

MARY ROSENBLUM

AFTERIMAGE

I'm walking down the street, and I'm wet. Rain is running down my face, and my T-shirt is sticking to me. Even my underwear is wet, and I think stupid-- you're gonna get there looking like you drowned. And then I think...

...get where?

And I don't know. I don't know where I'm going and it's like a black hole inside my skull. I stop -- forget the rain -- because I'm scared. Because it's like the old days, only then I used to let the blackness in with a needle.

I didn't do a shot. I mean, I think about it sometimes, you know? Like when you wake up and you figure there's got to be a reason you're alive, but no matter how hard you try, you can't come up with one? Nothing that really matters anyway. I think about it then. Yeah. But I didn't do one.

Daniel would kill me.

I recognize the sub shop on the corner, and I know where I am anyway. I'm either on my way to Daniel's place, or to see Hammer and Keri. At the corner, my feet take me left, away from the river, toward Hammer's. And that tells you right there that I'm not really sure I didn't do something. When I climb up the stairs to Hammer's loft I have to pound on the door, because his bass is shaking the whole building. Which doesn't matter because the building is empty, and Hammer's only there because the owner likes the band and lets him live rent-free as the official caretaker.

Dacey finally yanks the door open. "Hey, Ian," he says and backs off giggling. He's got a half empty bottle of tequila in his hand, and he's making faces at me. Which is normal for Dacey. He's nuts. Hammer only puts up with him 'cause he does the drums like a slumming angel. Or the devil. "Hey, Hammer," I say.

Hammer's stroking these dark chords out of his bass, and he doesn't look up. The notes make me shiver. There's an old lantern burning on the coffee table -- something Keri found in a junk store-- and that's all the light there is. Which means the place is full of shadows and I think they're kind of moving with the music. Hey, you can't not move when Hammer plays.

"So it's all a joke, huh?" Dacey flops down on the cushions that are about the only furniture in the place. "Heaven, hell, all that stuff. It's all shit, huh? You just keep on keepin' on." He sucks at his bottle again. "Jeeze, what a joke."

"What's up?" I say to Hammer, ignoring him. Something's wrong. Weirdness is crawling up and down my spine and I wonder what happened that I don't remember.

"Where's Keri?"

"She left." He doesn't look up from that blood red bass of his. The chords change, hitting me like big hands now, shoving me toward the door. I stumble over a cushion. "What's wrong man?" I say, really scared now. "What'd I do?"

"Ask Keri," Dicey snickers. He's sprawled on his back, the tequila bottle balanced on his skinny chest. "Hey," he says as I open the door. "I want to know what it's like."

"What about Keri?" I'm asking Hammer, but the music is a wall between me and him, and he doesn't hear me. "What's what like?" I say to Dicey.

"Being dead." He swigs from the bottle and cheap tequila dribbles from the corners of his mouth. "What's it like being dead, man?"

I slam the door behind me, and I wonder if this is a dream, because nothing makes sense right now. I look at my arms under the one bulb that still works in the fancy ceiling fixture. The old tracks are there--knotted strings counting off a bunch of days I don't remember all that well. Heaven, sometimes. Hell the rest of the time. Not much in between. The scars are white and old. Nothing fresh. I didn't do it long enough that I was shooting anywhere else, so...I didn't do a shot.

Hammer's music comes after me through the door, dark and angry like claws at my back, so that I run down the stairs to the street. No wonder they're so hot--with an album out already. Hammer can hurt you with that music, man.

I go to Daniel's.

I guess I always go to Daniel. Sometimes -- in the bad days -- I crawled. He's doing a degree in architecture because he says you can achieve God in a building. I wouldn't know.

The stoplights are bleeding into the empty puddled streets, and I'm shivering hard by the time I get to Daniel's place. He lives over this storefront down by the rail yard and the river. This old guy -- Chinese I guess-- has a shop where he sells herbs and paints scrolls for people. If you don't have a key, you got to pound on the front door, and the old guy wakes up, cause he sleeps in his shop. So I always go up the fire escape.

