

# North

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**p 11-13**

## Prologue Silver

*Vancouver, February 1982*

Rolling the silver was supposed to hold a promise. For Sarah, it had done so for years. ‘Rolling the silver contains the expectation, hammering it out provides the realisation.’ That’s how her teacher used to describe it and that’s how it always had been.

Turning the lever, she pulls the sheet through the rollers, over and over, until it’s the right thickness. The steady rhythm of the rolling mill, the hammering that follows and the first manual polish. The repetitiveness of her actions and the monotony of the sound channel her thoughts into a meditative trance. With every turn, each single blow of the hammer, her world should fade until her mind grows quiet and clear.

She’d started working on the necklace that afternoon to calm the storm inside her head. It’s no good this time. The rolling is uneven and her blows lack proper rhythm. She pushes the piece aside and, struggling to order her thoughts, arranges her tools instead. The rounding hammers are neatly aligned in the left hand corner, the saws next to them. The burner and gloves go in the middle, along with the safety glasses.

When the weathered surface of the workbench is perfectly organized, she turns off the desk light and studies herself in the mirror. It’s there for viewing finished pieces, after their final polish. If the jewellery merges with the shape of her silhouette, it’s ready, if not, she’ll keep working.

Today, there is no release looking in the mirror. There is only the line between her eyebrows. That’s new.

The letter on the kitchen table is lying exactly as she left it. She walks past the table and looks out into the twilight garden. Plodding through the snow in her boots earlier that morning, she found two letters waiting for her in the mailbox. The first with instantly recognisable handwriting, the second made of thick, expensive paper. She put the invitation to Ann’s exhibition up on the fridge and then carefully opened the second envelope.

The letter contained an offer. The kind of offer she knew existed. An offer she knew she could’ve received, if she’d continued on the course set out for her at the academy. If she’d have

steered that course, in all conformity, for several long years. Not now. Not after having followed her own path. It's too early. It's too strange.

Outside, the bushes look like dark beacons in the melting snow. Behind them is the outbuilding with its walls of flaking wood and the garage door that hasn't closed properly for two years. She can picture her car sitting there, under the grey blanket. Waiting. She hasn't driven it in months.

The excitement crawls up her spine, raises the hair on the back of her neck and draws a smile across her face. In the hall she puts on her boots and throws a jacket over her shoulders. It's hard work prying open the warped garage doors. Once inside, she swiftly pulls the blanket off the car.

In the fading daylight, its colour is barely visible. But just like that first time at the side of the road, she immediately falls in love again. Her car. A 1969 Dodge Charger, olive green with red leather upholstery, 330 HP.

She crawls into the driver's seat and feels the ice-cold leather through her clothes. She turns the key. Choking and coughing the car comes to life. The first actual roar from the engine a prelude to things to come.

Soon.

Tomorrow.

She goes back inside and wanders through the house. Picks stuff up and throws it into a backpack, lingers in front of her bookcase, takes out an atlas and leafs through it until she knows where she wants to go.

North.

Tomorrow.

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p 17-21

# 1. Thaw

## *Forty Mile, North Canada, March 1982*

To Mary, Walker's call at the beginning of spring signifies what the first thaw signifies to everyone else in Forty Mile: the end of winter. His call is later than usual this year.

She began waiting for it as soon as the sun shone down on the roofs in the valley again, and she was still waiting when the thaw set in and the town slowly rose from its hibernation. In a couple of days, the melting ice will turn the river into an impassable wasteland, cutting off everything north of Forty Mile from the inhabited world for weeks on end. She knows that Walker senses these things before anyone else, and that there's no reason for her to worry. He'll cross over a few miles from here, moving south across the last masses of ice towards Whitehorse, to sell his pelts and any other work completed over the winter. The knives and axes. The hand carved objects. In Whitehorse, he'll eat, drink and dance. Find a woman. Sleep. Then he'll call her.

It's drawing close to six. Mary picks up a broom and sweeps up the old wooden floor. She whisks the dirt out of the door, over the front porch, and into the muddy road. Then she arranges the goods on the shelves, restocking them from the small storage room at the back, and writes down the orders for tomorrow. On the other side of the street, she can see the first pick-up trucks pulling up in front of the Tavern. Happy hour will begin in about fifteen minutes. The starting shot for the evening.

