

# MUSIC TO DIE BY

## FELICITY SAVAGE

*A suspense novel*

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## MUSIC TO DIE BY

### Part 1: Unfair Game

“Let’s talk about you,” I snarled. “It must’ve been the first time. So did it excite you?”

Gen stood on my left, hunched over his Ibanez as if he were trying to protect it from the crowd. He wore his uniform of jeans and a plain black t-shirt. Sweat fell sparkling from his curls. When I tore into the chorus, he raised his head and bellowed the harmony into his own mic. He had the best voice of any of the boys, a raspy tenor that harmonized nicely with my own voice. I was more of a shouter than a singer, and inevitably got Janis Joplin comparisons, although I preferred to think of myself as the female Layne Staley, without the heroin problem. I had enough problems as it was.

Our faithful supporters swayed an arm’s length in front of me, chaotically out of step. About three-quarters of our guest list had showed up by the time we went on stage. It does mean something to be headlining. And it didn’t hurt, either, that Ace’s High was so small that this modest crowd was a capacity one. We couldn’t take all the credit: Dew Over, Bloodthirsty Fakers, and Vanilla Camp had left a residue of punters who were determined to get full value for money, curious about a band with two gajjins in it, or simply willing to give us a try. Some of them had trickled away during our first number, but others lingered. They even clapped.

Unlike Gen, I didn't just stand there. I covered the whole stage – which wasn't difficult: I could only take two paces before I bumped into Gen or Tad, our bassist. I struck poses, touched myself, danced with the mic stand, and interacted with the boys. My bottle-green top hat shadowed my face in the hot, shifting spotlights. When I finally doffed it, applause went up. I mugged, did a clownish shuffle, then hooked the hat on my mic stand and started dancing in earnest. I wore my cowboy boots, my lucky talismans, harness brown with turquoise, gold, and white flames. Their heels made me tall enough to see four or five deep into the crowd.

“Let's talk about you,” I ranted, “and the little places you call home.”

Tad planted his left foot on a wedge speaker and banged his head as he churned out the bass solo. A pair of black cat ears poked out of his flying hair. At home he also had floppy white bunny ears, tall grey donkey ears, and a magician's hat with stars and moons on it. He liked to wear that one with a gold kimono.

“It was the only thing you've ever done! I hope, oh yeah, I hope it was a good one.”

I extended the end of the phrase into a melodic scream, jammed my mic onto the stand, and let my head fall forward as Gen took over for the outro. Through the curtain of hair that slid in front of my face, I saw constellations of cigarette ends explode in the outer darkness as the technique freaks applauded. I straightened up and gestured broadly, helping the spotlight on Gen to make its point.

Joaquin crashed both hands down on the keyboard of his Korg. An instant of silence, and then the applause kicked in. I stepped back to the mic and thanked the crowd.

“For those of you that we haven't got to know yet, Joaquin's the tunesmith.” In his place behind the Korg, Joaquin bowed. “I write the lyrics. They let me do that because I can't play an instrument.”

Tad grabbed my mic and said, “I've got an idea, Shanti. You can have my job and I'll have yours.”

I grinned and said over the catcalls, “Shut up, Tad, I'm busy showing off my Japanese.”

This got a huge laugh, as usual. To the extent I spoke Japanese, I spoke it like a native. For that I could thank my sense of pitch, but more to the point, as Joaquin could have explained, once you have a second language, it's no big deal to acquire a third one. As a kid in Paris, I'd gone from zero to fluent in French in a year, and as an adult in Tokyo, it had taken me only slightly longer than that to learn Japanese. I still had plenty of holes in my vocabulary, but they didn't show onstage.

“Now guess what, you lucky people, we're going to do a song off the new album. U-Turn Day, out next Saturday from Cold Coeur Records. Available from your local clued-up independent music store, or buy it on our website, where we're streaming select tracks for your listening pleasure. Now here's another dirty little sample.” I leaned into the mic. “When I first started writing lyrics for Gorot, I didn't want to write about the same old thing. You know. Lurrrve.”

Nina, Joaquin's wife and our recording angel, dodged across the Bermuda Crescent in front of the stage with her digital camera. Our Shimokitazawa gigs rarely got rowdy enough for the crowd to venture into that buffer zone between us and them. Even when they did, they retreated when the music stopped.

“But I've learned a lot since I've been in this band,” I said. “I've realized that I have more to say about life in general than I ever knew.”

I saw him.

His blond hair shone in the dark. He was leaning against the wall about three people behind Nina. At this distance I couldn't see his eyes.

“A lot to say,” I repeated. “A lot to say.”

I had nothing to say to Ned Gallant, now or ever.

But maybe it wasn't him. Maybe it was just some coworker of Nina's who hadn't been on the guest list, or one of the European drifters Joaquin collected.

Tad glanced sharply at me. I couldn't tell if he was alarmed, or just trying to prompt me, but it

reminded me why I was here, why I'd written the song I was currently supposed to be introducing, and how I'd felt while I was writing it, in my tiny studio apartment with my headphones on, pushing rewind over and over again on the rough mix: as far from Ireland as I would ever get.

"Recently," I said, "I realized that I even have something to say about love. And this is it. 'Heartbreak.'"

I signaled to Joaquin with one hand behind my back. The silence lengthened: one, two, three, and the first plaintive piano notes floated out over Tad's bass line. Shingo tapped on the rim of the snare, a sinister rhythm like a clock ticking. Until its closing seconds, this song required no more of Gen than filler duties. "Heartbreak" was that rare thing in our repertoire, a slow burner designed to prove that I could actually sing, and that was appropriate, because it was my song of liberation.

"Struck dumb by a closing door," I sang, cupping my mic in both hands for a bit of distortion, "face down on the bathroom floor. Here's a dirty little sample, better keep it to yourself. I've lived, I've been, I've seen..."

Joaquin's line swelled, surging towards maximum volume.

"I've sunk, I've swum, I've fallen in between..."

Someone whistled deafeningly.

"And you, you think that you'll remain in my memory like a stain, but you'll fade like everyone! You were never here!"

Sweet, languid Jonathan had been the lead guitarist of the first band I was ever in, back in New York, and I'd thought he was the love of my life, until he turned out to be a cheater and a liar. When he cheated on me, I hadn't just dumped him, I'd left the country. Top that, asshole. I'd won, but it had taken me another four years to write him, literally, out of my heart.

And in the meantime, I'd discovered something strange and surprising, better than sex and almost as good as music.

Friendship.

I'd once had a boyfriend. Now I had four boy friends who meant more to me than Jonathan ever had.