I make a hell of a racket going up, but Daniel's light is on and I don't really care. Hammer's angry music is chasing me like a bunch of ugly crows, and I still can't remember, and I'm really spooked. I clatter up onto the landing outside his window. It's open. The curtains are wet and water's dripping in onto the floor because it's still raining. Daniel's asleep at the huge old dining room table that is most of his furniture. And there's a vodka bottle by his elbow. Mostly empty. And the hair stands up on my neck because Daniel doesn't drink. Not even beer. Bad history, I guess. His dad was a drunk. He doesn't talk about it much.

Dead, Dicey's voice whispers in my ear and I realize I've been hearing it all the way over here, backed by Hammer's bass line. I climb through the window and Daniel wakes up. He stares at me for a second, his face all blurry with booze and sleep. Then he gets up and his chair falls over. "You're dead," he says. And then he passes out.

It's so fast, I almost don't catch him. But I do, all off balance, and my feet slip on the wet floor and I crack my head on the edge of the table on my way down, and all my muscles go loose. So I land flat with the wind knocked out of me, and Daniel like a thousand-pound weight on my chest. He twitches and after a minute gets off, but I'm too busy trying to breathe to care. My head hurts like a son of a bitch.

"Ian?" His voice sounds thick and weird.

And I should be scared, because Daniel isn't Dicey, but my head hurts too much to be anything but mad, and when I touch the place where I banged the table, I feel sticky blood. "Do I sound dead?" I sit up and shove my bloody fingers under his nose. "Do I look dead? Do I look like I just dug myself out of a fucking grave?"

"I don't know." He looks like he's going to pass out again. "I watched them...shovel dirt onto your coffin, man. One day you're here. Then you're just...gone. A stupid hit and run in front of a Seven Eleven. After you got clean and everything." He looks away, up at the bottle on the table. "You used to tell me that nothing really mattered. I guess you were right."

"Stop it." He's really scaring me, now. "You sound like me." I try to make it a joke, but shivers are running up and down my spine. Because I remember something -- a car -- shiny red paint and sun on glass. "You used to kick my butt when I talked like that."

"You're really here?" Daniel starts to touch me, then pulls his hand away.

I grab his shoulders and shake him. "Yeah, I'm here. Snap out of it, man." I shake him again, hard. Like he used to shake me when I was trying to get off the needle and thought I couldn't do it anymore. "You hear me? Whatever's going on, I'm right here, and if I'm dead, nobody told me." But I'm looking into his eyes, and I'm seeing it there-- that yeah, he watched them bury me. And it comes back in bits like broken glass on the sidewalk -- car hood, windshield, all coming too fast. I can almost see the face behind the sunbright glass, and...I remember how it felt -- the impact. No pain, but it was like I could feel my self getting knocked right out of my body. My soul, maybe, if you want to call it that. Me, anyway.

"You remember," Daniel says softly.

"Yeah." The word comes out like a sigh. I let go of him and stare down at the white rosary of old dead days on my forearms. "Sort of." The car, nothing after.

"How long?" I ask and I hear the tremble in my voice. Because that black hole is there inside my head and I'm teetering on the brink.

"Two weeks. Nobody but us came to the funeral. You really don't have any family, do you? You know, you don't even smell bad." Daniel's laugh is shaky and I can smell booze on his breath.

"No, I don't have any family." Not anymore. "So I'm a ghost." A ghost that bleeds. "Why?" The word comes out a whisper.

"The world's full of ghosts." Daniel gets up and goes over to pick up the vodka bottle. "Just look out at the street. I see too many of them. That's why my old man started drinking. The ghosts. They followed him back from Vietnam. You can make them go away if you drink enough." His lips pull back from his teeth and he throws the bottle through the window. A moment later glass tinkles in the alley.

