

## "Together"

Elroy was uncomfortable. He bit the inside of his cheek until the twang of blood warned him to stop, at which point he let go and turned to the other side. Goddamn bitty boppers and their goddamn clumsy twirls and jumps, Elroy must have been bumped a hundred times. He got their sharp elbows in his back until he sat down, then he got their bare stomachs, sometimes their budding little nibs right on top of his head. Beside him, Cassy cooed in wide-eyed admiration at the gyrating starlet on stage. "Isn't she great, grandpa?" she yelled into his ear. Elroy shrugged his shoulders noncommittally. He looked hot. She tugged his sleeve. "You're the only one wearing flannel. I told you to wear a t-shirt."

"Not wearing what I don't have," he bellowed so she could hear him but her attention was already gone. Just like her mother, he thought.

Elroy suffered through at least twenty more minutes of candy bee bop, twenty thousand swaying tweens in Ali swag (he did the staggering math, revolted that the half naked, half talent must be mighty rich), when Ali finally slowed the tempo with "A Minute of You", thanking the crowd for making it the number one song on the Billboard Charts, whatever that was. The crowd settled, turning on their phones like a galaxy of waving electronic stars, and Elroy figured he might even settle in for a quick nap. Dog-tired farmers could sleep through anything. He leaned back, stretched out his legs, tipped the brim of his CFCW AM radio hat over his eyes and relaxed a little. Judy would have nagged him to stay awake, at the very least, but Judy was home with bad knees, so too bad. He was here, in this godforsaken circus, and he would do whatever he dam well pleased.

The arena dimmed and thousands of screaming kids nearly ruptured Elroy's ear drums. Ali had left the stage but the godforsaken concert wasn't over yet. Wild with anticipation, Cassy and

her friend Peyton were nearly on top of him, trying to spy the stage through the dark. Elroy shoved the girls away and picked at something crusty in his belly button. Elroy had just located... what was it? A bug? Something from the thresher? Maybe a dried scab? ...when he was captured in a spotlight and a previously hidden stage began rising from the floor in front of him. Blinded, Elroy blinked, finding his face and exposed belly projected onto a massive screen at the front of the arena. He stood, confused. Beside him, Cassy and Peyton, so overwhelmed with excitement, began to cry. "Oh, girls!" Ali crooned down at them as she rose above in a glittering, plunging unitard. Fog swirled around her legs and poured down the ascending stage and onto their faces. "Don't cry, now! I'm just as happy to see you too!" Cassy's open-mouthed smile was so wide, her uvula was dangling, two feet long, beside Elroy on the screen. "What's your name girlfriend?" Ali lowered her microphone toward them.

"C-Cassy! I love you!"

"Well I love you too, hun! And you are?" Ali asked Peyton.

"Peyton!" she vibrated.

"Hi Peyton! Hi Cassy! Can everyone say hello to Peyton and Cassy?" The building reverberated with the sound of their names. Then Ali pointed the microphone at Elroy. "And who is this handsome fellow with you two?"

Elroy felt the singer's eyes on his skin and he blushed. Fuck. Elroy pretended not to hear the question or see the microphone in his face. He looked at his feet. "Oh come on now, sugar, don't be shy. We're all friends here." Ali crooned. She did not take the microphone away from his face.

"His name is Elroy!" Cassy shrieked.

"Why, hello there Elroy! Can everyone here say hello to my friend Elroy?" A spot at the base of his head started pulsing, drawing toward his temples, pressurizing his skull. Cassy patted

his back, half jumping, half shaking. The crowd greeted Elroy, but Elroy still could not bring himself to look the singer in the face. Ali crouched to her knees. "So how are my new friends related?"

"She's my best friend and he's my grandfather," Cassy blurted. "Eeeeeek!"

