

The Next Stage
by Adam Bertocci

*Whisper in the morning, little roselet
Crimson lips upon me meet skin on skin.
Where does he come from, what kind of place
And where does he think of, can barely read his face...*
-- Lucia Cifarelli, "Little Rose"

A lone woman on a bare stage. Nothing exists right now except her and her song. She's sharing herself only with the audience. Only with us. It's too short.

The car won't start.

That's what I'm going to remember about this experience, years from now when I tell my grandchildren. That the one time good old Toby decided to be a human and get his act together and straighten up, fly right, whatever his old man told him—I mean, whatever I was supposed to be doing that day, the car wouldn't start.

I am facing a six-hour drive to L.A. in the sanest conditions, which have never been for me, and I am kicking the side of a four-doored vehicle whose best days were behind it years ago, and my only recourse is to swear like a child and to blame parking on a hill. I always blame parking on a hill, unless I haven't parked on a hill, in which case I blame not parking on a hill. Fuck San Francisco, fuck hillsides, fuck picture-perfect postcard scenery and fuck the yuppie liberals who thought it would be fun to set up shop here. Fuck the fact that I had to play errand boy last night and take this heap out to fucking Oakland so the boss wouldn't have to. I knew it was asking too much.

The funny thing is, I don't hold anything against the car. Not really. I know it's capable. It just needs time. Time and then it'll go, smoothly, like nothing happened.

"What in God's name possessed you to do this to yourself," they'll all ask, leaning in close so as not to miss one thrilling word on how the engine finally turned over.

"Love," I'll say, I think. And I turn the key.

"She'll be here," says the guy I wanna smack. "Just give her time."

The show was fantastic, I'm talking, I'm not just saying that 'cause Caitlin was in it, 'cause I saw her in some real crap, before. I mean, this had everything, and she was everything.

"She's probably just hanging back 'cause she didn't wanna deal with that crowd," continues the guy I wanna smack.

I am one of three people who have chosen to endure the first drizzle in the history of Los Angeles County as a sign of support for the arts. This theater we're outside is small but serviceable. Smells like beer. I am confident that the show will transfer to someplace less terrible. There's a dumpster only feet from my feet.

Toward the front of what used to be quite a little crowd, pressed against an imaginary barrier, stand my two apparent companions for the long haul. He is dark-haired, bespectacled, and wearing a scarf that makes the statement that this is a young man unafraid to wear a scarf. She is a little younger; black leather jacket and a bit of green in her wild hair. Looks like she's wearing a costume; he's really who he seems to be, I think, which is sad. I have nothing in common with these folk, and I am sort of grateful that they haven't acknowledged my existence.

"But she loves her fans," drones the scenester. "We're even friends on MySpace."

"Oh. My. God," chirps the fangirl. "My friend saw her in *Jesus Christ Superstar* before anyone had ever heard of her and I hate him."

I choose to pretend that I have nothing to add. There is a dull splash as the girl gaily tromps her boots into a little puddle; a crinkle of plastic wrapping as the flowers that have spent the evening under my arm are transferred into my hand. I hold them as I would a baby.

"You shoulda seen the crowd opening night," says the scenester, authoritatively. "They had the whole place taped off."

"You're makin' me nervous!"

"Flashbulbs. 'Caitlin! Caitlin! Miss Merrill!' The whole shootin' match. It was so crazy."

Of course there were flashbulbs. Of course there were photographs. That's what got me into this mess. My stupid work computer got all inscrutable on me on Wednesday, as Macs'll do if they don't feel like betraying the source of their errors, and rather than stare at the guy as he tried to fix it I plotzed at the reception desk and read some stuff we've got all piled up to give our visitors the impression we're plugged in to the world around us.

How we ended up with an *L.A. Times* from last month, what with allegations of some conservative stigma, I'll never understand. Maybe I was meant to find it.

"Caitlin Merrill is incandescent... confident... effortlessly combines the raw energy of her youth with the sadness and wisdom of a seasoned veteran. Her voice turns from exquisitely beautiful to dark and haunted, without sacrificing the integrity of the character... [Merrill's] command of the angst-pop vocals elevates a sensitive if innocuous tale of twentysomething malaise into a two-act anthem for a generation. We stand on the cusp of significant shockwaves in the realm of the rock musical."

Okay, those are the parts I remember. I mean, not that I know it too well, not that I read it more than once. It was a good article.