I touch the cut on my scalp again, and it's not there-- the cut I mean. Although drying blood still sticks my hair into clumps. I shiver. And for the first time it hits me -- that I'm...different.

I really am a ghost.

"There's got to be a reason. I'm back here to do something, Daniel. Avenge somebody. Save somebody." And I feel it like a shot -- all warm and bright, running through my veins. "I know it," I say softly.

He touches me finally -- hands light on my shoulders. "Yeah," he says. "Maybe you're right."

"I am." The words come out a whisper, and I think suddenly that I've just said a prayer -- the first one I can ever remember saying. And I'm shivering again, because Daniel's place is always cold, and he doesn't say anything, just goes and gets the blanket off the futon he uses as a bed. And he wraps it around my shoulders and just stands there real close, looking at the blood in my hair where the cut healed up so fast. And I think maybe he's crying, but he's got his head turned so I can't really be sure.

Then somebody knocks on the door, hard and sharp. Daniel jumps and I jump and we look at each other. "Your spirit guide," Daniel says. And he laughs, but it's a nervous scratchy sound like fingernails on a blackboard. Whoever it is knocks again, and Daniel is looking at me like I should answer it, but I can't move. It hits me-- that I don't know the rules. If there are any. Anything could be out there on the other side of that flimsy door. Daniel gives me this look and goes over to open it. "Wait," I say, but it's too late.

"My God." Keri is standing there, with her hair all tangled like she just jumped out of bed. "He wasn't kidding. Ian..." And then she throws herself at me so that I have to put my arms around her, and she's babbling in my ear about the car and saying thank you over and over, and she's crying too.

And Daniel is leaning against the door watching, and it hits me suddenly that I've never seen him look so sad. And for a minute I think I hear an echo of Hammer's dark chords, but that's just me remembering, because there's no way you could hear him all the way over here, no matter how loud he cranked that killer amp of his. "Keri, hang on." I push her gently away. "Take it easy, okay?"

"Yeah. Sure, Ian." She sniffs and wipes her face on her sleeve.

She's wearing a too-large T-shirt over sweatpants, and I guess she just did get out of bed. Raindrops sparkle like diamonds in her dark auburn hair but she's barely damp, although rain is still pounding on Daniel's window. Even the rain is nice to her, I think. "Who told you I was here?" I ask her.

"Dicey called me. Ian..." She reaches for my hand. "Thank you," she whispers. "I couldn't...live with myself after. Because it was my fault. Why...how are you here?"

Her fingers are twined with mine and I catch a whiff of her scent, and I get dizzy. And the car is roaring down the street like an attacking shark, and she stands there, just beyond the parked cars that hide her, frozen in place, like a deer caught in the headlights of a midnight truck, frozen even when I scream at her to watch out... "I ran into you at the store." I swallow, remembering that terrible impact. "You bought eggs." They had fallen in slow motion -- bright white grenades spilling out of the carton, exploding into flowers of yellow yolk on the gray pavement as I dove for her... "You and Hammer...?" My tongue feels thick and clumsy. "You moved out?"

"He was a jerk." She flushes and looks away. "He said.... He was wrong! And you saved my life." She trembles briefly. "Ian, how can you be...back?"

"We were just asking ourselves that question." Daniel's tone is flip and bitter. "Got any suggestions?"

"No," she whispers.

She won't let go of my hand. I feel really strange, because Keri is one of those people who are kind of larger than life, you know? Like Hammer. Only with her it's not music. It's not beauty either. It's like everything works when you're around Keri -- like the rain wouldn't have soaked me either, if I'd been out there with her. And there's no way ever that this lady could be interested in me. She and Hammer were perfect, man. A pair.

"You know who might know about this?" She's looking at Daniel now. "Dicey."

"That weirdo?" I laugh.

"Yeah, he might." Daniel is frowning. "I don't know, though." He shakes his head. "He bothers me."