"Grandfather! Why, Elroy, you don't look old enough to be a grandfather. Am I right or am I right?" The camera zoomed in on Elroy. His tattered hat hung low over his eyes but even with that it was easy to see his wiry hair was almost purely gray. It seemed he had more wrinkles than skin and though his suspenders pressed his shirt tight against his body, they could not keep the bottom ends tucked into his jeans. He was just too fat. Ali knew it and the camera knew it. He reddened and his glasses fogged from the heat of his embarrassment. "What do you think, everyone? Should we have our friends join us on stage?" The crowd hooted and whistled for their luminary. Ali responded, "Well, alright then. Let's get you up here!" Fanatical cheers resounded. Cassy and Peyton scrambled up the makeshift steps and threw themselves into Ali's open arms. The trio hugged and jumped together, then Ali broke the hug and turned toward Elroy. "Whatcha doing down there, Elroy? We can't do this song without you. Get on up here, I won't bite." She held out her long jeweled fingers. Elroy crossed his arms and sat down, frowning.

"C'mon grandpa!" Cassy beckoned from the stage. Elroy shook his head, having none of it. Ali leapt off the stage and took Cassy's chair. "Let me tell you a story, Elroy. I want everyone to hear it. Settle with me a moment, will you? Hush now." She pumped her hand slowly downward, reeling in the crowd. "Shh. Shh. That's right, bring it back a step, just for a moment. Thank you. Now, it's no secret that I was raised by a single mother. My father left when I was just four and my brother was two. Shortly after that, my grandfather, my mother's father, died in a car

accident. I didn't get to know my dad and I didn't get to know my grandfather but I sure wish I did. And seeing you here, Elroy, with your granddaughter in all this," she gave a wide wave over the audience, "well, it melts my heart. I wish I had that, you know? Someone who'll be there for you no matter what. Someone just like you, Elroy. I think there are a lot of us out there who wish for a little Elroy in our lives, too, am I right or am I right?" The crowd erupted with applause.

"Help me show Elroy how much we love him! EI-ROY! EI-ROY! EI-ROY!" Ali chanted and the crowd followed. Then she took Elroy's hand and led him on stage.

Questioned by Judy later that night, Elroy said he couldn't recall anything about the concert, only that Cassy and Peyton had fun but it was otherwise unremarkable. He was good at suppressing memories, even ones with semi-nude women in them.

Then Judy opened the paper the next morning.

"Local grandfather a hero to superstar Ali!" Judy shrieked and shoved the paper right under his nose, spilling his coffee. There he was, in all his red-faced glory, with Ali's arms wrapped around his neck and her lips pressed up against his cheek, his cap askew. He was smiling. Judy swatted him with the paper. "Nothing special, Elroy?" she asked incredulously. "You said there was nothing special about the concert. What the hell do you call this?"

"Nothing special," he blurted, to which he got another playful thwap on the back of his head.

"You're practically front page Elroy! Second page is as good as the first in my books and you got half of that! Look at you, all flirty with that girl." She proceeded to the junk drawer under the toaster, where she fished out a pair of scissors and set to cutting out the article for safe-keeping.

Elroy had never been a flirt. Where some men could navigate the seductive spurt of courtship, Elroy had always fizzled before he got going and he reckoned that Judy only married

him out of pity. Still, the idea that Judy *thought* he had flirted with the popstar tickled him. "Jealous?" he asked.

She giggled. "No, hun, I know better than that, besides you could be her grandfather. She even called you her 'honorary grandfather' in the article. A chummy old man, in other words." Judy laughed again, puncturing the delicate bulge in his ego. "Like Santa," she squeezed his shoulders from behind and pecked him on the cheek. *Like Santa?* Elroy thought. *Fuck Santa.* "I just don't know why you didn't tell me about this, Elroy. Cassy must have been through the roof when that girl called you up. Just look at Cassy's face, if I didn't know better I'd think she'd have peed herself right then and there."

"Mind if I take a read, Jude?" She passed him the clipping and took his breakfast plate away while Elroy read.