She counts the money in the register and writes down the figures in her notebook. Then she lifts the old hand brush from its holder and wipes the counter clean. She smiles. The grocery store's been around for almost a hundred years, the interior still unchanged: same shelves, same floor, same counter, and the same hand brush. All of it's as old as the town itself. When she took over the store almost thirty years ago, the previous owner offered to replace the weathered counter top. She'd refused.

Mary places the hand brush back in its holder, clasps her hands around her waist and stretches her back. There's a sharp pain. Ever since Rick died, she's been feeling old. This winter, her body's been telling her that this is indeed the case. Outside, the dusk has started to fall. She observes her reflection in the store's glass panelled door. Still slender, but less supple. Her hair as long as ever, but almost white now. Still beautiful, though she no longer knows for who.

When she turns the sign on the door to CLOSED the phone rings. She doesn't hurry.

'Mary Calhoun, General Store, Forty Mile, good evening.'

'Marion.'

She closes her eyes. He's the last one to call her by that name.

'Walker.'

'Spring's coming.'

'It is.'

They're both people of few words. In the old days, he'd ask how Rick had managed during the winter, now he wants to know how she's been. It's been a mild winter. Only a few deaths around town and the trappers and loners out in the wild have pulled through. As always, he keeps the actual reason for his phone call to the very last.

Whether there's any mail.

Forty Mile is a gold mining town, barely a century old. It sprung up from almost nothing, exploding into a sprawling metropolis, a Paris of the North, only to shrink back, just as quickly, to a trifle of the houses and people it once numbered. The people around town have always gathered at the same three places: The Tavern, the doctor's waiting room and Mary's store.

The Tavern is the town's oldest bar, and the only one that's open throughout the winter. It's a place for bonding, fighting, and laughing. The doctor's waiting room is open to hopes and curses. In Mary's store, life and work prevail.

She's never been fond of gossip, that's what the other two places are for. She buys what people ask her to and then comes up with whatever else they might need before they even know it. In winter, people sometimes complain about the shortage of goods on her shelves, the sameness of the food or the long delay in ordering an engine part. Like Mary, they know that this is the price they'll gladly pay to be where they are.

Each of the three establishments has a phone, the only three phones in Forty Mile. Mary also takes care of the town's mail, making her the main gateway to the outside world. Whenever anyone leaves Forty Mile, she carefully guards their letters for them. If the letter mentions a return address, she writes back in her steady, elegant hand, detailing what the addressee's been up to. Sometimes people answer her letters by sending her two envelopes in return: a larger one with a letter for her, which also contains a smaller envelope with a new letter for the initial addressee. Others just scribble their wishes to Mary on the back of their envelopes. Not once has she opened a letter that wasn't meant for her.

The people of Forty Mile call from other villages, towns, and countries to ask whether she's holding any mail for them. The previous store owners would read out letters over the phone, acting as unintentional confessors for anyone in or outside town. Mary has always refused to do this. If people want to know what's in their letter, she tells them to call back in half an hour. Then she drags the armchair to the counter and goes out to fetch Dawkins. Her neighbour is as old as the

hills and deaf as a post. He can read, but he's not a literate man. He can spell out a sentence word for word, but without understanding its actual meaning.

Whenever there's a letter to be read, Dawkins shuffles into the store, eases himself into the armchair and opens the envelope. Next, he produces a magnifying glass out of his breast pocket and places his hand on the telephone till he can feel it ringing. Then he picks up the receiver, clears his throat and, in a hoarse voice, barks the words, one by one, at whoever's on the other end of the line. After reading out the name at the bottom of the letter, he starts again from the top, to ensure that the caller has caught every word. After this second reading, he thanks the caller for listening and hangs up. Each word is forgotten by the next. At the end of the letter, Dawkins can only remember the name of the person who wrote it, because there aren't any words left.

In the meantime, Mary goes into the garden by the side of the store and chops wood while singing to herself.

Like every winter, a single letter has been left for Walker.

'Your mother,' she tells him.

