

Miss Cruz

I think I always knew I didn't fit in. I'd look around at the families, their dogs and bikes and travel trailers, parents hopscotching cars out of the driveway every morning to go to work, and knew I'd never be a part of that. Most of us feel that way, I guess, when we're young. But with me it wasn't a matter of feeling. I knew.

The other thing I knew was that I needed secrets, needed to know things others didn't, have keys to doors that stayed locked a lot. When I was a kid, for two years all I could think or read about was magic tricks, this arcane stuff no one knew much about. Thurston's illusions, Chung Ling Soo, Houdini. Sleight of hand and parlor magic and bright lacquered cabinets. Read every book in the library, spent the little money I had on a subscription to a slick magazine named *Genie* out of L.A. Later it was Hawaiian music (can't remember how that got started), then 19th-century clocks. I was looking, you see, looking for stuff other people didn't know, looking for secrets. They were as essential to me as water and the air I breathed.

One thing I *didn't* know was that I'd wind up here in this desert, where it looks, as someone told me when I first came, like God squatted down, farted, and lit a match to it. Long way from the hills and squirrel runs I grew up in. Everything low and spread out, dun-colored and difficult. But hey, you want to build this big-ass city, how much better could you do than smack in a wasteland where it's a hundred degrees three months out of the year, and water, along with everything else, has to be trucked in?

But cities are like lives, I guess, when we start out, we never know what they're going to turn into. So here I am, living in what's politely termed a residential hotel on the ass-end side of Phoenix, Arizona, with half a dozen T-shirts, two pair of jeans, a week's worth of underwear if I don't leak too much, some socks, a razor, and a toothbrush. Oh—and a four-thousand dollar guitar. It's a Santa Cruz, black as night all over, not even any fret markers on her. Small, but with this huge sound.

Because I'm a musician, see. Have the black suit, white shirt, and tie to prove it. They're all tucked into one of those dry-cleaner bags in the back of what passes for a closet here. It's the size of a coffin; at night I hear things with bristly legs moving around in there. Outside the closet, there's half of what began life as a bunk bed, a table whose Formica top has a couple of bites out of it, two chairs, and a dresser with a finish that looks like maple candy.

And the guitar case, of course, all beat to hell. Same case I've had all along, came with the Harmony Sovereign I found under the bed in a rented room back in Clarksdale, Mississippi around 1980, when it all started. Second one, a pawnshop guitar, didn't have a case, so I kept this one, and after that . . . well, not much history or tradition in my life, you work with what

you have. Been a lot of guitars in there since. Couple of J-45s, an old small-body Martin, a Guild archtop, Takamines, a Kay twice as old as I am. Really get some looks when I pull this gorgeous instrument out of that case. Books and covers, right?

I forgot to mention the stains on ceiling and mattress. Lot of similarities among them; I know, I've spent many a night and long afternoon sandwiched between, mattress embossed with personal stories, all those who fell to earth here before me, stains on the ceiling more like geological strata, records of climate changes, weather, cold winters and warm.

It's not a big music town, Phoenix. Mostly a big honking pool of headbangers and cover bands, but there's work if you're willing. What do I play? Like Marlon Brando in *The Wild Ones* said when asked what he was rebelling against: What do you have? Mariachi, Beatles tributes, polka, contra, happy-hour soft jazz—I've done it all. Even some studio work. But my bread and butter's country. Kind of places you find an ear under one of the tables as you're getting the guitar out of the case and the bartender tells you good, they've been looking for that, got torn off in a fight last weekend.

Those gigs, mostly Miss Cruz stays in the case, right there by me all night, and I play a borrowed Tele that belongs to . . . I started to say a friend, but that's not right. An associate? Man doesn't play, but he has this room with thirty or more guitars, all top drawer, and humidifiers pouring out fog everywhere so you go in there it's like stepping into a rain forest, you keep expecting parrots to fly out of the sound holes. Jason Fletcher. We work together sometimes. Secrets, remember? And he's a lawyer.

Thing is, musicians get around, hear things. We're on the street, out there wading in the sludge of the city's bloodstream. And we're like furniture in the clubs, no one thinks we're lis-

tening or paying attention or give half a damn. Plus, we get to know the barkeeps and beer runners, who see and hear more than us.