*Local grandfather Elroy Bends made a memorable impression on mega star Ali at the Scotiabank Arena in front of a roaring crowd last night. Following the popstar's number one hit, "A Minute of You", Bends caught the popstar's attention when he appeared onscreen beside his granddaughter, Cassy Bends and her best friend Peyton Illington, all of the small farming community, Scotch Block, about an hour west of Toronto. Over twenty thousand jealous fans swayed as Ali serenaded Bends with crowd favorite "Together", which the singer said was inspired by her hard-working, single mother. "Family is everything to me," the singer told the crowd. "Hang on to them and love them with all you've got. To all the mothers and fathers and sisters and brothers out there, to all the grandmothers and especially to all the grandfathers like my honorary grandfather Elroy here, hold on tight and love, love, love with all your might." Extending an open invitation to Bends to her future performances, teary-eyed Ali encouraged*

*fans to go home and hug their loved ones, then left us with her explosive hit, "Horrible", and we finally exited the coaster.*

Elroy set the paper down and sniffed. Judy was watching him. "I'd say you made quite the impression on the girl, hun." Elroy shrugged, but he couldn't deny what was right in front of him, written out clear as day. He *had* made an impression on the girl. He hadn't meant to, of course, but there it was, in big, bold letters with his big mug squished up against her thin face. The girl liked him, *admired* him enough to give him an open invitation. A member of the closed-circle elite, Ali beckoned old Elroy Bends in. *No*, Elroy thought again. She *begged* me in.

Two days later, Elroy found himself in front of his bedroom mirror, smoothing his sparse wet hair over with his pocket comb. He hummed a little song, something not altogether unfamiliar, and patted Old Spice onto his cheeks and neck. His favorite pants had shrunk a little (or was he expanding a little?), and he couldn't quite get the zipper all the way up, but his shirt was long enough to cover the area this time. Judy hobbled in and pecked his cheek, "getting all fancy for this one, I see. Should I be worried?"

Elroy grunted, took his glasses off and wiped them with the hem of his shirt. "I'm like her grandfather, remember? Ain't nothing more than that."

"Has Cassy calmed down any?" she asked, smoothing the wrinkles from the back of his shirt.

"Girl's gone mad, I think. Her phone's been buzzing up a storm, can't even do her schoolwork, her mind's all fussed up with this nonsense." But Cassy wasn't the only one who'd gone mad. Elroy had, and Judy had, too. Their own phone had been rung by no less than twenty six people they hadn't heard from in years, some twice, and another dozen or so times by people Elroy and Judy had known intimately for decades. *Big shot*, his friend Frank had hooted at him over the phone, and Elroy liked the sound of it.

"Angela would have loved every minute of this," Judy said from behind him.

"Yeah," he said. "She would've been loony over this." Judy began to cry so he whirled around to fold her into his arms and let her leak onto his clean shirt.

Cassy called him from the living room. "Ready Grandpa?"

"Coming, hold your horses," he called back and released Judy, who was now crying harder than he'd seen her do in months, almost as hard as the day they'd found Angela, half buried in pink snow, near Minto, over an hour away. "You going to be okay Jude?" he rubbed her arms. She nodded.

"This is good for Cassy," he said. "All considered."

Judy sniffled. "I know. It's just..." she let the statement hang.

"I know," Elroy said, clamping his lips so tightly together he figured they might just bleed.

By the time they arrived in Ottawa six hours later, Elroy had sour sweat stains beneath both of his arms and another that spread from the crack of his ass upward half the length of his back. Already greasy, his hair stuck to his head as though he'd combed it with butter. Still, he and Cassy had no trouble retrieving their tickets from the Will Call booth. "You're the grandpa!" the jaundiced looking woman had said to him from behind the protective glass where she sat distributing tickets. Elroy nodded, offering nothing else to the woman. "You just call her up, just like that, and she get you tickets?" she asked.

Elroy nodded. It had been almost like that. Ali's *people* had given him a number for her assistant's assistant, some gum-popping screechy puerile twit that Elroy didn't much care for. The woman leaned in conspiratorially, "think you can get some for me?" She slipped her fingers under the glass that separated them and gave him a seedy smile that suggested if the glass weren't there, well, Judy just might have a reason to be jealous after all.

"Sorry," he said, and took the tickets and a tour pamphlet from between the woman's fingers. She let out a whoosh of air as he departed and Elroy couldn't help but smile a little.