The letter arrived just after Christmas. Walker's aged mother is one of those people Mary has maintained a written friendship with for years. Their first letters were all about letters. Superficial writing about writing. Gradually, they became more personal. To the point that she now loves Walker's mother as much as she loves Walker himself.

Walker asks her to get Dawkins to read the letter. She takes her leave of him like she first did twenty-eight years ago.

'Bye, Walker.'

'Bye, Marion.'

She can picture him nodding now.

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p 23-28

## 2. Dodge

Sarah can tell from the sunlight on the wall that it's already past ten. Her head aches and the aftertaste of too many cigarettes is making her nauseous. She kicks off the bedcovers, takes a shower.

Her motel is on the edge of the highway, with her room overlooking the plain. The last few patches of dirty snow are refusing to melt. Her head is resting against the window, the tips of her dark curls like little wet paint brushes on her shoulders. In the distance, she can see the mountains up north. There's an uneasy feeling churning around in her stomach.

She kneels down next to her backpack, removes a toilet bag from the front compartment and searches through it. Finally, she decides on three pieces from an older set. A ring and a bracelet, with earrings matching the bracelet. Then she snatches yesterday's jewellery from the bedside table and packs it into the bag. She rummages through her crumpled clothes for some fresh-looking underwear and puts on some clean clothing.

With all her stuff squeezed back into her backpack, she walks down to the lobby. Like the rest of the hotel, it's tidy but old and rundown. The smell of bygone decades blending with the wall-to-wall carpet, the dusty wallpaper, and the wood panelling. This is the last motel on the way to Forty Mile. In a few miles, Highway 37 will flow into the Klondike Highway, the last straight line heading north. Another three hundred miles before she gets there. One day, a good six-hour drive.

The previous night, she'd celebrated the next to last stage of her road trip sitting in a blues bar. It was a bar like several others she'd stopped at on her way. The folk rougher than she was used to, the music better. Halfway through the evening, an older man had joined her at the bar. A baseball cap to cover up his baldness, a beard, and an impressive gut. Evidently drunk, he remained quiet and composed. Each with an elbow leaning on the bar, their beers in front of them, they had looked at each other and nodded.

'Not much of talker, eh?'

He caught on sooner than she'd expected.

The man was an ideal companion for a night out alone. They talked, in between long moments of silence, about life, the open road, and the way up north. About everything and nothing. He'd confirmed her assumption that she'd come to the right place to think things over. Good people. Rough, but decent.

They'd parted company close after midnight. The man at the bar was the first person she'd spoken to in a week, and he hadn't even asked for her name.

Sarah pays for her room and her breakfast. Outside the motel, the sun's high up in the sky. With her backpack over her shoulder, she walks towards her car. Its olive-green coat is barely visible under the thick layer of mud and grime.

The leather seats are still ice-cold from last night. The backseat, after a week on the road from Vancouver, is a complete mess. Just one last day before her final destination. Another three hundred miles to go: the last and only town north of everything.

In what's become a steady ritual, she fastens her seatbelt and folds the roadmap so it displays the right route. She opens her box of cassette tapes and slides her finger down the spines of their cases. Judging from the contours and the colouring on the map, she'll be encountering all sorts of country today. Plains, forests, low mountain ranges and panoramic views. Swaying rivers. Only two bridges.

She hasn't discovered any logic yet in the way she assigns certain types of music to landscapes. There seem to be a few parameters, though. Punk is good for mountains, new wave tends to go well with valleys and plains. Her own mood has remained the same throughout the trip: a mind bent on delaying the decision she needs to take. Journey and destination are one.

She hesitates. Then settles for punk. Hardcore. She chooses. First Black Flag, followed by NoMeansNo, and Minor Threat. She places the tapes in the right order and starts the engine. It's a half day drive to the last and only gas station this side of Forty Mile. She's got two jerrycans full of gas in the trunk. The worst cold has passed, she doesn't need to worry about the engine block freezing up.

The road snakes between forests, goes straight for a few miles, then swerves off to one side of a winding river, running along one of its banks to avoid an approaching mountain range. The further the day progresses, the faster she drives. Spring has only just started to melt its way through the snow here. The tundra lies before her like an oddly spaced checkerboard of white snow and brown grass. The birch forests are still bare. Delicate, white trunks dissolving into a filigree of brown twigs.

