



## Chapter 47 (excerpt) *Planets remain in extra-Whyominal orbits*

Back in Laramie, a town in 2/4 time, it was a chilly Saturday night. Nothing new there. The stars were out and the cafe deserted due to spring break. After a shower I Spurred over for a beer, maybe two. Here's to the spark of romance, the promise of glowing embers, the Bent Wheat Lager brewing family. Quirky ballads, the allure of snowmobiles. Widespread Panic, the group; "Mutant Victors", their signature first set close.

After the Spur, I came back and setup the darkroom to work on my term portfolio. When layed out on the floor before sequencing, the collective message jumped out--19 shots at emptiness, plus the wakeup. There were clusters of stepdown transformers in frozen alleys, a beauty contestant without pageant, rock stars I had known with empty looks, figures identified only by their shadows and silhouettes, a woman sleeping in a Land Cruiser in a snowstorm, coffee foam residue in a china mug threatened by a blurred advance from two o'clock--could be a spoon, arrow, punch, miniature thunderstorm, whatever you want it to be. Anything you can get or do for a grade at the *Supermarket of the Artistic Elite: An Installation*.

The woman in the car was of course Cathy. Exhausted or happily dozing at that moment, lulled into relaxation by the slow drive through the snow? Solid and forgiving, she put aside the notoriety which so often streaked, sometimes outright scratched my life, but wanted the one thing so hard for me to give--love. A fine woman. Would I ever escape the loneliness, to love someone again as I had begun to love Emily, totally, breathtakingly? And if yes, was I capable of the follow-through assuring it would live, last? I kept coming back to these questions, time after time.

The fences, bare trees, old tractor in a field set before frozen hills, vapor which might have been from an off-frame laugh. One brought in from somewhere else, maybe 1927. Nothing to laugh about in this spare land I was defining. The photographs captured the local universe of a few days, reflections recorded, some things only I would recognize once printed. Tracks which extended through the clearing of our time together, those we had made. I could rewrite all of this, reexpose the frames any number of times. They would all say the same thing. We haven't split up because we were never really together. I don't know why. I just know it's true.

March began like a walk in a field, the first green of Spring's beauty emerging, only to end with a fall into an unmarked well. "Same as it ever was ... same as it ever was," David Byrne and Talking Heads contributed. Mark Knopfler's Dire Straits, *hojoo bá' ágo*, neared the top of the charts, and things were looking up in the Middle East with the peace treaty between Israel and Egypt signed. The headlines should have read:

### **Failure to Knock on Wood**

On March 28th an accident at the Three Mile Island nuke plant, just a few miles southeast of Harrisburg, nearly caused a meltdown of the core. I could hear the Chief Event Containment Rep's monotonal debrief: "It was close, we almost lost the unit."

During the following week I called my parents repeatedly for updates, their evacuation plans. All the time thinking about never being able to go back--not me, since I had left years ago and wasn't interested in returning, but them. The

barns of Dillsburg abandoned, radiation-poisoned, overgrown by plants which would be studied for effects century after century by technicians in concrete suits. Reflecting on conversations with friends in the late 60's, about how well summer work at Three Mile paid. That's what it had been all about. Forget the fail-safe systems which failed. Return on "equity", sweat or capital, in its narrowest definition. Big money. Equity-safe.

Considering the stress, the spring MFA recital went well. Actually, an understatement. I channelled the tension of recent days into the dynamics of my original piano sonata, a technically demanding work of variations reminiscent of Mozart.

"Thank you for your kind interest and attention," I simply said, got up and left, boots sharply clomping on the wooden floor of the recital hall. Cowboy? Indeed. Terse. Got customers to tend.

The faculty panel was speechless, blown away. I know that because of a conversation later. A guest member of the MFA panel from New York, passing through on the way to a spring visit to Aspen, sought me out at the Cafe. It was no secret in the Music Department where I could be found.

"That was extraordinary, both in composition and technique. Have you considered studying with a master?" Swami Who? James and Bobby Purify-- "I'm Your Puppet"? That part fit.

"Maybe later. I'm having too much fun now running a cafe."

"As superb as you are, as much better as you undoubtedly can be, will *not* developing your talent, *not* taking it to its highest expression, ever be enough?" Not the background tint I was looking for; not the texture, chord structure, or optimal temperature to caramelize the glaze. Not, not, and more not. City guy.

"I do plan to continue sharpening my skills, but perhaps by a different course than you have described. Let's just leave it at that and enjoy some great Yrgacheffe coffee, assuming, of course, that you gave me an A."

"Indeed I did, though in no way does just one letter describe what we heard. When you change your mind about a course of study ... ." As if it was inevitable. "Innovation and excellence, what you can always count on at the Trade School of the Virtuosos Illustriativos." Get that product to market! The right tint, perfect glaze.

Beth heard a word here and there, and after he'd gone, sat down for a minute to talk.

"We can't help but hear you play upstairs when it's quiet down here in the cafe. The Music School people who came in earlier said you stoked the recital, that you're a world class talent. They're in awe of you. *Are you that good?*"

"I may be in terms of technique relative to my rather narrow musical interests and familiarity at this point, possibly in terms of potential as well. Certainly not in terms of repertoire. I'm not even out of the 18th century yet. Though the promise may be there, the sculpture doesn't always come out of the stone."

"Are you going to go after it, Craig? You know, New York? We'd be rooting for you, but it wouldn't be the same without you here. I'll never be able to thank you enough for bringing me out and giving me this opportunity. Bob feels the same way."

"About bringing you out here?"

"That too," Beth laughed.

I haven't changed my mind yet, though it would be nice to have friends who say things like, "I think I'll play the Chopin." Or, "I'd like to sing the Schumann." A soprano in my future? Not likely outside New York or Vienna. The closest I was going to get to that scene was Vienna, the roast.

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