

# Winnemucca

I pounded on Nancy's door for several minutes before I tried the knob. The door was unlocked. As I entered, a cold wind blew in behind me, pushing my skirt tight between my legs. I could smell creosote and sage. I pictured tumbleweeds rolling and bouncing, bullied by the wind.

I'd come to tell Nancy that Pepper was MIA. I'd just seen her fiddle for sale in the local pawnshop. I made a habit of checking the pawnshops because Pepper was always hocking something.

Without a fiddle, we didn't sound much like a country band. We had been gigging two weeks at Winnemucca's Te-Moak Casino. Nancy joked that Winnemucca was Indian for "where the fuck are we?" I didn't like being on the road. I had tried to quit it six months back, but here I was again, halfway across Nevada. When I'd left Kai in Berkeley, he said, "Why do you want to live this way?" All I could do was shrug, then kiss him hard on the mouth, as if that would hold him.

Nancy was sprawled on her stomach across the bed, like she had landed there after falling from a great height, white-blonde hair fanned neatly across her bare back. She had her jeans on but no shoes.

"Nancy?"

Her room smelled of baby powder and puke. A tinge of mildew too. The puke smell could have been anything. It didn't mean she was bulimic or drinking, problems that had

dogged her for years. She was thirty-five, still holding tight to the look of a late twenty-something.

The wind kicked up a dust devil outside the uncurtained window. I could see blue-gray mountains in the distance. This was high desert but not the pretty kind you'd find in Arizona or New Mexico. Nevada landscape in these parts was as underfed and scrubby as a coyote.

I stepped closer, then grabbed the cool heel of Nancy's left foot.

Nancy jerked awake and rolled over so quickly, I jumped back.

"Jesus, girl!"

Her face was swollen from sleep, a strand of too-blond hair stuck to her lower lip. A big block of mid-day sunlight fell through the open door behind me and lit up the mess of Nancy's room.

"You wouldn't answer," I said. "I was *pounding*."

"Sure, pounding," she said. "That's what drummers do."

"You all right?"

"I was writing." She glanced around for something lost, then pulled a t-shirt from the tangle of sheets. "You want to hear it?"

"We don't have time," I said.

Nancy was no song writer, but that didn't stop her from trying. Nearly every musician I knew was the same. Writing songs was like playing the slots. Maybe you'd get lucky.

"Everyone has time for a love song," she said.

"Pepper hocked her fiddle."

Nancy grimaced as she squirmed into her t-shirt. "She's such an asshole."

Other times, Pepper had hocked her turquoise-studded belt, her ten-gallon hat, her silver bangles or her diamond ear stud, even her back-up bow, but never her fiddle.

I used to think: *if I was band leader I'd never hire a flake*. But, now twenty-nine, I'd come to realize that most people are flaky. Pepper was a good player. She remembered the arrangements. She didn't have attitude on stage. But we were always running after her off-stage. Nobody has it all, that's the thing. No matter who you are, there's going to be a hole in your program. So it was with Kai. I loved him to death, but he was killing me. I was on the road because he couldn't pay the rent. He knew that. And yet he blamed me for going on the road.

"You've gone on like this too long," my mother told me on the phone that morning. "But it's not too late." Ten years before, when I'd refused a scholarship to the College of the Sequoias, I had crushed her dream. Unlike Mark, my older brother, I had no patience for classrooms. I'd never been able to keep my hands still.

"We're in a Recession?" she said. "And all you know how to do is drum?"

I knew plenty: how to tune up my antique VW van, how to make a killer cauliflower casserole, how to housebreak a basset hound, how to run 10 miles without choking, how to repair my wardrobe with needle and thread, how to build a bookcase with reclaimed pallet wood, how to speak enough Spanish to order the really good food from a taco truck, how to scour a flea market for collectible silver spoons.

See? Plenty.

Still, I held my hot, little phone to my ear and took it in, as I'd always taken it from Mom: "Think about it, Rainy—who's gonna hire you?"

Nancy would hire me.

I'd been in Nancy's road bands off and on for five years.

I said to Nancy: "You know it's the slots."

"Oh, fuck me." Nancy pulled on her boots.

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Nancy dry-smoked a generic cigarette in the passenger seat as I drove my VW bus to main street. "Downtown" was hardly more than a scatter of buildings hunkered by a shallow river. Across the river, Winnemucca Mountain rose from the scrubby desert. Treeless and craggy, blemished with white patches of snow, it was probably bigger than it looked. On the other side was the Sonora Range, huge and intimidating.

