

Black's Beach Shuffle

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The Mansion

It was two-thirty on a Sunday morning in June. Rolly Waters parked his old Volvo wagon outside the gates of a mansion, which sat on the cliffs overlooking the Pacific Ocean just north of La Jolla. It was Rolly's second visit to the house that evening. If he'd been more diligent about packing his instruments after the first visit, he wouldn't have needed to make the second. Somewhere on the other side of the eight-foot high stucco wall that surrounded the house was his 1965 Gibson ES-335 Thinline electric guitar. He wouldn't have been able to sleep knowing it was lying there, all alone, unprotected.

Any decent guitar player develops a special attachment to certain instruments that come along in his life, and Rolly was madly in love with the cherry red Gibson. It was a symbol of promises he'd made to himself, of changes he'd made in his life. It was also worth four thousand dollars. His car was only worth two thousand, at most. The value of the guitar was still increasing. It was the only thing he owned that could be called an investment.

He opened the door, climbed out of the car, and walked across the street. Except for the light shining from the button on the intercom at the gate, the house looked completely dark. Rolly paused for a moment, considered his choices, hoping he wouldn't have to wake anyone. He hated bothering people and, when he was sober, was as considerate in his behavior as anyone could expect from a thirty-nine-year-old rock musician. He

hadn't had a drink in four years, ten months, and five days now. His level of solicitousness had risen appreciably in that time. Still, his guitar might be lying on the lawn behind that wall, soaking up dew from the grass, salt mist from the ocean. He needed to overcome his reticence in order to retrieve it before any irreparable damage was done.

He pushed the intercom button, waited, pushed it again. There was no response from the house. If anyone was inside, they were fast asleep, a sleep deepened no doubt by the steady flow of champagne that had been part of the evening's festivities. He pushed the button again. There was still no response.

It was Moogus, the band's drummer, who'd insisted everything had been packed. Moogus was a man possessed of infinite jests and a walloping backbeat, but he was not the kind of man to depend on. Moogus had been in such a hurry to leave that Rolly had foregone his usual last sweep of the scene. The Volvo was packed full of gear—Moogus' drum cases, Rolly's amplifier, guitars, and kit bag, so it wasn't until they stopped at Moogus' house to unload that Rolly realized the ES-335 was missing.

Rolly searched along the wall that fronted the street. If his calculations were correct, the bandstand had been set up against the other side of the wall about thirty feet to his left. It stood flush against the inside wall, facing the pool and a large concrete patio. The guitar was sure to be somewhere close to the bandstand. If he could get over the wall, he'd be in and out in less than a minute. He walked to his left, along the wall, stepping between the ice plant and a row of small dirt mounds supporting miniature lime trees. He stopped at a spot where he figured the bandstand would be, looked up at the top of the wall. He needed to jump to get his arms over the wall, then try to hang on and drag himself over. He took one step back, looked up, took two more steps back. He balanced himself, ran forward and leapt towards the wall.

Even in his youth, Rolly had never been much of an athlete, and the twenty-five pounds he had put on over the years had not improved his abilities any. He hit the wall stomach first, fell back to the ground. Still, the leap had come close enough that he held out some hope for success. He tried it again, got one arm over the wall, but failed to hold on. After a false start on the third try,

he made it on the fourth, throwing both arms across the top of the wall just enough to hang on. He pulled himself up, slid across on his belly, dropped down to the wet grass. A dense silhouette of wooden risers, the bandstand, stood about ten feet off to his left. He walked over to it, searched around the perimeter and under the risers. The guitar wasn't there. The rescue was going to take slightly longer than he had hoped.

He looked towards the patio and the house. The house was shaped like a T laid out flat on the ground. A two-story section formed the top of the T and ran parallel to the edge of the cliffs. It had many tall windows, providing vistas from every room. The stem of the T was a more functional one-story section that divided the patio and pool from the parking lot. A covered walkway provided access between the two areas. If one of the other band members, Gordon or Bruce, had picked up Rolly's guitar case, he would have crossed the lawn to the edge of the patio towards the parking area where they had packed their cars after the gig. It seemed like the place to try next.

Rolly crept across the lawn, stopped at the entrance to the covered walkway, and waited for his eyes to adjust to the darkness inside. He began to make out shapes—a couple of large potted plants, a bicycle, the door to the garage—but there was nothing that resembled the long, flat shape of his guitar case. He felt nervous. A little bubble of gas floated up in his stomach.

