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ROSSETTI SONG

SOME PEOPLE HAVE ALWAYS wanted to be President, or a baseball player, or a movie star, or business tycoon. Me, I've always wanted to own a bar. Not some flaky franchised chicken-finger paradise for post-fraternity muscleboys and their bimbos; a real shot-and-a-beer kind of neighborhood joint. Pool table or two in the back, an old Wurlitzer by the bathroom doors, a long mirror behind the bar suitable for the sort of what's-he-got-that-I-ain't-got scrutiny to which melancholy drunks love to subject themselves. Tables with a topography of cigarette burns, water rings, dents of uncertain origin, all preserved under a quarter-inch layer of varnish. Beer signs on the walls, no bikinis or volleyballs allowed, just painted mirrors and classic flickering neon like the sign out front that says FRANK'S PLACE. Cab company numbers taped to the side of the phone. A blackboard leaning against the mirror advertising the day's special and a permanent addendum: HANGOVERS FREE OF CHARGE.

An old neighborhood bar, like I said, but it's hard to find a good one because fewer and fewer people live in the old neighborhoods anymore and the ones who are left don't talk to each other. Harder still to start one up, because any place that will support one already has one, but that's a defeatist attitude as Susan would have said. A real go-getter can-do type of person, that was my wife. She died the day after my small-business loan was approved. Car wreck. She wanted me to have the bar, though; ever since I'd known her she'd said I was born to be a bartender. How do people decide things like that?

Did you know that more Americans die every year in car wrecks than were killed in Vietnam? Or maybe it's every two years. Nine months ago I wouldn't have known that, but tending bar fills you up with more useless trivia than you would think any one brain could hold. I know that the Ambassador Bridge in Detroit runs south to Windsor, Canada, and that Wally Pipp is the name of the guy who lost his job to Lou Gehrig. Bar bets. There is nothing so esoteric or irrelevant that someone won't bet a beer over it.

I spent Susan's insurance policy on an antique Wurlitzer that plays real records. Limits my selection a bit, but the kind of crowd I draw has a certain collective taste and the guy who sold me the juke threw in about twelve hundred forty-fives that he'd been collecting since 1956. So I have Elvis and Patsy Cline, the Beatles and Marvin Gaye, Louis Armstrong and Johnny Cash, along with tons of stuff that I've never even played. And I take requests, got a sign over the Wurlitzer, so I find myself sorting through those boxes of forty-fives looking for something that I'm pretty sure I should have even though I've never actually seen it. It was because of one of those requests that I struck up an acquaintance with Milt Chrzanowski.

A guy -- not Milt -- sat down at the bar once in the early evening, not long after I'd opened, and said, "Beer."

I love people who order like that; to a bartender, it's an expression of trust.

At least, I choose to look at it that way since the alternative is believing that people don't care what they drink, and that concept is unsettling and foreign to people such as myself. This guy looked at first inspection like a local-brew sort (not something I can explain J, so I cracked open a Pike. After a second look, I set it down without a glass.

"Nice juke," he said, finding the beer without looking at either it or me. He took a long swig, glanced at the label, and dug a twenty out of his shirt pocket. "What's on it?"

People always ask me that when they see it's an antique, as if I'm only going to have some sort of theme music. It annoys me. The guy got up and walked over to the box, standing slightly bent in front of it as he examined the selections; he was taller than he'd looked sitting down. He stayed that way for a long time.

There were eight or ten people in the place, Boeing workers and fishermen killing time until their boats went back out. Two or three trickled in every time one or two wandered out. I lost track of the guy as I filled orders and shot the shit with regulars about the Sonics' postseason collapse and the continued influx of Californians into our fair city. Eventually my granola-punk

waitress Donna came in and everything leveled off into an average Wednesday night. I was unloading the dishwasher when I looked up to see the tall guy back at the bar. He waggled his empty beer at me. As I set a fresh one in front of him (I'd guessed right about the glass), he dropped a five on the bar and walked off.

Donna sashayed up to the bar laden with empties. "You haven't even noticed my new tattoo," she said petulantly.

"I lose track," I said, flinging bottle caps all over the floor behind the bar. I have a trash can by the coolers, but some nights my aim is off.