They found their seats, much closer than they sat previously. Losing none of her earlier excitement, Cassy bounced for ninety five minutes while Elroy rested in his seat, fascinated by her energy. She reminded him of Angela. He sighed. Then he was entombed in light when a spotlight captured him. A camera immediately followed. There, front and center, Elroy Bends was back on the Jumbotron. He straightened and stood, pulling the back of his belt to get his jeans up under his belly, waiting. Cassy jumped all over him, screaming. Ali waved to him, and Elroy waved right back, giving her his very best grandfatherly smile. Elroy looked for stairs but there were none. He looked for a security guard to usher him toward Ali but they were all occupied with crowd control. Elroy searched for a secret stage where he was supposed to be, for any platform to do his thing, but he saw nothing of the sort. Soon, the light withdrew and illuminated other people in further areas of the stadium. Ali waved at them, too. Elroy slumped back into his chair and crossed his arms. *Bitch*, he thought.

Afterward, they waited for almost two hours in the autograph line when a man in uniform pointed to a woman with three young girls two places ahead of Elroy and Cassy and said, "sorry folks, but this will be Ali's last autograph of the evening. You can see Ali again in Montreal. Thanks for coming out."

A man grunted, pulling his daughter out of the line. A pack of women pleaded with the uniformed man and, when that didn't work, resorted to vocal but fragile threats until their embarrassed children towed them away. Cassy turned, pulling his arm along, but Elroy stayed put. "Come on, Grandpa," she said.

"We ain't going nowhere," Elroy said. "We stayed in that line and we're going to talk to her. "

"Grandpa—"

"She *wants* to see us, Cassy. Just you wait and see. Mark my words, when she sees us, she'll, well, I don't know what she'll do, but I can tell you she'll be damn happy." Elroy caught the attention of the uniformed man, who took little time to turn them away.

"Sorry sir," the man said.

Elroy stepped forward. "But she wants to see me." The man shook his head. Elroy pushed ahead and the man, not altogether harshly, pressed his hands to the fat lumps of Elroy's chest. "She's done today, sir. You can see her another time."

"But—" and then Elroy saw Ali finish her last autograph, standing to leave.

"Ali! Ali! It's me, Elroy! Grandpa Elroy!" he cried. Never before had his voice seemed so brittle, so pauperous, so strange to his own ears. The man held Elroy back while the singer blew the lingering crowd a kiss, waved at no one in particular and departed.

"This ain't right," Elroy said, his chest heaving, his breath coming to him in gulps, his body struggling with the union of his sudden excitement and decades of inactivity.

"It's okay Grandpa. We'll see her another time. Let's go home." The guard shook his head as Cassy took Elroy's hand and led him through the labyrinthine jumble of roped areas and concrete corridors, slowing outside for Elroy to catch his breath. She looked at him. He looked not quite tired, more like a kicked dog. "Maybe this wasn't a good idea Grandpa. I mean, isn't it a bit crazy to drive six hours for this when we were just at her show two days ago? I'm sorry I made you come."

At this, Elroy felt something tighten in his head, as though something had gripped his brain and was giving it a terrible squeeze. "Sorry? What you have to be sorry for? Don't you go being sorry for me. I ain't having none of your goddamned pity, Cassy. We came because we were

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invited. Just because she didn't see us standing in that line doesn't mean she didn't want to see us." But Elroy had saw Ali look at him when she blew that kiss to the crowd. He was sure of it. He was sure that in that second, that one infinitesimal slice of time, she'd seen him. But that fucking guard wouldn't let Ali come to him. It was that fucking guard's fault. Ali blew him a kiss because she couldn't come to him, and Elroy let her just walk away without getting what she really wanted. What Elroy wanted. Before they reached the car, Elroy jackknifed in the parking lot and turned back toward the building, keys dangling off his pinky finger. "Come with me."

"Grandpa! What are you doing?"

"Just getting what we came for." His pace quickened and Cassy had to jog to keep up to him. Elroy hadn't moved this fast in years and it felt good, really good.

Elroy skirted the building until he saw large black and silver tour bus towing a red trailer with Ali's face crawl away from the loading area. The singer was leaving.

