

STAGESTRUCK

As Althea's voice enters my left ear through the headset, I have the odd sensation that it somehow floats out my other ear and drifts through my truck window where her words dissolve into the cold air. Even when she's angry, her voice stays silky.

"You know this isn't going anywhere," she says. The odometer rolls over: another nine erased by another zero. I don't count how many nights away from home or the number of guitar strings I've replaced. Instead, the little row of numbers tallies up the miles for me. Over two hundred thousand.

"Jimmie, you still there?" Althea asks.

"Yeah. Wherever that is."

"I'm sorry," she says, and I know she means it. She'd be standing by the window, looking over the cold November marsh, with her left arm wrapped around her ribs, wearing one of those lurid orange sweaters she'd knit for herself. Last year, she ordered a large amount of yarn online, thinking she was buying a warm sunset gold to blend with crimson or emerald green into the beautiful scarves that she sells. When the box was filled instead with lurid pumpkin colored fibers, she didn't send it back like I would have. Althea made sweaters that are too ugly to sell or even give away. I sometimes think that she adds lumps and nodules into them on purpose. She has three or four of them that she never wears outside of the house, and she made me a sweater vest that hangs in the back of my closet.

It isn't like her to erase a mistake, to unravel the knitted yarn. But now she's telling me something like that. I let my eyes sweep along the side of the road where a wild turkey stands in the late afternoon sun. The turkey spreads its tail feathers and turns around, showing me its backside as if to deliver the insult as best it can.

Your girlfriend gives you the boot and a turkey shows you its butt. There's a song in there somewhere. A crummy song. Althea is still speaking and I wish I was paying better attention, because how can I plead my case when she's already moved on?

"So, in other words, next time I'm home, don't come home. Is that what you're telling me?"

Her sigh is almost lost beneath the hum of the tires against the pavement.

“Jimmie, we always knew this was going to be hard, you on the road and me at home—”

“Then come with me! We could do this together.”

“I should be with you even when I’m not there. But when you’re gone, you’re so far away. And when you’re home....it’s the same thing. I can’t reach you anymore. There’s no point in me trying to explain it again...”

How vague we are, saying “it” and “this” instead of what we mean: You and me. Us. Love.

“It’s time, Jimmie. We both know we’re going in circles.” She disconnects the phone. I brake hard, almost missing the turn, needing to yank the steering wheel to the right.

She’s wrong, though. I’m a kite, the highway is the string, and she’s the hand holding me to earth. I scabble through the junk scattered across my dashboard for a pen and scrap of paper to jot this down: kite, road, her hand. The truck bounces over a pothole and my pen jolts off the page.

There never was a question of her joining me on the road. It takes an optimist to roam without losing your way. You need to embrace every stop with enthusiasm for the new and unseen, and welcome each return to a familiar place. I have a good memory for the layout of towns, and I always remember how to find the funky coffee shop with Wi-Fi or the neighborhood tavern that stays open late and hosts a decent Irish band in the back room.

Althea isn’t that flexible, more like her knitting needle than the soft yarn. When my grandmother met her, she said, “There’s a broody woman.” I laughed, picturing a sad hen sitting on her nest, with her head hanging down as if she can’t believe those eggs will ever hatch. Grandma didn’t put up with nonsense like feeling sorry for yourself or needing time off. But Althea had days when she hid in bed, and I couldn’t give her much comfort during those long hours. If I brought her a cup of hot tea, she might take a sip, but mostly she kept her eyes closed and the shades drawn. I thought maybe it was migraines but she said, “Sometimes the world is too much. It’s too sharp, too rough. I have to go inside for a while.” It was like she had to find a safe harbor from some bad weather that I couldn’t even see.

But I’m sure feeling those rough seas now. I pull in back of the club, feeling as if I’ve been up for two days without sleep. During sound check, I’m lightheaded, floating: not free, just away. The tech has to ask me several

times if the guitar is loud enough in the monitors. I close my eyes to focus and realize Regina has gone out of tune.

Tonight is the seventeenth stop on my New England tour. I always play Providence, Amherst, and Brattleboro the week before Thanksgiving. Like everybody, when I started out, I busked on the Square and then graduated into the weekly coffeehouses held in basements of Unitarian churches. A gray-haired crowd perched on metal folding chairs to listen to me sing. They paid a dollar for a Styrofoam cup of weak coffee and another buck or two for me. Happy for the night out, despite the bad acoustics, they would sing along when I did my covers of Dylan songs. If I felt brave enough, I would try out one or two of my own.