He turned back around, scanned the patio. The large round folding tables that had been loaded with towers of jumbo shrimp, trays of sushi, and champagne bottles packed in ice were now empty, reduced to their low-grade wood surfaces and dented metal edges. Bits of red paper tablecloths clung to the spots where they'd been stapled down to keep them from blowing away. On one of the tables stood a couple of champagne flutes the caterers had missed. The party supply company would arrive after sunrise to pick up the tables and chairs, haul them away in their big trucks. Rolly had to find his guitar before they arrived. You never knew what kind of finders/keepers rules the guys who worked the clean-up detail might live by.

He began a methodical walk through the tables, looking under each one, forcing himself to be disciplined. Moogus had been standing out here at the end of the evening, chatting it up with a

slinky young woman in a black strapless dress. Moogus' mind worked even less well in the presence of an attractive female.

He spotted the guitar case. It was under one of the tables on the patio, as if someone had shoved it there. He knelt down beside it, flipped the latches and opened the case. The ES-335 was there, safe and snug in the velvet interior lining of its protector. He slapped the cover back down, clicked the latches in place, and grabbed the handle. Everything was right again in his world.

As he turned towards the pool, he saw something he hadn't noticed before, a black shape floating in the water. A stone dropped in Rolly's stomach, sending out ripples. The light from the lamp at the end of the pool surrounded a dead, naked body, creating a silhouette, and the clumps of long black hair that floated around its head made a halo through which bright beams shone, as if the person were departing to meet an alien spaceship, or riding a watery blue light to heaven. Whoever had once inhabited the body was gone now from the earth.

A Quandary

The body was skinny, delicate, the figure a little bit girlish. It was hard to tell for sure, but Rolly guessed it was a young man, in his mid-twenties at most. Regardless of age, he was dead; there was no doubt about that. Which left the question of what to do next. Rolly turned, searched for signs of life in the large picture windows that stared down at him. They were silent and dark. An empty balcony hung over the far end of the pool like an elegant, shadowy gallows. Other than the body in the pool and Rolly standing beside it, there was no sign of a human being anywhere. No one had answered his earlier ring at the gate. But it was possible someone was watching him from inside the house even now, someone who might be calling the police. It was an expensive house in an expensive neighborhood. He might have set off some kind of silent alarm without even knowing he'd done it. The security service would have responded by now, sent in a call to the cops.

Rolly looked back at the body and again at the house. Before he could stop himself, he started to run. It was the kind of decision the rational side of his mind had no say in. His feet wouldn't listen to what his mind was trying to say, just like his mouth wouldn't listen to what his mind tried to tell him whenever he used to start drinking. He crossed the lawn at full speed and jumped onto the bandstand, hauling the guitar case with him. Standing on top of the risers, it would be easy to climb over the wall. He placed the case on top of the wall, shoved it over.

He pulled himself to the top of the wall, felt it scrape against his belly. He cursed his expanding middle-aged gut and slid over the edge, plopped down on the ice plant next to his guitar case. He picked up the case, scurried back to his car, and opened the door. He set the case on the passenger seat, sat down beside it, and strapped it in with the seatbelt. The man in the pool had probably been drunk. There hadn't been any blood or signs of a fight that Rolly could see. Just some poor guy who had put away too much champagne and beer, maybe something stronger, then drowned in the pool when no one had been watching. Rolly hadn't seen many dead bodies in his life. Two, really, counting tonight. He looked at his watch. It was late.

He flipped on the headlights, turned the key in the ignition. He shifted the gears into drive and pressed on the gas. The engine sputtered and died. Rolly cursed. He turned the headlights off, made a silent promise to himself that if the car started this time, he'd take it to Randy first thing Monday morning. He waited ten seconds, turned the key, and pressed on the gas. The engine sputtered, but it didn't die. He spun a u-turn in the street and headed back out towards Torrey Pines Road and the relative anonymity of a more traveled thoroughfare. He made himself focus on driving, discarding all other thoughts like a man who knew he'd had one too many. He prayed to God he could sneak his way home without seeing a squad car behind him. He took a deep conscious breath, full of effort, then another, trying to slow down the ska-rhythm beat of the blood in his eardrums.