Elroy ran. He pumped his arms and fanned his legs into the loading area, quick, quicker, until he reached a breakneck pace. His heart pummeled the inside of his chest cavity, rattling around like a rock in a coffee can, and Elroy felt the comings of an attack. Blackness shrouded him, threatened to overtake him in his stupor, take him and drown him until he did the thing that had to be done. Like before, only different. That he had survived. This he would, too. Elroy hit the bus with his hands and for a moment, the bus stopped. He had done it. He pressed his face to the black window from where Elroy was sure Ali was watching him. Might she even be impressed that a guy like him had the gumption to catch her attention like that? Most guys these days were pussies, sucking from mommy's tit so long they grew boobs, not balls. In Elroy's day, men were *born*, they weren't coddled into some delicate, inhibited existence. He smacked the window again. "I know you want to see me, Ali! It's okay. Grandpa Elroy's right here." He circled the

glass with the tips of his fingers, like a lover, letting the whiskers on his cheek rest against his damp exhalation splotch on the window. "Grandpa's right here."

"Grandpa!" Cassy cried from behind him. "What the fuck are you doing?" The girl had never used such language in front of Elroy before but he barely registered the slip. The bus let out a high *psssssss* sound. Elroy stepped back. Ali was coming to him.

Then the bus began to move again, faster than before, and Elroy was caught so surprised that he barely had enough time to jump back before the heavy tires rolled over his toes. He smacked the side of the bus, then Elroy ran, beating the steel with his fists and forearms, running alongside the vehicle until it was far out of his reach. "Stop!" he screamed. "Ali! Stop!" With a quick turn from the parking lot, the bus departed.

They didn't speak until they pulled into the driveway before dawn the next morning. Cassy had fallen asleep but Elroy was wired up, too agitated for even for a road trip coffee. He nudged the girl awake. "We're home."

Cassy gathered her jacket and backpack, leaving him without so much as a word. Elroy abandoned the warmth of the car for the chilly, unlit air. "Cassy—" he started but didn't quite know how to finish.

"Let's not talk about it, Grandpa."

"But—"

"It's over."

Elroy woke a few hours later to the smell of frying bacon and percolating coffee. He splashed some water on his face, treaded lightly down the steep farmhouse stairs to the kitchen and waited for Judy to do the talking. She wasted no time. "I looked for you in the paper this morning," she chuckled.

"We didn't meet her this time, just watched the show." He sat while Judy poured him a hot cup of coffee, adding a heavy dose of cream and stirring it before setting it near his empty plate.

"Well, it sounds like it was an exciting time." Was there something in Judy's eye? The way she looked at him, the way the droopier of the two twitched, made him wonder if she had spoken to the girl.

"Nothing but teeny boppers and bad music."

"Oh come now, Elroy. You must have enjoyed it at least a little?" she said, with a little hop in her tone that required an answer.

"Ah," he said with a dismissive swipe of his hand. "You know me, Jude. It's not my cup of tea."

Cassy bounced down the stairs in jeans and a sweater, eschewing the last step as she always did, nearly buckling a knee, as she always did. "Morning," she said, taking an apple from the bowl in the middle of the table. She snuck a piece of bacon straight from the sizzling pan, stole a piece of toast off Judy's plate, then kissed Judy on the cheek, which Judy warmly accepted. "I'm doing homework with Liv today." Cassy hoisted her heavy bag over her shoulder as if for evidence. She wouldn't look Elroy in the eye.

