

## SHACKED UP

by Justin Patrick Moore

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Their bodies entwined together as the rain from the latest thunderstorm pelted the leaking roof of the squat. The smell of old wet carpet, and the cardboard they'd lain over top of it was heavy in the air, as were other scents, their skin, their sweat. The smell of damp soil from underneath the understory of honeysuckle in the patch of woods where they had suckled each other on the herb gathering trip earlier in the day still clung to them, and they were making the room ripe with their perfumes once again.

Theirs was a new love and a young love and they were enthusiastic in sharing their passions with each other.

"I'm gonna miss this tomorrer," he whispered in the aftermath, after he had taken her a second time. His fingers interlaced with his girlfriend's fingers. She laid her head on his chest, placed her hand along the outline of his scrawny ribs and sunken stomach. They sat up and rolled cigarettes out of butts they'd scrounged from the ashtrays outside the restaurants on Ludlow Hill where the bougie ate. They scavenged as much as they could, and hitting up ashtrays was part of the routine when they made a dumpster diving run as part of their work in the Sprout House Collective.

Wyatt rested in the memory of the first run they had made together, soon after Magdalena had showed up on their doorstep, looking for shelter and protection. They were rooting for anything edible in the slop buckets behind the Lamplight Tavern and they'd filled up a bag of used rib bones to boil down into pork broth and gravy. When the kitchen boy came out with another haul of scraps, he'd caught them and started shooting rocks at them with his slingshot. He saw her smile as they started to run and noticed how her hips moved as they hopped over the fence and started to fall in love. When they were far enough away, when they recovered their breath, they shared their breath, and their spit, and their lips as they leaned against the columns of Unity Lodge. They held hands in quiet night as they walked back down to Camp Washington, the tough neighborhood wedged between the rail yard, the Mill creek and the remains of I-75.

"You don't gotta go." She exhaled the smoke into the air. It mingled with the steam from their love making and the steam from the ramen soup they'd brought up from the kitchen. Syd had been able to trade some seeds for forty-eight packs of stale dehydrated noodle soup.

"I do gotta go. I need to do this, I gotta at least try to find my brother and make amends, otherwise it's gonna be like Marvin says, I'm gonna be haunted by what I shoulda of done, and that's gonna make it harder for me to keep clean."

She turned her head and met his eyes in what remained of the LED lights glow. The batteries had started to fade and would have to be put back on the solar trickle charge again

tomorrow, which wouldn't do much good if the sun didn't come out. "Then will ya take me with ya? I know I ain't supposed to ask, that this is your bidness more than mine and all, but, it's just that..." she wanted to say, *I'm afraid, to lose ya because I lost too many damn people already, I need ya and I can't bear to risk ya.* She did say it with her brown eyes, with a look of loss that spoke without speaking. Everyone they knew had lost someone, and since neither of them knew anyone bougie neither of them knew a family who had been spared the tragic blows dealt by drugs, tornadoes, influenza.

"You'll be alright," he tried to reassure her. "I won't take long. Juss a day, two at most. You can hang with Syd and Iz, and Marv. There's always's work to do, specially with spring here. And when I gets myself back we'll keep trying to make that baby, start our family." Since they'd first made love it had been a possibility, one they both accepted. It's not like they'd ever used protection. Condoms had become a high ticket item during the trade wars, and medical procedures were only available to the bougie, or to those who saved enough to pay up at a clinic. For most folks being broke meant it was too expensive to not have kids.

She pulled her bottom lip up between her teeth. "If it's a girl I wanna name her Polly."

"After my sister?"

Her smile was his answer, and he couldn't find it within himself to argue. He would give her anything she desired. Their pit bull Ziggy got up and moved in closer with them, laid down in a heap. Wyatt soaked in the feeling of safety and warmth. He had lived on the memory of how soft her skin felt against his, of the fullness of her lips.

"Then, we name him Alejandro if it's a boy."

Magdalena had protested. "No. Any old thing but that."

"Why not? If you'd use my sis's name for a girl ain't it a bit hippiecrit to not use your brother's for a boy?"

"I don't wanna get into it right now."

There were still so many things about her he didn't know, so much about her he desired to learn. He needed to know every inch of her, her whole story, leading up to the time when she first stumbled into the squat two months ago.

"Still, I'm going with ya," she said, "Whether ya like it or no and no matter what we name the bay, if and when it comes."

He sighed in defeat unable to make comeback. He knew it was pointless trying to get her to change her mind once she'd made a decision. Her stubborn persistence was one of the things he admired about her.

"Besides, I wanna see the hood ya grew up in."