My job at the stupid magazine is laying stuff out. Copy, pictures, ads, I'm sort of a one-man band; I keep reminding myself that they'd be lost without me. The worker controls the means of production. "Caitlin Merrill is incandescent," I'd put, probably in News Gothic extra condensed bold, white against black, and there'd be the picture from the review and a rose beside it and then the title of the show in lowercase letters. Five minutes' work. I'm a real client-pleaser.

At least the rain stopped. I quickly brush the droplets out of my hair. I feel like a schmuck. I felt like a schmuck the minute I got to the theater and saw her on the poster. The

poster doesn't even look like her, 'cause she's all looking up at the camera and it's kind of a wide-angle lens and it distorts her a bit, very nineties. Title of the show in a distressed variant of Avant Garde. She's in monochrome with a slight hint of a bluish tint. Looks cheap. But it's still her and that was the moment where it hit me that I was really there.

I mean, up till that point, I wasn't a guy chasing a girl, I was just a guy who'd driven six hours and fourteen minutes to sit down at a diner and have himself a tasty burger. Now there's me, at the theater, looking at her looking terrible, and thinking, "Well, here I am. This was a good idea."

Then I have to go up to the ticket booth, present my credit card, and think, "Well, here I am. This was a good idea."

Then I take my cramped little seat, flip through my Xeroxed program, scan her bio, note the shout-out to our beloved alma mater, and think, "Well, here I am. This was a good idea."

The abstract date on a calendar has turned into the real event; I'm there, really there. Like that dentist's appointment you've been dreading: one day all of a sudden you're in the chair and leaning back.

And then some chords, and she strolls out on stage. There she is. For real. I'm glad half the budget of this thing went to lights and to smoke so I could pretend it was all pretend.

Most of it's a blur for me. I was looking at someone playing Caitlin, not Caitlin playing someone. But the big solo, that's the hard part, there's no dishonesty in that. They clear the whole stage and throw it in darkness and she stands in the spotlight in a red dress. Elegant. Simple. Unflinching. I'm glad there's a light in her face; I'm glad she can't see me.

That's why I'm hanging back right now, letting the scenester and the fangirl and anyone from MySpace they may have cared to Twitter at get their first crack at the rising star. While I stand in the shadows and think, "Well, here I am. This was a good idea."

So finally the stage door opens and the kids go nuts. For full minutes we have been the last three holdouts, the ones who didn't go home. "Caitlin Merrill oh my God you are my biggest inspiration ever," begins the fangirl.

"Oh, wow," comes a murmur from the door. Can't see her face. She's backlit, or maybe that's my imagination. Maybe I'm trying to put off the first real look.

The scenester chuckles. He is an old hand at this, it would seem. Readies his camera.

Then Caitlin steps out. Into our alley, our wet little place of neon light reflected in dirty puddles. She lets the door slam, lets me see her as she is.

Black t-shirt, gray sweatpants—sweatpants, I swear. Her long black mane pulled back in a ponytail, the stage makeup gaudy and whorish up close. The goddess from before was left on stage, packed away with the red dress.

So beautiful.

She seems still flustered with this whole stage door thing, as if every night for a month she's been thinking this will be the night she'll try to leave and the world will let her. I am trying

to match this experience to any that she and I have shared before, watching her awkwardly put pen to any scrap of paper the kids push at her.

“You were so great,” squawks the fangirl.

“Thank you!” says Caitlin, smiling like it’s the first time anyone’s told her that, which I promise you is not the case. I enjoy watching her enjoy this. “I, I’m not used to—how long’ve you guys been out here?”

“Not long, not long,” says the girl, bobbing her head; the green streak tosses about hypnotically. “There were, like, twenty people, they gave up after forty minutes, or maybe vice versa. Hey, you can’t tell me if there’s gonna be a cast album?”

“Oh, I hope,” says Caitlin, with a trace of her hometown accent on the long O; “it wasn’t really planned for, but all the press, I mean, I’d be surprised if it didn’t come together at this point.”

“Good, this show really speaks to me,” says the fangirl, nodding fervently.

“Well, I’m glad you dug it. No, I mean, even in the auditions, that’s what I was thinking, that this could really mean something to people.”

I wonder if she even knows who I am. My face was less hairy when last we met. This could be my chance; she’s doing her duty to her burgeoning public, and she is distracted. She hasn’t seen me. This could be my chance to slip away.

I shuffle closer, toward the clamor.

A camera flash goes off; I recognize Caitlin’s smile from a million pictures. She was never good at faking it. The fangirl is genuine in her adulation, and that shines through. “Wait, get in here,” she tells her companion, as he checks the image for stupid faces.

“Right, hold on,” says he of the scarf, and he extends his little camera in a very familiar direction: mine. “Mister, could you take one of the three of us?”