"Do tattoos change color when you get a sunburn?"

The speaker was not the tall guy. He was a slight balding fortyish guy in a pinstripe suit that looked kind of crooked. Except for the suit he kind of resembled me. I looked around for Donna but she was gone, a faint odor of patchouli her only remnant.

"Dunno," I said. "I never had one."

"Neither have I," he said.

"Fine place you have here," he added, squinting into the narrow neck of his bottle. "The Wurlitzer is a lovely touch."

He gave me a funny look when he said that, like he expected it to mean

something

more, or at least other, than just what he said. I'm a bartender; when in doubt,
I always agree. "Yup."

"You don't recognize me, do you?" he said, looking back into his bottle. I've heard many a man swear that they saw God in the bottom of a beer bottle. Myself,
I just usually feel Him pounding on my head the next morning.

"Fraid not."

"Ah well," he said, motioning for another beer. "I guess you wouldn't, but those
of us in invisible occupations occasionally pine for recognition. We are the offensive linemen of the commercial banking world, the midlevel functionaries."

Lawyers and bankers, two kinds of people you never want to piss off. "I'm sorry,
ah, Mister..."

"Chrzanowski."

"Oh, yeah," I nodded vigorously. "I remember talking to you now." It was actually true. He had called to reassure me that the loan was not in danger because of Susan's death. I had been worried because she made quite a bit more money as an engineer than I did as a local government reporter for the P.I., and
I had quit my job to give the bar a go. So they could justifiably have worried about my ability to make the payments. But we had some money put away, and even
after the funeral expenses and the Wurlitzer there was a bit of insurance money
left over. I was a financially comfortable widower, at least as long as the bar
broke even. "It's Milt, right?"

He brightened. "That's right, Mr. Sutter," he said, reaching for his wallet.

I shook my head. "On the house, Milt, as long as you never call me Mr. Sutter again." I caught myself just as I began to slide into smarmy-bartender mode. "The name's --"

"Frank, yes, I remember." We shook hands, me self-consciously wiping my hand
on
a towel first. He peered into the full bottle, wrinkled his forehead as if in disappointment, then drank anyway. "You know that this space was occupied by a bar before you leased it, don't you?"

I nodded. "Yeah, they left it a mess, too," I said. "Place was a dive."

He nodded, wistfully I thought. "It was that, at least in its last few years. But in the years before that, it was a place not unlike this one; not too rowdy,
but not sanitized either."

I was surprised that my taste in bars had anything in common with that of a mid-level bank manager.

"I used to stop in fairly frequently when I worked out of the branch near here,"

Milt continued. "Ten years or more, until I transferred downtown in eighty-one,

I came to this place to decompress after a busy day of climbing the corporate ladder." He chuckled and shook his head. "God, has it been seventeen years? Ambition; glad I've given that up. Middle management is the lubricant in the great engine of commerce," he said grandly, raising his bottle in a toast.

I returned the gesture with a dirty highball glass, and Milt fell silent as I filled Donna's orders. I never did ask her about the sunburn thing.

"They had one of those, too," he said suddenly. I looked up and he was gesturing

at the juke with the now-nearly-empty bottle. "Splendid machines, those. Memories as pleasant as the music." He drained the bottle, waved it at me. He was getting lit pretty fast, and the more he drank, the more English he sounded.

Not an accent, but choices of words and emphasis. Something.

I set another beer in front of him. He clinked the neck of his empty against its

replacement, a sardonic little fare-thee-well. "Have you ever heard of a folk duo called Five and Dime?" he asked.

"Nope," I said. "I wasn't much of a folkie; earnestness makes me squirm."

"Well, you couldn't really be expected to know them if you weren't a native, either. Are you?" I shook my head; I'd grown up and gone to school in Michigan,

then ended up in Seattle by way of Texas and Colorado. Susan had more to do with

it than anything else. I've always been a sun-worshipper, and there are winters

here when I'd willingly trade a week at the beach for melanoma. But love will make you do strange things.

