You Know Better, But I Knew Larry Hinjos

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YOU KNOW BETTER BUT I KNEW LARRY HINJOS

THIS WAS WHEN I was bartending in southeastern Montana. I’d love to say it was in Ekalaka, which wasn’t far, but I’d be lying for the good sound of it. This was when I worked at the Melt Down Lounge, down in the very corner pocket of the state, and had friends that I normally wouldn’t—like Larry Hinjos—because I’m educated, from suburban Seattle, and twenty-nine years old. But in tending bar you develop relationships with people you wouldn’t otherwise, and from this group a minority of good friends emerged.

The time it took to get to know someone in that one room bar was compressed. It reminded me of the speedy reality of falling in love with a strange woman on a cross-country road trip, say a friend of a friend you caught a ride with around the holidays, unspooling your best stories over highway miles and coming back lovers.

On several intoxicated moments in the Melt Down I confided a number of my best sins, but mostly I did the nodding and listening. Then after several months, and after I’d been the final voice in a number of football related arguments, I was accepted. This despite my education, which was real, and my affluent upbringing, which wasn’t—it was assumed. You could feel the customers’ thoughts when a twenty second spot for a university came on during a college football game: all opportunity in this world was directly proportionate to how much dough you had. Or more likely, your family had. The American Dream was as dead as winter road kill here, and I couldn’t blame them.

I’d spent half of the ’90s studying at a private college in Olympia, Washington, where after class we’d pile into a bar with everyone competing to know the saltiest barfly, trying to out blue-collar-sympathize each other. Some of us drank on student loans, and others on stacks of singles from running pizzas. But most
boozed on the hard money our folks had socked away years earlier, a time when the pragmatism of an early suburban marriage and a job at the furniture store had precluded their own realities of college. We were the vicarious dreams of our parents' second born, and condescendingly we worshiped the drinking class—a class I later became very much ingrained and respected in.

There wasn't much to my moving, other than I graduated and had no plans, and my sister was bored and invited me out for the summer. I arrived wanting to relax and get through a stack of books, maybe listen to some baseball on a small radio on the porch.

My sister ended up moving to Sheridan where my brother-in-law got a better job, and I ended up renting a cheap apartment across the street from the Melt Down and drinking instead of reading and there you had me: behind the bar, not always laundered but tucked in, jeans with a belt, expensive sneakers, staring over the meaty heads of customers while trying to find the Bronco game on the dish.

Now studying comparative literature and finding a life in the strata of lower middle class America aren't mutually exclusive, I know. But we cohabitate with our own, and I should have gone to graduate school. I should have been disheveled to perfection in my retro collars and baggy chinos, obsessing over a manuscript in some tiny office.

Yet I did not, and this divergence from a prescribed life seems a lone and discernible fact that me and Larry Hinjos, the tomato-round Oglala Sioux postman, shared.

"Hey, it's the King!" he'd shout when Elvis came on the jukebox. Out came the tiny air guitar and pelvis thrusting. "It's the King, Goddamit!"

This was when I was twenty-nine, before I quit and moved back to college town Washington, before I imposed a break from the Johnny Walker Black and yellow rails of speed off of the Rock-A-Hula Elvis mirror in the back room. This was before I left southern Montana and added some normalcy to my life.

Evelyn Zimmerman was in her forties and went by Zz. There were a lot of surnames thrown around the bar, mostly to distinguish between the multitudes of Cathys and Mikes, but also these
names had a richness and oddity that added dimension: Hinjos, Skoog, Mugass, New, Elko.

Zz would study my face from the side as I served somebody their drink, but as soon as I’d look back towards her she’d look quickly into the mirror behind the bar, grinning. It was her joke or flirt or whatever, and we’d go through that charade at least once a shift.

Zz’s hair was big and blonde, cumulus even, and very fake. As she drank, so did her coiffure, sliding about her head like a party hat on a pumpkin. Zz drank Cuervo and soda, always, in a highball glass with four straws, and she had a fifteen-year-old daughter named Zoey who would pick her up from the bar. Zoey had those far-apart eyes that can only look good on women.

Zz was almost six feet tall and because of the makeup and ass-pants and general boozy demeanor she was often mistaken for a whore.

“What?” I’d hear her scream. “You want what?”

I’d walk down. Next to her would be a little man in his late sixties, drunk on Brandy, and trying to hide in his oversized windbreaker.

“You gotta go man,” I’d say.

“I didn’t mean . . .”

“Gotta go.”

It was always Larry Hinjos who started the chant. It would begin as a suggestion. A minor sound quieter than the hum of the ice machine.

“Eighty-Six. Eighty-Six.”

Zz wouldn’t do anything more than straighten up and primp her wig, pretending she’d been insulted somewhere deep down, yet I believe that deep stirring was something else. I believe it was more a pride in the fact we’d stuck up for her fading honor.

“Eighty-Six. Eighty-Six!”

