

THE RENEGADE JACK OF HEARTS

Oh it had been good at first. It had seemed like something out of a story book, or a bad movie. They had met by singing together, for Christ's sake. In their college dorm. He had brought his guitar down into the laundry room because he felt awkward about practicing in front of his roommate, and thought he would try his luck in the laundry room at some middle-of-the-night hour when no one else was supposed to be around. So there he was, sitting on a little wobbly chair behind the table that was for folding clothes on, when in she came.

He was trying so hard to be cool. He would admit that fully, looking back afterwards. He didn't look up at her. It took every ounce of maturity he could hope to grasp for at that age not to immediately start into one of the two solos he had learned, but instead to keep going with the simple little back-and-forth strumming he was doing. Nice, and easy.

And she came in, and walked across to the other side of the little room, and started loading her laundry into one of the machines. And as she did, she started singing. And her voice was beautiful.

*Amazing grace, how sweet the sound
That saved a wretch like me
I once was lost, but now am found
Was blind, but now I see*

He looked up at her, and she wasn't facing him at all, she was still loading in her laundry, one piece at a time, no rush, swaying back and forth. She had bright orange frizzy hair that hung down a little past her shoulders.

He didn't know the next verse of Amazing Grace. He could have convinced himself then that there wasn't one, because he would have heard about it, a song everyone knew like that. So, not knowing quite what else to do, he sang the very first verse again in his own voice, which was unpracticed, not good sounding, no sir. But midway through the very first line, she started singing it with him, and so the both of them sang it, and it felt unreal to him that it was happening.

She started her washing machine, and came over, and sat down across from him. She had a mask of freckles, and in addition to that, she had a scar on her face, a real noticeable one kind of to the side of her nose, going to her cheek bone, and the scar was raised very prominently in that moment with her big dimples, from how hard she was smiling. He didn't mention her scar to her. Once he had seen it, he tried very very hard not to stare at it at all, and so he looked into her eyes. It would turn out, her scar was from when she was little, her friend had actually stabbed her but not to kill her, they were playing a pretend game where they threatened each other to see who could make the other the most scared, and the friend had meant to just make her flinch with a big knife from the kitchen but had actually made contact. And in genuine, it wasn't anything more nefarious than that, she and the other person were still on friendly terms and the other person hadn't gone on to be a serial killer or anything, it had just been a really dumb, unfortunate mistake.

"What's your name?" she asked.

"Oh um," he said, and stopped playing, and kind of hung his arms over the guitar. Nice and cool, he thought. And it was, but not because it looked all casual. It was because he looked like a dork, and chicks were starting to dig that, some of them. For him, it did him the favor of showing, more than he knew it did, that he was trying, which wasn't something to be ashamed of like he'd have thought if someone had pointed it out to him.

Anyways, she had asked him a question, "What's your name?" And he stammered and actually forgot for a sec, but then it came to him in a rush, and he answered, "Lory. How about you?"

"Sandra," she said.

And they got to talking. Really got to talking, a lot more than he had talked with anyone at all yet since coming here, even his roommate, even the couple of people here who had come from his same high school, Lory and Sandra really hit it off. So long after the fact, Lory wouldn't have been able to say word for word what all of the conversation that night had been, Sandra probably could have, but he chiefly remembered how damn nice it was just to *talk*. He remembered complaining about some of his classes, and her listening, and saying she could relate, there was some BS she had to put up with in her own classes too, and she told him about it. They talked clear through until her laundry was done in the washer, and then clear through until it was done in the drier, and by that point the both of them really ought to have been getting to bed, there were classes the next day for the both of them, not early, but, it was an ungodly hour in the middle of the night, almost morning really, by then.

As she was leaving, he called to her, and asked her, hey. Do you wanna play pool tomorrow, after your classes? He had never been, but it was something that had come up in the conversation, as something they'd both like to do sometime here. And she smiled, and said yes, and they agreed to a time. And that was the beginning of it.