So I do a little freelance work for Jason sometimes. Started when he came by Bad Mojo down on the lower banks of McDowell looking for a client of his who owed him serious money and caught me with a pick-up band playing, of all things, Western Swing. Strong bass player/singer, solid drummer, steel player who'd been at it either two weeks or forty years, hard to tell. Anyhow, Jason and I got to talking on a break, and he said how he'd always wanted to play like that and wanted to know if I gave lessons. People are coming up to you all the time at gigs and asking that, so I didn't think much of it, but a few days later, comfortably late in the morning, my phone rang. After work that day he swung by, and when he opened up the case he was carrying, there was a kickass old Gibson hollowbody.

The lesson lasted about twenty minutes before dissolving into gearhead chatter. Man could barely play a major scale or barred minor chord, but he knew everything about guitars. Woods, inlay, model designations, who made what for whom, Ditson, Martin, the Larsons, Oscar Schmidt—had it all at his fingertips, everything but music.

“Were you mathematically inclined as a child?” I remember he asked. It was a question I'd heard before and, knowing where he was taking it, I said no, it's just pattern recognition: spatial relationships, forms. That musicians, all artists, are just compulsive pattern-makers at heart.

And like with music, you stay loose, follow where life takes you. You've got the head, the changes, but the tune's what you make of it, you find out what's in there. So when the lesson

dismembered itself we went out for a beer and went on talking and the rest just kind of developed from there. He'd say keep an ear out for this or that, or once in a while something would drift my way that had a snap to it and I'd pass it along.

For the rest, I have to go back a year or so.

It's a breezy, cold spring and I'm sitting in the outdoor wing of a coffeehouse with half an inch left in my cup for the last half hour looking over at the café next door, Stitches, a frou-frou place heavy on fanciful salads and sandwiches. There's a waitress over there that just looks great. Nothing glamorous or even pretty about her, plain, really, a summer-dress kind of girl, but these sad, unguarded eyes and, I don't know, a presence. Also an awkwardness or hesitancy. She'll stall out by a table sometimes. Or you look over and she's just standing there—on pause, like, holding a plate or a rag or the coffee.

There are all kinds of ways of knowing things, and in the weeks I've been watching, it's become obvious that she and the manager are down. Nothing in the open, but lots of small tells for the watchful: their faces when they talk to one another, the way their bodies kind of bend away from one another when they pass, occasional glances into the relic'd mirrors set up like baffles all through the café.

Secrets. Things others don't know.

And in the past few days it's become just as obvious that it's over. They've had The Talk. She stalls out more often, gets orders wrong, forgets refills and condiments.

So, lacking much of an attention span and with a loose-limbed hold on reality, I'm sitting there, looking over, thinking how great it would be if she went calmly to the cooler behind the counter, grabbed a pie, walked up to him, and let him have it. Everyone over there in Stitches is staring. And the manager

is standing stock still with meringue and peaches dripping off his nose.

All at once then I come to, back to my surroundings, to realize that I'm witnessing, with a half-second delay, exactly what I've been picturing in my mind.

Now *that's* interesting.

Sweat runs down my back as I wonder how far I can take this.

One of the other waitresses runs into the kitchen, comes back with a can of whipping cream, and lets him have it in the face, right there by the peaches. A few customers look upset, but most are laughing. The cooks come out, stand around him, and sing Happy Birthday. Then I have everybody hold still, like a picture's just been taken, then they move, then I stop them again, another picture.

Cool.

Then I get scared and bolt.

That night at a club called Tip's I sat down with my guitar and ran an E chord into an A as many ways as I could think of all over the neck, but that was it. After fifteen or twenty minutes, without saying anything, I put the guitar back in its case and left. Didn't play for weeks, didn't go out in public at all, really, just hung in my room. The pictures of those people in the restaurant doing what I was imagining in my mind, *exactly* what I was imagining in my mind, those stayed with me. But like pictures on a wall, eventually you get used to them, stop seeing them when you walk past. So after a while I eased on back into the world. I'd like to say I was strong enough or scared enough never to repeat the incident, never to take that song for another ride, but of course I wasn't.

Miss Cruz came to live with me not long after that. She wasn't happy where she was—a common story: unloved and