Hear the rising unison of the voices, the whole happy hour regular crowd smothering Elvis’ “Blue Christmas” on the jukebox.

“Eighty-Six. Eighty-Six!”

See it: Larry Hinjos now pounding on the bar with such an enlightened and mirthful grin that all the features of his face
angled into it. In these times I’d say nothing, didn’t need to. I’d just take the guy’s drink and wash the glass out.

“Eight-Six! Eighty-Six!”

The guy would either leave or be shown the door. The cops were never called. If he retaliated I had the butt end of a busted pool cue—stenciled in a filigree of roses and vines—that I’d brandish. We called this The Bouquet.

Actually all this happened only once. Larry had a half nelson on the old guy. He’d become so incensed about being cut off that he was attempting a maneuver over the bar.

“You little faggot!” he screamed. His tongue writhed pink outside of his mouth, licking his mustache between words. “I’ve been drinking here since before you were born!”

Somehow he squirmed loose from Larry and made an off balance lunge, sending drinks and change flying in ten directions. For a moment he was high-centered on the bar, then as he continued his somersault I touched him with The Bouquet—a quick little whap! that mostly got ear.

Out of the five fights I’ve been in (dating back to that devastating loss to Charlie Hayes and his awful handful of worms in the third grade) this is the only one I ever won. I don’t count the one against Larry Hinjos.

The Melt Down Lounge was beautiful and sturdy, with ocean gray plaster walls and recessed pill-shaped windows. A lone Pabst neon in one of the windows would pull in clouds of mosquitoes during the summer. The floor was recycled from an old basketball gym, and a red three-point line curved from the pool table to the juke box like one of those lines painted on the floors of hospitals that tell you where to go. The walls were hung with hunting and fishing photos of people nobody knew. The jukebox was never broken for more than a day.

I’m as white as a calendar and will be bald, chubby and probably an alcoholic in full when this decade ends. They say you look at your mother’s family for things like personal magnetism and inclinations towards hooch, and so yep, the bald, chubby and thirsty women of my mother’s side have passed their legacy to me. You look at our faces and it’s like staring into a fascinating landscape made of milk. We look exactly like what people de-
erved and hammered upon in central Washington, then moved to suburban Seattle, look like.

The alcoholic women in the Melt Down were similar to the drinking women in my family, and maybe I felt that I owed them something, a measure of wit or charity that would allow us to feel something more than just being afternoon strangers drinking together.

These women were funnier than they were sad. They changed hairstyles three times a year. Their bodies seemed impossible for their legs, like the Planters Peanut maybe; and for these mothers I'd show a son's love, charging half price if anything at all.

Last year on the afternoon of the Kentucky Derby I was collecting wagers and putting them in this old pork pie hat we kept on top of the cash register. Carroll was there. It was Sunday and her day to give free hair cuts—mojob, Hinjos called them—out back with her rickety clippers. Grace was there too, framed as usual in a grand dangle of turquoise jewelry. They were waiting for Zz to arrive from the flea market, a dusty event out at the fair grounds that she attended religiously.

"Maybe she's at home," said Grace, and went behind the bar to use the phone.

Half an hour later Zimmerman walked in, wig-pile sloping to one side and an owl-embroidered sweater stretched slack around the neck. From the flea market she'd bought a lamp made of plastic seashells, a silver serving tray, and a single, ornately carved, table leg. As she neared the bar I noticed her bottom lip, though badly swollen, was still freshly covered with lipstick.

Zz and her daughter Zoey lived in a shitty little prefab duplex out by the airstrip where the crop dusters landed. They occupied one half of the duplex while Zz stored her antiques in the other. She owned things that would never fit in the kind of spaces she and her daughter rented. Zz had everything but the mansion and the hill. The duplex itself was boxy and brown, and instead of stairs leading to the front door it had a switchback handicap ramp. The yard, having already overgrown a microwave the size of a television, was now working on a spongy hide-a-bed.

I once spent an afternoon with Larry Hinjos insulating and chinking the place. The walls were of cheap sheet rock, and the
whole structure seemed to be rotting from the inside out. That afternoon we’d installed foam strips, beads of caulk, and jammed newspapers into the wall in an effort to fill the cracks and gaps that marbled the place. Every room reeked of burnt microwave popcorn.

Zoey had watched us work from the couch, at first glowering at us past the television while drinking a cheap Dr. Pepper imitation called Dr. Thirst. I remember the red can and the counterfeit lettering. That and the roar of a laugh track from the television.

Sometimes Zz had men out there, but seldom was it anybody from town. There were always men in and around the Melt Down, mostly laborers and seasonal workers: Carnies with hilarious travelogues and methamphetamines, Mexicans in cowboy hats up from Texas to work the summer wheat, sun-bleached blonde construction workers trying to make enough to get farther away from Billings. There were always men, and they came to the bar to drink and attack the heart of the night with Zz or Grace or Carroll—these women successfully living lives younger than their own.