"I know. I wish Hammer hadn't let him into the band." She's got this stubborn

look on her face. "But you want to know, right?" She looks up into my face, still pale and worried.

"Yeah." I want to know what I'm supposed to do. This time I reach for her hand, and she smiles.

"They're playing Luna Two tomorrow night," she says. "We could go talk to Dicey then."

I almost tell her that Dicey is over at Hammer's, but he's probably passed out drunk by now. And she probably doesn't want to go back there.

That's not the whole reason. That music scared me.

Keri's looking over my shoulder and I turn around to see what she's staring at. It's getting light out. Dawn. And she looks at me and smiles and her face lights up. "What? You thought I was gonna disappear in the daytime?" I laugh, but I shiver a little, too. Because like I said, I don't know the rules. And I yawn, because all of a sudden I'm incredibly tired.

"Okay." She laughs. "I'll take the hint and let you get some sleep." She looks at Daniel, her smile fading. "I'll come by this afternoon, okay?"

He shrugs and lets her out.

"What's eating you?" I say as he locks the door. "You act like you're pissed at Keri."

"You're eating me." He stomps over and flops down onto his futon. "Hey, you're walking around without even a damn bruise, and Keri is coming on to you, and everything's fine, huh?" He glares up from beneath the black fringe of his bangs. "Something's really wrong here, you know?"

"I know." I sit down beside him, more tired than I've ever been in my life. "I guess I'm just trying not to think about it -- what this means." I touch my still-wet jeans. "I mean...this can't really be happening, but it is," And it hits me again -- that bright warm shot-feeling. "This is my chance, Daniel-- my chance to mean something in this shitty world. This is it."

Daniel puts his arm across my shoulders -- hesitant, like he expects me to shrug him off. "There's a lot of power in the world." He's still staring at the wall. "Don't you feel it when you walk down the street, or walk into a crowded room? It's like currents in the air-- warm, or cold. Sometimes freezing. Sometimes...ugly."

And I shiver, because he's looking into the air like he's seeing stuff I can't. "Hammer's powerful," I say, and think about the bass chords shoving me out the door.

"Yeah." Daniel nods. "And Keri, too, in a different way." He frowns. "You know,

when you save somebody's life, you kind of own it. That's a lot of responsibility." He's looking at me sideways, frowning. "I wouldn't want it."

He's talking about Keri. "I don't own her," I say. "What about Dicey? He's such a loser."

"Maybe he just acts like a loser." Daniel crosses his arms on his raised knees, and leans his head on them. "I feel like shit," he mumbles.

"You're hung over." I look at the empty table and something hits me. "Where are all your books -- for your classes, I mean?"

"I took 'em down to the bookstore. They pay for used textbooks." He's speaking so softly that I can barely hear him.

"You quit?" I grab him by the shoulder. "You can't quit. It really mattered to you."

"Not anymore." He doesn't lift his head. "Why look for God in a bunch of steel and concrete? Why bother?" He dips his shoulder to shrug off my hand. "I've got to get some sleep before Keri shows up again."

He stretches out on the futon and I drape the quilt over him. He's asleep in about two seconds, snoring a little. I'm not sleepy. I'm not cold anymore either. My jeans are still damp, but my T-shirt has mostly dried. I borrow Daniel's comb and I make faces at myself in his bathroom mirror. I look the same. I don't know if I feel the same or not. I pick up Daniel's razor and touch the thin steel blade with my fingertip. Then I put it away and go out.

The little old Chinese man is up already, whisking dust off stacks of china bowls and tea cups with a duster that looks like a rooster's tail. He stares at me as I go past, like he's heard everything we said. I can almost feel him looking as I let myself out, and I wonder if he's one of Daniel's powerful people. Then I'm out the door and into the early morning streets.