He drove out the winding two-lane road, past the looming shapes of gigantic estates, parked like public announcements for the relentlessly rich, the outer walls wrapped in gnarled, sticky thickets of ivy or bougainvillea. As he slowed to negotiate a sharp left turn, a bright blast of headlights hit him full in the face. Rolly let out a nervous yelp and wrenched the steering wheel to his right. An old Coupe DeVille flew past, inches away from scraping his door. Its headlights whipped through the cabin of the Volvo like a Vari-Lite at a stadium show, then were gone. He turned his head and looked back as the Cadillac's taillights swung around the corner and disappeared. The Volvo bumped against something, came to a stop. Rolly waited, catching his breath. He glanced into the rearview mirror, half expecting to see the Cadillac return. It didn't.

He needed to get going. If a rent-a-cop nitwit or one of S.D.P.D.'s beat boys ran into him before he got out to Torrey Pines Road, they'd pull him over for sure. There would be all sorts of questions about what Rolly was doing in the area at this time of the morning, whether he knew anyone in the neighborhood who could vouch for him. If a rent-a-cop nabbed him, he'd make Rolly wait until the real cops showed up. Then the Finest from America's Finest City would take over, make Rolly squirm for a couple of hours just to prove they'd done their due diligence. They'd ask him the same questions over and over to see if they could catch him saying something two different ways. Rolly had two strikes against him in any beat cop's book. First of all, he was a musician. The guitar and the amplifier would give that one away. Cops hated musicians, especially at two-thirty in the morning.

But it was the identification card Rolly carried in his wallet that would make the cops really antsy—the one with the seal from the state of California that listed his regular profession, his day job. For in the idle hours of the last five years, Rolly had made himself into something other than a musician. He'd worked hard. He'd put in the hours. He'd taken the test and been fully certified as a licensed private investigator.

He was a part-timer, really, like two thousand other guys in town, mostly retired FBI or law enforcement, perhaps ex-Marines, who needed a little cash and something to do because forty-five years old was too young to really retire. But those guys knew how to talk to policemen, had friends who were cops, were part of the club. Rolly got nervous, sloppy, and stupid around anyone in a uniform. He didn't know why. It could have been all those years of late nights, watching his back as he tried to get around in the early hours of the morning, bombed out of his mind. Or maybe it went back to his father, the Navy career man, hiding behind his immaculate white suit and command-level duty while his family had come crashing down all around him.

Rolly returned from his thoughts, brought his eyes back to the Volvo's front windshield. The front fender rested against a large boulder. There was one standing on each side of the road at the entry to The Farms, like net worth boundary markers. They were imported, carved out of granite that had been ripped from the side of an Italian mountain, dropped down here to

make suitably weighty and serious sentinels. The cliffs above Black's Beach weren't made out of rocks as solid as these. The cliffs above Black's were made out of sand, hundreds of feet of it, compressed over millions of years. It was fragile, impermanent, slowly giving itself back to the ocean, breaking off in small chunks every day, every month, every year, dropping its leavings down on the beach, sometimes taking some poor tourist or pool cabana down with it.

Rolly put the car into reverse, backed it up a couple of yards and pulled onto the pavement. As he turned onto Torrey Pines Road, he breathed a sigh of relief, felt the knot in his stomach ease up just a little. Leaving the scene had been stupid. But he wasn't going back now. No one had answered his ring at the gate. No one had seen him. His moment of weakness and panic was his own private baggage to carry.

He pulled the car onto Highway 5, south. The baggage started to weigh on his mind. He'd seen a dead man. Someone needed to be told. The party-supply crew would arrive after sunrise, but that left at least three or four hours to go. He'd be at the Pacific Beach off-ramp in less than five minutes. There was sure to be a phone booth at the gas station there, off Garnet. He'd stop and make an anonymous 911 phone call. That was the safest and smartest thing he could do. If anyone ever did make him, he could point the authorities back to his call, use it in defense of his well meant, if somewhat suspicious decision to leave.

He stopped at the gas station, pulled out the photocopied map he'd been given. The letters "BFH," which he assumed were someone's initials, were printed in ornate text on the upper left corner of the paper, next to a roughly sketched map and printed directions to the house. He got out of his car, walked to the phone booth. He dialed the three numbers, reported a dead body in a swimming pool at 1186 Starlight Drive. The operator asked him his name, tried to get more information per their standard procedure. But Rolly stayed with the minimum facts he thought were necessary, then hung up the phone and went back to his car.

He pulled onto Interstate 5, headed south towards downtown San Diego. The traffic was light this time of the morning. He ran through the events of last night in his mind, reviewing the scenes and conversations he could remember, trying to place the dead

man among the sea of faces that had passed him the previous evening.