Then there were years when nobody had heard of me, but I persuaded club owners to throw me a Thursday night slot or let me open for a weekend main act. The carpets always smelled of beer; the rooms were too dark; the crowds were there to drink and maybe find someone to take home. If I didn't crank up the amp, no one could hear me over the shouted conversations. My finely honed lyrics were lost until I learned to set aside my nylon string Martin and bring out Regina, the steel-stringed Taylor. I added more raucous songs to my repertoire, banged out the chords, stomped my Doc Martens against the floor to set the beat. Sometimes a brave or very lubricated couple would try out a hobbling sort of dance.

And I won them over, chorus by chorus, singing until I was hoarse. The cheers and enthusiasm from the tabletops spilled over to the folks lining the barstools until they finally turned around and listened to a song or two. People started to believe they might've be witnessing a new talent. They imagined that someday they could tell their friends that they were there, right at the start (as if my decade in coffeehouses had never existed). "I remember when I saw Jimmie Lester in '09," they would say. "He was playing in a small club down in Midtown and I was this far away from him!"

A small cadre of fans returned each time I played and they brought their friends. I got a booking agent and sometimes I became the main act. My audience drank enough to feel generous; they bought my CDs and waited in line for me to sign them. Now I have steady gigs in most of the better clubs, where I circle back year after year like a migrating bird, playing the old favorites and introducing new songs when they're ready to fly.

Get your head together, I tell myself as I tune. Got to sell at least twenty CDs tonight just to cover the cost of gas. The new CD will have to be crowdsourced to pay for studio time. No label pays advances any more.

Every fan matters, every social media “like,” each person willing to pay for songs they could find online somewhere and download for free.

“Let’s check the lights,” the house manager calls out. Glare stabs my eyes. “Sorry, Jimmie, we’ll adjust that.” A lanky kid dressed in black hauls a stepladder over and mounts it to fiddle with the cans, directing them so I can be lit without being blinded. One can pivots loose, pointing its spot at the floor.

“We got a loose one.” The kid angles the spot back to the stage and descends his ladder. Early evening customers start to wander in for a beer, greeting one another in recognition. I grab a Coke and retreat backstage—nothing but a narrow corridor on the other side of a black curtain where the wait staff have to sidle past me from the kitchen with their trays of drinks held shoulder high. The manager offers me a plate of fried chicken, but I never eat before a show: I want the hunger to help drive me like it did when I busked for spare change in the subway stations.

One of my old songs is about those times. Maybe I should play it tonight. The words drift through my mind: And the people, passing by, start to smile, and don’t know why. That’s the gift of a song, planting joy... I see Althea moving her slim shoulders to the melody, how she smiled as I sang it to her in our first rundown apartment. My throat grows thick at the memory. Not now, not here. The wrong time for heartache.

The opening act is some local kid, a girl whose voice is sweet enough but whose red cowboy boots have never touched dirt. She can’t have felt the kinds of pain that her songs describe. She needs a few more years, a few thousand miles on the road. When she finishes her set and pushes through the curtain, I give her a thumbs up.

“Did you really like it?” She has painted glitter on her eyelids, and a white plastic barrette like a little child would wear, pins her hair back. Before I can answer, she says, “It was such an honor to open for you, Mr. Lester. I’m super in love with your song, ‘Riskin’ it All’.” Shit, kid, thanks for making me feel old.

“That’s okay. You did good. Got a sweet voice. Keep it up.” I’m careful not to pat her on the shoulder, not to touch her young skin at all. I suppose I could; I’m a free man now that Althea is cutting me loose. But I’m feeling the cut much more than the release.

It’s quarter past starting time and the crowd is starting to sound impatient. Shove those thoughts of Althea aside. My most constant companion is cradled in my hands and she’s eager to get started.

"Let's give a warm welcome," the manager shouts into the microphone, his voice distorted, "to MISTer JIMmie LESTer!" I bound onstage into the familiar dazzling lights. The audience hollers and whistles from their seats; Regina vibrates and hums in response.

The first number is one of my most well-known, a song that grabs the crowd's enthusiasm and turns it up. We hit a groove right away. At each chorus, they join in greater volume. Can't wait to leave this city, can't wait to leave this town. Gonna pack up everything I own, I'm going underground... The sound tech is keeping the levels just right, folks are still coming in the door, and the lighting is good enough so that even when that loose spot on the right pivots down again, I don't mind. A couple sitting directly below it is lit up like they're on a tiny stage and my eyes keep straying toward them.

The woman has a mass of blond curls that gleam in the light. Her boyfriend is darker with a lean face, his arm drapes around her shoulders like a fur stole. One of his feet jiggles constantly, not keeping time, out of rhythm. They seem unaware that they are spotlit. For once, I feel like I'm in the audience, watching someone else illuminated in the midst of a dark room. As I play, I find myself directing the music toward them.