But the day Zz’s lip was swollen, the day of the Kentucky Derby, was the day she’d been beaten. It had happened before, and it never mattered who because they’d be long gone. I never called the cops because they were just as dangerous to everybody involved, especially the victims.

Zz found her place at the bar and set her things—the lamp, the silver tray, the table leg—in front of her. I poured her a tequila and soda in a chimney glass with four straws. She wrote a check for five dollars.

Nobody knew what to say or how to start. Beyond her broken lip and disheveled hair, I noticed a smear in her eye shadow—a detail she’d never overlook.

“The lamp was only four bucks, so I said what the hell,” Zz said. “I think it’s from Mexico or something.”

Larry Hinjios walked in and sat at the other end of the bar. His whole being seemed to exhale when he made it to his bar stool. Our routine, invariably, was while I poured Stoli into a shaker with ice and limes, he’d load the juke box up with early Elvis. The rockabilly stuff with Scotty Moore on guitar. As the
first song came on I shook the vodka until the tips of my fingers were cold, then squeezed the spines of several lemon slices into a rocks glass. I poured double shots for us. Several seeds swirled to the top.

Serving an alcoholic his first drink after an eleven-hour day—in Larry’s case humping fifty-pound sacks of mail all over town—had a sense of significance matched only by the booze high itself.

“Hey, it’s the King,” said Larry, gesturing back over his shoulder to the jukebox. Between songs you could hear the mechanical arm select the next CD.

Larry Hinjios was everybody’s friend. I didn’t have to worry about playing bartender-psychologist or friend-to-the-lonely-guy with him. As soon as he found the stool he wanted and emptied his pockets of checkbooks and sunglasses onto the bar, he began holding court: rolling dice, guffawing, slapping backs and punching arms. You felt lucky and good to be there.

After another Stoli shot with Larry, I walked back down to Zz. Carroll and Grace flanked her closely. Zz hadn’t touched her drink.

“This isn’t real silver but who’d know? You know?” Zz said. Her voice was thinning. Something was rushing forward behind it.

“This table leg is done so well that . . . I thought maybe you could just put this on the wall all its own . . . look at it . . . it’s beautiful.”

We remained silent, waiting for her charade to weaken and expose some emotional nub. We knew our job: listen and drink. I stared out the pill-shaped windows into the parking lot. Nothing moved. Elvis sang and I tried to make a connection in that way that you do when you need a song to explain your life to you. Then it came, sobbing. Her hair moved with the cries. Carroll and Grace moved in closer and embraced her from either side. This went on for a long time.

“The motherfucker didn’t even give me a chance!” she screamed.

She cried for a long time. I washed glasses at the other end of the bar. I pretended to really inspect them before lining them up behind the bar in their tidy rows.
"The motherfucker got me in the bathroom! What a shit! Didn’t even give me a chance to escape! Cornered me in the bathroom! Where am I supposed to go? You know? Nowhere to fucking go! He’s in front of the door! Didn’t even give me a chance. Not a window or nothing. Fucking bastard coward."

I opened myself a bottle of beer for something to do. I caught Zz’s eye for a moment, then stared blankly towards the pool table. Somebody had left fifty cents on the rail.

Coldly, ashamedly, I understood right at that moment, as I do now, that I didn’t have to be a part of any of this. I had my remove. Someday when I was gone this would be only material to me, words whored out onto a page that rendered the event history. And subsequently bogus.

Larry Hinjios was Oglala Sioux, was as Sioux as the day is long, yet it seemed almost an accident that he lived here not thirty miles from the Powder River and the Little Big Horn.

Born in Rapid City, he was adopted by Mormons who moved him to Idaho Falls. Eleven years later he ran away to Salt Lake City. From there he spent the following twenty five years yo-yoing up and down California, first working at a donut shop in Hollister and then one in Bakersfield. He moved to Palm Springs and married a woman who had a pool cleaning business. Then he moved back to Bakersfield, divorced, and bought the donut shop. Six months later he sold the donut shop. In the ’80s he drifted as a maintenance man on the California county fair circuit, was a roadie for a Led Zeppelin cover band called Stairway to Heaven, and worked in a video store. For a year he managed a Chuck E Cheese in suburban Sacramento where he tried Jesus, twice, got bored and discovered Elvis and chilled vodka. How he ended with the post office back here in southern Montana I had no idea, but there were worse fates than working a government job and having a good bar.

Before I met Larry he’d been a volunteer out at the Custer battlefield, riding in the reenactments every June. To hear him tell it, the whole production was about reinforcing that famous reprint you’ve seen in junior high textbooks and on the walls of Wyoming bars. In the image the wounded are strewn everywhere. Horses run without riders. In one hand Custer is firing a re-
volver and in the other he's swinging a saber. His flaxen hair blows as if there is a wind machine just off camera. He's a rock star. The dead are at his feet.