Pre-show Jitters

It had been a corporate party, given by a company called Eyebitz.com, a local start-up that was making waves, at least according to the *Union-Tribune's* business section, which Rolly occasionally read. Rolly didn't know much about the Internet or what the company did, but he did have a couple of musician friends who had gone to work at another Internet company in town, MP3.com. Kevin and Rick claimed to be sitting pretty, talking about all the money they were going to make when they went public, whatever that meant. It was one of those mysteries of the financial world that Rolly didn't quite understand, like record company royalty payments. As Rolly saw it, you never really made money unless you were standing at the top of the ant hill. All the worker ants at the bottom would keep on working, thinking they were getting somewhere until the day they got a pink slip because the guy in charge needed a new house in Aspen.

But the Eyebitz.com gig would pay well, especially for a couple hours of actual playing time, which is all that these things ever turned out to be. A company party was sure to include at least one long-winded speech, several employee appreciations and general rah-rah. There was always disorder and confusion over how long and what hours the band was to perform. It wasn't like working down at Patrick's on a Saturday night, with Harry hunting you down and screaming at you if the band stayed on break for more than a couple of minutes over schedule.

It was Fender who had set up the gig for the band—Fender “Dodge” Simmons, whom Rolly had known since junior high

school. Fender had earned his nickname on the second day of ninth grade when he'd failed to notice he was part of a suddenly improvised game of dodge ball, one in which anyone insignificant and unprotected could suddenly and unknowingly be appointed dodgee by the ruling thugs of the asphalt play yard. Fender was tall, skinny, with a slightly drooped face like a basset hound. He was an okay guy by Rolly, who had always preferred the wallflowers and dweebs to the in-crowd social climbers and power players. Rolly had been an outsider himself, but one who had managed to carry the vague scent of cool by way of his musical skills, pulling in pretty girls and the jocks that followed them with a force they couldn't understand, but couldn't dismiss.

The party started at eight. The band arrived at six-thirty. They set up the equipment and ran a quick sound check. Fender stopped by to show them the room where they could change clothes and stash their belongings. The room was empty, except for a closet, three folding chairs, and an aging white carpet. All of the rooms they passed in the long hallway were empty. Fender explained that the house's lone occupant lived at the other end of the hall, on the second floor, in the room with the balcony overlooking the pool. Rolly thought to himself that it would take him a lifetime to fill up the rooms in the house. If you were living alone, you could just start on a new room every year, trash the one you had been using, lock it up and just forget about it. After all, you still had fifteen rooms or so to go.

After the band members had changed and hung up their clothes, Bruce and Gordon headed off to find an out-of-the-way corner of the house where they could smoke a joint without being noticed. Moogus followed Fender back to the patio by the pool to check out the food and the beverage situation. He was probably checking out the female situation, as well. Rolly wanted to avoid the bar, so he walked out to the front deck, which overlooked a large yard that ran to a short stone wall and a dusty cliff top with the ocean 300 feet below. They were on top of the cliffs above Black's Beach, known to locals and tourists alike for its outstanding waves and optional swimwear. To the south, Rolly could see La Jolla Cove and the village. A light breeze blew through his hair as moist ocean air rose up and met the dry desert wind, creating a temporary stalemate in their endless battle for the coastal atmosphere. A thick bank of fog lay a mile offshore.

"Nice gig," said Moogus, walking out onto the deck towards Rolly. "There's a lot of serious talent here."

Talent was Moogus' word for attractive young women. Moogus was pushing forty-eight and making maybe twenty-five thousand a year full-time drumming, but he remained convinced that "the talent" was always waiting and ready for a man of his unfettered masculine skills. Rolly had never known a drummer who wasn't continually horny and on the make, or at least talked like he was.

"Hey, Rolly." It was Fender, following close behind, carrying that slightly off-center gaze he had where he didn't quite look at you.

"Hey, Fender."

"You got a minute? I'd like to introduce you to some of the folks here. There're important people you should get to know."

Rolly hated meeting important people he should get to know. It made him nervous. He never knew what to say around people with money and power. It looked like these people had plenty. But he needed to be polite to his patrons. It was good business. He stepped off the deck and followed Fender around the garden path to the pool area. On the patio underneath the balcony next to the pool, a small group of sycophants had gathered around a short, skinny man with blond hair. He looked about fourteen years old to Rolly, wiry, nervous. The man moved his hands a lot as he talked, waving a dark bottle of micro-brewed beer in the air. The group standing with him looked spellbound, holding their bottles of beer or glasses of champagne at their sides, afraid that raising the drinks to their lips might signal a lack of respect. Fender nosed his way in.