Besides a few trucks, the road heading north is hers alone. The entire north is hers alone. She drums her fingers on the steering wheel, nods her head to the rhythm of the singer's syncopated screams.

From time to time she forces herself to consider the letter and its unexpected offer, the decision she will have to take back home. She weighs her options. It's hard to erase a certain nagging from the back of her mind. The landscape beckons and soon her gaze goes roaming across the plains and mountains again.

After four hours, breakfast has gone through her system and her stomach starts rumbling.

There's a truck parked in front of the gas station. Sarah waits inside her car for the driver to return, get in and leave. She fills up the tank and enters the little building. There's a sweet smell, like cake. A whiff of stale coffee. Engine oil and piss. The manager's been watching her from the window since she got out. Sarah can sense him taking in her every move.

'Travelling alone?'

She looks at him. Shabby, tubby, dressed in filthy blue overalls. She nods her head and asks him for the restroom. He sticks out his chin, directing her to a corner in the back. He grins.

'Brace yourself, miss.'

It's filthy and it smells but it's a relief.

Back in the store, she takes her time. She takes a few extra bottles of water from the shelves, chocolate, dried meat, and raisins. Stopping in front of the magazine rack, she scans through it. TV guides, two newspapers and a large selection of nude magazines. An issue of Vogue, over a year old. Her head tilted to one side, she hesitates for a while. She looks at the man behind the counter. He's still watching her closely. For a moment, she feels embarrassed, but then snaps out of it. She places the items from the shelves in front of him, picks up the magazine and browses through it till she reaches the advert published by the jewellery house. Four pages into the magazine, a double spread.

She sighs.

The brand name is printed across the top in large letters, all other attention is to be lavished on the model, apparently. She's lying naked on the bed, wearing nothing but a fur blanket and a sultry glance. The jewellery design isn't bad. The gem stones, as usual, are too showy. It takes her a while to find the designer's name. On the bottom of the page, the small lettering.

So.

Is this what she wants?

She sighs again, before placing the magazine back in the rack. At the register, she asks if there's any chance of a coffee.

'Sure.' He takes a mug from the rack behind him and fills it from a large thermos on the counter.

'Nice set of wheels, miss. Where you from?'

'Vancouver.'

The man tilts his head backwards and looks at her. Looks at her car again. He holds up a pot of sugar, she shakes her head: no.

'How many days?'

'It's been a week now.'

'Nice little car. Got it off your old man?'

'Bought it myself. Always wanted one of these.'

The man looks at the car again. 'How'd it do in the Rockies?'

'Not bad. Strong climber. Did great in the turns. How's the rest of the road?'

The man scratches his neck. 'Well... You best get used to the idea of that paint job getting damaged. No more paved road in a couple of miles. Permafrost. Anything solid gets frozen to bits anyway. A good road, but gravel. Real shame about that paint job, though. 290 HP?'

'330. It's the four barrel.'

'Hmm. We rarely see fine automobiles like that round these parts.'

She finishes her coffee, pays him, and bids him goodbye.

Standing in the doorway, he calls out to her.

'You mind the twilight now, miss, you don't want a moose through your windshield!'

Sarah stacks the newly bought food in the passenger seat and honks a farewell. In her rear-view mirror, she can see the man, still standing in the doorway. He raises his hand.

Another hundred miles.



### 3. Coffee and shame

Adam climbs the steps to Jacob's house. Now the sun has returned to the valley, shining down on the front porch again, there's no place Jacob and Adam would rather be. Jacob usually in the sagging couch, a blanket over his knees; Adam with one leg over the railings, his long body leaning against a pillar. As far as appearances go, they're each other's opposite. Adam tall, thin, and blonde; Jacob broad-shouldered and dark. They both have equally wild and bushy beards.

Walking from the Tavern to Jacob's house, Adam has been trying to remember what happened last night. He can't seem to piece together a logical sequence of events. He remembers yelling. Possibly fighting. He switches the violin case from one hand to the other and sticks his free hand in his jacket pocket so it can warm up. A familiar sense of shame is eating away at his stomach. It would help if he had any idea how the night ended. All he knows is waking up in a room above the Tavern.