I'd written "Heartbreak" for them, and if the lyrics didn't really reflect that... well, my lyrics always turned out kind of dark.

I couldn't lose them. I couldn't, but my own words sounded like a dire prophecy as I sobbed, "Stupid enough to not quite see the temporary nature of everything behind your eyes!"

It was Gen's moment. Unexpectedly, he launched a gargoyle of a riff that climbed on the back of Joaquin's piano line and reached for the stratosphere. We'd heard this variation in rehearsal, but never live. I signaled to Tad and went for a repeat of the chorus. Gen's riff toyed with my voice, then folded up and flatlined into a distorted hum that grew louder and louder until it swallowed Joaquin's last notes.

After that, our last number was an anticlimax. I thrashed around the stage, but I couldn't stop looking at that spot over by the wall. In a montage of underexposed stills, I saw him draining a can of beer, taking off his knit cap, and putting two fingers in his mouth and whistling. So it had been him.

"Encore! Encore!"

For once I wished our supporters weren't quite so faithful.

"Encore!"

I bowed for the third time. Behind me, Joaquin hissed, "What are you waiting for?"

"No encore," I said through my smile.

"Fuck off. What's wrong?"

With the show officially over, we could take a minute to confer. I went back to Joaquin, mic in hand. His face was scarlet and his hands hovered on the keyboard. "OK," I told him, "I'll do an

encore. But not ‘You’re No Fun.’”

“Don’t give me this shit. If you don’t want to do it, why did you want it on the set list?”

“Joaquin, I can’t fucking do it!”

Joaquin’s jaw tightened. He seized the mic from my hand and plunged around the Korg, shaking the cord clear. “OK, we’ll do another track from *Xenophobia*,” he said out of the side of his mouth. “They’ve heard the whole album many times, but what the hell.”

He arrived at the front of the stage in a single stride with his smile on full. A storm of clapping greeted him. Everyone knew he was the brains of the band, and although he seldom took a producer’s bow, they felt he deserved it. He thanked them in English, Japanese, and French, and waited for the applause to subside. I hovered at his side, trying to look supportive rather than apprehensive. He said in Japanese, “We are delighted that you come all the way to Shimokitazawa to see us. I mean, it’s the middle of nowhere, eh?”

Laughter.

“We hope you will come all the way to Hokkaido to see us, too! We can’t reimburse you for the airfare, but we think it will be worth it. They say that Sapporo is a beautiful city. Myself, I’ve never been there, but I’m looking forward to it. Yes, ladies and gentlemen, Gorot is going on tour!”

I did what I had to do, which was lead the applause. When we were debating whether to tour for U-Turn Day, I’d been anti. I didn’t know why I even bothered, since Joaquin always got his way in the end.

“Some of you are familiar with Kinderbox,” continued Joaquin, naming another of the acts he produced for our label, Cold Coeur Records, which he also owned. “We tour together. We will look for you next week in Sapporo! Hakodate! Aomori! Morioka! Yamagata! Sendai! Fukushima! And Utsunomiya! But if we don’t see you there, we hope to meet on Tuesday the twelfth of March at Oasis in Shinjuku, where we plan a party for our homecoming. It is also the release party for U-Turn Day! *Yoroshiku onegai shimasu*. Also,” Joaquin added rapidly, “we have gigs upcoming throughout March, please check out the information on the flyers. We’re running late, but we will do one more song for you tonight. ‘Dreamstomper.’” Throwing me a look of triumph mixed with a challenge, he hopped back behind the Korg.

Numbly, I waited for the piano loop to roll out of the speakers. In the interval of rustling silence I cleared my throat. “This one’s for everyone who got lost along the way,” I said, wishing Ned Gallant had.

**Backstage**, Nina handed out bottles of Crystal Geyser. Joaquin upended his over his head, splashing everyone. “To Cold Coeur Family Volume II!” This, unbelievably, was what our tour had come to be called. Infected by his mood, the other boys slavishly acted like they’d all been excited about it from the start. The manager played along, too, opining that it would be just the ticket to launch us into the big time. Joaquin followed him into his office to sort out our cut of the door. After retrieving our kit from the stage, Gen, Tad, and Shingo piled into the cruddy little restroom down the hall and jostled for access to the tap.

I gulped water. As soon as Joaquin squared the manager, we were due to join up with our faithful supporters and head to an izakaya. Ned might turn out to be someone else, and it wouldn’t be the first time. My fight-or-flight reflex often went off at the sight of a blond head and a pair of blue eyes. But if it had been him...

Pushing a hand through my damp, tangled hair, I went out the side door and said hello to my friends. There were about two dozen people left in the house, and I didn’t know all their faces, let alone their names. Back in Gorot’s early days, the same people had come to all our gigs and we’d gone to all their gigs; now we had friends and fans, and it was getting harder to tell which were which. I clocked the blond guy hovering near the exit.

I went back through the grey room, past the manager's office and the restroom, looking for another way out. There was an emergency exit, but it was padlocked.

I retrieved my shoulderbag, threw on my coat, and ducked back through the side door. I didn't have a plan. All I knew was that I had to keep Ned away from the band. I couldn't be sure that he wouldn't approach me in front of them, and I was even less sure of my own ability to deny to his face that we'd ever met. I wasn't even sure that would be the best line to take. He might react unpredictably.

"Shanti, you're not skipping out?" Nina said in astonishment.

"You're on PR duty, gorgeous," I said. "Oh, I left my hatbox back there. Could you take it home with you? I'll come over and pick it up tomorrow or sometime."

I beelined to the exit, calling goodnight to the technicians who were shutting down the equipment onstage. As I passed the blond guy, he took an abortive step towards me. I pushed through the door into February. His footsteps echoed mine on the stairs. Out on the street, the rest of our supporters were hanging around in groups, smoking and chatting. I shouted to them that I had an early start tomorrow and inconsistently turned left, away from the station. He caught up with me. I kept walking. At the 7-11 on the corner I turned again. He matched my strides. A cold, dusty wind blew around us.

"Fuck, this feels weird." His voice was deep. I'd subconsciously been expecting him to sound like a child. "But it feels kind of natural, too, doesn't it?"

"Well, it's been a while," I said, head ringing.

"A while?" He laughed. He looked like none of the men I'd mistaken for him over the years. He was still blond, and his eyes were still that eerie blue – but he was no longer small or pale or skinny. His skin had seen a lot of sun, and he hulked over me with shoulders as broad as the axle of a small car. He'd turned out as big as Nigel. But his accent no longer sounded like Nigel's. It had softened dramatically. "I guess you've added the art of understatement to your repertoire. It's been half our lives. No, more. I was twelve, and your birthday is before mine, so you'd have been thirteen."