"Ricky, I wanted you to meet Rolly Waters. He's a good friend of mine and he's with the band that's going to be playing tonight. Rolly, this is Ricky Rogers, the man with the vision."

Ricky Rogers interrupted his talking to grab Rolly's hand and shake it enthusiastically. He had a big blonde freckled head and bright blue eyes that stared straight into yours, then into the back of your head, through your skull, and out beyond to some horizon that only he could see. Rolly wondered if that was why Fender referred to Ricky as "the man with the vision."

"Glad to meet you, Rolly. Fender tells me you're quite a musician. That's great. We're glad you could be here, be a part of our family."

Rolly wasn't sure he wanted to be a part of any more families. He had a hard enough time with his own. He'd read about Ricky in the paper, a beach rat from Orange County who'd made a million dollars in the self-empowerment seminar market, selling recordings of his gung-ho speeches set to the sound of the surf in the background. Now he was running this Internet company. People said he was going to make a hundred times more. The immediate presence of money and power along with the beer Ricky was waving around made Rolly wish he had a drink. But that would only make him feel worse. It always had. How much was this guy going to be worth, a hundred million billion or something?

"Th-thanks." Rolly stuttered.

"Hey, that's great. We're glad to have you playing for us." Ricky's voice was bright, a little on the high-pitched side. He was a very "up" personality type.

Fender jumped in. "Yeah, Ricky, I've known Rolly since high school. We always knew he was going to be a great musician. He'll get this party rocking!" Fender made it sound as if he had played a critical role in the development of Rolly's musical skills. Fender had always been a little bit of a groupie in the old days, always dropping by during rehearsal, trying to get himself backstage, acting like he was part of the band. But that was just Fender's way. He seemed to always need a little self-stroking, especially in front of the "important" people, the boss or whoever it was. He was okay when you talked to him all on his own.

The boss was already moving away from them, reaching out a hand to yet another incoming partygoer who had honed in on him like a stock-option-seeking scud missile. Ricky was a man in constant motion.

"Yeah, that's great," he said as he left. Ricky seemed to be fond of the word "great." Maybe everything was great when you were going to be worth as much as Ricky.

Fender's smile dropped away for a second as Ricky moved on, then rebounded again as he turned back to Rolly.

"Ricky's a great guy."

"So I can see," Rolly said. "What does he do, exactly?"

"He's the man with the plan, the visionary. He gets it."

"Gets what?"

"This whole Internet thing, the new economy. He knows how to stay on top of the wave, make opportunities happen."

Rolly had enough troubles with the old economy. He'd never be able to handle a new one. Well, maybe Fender was ready for it. He half sounded like he knew what he was talking about.

"You're in pretty tight with these guys, huh, Fender?"

"Yeah, Rolly. I really think this is going to be it."

Rolly had given up on whatever "it" was a long time ago, but Fender was still out there chasing "it" down. Rolly was fine with his life as it was now, writing songs and playing guitar, chasing down deadbeat dads and teenage runaways. It wasn't a bad life. It was *his*, at least. Every day now that he wasn't drinking was a success. Somebody else making money was not going to make him jealous, even if it was Fender, who was a nice enough guy, but couldn't put more than three chords together without screwing them up.

They walked back to the front deck, overlooking the cliffs. Moogus was gone, but someone much more attractive had taken his place. She was staring out at the view, a cigarette dangling in one hand by the side of her short leather skirt, a glass of champagne in the other. She had on black stockings and suede, high-heeled boots that came up just past the top of her ankles.

"Hey, Alesis," Fender said.

"Hey, Fender," she said, glancing at both of them before she returned to the view, taking a slow drag on her cigarette. It was a tired voice, whisky deep, with a little bit of Southern slowness to it. She had short black hair, cut in a pageboy with a slash of blonde frosting through the bangs.

"Have you seen King?" Fender asked.

"I don't keep track of him when I'm not at the office."

She was tired, perhaps permanently so. And maybe a little pissed off.

"Just wondering," said Fender. "I wanted Rolly to meet him. Maybe he's in the living room. Rolly, you should meet King, too."

"I think I'll just stay out here for awhile, if that's okay," Rolly replied. There were too many people and too many kinds of

liquor back in the house. It made him nervous to be around either one. Besides, there was a dangerous looking woman out here, all by herself. He hadn't sworn off of everything that was bad for him. Not yet.