"I didn't think so. Anyway, they were locals, students at the U-Dub." This is a

strange local colloquialism; University of Washington, therefore U-W, therefore

Yoo-Dub. "They never amounted to more than playing coffeehouses for tips, but they pooled all of their money once and recorded a single. It was 'Tangled Up in

Blue,' as Simon and Garfunkel might have done it while on a sodium pentothal IV

drip. Godawful song. But it was backed with the most amazing piece of pop music

I think I've ever heard, a lovely ballad called 'Rossetti Song.'" He raised a questioning eyebrow at me; I shook my head again and looked at the clock.

Nearly ten. I cracked open my first of the night, cheating by only a few minutes. Since the accident, nostalgic people give me the jitters.

"'Rossetti Song,'" I said under my breath. The sound of the words out loud brought to mind 'Rosetta stone,' and it was in the grip of strange allusions that I went back to lean on the bar opposite Milt.

"The reason I ask all this," he continued, "is that your predecessor had that song on his jukebox. I was wondering if perhaps you hadn't acquired his

collection as part of the lease or something."

"No, I got the spinner and the records from an ad. 'Actually plays records!' the copy said, like it was walking on water, and the guy who sold it to me referred to it as an antique. Shit, it's only two years older than I am."

I paused to drink my beer, get something in my mouth before I started some maudlin rant. "Helluva collection came with it, though; supposed to be twelve hundred, but I haven't counted."

"Twelve hundred," Milt repeated. He drummed his fingers on the bar for a moment, then added, "Did you get it around here?"

"Jesus, Milt," I said, rolling my eyes. "Yes, I'll look for you."

"It's called 'Rossetti Song.'"

"I know."

"Reminded me of the words 'Rosetta stone' the first time I saw the title; isn't that strange?"

I drained my beer. Slowly. "You don't say."

"I do, and you know what else? The word juke comes from Wolof, a West African tribal language. Their word dzug means 'to live wickedly.' How about that?" He knocked back the rest of his Pike. "Another, please?"

I got one for him and another for myself, and it still wasn't ten o'clock.

"Rosetta stone," I said, sitting cross-legged on the attic floor of the home Susan and I had bought 4 B.C. Before Crash. Every event, every memory of mine was starting to orient itself around the accident, around the afternoon that I'd come in the front door shouting "I got it! I got it!" and heard the phone ringing. I picked it up and the voice on the other side identified itself as one Maura Yee from Swedish Hospital downtown. I didn't get there in time to say goodbye.

And that was it, really; I was a married newspaper columnist one day and the widowed proprietor of a drinking establishment the next. I wasn't able to either mourn my wife or exult in the realization of a lifelong ambition. They canceled each other out, and I trudged ahead in a sort of dazed equilibrium. No great epiphany, no sudden collapse; just a bit more beer than was really good for me and an aching vacant spot that I tried to pretend wasn't there. And every now and then I would wonder when I would begin to mourn, or stop mourning, or begin enjoying Frank's Place, and by the time I got done thinking about it I didn't know what the hell was going on. And at that time it was nearly 1 A.C., almost a whole year; when did everything start up again?

The streetlight across from my house flickered weakly, mortally wounded by

neighborhood teenagers. In its sporadic pink-orange light I could just barely read the label of the forty-five that rested in my lap: FIVE AND DIME, it said at the top of the circular label, and on the bottom ROSSETTI SONG 3:47. And running along the outside edge was the legend SPARE CHANGE RECORDS. I'd never heard of the label.

Rossetti, I knew, was a poet. Two of them, as I discovered when I rooted out Susan's Norton Anthologies from her undergraduate English courses. I flipped through the wrinkly translucent Norton paper and found Christina Rossetti, younger sister of Dante Gabriel. The first two poems were simply titled "Song," and I put the book down. It was four o'clock in the morning; Milt would be happy and the poems could wait until tomorrow. I reached for my beer, remembered I'd left it upstairs next to the boxes of records. The book lay open in front of me, and I suddenly registered that the handwriting between lines and in margins was Susan's. Susan's from twenty years before, when the only Frank she was interested in was Zappa.