He spoke as if he didn't remember exactly. This confused me.

"So how's Alastair doing these days?"

We were turning corners at random, and although I couldn't remember crossing the railway tracks, we must have done, because we were now descending the gentle hill on the far side of Shimokitazawa station. Shuttered boutiques lined the narrow street. Here and there, golden light from the windows of a restaurant shone through a screen of trees. The wind numbed my face; it seemed to have penetrated to my bones and slowed down my brain. Ned and I were talking. How had this happened?

"Alastair lives in the States," I said. My brother had spent his early twenties trying to be an artist; now he was the assistant manager of Windrose & Sons, a 150-year-old gallery in Boston's Back Bay that sold objets d'art and antiques from all over the world, true to its origins as a clearing-house for plunder from the Orient. He and his girlfriend Maisie lived together in Somerville with her second-hand Volvo, his BMW 6-series, and two Weimaraners, and he seemed happy. "He's doing OK, I guess."

"Figures. He was bound to land on his feet. And June? Still painting, is she?"

"She moved back to France years ago," I said. Our mother had nothing to do with it. Ned would have no reason to track her down, nor could he learn anything from her he didn't already know. "She lives near Bordeaux now. It's la France profonde, the true France. She keeps chickens and goats. And yeah, she's still painting her heart out."

Ned laughed. "You know something funny? All this time I thought your family was still in Thailand."

“You’re kidding! We only stayed there for six months.”

I remembered promising Ned that he could come with us. Promising it would be all right. But I was only thirteen and it wasn’t my decision to make.

Ned would probably have hated Thailand, though. We did. After Ireland, it had been so hot that I felt like I’d stepped onto another planet. I remembered the energy draining from my thirteen-year-old body, the sunlight so bright that my eyes hurt, and a hundred and one permutations of boredom and anxiety. That was nothing to how June must have felt. She’d dragged us halfway around the world to the one man who had to take us in: our father. Malcolm Ogilvie had settled in Phuket. He was a poet – we’d owned an actual book of poetry by him at one point – but he subsisted on the generosity of hotel and bar managers who gave him odd jobs. From his point of view, having the three of us descend on him must have been the worst trip of his life, especially since he had a live-in Thai girlfriend.

Somehow, we all managed to cohabit in his disgusting bungalow for five or six months. That was how long it took June to accept that she’d made a mistake. She fell back on her brother Red, my corporate lawyer uncle in Philadelphia. And just like that, as if the first thirteen years of my life had been a dream, I’d suddenly had the life of a privileged American teenager.

Not for long, though. Unlike Alastair, I hadn’t been able to keep it up.

“As for our father,” I said, “he’s dead.”

It was Ned’s turn to exclaim, “You’re kidding!” And in his smile I saw a hint of schadenfreude that chilled me to the bone.

“He hanged himself about ten years ago,” according to the letter that the Thai girlfriend had sent June. It had been wrapped around a small teak box that contained Malcolm’s ashes. “He left a typical, self-pitying note. Saying he’d failed everyone and he was sorry. Talk about wasted sentiments. *We* weren’t.”

Ned hissed between his teeth. I thought I’d succeeded in shocking him. But he said in the same easy tone as before, “Funny thing is, *I* live in Thailand now. On Koh Samui. I go across to Phuket all the time, and I used to ask around for you, but no one’s ever heard of you or your father.”

Shit.

“Ned, how on earth did you end up in Thailand?”

“I’m an architect,” he said, and went on expansively, in the strange nonaccent he’d acquired. “Koh Samui is booming. The tsunami created a lot of opportunities. New regulations, new land up for sale. I’ve got my own business, building villas. Referrals from all over. The clients appreciate having someone on the ground to see their projects through to completion: they don’t want to deal with the Thais themselves. They’re racist fuckers, as a rule. But I believe in doing the best work possible.”

“Wow.”

“I’m building my own house, too. It’s still under construction. I’ve been working on it on and off for the last four years. But it’s going to be fucking stunning. I can show you some photos if you’re interested.”

Laughter bubbled up in my chest. Ned was a builder. I didn’t know why this struck me as so funny. I said, “Cool. Did you study architecture at school?” I wanted to find out where he’d spent the twelve years that were still unaccounted for. Why couldn’t I just ask?

“Sure, I learned on the job. That’s the best way. Hands-on experience. You’ve got to be focused, though. Thailand is full of Westerners who just drift from beach to beach...” Ned shook his head.

“Oh, we’ve got them here, too, except they don’t come for the beaches. They come for the jobs.”

“Still, I can’t criticize that lifestyle. I lived on Bali for a while. Bummed around Indonesia, Malaysia, India.” We reached the level crossing at the bottom of the hill. The barrier was down, the warning bell pinging. “I guess I was looking for something, but I didn’t know what it was,” Ned

shouted as a train rushed past. “Maybe it was just a decent living,” he added, laughing.

“Look,” I said, pointing to a record shop on a side street. “They sell our albums. We’ve got our own label, and we’re hooked up with an independent distributor.”

“Oh yeah? Way to go!”

“Jesus, Ned, what *has* happened to your accent? You sound almost American.”

“You sound fairly American yourself, Shanti.”

“Well, I went to school on the East Coast. High school in Philly, and then NYU.” No need to mention that I hadn’t graduated, committing myself to rock ‘n’ roll instead of to the library.

“Get a load of you. I didn’t go to university at all. After you left, my grandmother showed up and took me back to Denmark with her.”

“Denmark!” That was it, of course. He didn’t sound American. He sounded ever so slightly Scandinavian. The legend came back to me all at once: the mother who did a runner when Ned was three, leaving Nigel to raise him whilst making a go of his business, Allihies Ceramics. I even remembered Ned telling me where she’d come from. Somewhere like Norway, but without the funky mythic associations. *Denmark*. “I didn’t know you even had a grandmother!” I said.

“Neither did I, until she walked in and told me to pack my stuff. I had a terrible time adjusting in Copenhagen. Couldn’t get my tongue around the language. I used to think about you and Alastair jabbering away to each other in French. How did you do it? I picked up enough Danish in the end to get by, but as soon as I got out of school I buggered off. I used to go back as often as possible to see my grandmother, though. I owed her, didn’t I?”

“She must be an amazing lady,” to have put up with you, I added to myself.

“She was. She died last year.”

“Oh Ned, I’m so sorry.”