I-80 sluices straight through Winnemucca, population 7, 396. The flashiest part was casino row, a short stretch of neon enticements for fast food, gas, and gambling. There were nine casinos. By the time we got to the last one, it was 4:30. We were due on stage at 7:00. "Fuck," said Nancy for the millionth time. "Fuck, fuck, fuck."

When we found Pepper, she was with a man named Levon Little. He raised his Stetson off his head when Pepper introduced us. He was cowboy-lanky but pale as cake flour, with black hair that kept falling over one eye. His eyes were a dewy blue-gray and could have belonged to a kindergarten teacher. He said he was a chef at Te-Moak, though I'd never seen him.

Pepper wouldn't stop playing her machine, even as we talked. Her fingers were black from coins. She was down to a bucket of nickels. Pepper looked sixteen, even though she was twenty-six. She had straight black hair down to her waist and a wide doll-like face. Everywhere she went, there was a man in her wake. It didn't matter that back in Berkeley she was married and had a seven-year-old daughter.

“Gig starts in two hours,” Nancy said. She was staring at the back of Pepper’s pretty head.

“Right!” Pepper said, yanking the slot arm. She was fond of the old machines, which were easy to find in small towns like Winnemucca.

Nancy turned to Levon and said, “Why’d you let her hock her fiddle?”

Levon blinked in confusion. “I just got here!”

I said, “Pepper, we’ve got to go get your fiddle.”

She smiled sweetly at me. “Would you do that?”

“You’ve got to go with us,” I said.

“I can’t leave my machine,” she said. “It’s about to burp.”

“Fuck me!” Nancy said.

I saw Levon look at her with interest. Nancy turned to him and said, “Not talking to you, cowboy.”

“I’m a chef,” he said.

Nancy pulled Pepper’s free arm. “Ouch!” Pepper said.

“Come the fuck *on!*” Nancy said.

I said, “Give Pepper three more pulls, Nancy, then we’ll go.”

“Why three?” Nancy said.

“It’s an even number,” I joked.

Levon wagged a long finger at me.

I turned to him: “Did you say you were a *chef?*”

He nodded yes.

Pepper had a very fluid motion: coin-to-slot, pull-the-arm, wait-for-the-spin, then-coin-to-slot, and so on.

“I’m not going anywhere,” she said.

I pulled out my cell and dialed her house in Berkeley. I said, “I’m calling Tiffany.” Her daughter.

Stubb, her husband, answered. “What?”

“It’s Stubb,” I said.

“I don’t want to talk to Stubb,” she said.

“He wants to talk to you,” I said. In my ear, Stubb said, “No, I don’t. Is she stepping off again?”

Nancy said to Levon: “You don’t want to get mixed up in this.”

Levon said, “I’m not mixed up in anything.” Then he winked at me like we shared a secret. I felt my ear burning where the phone was. I thought of microwaves coursing through my head. This was autumn, 2008. Nobody had smart phones yet.

“I’m not leaving this machine,” Pepper said.

Suddenly Stubb was weeping in my ear. “She’s cheating on me again, isn’t she?” I hated myself for pulling him into this. A band is like a family in all the worst ways.

“It’s not like that,” I told him, though I wasn’t sure what I meant by “it” and “that.”

Pepper was promiscuous, we all knew.

Pepper said, “You shouldn’t have called him, Rainy. You’re such a mother hen!” Then she took my phone, pausing only for a moment in her play. She said, “Honey, I’m hot on the slots is all. I’ll be done in a minute, then life will return to normal. Stop it.” She waited. Then:

“Stop.” She waited some more. Then: “I love you, bunny-bear.” She waited. Then: “Yes, I do.” She waited some more. Then: “I do, bunny-bear.” Then she handed the phone back to me as if it were a bar of soap.

I felt like an idiot. Was I a meddlesome mother hen?

“You said *a minute*,” said Nancy. “I heard you.”

“I lied,” said Pepper.

“Pepper,” I said, “you go with Nancy to get your fiddle and I’ll keep your seat warm.”

Pepper paused to glance at me. “You’d do that?” Then she smiled her irresistible, just-love-me smile.

“Sure,” I said. “I’ll keep working it until you get back.”