"Yeah, well, he's dead too," I said, and stood up. I flipped the Five and Dime record over in my hands and laid it B-side-up on my ancient Garrard turntable. The soft crackle in the dim room as I laid the needle smoothly on the lip of the record gave me a shiver; it was a sound I loved, bringing a weight of anticipation that the tiny spark of a compact-disc laser cannot match, and the few seconds of not-quite-silence that follow it always flood me with memories of songs, and memories of Susan.

I sat on the floor in front of the couch and picked up the book as the music began, a melancholy call-and-response between two guitars with a faintly Celtic flavor and a definite tinny recorded-in-someone's-bathroom edge. One guitar dropped into a steady chorded dum dadadada dum dadum and the first voice came in, a half-chanted lyric baritone:

I met my love and wooed her, overarched by cypress leaves
She was so frail, her face so pale,
I feared that soon I'd grieve. My love proved stronger than my fear,
and her fair hand I won
Though we both knew her illness grew, our two lives we made one.

It was my wont to mourn her as we clasped our hands together
To slowly walk and hear the clock toll far across the heather.
I had but to caress her cheek; my touch bespoke my fear
"But I still live!" she'd say, and give this song to stop my tears:

And now the second voice (was it Dime or Five, I wondered?) took over from the first, a sprightly tenor dancing a cappella except for a double knock on the guitars at the end of every phrase:

When I am dead, my dearest, sing no sad songs for me;
Plant thou no roses at my head,
nor shady cypress tree:
Be the green grass above me with showers and dewdrops wet;
And if thou wilt, remember, and if thou wilt, forget.
I shall not

see the shadows, I shall not feel the rain; I shall not hear the nightingale
sing on, as if in pain: And dreaming through the twilight that doth not rise
nor
set, Haply I may remember, and haply may forget.

At the second line, I recognized the second "Song" in Christina Rossetti's
Norton entry. I followed along as that lovely tenor embraced her words and
then
soared into wordless arpeggiated harmonizing as the baritone and guitar leapt
back in:

One day she lay and could not sing, nor raise her lips to mine Her breath was
stilled, hard sorrow spilled my love upon her dying. I laid no roses at her
head, nor sang a dirge to mourn An oath I swore, to nevermore love any woman
born.

She was my Lady of Shalott, my belle dame sans merci, And when she died, I
only
cried to keep her memory. I walk the grass above her now, and every shady tree
With her voice rings; I know she sings, and know she welcomes me.

I sat very still, Susan's handwriting in the margins of the blocky book
wavering
in my teary gaze. There was a pop from the speakers as the needle kicked off
the
end of the runout groove, and a tear fell directly onto a note she had made
next
to "Song."

Expressions of mourning, it said. Dead don't remember us, why should we them?

The tear sat trembling in an auroral ring of dissolved black ink, smudging the
word don't. I started to close the book. There was a touch on the back of my
left hand, a familiar brushing across the backs of my fingers that started a
quivering in my stomach as it paused briefly over the still-pale stripe on my
ring finger. Then it was gone, and I was left alone in my house an hour before
dawn, my only company the ticking of the runout groove and the crushing
realization that she really wasn't ever coming back.

MILT DIDN'T SHOW UP until the next Wednesday. I spent the week staring at the
Five and Dime record peeking out from where I'd stashed it behind the cash
register. I suppose I was convinced that if I stared at it long enough I would
figure out whether what had happened was real. I was wearing my wedding ring
again. Donna noticed right away and asked me if I'd been to Vegas and what was
her name; after an inexplicable crippling wave of embarrassment, I threw a
washcloth at her and went to open the doors. I mopped the floors, got
deliveries, sparred with Donna, called cabs for laid-off Boeing riveters, and
not once did I find myself suddenly destroyed by remembering that my wife was
dead. Well, I found myself thinking at irregular intervals, I guess I went and
got over it. The words wouldn't attach themselves to an emotion.

When I turned around from the register and saw Milt there, the first thing I
noticed was that it was nearly twelve, much later than it had been the first
time he came in. He was wearing the same crooked suit, wet from the misting
rain. I wondered if he wore it every Wednesday. He was the kind of guy who
might
have a schedule like that.

"Whatever it was I was having last week, I'll have it again," he said, and
damned if I could remember. I reasoned that if I couldn't, he couldn't either,

and cracked him a Pike. "So --" he said, and I cut him off.