After a decade of role playing Larry had had enough of this revisionism—asshole as martyr—and one day he decided to amend the production. Every year it had been the same fucking routine. Phase one: the initial circling. Phase two: the dismount. In phase three he fired two shots that never hit anybody. Phase four included his big war cry that was less daunting than it was a cue to get plugged, every summer like clockwork, by the same cavalry trooper with the blonde mustache.

"God I hated that fuck!"

For the remainder of the battle he was to lay there, staring at the cloudless white sky. Boring. Especially considering that Larry felt that, had he actually been at the battle of the Little Bighorn, he would have kicked no uncertain ass.

So on a day in late June, an afternoon wracked with mosquitoes, having had enough, Larry rode directly into the battle's inner circle. Going against the script he failed to dismount, refused further to fall at the hands of the blonde mustache, and continued to charge. He rode through the phalanx of the 7th Cavalry, all clad in royal blue with yellow piping, rode over the already dead and the impending, past the tomahawks and pistol butts of the hand to hand combat circle, and upon The Man himself. This took very little time, and before any of it could be figured, Larry had reared back and dropped General George with a barroom haymaker. The tourist families watched as he stood directly over out-cold Custer, squawking at him just as Muhammad Ali used to admonish the collapsed.

"That guy who played Custer tried to blind side me in a bar in Powell about a year after that," Larry told me. "Drunk thing. You know bar fights, so few punches ever connect. This one didn't, kind of glanced off my shoulder. I didn't even see it coming. I thought it was somebody tapping me on the shoulder. The Custer hairdo wasn't real you know, it was a wig. I don't know about the mustache. I don't know if it was a glue-on or if I knocked the real thing off his face."

Zoey was there in the Melt Down picking up her mother. Zz was
too drunk to drive, which says a lot in a state where distances are so uncluttered and without margin that drunk driving accidents usually entail a dog or a garbage can.

I doubt Zoey had a permit, but she docked her mother's brown Monte Carlo with such aplomb that I could tell none of this was new to her.

I got her a can of Pepsi from the cooler and poured it in a pint glass with ice and cherries. She dug in her mother's purse and pulled out a five to pay for it. Fading mauve fingernail polish, a good idea one night, chipped off in flakes and made her hands look veteran and sad.

Larry made a loud, funny noise from the other end of the bar. He was still wearing his blue post office shirt and navy blue shorts. His tube socks went up to his knees. Everybody sitting around him was grooving with their heads as if suddenly listening to Elvis for the first time.

"That's Scotty Moore on guitar," he beamed. He always said this, and after a while it meant something to me as well. The air guitar Larry Hinjos played was about the size of a ukulele.

I told Zoey that the coke was on me. She smiled and said thanks, and then said my name. This surprised me. Though we were aware of each other we'd never met. When she came to pick up her mother she always stayed in the parking lot. Later we figured out that we'd probably talked a dozen times on the phone without knowing it.

Zoey stuck around for a while that night. I gave her singles for the jukebox and refreshed her cherry cokes. At two I helped with getting her mother to the car. When Zoey, tiny behind the wheel, got halfway across the parking lot she turned the headlights on. Instantly a column of falling snow was illuminated. Until then, I had not noticed the night's weather.

I could give you an encyclopedia of facts about Larry Hinjos. I could rub them into a sentimental biography, but I want the man to make sense to me.

Three of the five anecdotes here I witnessed first hand. One of them I saw happen to an uncle of mine back in Washington, and the fifth I stole from the television show Bonanza. But the following went down, absolutely.
I’d been commandeering the jukebox all afternoon to much protest. I was trying to play what I thought Montanans liked, Waylon Jennings for example, but everyone whined. They wanted TV country. Billy Ray Cyrus in Reeboks and fluffy hair. The whole neocountry scene seemed to me an awful lot like the contrived L.A. Glam Rock scene of the ’80s. All image. The fact that Johnny Cash had denounced Nashville and that both Hoyt Axton and Townes Van Zandt were both recently dead meant little to my customers. They didn’t want the history of Americana, they wanted music video: Brooks & Dunn balladeering in the rain, Clint Black next to a fire on a beach, Garth Brooks jumping around a stage in a dumb shirt and a drive-through headset.

“Whaaaaaat is this shit?” bellowed Larry. “Where’s the King?”

I took money from the register and punched the jukebox up with plenty of Elvis. I knew nobody would give Larry shit.

Two guys I’d never seen before were sitting down by the bar’s elbow and drinking Early Times. I began pouring them stiff when I realized that the gentleman who was staring blankly through me also had a collapsible cane in his lap.

About an hour and three drinks later the blind man began yelling, “Fucking coward, hit me!” He stood and stared blankly at his buddy. His friend tried to hush him, telling him to just cool it and sit down. “C’mon, you haven’t even touched this drink,” he said.