I caught his flickering glance of contempt. He didn’t believe I was sorry, although when I said it, I *had* been.

We rounded the corner onto the plaza. I veered towards the station entrance and started up the stairs. Ned climbed beside me. He was explaining how it was that he could jaunt off to Japan at his pleasure, with zero hardship or sacrifice, but I wasn’t really listening, because I knew it was just a bunch of excuses. I was wondering if I could lose him in Tokyo’s fiendishly complicated rail system. “Have you got a ticket?”

“I need to buy one, do I? Where to?”

I thought quickly. “To Shibuya, but the tickets are priced by distance. It’s a hundred and twenty yen.”

I watched him shoulder through the milling crowd to the ticket machines, scoop change out of his pocket, and examine every coin before putting one into the slot. I had a prepaid Passnet card. I thought about dashing through the wickets while his back was turned. But there was only one platform. I’d have much better odds of losing him in Shibuya, where the JR, Tokyu, and Keio Inogashira train lines and the Ginza, Hanzomon, and Denentoshi subway lines all looped around each other in a multistorey knot.

As we came out of the wickets at Shibuya, I plunged ahead of Ned into the horde pouring down into the Mark City building. He seized the shoulder strap of my bag. “You don’t mind if I hang onto you? This is fucking mad. I’ve never seen anything like it in my life. Feel like I’m about to be swept off my feet.”

“Yeah, it’s crazy, isn’t it,” I said, teeth gritted in frustration.

But then again, if I’d cut and run I would have looked guilty. And he’d just turn up again at our next gig, wouldn’t he? My only hope was to brazen it out and get rid of him by some means as yet beyond the reach of my imagination. Leave him as completely as possible in the dark.

Yet every minute he was finding out more about my new life. I showed him how to buy a JR

ticket and we rode the Yamanote line south, squashed shoulder to shoulder between drowsy drunks and noisy ones. At Gotanda I got off. He got off. We left the station and walked along a dark street, embroidered on one side with snack bar signs, which led back along the foot of the Yamanote line embankment. There was no traffic. Gotanda was an undercover town, buttoned up during the day and sleazy by night, with the highest concentration of love hotels south of Shibuya. You never bumped into anyone you knew here, which was why it suited me.

Among the office buildings on this side of the station towered a few elderly apartment blocks. I came to the dinged elevator doors at the foot of my building and turned to face Ned, feeling panicky. “Well, now you know where I live.”

“Pretty ritzy.” He craned his neck to look up at eight floors of concrete balconies.

“At least it’s supposed to be earthquake-proof,” I said.

“Oh sure, that would be a concern in this country.”

We stood between the morgue-like walls of mailboxes. Was he waiting for me to invite him in? Did he plan on crashing *at my place*? No. No. No. This was not happening.

“Whereabouts are you staying, Ned?” I said bluntly.

“I’ve a couple of mates living in the city.” He looked away from me. There was a trace of anger in his voice. “They came to Japan to work and save money, and they’re spending it as fast as they make it, but they’re good lads. I’ll introduce you at some point. Mike’s got a job in the public school system; Gavin works for one of these English conversation schools, same as you. They’re raking it in. So they’ve a house, not just a crappy little apartment, in Nakano. You know where that is?”

Five minutes west on the Chuo line from Shinjuku. A goodly haul from here. But nowhere would be far enough.

“I can stay with them as long as I want. It’s party central, but I’m not fussy. You’ve no need to worry about me on that score!” Ned chuckled, an unamused masculine sound that reminded me of Nigel.

“Ned, how did you find me?” I blurted. Immediately, I had a sensation of having taken a misstep. “I’ve often thought about you, but I had no way of knowing where you were.”

He looked at me for a long minute. I concentrated on not letting a muscle of my face twitch. At last he said, “I searched for your name on the internet. Googled you, and up you popped. Your band’s website. Pictures and everything.”

I’d known it. I’d *known* it.

“So I knew it was you. Of course, it had to be you; there can’t be two people in the world named Shanti Hazard.”

Oh God. To hell with staying true to myself. I should have changed my name.

“That was about eighteen months ago.”

So I’d been living in jeopardy, my illusion of safety hanging by a thread, for more than a year.

But how could I have talked the boys out of putting up a website? How could I have forced them to leave me off it? I was the face of Gorot, literally – Tad had used a picture of me for our logo, and they were always pushing for more pictures: pictures of me walking on the beach, drinking coffee, laughing out loud – pictures that would make me seem like someone you knew. I vetoed all but the blurriest live shots. That had made me feel better about the website, as did the fact that not much of the information on it was in English. But what difference did that make when my name was out there?

“I thought about getting in touch there and then, but you know how it is. Life gets in the way. By the time I finally got around to it, I thought I might as well just pop over and see you. So I got a Japanese mate to translate the squiggly bits for me, and here I am!”

“And how do you like it so far?” I keened softly through my chattering teeth.

“Well, I’ll tell you. It’s bloody confusing and it’s bloody cold.” Ned lowered his voice



conspiratorially. “And do you get the feeling that these people don’t know how to relax? This is according to my Japanese mate at home, but the culture here is fucking totalitarian. The level of social control is such that the people can’t make their own choices. If they could, maybe they’d choose to be a bit more free!”

“I like it here because I fit in,” I said, provoking a cry of disbelief from him. I explained, though it felt futile: “I didn’t do very well as an American. It’s much easier to be a foreigner.”

“Well, in that case, then, I know what you mean! It was a nightmare living in Denmark, as I said. Looking like them but not speaking their language, not knowing their TV shows or their songs, not knowing shit about their fucking history and not caring. But when you’re a Westerner out East, no one cares where you supposedly come from. No one asks why you’ve got a funny accent. You don’t have to pretend to be something you’re not. You can be yourself, can’t you?”

Ned’s face lit up as the words tumbled out. I didn’t want to agree with him about anything, so I said nothing.

“Shanti, this is the kind of conversation I want to have with you! It’s not everyone who understands, is it? But you’re on my wavelength. You’ve had the same life experiences. You were *there*.”

Feeling dizzy, I steadied myself on the mailboxes.

“I just want to talk. No games, no bullshit.” He looked eagerly into my face. “I just want us to be open with each other.”

“Yeah, OK,” I said faintly, “but can we do it some other time? I’m dead on my feet, and if I don’t get indoors, I’m going to die of hypothermia.”

“Oh well, then, I won’t keep you,” he said, drawing back with unsettling rapidity. “We couldn’t have *that*, could we?”