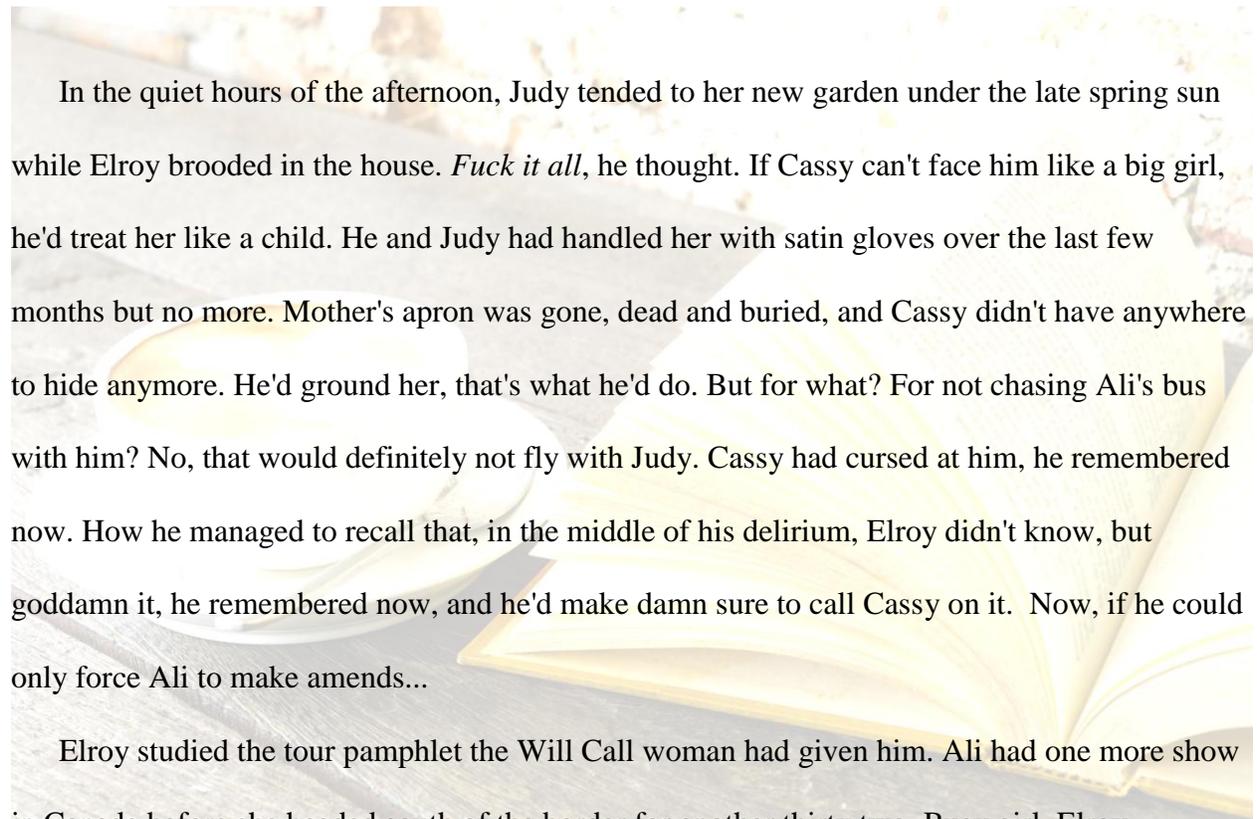
"On a Sunday?" Judy asked. She observed the dark circles under Cassy's eyes and knew the girl didn't catch enough sleep. "You must be exhausted, Cassy. Why don't you stay for breakfast, maybe have a quick nap, then I'll drive you to Liv's after lunch so you can rest?"

"I'm fine, Grandma. We've got a test tomorrow and I'm not ready for it." Judy tilted her head, raising her eyebrows. Cassy smiled. "I'm fine, Grandma. I promise. Just a few hours, okay? I won't be able to relax unless I study."

"Let Grandpa drive you, then. Elroy, be a dear and take Cassy to Liv's while I finish breakfast. It'll be ready by the time you get back."

Elroy didn't even have time to respond before Cassy said, "I'm good. I'm going to take my bike so Liv and I can ride the trail later on." She took her helmet from the porch, slipped her backpack over her other arm and said, "thanks though."

"Well, I suppose it's —" but Cassy was gone before Judy could finish her sentence.



In the quiet hours of the afternoon, Judy tended to her new garden under the late spring sun while Elroy brooded in the house. *Fuck it all*, he thought. If Cassy can't face him like a big girl, he'd treat her like a child. He and Judy had handled her with satin gloves over the last few months but no more. Mother's apron was gone, dead and buried, and Cassy didn't have anywhere to hide anymore. He'd ground her, that's what he'd do. But for what? For not chasing Ali's bus with him? No, that would definitely not fly with Judy. Cassy had cursed at him, he remembered now. How he managed to recall that, in the middle of his delirium, Elroy didn't know, but goddamn it, he remembered now, and he'd make damn sure to call Cassy on it. Now, if he could only force Ali to make amends...