It's not coming back to him. The struggle to remember things isn't new but it sure is a nuisance. Because things had been going well these last few weeks. And because it makes it harder for him to assess to Jacob's mood. They're playing a gig tonight, so a little harmony between them would be more than welcome.

Adam knocks at the door, waits a short while before going inside. From behind the kitchen table comes the clicking, scratching sound of nails on a wooden floor, as Muddy rushes out to greet him. Hushing and petting his Labrador to calm her down, he takes a look around the room. Jacob's shoes are lying next to the door, his coat is hanging over a chair by the kitchen table. Upstairs, all is quiet. Adam pulls off his shoes and moves towards the stove to make coffee. Carefully, he blows on the coals till they start glowing again.

Jacob's house is small and narrow. A red wooden house with white rain gutters and a small porch, surrounded by an unkept, overgrown plot of land. Three years ago, Jacob built the house with his own hands, with the money he made here, up north. It's a small and simple place. With a kitchen downstairs, and just enough room for a table with four chairs and the big couch where Adam usually sleeps. Muddy's basket is next to the stove. The staircase, which runs up from the kitchen, leads straight into the bedroom.

Jacob's house is in the southern part of town, slightly higher up than the other houses. Behind his garden gate rises the steep mountain face that surrounds Forty Mile, pressing the town against the confluence of both rivers.

Adam pours himself a cup of coffee, takes off his coat and leans back in one of the kitchen chairs. Muddy puts her head in his lap.

Rousing himself from his state of hibernation is becoming harder each year. He's thirty-four, but life up north and the drink make him look much older. This winter, the darkness took a hold of his mind on two separate occasions, making him to leave Jacob's house for a room above the Tavern. Each time, Jacob left a hot meal outside Adam's bedroom door – every day for several weeks. Some days, Adam couldn't bring himself to open the door. If the plate of food was still there the next day, Jacob would replace it by another one.

The long winter stretches of darkness and drink don't mean anything, nor do they have to. It's the other seasons which Adam fears. All that will follow after those first tentative days of spring. The months that require a year's worth of work and toil, in which people stake their place in the community, make a contribution.

Another few months before the short, hot summer. A time when town and nature are at their wildest. These are the weeks in which gold is sought and found, and the adventurers pass through

the area. The summer visitors who've been coming here for years, return like so many late swallows. Every autumn, every winter, every spring, they can feel it in their bones: how it calls them, draws them in. The valleys and the tundra, the rivers, and the silence. The vast, crushing emptiness. The hunger for solitude and life in the wild, which comes to a standstill in that last town north of everything. Forty Mile. Where everyone hangs around, aching for something. Where people find each other on the edge of the wild. Where companionship softens the harshest winters and there's always enough drink to drown one's inabilities.

Upstairs, the bedframe creaks. After some stumbling sounds, Adam sees a pair of feet coming down the stairs. Wearing underpants and a T-shirt, his eyes still bleary with sleep, Jacob looks at him in a daze.

'Hm.'

'Coffee?'

'Hm.'

After a few gulps of coffee, Jacob squeezes past Adam's chair to get to the sink. He runs his head under the tap and roughly dries his hair and beard with a towel.

'Goddamn it Adam, you were such an asshole, yesterday.'

'Thought so. Sorry.'

'Sorry? Jesus. Just act normal for a change.'

Jacob drinks his coffee with a sullen face, cuts himself a slice of bread and goes back upstairs to get dressed. Adam follows him with his eyes, wondering whether he'll get off that easily.

As soon as Jacob's facing him again, Adam can tell it's not over yet. He gets out his violin anyway and steps out onto the porch. Because of the cold, it only takes three songs for their fiddle and banjo to get detuned, but the sun is more important.

Red-nosed and watery-eyed, they play until their fingers grow numb. Then they move back inside for a while, to warm up and tune their instruments. After another five songs or so, the irritation is lifted from Jacob's face and the sharp edges of Adam's shame have worn off.