I realized they were both probably drunk when they came in. Not that that was a crime in my mind.

“No, fuck that, hit me. Pussy.” The bar went silent save for a guy who was still telling this nothing story about the guys who poured the concrete in his driveway. I felt the pressure to do something with my hands, to wipe a surface or stir the ice bin.

“Hey you guys,” I said.

“You won’t fucking hit a blind man will you, will you!” he shouted. His friend stared ahead.

“You won’t pay a blind man enough fucking respect to hit him in the face, will you? Will you?” The blind man took a swing that skimmed his friend’s shoulder.


“You hit me then.”
He turned to me. His countenance drew past me. Outside of the blank stare there was no way by looking at the man’s eyes to see that he was blind. They were not milky or wandering, but intense and a deep brown. I had nothing to base this on, but I believed he hadn’t been blind his whole life.

“Rich, please,” said his friend.

“You, my man, bartender, hit me. Hit me right here and I’ll tip you a hundred dollars. Here it is. A hundred bucks. It’s yours. Take it. You don’t have the balls.”

“Look man.” And that was it, all I could say. The bar, needing some response, stared at me. I had none. I didn’t know what it meant not to have the balls to hit a blind man.

“I’ll fucking do it,” said Larry. “Be honored.” He was off his bar stool in an instant and offering his hand to Rich. Larry guided the blind man’s palm into his own.

“I’m Larry Hinjos.”

“Rich Becker.”

“Pleasure.”

“Likewise.”

“I’m going to need a couple of shots here,” said Larry. Immediately I went to work with the vodka, thankful for having something to do.

“I’ll hit you, man. You sure?” asked Larry.

“Yes.”

“I’m an Indian you know. You have problems getting decked by a Red Man?”

“I don’t care if you’re green.”

Larry laughed, “All right, let’s do this right then. What are you drinking?”

As I poured up the shots, Larry and some others went about clearing stools and tables away. The silence in the bar had surrendered to incredulous chuckles. The two did their shots with a slight wheeze and grimace.

“Give me your left hand, blind man,” said Larry.

Rich held out his arm and Larry secured it with his own. Left looking left. “You got a good grip? You gotta hold tight.”

“Yeah, I gotta hold.”

“Don’t let go. I won’t let go of you.”

“Ok.”
"You holding tight?"
Rich nodded his head.
"Ok, then you go first blind man. You punch first."
A huge grin came across Rich's bearded face. He bunched his right fist and raised it waist high.
"I ain't going anywhere," said Larry. "Hold tight."
Rich reached out and placed Larry's face, then he reared back and caught Larry square in the jaw. It made that nauseating mush sound that real life punches have.
Larry went back on his heels but held on. He said nothing, evening his eyes and making firm his grip on Rich's forearm. He connected with a right that exploded Rich's lip. I went for a towel. A moment later Rich came back with a glancing blow that did little damage to Larry's nose, then Larry connected again with Rich's lip. The thing was trashed with blood now in his beard and all over the front of his t-shirt.
Rich spit on the floor and squeezed Larry's forearm until it was white, then caught Larry just under his right eye. This made him smile. Larry's knees buckled but he didn't go down, Rich wouldn't let him.
The next blow caught Rich on the chin and split that open too.
Larry closed his eyes for the coming punch. Rich hit him so hard this time that when Larry hit the floor he went down on top of him. Then they were helping each other up and locking forearms.
"That's the way to hit, baby!" yelled Larry Hinjos.
This went on in otherwise silence for another minute or so. Maybe ten blows in all, something outrageous. Neither of them went down. The other wouldn't allow it. By the end they were both laying propped up against the door to the office with ice packs, blood soaked rags, and fresh cocktails. Rich's buddy, a man you knew spent his life trying to keep Rich from harm's way, was infinitely relieved it was finally over. Everybody else laughed. Elvis sang loud. Larry found a loose tooth way in the back of his mouth and played with it. Rich continued spitting blood over the top of his demolished lip. There was a slow bruise developing under Larry's eye.
They laughed so hard together that blood and snot ran in a single rope from Rich’s nose. He had no idea as it pooled in his lap, a gory image that had Larry in such hysterics it sent him out to the parking lot, coughing. And then vomiting.

I followed him out there and uncoiled the hose from the side of the bar. Doubled over with an ice pack on his eye and white vomit at his feet, he laughed and laughed and soon I was too, slapping the hose against the ground.

I turned the hose on and pushed the barf across the parking lot. Nasty business. The trick was to get the stream angle low enough on it so you could move it all the way to the curb. Minutes later I admired the job I’d done. Where the vomit had been was now just wet, black pavement worthy of parking. Then I aimed the hose on the Skylark, and as Larry protested that the car had never been washed and that the windows were rolled down, I turned it on him, watching him flee on all fours back into the bar.