I'm not tired, and I'm not hungry. I go downtown, where the streets are full of hurrying men and women wearing business suits and busy faces. They don't look at me, or if they do, they look away fast, figuring I'm going to hassle them for spare change or something. Sometimes, I brush close enough to feel cloth or get bumped by a swinging briefcase full of appointment calendars and important papers. Once I get yelled at by a guy delivering boxes of cut flowers to a florist shop because I'm in the way.

And I'm dead, and maybe they don't know it, but I do. I'm not really part of this anymore. Even if they see me, I'm not really here. And I wonder if I ever was here, or if I was born a ghost, and maybe that's why the car didn't end things for me. Maybe I never really existed. And that black hole is wide open inside me, and it would be easy to let go and fall in.

Only I did that once, and it wasn't any better inside. Don't let anyone tell you

that there's bliss in oblivion. It's just another kind of hell.

I skirt the courthouse plaza where everyone hangs out, bumming cigarettes and scaring the tourists. I don't belong here either. They look at me-- the punks and the whores and the guys just hanging, and they know it. That I don't belong. I'm weirded out again, and I head up away from the river-- up into the hills where the rich people live, and I sit on a stone wall behind this big mansion. Below me the city shimmers in the sun -- old brick warehouses and tall new skyscrapers divided by the river, stitched back together again with the bridges. The crummy old buildings and the shiny new ones all fit together in a weird way -- patches of darkness and light that don't have a lot to do with color, or maybe it's a new color that I couldn't see before. But whatever, all of a sudden I see it as a whole -- a single giant sculpture made up of brick and concrete and wood, only it has its own soul, and we're part of that soul -- the suits, and the mohawk crowd in the square -- even the hookers and the dealers.

It...works. And for the first time I think I understand what Daniel meant when he talked about finding God in a building.

I think maybe Daniel's powerful too, like Hammer or Keri, only he doesn't know it. And all of a sudden I'm sadder than I've ever been in my life. So I go back down the hill, and I walk through the city all day, and I'm a ghost and nobody notices. But they never really did.

The sun is setting by the time I get back to Daniel's place. The sky looks like a raw wound-- full of bloody light and bruise-colored clouds. The little shop is still open so I go in the front door. And the little old Chinese guy steps out into the archway that opens into his shop like he's been waiting for me.

"When you look at the flame of a candle," he says. "The flame is still there when you close your eyes."

"Yeah?" I kind of edge past him, because he's giving me

goosebumps for no good reason. "But it's just this image in your head."

"Does that make it less real?"

"Wait a minute," I say, but he just shuffles back into his shop and picks up his feather duster. I wonder if he spends all day dusting stuff, and I go on upstairs, telling myself that he's just an old man.

But his words chase me the way Hammer's music did last night. It's too much like what I felt today on the streets. The city blinked and I'm just an afterimage on its collective retina. I'm wanting to shiver again as I open the door. Daniel is sitting on the edge of his big table, and he sort of lights up when he sees me -- like he thought maybe I wasn't coming back. Keri is with him.

He's right about her being some kind of power. Sitting there she fills the room with light. Not a light that you can see, but I feel it, like the first spring

day after a long cold winter. And I want her all of a sudden -- I want to own that warmth. Possess it. And she wants to give it to me -- because she figures she owes me.

But she loves Hammer. It's like music that you can't quite hear all mixed in with that light. Maybe she's not even hearing it herself right now, but it's there. "Hey, Daniel," I say, and I punch his arm lightly as he comes over to lock the door behind me.

"Hey." He looks like he wants to touch me, walks back over to the table and sits on it instead.

"I went up to the top of the hills," I say to him. "I saw the city --all the buildings, all together. You're right about God," I say.

He just looks at me, and his eyes are the same color as rain clouds when it's just drizzling.

"We can talk to Dicey when the band takes their break." Keri's talking to me like I'm the only person in the room. "I brought Thai food." She nods at a bunch of white cartons on the table.

"I'm not sure this is a good idea," Daniel says.