Lory stayed up all that night elated, but anxious that he was getting away with something. He had a sordid past. Not really, but that was what he thought he had at the time. He had seen in the woods a dying bird once, really dying, bloody and not able to get off its side and swarmed with flies and flapping its wings feebly, and Lory had tried to pet it to comfort it, he was just a little kid at the time, and the bird cried out in pain and flapped around and he pulled his hand back and ran away, and he thought afterwards he should have killed it, put it out of its misery with a big rock, he could have found one, but instead he'd let it go on having the worst last moments of life you could imagine, and he had pained it even more. It was stuff like that

that haunted him in the nights. Stuff that he had made worse because he was a bumbling, cruel idiot.

That was what he thought. In truth he got As and Bs all throughout high school, and he didn't have a mean bone in his body. He had entirely healthy interests, maybe aside from the fact they were all just rather personal in a way, solitary: he kept his nose down in books; he liked to go outside and find bugs, turn up rocks and see what scuttled or pulsated underneath, stare at moths, handle grasshoppers and wasps, catch snakes just to look at them close. He'd never had a girlfriend until junior year in high school, and she had broken up with him, he was not "boyfriend material." She got bored by him. Summer. Her name was Summer, and he'd had a crush on her for her name alone since he was eight, he always thought it was the prettiest name a girl could ever have, and she gave him a real chance, two months, before she broke it off, and that made his dating resume pretty rough. Besides that, all he had to speak of in the sex and dating department wasn't really something he did speak about, to anyone: he made out a lot with the family's Border Collie, Casidy, and did, well, other stuff with her, too. Some boys looked at porno. Others got straight into getting their classmates pregnant before they were eighteen. Others had alone time with dogs. His kick was dogs. He'd been with his own, mostly, but had taken it where he could get it when left alone with friends' dogs too, if the dog clearly liked him. He figured that if anyone knew he had done stuff like that, and since he didn't have anything else going for him that made that stuff with Casidy just a drop in the bucket, and since he actually liked it, if a chick could read his mind and see everything in it before agreeing to go on a date, he'd never see a date as long as he lived. So after that fate-guided meeting in the laundry room, as he tried to get to sleep, awaiting his date for the next day, he couldn't believe how lucky he was to have pulled something so slick.

Lory and Sandra. Their first date, playing pool, was fun. They laughed at themselves. They laughed every time Lory whiffed it, wasn't even in the ballpark of making a shot that would improve his standing on the board. They laughed every time Sandra mixed up what the goal was: "Sandra! Stripes!" "What? Oh come

on.” He had walked away from that date with his sides aching, from all of the laughing. It was sealed. They were an item. And there was no shortage of things for them to attend on or around a college campus, oh no, there were dances and sporting events and house parties, even a lot of creative events put on, arts and crafts or painting things they could attend as a couple, they could pack a date into every hour of the day and night if they wanted to, and they more or less did exactly that, so that by the time a couple of weeks had passed, they felt like they ought to have been celebrating their one year anniversary already.

It so happened that Sandra hadn’t been stuck with a roommate, odd number of female students in the dorms, fate, and so she wasn’t beholden to anyone about having guests over, and there was no one to complain that her boyfriend started hanging around every day and night. He practically lived there, and he was a swell enough guy, the other women on the floor liked him, they thought he was gay because he was usually soft spoken and never hit on anyone, didn’t even seem particularly flirtatious with his own so-called girlfriend. And it was true enough that he wasn’t trying to rush things with her as far as sex went. He didn’t want to ruin a good thing. In mind of all the things that usually haunted him, all his mistakes, he didn’t want to be the one to push and ruin it. But one night she had gotten to reaching down inside of his jeans and touching him, and that was that, and they started having sex most nights too. Even their idle time spent in her dorm room was filled with little happy moments, things to laugh at. Her freaking out big time over a daddy long legs, and him not even having to get a jar, he just goaded the little critter to walk onto his hand and then walked it outside, and let it go out there. Neither of them being able to open a jar of pickles if heaven and hell depended on it. Him practicing on guitar, her sometimes singing along, and he was actually getting better faster than he had been before by her pointers, not that she played, herself, but she had more of an ear for music overall. One day Lory had been making a sandwich, peanut butter and jelly, butter on the jelly side before the jelly went on, and one of the slices of bread out of the bag was way thicker than it should have been, almost like they had missed making a slice, but it wasn’t quite twice as thick as a normal slice

either, just shy of that. "Check it out, Sandra," he said, and showed it to her, compared to the other slices, and she said, "Oh that's so weird, how do you think that happened?" and the two of them guessed on it for maybe an hour on and off, as they played games of checkers, and Lory ate the sandwich, sharing a lot of it with Sandra.