A Possible Match

Rolly smiled at Alesis. He still had a smile that made an impression. It was a friendly thing that sometimes helped women forgive him for being a man. Alesis smiled back.

“Um, yeah, okay,” said Fender, glancing back and forth from Rolly to Alesis, “I’ll catch you later.”

Fender walked back to the house. Rolly turned and stood next to Alesis, took a look at the side of her face, a quick glance down her blouse. She was older than he’d originally thought, but she still had a lot going for her. Not as much as she used to, but plenty enough. He noticed little lines at the edges of her eyes.

Alesis continued to stare out at the ocean, as if the long lost ship she was looking for might suddenly appear on the horizon.

“Ever been to Japan?” she asked, not really expecting an answer. He decided to give her one, anyway.

“Yeah, once. On a tour.”

“What kind of tour?”

“I was in a band. We did a tour there.”

She turned her head to look at Rolly.

“You were in a band?”

“Still am. We’re playing tonight.”

“Oh, yeah? I used to be in a band.”

Telling people you were in the band always brought something personal back, memories of one shining youthful moment or confessions of non-talent, failed piano lessons. The confessions were easy to handle. It was the folks who’d had a little bit of success you had to step around like landmines.

"What kind of band?" Rolly asked.

"It was an all-girl band, kind of like the Go-Gos. Only more . . . adult. We played in Japan one time."

He wasn't sure what the "adult" comment meant. But before he could think of anything else to say, they were interrupted.

"Alesis!" someone shouted from off to their right. Rolly turned. A man, middle-aged, glared out from the sliding glass door.

"I'm right here," said Alesis, without turning around.

"I can't find my glasses."

"Did you check on top of your head?"

The man put his hand up to his bald pate, where a pair of glasses indeed rested.

"Oh, yes. There they are." He pulled the glasses down over his eyes, inspected his fingernails for a moment, then looked back up.

"I can't find my cell phone, either."

Alesis sighed and rolled her eyes. "Okay, I'm coming." She turned towards Rolly, dropped her cigarette on the deck, stamped it out with her boot.

"Just a word of advice. Never go to work for your ex-boyfriend. It's worse than being married."

She smiled again, for real or just out of habit, then turned and walked slowly away. Rolly watched her depart, felt a warm glow run through his body. She knew how to make an exit. It was the kind of departure that would convince men they should spend a lot of money to make sure she came back.

Rolly returned to the view. Down below him, a skinny young man with a black ponytail played the drunken daredevil, balancing along the edge of the cliff for three young women who were dressed for encouragement in tight summer dresses. The women stood in a safe spot behind the wall watching the young man approach the edge of the cliff. He let out little screams and then laughed as the girls reached out to pull him back towards safety. It was the kind of thing Rolly might have tried when he was younger, tempting fate for dramatic effect, craving attention, naïve, unaware of the invisible nearness that death always has. Rolly knew now that invisible things can make themselves seen in an instant. It made him nervous watching the young man's balancing act. He turned back to the house.

His thoughts returned to the present, heading south on Interstate 5 towards downtown. He was about to miss the exit to Hillcrest, and home. He took a quick look back, ripped the car across two lanes of traffic, made the exit with a hundred feet to spare.

What had really returned him from his thoughts was the realization that the young man he'd seen dancing along the edge of the cliff might have been the same man he'd seen floating in the pool, the one who had flirted with death earlier that evening. The man in the pool had the same long hair as the man on the cliffs. But Rolly hadn't looked closely at either one. There were several men at the party with long hair.

He headed up Washington, across First, saw the lights of the La Posta Taco Shop up ahead. His stomach felt empty with hunger, or from stress, probably both. He pulled up to the drive-in menu, ordered a *carne asada* burrito and a *Horchata* to drink. There was a small group of gothic-styled teenagers gathered around the front order window, black in their clothes, pale in their makeup. He wondered how many had parents who were drunk or divorced or had hit them, if any were runaways he might be asked to track down. He watched the young Mexican woman inside the bright fluorescent kitchen dip a ladle into a pot of greasy, spiced meat, spread it out on a flour tortilla, then expertly fold it into a little package for filling the stomach of one of the kids who waited outside. Rolly pulled up to the window, asked for a couple of extra packets of hot sauce and picked up his order. He looked forward to feeding his own little hunger, then falling asleep. He glanced at the open door of the liquor store across the street, thought about how his meal might taste with a beer, decided not to find out, then turned the corner and headed for home, four blocks away.