"So what do you want him to do?" Keri snaps. "Just hang around and wait?"

"No." I shake my head. That's what I did all day today. That was enough. "If you guys think Dicey has some answers, I want to go ask." And what if he tells me that I'll be like this forever?

I've already been like this forever.

Daniel gets up suddenly and touches my shoulder. "Okay, we'll go ask," he says. And then he goes into the narrow little kitchen to get plates and stuff.

Keri lays out the throwaway chopsticks, plastic packets of fish sauce and hot sauce that came with the food. I scoop a pile of pad Thai onto my plate. Can a ghost eat? I take a bite, noodles trailing down my chin. Daniel is watching me, pretending not to. I chew them up and swallow, but I'm not hungry, and they don't taste good. They don't taste bad, either. I push the plate away. "How come you left Hammer, Keri?"

She stares at the tangle of pad Thai on her chopsticks. "He started saying things...about you. And me." She lays the food down on her plate, blushing hard. "I don't know how it got started. I mean...we were supposed to go to...your funeral. And all of a sudden Hammer is accusing me..." She shook her head. "I think Dicey said something and that set him off. He can get real jealous sometimes. I don't know." She looks away. "I don't know how he could even think that."

Yeah, she's in love with him. "Dicey again?" Something is bothering me, but I can't pin it down. "He's always around, isn't he?"

"You know...I used to wonder if he...had a crush on Hammer." She shoots Daniel a quick glance. "I never...liked him much. But Hammer did. Well, he lasted longer with Hammer than I did." She stabs her chopsticks into the pile of food on her plate. A springroll slides off onto the tabletop but she doesn't seem to notice.

Daniel is eating quietly, but I can see that he's not really paying much attention to his food. He's feeding his body the way you'd feed your dog. My fingers are tracing my scars again. It's dark outside. "Let's go on over to Luna Two," I say to them. "We can get a good table."

Even this Early Luna Two is packed. The music leaks out into the street and hooks people inside, heavy and dark, full of power. We sit at this little table along the crumbling brick wall. The place used to be a warehouse or something a hundred years ago, and it's really dark, full of old beams and shadows. The crummy little stage is flooded with bloody light. Randy, the front man, is bawling lyrics into the mike, but it's Hammer who's really center stage.

Barechested, he hunches over his bass, his muscles bulging like he's fighting for his life, coaxing that dark, angry, hungry music out of his blood red bass. Dicey is really working the drums, his face shiny with sweat, grinning like a withered little demon. And the crowd is all Hammer's. The music pulses through everyone, comes out in drumming fingers, swaying bodies, eyes that glitter with its bloody hunger.

It scares me. I want to get up and get out of here-- talk to Dicey later. I've never heard Hammer play like this, and I look sideways at Keri. She's frowning, too, and I get the feeling something is wrong. Then Daniel leans close.

"Dicey just saw us." He's almost shouting in my ear, but I can barely make out the words over the music.

I nod and look at the stage. Dicey grins right at me. The red-filtered spots fill his eyes with bloody light and for an instant his teeth look pointed, like animal fangs.

The music changes. I realize that it's him doing it. He's laying down the skeleton of the music with his drums and Hammer's fleshing it out. It swells and grows, filling the brick-walled space with rage and hunger and a cold, cunning hatred. The music flows into me, burning like acid, turning my knees weak even as I cover my ears with both hands. Around us, people are swaying, moving, eyes on the stage, lips drawn back from their teeth. Hammer looks at me and his face is full of hatred. He slams a chord out of his bass that hits me in the gut, flings me back against the brick wall.

At another table, a skinny guy wearing a biker jacket grabs his chest and doubles over. Falls to the floor. Gasping, I struggle to stay on my feet. The bricks scrape my palms and I concentrate on that pain, fighting the blackness

that's tunneling my vision. "Hammer, stop it," I yell, but I can't even hear the words. The whole building is shaking. Bricks grate together with the sound of teeth grinding and dust sifts down on my face, filling my eyes with grit and tears.