Over Thanksgiving, when a lot of students were going home to visit family for the holiday, Lory and Sandra and a couple of their friends all drove out to a cabin on a lake. There was beer and swimming and bug bites and poker and the raunchiest jokes Lory or Sandra had ever heard in their lives, yes indeed. One night they were all sitting around the dining room table playing a card game, not poker, something without betting, just a game to pass the time. Lory and Sandra had each had a couple but the others were *drunk*, real drunk, and he and she were in their own corner of the table secretly giggling to themselves at the others, like secret agents spying together on a party they were attending undercover. A loud woman, friend of a friend, started telling all about how men didn't know how to please a woman, how to get in there and do what a body needed, and she was not shy to speak about it from experience. Piercing laughs filled the room as people's facades broke over how right she was, even the guys were wiping their eyes as their fists pounded on the table, doubled over laughing. And Lory and Sandra tried to stay unseen, but it wasn't going to happen, there was comedy to be mined out of them by the others. In a lull in the shouting and laughing, a guy across the table said to Lory, so everyone could hear it loud and clear, "So what's your technique?" And Lory reached for his beer and had a long, slow drink, hoping everyone would move on to something else before he was done, but it had the wrong effect completely, everyone quieted down, you could hear a pin drop, and they waited for him to say. And when there wasn't any beer left he quietly set it down, and leaned on his elbows on the table, looked down at his hand of cards, and said, "So whose turn is it?" And there was booing and thumbs-downs, someone said, "You got nothing, damn." And then the eyes all turned to Sandra. And she laughed, broke the ice for herself a little by it, and she put a hand over Lory's hand and said, "He's fine, everyone. He's not a Kryptonian sex idol like you all think

you are, but he gets it done. Jake it's your turn." Lory felt like he had probably never blushed harder in his life as Sandra was talking, but the ravens were satisfied with that answer, they had picked all the meat off that topic they were clearly going to get, and they moved on, laughing and ribbing about other things.

A few more rounds of the card game were played, and by then it was getting to be time for bed, Lory and Sandra both were yawning. The others were still planning to be up for a while, one guy came in and said he'd gotten a fire started outside, and as everyone else started making their way outside, or went to use the bathroom or refresh their drink, Lory and Sandra held hands, and made their way off to their room. They undressed down to their underwear and climbed into bed together, and shared a blanket, and both of them were pretty ready to get to sleep, but there was something Lory wanted to bring up, before that.

"Babe," he said, "I'm not as boring as you think, when it comes to being kinky, I just didn't think you wanted to know."

"I'm not worried about that babe," she said back, and nestled in in the bed even more. "I just wanted them to shut up."

He gave a quiet little under-his-breath laugh, in agreement. And then he told her, thinking he was cool as can be, "You weren't my first time."

"Hold on, what?" she said, in an angry tone, quicker anger than he had ever seen in her before. But he didn't know better yet how to handle that, because as of then, things had been good. Their conversations weren't yet careful bomb diffusals, wartime negotiations. He just thought she was a little surprised, maybe embarrassed that she hadn't given him enough credit at dinner and would have to apologize to him. He really thought that's where it stood.

So he went on, and said, "Yeah, I never brought it up, but I've been into more than you'd guess. I didn't think you'd want to know."

"You said you and Summer never did anything but kiss. You said you and her *barely even* kissed."

Now he heard the anger, now it was unmistakable, but he still thought it was savable. So easily savable that he said the next thing like he was revealing the answer to a joke. "I never did

anything with Summer. That was true, we barely even kissed, promise. It wasn't her I was talking about. You didn't know this, but I've always been into animals."

"Like *dogs*?" she asked.