“Okay,” he said, “It ain’t much, but okay. It ain’t safe over there for me now, that’s kinda why I didn’t want ya to go. Lil Dem and the Ratboy’s don’t take kindly to deserters. I can’t ken what they’ll do when I show up on their turf. There’s a reason I ain’t been back, and I don’t want you getting hurt.”

“But you’ll protect me right?” She squeezed his biceps. For a nineteen year old who didn’t always get enough to eat he was strong. He had gotten stronger since Marvin had helped sober him up, since he’d started doing some meaningful work with the Sprout House crew.

“Sure will, Maggie.”

She buried her head into his chest and pulled the covers up over the frayed sleeping bag. They snuggled together in a tight knot until dawn. Ziggy kept their feet warm.

He woke up hard in the morning, and he woke her up with his kisses, as he pressed his hardness against her thigh.

“You’re mine, Wyatt. For real and for true. Promise?”

“I promise.”

As he ravished her body with his, he had never felt so sure of anything else in his life.

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The next morning Wyatt went back to his own room to put some things in his leather hip pack. They still hadn’t moved into the same room together, but he thought they would, soon. They were getting serious. Space was at a premium in the squat and the collective could always use more hands to make light work. If he knocked her up as they both hoped, they’d be sharing a lot more. He hoped to borrow a ladder somehow so he could climb up on the roof and patch the leak, so their digs wouldn’t be so damp.

After they ate some more ramen with a couple scrambled eggs from the chickens out back and asked Joan if she would mind the dog while they were gone. Syd and Iz were out fishing in the Mill Creek, Marvin was on one of his mysterious jaunts looking for the useful kit he always seemed to find and bring back, and the rest of the crew were about some chore or other.

“No problem,” Joan said. “I’ll be working out back getting the beds ready for the seeds we started. I hope y’all can make it back for the gig. *Terpsi-Core* is in town from Cleveland, and it’s sure to be a full house.”

“Damn, I forgot about that.” Wyatt muttered.

The Sprout House served as one of many homes around the region for the ad hoc folk-punk music circuit. The gigs often doubled as a potlatch between squat houses and sometimes after the shows Marvin would hole up in the second floor library with other members of what he called the *Arachnet* or sometimes the *League*. Wyatt wasn't sure if they were the same thing or different, all he was able to gather so far is that they were a secretive group who were organizing around several agendas. Politics had never been his thing and he was only now learning to read a little better, with the help of Joan and some of the others. Marvin had promised he'd learn more in time, but his first task was staying sober, and that meant attempting to heal the rift with his brother.

"If we get back tonight it'll be late. I ain't know how long things'll take with Brett. We might be out overnight."

"It's all good," Joan said. "There'll be other shows. *Terpsi-Core* usually comes down at least once a year. May the gods bless and keep you both, and your brother."

They were about to head out when Wyatt had a funny feeling in his gut. "Hold on, I feel like I'm leaving something behind. Back in a sec." He ran up to his room and grabbed the banjo from the wall where it hung.

"Yer lookin' like a regler old troubadour," Magdalena said when he returned, pointing to the way the instrument was strapped over his back.

"That's what I was thinkin'. It might help to have some tunes on the way"

"Well be careful you bring it back in one piece," Joan said. Marvin had given it to him as a first year sobriety present.

He tapped the back of the banjo with his thumb. It had a painting of a turtle shell on the back. "Having this makes me feel better already."

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Going from Camp Washington to River Rat Row was a six mile slog across town, up the hill from the valley, then back down the other side to the community on the river. The city was bustling and alive, but within the throng and crush of moving people, they felt a sense of privacy sometimes absent in Sprout House and they talked over the course of the three hour walk.

"What was growing up in the Row like?" she asked.

"It weren't all bad," he said. Each hood had its gang, but the Ratboy's were known as some of the fiercest, with intimate connections to the drug trade along the inland waterways due to their turf along the docks. The Row had a reputation for hard living, fighting, and dying.

“We used to play tag around the houseboats at Mariner’s Landing, or we’d sneak onto Branson’s farm to steal some veg or whatevs. One time he caught me and Brett and put us to work. But there weren’t nothing to be done. It was either work or take the belt, so we worked. Then he sent us home with a basket. After that I’d go sometimes go over there to help out and he’d give us some food. His farm used to be a park. Mom said her old man played baseball on them fields. Branson’s farm was extra ripe cause the floods during the winter rain put down new soil every year.”

“Furreal?” she said. “I used to help out the nun’s up at St. Theresa’s up in Westwood. They used an old baseball field for their garden too, and fed a lot of the church.”

“The church down here got taken out by a landslide.”

Wyatt wasn’t prepared for her next question. “So, did you have any girlfriends?”