Elroy studied the tour pamphlet the Will Call woman had given him. Ali had one more show in Canada before she headed south of the border for another thirty two. Busy girl. Elroy wondered. Maybe he'd give the girl another chance. Looking at the paper in his hands, he only now understood how busy the star was. He figured she must be exhausted, being in a new city every few days, prancing around in practically nothing, unable to retreat afterward until she had signed her quota of autographs for complete strangers who only wanted the proximity of her stardom. They didn't appreciate the girl like Elroy did. They didn't understand what it was like to

live within a shell, emotionally and mentally confined, unable to share unmentionable secrets that sometimes needed daylight, sometimes the inky depth of the sea. If he really thought about it, and Elroy did, he knew that she needed him. And, perhaps, he needed her.

Later, when Judy entered the house with dirty knees and sweaty face, Elroy said, "I'm thinking of going to see Gary this week. Up for a road trip?"

Judy pulled the tips of her rubber gloves, removing them carefully so as not to dirty the floor. She took them into the hand still holding the muddy spade and said, "You know I don't care for him Elroy. The way he treats Nancy is just deplorable."

Elroy knew she'd say that. "He's just having a hard time, is all, Jude. Saw my picture in the paper and thought to call, so I figured maybe he could use a visit, you know."

"Well, I'm not going to let my knees go swelling in a car for fourteen hours just to see Gary. Besides, I never minded that city, Elroy. They drive like madmen over there."

"I'm sure Nancy would love to see you." Nancy, of course, would love to see Judy, if the glaucoma would let her, they both knew that, which tore at Judy's softest parts.

Judy sighed, shaking her head. "Send Nancy my love, Elroy. You go ahead. I have to watch Cassy anyway. Can't leave the girl alone that long, she's still a baby you know."

"Ain't no more a baby than I am a boy, Jude. The girl's getting a bit too smart for her britches, if you know what I mean. She damn well cussed at me!"

"No!" Judy was taken aback.

"What do you mean, no? Of course she did, Jude. You don't see the way she's getting too big for herself, wearing God knows what half the time, swearing like a baboon, running off to her little friends, disrespecting us. We got to start putting our foot down, Jude."

"But surely—"

"Together"

"But nothing."

Then Judy hit him with one of her hard stares. "Elroy, after what that girl's been through, we will do damn well everything we can to help her through it and you putting your foot down, so to speak, isn't going to help anything. So help me God, if you so much as..." But Elroy left to pack.

Elroy settled into the spare bedroom that night, having received the cold shoulder from Judy until he could stand it no longer. Cassy, too, was silent with him when she returned from her afternoon with Liv. Elroy figured Judy and Cassy could fucking have each other, then. He'd go take his trip and let them to their sulking. He picked up the phone and dialed the number Ali's assistant had given him. Her concert in Montreal was just three days away and Elroy was determined to be there, to show Ali that no matter how she had rejected him, he was practically family and he would be there to support her no matter what.

Elroy gave his name to the woman on the phone and told her he was planning to attend Ali's show in Montreal. She paused, then said, "I'm sorry, sir. Your name's not on the list this time."

"There's got to be a mistake."

"No mistake, sir."

Elroy coughed. "I have an open invitation for all of her concerts. She said it at her show in Toronto, when I was on stage. Grandpa Elroy? I made the paper. You gotta know who I am. I'm sure she wants me there."

"Please don't call back." Then the woman hung up on him.

Elroy shook. From his fingers to the top of his head to his ankles, he pulsed with rage. His breath quickened and he could not get enough air. Pinholes of light dotted his vision and soon the darkness took over. Elroy slumped onto the bed and didn't wake until dawn.