The way she said that one was what finally made him realize this wasn't about to be a simple miscommunication that got patched up once they were on the same page, caught up to the same point in each other's scripts. They disagreed about this. They disagreed completely, by the sound of it. She said "dogs" as though he had said he'd like to go jump down into an outhouse to take a bath. He knew fooling around with dogs was a little risqué of a thing to admit to, maybe, but he thought they were past the point of that being a problem to talk about, in their relationship. Apparently not.

"Well," he said, "yeah. All of this started before *we* met, but yeah. Casidy."

He had told her about Casidy. She had seen pictures of Casidy, and some other pictures from home, tacked up on his dorm wall. Although, she certainly had not known that he had masturbated to one of the pictures of the Border Collie a few times, actually, both before and after he and Sandra had started going out. It was one of her holding a stick in the front yard, proud as could be, sunlight in her long hair. It may not have been known to Sandra how much he was fond of that picture, or how much he had considered going back home over the Thanksgiving break to see Sandra specifically, and get up to some of their old routines, as it were. He hadn't shown his hand on every last detail of that. But, he had shown enough. He had told her about the dog, Casidy, and she had seen the picture even if she didn't know the details, and so she knew, when he said he had been with Casidy, exactly who he meant he had been with.

She said crossly, "Well that had *better* be something that stops now that *we're* together."

"Yeah," he agreed, before he thought about it.

As soon as the word had left his mouth, he was imagining how was he going to bring the idea back up again and convince her back into letting him, with Casidy still, or another dog, at some point. Because he wasn't going to stay away from dogs

forever. He had come to realize, in the time he and Sandra had been going at it, that humans weren't all that exciting to him. He really preferred a well-placed Border Collie tongue to putting it in a woman. He wouldn't have guessed he would have felt that way, beforehand, but it was true. And the sooner he could try to bring it up again, the better it would be for her, for both of them, he thought. But there it was, he had already flown the white flag on the topic, and that, it turned out, was going to be an impossible thing to retract, because they were fighting now. He didn't know it completely. He didn't know that things had changed. But he got the idea pretty quick. The next morning, she came back to the cabin from a grocery run and was unpacking while he happened to be making himself a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, with butter on the jelly side before the jelly. The others were all outside on a floating dock, drinking tequila, complete college alcoholics with nobody at the cabin present to be the voice of temperance. And as Lory was taking out the bread for the sandwich, one of the slices was a thick slice again. And he pointed it out to Sandra, "Hey, look babe. Another thick slice." And she turned and looked for a second, and then turned back to stacking cans in the cupboard, and she said, "Who cares." Wowza. "Not you, I guess," he said, and started spreading the peanut butter. "What was that?" she asked him, and stopped stacking cans and turned to him. He kept spreading the peanut butter. "You said who cares, so, I assumed you don't care, and I said so." "But was does that *mean*?" she asked. He set the knife down, where it clattered on the countertop, and he folded the two sides of his sandwich together. "It doesn't mean anything," he said. She made a doubtful hmmmmmmmm, and turned back to stacking the cans, slamming them onto the cupboard so hard that Lory halfway wanted to tell her to be careful she didn't break something, but, he didn't. He put his knife in the sink and left the kitchen with his sandwich, and ate it in the living room. Sandra walked from the kitchen to the front door and stepped outside, walking past him without saying anything. He finished his sandwich, went to the fridge, poured himself a glass of lemonade from a pitcher, and sat back down in the living room with the glass, sipping on it, and thinking. It

was pretty clear to him what it was about. It wouldn't be about anything else.

The door opened, and Sandra leaned inside, sunlight haloing her figure, making her frizzy orange hair seem like some kind of exotic luminescent jellyfish. She said to him, as though nothing in the world had happened, "Doofuses are playing volleyball, wanna come?"

It was her way of apologizing, he thought, because he didn't know better yet. So he said, "Yeah," and stood up, finished off his lemonade, and went outside with Sandra, and they played volleyball with everyone and laughed with each other about how much of an edge they had, being the only ones sober.

