket and his milk glass in the sink.

“What are you up to today?” I ask.

“I’m gonna try to make some money, sell some bracelets I made.” He pulls a hemp braid from a pocket and shows it to me.

“Where are you trying to go with this?”

“What do you mean?”

“What are you trying to do? What are you hoping to get out of selling trinkets day to day?”

“I don’t know. I’m just trying to stay afloat.”

“Do you try to get jobs?”

“Right now I don’t even have I.D.. I was born in Oregon and I can’t get an I.D. until this asshole lawyer up there sends me by birth certificate. But he’s charging me \$200 for it.”

“Did you tell him how bad you need it?”

“Man, I’ve been trying to get this thing forever.”

“How long would it take you to get \$200?”

“Depends where I was, what I was doing.”

I walk to my closet and pull my guitar case out. I set it open on the table. “I’m gonna give you this guitar.” I put it in the case. “What kind of picks do you use?”

“I don’t know—medium.” I put a few medium picks in with the guitar.

“You can probably make some money playing this downtown.”

“Are you serious?” He looks at me. “Are you really giving this to me?”

“I figure you can use it more than I can, and I’ve got another one, too.”

“Ahh, brother.” He hands me a small stone.

“What’s this?”

“It’s a clam-shell fossil.”

“I see.” The clam has been pressed into marbled stone.

“I want to make some sense to you,” he says, “but I’ll try to make it short. My dad left when I was two weeks old. My mom married five other guys before I was seven. The fifth was a quadriplegic, and she stayed with him. I was supposed to take care of him when she went to work. I took my last sock in the jaw from her when I was sixteen, and I’ve been on my own ever since.” Tears pool in his eyes. “I don’t feel like I ever had a childhood.”

“I can’t even imagine,” I say. “The only reason I have any of this is because my parents gave it to me.”

“And I’m happy for you. Most people don’t get that.”

“But man, life is too short to not give whatever it takes. Can you be happy without a place to live?”

“I don’t think so.”

“Then you’ve got to do whatever it takes to get that.”

“But I don’t feel like I ever learned how to do that.” His forehead tightens and his eyes are quickly angry. “No one ever taught me any of that—how to get a house, or get insurance and shit like that. All these different things just keep going against me, and I just ask, ‘What am I supposed to be learning from this?’ I don’t know how to get out of it.”

“I don’t know. It could be real damn hard. But you’re smart—and this is too important. You’ve got to quit waiting for this town to show you what deep change it has in store, and you’ve got to make the change yourself. No girl will help you, no parents. You’ve got to do this, man.” I grab my backpack. He puts on his coat. “So where are you off to?” I ask as we walk outside.

“Think I’ll go to Peabody’s for some peppermint tea—or some coffee might do me good today. Then I’ll make a sign about my birth certificate explaining why I’m playing this guitar.”

“I can walk with you a bit. If you can get that birth certificate you can get a job around here quick. You could sign a lease on an apartment. You could work at Safeway. They’re always hiring. There are some apartments right there.”

“I’m not gonna work at Safeway. I’m not gonna work at any shitty job that traps me there.”

“You might have to do some things you don’t want to do just to get going.”

“Look man, I appreciate it, but I’ll find my way.”

“Okay, well I guess I’m heading over to campus.” I stop to shake his hand. “Sing fucking loud,” I say.

He smiles. “I will.” We diverge and I make it to class twenty minutes late.

The knocking on my door wakes me up. The sun blinds my view through the peephole. I open the door and Ken is standing there. It’s been months—long enough that I feel sure it won’t become a habit. “Hey, man. How’s it going?” We shake hands.

“Just coming to see how you’ve been.”

“I was just sleeping, but I’m glad you woke me up. What’s this bike you’re sporting?”

“I’m borrowing it from a friend. I rode it up here to grab a tent I stashed in the park a while back.”

“Well, come in.” He leans the bike against the wall.

“Yeah, man,” he says as he sits down. “I’ve got a place down off Pearl.”

“No shit? You got a place? You been working?”

“Yeah, I’ve been doing some vinyl siding and stuff.”

“That’s awesome, man. Where’s your house?”

“It’s down Pearl past the mall near that grocery store, that Safeway.” I can’t picture a Safeway on Pearl. “It’s the big house on the corner.”

“You got a house?”

“I’m renting it with some friends.”

“How’s that?”

“It’s good. I mean, they’re kids, so it’s sort of like—I don’t know.”

“You’ve got to be the dad?”

“Well, usually it goes pretty smooth. So this is your other guitar?” He picks it up and strums a bit.

“You been hanging out at the rocks?” I ask.

“Nah, not really. The house is by the river, so I’ve been hanging out down there. By the way, were having a New Year’s Eve party if you can stop by.”

“Definitely.”

“I should probably take off, get this bike back.”

“Hey, thanks for dropping in,” I say. He stands up.

“Oh yeah, I’m loving that guitar. It’s awesome—except for the buzzing on the high E.”

“High E is buzzing? You should be able to fix that with an Allen wrench. On the truss rod—you can adjust the action like that.” I step over and point to the spot on my guitar. “I don’t think I have an Allen wrench, but you could take it to a shop. They’d probably do it for free.”

“Oh, alright. Yeah.”

“Okay, man. See you on New Year’s.”

I go to the fridge for a snack. The six pack of beer in the back reminds me it’s New Year’s Eve. I check the time. 11:45. I grab the beer and throw it in my backpack. Out the front door I hop on my trusty steed. Riding slowly down Pearl I check both sides for a house. It’s all commerce—banks and restaurants, books and trinkets. I pass the grocery store. It’s not a Safeway—not even a major neon-sign-bearing chain store. I don’t see a house. Further down are dormant office buildings and dark fields that lead to the plains of Middle America.