A light bulb pops with a blue flash and people start screaming. The floor is undulating like in an earthquake and everyone is scrambling for the door, clawing at each other, trampling on the poor suckers who fall down. A table goes over as the dying biker's friends take off. It hits Daniel and knocks him down. Someone falls over him, and he vanishes in the crowd as more bulbs pop, and there's no light at all except for the bloody spots. And Randy's on his knees clutching the mike, and I'm screaming Daniel's name, and the spots are focused on Dicey and Hammer, and the music is tearing the damn place apart.

Only Keri isn't hurt. She's standing there and nobody bumps into her, nobody shoves her, and there's no light, but I can see her anyway. She keeps looking at Hammer, and her face is full of the worst sadness I've ever seen, so that I stumble a step away from the shuddering wall, wanting to go to her, put my arms around her, make it better. Onstage Hammer looks at me again, and slams out a new riff.

The music clubs me and I almost black out. My head hits the bricks as I stagger backward and red light fills the blackness. The music pounds at me, at the wall, and I can feel it cracking, coming apart. And in a second it's going to come straight down and bury me. And Keri sees it, too, and she screams, and then she's running toward me and the bricks are failing.

And she's going to die. I'm already dead, but she forgot that. And Dicey is grinning with his demon teeth, laughing at me like he's just won. And I get it. All of a sudden.

He wants to kill Keri. Because without Keri he can use Hammer's power. And I see the car coming again, and the sun glares on the windscreen, but this time I catch a glimpse of the face behind the glare, and I feel again that instant of shock when I recognize Dicey. And then the car hits me and the impact that isn't pain knocks me out of my body...

I'm just a wedge to split Hammer and Keri. The first brick bounces off my shoulder. And now I'm bait to get Keri killed.

"No!" I scream, but the music pins me down and I can't move.

Daniel staggers to his feet and grabs Keri, and she fights him, and they both go down, and bricks are falling on them, only they're falling in slow motion. Another one bounces off my arm, and it hurts like hell, but hey, I'm just an image on the city's retina and they don't damage me. A chunk hits Daniel on the side of the head, and I see blood on his face, and the whole damn wall is crumbling, and up onstage Dicey is grinning and rocking pounding out his victory on his damn drums.

All my life I've been nothing -- a flesh and blood ghost, and I could have died anytime and nobody would have cared. And for a while I thought I had some kind of meaning, but I don't. Not even now. And it rises up inside me-- darkness-- the whole damn deep well of it -- and it's stronger than the music and I take one long step toward that stage, and Dicey, who owns Hammer now. And he looks at me and I'm nothing, dirt, and he curls his lip because he doesn't need me anymore. Then he raises his sticks to drum the music out of Hammer that'll wipe me right off the city's retina.

And I take hold of it -- that darkness-- and it burns me with cold and I see just how shitty I really am. And it sucks in all the music -- all Hammer's hunger and rage and lust -- turns it cold and ugly, and I hold onto it, shape it. Aim it. Throw it.

Dicey's grin stretches inhumanly wide and his eyes are full of bloody light as it hits. His eyes go out like a turned-off light bulb and he falls backward, one drumstick flying end over end into the air, so high that it just misses one of the overhead spots. He hits the stage with a crash, and Hammer falters on his bass because the drums have stopped, and then he lets the chords fade. And the stick falls to the floor in eerie silence and the clatter of it is so loud that I put my hands over my aching ears. It is so silent now that I wonder if I have gone deaf.

The club is empty of everyone who was capable of leaving. Two or three bodies are sprawled on the floor, and a couple of them are groaning. Randy is hunched into a fetal curl onstage still clutching the mike. Daniel and Keri lie clasped together like lovers beneath the fallen bricks. Hammer stands there in the light, shoulders bowed over his bass. He doesn't lift his head as I climb onto the stage. Dicey lies on his back, arms out, feet together, like a crucifix. His eyes stare into space, wide and empty, like nothing has ever lived there.