And that was how things went on with them. Plenty of fun, especially when they were out and around friends, but in private where no one was looking she was cruel to him. One day back at the dorm she told him his guitar playing sounded like shit, actually said the words, "That sounds like shit," and he stopped. Didn't play much at all from then on. Any time he brought something up, like an interesting turn of phrase in a book he was reading or something funny that had happened that day in class, she was sarcastic with him, said, "Wow, that's really interesting thanks for sharing" with all the venom that could be imagined, and sometimes she didn't even do that much, she just rolled her eyes at what he said and then ignored him. If he spent time in his own dorm, the phone always starting ringing pretty quick, and it was her, asking why he didn't want to be over. And then sometimes there would be the times when she wasn't like that. The times like that time she had leaned inside through the doorway and asked if he wanted to play volleyball. Sometimes she *would* say "Oh that's so interesting" and still sound like she meant it. Sometimes she would bring up to him something that had happened in one of her classes, something ridiculous that some classmate had said in a workshop, and they would laugh. But it wasn't good anymore. Even when things looked like they were good, he always had a feeling like he was on thin ice, and it was only a matter of time before he made the wrong step, said the slightest thing that caught her the wrong way, and it was back to her being cruel again, her saying that whatever had just been fun was stupid, and that he was stupid. Over winter break

he wanted to go home and visit family, give the relationship some space, but she said, "You're going to get your dick wet with that *fucking* dog if you go back there, aren't you?" And in all truth he did want to see Casidy, he missed petting her and giving her food and going on walks out in the woods with her, and in better circumstances sure he would have liked to kiss her and do more with her too, but he had already agreed, that night in the cabin, that he was done with dogs in that way while he and Sandra were dating, and so he actually had made up his mind that when he did see the Border Collie over winter break, there would be no fooling around, not even any kissing at all, she would be like an ex to him. But there was no convincing Sandra of that. He tried, but she kept talking over him before he could get a sentence out. It was pointless. So he agreed to come with her to visit her family instead, for the entire three weeks. Her parents were very polite, and he didn't have a bad word to say about them, and Sandra was actually mostly really friendly those three weeks.

When they got back to school, he started working at a gas station, part time. They had each gone into college with savings from jobs they'd had in high school, him working at a gas station then too, her a fast food joint, and neither of them was near broke. but she had been getting on him about money, saying how more of a buffer never hurt, and he didn't disagree, he thought that was a fair point. It wasn't long, of course, before she started getting on him about his hours, saying he was working too much, asking why his hours never seemed to overlap with her classes and if he was trying to find an excuse to spend time away from her. Christ, he wasn't, but he realized what a good idea that was, and he started to arrange it that way as much as he could. No matter what they still saw each other every night though. And still, there were those times she was nice to him, that made him stay.

And then, the clincher. It was the spring, not long out before spring break. She was nice to him all day, that day, which was offputting enough by itself, and the two of them went out on a walk through town, and they came to a bridge over a river, and they stopped halfway over to stand at the railing and look over together, out at the big river crashing along, and the cars going

over another busier bridge that was farther upstream. And as they were standing there looking out at the river, side by side, she said it, "I'm pregnant."

He thought about pushing her over the railing. Not seriously, but it was the first idea that flashed across his mind when he heard what she said.

He knew what he was supposed to say back. And, he did. Not romantically though. He had been burned too much to really express much of any genuine feeling to her, because it was easier if the pleasant thing she turned and trampled on hadn't been real to him anyways. But, he knew what he had to say some version of, and he did. "I suppose we should get married then."

That did not land well, and he wasn't surprised. "I hate you," she said flatly, and then turned and started marching away over the bridge.

He called after her, "Well do you want to or not?"

She didn't answer him, kept marching away. He walked alongside her back to campus, trying now and again to say something, but she marched on, ignored him, wiped tears out of her eyes, and when they got to her dorm room she went in without him and slammed the door.

He didn't know what to do. He went back to his room, told his roommate he might actually be spending the night for once, and then the phone rang, and Lory answered it, and her voice came through and said, "Yes."

"Okay," he said.

"I'm sorry," she said. She wasn't sorry. It was the same thing as always. It was her way of not giving him enough steam to achieve escape. Worked like a charm. Every, damn, time. She said to him, "Come over."

And he came over. They got married the next day at city hall. They both signed the papers. They booked a room at a restaurant for a week from then, and had their families over, and Lory's parents met their daughter in law for the first time, and hit it off well enough.