Levon said, “That’s fair.”

“I don’t know that we can get back in time,” said Nancy.

“Then I can’t leave,” Pepper said sadly.

Nancy stepped up close and said, “Fuck this up and I’ll fire you.”

It was an empty threat, Pepper knew. The nearest decent fiddler was in Elko and Nancy would have to pay him more than she wanted. And then it’d ruin her angle because we were booked as an “all-girl” band.

I stared at Pepper and she stared at Levon and he stared at Nancy and Nancy folded her arms as if to say, *Well?*

Maybe it occurred to Pepper that we’d all get fired. “Okay,” she said at last, “let’s go.”

Nancy grabbed her by the hand, and they were gone.

I started in on the slot and soon had a good rhythm going. I was surprised that Levon stayed to watch me.

“What kind of chef?” I asked.

“Sauces.” He was leaning against the machine on my left. I was getting prickly in anticipation of the spinning fruit. The guy who invented the slots was a genius for making the three wheels stop in sequence instead of all at once. Thwock: cherry! Thwock: cherry! Thwock: lemon!

“I didn’t know there was a chef who did nothing but sauces,” I said.

“Almost everything needs a sauce,” he said.

I recalled the breaded eggplant I’d had the previous night at Te-Moak’s “fine dining” room. I had wanted to treat myself. But the eggplant was swimming in a too-sweet brown sauce that made me wonder, *Who thought this syrupy mess would make the meal “fine”?*

Now I knew.

“Is that all you do?” I asked. “Sauces?”

He smiled at me. “I make a mean gumbo.”

Kai, my boyfriend--who was earning his Ph.D. in library science--called himself a chef. A few months back, he had used a chunk of his student loan to buy a stainless-steel barbecue rig, which he chained to a tree behind our apartment building. His aspiration was to win a national BBQ contest. Pulled pork was his specialty. “He’s a narcissist,” my mother said. I was surprised she even knew the word. “He’s an academic,” I said. “His head’s in a different place.” “Yeah,” my mother said. “Up his ass.”



Levon was watching me intently, though I couldn't tell whether it was me or the machine that held his interest. Gambling has never been my thing. My brother, an actuary at an insurance company, recommended buying lotto tickets the way some people recommended getting flu shots and taking vitamins "just in case." I know, why would an actuary--who knows all about probability and statistics--bother with lotto?

Maybe there was something about America's wide-open spaces and go-for-broke optimism that made people like me and Mark believe that we could make our own luck. Every time I drove my old VW bus across Nevada for yet another gig, it felt like making bad bets was my addiction. Then I'd promise myself, *All right, this is it, time to stop.* But did I ever stop?

I fed the machine another nickel. The wheels spun. "This is my life," I joked. "Lots of expectation and no payoff."

"Too bad," Levon said.

Then the wheels clicked into place: one-two-three, a pot of gold! Before I knew what had happened, nickels were cascading out of the machine's chrome mouth. It was like a dream, that metallic stream spilling through my fingers. I was on my knees. I was making giddy girlish noises like a kid opening Christmas presents. Levon stood behind me to keep the crowd back. One of the tellers helped me rake the take into cardboard buckets. I was breathless and half dizzy.

After the cashier gave me seven one-hundred-dollar bills, four twenties, and a handful of change, Levon put his arm through mine and walked me to the parking lot. Outside, the sky was purple above the treeless mountains. I thought I smelled the nutty, roasted scent of burning leaves. I loved how things change so fast in autumn, especially in Nevada's high desert,

where seasons were so much more pronounced than in Berkeley, the crowded college town I called home.

Levon took off his Stetson and turned as if to offer me a dance. He said, "Let's run away, right this minute."

He made it sound like the most reasonable suggestion.

Only then did I remember that the cash wasn't mine. And it wasn't much cash at all, certainly not enough to run away with. Then I wondered, *How much cash is enough to run away with?*

"Where would we go?" I asked.

He smiled. "Wherever we want."

"It's just seven-hundred dollars, Levon."

"It's more than you had yesterday," he said. "More than you'll have next week."

He was right. And I was surprised that it tempted me.

"That may be true," I said, enjoying the moment and playing it out. "But it's not mine, it's Pepper's."

"She's not the one with the magic hands," he said.

I looked down at my hands. Drummer's hands. There *were* magic in a way, weren't they?

"With hands like that," he continued, "you got nothing to be scared of."