Adam looks at his friend as they play. Jacob's about four years younger than him. Like so many others, he initially came to Forty Mile for a seasonal job over the summer. On the first day of his arrival, early in June, he bumped into Adam. What followed were three days filled with hanging around the bar, camp fires, boat trips, booze and, above all, music. Jacob's way of playing the banjo fitted perfectly with Adam's fiddle, and the sounds of their voices melted together like sugar and warm milk. After a month, Jacob stopped shaving his beard and decided to stay. Adam had barely managed to keep his head above water, whereas Jacob landed one job after another. Adam will always be the better musician, though. Every time Adam screws up a job, ending up almost penniless after yet another lame excuse, they find each other in the music.

It's almost spring again, and life is beckoning. Maybe everything will be different now. Maybe this year things will start moving. Tonight, they're playing the opening gig for the season. Half the town will be there to drink and dance away the winter. It's the last weekend the Tavern will be the only bar open in Forty Mile.



## Part III

### 5. Punk

In the dark, Adam can barely make out the letters on the building. Eastside Printing Factory. The last street lamp is already hundreds of yards behind him. Behind the old printing works, a plume of smoke is visible against the night sky, a fire is being made. He walks over to it and takes out his hip flask. A few more gulps. There'll be more drink inside. Drink, and Sarah. He wants her. Lift her up, drown in her scent. And then get drunk. Drunk like he hasn't been in a long time.

Today was his first day recording. Another two days rest, then three consecutive days of recording and his first assignment will be done. More than eight hours he spent in the studio today. A musty building whose walls absorbed every sound before it bounces off them. The studio he was given smelled of sweat, dust and cigarettes. It was tiny. The equipment behind the glass of the recording booth he'd only seen in films and documentaries. He did recognise the brands. Knew he should thank Willy on his bare knees.

They'd worked at Adam's pace. Letting him get used to the isolated sound of the vocal and banjo tracks that they'd recorded earlier. With closed eyes he'd tried desperately to conjure up the feeling of playing live. The voices stirring around him, the warmth of bodies, the smell and taste of the beer before, during and after. He forced himself, like masturbating without horniness. It felt just as dirty. He'd kept repeating his lines doggedly, starting over, faster, louder, more feeling. At lunch he'd started on the hip flask of whisky he'd brought with him. From then on things started running more smoothly.

Adam takes the final sip from his metal flask and slips it back into his jacket. He nods at the group of people standing in front of the large door of the old printing factory. A thundering drum and raw screams go crescendo when he pushes open the door. In the faint glow of a few light bulbs he sees a bar made of waste wood. The band is nowhere to be seen, but the sound is hellish, echoing and crashing against the high ceiling. There are people at the bar, mostly men, boys. Bony types, in black. The barman hands Adam two bottles of beer. Says something that gets lost in the continuous roaring drowned out occasionally by a wall of guitars.

Adam empties the first bottle in one gulp and places it on the bar, then starts on the next one. He reaches for money but is waved off. Two more bottles are placed in front of him. He toasts the bartender, downs the second bottle and turns around, a bottle in each hand.

He walks towards the sound of the punk band. The singer and his girlfriend are friends of Sarah's, she told him at breakfast that morning. In the far corner of the large hall is a door opening, hung with thick strips of overlapping plastic. He can see green light flashing through the transparent material. He pushes the flaps aside and comes upon a staircase leading down.

It takes a long while for his eyes to adjust to the dark. It was already dark upstairs, down here nothing is visible but for the green lights flashing. The room is held up by robust, square pillars. At the back is a stage, the source of the overwhelming sound. Holding a bottle of beer to his lips, he takes in what's happening in front of him. A tangle of bony arms and shoulders, bare torsos, jerking in sharp angles to the beat of the drum. Jumping up and down, in shocks and starts, headbanging. Now and then people shout along with the lyrics, their fists raised high. Adam slowly steps forward, towards the last row in the audience. Then he sees the singer, on the edge of the stage, with his back to the audience. The drummer is invisible, sitting behind the two green spotlights that flood everything. The drum solo keeps going. When the singer's turn comes, he swings around, grabs the microphone stand, leans back and shouts, roars, screams his lyrics. Then he turns around again.