I’d been up for nearly two days doing speed in the back office between working doubles, but I felt all right. I knew that when I finally went down I’d sleep a long time.

I had already been thinking about leaving this flat stretch of the country and going back to Olympia, so it wouldn’t be fair to say that the events that transpired were a clean cause of which leaving was the effect. It’s more oblique than that, and it always is.

Some college friends called and said they had this tiny laundry room connected to the back of their house they’d rent me for cheap. Plus there was a girl out there who’d been sending me interesting letters. So.

I’d been up for a long time but felt ok, knowing I had another six hours of drinking in me that I could enjoy before crashing. I got off shift at five and Larry Hinjos and I were thinking of driving out to this farm to check out this white buffalo that had been advertised on Xeroxed leaflets all over town. Five bucks! it advertised. First one born in the state in over a hundred years! “We gotta check this out,” said Larry. As a Sioux he wasn’t so much indignant over the exploitation of this sacred symbol as he was amused. Back when he’d tried Jesus in Sacramento, at the
height of his apostasy, he too had made light of the paganism of his ancestors.

What most made the flyer interesting were the disclaimers: Real Thing! No Bleach! No Paint! No Fake Hides!

We howled at the image of some poor fucker out in a clearing trying to whiten a buffalo. He’s roll-painting its sides, he’s pouring his fourth bottle of bleach on the sizzling beast. Now he’s draping llama hides over it, fastening it underneath with bungee cords.

We were high and had the giggles, yeah, and Larry was doing crank with me which animated him even more, but even still these images tore right through us and we laughed until those around us moved away.

Before we piled into Larry’s Skylark we got a twelver of Rainier. Zz called the bar and said she was having a barbecue out at her place and that everybody was welcome.

We never made it to see the white buffalo. We hit a couple more bars instead. Like so many plans hatched in a bar—designs of fishing or a road trip, softball, whatever—they fizzled into simply more drinking.

When we arrived there were a dozen people in the yard drinking and taking in the warm twilight. My eyes kept drifting over to the small airstrip that was a hundred yards beyond Zz’s place. It was marked with a dozen red lights lining either side of the runway. Just beyond it was a towering antennae with a pulsing red light on top. The light faded in and out so fluidly that you couldn’t tell if it was ever all the way off. It was a simple but fascinating thing to stare at stoned, and I did for a while when Zoey wandered out into the yard with a plastic cup full of strawberry wine.

“Hey Zoey. What’s shakin’?” I said lamely.

“Nothing,” she said. We talked about the party for a while. She did not roll curly-cues in her hair with her fingers or kick at the dirt. She did not look away when talking or drink too much with each raising of the cup, as I did.

Zz’s place marked a solitary dot in the midst of incredible emptiness. It was one of three or four structures that broke up the landscape. Maybe it was because dusk is a poetic time, with all the light falling out of the day, that I felt that this flatness was
supposed to mean something to me. Things that you’d never notice in town—a leaning fence with a yellow Billings Gazette box on it, a neat orchard-row of Cypress serving as a windbreak—these became something more in this space. And the grasslands surrounding Zz’s were so massive and easy that you could imagine taking off in any direction. Driving roadless, say, on a swath blazed by those huge towers that shouldered power cables across the prairie.

Of the people at the party, most I knew from the bar. Those I did not were simply versions of these same people who lived at other bars.

The party was spaced between the duplex and a fire ring outside. Some guy had a guitar but wasn’t being obnoxious about it. He could play, but also knew when not to. Inside Zz had set up a folding table with more booze than was fun, bowls of cheetos and pretzels, plastic cups and a big Tupperware bowl she kept dumping ice into.

Larry came in with a few other guys from the yard and we went to the same tiny bathroom Zz had not been given a chance to escape from months earlier. We did some speed—I lined it up on the counter, dicing up some of the larger, rougher chunks into an inhalable texture. One of the guys said “good shit” after his line, though it was low-grade and tore hellfire through your sinuses.

I couldn’t drink enough. High, my tongue metallic and thick, I went into the yard to stare at the light on top of the tower again. This time it resisted its soothing rise and fade; just a nothing light at the end of a road and me grinding my teeth together. Inside the duplex somebody put on a tape of David Allan Coe. Zoey found me again.

“Mom’s trashed,” she said. She paused a long time after saying this. I could tell she was ready to say something important, maybe something about me. Or at least a measured complaint against her life.

“Yeah,” I said. My toes curled from the speed.

“Don’t you think like you’re a little young to be hanging out with this crowd?” she said.

“You’re probably right. But maybe I break the mold. They respect me.”
"You serve them drinks."

I grinned. Did she see me in the society of adults? Or was I closer to her generation? Maybe I was an object of pity, an easy thing to confide in standing at the edge of the yard.

I wanted to ask a provocative question. I wanted to show Zoey that I was interested in her and Zz's history, but mostly I wanted to sound smart and attractive. Nothing came out. I could have talked for hours, but stayed silent, the speed buzzing in my teeth and mashing my lines of thought. I couldn't grab a single word from the air.