Rolly lived in a one-room granny flat above Highway 163, the old road that passed through the heart of Balboa Park into downtown San Diego. It wasn't much of a place, but the location couldn't be beat.

The iron light fixture over his front door was shining brightly when he arrived, making his humble abode look unusually cozy

and warm. His mother, ever protective, had turned the light on for him. She lived in the two-story Victorian next door and rented the granny flat to him. It was a temporary business arrangement. They had agreed. That had been five years ago. He was still paying the same rent he had when he started, 200 dollars, which was a hell of a deal, considering the going rates in Hillcrest.

He opened the door, flicked on the light, and dropped the white paper bag on the table before crossing to the bedroom and sliding the guitar case under his bed. It was safe now. The rest of his guitars, currently ten of them, were kept in the living room, stacked in their cases, displayed in floor stands or hung on the wall. But the Gibson stayed under his bed, in a safe place, away from the eyes of the world.

He took off his shoes, walked back to the kitchen, sat down, and started to eat. There were still a lot of things in the world worth living for. One of them was a *carne asada* burrito at four in the morning.

Wake up call

Rolly lay in bed and stared at the ceiling. It was 6:32 A.M. He hadn't been able to sleep much. His stomach kept rumbling, perhaps from the *carne asada* burrito, but more likely from the uncomfortable thoughts in his head. Every time he closed his eyes, a picture of the man in the pool rose up in front of him.

He heard a car approach on the gravel driveway. Something thumped on the door. Rolly jumped, realized it was just the Sunday edition of the *Union-Tribune*. His chances for sleep seemed about over. He struggled out of bed, went to the kitchen, tried to decide which was worse, feeling old or hung over. As best he could tell, there wasn't much difference, but at least there was a cure for a hangover. There was a cure for getting old too, but it wasn't much of an option. The man in the pool might have been drunk, but he wouldn't have a hangover this morning.

Rolly put a few heaping tablespoons of coffee into the brewing machine, poured in some water, and flipped on the switch. He opened the front door, found the morning paper propped up against it perfectly. If the new deliveryman had any speed on his throws, the Padres should give him a tryout. They could do worse. They probably would.

This morning, like most, was shrouded in light misty fog. It would burn off in a couple of hours, giving way to another oppressively bright, pleasant day in the sun. It had been the same kind of morning, the same kind of day every day for the last thirty-nine years, for the last 200, for all Rolly could tell. He

remembered something resembling rain a year or so back, but it might have been something he'd seen in a movie. The weather in San Diego had been one of the few things in life he could depend on.

The thought of the dead man in the pool kicked back into his head like a bad rap song, riffing on dope, "bitches," and guns. He sat down at the kitchen table and looked through the paper, trying to chase the thought out of his mind. He checked out the sports section first, ran through the box scores. The Padres had lost again. Their chances of repeating the pennant run of last year were already fading. He leafed through the world news, then the local section, thinking there might be a story about the man in the pool, but there was nothing. It didn't surprise him. Any police report that had been filed would have come in too late to make last night's deadline. But if someone had drowned at a millionaire mansion at The Farms, it would make the paper sooner or later.

The coffee machine sputtered, spit out a last gasp of caffeinated water. There was someone outside on the porch.

"Rolly?" It was a high sing-song voice. "Rolly, are you there? I've got some croissants for you." It was his mother.

"Come on in, Mom," Rolly yelled through the door.

The door opened like an apology. Rolly's mother walked in, her long gray hair pulled up in a loose bun. She had on a canary yellow nightshirt, which was tied gracefully at the waist above khaki pants and Japanese house slippers. She carried a small white paper sack in her right hand.

"It's a wonderful morning," she chirped, like an accusation. He never understood how someone could sound so cheerful and confrontational at the same time, as if she were daring him to disagree.

"Good morning, Mother," he shot back with the best attempt at enthusiasm he could muster. It was always tough to compete with his mother for the bright-eyed, bushy-tailed trophy, but for some reason he still tried. Maybe because if he didn't he risked the slow inquisition, even now, at thirty-nine. Even now, after he'd been sober for almost five years.

Rolly's flat stood behind his mother's house on Eighth Avenue, just south of Upas at the edge of Balboa Park. It was in the heart of Hillcrest, neighborhood home to members of the

rainbow coalition, the hopelessly hip and the urban elderly. There were knick-knack shops, organic grocers, alternative bookstores, and chic restaurants and hair parlors. There wasn't a Hooters in sight.