"I'm not scared," I said. But then, as I thought about it, I realized I was scared plenty because wasn't I was always just two paychecks away from broke? And wasn't my mother

right? I was six months away from thirty. Good things should have happened by now. Really.

What the fuck had I been doing with my time?

I sighed. "I've got to gig in half an hour."

"I make a mean gumbo, Rainy." He winked at me again.

"You've got a job too," I said.

"I could show you the mountains," he said. "You've never seen places like I could show you."

We were already at 4,295 feet in Winnemucca.

"You mean those?" I pointed to the purple silhouette in the distance.

"Canyons back there," he said, "and aspen and a waterfall you'd never imagine. There's lots more to it than it looks."

"Sounds nice, Levon."

"Come find out."

I laughed a nervous laugh to break the spell. "Why don't you come to the gig," I said. "I'll buy you a drink."

"Can't do that," he said. "I've got places to go."

"Mountains," I said. "Sure."

"And more," he said, serious now.

"Even without the jackpot?"

"Well, Rainy, I'm taking the jackpot."

Suddenly I understood why I was feeling so fluttery and dream-woozy. I was about to be robbed! Somehow I'd known this was going to happen.

"It's not my jackpot to give," I said.

"I'm gonna take it whether you give it or not," he said. He was standing casually, close enough that I could smell cigarette smoke on him and spicy cologne. He held his hat in one hand. His other hand, the hand I feared, was idle at his side.

Feeling weak and sick, I groaned inwardly. I wanted to retrieve the magic of the previous moments, but it was far gone now, like a lone swift circling high overhead.

"This isn't funny, Levon." I fought to steady my voice.

"Give over the cash," he said, "then you can go to your gig."

"Like that's all I care about?" I said. "Like I wouldn't go to the police?"

When he fitted his cowboy hat back on his head, I nearly flinched. He said, "You and me shared something. We're sharing something now."

When I didn't answer, he said, "I just want the money."

"What if I refuse?" I was crying now, hating myself for this.

"You won't refuse," he said.

"I might." Through a blur of tears, I glanced behind me. It was dark. Nobody was coming out of the casino.

When I turned back to Levon, he was smiling at me in a way that made me want to cry some more.

Levon held out one large hand.

Would the police call this a robbery?

I pictured myself laid up in my motel room with a black eye, watching reality shows on cable and crying for days.

Then, like the blast of a diesel horn, the double doors of the casino slammed open and five women walked out. The kind of women I had always mocked, with their cute kitten sweatshirts and black-rooted mullets. They stopped on the concrete skirt at the entrance and each lit a cigarette.

I waved to them: "Hey, ladies!"

They waved back. One called, "Hey, doll!"

Then I said to Levon: "I've got to go."

"I wish you wouldn't," he said.

I turned and walked away, clutching my messenger bag, tempted to run and nearly cringing with every step. It took me too long to get my keys into the door of my van. Once inside, I sobbed with relief. I saw in my rear view that Levon hadn't moved. He was watching me, though it was too dark to read his expression. I had a fleeting urge to run him over.

Five minutes later, when I pulled into Te-Moak's lot, I hadn't stopped trembling. I told myself I wasn't to blame for what had just happened. But I didn't want to tell anybody about it either, not even Kai.

*You're not a victim, I told myself. You don't need rescue.*

It made me sick to listen to pep-talking like that. I had always wanted to be tough. But what did that mean? Big girls don't cry?

It was dark already and surprisingly chilly, the moon like a distant streetlight. I phoned Kai.

He said: "Have you had enough?"

"You're so full of shit, Kai."

"That's why you love me," he said.

I knew he was right. "It's been a long day."

"Did Nancy act out?"

"It was Pepper this time," I said. "Do you miss me?"

"Every hour. If you were here right now, know what I'd do?"

"Ask me for twenty bucks, probably."

"After *that*," he said.

I closed my eyes and tried not to think of the long drive home. I said, "When are you going to get a job, Kai?"

"Is that why you called? Shouldn't you be on stage right now?"

From the nearby interstate ramp, I heard a truck whine as it shifted down, its driver probably eager for a casino stop.

I said, "Some guy asked me to run away with him tonight."

"I assume some guy is *always* asking you to run away with him. You're a drummer in an all-girl country band."

"I was tempted," I said. "For just a moment."