"Want to see our flea market stuff?"

I nodded and she took my hand and we walked behind the duplex, through more weeds and around a couple of unidentifiable chunks of heavy machinery in the yard. We came upon a back door. This was the sneak away spot where I could kiss her. I did not.

Even in the dark you could sense the space we entered was crowded with treasures. She pulled the chain from a single bulb and suddenly we were surrounded: paintings in garish frames, two cuckoo clocks, a cherry wood bureau. On a table along the far wall was a pachinko board with a mermaid on it.

Zoey stepped over a box of doorknobs, around a sideboard bar complete with several crystal decanters, and back to a rack of gowns. I noticed they were all in tones of green and blue.

"Mom said she'd let me wear one of these to the Kids against Cancer dance this summer." She took one from the rack and handed it over. It was well made and cut low. I imagined her breasts squeezed together, her hair up with a single lock tucked behind her ear.

"What do you think?" she asked. She held up another gown, this one with a matching scarf.

"I like it, does it fit?"

"Hold on, I'll put it on."

It was cliché, I know. But what happens when it happens? Do you lie about it because it doesn't sound real?

She folded her jeans over the rack and knocked something over in a cardboard box I couldn't really see. Her laugh was high on sweet wine, giggly even, and I felt dirty and old. I felt excited.
and above my head with desire. Then I felt really good and told her that while she dressed I'd go refresh the drinks.

"The strawberry wine is in the back of the fridge," she said. Back outside I stood behind the duplex regarding the darkening sky. The initial panic of the speed had evened out and I felt hyper and drunk, good again.

The red light of the airport pulsed slowly; a comforting robotic eye against a background of purple. I could hear laughing, loud, booming Larry Hinjos laughter. I wanted more scotch, I wanted to see a plane land, I wanted to screw Zoey. All these things were true to me, and I'd be an idiot to lie to you about them now.

Larry was slaying everybody in the yard with his tales, as usual. There was a circle around him, and as other people told stories I noticed they weren't funny until Larry laughed first. I saw one guy drinking straight from a fifth of Early Times who became so giddy and confident after Larry's ratifying laugh that the remainder of his story was brilliant and beyond himself.

In the kitchen I poured myself more scotch and tap water, then I went to the fridge and pulled out the strawberry wine. I found a red plastic cup and washed it out in the sink.

"Hey," said Zz. She was trashed and closer to me than she'd ever been in the bar. I could smell the funky combination of Tequila and perfume. She adjusted and poofed her yellow wig. The pinky underneath her drink stood straight out.

"Hey Zz, great party. Thanks for having us out."

She grinned and pulled me in for a long, off balance hug. She pulled my face into her shoulder and lost part of her drink onto the floor. It was like embracing a tipping statue.

"I have to tell you... I want to say... Ok... " and she laughed until she took a deep drink of her Tequila. She seemed to be staring at something deep in her cup.

"Look, you're a great guy, you really are. I know a lot of people down at The Melt Down say that, but I really really mean it. You're a great guy."

"Thanks Zz, I think you're great too," I said.

"And I want you to know that if there's anything you ever need, or want, just ask."

I nodded.
"Can I be honest with you?"
"Sure Zz, what is it?"
"I don't want this to sound weird."
I nodded. I had no idea what she was talking about so I raised my glass and she brought hers in. We toasted and drank long.
"I want to say that this has nothing to do with us being drunk. I want you to know that, right?"
I nodded.
"I'm sorry. Look, Zoey is getting that age, where, I don't know. You know?"
I didn't.
"You know you're such a great guy, and I just don't want her losing it to some kid at school who's insensitive, or doesn't know what he's doing? You know? I know this is weird. But you're such a great guy."
I was stunned, then drank.
"If you want to, that is, I can't force you. I'm sorry. This is stupid. I know," she said, and she looked at me with such sincere regard that the twisted love of a thousand mothers shimmered in her green sequin blouse. Who knows at what age and in what space Zz had lost her virginity; who he had been, and what all exactly revolved around that memory. All I knew was she wanted to protect her daughter from whatever that was, and that her love of Zoey was far stronger than any pang of lust I'd felt earlier. In the small kitchen I made us up fresh drinks and she hugged me again.

Outside Larry Hinjios was slapping a guy on the back as he choked and spit booze into the smoldering fire. In the storage space Zoey wasn't to be found. The single sixty-watt bulb was still on and I found the lamp made of fake shells that Zz had bought a couple weeks earlier. It stood on an antique coffee table that I put our drinks on. Zoey's clothes were rumpled on the floor. I went outside.
"Zoey?"
Far off I heard retching and coughing. When I found her in the tall grass she was on all fours, wearing the green gown. A stream of spittle connected her to the cold ground.
"You ok?" I asked.
"Ohh shit," she wheezed.
I pulled the hair in front of her face behind her ear. Then she was sprawled in the dirt again, so I left her alone and wandered to the dirt airstrip. I strolled between the parallel rows of red lights. The sounds of Zoey being sick lasted a while. When I returned I noticed the scarf from the gown had been sacrificed somewhere in the grass.