Like an athlete before the jump, hypnotising himself, concentrating. Adam can't take his eyes off the singer. His scrawny frame pale in the green spotlight.

He feels how the drum pounds in his chest, how the music's anger makes his stomach muscles tighten. He leans forward, allows himself to get carried away. He moves along with the crowd in front of him and feels himself disappearing in the rhythm of the guitars and the drums, longing for the next screaming laceration. Only then do the words come. He listens to what the man on the stage sings and screams. The despair and disgust. A language spat out and transformed into a persistent, animal cry.

And then it becomes too much for him. The long winter, the drink, the turmoil of the past few days, the unspoken shame towards Sarah, for what she is, for what he is. He breaks out of the crowd and stumbles to the back, towards a pillar in the dark, leans against it with two hands and throws up in repeated gulps. The tears in his eyes transform the green spotlights into blurry dots. He wipes his chin, staggers to the next pillar and squats up against it, his head thrown back. He's disgusted with the basement air, craves the cold outside. He feels utterly ridiculous, all of a sudden. Everything he's ever done on stage strikes him as ridiculous. The bluegrass he loves now seems childish to him. The neat pattern of choruses and verses is something he's never considered before. He loves the language of the music, the structure of its lines, the alternating solos. But now, here in a dank basement, with the taste of vomit still in his mouth and a screaming Grim Reaper on stage, it's all one big joke.

He walks back to the rear end of the audience, lets the music do its work. Someone hands him a bottle of water. He drinks greedily, gratefully, passes on the bottle. At the front of the audience, raised fists pump to the beat of the music. One pair of arms is more beautiful than the angular ones around it.

Sarah.

He wades towards her through the frenzied crowd. Her hair covers her face as she shouts along with the singer. Next to her is a remarkably tall woman. Even more so than Sarah, she is one with the music. Adam lays a hand on Sarah's shoulder and watches her break out of her trance. She smiles, kisses him square on the mouth and wraps an arm around his waist. The woman next to her eyes him curiously. Sarah shouts something at her, to which she smiles broadly, taking Adam in from head to toe. Together they watch the singer, who notices them. His grimacing face shatters like a mask. He winks, then turns his back to the audience once more, swaying, focused.

After the set a DJ takes over the basement and the music keeps on pounding. They go back upstairs to get drinks and return, down into the droning noise. In the haze of what's going on around him, Adam sees the singer. Talking is impossible, so they drink. Adam takes a pill that is offered to him. The room starts swaying, the sounds merge with the green glare of the flashing spotlights. He sees the mouth of the singer moving, sees him looking at him with Sarah, sees how others are involved in the conversation. The tall woman he noticed before. She's hanging round the singer's neck. Ann, Adam remembers her name. Ann and Steve. How come they can hear each other? He recognises the two guitar players. The bass player slaps him on the back and pulls him with him, Sarah nods encouragingly, speaking words he doesn't understand. He follows, stumbles, enters a room behind the stage with more light. Needles in his eyeballs, he lifts his hands to his face. He opens his eyes again and sees the light has now been dimmed. People are pointing. Instruments. Guitars and basses, half a drum kit. Undefinable cases. And the shape of a case he recognises immediately. He stumbles towards it, clings it to his chest. A beacon in the storm. He clicks open the locks and moves his hand across the slender neck, the sound holes. He lets the strings resonate. His head throbs harder and harder. Then he clasps the violin under his chin. Steve is standing next to him, holding a guitar now.

Adam plays what comes to him, sings along. Steve plays counter parts that go straight against Adam's own, shouting over his vocal lines. Adam plays louder, sings harder, more tunefully. He sits up straight and his right foot automatically starts stomping the rhythm. Soon there are hands on his shoulders again, someone pulling his arm, a few wooden steps that seem impossibly high, feet that lose their ground. A sharp pain in his knee and elbows. In his fall he has kept the violin up high. And then the green lights are suddenly behind him, the audience in front of him, Steve next to him. They share the same microphone, he fights with his melodic vocals against the singer's yelling and screaming, his fiddle against the steel chords of the guitar. He sees Sarah, below them. Shouting in the crowd. Her arms high, just like the arms around her. A forest of fists.