Lory and his dad stood outside at one point as his dad smoked a cigarette.

"She pregnant?" his dad had asked.

Lory nodded. "Yeah."

“Need any advice?”

“Got any?”

His dad smiled ruefully, and said, “Nope,” and then sucked in another drag.

Lory and Sandra got an apartment together. Lory picked up more hours at the gas station, that buffer of savings now feeling a lot more tangible than before, Sandra had been right about that one if nothing else. Lory came home each day to a nice looking place. Sandra had really taken to decorating. The baby’s room, especially, looked like something out of a magazine. She even threw him a bone in the decorating, and put up some of his pictures in frames on different shelves among her own family pictures, although none of his pictures she had put up had a certain Border Collie in them. She had seized those from him a long while back. He kind of hoped she’d held onto them, and the first time he came home to see framed pictures around, he went from one to one, hoping one might be the one of Casidy, with the stick in the front yard. But no. He never saw that one again. More than likely she’d ripped it up. Casidy was an ex, anyways, a bygone time, and she hadn’t even come up in the context of arguments in quite a while. Because all of Sandra’s vitriol, it didn’t stem *from* the fact of Lory and Casidy’s horny adolescent deeds. That was just what had broken the honeymoon phase. Sandra cared a lot that things were just-so. When he’d picked up one of the framed pictures of her and her mother to hold it up and compliment it, she scolded him and told him to put it back, and then told him *how* to put it back for minutes on end of arguing, and her making him do it since he’d been the one to ruin it and now she wanted him to fix it, until eventually she did put it back at just the right placement herself. And so when she had first learned that she wasn’t his first time, and that he’d been with a dog of all things before he’d been with her, that was what had made her realize that their relationship wasn’t something perfectly out of a story book or a bad movie. But she had already been mean. It didn’t have to have been knowledge of Casidy that sent her back to it. If he had failed to compliment her haircut at some point, or if he had said he wasn’t up for going out some night, it would have broken her spell just as much, brought them to the exact same outcome. Nice as she was

for as long as she was at the start, she must have been chomping at the bit for something to get set off by, so that she could get back to being her mean, mean self.

The baby was stillborn. "Something's wrong," Sandra had said, before the delivery had begun. She had stepped out of the baby's room and into the living room where Lory was sitting watching TV, and she looked really, really scared. She kept repeating, "Something's wrong, something's wrong, something's wrong, something's wrong," on and off all the way to the hospital.

When they were able to get home, Sandra trashed the baby's room, ripping everything off the walls and knocking over furniture, and at some point she took to all of it with a hammer. Lory slipped out as it was escalating, went for a walk by himself, a few laps around the block.

At some point in the middle of a lap she came marching up to him, he saw her from a ways off, saw she was furious. She said to him, "You hate me!"

"Sandra," he said, and really gently, because now of all times he didn't want it to be an argument, he wanted to tell her it was alright.

She shouted over him though, "You're going to leave me!"

He shrugged. "I'm not."

The idea had crossed his mind, no doubt about that at all. But a day ago he had been prepared to spend eighteen years with her, if that was the decent thing to do. And right then, she needed him to tell her he wasn't leaving, even as she yelled at him for hours that he was going to, and all he could do was quietly say that he wasn't.

One day, later that week, when Sandra was out being consoled by her mother, Lory took the opportunity to go into the baby's room, and bring all of the debris out to the dumpsters. They lived on the first floor, so there were no stairs to contend with. He took the bag out of their kitchen garbage bin, and used the bin to move out load after load. The room was completely bare when Sandra came back. He left the door to that room open, wanting her to see it, get it over with. Oh she yelled, and he thought she might actually kill him that time, it was in her eyes like she was really thinking about it. The police came and

knocked on the door. There was a noise complaint. Sandra became really quiet and apologetic. The police had heard her through the door as they'd been approaching, there was no doubt that the noise had been coming from her. The police left with no citations issued and no particularly well-done marriage counseling, but they didn't have to come back. Sandra did stop yelling after that. She still berated him, but she did it at a normal voice, like she'd used to. It was back to the same old, same old.