He thought it was a no brainer. He was good looking and had been a member of the gang, so had his pick of the Ratgirl’s; but girl’s whether Rat’s or not, always seemed to want to know these things.

“Yeah, I had a girl. Carly. We grew up together. She was friend’s with Polly.” He was hoping they wouldn’t run in to her. Or Lil Dem.

“What was she like?”

“She’s a redhead. About five feet tall. Liked looking at comic books when she could get em.”

Magdalena frowned, got quiet. Wyatt felt a sinking feeling in his stomach. *Had he just said the wrong thing?* he wondered. Surely she hadn’t expected him to not have been with anybody else before her.

She ran her fingers through her braided black hair with all their beads, bolts, shells and feathers tied in. “I thought you liked Latina’s?!”

“I do. I like you!”

“I never heard of a Latina girl with red hair. Not unless she died it. So was it like the color of a beet or a rose?”

Wyatt did’n’t know what to say. He hadn’t encountered this side of her before. All he could think of was, “You must’a had a boyfriend too. It’s ain’t like you were inexperienced.”

*Uh oh, he thought. I done blown it now.*

They kept walking in an oppressive silence. After awhile he started to pick a tune on the banjo to try to lighten the mood. She glared at him. His playing wasn’t the best. He’d only just

started to learn a few months ago. He tried playing a song they'd both heard at a gig at the Phoenix Asch House Collective. It was a simple number, and he had been working on playing the tune himself, though he still didn't have the chords down quite right.

"Our house, in the middle of our street... our house. I remember way back then when everything was true and when, we would have such a very good time, such a fine time, such a happy time, and I remember how we'd play, simply waste the day away, then we'd say nothing would come between us...two dreamers. Our house..."

"Yeah, I had a beau," she conceded, lightening up the mood.

Magdalena told him about Max. He'd been a member of the Westworld Loco's, succumbed to the drug nepenthe as so many had, and after two years on it, no longer recognized her anymore. Her trust in him had disintegrated just as Max's memory had. Not that she'd been drug free. Just nepenthe free.

He told her how he snuck Carly into the upper floors of old brick homes in the intertidal, whose first floors were underwater, parking a borrowed canoe in the living.

They were quiet again until they reached the top of the hill and could see the Ohio river stretched below them, the docks of River Rat Row on its banks, and the hustle and bustle of vessels in the brown water.

"I hope Brett's down there," he said. "He probably still works for Lil Dem. I did too. We all did. Anyone who was a Ratboy worked for him. I don't wanna run into Carly or them. That was my old life. But I've kicked nepenthe and am getting my memory back, getting my life back. That was my old life, I don't wanna shut the door on it, but I want you to know I ain't gonna re-embrace it neither. You the only thing I'm gonna embrace now."

Up on the top of Walnut Hill the city lay sprawled all around them, from what remained of the skyscrapers downtown to the redlight district in Kentucky on the other side of the river, Cincinnati's Southside. They took in the view. They took each other all in, their past lives, loves and whatever future lay ahead. He brought her close into him and kissed her in the cold spring sun as the wind blew through his blonde hair.

Holding hands they descended down the potted and crumbled asphalt gravel road to the valley below.

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Back in the day River Rat Row had once been known as the East End. Except for a brief splurge by the bougie when it pushed out and money flowed in and condos were built in a rebranding effort, it had always been a working class hood. It had slid back down to its original status as a place for the stiff's when a series of landslides from the constant rain spilled onto the

condos that had been built on the bottom of the hill. At the same time the banks of the Ohio started creeping up over the roads, and anyone who still had a dime to their name bolted for higher ground. It was a pattern replicated all across the seven hills of the Queen City. Those who could afford it moved to the top and those who couldn't slid into the many valleys and hollows of the region.

Coming back down to the grounds he had stomped as a child and young man, after being gone for almost two years, filled Wyatt with fear and a sudden riotous longing for his old way of life. The excitement of the violence and the oblivion of the drugs and the interpersonal drama within the gang all called out to him as the ramshackle collection of houses, sheds, shacks, chicken coops, garages, tents, yurts and junk cabins came into view. All of these were built up around the long warehouses close to the docks where goods flowed into and out of the city.

Magdalena could tell Wyatt was agitated. "Take a deep breath," she said.

He inhaled through his nose and imagined a spark of fire within him, radiating stillness and serenity as Marvin had taught him.

When they stepped over Columbia Parkway they became trespassers on the Ratboy's turf.

"Just cause I quit the game ain't mean the Rat's will see it ataways. Far as they care I ain't rat no more, but a mouse."

"You'r no mouse to me. It'll work out, you'll see. Will ya show me the house you grew up in?"