"Got it," I said, pulling the disc out from behind the register. I returned to the bar and spun it on the polished wood in front of him. "It's been here a week, waiting for you to come back."

Milt seemed afraid to touch the record, afraid even to get near the corner of its plain paper sleeve that pointed at him. "That isn't funny," he said.

It happened to him, too, I thought, although what exactly I meant by it I wasn't sure. I looked at the clock again, suddenly in a hurry to chase everyone out and close UP; I didn't want to play the song with people around. If whatever had happened in my living room happened again, the whole bar would be treated to the sight of my flipping out over a thirty-year-old garage-folk ballad.

A scan of the premises revealed only three bodies not in my employ, and one of those was Milt. The other two were down to the lukewarm dregs of a pitcher of Budweiser and showed no great promise of finishing it. "Call you a cab, fellas?"

I asked, hardly raising my voice over Patsy Cline singing "I Fall to Pieces." The pair squinted up at me, then stubbed out cigarettes and rose to leave.

Donna had already put most of the chairs up. I called her over. "You can go early if you want," I said. "I'm coming in tomorrow morning anyway."

She shook her head. "Rent's going up. I need the hours."

"What, it's Wednesday; you'd be gone by one anyway -- never mind, I'll pay you until two. Just go. Deal?"

She looked quizzically at Milt, then back at me. "You just put your wedding ring back on, Frank."

After she left, I turned out the neon signs in the windows and the hanging lights over the pool tables. Streetlights cast spiny shadows of chair legs on the floor, made wavy by the rain and crosshatched by the sharper shadows cast by the single light behind the bar. Across the street was a vacant factory building, most of its windows broken out, graffiti covering the padlocked doors and grimy brick walls. It was raining like hell.

I wondered if my place was going to turn into a sleazy dive the way my predecessor's had; I was on the edge of a vacant part of the city. But who knew?

I was also on the edge of a perfectly healthy retail area, and in six months Frank's Place could be surrounded by a completely new trendy zone. Fashion was too capricious to be outguessed.

Milt was still staring at the record as if it were a booby-trapped memory. I walked by him and picked it up on my way over to the jukebox. I pulled the juke away from the wall and opened its case, removing the Supremes and dropping Five and Dime in their place. Milt hadn't moved; he was looking at me out of the corner of his eye and gripping his beer in two hands.

I dropped the canopy back into place and was pushing the Wurlitzer back against the wall when Milt said, "It's happened to you too, hasn't it?"

I stood slowly up and wiped my palms carefully on my towel until I was sure I could speak without making a fool of myself. "What exactly do you mean by 'it'?"

"Come on, Frank, you kick everyone out as soon as I get here, send your waitress -- who obviously thinks I'm some sort of rough trade home early, and you're wearing your wedding ring again. I hadn't noticed that until she brought it up, but I'd bet the contents of my branch safe that you played the song and something happened." He was looking at me greedily, practically begging me to admit to something. I wondered what he saw when the song was played. Or thought he saw; maybe I'd just been drunk and feeling guilty.

I dug a quarter out of my pocket. "Why is this song so important to you, Milt?" I asked.

He hesitated, but only for a second. "Because my wife died here while it was playing."

I was looking at the selection cards, and I saw number 19.6, "Baby Love" by the Supremes, but my hand wouldn't quite move to put the quarter in the slot. "I remember humming along with the tenor over the melody line," Milt went on, "and right at the words 'raise her lips to mine' she put a hand to her temple and just pitched over out of her seat. Her name was Petra and she would have been forty-six this September." He said all of this as if he were the Ancient Mariner, doomed to repeat his tale of woe. I saw that he still wore his wedding band as he pointed to a window table and said, "Right there, under the Mount Rainier sign. That's where it happened."

Milt slid off his stool and walked toward the front table, still pointing. "And now when I hear that song in this place, I can see her," he said, his voice beginning to tremble.

His arm fell back to his side as he approached the table and stood in front of it. "After I was transferred downtown, I found a copy of the song and took it home thinking that whenever I needed her I could play it there. But it didn't work," he choked, and I could see tears shining in the odd pink glare of the streetlights. "It didn't work, and then this place closed and it was years, years before you came along."