Both of them had stopped going to school. Lory was working more than full time, and Sandra stayed at home, or was out with her mother. Mostly, he and her crossed paths as little as they could arrange it, but they slept in the same apartment, same bed, so there was only so much avoiding each other. And sometimes she was nice to him. Usually not. But sometimes she was.

One day, in the spring, after they'd been married for a year and some, Lory had decided to take a walk in a nearby woods, by himself. It was a day off for him, Sandra was out with her mother, he had nothing to explain to anybody if he decided to just go do something. So, he walked. Passing by a picnic table that was beside the trail at one point, he had an old impulse to look under it, and there, hanging on the side of one of the crossed wooden slats that held the table up, there was a daddy long legs. He felt some flit of joy cross over him, unexpectedly. Brief, but, it was something.

He made another decision on the way back. He stopped into a pet store and he got a goldfish, with a big rectangular tank and a filter and colorful pebbles and decorations and everything, and when he got home he set it on the kitchen table. When Sandra got home, he was sitting leaning back in a chair, hands behind his head, looking at the goldfish that was still in its own bag floating in the water, acclimating the one water's temp to the other.

Oh there was no surprise what she thought of seeing that. Right away, not even through the door, she froze, and asked, "How much did that cost?"

"Hundred and thirty," he said.

"Did you even think to *ask* if you could get that?"

He continued to face the fish, continued to wear a blissful smile, and he closed his eyes as though he was relaxing on a beach towel out in the sun, and he said, "Thought about it."

"So you just *decided* to get this enormous fish tank that doesn't go with anything in the apartment?"

"Yup."

She scoffed. "Unbelievable! Is the store still open?"

"Oughta be."

"You are getting up and returning that right now."

"Threw away the receipt."

They went on arguing about that the entire day, until eventually Sandra went into the bedroom and locked Lory out. He slept on the couch and was glad to do it.

The next morning he let the fish out of the bag into the tank's water, gave it some food, and watched it as he ate his bowl of cereal. It was another day off for him, a rare actual two-days-off-in-a-row weekend, and he more or less intended to sit around all day long and look at a goldfish and be happy. After he was finished eating, he stood at the kitchen sink, rinsing his bowl, and the smell of the garbage caught him, the bag was getting to be full. He turned off the water, set the bowl down, and turned and tied off the top of the garbage bag, and carried it out. When he came back in, the fish tank was gone. He looked around. The door to the bedroom was closed, and when he tried it it was locked. He opened the door to the other room and looked in, and saw that it was still as it had been when last he'd looked in, just some packed up boxes, off-season clothes and the like, but no fish tank. Then, wandering back into the living room, he saw the window was open. Stepping up to it, and looking out, he saw the fish tank glass smashed on the ground outside, and all that had been in it spilled out onto the grass in a soaked run. The goldfish was there atop the colorful pebbles, its scales brightly reflecting the sunlight, its body severed almost completely in two by a shard of glass. It didn't move. It was dead.

Lory turned away from the window, walked across the living room, put on his shoes, grabbed his car keys, and left.

He called her from a motel that night.

“Hey Sandra,” he said, and didn’t even bother with more than that, because he knew he’d get talked over if he tried, and he didn’t want to give her that.

“Where are you?” she asked, angry.

He waited for her to say more, and she didn’t, so he then said one of the things that he had called to tell her. “I bought a van.”

Her yelling in response to that wasn’t even understandable through the phone, it came through all broken, garbled. At some point she asked a question, he didn’t catch it.

He said, “I traded in the car, so it didn’t cost too much after that.”

Again, fury. And he actually thought that her feeling that way was fair enough, because he hadn’t told her yet that they were over.

He knew it himself. He was done. He was free again. He was going to drive to Casidy, and borrow her, take her on the road trip of her dreams, and she and him were going to make out all they wanted, human and dog like he always liked better, snuggle naked, take care of themselves, take care of each other, he was going to feed her snacks and go on walks and play fetch again, and they were going to love it. They were going to love it. For the time being, though, he hung up the phone, went out to the van, and just sat in the back, sipping on a margarita out of a water bottle, and looking forward to it.