"Let's get you into the bathroom," I said. She held on to me with both arms around my stomach. Her left breast was firm against my forearm. I guided her, bumping and stumbling, through the back door of the duplex and into the bathroom. She sat with her back against the wall, slouching with a bunched up bathroom rug under her. She stared into the toilet.

"You'll be fine," I said.

"I feel awful," she said. I got her some ice cubes to suck on and she responded by dry heaving for another ten minutes. I sat in the bathroom, my legs folded up against me, saying nothing. Then I went outside to take a leak. I told her I'd be right back and that she'd be fine, and closed the door of the bathroom softly.

Out in the yard everyone was gone. Drunken remnants of the party lay everywhere: bottles in the grass, a guy sleeping in his car, the David Allan Coe tape playing back for the tenth time. A guy I recognized from the Melt Down pulled his car up alongside the duplex. I asked him what was going on and he said Zz had left with everyone to go close The Point After. Did I want to go?

I said I was fine.

Tired of scotch, I grabbed a bottle of Budweiser from the fridge and went to look for Larry. The Skylark was parked at the same angle. He wasn't in it. I walked out onto the airstrip and followed the red parallel lights west with my eyes until they joined into a single laser at the end of the runway.

"Jesus Christ."

I meant everything. I knew right there that I would be moving. Two months maybe. It was one of those small moments afforded to you when you articulate decisions you've already made. I would leave the fishbowl that was the Melt Down Lounge, leave this elevated prairie that was south eastern Montana, and I'd go back to live in college town Washington.
I stood out there until I finished my bottle of beer, throwing it into the weeds lining the runway. I walked back past the fire but still no Larry. He'd left my ass here and went to the bar with Zz.

I don't know how to express what I felt next because it was such a tumble of contradictory impulses that I stood for a long time, motionless in a breeze combing the grass. I no longer wanted to fuck Zoey, or even kiss her. I wanted to ravage her, and I knew that I probably could with nobody around. That she was helpless on the bathroom floor fueled my lust further. The idea that I could have my way with her and convince her later of her consent utterly charged this moment. I swirled in these darknesses, half marveled that I had the deviance to conjure them.

And then, like an undiagnosed sickness, it simply passed. Half hard, the whole thing turned against itself. It faded into a terrible, abominable idea. More fickle than righteous, the source of all this morality was beyond me. Is beyond me still.

I'd walk to the bar they were all at. The walk and the chance to soak in some air and plot my move to Washington would do me good. I'd wind down this three-day bender with some cocktails with the gang and sleep deep into tomorrow.

I went back into the duplex to check on Zoey and make sure she wasn't puking on the green gown or worse.

Inside the bathroom she lay with her head on the edge of the toilet bowl. Beside her was Larry Hinjos. He had his cock in his hand, and his cock was on the green of the dress. Her eyes rolled and her head flopped. The dirty, pink bathroom rug was bunched between her knees. Larry's shorts were at his ankles. He pulled them up. Then he charged me, huge.

But it was easy. Delivering a blow hasn't felt easy since. With a right, I hit him mostly in the forehead. It stunned him long enough for me to push him through the shower curtain and into the tub. His head bounced violently off of the spigot. Zoey's face rolled on the toilet seat.

"Motherfucker. Motherfucker." I said. I tore the towel rack off the wall, then I walked out. I walked passed the Tupperware bowl of melted ice. I walked into the yard, past the fire and Larry's Skylark and onto the road. I walked for hours into the night. I finished the speed in my pocket by inhaling it in small amounts.
scooped onto the tip of my apartment key. I walked through town and bought a bag of Doritos at an all night convenience store that wouldn't sell me beer because it was after two. Sprinklers wet my ankles. I saw a kid in the back of a station wagon throwing newspapers.

What other inane details do you want?

I stayed up all night in my apartment, coming down and packing. Somewhere mid-morning I passed out on the couch and didn't wake until night. Outside it was snowing heavily. I felt like I'd slept through two seasons.

I was leaving and that would take care of itself. I had very little. I could ship everything for a hundred bucks. I wasn't worried about that. I was worried as to how I was going to leave. What attempt at a decent exit could even be considered here? I thought of Zz, weeks back, trapped in that bathroom with some man, drunk, a stranger really, and no way out. I thought of Zoey, stunning, at the Kids against Cancer dance in a gown beyond her years. Then I made a pot of coffee and sat at the window for a long time, watching my packed boxes do nothing. I needed something unifying. Out the window I told myself to watch the snow slant under the streetlight where you could see it best, but ended up reading an old sports page instead.