Safely upstairs, I raged around my apartment, crying. My apartment was too small to rampage around very effectively, but I had a routine: I bounced on the bed, punched the walls, and threw my stuffed fox, Henri, at the bookcase. After fifteen minutes I was calm enough to sit on the floor, wiping my eyes, and realize I was hungry. All I’d had since lunch was some fries at Mickey D’s before the gig.

I topped some bread with processed cheese slices, stuck it in the microwave, and put on a CD while I waited for it to ping. *Appetite For Destruction*, a mood-improver tested under the harshest experimental conditions. I also switched on the heater. What else? I double-checked that the door was locked. Welcome to the jungle... I took a turn around the apartment, picking up the things I’d knocked down. Picture of Alastair and June on the beach at Biarritz, check. Picture of Alastair and Maisie at Fresh Pond with their dogs, check. Picture of me and Alastair with Uncle Red, Aunt Phoebe, and their daughter Katie, our only cousin, as pretty as a carrot in a plastic bag, check. No pictures of Ireland. June had only ever taken photographs as references for landscapes. But she’d given Ned a little Kodak for his eleventh birthday, I recalled. Defying her example, he’d mostly photographed us, instinctively placing human beings in the center of the universe...

As I washed up my plate, a fresh wave of fear hit me. I forced myself to complete the motions of drying the plate and putting it away. Then I turned off all the lights and the music, went to the window, and parted the curtains. Nothing on the balcony except my laundry carousel. In the distance, clusters of red eyes winked in the brownish night sky: the aircraft warning lights on the tops of the skyscrapers in Shinagawa and Shiodome. I stepped outside in my sock feet. Peeping over the balcony wall, I could see down into the alley that ran around the back of the building. A couple of bare-armed women escorted a salaryman out of a snack bar door and bowed him on his way. Their voices tinkled like a distant music box: goodbye, goodnight, come back and see us some time.

I went back through my apartment, putting on my sneakers en route, and pattered along the

windy corridor to the fire escape. By going down a flight and craning around the corner, I could get a view of the sidewalk outside the building's entrance. It was deserted. The light from the lobby fell on bare concrete. As far down the street as I could see, nothing was moving.

But I couldn't stay out here all night! I couldn't defend my perimeter while I was *sleeping!*

I went back into my apartment and sat on the floor with my arms around my knees. After a while I tore off my clothes and flung myself into bed. But it was no good. I rolled over and looked at the clock. Five to midnight. I jumped out of bed and packed some overnight things into my bag.

Gotanda station was full of rings of salarymen bowing goodnight. I threaded between them, caught the Yamanote line south, changed at Shinagawa, and boarded a southbound train on the Keihin-Tohoku line. The press of bodies kept me upright. Wielding my bag, I fought my way off at the second stop, Omori. This was the southern fringe of Tokyo, where the city bled into the Kanagawa sprawl. A couple of kids were playing guitar pop outside the supermarket, off-key and out of tune.

Cutting through Omori's dowdy little red-light district, I hurried south through the narrow streets. Despite the proximity of the railway and the small factories that lined it, this neighborhood qualified as livable by Tokyo standards. Not many family homes remained among the new apartment buildings and lowrise blocks of condos. Floodlights gave a lurid tint to the greenery that overhung yard walls. Streetlights dimly illuminated the corners. Still, I was very conscious of the darkness. A couple of times I thought I heard footsteps behind me, but when I stopped to listen, I heard nothing except my own breath.

At last I rounded the windowless corner of the Armageddon Institute, as we called it – we had no idea what it manufactured, although trucks rumbled in and out of the gates all day. The Keihin-Tohoku tracks glimmered through a chink of fence at the end of the street. I ducked into a tiny cul-de-sac, leapt up a flight of steps flanked by potted trees, and rang the bell.

Tad opened the door. "Oh boy. We'd pretty much given up on you for tonight."

I smiled weakly and stooped to untie my sneakers.

"That's Shanti, is it?" Joaquin appeared at the end of the hall. "You have something to say to me? Let's hear it." He slouched against the jamb of the door. "Although I have to tell you that your childish behavior really pisses me off!"

The relief that had already started to take hold of me soured. If I'd thought about it at all, I'd hoped that a couple of hours of booze and adulation would have put Joaquin in a conciliatory mood. Evidently not. It did him credit, in a roundabout sort of way, that he still felt the need to justify himself, but I no longer wanted to argue with him about the tour or anything else.

"Sorry I ditched the afterparty," I said meekly. "Did it go OK?"

"No thanks to you, it went better than OK! Didn't it, Tad?"

Joaquin was still blocking the entrance to the dining-room, so I hung a left into the kitchen. Herbs on the windowsills, pots hanging from the undersides of the cabinets, appliances crowding the counters, dishes soaking in the sink – the comfortably chaotic ambiance made it feel like one of those kitchens that someone has been adding to for twenty or thirty years. In fact the clutter was all Nina's. She and Joaquin had been living here with Tad and his father for almost three years now, their rent in abeyance the last time I checked, still surfing the collapsing wavefront of their personal charm. Tad's father worked nights as a taxi driver. He wasn't home right now, judging by the strains of King Crimson yowling from the boombox on top of the fridge.

Nina, bless her, never objected to me at any hour of the day or night. Brushing back a strand of her short blond hair, she looked up from the textbook she was highlighting at the table. "How about a coffee, Shanti?"

"Lovely, I'll fix it." But she was at the sink before me, filling the electric urn.

Tad sat down at the table and flipped the pages of her textbook, blatantly eavesdropping.

I edged up beside Nina and whispered, "Is Joaquin really mad? Because I'm not. I still don't think the tour's a good idea, but..."

"I *told* him we should have held a vote," Nina said, which was as close to criticizing Joaquin as she'd ever get.

"Shanti, here's your money," Joaquin said entering the kitchen. He handed me an envelope. I stuck it in the back pocket of my jeans.

"One of these days I'll break even."

"Count it. You have three thousand yen in profit there. I didn't charge you for anything we ate or drank at the afterparty, although I should have." Joaquin sat down at the table, pushed his arms out before him, and yawned. "Cherie, I'll have some of that. We have a lot of important decisions to make, and not much time left to make them. The travel arrangements still need to be finalized..."

"We'll have to rent a bus at this rate," Tad said. "The latest addition to the lineup is Chiharu," he told me. "Gen's girlfriend."

"His ex," Nina said, trying to soften the blow for me.