He sighed and said, "Might as well."

As they walked he saw a group of ten year old boys and girls headed down to the river with their fishing poles and pails. "On the happy days, that's what it was like" he told her, pointing to the kids. "I do miss livin' by the river. Fishin' the Mill Creek ain't near enough the same as fishin' the Ohio. Sure, you got mostly carp in either stream, but down here there's something 'bout watching the barges, sailboats and canoes on the big water that juss set's me right. Even if there's a bunch drama going down, or whatever, standing at the docks in the morning or at night, or down at some of the other holes, it's just peaceful."

"You good at fishing? Round Westwood people spent more time trying to shoot geese or hunt deer."

Wyatt looked at her. "You kiddin'? I can fish the hell out of this river. Give me a gun or a slingshot and I'll get a goose from Christmas dinner, you juss wait 'n see. You won't starve with me. Not if I can help it."

They passed the five and dime on the corner of his old street. Tobe was still sitting out front under the awning with his peg leg, courtesy of a barge accident, propped up on a plastic bucket. Mothers and their broods were hanging laundry on the lines that crisscrossed between the buildings and shacks. Wyatt recognized some of them and felt a trickle of adrenaline, and the uptick of his heart. It was only a matter of time before he ran into a banger.

They came to the house he'd grown up in. Smoke wisps blew out the chimney, and shouting, just as it ever had, drifted out the windows sheeted by plastic and duct tape. Fading graffiti spoke in rude idioms across the brick.

"There it is," he said. "I can't say I miss it. It ain't like a whole lotta good ever happened there."

She could tell his mood had slumped. "Hey Wy, it's all good. If we were up in my hood looking at all the different camps and flops my padre dragged us through, I'd feel about the same. But I do like you showin' me."

"I know ya like it when I show ya," a small smile cracked his lips. "But yeah, this house, it don't hold any memories I like to dwell on. A few weeks after I got jumped into the Ratter's, Polly ran away and I ain't seen her since. Mom lost it bad after that. I came home after a run on a warehouse for Lil Dem and found her dead. Empty nep baggies were all over the bed."

Hell, I'm sorry, I shoulda known better than to ask you take me to this place, stirring things up."

"Don't worry bay, we got this." Wyatt squeezed Magdalena's hand.

"My padre done got himself hanged because of nep," Magdalena said. "He shot a man in the back for a fix, and then the Loco's came down on him, 'cause the man he killed was one of them. So they caught him, and noosed him up in a tree for everyone to see. I wanted to cut him down and bury him but Max wouldn't let me. After that, I hated Max, and Max started losing his memory from the drug, and I couldn't deal with all that drama. Then my drinking got worse."

Nobody knew who'd brewed up the first batch of nepenthe. Some speculated it was the Chinese, or the Russians adding fuel to the fentanyl flames in a plan to further deteriorate and demoralize the American republic. People in politics still blamed Islamic terrorist cells, or on the troops who'd brought it home from the Middle East and formed gangs to distribute it when they couldn't adapt to realities at home in the fading empire. Others said it came from a big pharma lab up in Canada, that it had been part of an Alzheimer's cure when the recipe got leaked onto what remained of the dark net.

After an intense bout of pain numbing euphoria, nepenthe reworked the memory circuits of the brain resetting the short term, so the person who took it couldn't recall they had taken it. It pulled the blackout curtain down over what they'd done while under its influence. The fact that it



was highly addictive made it a royal pain to get off of because they hardly remembered taking it in the first place. For those who got hooked long term memories disintegrated over time into nothing until they ambled around the world like someone with dementia.

“We stopped staying here after mom died and went to live in the Rathaus. Brett’s a bit schizo, has these super hyper moods, and then he can’t get out of bed for days. It got worse when he got jumped in. He got tight with some of the upper crew and didn’t listen to me much after that.

“It weren’t long after that when I caught Carly sneakin’ behind my back with Lil Dem. I got so jealous I couldn’t take orders from the bastard. Brett didn’t need me, and I hated myself for giving him his first dose of nep so I took myself down to the tracks hoping to end it all.”

“And that’s when Marvin found you?”

“Yup. He jumped off a box car and tackled me when he saw what I was gonna do. Talked to me all night, then convinced to go to the Sprout House, get clean. I’m finally starting to get my memory back. Seems like I’m only now kennin’ who and what I am. Maybe if I’d never taken nep or joined the Rats I’d be workin’ on the river now.”

“So where do we go now? The Rathaus?”

Wyatt was nervous and wanted to stall. “We could go to the biergarten first. Can I buy ya lunch?” The walk had burned off the ramen and he had a bit of coin from doing odd jobs Marvin found for him.