He left before Judy and Cassy could catch and castigate him, packing only a change of underwear, a pair of jeans, a shirt and his toothbrush. It was enough for three days. Judy would expect he would do laundry at Gary's, like all the other times, but Gary wouldn't even know Elroy was in town. He didn't want to share the girl. This one was his. Plus, Judy wasn't the money manager in their marriage. It was Elroy who kept tight reigns on their finances. Judy got what she got and if Elroy wanted to spend money on a hotel room and concert ticket, it was his God-given right and, besides, Judy would never know,

He checked into the *Auberge*, a cheap hotel with free breakfast and onsite laundry a little after ten in Montreal that evening. Only a six minute walk from the Bell Center, it was affordable and reasonably close. Elroy pulled out Ali's tour brochure, which gave him a website where he could purchase tickets. A quick search on his phone showed none available but a pop up advertisement directed him to another site from secondary sellers. "A fucking grand?" Elroy said to himself when he scrolled over the prices. He had to sit close enough so Ali could see him but that kind of money hurt the bank, no matter which way Elroy considered it. He'd bought from scalpers when he was younger but there would be no guarantee of proximity to the stage. Hell, there'd be no guarantee even with the thousand dollar ticket. Hadn't people been fooled before? Elroy knew it to be true but he also knew it was his best chance to see Ali. If it turned out to be a fake, he'd have to settle for whatever the scalpers were selling. He pressed "purchase", then took the pad of hotel stationery from the desk drawer and began to write.

*Dear Ali,*

*I didn't mean to scare you the other day. I just wanted to see you. I know it sounds crazy that an old man like me can care so much for someone like you, but it's true. You remind*

*me of my daughter, Angela, I think that's why I did what I did. We found her in a snow bank in March and I miss her so damn much, you know? I was a father and I can be your father, too. Or grandfather, if you prefer, but I think I see you as my own. You can look up to me and I can help you with anything you need. I'll see you tomorrow.*

*Love,*

*Papa Elroy*

Of course, Elroy didn't know where Ali was staying, so he did a quick search online, copied the letter two more times, sealed each in an envelope, and delivered them to the three most likely: the Ritz, Le St. James, and the Loews. Something about the uppity front desk woman at the Le St. James told Elroy he would find Ali there but Elroy didn't press the bitch. Not yet.

Elroy wrote five more letters that evening. Ali needed to know about him as much as he needed to know about her. He wrote that he didn't love his wife, that he hadn't in a long time, that they hadn't had sex in almost eleven years, that she looked at him funny since their daughter died, that maybe that look was always there and he hadn't previously noticed it until then. He wrote that farming was hard work, a lonely man's work, and it sure would be nice to have someone to talk to, to share his secrets with, to maybe love a little. Elroy penned another that described, in detail, the position of Angela's body, how it looked like she'd peacefully fallen asleep in the snow, how hard it was to clean the area when cold white and warm red made a slushy mess over everything. Judy knew, he scribbled, and that made her just as bad as him. Ali couldn't blame Elroy for not loving his wife, then, could she? How could you trust someone like that? Unable to sleep, he took all five letters back to the St. James just after three in the morning.

Two hours before show time, Elroy found his chair on the floor, two rows away from the front of the stage and five seats off center. Ali would see him for sure. He smelled his armpits. Semi-fresh. He waited while the arena filled. His girl would be on stage soon. The opening band was just beginning to pluck their instruments when a bald man with an Ali lanyard hanging from his neck approached Elroy. The man leaned over the front row between two eager fans and called, "you Elroy?"

Elroy stood straighter. "Yeah!" he yelled back to Ali's guy.

"Come with me." The man beckoned to the girls to move aside, sliding their aluminum chairs apart to help Elroy through.

"Awww! He's so lucky!" a girl gushed. Elroy beamed, even gotten a bit of a chubby. Ali had gotten his letters. She had understood him. Now they could be together.

Robed in his faded blue hospital gown, Elroy sat across from Dr. Lessnar for another one of their assessment sessions. "You can't keep doing this, Elroy. You have to talk to me." The doctor crossed his legs and leaned forward. "You can talk to me here or in prison, Elroy." But Elroy knew where he belonged. He hummed "Together" to Doctor Lessnar, and remembered everything.