"She came to the afterparty and played some of her new songs," Joaquin said. He grinned at me. He was still drunk. "I think in future I'll hold all my auditions at izakayas! The material is catchy and it's only guitar and vocal, so it will be easy to produce. Maybe a maxi-single... Of course, we'll have to see how it holds up to the audiences on tour."

"And whether she can afford your fees," I said. In his incarnation as Cold Coeur Productions, Joaquin fleeced wannabes to pay for Cold Coeur Records mastering and manufacturing.

Joaquin chuckled. "I'm fond of Japanese girls. They never quibble about money!"

Nothing I could do to soften that blow for Nina.

"In fact, I'd like to substitute Chiharu for Shanti on tour." Joaquin's bloodshot eyes gleamed. "But unfortunately it's impractical. Unless, Shanti, you want to stay behind?"

I dropped into French. "You know what? I was dead set against this tour. And I still think there is no way we're not going to end up in the red, and that's all right for you, because you'll make it back by charging Kinderbox and Chiharu for PR and marketing and God knows what else—"

"Naoya and the others are very excited about it, and without them, you're quite right, we couldn't do it. Let me tell you about a concept called economies of scale." Joaquin stood up.

"Joaquin, I'm not finished!"

"I need to smoke if I have to listen to you. Tad?"

"Sorry, I'm all out."

"I think I've got enough for one jay." Nina went to look for her bag and came back with a miniature glassine bag with a few black crumbs in the bottom.

"This is fucking ridiculous." Joaquin rolled a joint the size of a cocktail straw, moved over to the stove, and switched on the fan in the hood. The joint stuck out between his fingers like a skinny white accent acute. "This fucking country."

Tad said nothing. When Joaquin offered him the joint, he shook his head.

"If you're really desperate, you could always go to Center Gai or Roppongi and score off the Iranians," I needled Joaquin. "Then when you get caught, we'll be rid of you for at least ten years."

He extended the joint towards me. "You should," he added, anticipating my refusal. "It might help you to relax!"

I shook my head. Switching back into French, I pointed at the thread of smoke winding into the hood of the stove. "See that, that's what will happen to the money you're spending on this tour. But..." Ned's face loomed in my mind, those bright blue eyes too near together, too close. "Oddly enough," I said through gritted teeth, "I've started to think it would be nice to get out of Tokyo for a while."

"You're such a terrible loser, Shanti!" Joaquin leered at me triumphantly.

“Don’t worry,” Nina said, hugging me one-armed as she clonked the coffee pot down on the table. “It *will* be fun. Tours always are. The best gig Joaquin ever had in Europe was tour manager for Jemme... twelve countries in two weeks. We had a blast.”

She lit a handful of incense sticks. Tad’s father probably wouldn’t have known the difference between the smell of poor-quality Turkish hash and the smell of Twilight Rose #36, but you can’t be too careful.

Curled in my sleeping-bag on Tad’s floor, I berated myself.

What’s the point of being in a band if you don’t want the whole world to hear your songs? I’d been asking myself this fairly obvious question for as long as I’d been involved with music. When I sent Alastair a copy of *Xenophobia*, he’d made all the right noises, but I knew it had given him sleepless nights, and he was right.

I should have ditched Gorot a long time ago. But I’d got pretty good at reassuring myself, and one way and another, I just hadn’t been able to tear myself away.

I couldn’t tell Alastair that Ned had found me, and it was all my own fault. I *couldn’t*. Somehow, I’d have to contain this catastrophe so that he never found out.

I managed to go to sleep, but I kept waking up, jolted by glimpses of a figure standing motionless outside the Armageddon Institute, watching the house through the hours of darkness. It grew light outside, and I opened my eyes on rainbows: Tad had hung a geodesic prism in the window of his room, so that the morning sun filled the room with streaks of color. But when I fell asleep again, it was still night.

Around ten o’clock, my nightmares drove me out of my sleeping-bag. I took a shower, and was making coffee when Tad’s father wandered into the kitchen with a pair of garden shears in his hand. Mr Kuroiwa lived in the annexe at the back of the house. At some point, Joaquin and Nina had edged him out of the master bedroom upstairs, either by design or because they weren’t culturally equipped to deal with his politeness. A tolerant man with a quiet sense of humor, Mr Kuroiwa worked for thirty years at the same company until the lifetime employment system turned out not to be. Now he spent the same ten, twelve hours at a stretch behind the wheel of his taxi. He was also a racegoer and a heavy bettor, which made me feel less guilty, for some reason, about taking advantage of his kindness. I bobbed my head. “Good morning, Kuroiwa-san.”

“Morning,” he greeted me. I suspected he didn’t know my name. “Going out to prune the azaleas. Spring wind’s blowing. That old plum tree should be blooming any time now.”

I hadn’t noticed, but the windows over the sink were rattling in their frames, and the branches of the plum tree in the fun-size garden leapt in the sunlight. They looked bare, but I believed him, and for an instant I could almost believe that it mattered.

As soon as the door closed behind him, I went to get my coat. We’d used up the bread on a midnight snack of fried-egg sandwiches. I’d nip out and buy some before the others came down for breakfast.

The wind caught me on the doorstep. It seemed to toss the pale clear sunshine around the cul-de-sac. Mr Kuroiwa was right, spring was coming. The sky had a hint of color in it, and the polluted city air smelt almost fresh. I bounced down the alley and around the corner.

“Shanti.”

Ned pushed off from the wall of the Armageddon Institute, almost exactly where I’d seen him in my dreams. My grip on reality seemed to falter. “Jesus Christ, how long have you been out here?”

“Half an hour?” He gave me a hangdog grin. “I was going to knock on the door, but I thought I’d give it a bit longer. Didn’t want to wake up the neighborhood.”

The red and white parka was the same as yesterday, but he’d changed his jeans from blue to

black and he looked like he'd had a better night's sleep than I had.

"Wasn't positive I had the right house, anyway," he admitted, looking around at the variegated palisades of shrubbery. "They don't go in for street numbers, do they?"

Of course, he needn't have followed me last night. He could have taken Gorot's mailing address from our website and worked it out with a map. Finding any given address in Tokyo was a challenge even for natives... but Ned was nothing if not dogged, was he? A third possibility occurred to me: he could have followed me last night, returned to his friends' house in Nakano by taxi, and then come back.

I kept walking on autopilot. Ned kept pace with me. "Heading home? I thought we might hang out today. We could do some of the tourist spots. I reckon you've never been to Tokyo Tower, have you? Gav and Mike haven't, and they've been here for years."

I went into Family Mart and bought a loaf of sliced Pasco while Ned wandered up and down the aisles, asking me what things were. As we reemerged into the sunlight I said brightly, "I might as well let you know, my schedule is pretty crazy. We've got a rehearsal in a couple of hours."