Milt paused, his fingers tracing the surface of the table. When he spoke again, he was calmer. "And when your wife died I was terribly afraid that you would refuse the loan and the space would remain vacant for longer than I could stand. A midlife crisis is difficult enough without the added complication of a dead wife you can't talk to, ha ha. So even though I had no idea what you would do with the space, I had to make sure your loan wasn't recalled. And after you

actually had the place open, I came in just sort of -- quixotic, you know, and saw the jukebox..." He shrugged miserably and produced a handkerchief.

I caught myself punching buttons and realized that I'd put the quarter into the jukebox. The selector arm reached up and plucked the Five and Dime single from the row and laid it on the turntable, and the sad, searching guitars began their once-upon-a-time.

The colors in the Wurlitzer's bubble-glass began to dance, and I could feel gentle vibrations in the palms of my hands as I leaned against the machine and watched Milt stand quietly for a moment, then pull out one chair and stand behind it. He smiled and went around to the other chair, sat down and leaned forward, spoke quietly and reached out, his hand moving like he was brushing his thumb lightly across invisible fingers. He stayed like that, smiling and talking, his eyes alight, and once I swear he laughed out loud and I couldn't hear it.

And I felt nothing.

The song ended, and Milt looked down and shrugged, then lifted his hand in a halfhearted wave. He looked up at me like a man beatified a long time after death.

I stalked across the room and flipped the door key onto his table. "Lock up when you leave," I said harshly, and charged out into the storm.

"You haven't slept," Milt chided, looking me up and down from the other side of my screen door the next morning.

"Your goddamn pounding on the door woke me up," I answered truculently, lying. Milt shifted nervously from foot to foot.

"The key," he said, almost as if reminding himself, and he lifted it wrapped in a handkerchief from his breast pocket. "I left the two dollars for the beer next to the register."

"Oh, for Christ's sake," I said, snatching the key from him. We stood there for a moment not looking at each other. "Well --" he said, but I cut him off.

"You had coffee?"

"Well, no," he said. "Is that an invitation?"

Neither one of us spoke again until I'd gotten coffee and we'd both had the first scalding sip. Then the silence seemed more companionable, and finally Milt said, "You can tell they're not English, can't you?"

"What?"

"Five and Dime. Whatever their real names were. Are. I mean, heather and cypress

trees don't even grow within a thousand miles of each other, I don't think."

"What's your point, Milt?"

"No point. It was an icebreaker. Another middle-management skill." He sipped at his coffee. "As was accepting this coffee. It gives us a chance to talk. Communication is the first step toward a solution of any problem."

"How come I didn't feel anything last night?" I asked. I have no middle-management skills.

"Why do you expect me to know?" Milt answered.

"Goddammit, Milt. Answer the question."

He paused, and then spoke carefully. "There is a difference," he said, "between mourning and nostalgia. That's as simple as I can put it. And some people make the transition from one to the other invisibly, over a period of time. Invisibly. Ha. That's me," he said bitterly.

Then he shook it off and continued. "Others make it in a great terrifying epiphanic moment. You felt something the first time you played the song?" I nodded. "And where was this?"

"In my living room."

"But Susan didn't die there, did she?"

"No."

"Well." He rubbed at one eye. "Hm. There's an old saying, ancient really, to the effect that magic only works on those who believe in it. Now I don't necessarily believe that's true, but I do think -- how to put this -- that there are some things that can be used in unusual ways given the proper circumstances. Which wouldn't arise unless the person was aware of the object's capability, so there you have your 'magic only works' canard. And I suppose this record, or this song, is one of those things. What's it about, after all? Getting past mourning. Are you through mourning your wife?"

I thought about it. My wife is dead, I thought, and waited for the squeeze in my chest, the anger, the rotten ache of loss. It didn't come. In its place was a memory, almost a waking dream, an image of the way her fingers used to brush across the backs of mine and linger for a moment on my wedding band, like Piglet saying I just wanted to be sure of you. And then it was gone.

I found that my throat was tight, but I was smiling. "'Tis better to have loved and lost, right?" I said. "There's a canard for you."