His mother always said she moved to Hillcrest because it was "artistic." Rolly thought she moved there so she could flirt with attractive young men while avoiding the threat of any real sexual pressure. She liked attention. His father had never understood that. It was all she ever had wanted, just some attention, some hugs and some credit for taking care of their house and their son, who wasn't so easy to handle. Some credit for keeping herself almost celibate while her husband was away for six months at a time. Some credit for staying more honest than he ever had.

"You look tired," she said to him.

"I didn't get home until late."

"Did you have a good party?"

"It went pretty good. Rich people. Big house in The Farms, up on the cliffs above Black's. They seemed to like us pretty well."

"Well, perhaps there was someone there who could help your career. You never know with those folks in La Jolla. They've got connections."

Rolly's mother still thought of him as a full-time musician. He was never sure if she just liked to be encouraging or if she thought he still had a chance of making it big. He might be young in her eyes, but Rolly knew the guys in L.A. in the Armani suits and the \$100 haircuts wouldn't even talk to you once you passed thirty-five. His mother never mentioned his day job, as if she pretended it didn't exist.

"You want some coffee?" Rolly said.

"Just half a cup, thank you dear." His mother sat down at the table. "How about some plates?"

Left to his own devices, Rolly avoided china and silverware whenever possible. It wasn't possible now. He poured out two mugs of coffee, went back to the kitchen, pulled out a couple of plates and two knives, brought them back to the table.

"So tell me more," said his mother, doling out a large croissant for each of them.

"Well, like I said, it was a nice house, right on the edge of the cliffs. Lots of big windows. You could see down to The Cove

and up to Mt. Soledad. You could probably see all the way up to Dana Point on a clear day. And, of course, lots of ocean.”

“I don’t think I’d do anything all day if I had that kind of view. I’d just sit there and look out the window. Whose house was it?”

“I don’t really know. They don’t seem to live in it much. There must have been twenty rooms, but only a couple of them had any furniture. The party was outside on the patio, by the pool.” There was that picture again in his head.

“Perhaps the owners are still moving in.”

“Maybe. Fender said they hadn’t been living there long.”

“Fender lives there?”

“No, he just gave us a tour. He works for the company.”

“Oh. What’s the company called?”

“Eyebitz.com. It’s an Internet company.”

“Oh, yes. I think I’ve read about them. So Fender works for them?”

“Yes. He seems to think he’s going to make a lot of money.”

“Well, that’s nice for him. I haven’t seen Fender in years. He was always a nice boy. Shy and quiet, but very polite.”

They continued their small talk a few minutes until they had finished their breakfast. His mother cleared the table and rinsed off the dishes while Rolly finished his coffee.

“I’m going to Henry’s Market this morning,” his mother said.

“Can I get you anything while I’m there?”

“No, thanks, Mom. I’ll go to Ralph’s later,” Rolly replied.

“That produce at Ralph’s is full of chemicals and pesticide. You should go to Henry’s. It’s better for you.”

“Maybe I will.” He wasn’t going to argue. He wasn’t going to the grocery store, anyway. He hardly ever bought groceries. Sometimes he bought milk, cereal, coffee, maybe peanut butter and jelly, a loaf of bread.

His mother dried her hands on the towel by the sink. “Well, have a nice day, dear. Take a nap if you need to. You’ll feel better.”

“Thanks, Mom. Maybe I will.”

His mother walked to the door, closed it softly behind her, leaving the room as empty as it had been before she arrived. Outside in the driveway, Rolly could hear a car pulling in, the gravel scrunching under its wheels. He stared into his coffee. The scrunching stopped. A car door opened and shut.

"Fender Simmons, is that you?" Rolly's mother sang out in a bright cheery chirp.

"Hello, Mrs. Waters. How are you?"

"Well I'm fine, Fender. I haven't seen you in years. Rolly tells me you're going to be very successful."

"I hope so, Mrs. Waters." Rolly could hear the puff of pride in Fender's voice, even through the door. "I think I may have hooked up with something really special."

"That's wonderful, Fender. How's your wife?" Rolly had neglected to tell his mother that Fender's marriage of last year had only lasted three months.

"My wife and I are separated, Mrs. Waters."

"Oh. I'm sorry to hear that, Fender."

Rolly was going to go crazy if his mother kept repeating Fender's name every time she said something to him. He didn't know why, but it bugged him. He got up from the table and opened the door.