A few more numbers and it's time to take it down a peg, ease into a quieter space, a love song. The blond woman under the spotlight starts gazing at me with a hungry look, as if she hopes I'll call her up onto stage. My left fingers run down Regina's neck, while my right hand picks the melody. Damn Springsteen and his "Dancing in the Dark" video. How many fans thought he spontaneously pulled some random girl from the front row to join him, their bodies moving in sync? Of course, it was choreographed. Some of the best improv is planned in advance.

The boyfriend leans over, says something in her ear. She shrinks away from him, her eyes still locked on me, and my heart drops. I've seen this before: body language that shouts how much more she wishes she could be with the stranger on stage than with the man beside her. Usually, I just offer a silent "sorry, man" to the guy and look away. All I can do is sing my songs, it's up to you to get the girl.

But tonight, Althea's silky voice still echoes, "I don't reach you anymore." As if she too can't bear it, Regina's E string goes flat. At the end of the song, I take a long swig from my water bottle.

"Thanks for coming out tonight." The crowd cheers in appreciation. "It's always great to be here at—" my pause to recall the club's name is too brief for them to notice. "—Finnegans. One more song and then we'll take

a quick break." This is crazy; I've only done five songs and I'm taking a break? I'm rattled and Regina knows it.

I keep talking. "The new CD is out and I'll be happy to sign it for you at the back of the room." Stomping and a few shrill whistles. "Some of you might know this one. It's called 'Ocean'."

A woman screams out, "Yes!!" and others laugh at her fervor.

"Ocean" is a song I wrote for Althea during our early days. It has a light melody hung on a calypso rhythm, and the first notes bring her face to mind. How her green eyes used to sparkle when she looked at me. The room quiets down to hear the lyrics. My voice cracks just a bit on the high notes. A risky choice to sing tonight, but worth it if I can bring that gal in the audience back into the circle of her partner's arm. If only she will nestle against his side.

She leans all right, but away from her boyfriend and toward the stage, her hands on the edge of her chair like she's ready to catapult herself forward. Her yearning is evident, her bright face too expectant. The boyfriend slumps in his seat, half withdrawn into the shadows, an empty glass on the table before him. This poor guy is trying to reach his lady and all she wants to do is daydream about making it with the star. My mistake: I should be warning them with Hank Williams-style lonesomeness, not wooing with a love song.

I carry the last note in harmony with Regina, our tones washing over the dark room. I usually love this moment, this lingering, suspended breath. But it's always too short because the crowd—whether on the sunny hillside of a folk festival or lurching from the barstools of a beer-soaked tavern—breaks it every time. No matter whether the song was rollicking or hushed, a cappella or rockabilly, they respond like a many-headed beast that only knows how to roar. I set Regina carefully into the guitar stand, wave to the audience and retreat from their whistles and hoots into the back corridor, my shirt drenched in sweat.

After a cold drink and a change of shirt, I make my way through the room. The house has turned up the sound system for the break and Waylon Jennings is doing his bad boy thing over the speakers. People slap me on the back. They shake my hand and I nod as if to say I really do remember them. At the merch table, plenty of people are lined up, ready to fork over fifteen bucks.

"Can you sign it 'To Donna'?" the first person yells over the music. "That's me—Donna!"

"Glad to." I give her a broad smile. There's a certain technique to these signings: spend just enough time with each fan so they feel special, let them holler to me over the blare of the recorded music and pretend I can make out what they are saying, and keep an eye on the time without seeming to glance at my watch. The spotlight devotee waits near the back of the line. She holds one of my older CDs. There is a gold band on her ring finger. The guy, her husband then, lingers behind her, as if he has conceded defeat.

The usual pattern is to work the line to its very end. Standing up signals to the manager that the break is over, and it's time to let the bartender know to silence the basketball game playing on the bigscreen TV. Tonight, I cap my Sharpie when there are still two people standing ahead of the unhappy couple.

"Sorry, folks. Gotta do the second set. Come back after the show." I turn away from their disappointed faces, hurry through the door marked "Staff Only" and almost collide with a waitress carrying a loaded tray. She swears and I apologize again.

I pace in the narrow corridor while the manager starts revving the crowd to welcome me for the second set. How to turn this around, persuade this starstruck fan to look at her husband with some of the wattage that she's been pouring in my direction? I'm arguing with her in my head: I'm not even a star!

I stride back onstage with dark determination and grab Regina around the neck. C'mon girl, let's do this.