"I can't blame you for that," he said. "Your life is shit."

"You really mean that?"

"Which part?"

"My life is shit?"

"I'm trying to be sympathetic," he said. "Sounds like you need it."

I wiped at my eyes. I didn't want him to hear me crying. At last I said, "I just want it to be better than this."

Then I understood what I'd wanted from Levon Little: I wanted all of his lies to be true, about aspens and waterfalls way up in the canyon of those mountains--about the possibility of running away. Jesus, life is cruel.

Kai said, "I'd be there if I could."

I almost believed him. "I'm late."

"I hope you mean for your gig."

I liked that I could tell him anything and he'd make a joke of it. Sometimes I hated it, too.

Then he said, serious now, "I know you're the one holding things together out there."

"That's what drummers do," I said.

"You're good," he said. "You're solid."

I thought of making a joke of this. But then, like a sigh, I said, "Love you."

"That's all I need to know," he said. "Later, my little gator." Then he was gone.

On my way to the stage, I surprised myself by turning abruptly and striding towards the kitchen. The kitchen was down the same hall as the staff lounge. That's where we got our one free meal a day: a club sandwich with a handful of chips. The skinny security guard, slouched at the cordon that marked the employees' corridor, nodded to me as I breezed past. "Sup?" he said.

When I got to the smelly maw of the kitchen and faced its two huge swinging doors, I stopped dead. If Levon was in there, concocting mediocre sauces for overpriced entrées, what

would I say to him? I still had a pocketful of cash. I pushed through the doors and nearly ran into two servers carrying full trays as big around as wagon wheels. Two prep cooks were chopping vegetables at a long stainless-steel counter. Two others were tending pots at the huge stoves. The chef—a tall black man, wearing whites, with a pink rose pinned to his toque—peered into a big pot and said: “What the hell is *that* supposed to be?”

Did I see Levon standing at the steamy slop sink--loading a cart of dirty dishes into the washer, his head wrapped in a red kerchief?

No. It was a lanky Levon lookalike. Nevada was crowded with Levons, hungry caballero wannabes toiling for low pay and dreaming of a small break.

“You’re in my kitchen.”

I turned to the chef, who towered over me, his face as dark as dreamless sleep.

“Yeah,” I said. “I’m looking for somebody.”

He regarded me the way he might have regarded a tentative soufflé, like I looked near collapse. Then he said it again: “You’re in my kitchen.”

“Levon Little?” I said.

“Do I know you?” He had an accent I couldn’t place. His left coat sleeve showed a single red stain the size of a penny. He was leaning forward as if to inspect me.

“I’m the drummer. In the band. Have you heard us? Country music?”

“Country,” he said, as if to test the word.

“You know, Willie Nelson, Hank Williams, Loretta Lynn? Old school stuff.”

“No,” he said. “That’s not *my* country.”



I imagined some polyrhythmic Nigerian tune with pizzicato stringwork and a burbling kalimba counterpoint.

“You should check us out,” I said. “It’s live music.”

“As opposed to dead music?” He had a scar at the corner of his left eye. Possibly made by the flick of a very sharp knife.

“I know you’re busy,” I said. “I’m just looking for Levon Little.”

“Why should I care about Levon Little?”

“I didn’t say you should care, I just asked if he worked here.”

“You angry at me?” he said. “You come here to *harass* me?”

“I’m angry at Levon Little, this squirmy little fuck who wears a cowboy hat and a fat turquoise-studded belt--“

“No, you come in here and *say* you’re looking for this, this cowboy but what are you really looking for?”

How was I supposed to answer that? I *was* looking for trouble. I was looking for answers. I was looking for restitution. And satisfaction. I know, I was asking for too much. Always.

The clatter of plates in my ears, my brow dripping with sweat, the soapy scent of dish detergent filling my nose, I stood there looking at this big chef who seemed to think I was a spy from the Health Department. I wasn’t nearly as angry as I should have been, but I must have been scowling. I didn’t know how to explain that it had nothing to do with the chef or his noisy, steamy kitchen. But I was too far gone to utter an explanation.

The only thing I knew for sure was that I was late for our first set. They'd start without me. That's just how it goes: you start no matter what--without drums or fiddle or whatever. Nancy would be singing "Blues Eyes Crying in the Rain" and flirting with the heavy drinkers up front because she wanted tips and that's what you do when you're in the spotlight: give people something to dream on.