“Sure.”

The biergarten was next to the docks and served the men and stout, butch women who were unloading goods from the boats, zipping two-wheelers loaded with boxes down the gangplanks and into large warehouses.

Long rows of picnic tables under an open shelter made up the biergarten. Food shacks were set up between towering cottonwoods and sycamores, serving up gumbo and chili potatoes. It was a Saturday and people were getting off work early, and the boats-men were starting in on the beer.

He got a large bowl of carp, catfish, and mussel gumbo with chunks of cornbread from one of the stands and they sat down at table as far away as they could get from the others who were chowing down.

“Ya know what?” she asked. He shook his head. “This is our first date.”

He laughed. “Some kind of date I’ve taken you on,” and then then spooned a scoop into her open mouth.

He remembered Marvin's advice on eating regular meals when they could be had. They were an antidote against slipping back into old patterns, and if he wasn't hungry, he'd be less irritable, discontent, better able to do what he had to do. The meal took the edge off of his nerves.

As they ate a man wearing a frayed seersucker suit jumped up on a table and began to address the gathered crowd with a bullhorn. He rattled off a scurrilous screed marking him as a member of the New American Syndicate. Members of the Waterways Union were starting to salute the speaker with sloshing steins of ale.

"Let's get outta here before these folks get all riled up."

They slipped past the tables and the warehouses and were almost in among the rowbo shacks and drug dens that huddled around the protection of the Rathaus when he spotted Carly walking towards them. She was wearing the blue bandanna of the gang tight around her tangled red hair. Carly saw Wyatt at the same time and he could feel tension in the air rippling off of Magdalena who already had her hand clenched in a fist.

As Carly walked up to them he saw she had a fresh black eye and a bruise on her cheek. *Lil Dem*, he thought. He'd seen the chief lose his temper before. It could've been a fight with another gang, but it was probably Lil Dem. Wyatt never could kill his conscience enough to treat the women the way some of the other guys in the gang did.

He could tell she was seething from the way she hot-boxed her cigarette. Some drama must have just gone down and he found himself relieved he didn't have to live like that anymore.

"You come back to get your ass killed?" she said, flicking the cig onto the dirt trail.

"Course not. I came to talk to Brett. Is he around?"

She huffed and looked over her shoulder. Then she nodded her head over to a side trail through the brush along the river where they went to be out of view.

Carly sized Magdalena up. "I'm guessing you with him?"

"That's right. He's my beau and I'm his girl."

"Well ain't you lucky. Me and him had some fun together, but in the end, he wouldn't ever been able to take care of me, or my needs. I hope it's better for you."

Magdalena and Wyatt both knew her hardness was a front, but it didn't make them any less uncomfortable. Magdalena had her guard up, but was trying to stay cool, reasonable.

"He'd doing just fine. I'm lucky to have him."

"We heard you was living in some kind of hippie-punk commune, is that so?"

Before she knew what she had done Magdalena let it slip, “yeah, the Sprout House Collective.” Wyatt glared at her, and Carly’s lip curled in a slight grimace of a smile.

“Carly, I’m not here to stir up any other shit,” Wyatt said. “I’m not in any other gang. I just need to talk to my brother, Brett.”

“Yer brother ain’t yer brother anymore, he belongs to the Rats, just like your ass does if any of ‘em spot ya out here. Me I’m givin’ you a pass because yer sister was my girl, and I know how it is to lose the only blood you got left.”

Carly’s brother, her last blood family, had been in the gang. Now he was on the bottom of the river. He’d had an unfortunate run in with the 100 Proofers.

“So where is he?”

“He’s across the river. He ain’t been around for two days. We sent him over to Bobbie’s Honky-Tonk on a job and he ain’t made it back. Lil Dem’s startin’ to worry.”

“Why’d you send him there!?”

“Bidness, just like usual.”

“You sure that’s where he went?”

Carly lit another cigarette and nodded.

“Come on Maggie, we gotta go.”

Running to the ferry landing Wyatt felt even more guilt for his brother’s fate than he had before.

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The ferry ride across the Ohio to Southside Cincy’s redlight district was quick. Dirty biodiesel fumes spilled into the air. A worried grandma in her forties with a couple of scared toddler’s in tow looked over the rails into water chopped by the wind. The ferry passed between the columns of an exhausted bridge. Wyatt and Magdalena held hands as they looked up through the gaps where concrete had fallen away from the rebar. The sun was in the west and the clouds glowed with pink phosphorescence.

Wyatt rubbed the coarse stubble above his lip. “You’ve heard the rumors about Bobbie’s, right?”

“Never even heard of the place.”