"Gonna change it up now, folks. I've made my share of mistakes, just like you've made yours. Life isn't always so grand, is it?" I shoot a glance to the right. They're still caught in the glare of that broken light; he still looks pained; she's holding her body cantilevered away from him like she doesn't want even the hem of her dress to graze against his blue jeans.

"We love you, Jimmie!" someone calls out.

"Well, that might not be such a good idea." I toss the guitar strap over my head and hit the strings so that they twang, discordant and loud. Then I launch into the Beatles' "I'm a Loser." I look straight at the wife and sing to her, "and I'm not what I appear to be" but the message escapes her. Her face shines with delight at my attention. Her husband's hand strays toward her knee; she shakes him off like a spider.

Without pausing to introduce it, I choose my most ironic song from the new album, a yarn of a missed rendezvous, an overlooked opportunity.

The crowd stirs, a new restlessness filtering through them. They know something's off. What's happened to happy Jimmie? He used to be so mellow...

After that number, I stop to tune, giving us all a respite while I try to figure out what else to try. Something bright orange moves at the back of the room: Althea, in her ugly handmade sweater, is here! But it's one of the bartenders, wearing a T-shirt with a beer slogan on it. She catches me staring at her and gives me a wave. I drop my eyes again.

She waved because I looked at her. That's what all the fans desire: not just the music, but to be seen by me, to be remembered, for me to thank them for coming. They want my smile, my autograph, to shake my hand. They want to be held in the spotlight with me, even just for the length of a song. I raise my head and clear my throat.

"Regina and me," I tilt her so that light refracts where my pick has scratched scars into her surface. "We've been on the road a long time and we've broken a lot of hearts, the two of us." Someone chuckles in response.

"Sometimes we mean to and sometimes we don't. Sometimes the only heart that gets broken is mine." More laughter, as the room relaxes with me.

"But we're not on the road to break love. We're here for one reason. To make love. And it's a risky business."

My heart is racing faster than it should be if I'm going to be able to sustain vibrato. I start to strum her strings, a tune bubbling up from somewhere and finding its way through my fingertips. I shift to a D chord and drop my voice.

"So tonight, I'm going to try something I've never done before." The room responds with a ripple of anticipation and my heart flutters like an echo.

"I'm going to make up a song—music and lyrics—right now, on the spot." A smattering of applause, exclamations of surprise. "Regina and I want to dedicate this to a special couple, sitting right over here, enjoying the spotlight." Chairs scrape as people pivot to look where I point. Blond curls bob as the woman squirms under all the attention. Her husband stares straight up, as if noticing the light for the first time. It washes his face pale; he squints and then turns toward his wife, a half smile on his lips like an unspoken wish.

With the heel of my hand, I thump Regina's body in a heartbeat rhythm: ba-bump, ba-bump. The room seems to pulse, feet tapping in time, even as I speed up. And then, like diving off a cliff, I plunge into a song. The tune that emerges is an old, well-traveled air, one that drifted over from the British Isles long ago and has been reshaped and played as accompaniment to ballads and blues. I don't need to think about chord changes or frets: my fingers know the way. The words appear as if I've always known them, as if I'd composed them thousands of miles ago and they've ridden in my guitar case ever since.

I sing of a love triangle: you, and me, and time. Time, which binds us together. You, who loves me over time. I, who will bend time to reach you. Regina responds to every strum as if she can anticipate it before my fingers hit the strings. My hand dances up and down her neck, my voice warbles like it did when I was nineteen. Rhymes spring into being without me needing to search for them.

I stride across the stage, leaning toward the couple at their illuminated table, yearning for them to turn toward each other, to find their way back. She shifts in her chair, no longer aiming toward me. Her shoulders relax. Across the small space between them, he reaches for her hand. She turns to look at him and then interlaces her fingers with his. They gaze into each other's faces like dreamers waking up. As the rhythm speeds up and the room throbs with excitement, those two become more and more still, as if nothing exists but each other.

I stomp my boot against the floor, pounding out a beat of desire. Ba-BUM-bump, ba-BUM-bump. Al-THEA-a. Sweat pours down my face but I can't stop to wipe my brow. The crowd is on its feet, cheering madly, and I can barely hear myself over their wave of noise as I shout into the mic. I'm bending over Regina, strumming until my forearm burns, and I hope to god someone is recording this on their phone and will post it on YouTube 'cause I can't hold onto the words once they've left my throat. I let out one final long, wordless note of joy, drop my hands, and straighten up. The room is dark and wild and loud, but there in the midst of the tumult, a man and a woman under a steady light hold each other so close that you might never guess that once they were apart.