"You know, it's funny," Ned said after a moment. "Of all the things I thought you might have turned out to be, *rock star* wasn't even on the list."

"It still isn't," I said.

Short of an outright confrontation, I couldn't stop him from following me back to the house. Mr Kuroiwa squatted over his pot plants beside the steps, a cigarette hanging from his mouth. He greeted us without surprise. He was used to uncouth strangers turning up at all hours. But Ned couldn't have known that, so maybe it encouraged him. He didn't ask me whether he could come in. He just did it.

"Shoes off, Ned," I said between my teeth.

"Whoops. I was forgetting."

Oddly, he seemed bigger and clumsier with his shoes off – or it might just have been that he was too big for the Kuroiwas' dining-room, which was almost entirely taken up by a table covered with books, junk mail, Gorot flyers, sheet music, CDs, magazines, pencil diagrams on scrap paper, ashtrays, Joaquin's and Tad's laptops, and the dismantled guts of an effector that Joaquin had been working on last night in hopes of selling it online. I went into the kitchen and dropped the bread in its Family Mart bag on the counter. "Well, do you want some coffee?" I said ungraciously.

Tad came into the kitchen with a towel knotted over his hair. "Good morning," he said, staring. Tad spoke English almost as well as Joaquin, with an equally heavy, but very different accent: *Guu' moningu*.

"Ned," I said, "this is the guy whose house you're in."

Ned surged forward to give Tad a high five. "I saw your show last night, man. You were fucking fantastic."

"Always helps when we get a good crowd." Tad tossed his towel onto a chair and returned Ned's high five, grinning. "First time you've seen us?"

"First time I've seen Shanti in sixteen years."

"No way!"

Gritting my teeth, I explained that we'd been childhood friends. *Friends* was a stretch, of course. How had Ned maneuvered me into covering up for him like this?

"Sixteen years," Tad marvelled. "Did you recognise her easily?"

"Oh, she hasn't changed at all."

"So what was she like as a child?" Tad gestured Ned to a chair and sat down across from him.

"Well, she was into a bit of everything, I'd say. Of all things, it never would have occurred to me she'd become a rock star!" Ned cleared his throat. "I don't mind saying I was fucking impressed last night. You've got an aura of greatness. I could tell you believe in yourselves."

I choked on my coffee. I was twenty-nine, and the only thing I believed in was the brutality of the world and the music industry in particular. Tad was two years older than me, a veteran of the Tokyo indie rock scene, but he was vulnerable to flattery. I saw his social grin turning real, and knew exactly what was coming next. "I used to be in Fuct Of Life. You haven't heard of us, but we opened for Saxon, Fastway, such dinosaurs... Well, that was ten years ago. Metal isn't so popular anymore. But Gorot isn't metal. We're pure rock 'n' roll."

"Yeah, man," Ned said, grinning. "Yeah."

When Joaquin and Nina came downstairs I steeled myself to trot out the childhood-friends line again, but Tad assumed the responsibility of introducing Ned to them, and he did it so well that Nina jumped to the conclusion that Ned was to be made to feel at home, while Joaquin grunted and ignored him. We ate breakfast and migrated into the dining-room. Joaquin and Tad multitasked on their laptops while Nina told Ned about teaching English in Japan. I could see that it was nice for her to have a non-musician to talk to for a change. I contributed a few English-teaching anecdotes of my own, swilling coffee to counteract the sense of helplessness that was making me feel sleepy.

At noon Shingo, our drummer, sloped in. By now Ned had worked himself so adeptly into the ambiance that his presence passed without comment. Shingo eyed me. "What happened to you last night?"

"She had a diva moment," Joaquin answered for me. "But she's over it now."

"Entirely reconciled to the inevitable," I said with a poker face. "While reserving the right to say I told you so."

Shingo laughed and stretched his legs out. "So, any further word from Hori-kun?"

Tad shook his head. "I'm emailing Naoya now."

Naoya Kobayashi had been in Fuct Of Life with Tad, back when dinosaurs walked the earth. He'd also been the vocalist in Ravisher, the first band that Joaquin and Tad started together, and the lead guitarist in Dufek Intrusion, the second one. Finally he'd left to start his own band, citing creative differences with Joaquin: the stuff they'd been doing was too upbeat for his tastes. That hadn't stopped him from persuading Joaquin to produce Kinderbox for free, though, and they'd released their album on Cold Coeur Records.

"Hori-kun is their drummer," Nina explained to Ned. "He's afraid if he comes on tour with us, he might lose his job."

"Ha," Tad said. "And if he lose, he never gets another one." Hori-kun was Joaquin's hash dealer, and an enthusiastic consumer of his own product.

"Anyway, Shingo said he'll double for him if he can't come. He's a total star, aren't you, Miya-chan?"

"Musically, I've wanted to dispense with Hori-kun for some time," Joaquin said. "But he's so useful in other ways!" I watched Ned. He was faking amusement, but he didn't seem to know what Joaquin was talking about. "But I'm also thinking about the driving," Joaquin added more seriously. "If Hori-kun doesn't come, that's one less person with a license. And we have too few drivers as it is."

"I just want to know whether I have to learn all their songs or not," muttered Shingo. Seeing Tad's Lucky Strikes on the table, he took one and lit up. I dug my fingernails into the seams of my jeans.

"If you're needing a driver, I might be able to help you out." Ned spoke up. "I've got my international license."

I sat bolt upright.

"We aren't hiring," said Joaquin, to my unspeakable relief. Chuckling, he added, "If you're content to do it for free, then by all means, let's talk!"

"Sure, I wouldn't expect a penny. I'd do it for the chance to see the country. What kind of a rig do you have?"

My stomach twisted, coffee-sour. “Do we really need another driver?” I said in French. “You, Tad, Nina—“

“It’s me, Tad, Shingo, and Naoya only,” Joaquin said, sticking to English. “Nina failed her Japanese driver’s license test.”

“I screwed up,” Nina confirmed with a brave smile, and I couldn’t say anything, because that happened to her sometimes: she had these periodic, inexplicable lapses.

“Yes, they say even a corpse can pass it, but she failed. Heh! So we’re looking at four drivers for two vans, and all of us must perform every night. Have you ever tried to play at your best after driving for five hours? It’s not pleasant. We could use a roadie, in fact.” Now Joaquin spoke directly to Ned. “We have two vans: one of them fairly new, that belongs to the other band that will be travelling with us; the other one – it’s mine – fairly shit.”