“Really? I thought everyone kened the honky-tank. People tell all these stories ‘bout it, ‘bout how the owner Bobbie never ages but looks the same year after year. But what’s more, supposedly down in the basement, there’s a gateway to the underworld. To the land of the dead, or the fairies, some say both. They say that’s where Bobbie comes from and gets her power from.”

Magdalena had been raised on tales of miracles performed by the saints, and honored the dead on Dios de los Muertos, but even with all her Catholic folk belief it still sounded preposterous. “You juss messin’ right?”

“Naw, I’m furreal. At least that’s what the stories say. I only went once before, Lil Dem dragged me up there with him, and I never saw Bobbie, so I don’t know. But the place felt weird. I felt real tired after leaving, like something’d been sapped from me.”

As they traveled downriver they passed a long stretch of rowbo jungles along both banks. A grizzled old man tended a cauldron of mulligan stew over a fire, and others passed around mugs of dandelion coffee and jars of moonshine. Cincinnati had some of the biggest rowbo camps outside Cairo, Illinois where the Ohio met the Mississippi as itinerant workers canoed, kayaked, and rowed up and down the rivers of the country looking for work. The one along Cincy’s Southside was a real popular jungle due to its proximity to the brothels, hookah lounges and nep dens.

“My mom told me my dad was rowbo,” Wyatt said. “Maybe he’s in that camp now. Or some other camp down on the Mississippi. If he ain’t dead, if he ain’t drowned himself in liquor or the river itself.”

Magdalena raised her eyebrow, gave him a look. Wyatt went on.

“He was working down on the docks when they met. He spent a couple years with us. I still remember his mustache. They was always partying and always fighting, but then they had a real big fight. Mom said he’d grown restless for the rowbo life, so he left and went to stick his rod somewhere else. I kinda wonder how many other bro’s and sis’s I got out there.”

“It’ll be different for our kids,” Magdalena said. “They’ll know the both of us and know each other.”

“It’d be good if they ken their uncle. I wish Polly’d stuck around too.”

The ferry docked on the other side of the city and they started to walk towards the Licking River, a north flowing tributary that wound its way through the hills and hollers of Kentucky until it bisected the Southside of Cincinnati and poured into the Ohio.

“Bobbie’s Honky Tonk is a couple more miles up the Licking. Let’s get walkin’.”

The streets were jammed with pedestrians, bicycle rickshaws, horses and buggies. Beer and bourbon flowed in the bars, money was being lost and won in the gambling holes, and male and female prostitutes of every stripe and persuasion plied their ancient trade. There was something to be had for whatever price point fit the budget. The wealth that flowed into the district kept the streets and buildings there in better repair than some of the other neighborhoods, but underneath it all was a sense of something of rotting.

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An hour later they were at the entrance of Bobbie's Honky-Tonk. Surrounding the building proper was a small compound of shipping containers serving as hookup pads for the customers who came looking to pay for sex. Men and women ranging from their teens to their thirties stood outside or milled about on the patio, smoking cigarettes, drinking, flaunting their wares. Magdalena kept her eye on Wyatt's eye, making sure he didn't look overlong at any of the women who were dressed to sell.

Wyatt looked her in the eye, "None of these have anything on you, girl. Besides, life's best things are free."

She smiled.

Hanging electric lights flickered above the patio as the sun set lending the place a touch of class. The power came from a generator in the watercourse. The entire area the nightclub was situated on was verdant and full of life. Having stepped onto the property they both felt a sense that the rest of world was dull. There was a sense of being more alive and it made them both wary, as if something had been overlaid on top of them.

Inside the clientele was a mix. Not just dockworkers, buggy drivers, and hard labor, but wealthy farmers in fancy duds, bourbon and horse barons entertaining potential business partners, and some bespectacled clerks and suited newspapermen who milled about the bar ordering drinks. A crowd gathered in front of the stage where a real live electric billyrap band was tuning up to play. Lots of women mingled, and not just Bobbie's employees. They'd come to slake their thirst for whisky, music, men, or women. Bobbie's had a reputation, not just for the strange stories, but as a place anybody could come to forget their cares. The one thing the visitors all had in common was an enchanted sparkle in their eyes.

The smell of the battered fish and chips wasn't bad either. Servers carried platters to the tables. Wyatt's stomach rumbled. All through the winter he'd struggled to get enough calories.

There were upstairs rooms for various entertainments and rumors of other pleasures downstairs below.

"You see your brother?"

“No. Let’s ask.” He waved down a waiter, and slipped him all but the remaining coins he’d need to get back over the river. The band had started to play and he had to shout into the guy’s ear.