"That's what I thought," Milt said.

DONNA GOT USED to it, I guess, but she always gave me an odd look when I let

Milt stay past closing on Wednesday nights. I let it go; after all, it wasn't some thing that could be easily explained. Milt and I evolved our own set of rituals attendant only on Wednesdays: he brought a roll of quarters, I left the door key by the register. Usually when I came in the next morning, there were a few empties on the bar and a sawbuck on the register, and in return Milt drank free whenever I was there. It was a peculiar arrangement and it proved satisfactory for both of us, if not for Donna.

And after a dozen Wednesdays, I took a detour on the way home after leaving Milt to his visit. I sat with a six-pack on a park bench facing the Sound and drank slowly until I had to turn around to watch the sun come up. The colors of the dawn take on a certain enduring splendor when you've stayed up all night to see them, as if you've ridden the underworld, been swallowed by the wolf and come out the other side. And the sun, oh, the sun, leaping huge and molten from the Cascades and waxing into its full blinding brightness as the city began to wake up around me. I drove home accompanied by foreknowledge of nostalgia.

The next Wednesday was miserable, gray and drizzly, the sun a pale smudge. I spent the day running errands. The evening at the bar passed pretty much like it always did, and Milt showed up at quarter to twelve like he always did.

I stopped Donna before she could escape and handed her an envelope. "Don't read it before you get home," I said.

She shook her head and said, "Nothing you do surprises me anymore." I held the door for her as she left, thinking Yeah. We'll see.

Milt and I didn't usually talk on Wednesday nights, him being incoherent with anticipation and me likewise with exhaustion, but tonight I went over to his table after I'd shut everything down and said, "I put the key in an envelope tonight."

He looked at me quizzically. I'm the worst liar in the world, and I know my face was giving something away, but all he did was nod, God bless him, and I walked out the door. Outside it was still raining and I whistled all the way to my car. Then I whistled all the way home, and then I went through the list one more time. Accountant; check. Realtor; check. City clerk; check. Bank account; check.

Loan officer. "Check," I said, and laughed out loud.

I thought about it as I hummed down 1-90 past the suburbs and the outlying communities and up into the mountain towns. Thought about the progression from mourning to nostalgia, and moments of epiphany. Invisible, ha, that's me, Milt had said, but what he hadn't figured out is that he didn't want it any other way. He'd opted out, settled into a comfortable mid-level job, saved my loan after Susan's death, done everything he could to keep everything the same. Or not even that; he'd gone back, recreated a previous sameness. Petra keeps coming to him because he wants her to.

And that was the one thing Susan was wrong about. The dead do remember us, and they do want to be mourned, and they will keep coming as long as we keep wanting to go to them. That wasn't what I wanted anymore.

Frank's Place was a huge temple to Susan's memory, an everlasting flame hoping to draw her like an ectoplasmic moth. I threw everything I had into it after she died because it was her dream for me as well as my dream for myself. It took more than a year before I figured out that dreams you dream with someone die with them. Frank's Place was a dead woman's dream kept alive by the living.

And I couldn't keep it alive any longer, but Milt Chrzanowski could. He was on that invisible slow climb, that vision-dulling trudge through the bleak underground of loss and inadequacy and abandoned anger, and Frank's Place had been his dream for a dead woman before anyone had dreamed it for me.

Or maybe that's all bullshit. But Milt signed the quit-claim, and sent a letter to my accountant too. I don't think I want to read it just yet. I do hope Donna still works there, and I told her so in the letter I gave her that last night. There was a check in that envelope too, in case she thought she couldn't work for Milt, but my accountant says she hasn't cashed it. So things are probably just going along there like they always were. Maybe Milt quit at the bank to take on the barkeep's life that was dreamed for him. Maybe not. I imagine I'll find out whenever I read his letter.

Meanwhile, the check from the realtor came, and due to the robust nature of the Seattle housing market I can afford to drive myself a bit further down this road or that, looking for a little sun to worship and a new, living dream instead of a monument to loss. I'm leaving the sad songs to Milt. Let him hear the nightingale. And let him rendezvous with the dead, too; I'll remember if I will.

And if I will, forget.