Behind me someone moans. Keri. I spin around. I was sure they were dead, had heard it in Dicey's drumbeat of triumph and believed it. Hammer puts the bass down in a discordant blare of sound and is off the stage before I can take a step. He flings bricks aside like they're made out of paper, and then he has Keri in his arms, cradling her against his chest. Weeping. And Keri is touching his face and nobody is going to doubt how much she loves him. I climb down from the stage and walk slowly over to Daniel. And I'm afraid. But then his eyelids flicker, and I'm on my knees beside him throwing bricks aside as I uncover him. His face is all bloody and he whimpers as I move his left arm. Broken, I think. But he opens his eyes as I claw bricks from his chest. "Is she okay?" he whispers.

His eyes are bright with pain but he's talking clearly. Sirens are screaming. The cavalry is on the way. "Yeah." I hold him gently down as he tries to sit up. Moving his arm turns his face white and sweaty. "Lie still, damn it," I say. "Hammer has her." He has picked her up like some movie hero and carried her up onto the stage. Randy is sitting there looking dazed, and they're murmuring together, oblivious to everything. "They getting it back together," I tell him. "Happy ending." Only maybe it isn't, because Dicey's body isn't on the stage

anymore. I look around and I don't see him anywhere.

And I start to shake because it's finally hitting me -- what just happened. And I wonder what would have happened if Dicey had kept control of Hammer, and I'm not sure I want to think about it. Not in this day of mass distribution of music. And all I want to do is put my head down on Daniel's chest and cry.

Because I did what I was supposed to do and more. And it was all an accident, and anytime now the city will blink again and I'll be gone. And Daniel has his good arm around me, and I can hear cops and firemen and God knows who else yelling to each other in the street, and they'll be in in a minute to put Daniel on a stretcher and take him off to the emergency room to fix his arm. "Will you go back to it?" I whisper. "Doing God in buildings? I think maybe it's important. I think maybe you could...change the city. Change the world even." Maybe it could balance the Diceys. Maybe it's supposed to.

"You're bleeding," Daniel says. He touches my scalp and shows me the bright blood on his fingers. "You're going to need stitches."

I reach up and touch my scalp and I wince because there's this huge jagged gash and my hair is thick with blood. And it's not healing. And it should heal, because when the bricks hit me they didn't even bruise me. But I touch it again and it's still bleeding and it still hurts. And Daniel's face is so bright with hope that I have to look away. Because I want to hope that hard, too. "Dicey was driving the car." I wipe that bright hopeful blood on my jeans. "I wonder if he...did this to me."

"If he did, maybe his dying changed something. Or maybe somebody else gave you another chance. Hell," Daniel says softly. "I don't know the rules. Do you?"

"No." I lick my lips, tasting old dust. I realize that I want to be here even after the city blinks. The black hole inside me has closed up -- or maybe I just emptied it all into Dicey. Anyway, it's gone.

And then there are all these uniformed people in the place, and a couple of them are bending over Daniel, taking control the way medical people do. And another one -- a woman is poking at my scalp, shining a light into my eyes. She gives me a gauze pad to hold onto the cut and escorts me to a waiting ambulance, holding my elbow in a grip that feels more like capture than support. And they're bringing Daniel on a stretcher, and he's cradling his broken arm and he looks like hell, but he winks at me.

And I wink back, and the paramedic lady frowns and gives me another wad of gauze because I'm still bleeding. And I don't feel like a ghost anymore. And I wonder how much legal shit I'm going to have to wade through to prove I'm alive. Maybe I'll have to dig up the coffin to prove that I'm not in there.

I walk out with the stretcher, holding Daniel's good hand. What a fucking mess.

Hey, it's a start anyway.