Magdalena noticed another room off the main hall. A taxidermied deer head and large snake were mounted above the entrance and a leather clad bouncer guarded the door.

“He’s in there,” Wyatt said. “VIP only. I don’t ken how we’ll get past him.”

They felt odd standing around, without drinks, the only two sober people in the place, so they sauntered up to the bar, ordered ginger sodas, and formulated a plan. The house band started in on a version of the *Knoxville Girl*. Wyatt knew the murder ballad and it filled him with a sense of dread.

“I took her by her golden curls and I drug her round and around, throwing her into the river that flows through Knoxville town” the band rapped.

Magdalena got up and walked over to the bouncer. She gave him a distressed look and then started raging at him, then pointed at an unsuspecting man watching the band. The bouncer went over to talk to the guy, thinking he’d done something to her, and she dipped out the door to a meeting place down the road.

Wyatt slipped into the vacated door and headed down the stairs to the basement, and into another world.

#

The smell of the river permeated the porous rock of the basement. Another smell of honey, milk, and the nectar of fresh cut flowers floated on top of it. There was an orange oscillating light coming in from the room, low voices, giggles, and sighs.

Wyatt stepped into a love nest. Soft pillows covered the floor and silk hangings adorned the walls. Vases with exotic flowers were set on stands and oil lamps scented with fragrant perfumes intoxicated the air. A multi-stemmed hookah was in the center of the room, it’s drifting smoke adding to the haze of unreality he started to feel. Underneath it all was a slick smell of sex, a throbbing heat, and the wetness of the previous night’s rain seeping through the foundations.

Brett was there and the elfin Bobbie tangled up with him, her cream white buttocks bare in the glow, covering Brett’s more private parts. She was as young looking as the stories told, a lady in her early twenties. Yet how could it be she looked so young when she had owned the honky-tonk for over fifty years? Some said she’d owned it longer. Her jet black hair fell to her shoulders. She turned to look at the interloper and the room grew cold with her gaze, the lighting dimmed, shivers ran up Wyatt’s spine.

In the corner of the room he noticed a cellar door with a heavy lock. A skeleton key hung around Bobbie's neck. She held one hand on the key and another clutched Brett's neck. "How did you get past my guard?"

"I didn't see nobody." He looked at his pale, spent brother. "I didn't mean to interrupt yer fun, but Brett, I gotta talk to ya!" Bobbie kept her long green painted fingernails wrapped around his neck.

"What the hell..?" His brother looked as if he was coming up for air after a deep dive.

"You always said I had bad timing." Wyatt adjusted the banjo strapped to his back.

"You can put that down," she said in a commanding hypnotic voice. "I can see you've been carrying it awhile and the burden must be getting to you."

No one stood between Wyatt and his banjo. All he could do was shake his head.

Brett tried to talk but he was so high and sexed up all he could do was a mumble.

"Maybe you'd like to join us, then" she said with a greedy hunger and bewitching resonance in her voice. "Come sit down here and smoke and play with us. You don't mind sharing me do you Brett? You never did before."

A strong arousal started building in Wyatt's blood despite the fact that Bobbie wasn't his type. She was way too pale for his taste, but he got the feeling that his response wasn't of his own volition. It took every effort of his will to resist the urges she was casting into him.

Images of the girl he loved ran through his mind.

"Come on, Magdalena won't mind."

"How'd you know..." *The stories must be true.* He shuddered.

His brother sat up. His hazel eyes were bloodshot and rheumy. He wiped his nose on his arm, reached for the stem of the hookah and took a long puff, then directed the stem towards his brother. He could smell hash interlaced with nepenthe. Wyatt noticed Bobbie wasn't smoking the stuff herself.

"Naw, brother. I gave it up. That's why I've come looking for you. I need to tell you I'm sorry."

His brother fell into a coughing fit. "For what?"

"For giving you the stuff in the first place. And for all that's happened between us since mom died."

Brett looked dislocated, as if some memory had just dropped into his skull offering a new temporal view. A small tear, glistened in the corner of his eye, close to the tattooed tear from the Rats he wore so proud.

“I got this girl Brett, and me and her are bound to have some kids soon, from the way were going at it. I want you to meet her, you could come live with us, and we could help get you clean.”

“You’re a grown man,” Bobbie said to Brett before he could reply. “You don’t need a big brother to baby you. Look how long it’s taken him to come back to you anyway.”

“Bobbie, shut up! Aren’t you getting enough of me? What’s the harm in talking? ”

“I missed you bro, all our adventures, the good times, the craziness...”

“Why’d you ditch me, man?”