“I’ve driven a decommissioned army bus across the Himalayas,” Ned said proudly. “And when I say decommissioned, there was a reason for that. I had to take the entire engine to pieces several times before we reached Nepal.”

Nina giggled. “That sounds like ours! We lived in a bus for a while. In Germany. We called it The Autobahn Racer.”

“Ours was just called This Fucking Thing.”

“It’s a very attractive offer.” Joaquin’s voice seemed to come from a distance, and his frowning face might have been painted with crushed jewels on wood. “But we’re driving up to Hokkaido the day after tomorrow. And we’ll be on the road for ten days. Are you sure you can commit for that long? Don’t you have other plans?”

“Nothing I can’t reschedule!” Ned chuckled.

I said, “But Ned! What about your business on Koh Samui?”

His brows flexed in annoyance, then smoothed out again. “I’ve a business partner. Jeremy Loh, he’s half Chinese. I’d trust him with my wife if I was married. He’ll look after my projects for me. Don’t you worry, when I make a promise, I keep it.”

“On that basis I can’t say yes, but I can’t say no, either.” Joaquin frowned and tapped a rhythm on a back issue of *Voicer*, one of the freezines where we advertised. Tap, tap, *and he played upon the table, and his name was Aiken Drum!* I shivered. Abruptly Joaquin said, “Where’s Gen? Fuck, it’s twelve o’clock already, and I have to be in Shinjuku at three.”

Joaquin worked part-time as a sound engineer at Oasis, a club in Shinjuku where Gorot performed once a month. The gig paid peanuts, but we cherished it.

“Somebody call Gen,” Joaquin ordered, looking at me. “In the meantime, since our guitarist is not here, we can’t rehearse, so I’ll show you the van, Ned.”

Unwilling to let them out of my sight, I trailed them out of the house and around the corner, away from Family Mart and the little neighborhood park. Joaquin had rented a space in a privately owned four-car parking lot, its corrugated iron roof festooned in dead kudzu. From a distance I watched him reverse the van into the street. All four men looked under the hood, then squatted to peer under the chassis. They made a comical group. Ned seemed to take up as much space as the other three put together, Shingo was equally tall but half as bulky, Tad was a brown wisp. Average them out and you got Joaquin, with his medium build and medium brown hair sticking up in a dozen cowlicks. From all the way down the street I could hear him lecturing Ned about the broken heater, the possibly defective steering column, and whatever other problems had manifested recently.

Gen’s cell phone rang in my ear. “Moshi mosh!”

“It’s me. Did you forget you were supposed to be here at noon?”

He apologized breathlessly. “I’ll be there in fifteen minutes. You guys go ahead and start without me.”

He knew we couldn’t start without him, but he persisted in acting as if he was dispensable,

because the alternative would have been to act his age. “Gen,” I said rapidly, “just to warn you before you walk into a crazy situation. This guy I know from Ireland turned up at the house this morning, and he’s trying to get himself taken on as our roadie. I... Gen? Hello? Hello?” He’d hung up on me.

The van crawled past me with Joaquin at the wheel.

“Ned thinks he can fix the heater right now,” said Tad, returning on foot.

“I wonder what it feels like to have that much time on your hands,” Shingo said.

“Speaking of which, Miya-chan,” I said. “How are you swinging the time off? Tad’s going to quit his job...” I still thought that was a mistake, but at least Tad was only a temp in the hot-desk realm of IT, and he could easily get another job. Shingo was a fully fledged salaryman. “*You’re* not quitting your job, are you?”

“I’m going to take my legally mandated two weeks of vacation time per year,” Shingo said with mingled pride and defiance.

“Will they let you?”

“Can’t stop me. I didn’t take any vacation days last year, and the last time I called in sick was the twentieth century.”

The van plugged the cul-de-sac so neatly that we had to squeeze past it to reach the house.

“Tools,” shouted Ned self-importantly from underneath the dashboard. “I need a Phillips, an all-purpose wrench, and a pair of pliers.”

“We’ve got tools in the studio, but they won’t be the right size. I’ll ask my dad,” Tad said. “It’ll give him something to do while we rehearse.”

We’d tried at first to stay out of the studio when Tad’s father was at home, but this rule had inevitably fallen by the wayside. We rehearsed with everything plugged in but turned down. Shingo played with three towels stuffed into the bass drum and muffle rings on the toms and snare. Thanks to Joaquin and Tad’s DIY soundproofing, you could hardly hear us outside the house. When we were cooking in the studio late at night, we resorted to headphones and a set of electronic drum pads, and when we were recording, we just cranked it up as loud as necessary and crossed our fingers.

“I’ve got an idea for a new song,” Joaquin said.

“We just put out a new album!” I wailed.

“Well, I haven’t worked it out yet, but here’s the basic idea...”

I’d never known anyone who could touch Joaquin as a songwriter. He might have become a one-man band like Trent Reznor, or just another Pro Tools whiz, alchemizing bands that sucked live. But with this band the energy came from our synchronicity, and what worked live worked equally well in the studio. Nowadays, Joaquin often just dumped his ideas on us and let the chemistry take over.

Within the infamously narrow specs of the four-minute rock song, there are only so many ways you can flip the script. Gorot had two tempos, fast and heavy or slow and bluesy. This wasn’t either, or rather it would be both. Joaquin’s new idea involved an inversion that put the chorus first, in the form of an intro where we all had to come in at once, behind the beat. The verse was a simple turnaround played by Joaquin and Tad, with a final B flat chord creating the expectation of a key change. Then Gen and Shingo would burst in and annihilate the key altogether. The song would explode like a dirty bomb, shattering the beat into a maelstrom of guitar noise, where I found a long note like a plutonium contrail in the sky.

But my voice wasn’t cooperating. All that talking after the gig last night, followed by a crying fit, followed by more talking: a recipe for cranky vocal cords. I couldn’t concentrate, either, for thinking about Ned, who still hadn’t left the house, as far as I knew. Could he find out anything from Nina to use against me? I blamed the late night I’d had.



“Diva diva,” said Joaquin.

“Fuck youuu,” I sang, high C.

We kept at it for a while after Joaquin went off to work, but there was a limit to how much we could do without inadvertently starting to memorize our mistakes. At last Gen said he had to go.

“Oh God, what time is it?” I croaked. The studio had no windows, or rather Tad and Joaquin had covered its one window with acoustic foam.

“The Celeste Trio is playing Newport Café at six thirty.” Gen zipped his guitar away and unplugged his stomp box.

I thought fast. “Can I come?”