“I lost my freaking head.” Wyatt said. “I was going to kill myself, and then I was stopped by this man. Then I was saved again when I met Maggie. I been meaning to come see you, but...it’s been hard to come back, I didn’t wanna risk what I’m starting to build, but I got to this point where I couldn’t go on unless I came back...”

“I apprish ya coming back Wy. I do. But down here,” he looked at Bobbie, “I never felt so good in my life.”

“I ken ya do right now. But there’s so much more than the game. And after a few months off the drugs, life does get better.”

“I don’t ken man. I think this the best it’ll ever get for me.”

Wyatt’s heart was breaking. Then he heard an old tune they’d both known calling in his soul. Something mom had sung to them all those years ago. He thought maybe if he could play it, he’d have a chance of getting through to him.

He started banging out the tune, clawhammer style, rapping the words in an incantatory cadence that came from a secret place he hadn’t kenred was inside him.

As he played the milk and honey and nectar which had covered Brett’s eyes started to dissipate and Bobbie’s heart softened for a moment from the sound of Wyatt’s playing and she let go of the clutch and glamour she held on her boy toy. The light was coming back into Brett. He rose unsteadily to his feet and shambled towards his brother.

Now was his chance.

“Let’s go” Wyatt turned to go upstairs, in a hurry to get his brother back to the land of the living. It felt like he was climbing up a mountain. Each step was an effort to take and when he



reached the top he looked back down to see if Brett was still with him. To his dismay Brett was once again entangled in Bobbie's lair.

Brett called up to his brother, "Give my love to the bay when you have one, and please, name her Polly."

"Are you crazy Brett?"

"Maybe I am, maybe I am. Be seeing you bro."

Wyatt let out a horrified moan of despair and he ran to find Magdalena, letting his brother go.

#

Wyatt kept to the shadows on his way to the docks where Magdalena was waiting for them, the ferryman ready to take them back across the Ohio. This time they were dropped off downtown, closer to Camp Washington.

It was still a long walk back and Wyatt was lead-footed in silence on the way home. He didn't want to let her see him cry, and he didn't want her to see him fly off into a rage. He craved the false comfort of nepenthe, and he craved anything that would obliterate the pain of loss that burned inside. He tried to recapture the divine spark of the void, the stillness within him, but it was elusive.

Then he looked at Maggie and knew she was enough.

As they got closer to their block the smell of fire lay heavy on the air. It wasn't just cook fires, trash fires, bon fires, or stove fires. This was house fire, plastic fire, burning furniture and timber down to the foundations fire. Both were all too familiar with the smell. They could hear it too, the cries, the crackle, the chaos.

"Come one," she yelled, and they mustered a third wind of energy in the late night to make a final mad dash to the grand old building that had once been Sprout House. Flames spit out the window that had once been their room. Marvin, Syd, Iz and a crowd of people they didn't ken were doing their best to fight the conflagration. It was to no avail.

Joan came up to them crying with Ziggy was in tow. Joan leaned into Magdalena.

"What happened?" Magdalena asked.

"Don't worry Wy," Joan said. "It's not your fault. At the gig tonight... some different folks than usual came in. We thought they were bangers and had our people check them out, but we couldn't be sure, so they came in. The girl, she was all bruised up, and we thought she needed shelter, and in the middle of the gig between songs, she lit a Molotov, and said 'this is for

harboring a Rat' and threw it into a bookshelf. Another was with her and threw one in the stairwell."

Wyatt looked at Maggie who was pulling her hair in anguish. She had mentioned the Sprout House to Carly. "It's my fault... I let slip where we live."

"It ain't your fault bay," Wyatt said, taking her in his arms. "I take the blame, look at all this trouble I brought on us all. It was too risky going back. I shoulda let my brother go a long time ago."

"No, you did what you needed to do," Joan said through tears. "You can't be responsible for her actions. All we can do now is try and rebuild. And it's a good thing you took that banjo with you, otherwise it'd be up there burning."

#

## 2 MONTHS LATER

The members of the Phoenix Asch House had helped put some of the Sprouts up as they began the process of scouting out a new squat, but their space was cramped and some folks decided to build a temporary camp in a field along the banks of the Mill Creek.

Wyatt was putting the last nail into a shack he'd improvised and Ziggy was already sacked out inside when Magdalena came over to him and said. "It looks awesome! And I've got something to tell ya."

He grinned. "What, you pregnant already?"

She nodded. "I am. I ain't had a period since just about a week after the fire."

"I guess now that you's knocked up, think it's time we shacked up?!"

"You ken it! Only promise me one thing."

"What's that?"

"That you'll be mine, forever."

"I will girl, I will. Always and forever. For real and for true."

--Justin Patrick Moore  
Cincinnati, Ohio  
April 24, 2019