I can’t believe the first thought to run through my head is mild confusion at being called ‘mister’. But the geometry is perfect. I can trace Caitlin’s eyes running along the outstretched arm like it was in a Michelangelo, see her drink in the sight of this new party, in his rumpled gear and practical shoes, wearing what is certain to be the dorkiest smile in the metropolitan area.

The surprise in her expression registers on explosive.

She processes faces in her mind. Thinks she recognizes me. Reconsiders. She has an open face, perfect for performance, the review said that... you can see the wheels turning in her mind as she thinks, no it can’t be, doesn’t he look a little, wait, is that—

“... Toby?”

Oh fuck!, this is wonderful. Even the kids don’t know what to think.

She hasn’t thing one to say. Neither have I, but at least I came prepared, and I don’t have burden of reaction in any case. Good. Hers is so much. It’s enough for both of us.

I can feel myself smiling meekly, playing it all so casual. I shuffle my feet. Give the roses a little bounce in my arm, to indicate them. Nod a hello. That’s all. It’s been my experience that trying to say something clever inevitably fucks me right in the ear.

After the initial shock, the shriek, the hug, “Toby! You’re kidding me!”, she dragged me into the theater like I was some refugee from war-torn lands, hurriedly ushered onto embassy soil. Those two fans outside are probably wondering who the hell I am. They probably think I’m sleeping with her, possibly even right now. The fact is, the real story is much more interesting, if only they’d asked.

I know for a fact we’re on the first floor of the theater, but it looks more like the underground, cast in green and white brick, fluorescent lights above, buzzing. No windows. None too glamorous. It is not immediately obvious that we are even in a temple of the arts.

She asks me if I’m parked near the theater or what. She asks me these normal mundane questions as if we’ve seen each other all the time. I don’t try to elevate the conversation; I decide not to tell her how stunning she looks. She knows.

We come to a green door. Taped to it is a sign. CAITLIN MERRILL, it says, in capital letters, Times New Roman. I resist the urge to cringe. “We should get a yellow highlighter, draw a star here,” I say.

She chuckles. Opens the door. It hasn’t occurred to me to ask why we’ve come this far.

I am thinking back to the first time I visited her room, back in her dorm; the nervous sensation as I stood around outside waiting to be buzzed in, the cursory discussion of the décor, awkwardness, grabbing her roommate’s chair, feeling like an unwieldy fish in a delicate pond. And this was just to say hi, hang out for the evening, watch a movie. That really was all.

Her dressing room is red, which surprises me; I was expecting something more utilitarian. Deep color. Some personal items adorn the hutch. She always made a space her own.

“So why are we here, if you were going out there,” I wonder. “I mean, do you wanna put these in water or what?” (I’m still carrying the damn roses. There never seemed a good time to give them to her.)

“My roses are so beautiful. Thank you,” she says. Warm if practiced. I’ll take it. She takes them.

They’re yellow. I see in her eyes that I have made the safe choice. Good. The Chinese lady at the flower shop three blocks west really could not have cared less.

“Yellow for friendship,” I say. There are little flecks of red on the petals, just around the edges, but we don’t discuss that. “I figured red was a cliché.”

She nods. “Yeah.” So absent, so casual. Sounds like a freshman again. She deposits my sad little bouquet beside some more lavish, elaborate arrangements. Piles of cards from well-wishers. The sum total of the floral display is enough to rival the Botanical Garden in Golden Gate Park, which I hear is lovely. My little dozen seems unrobust by comparison. “It was very nice,” she says, probably lies. Fuck. Sits. There’s no chair for me, but that’s all right.

“But the door,” she continues. “I had to get out there just to see what the crowd was like, deal with them if I need... I’m still getting used to... you know. My last show I was the girl who could leave with the orchestra ‘cause everyone was really waiting for the important people. Now they’re waiting for me and I still don’t feel like the important people.”

She's looking at herself in the mirror the whole time, as if waiting for the person on the other side to contradict her. I have no idea where she's going with this.

"I think you're important people."

"Well, thank you, Toby Cusack," she says, shooting me a gracious seated bow. She always found my last name amusing. "Now hush. You spoil me rotten."

"Always," I admit, watching her dig around her extensive makeup collection. She wipes off the character and starts to become herself, the girl in L.A. She was never one for wearing much makeup back in school, either.

"Did you like the show?"

"Oh, you were fantastic."

"Well, thank you, but, I mean, the whole show." The consummate artist.

"Oh. Well, yeah, I dug it. Kind of like *Rent*, but more, you know, now. I mean, look," I say, now wishing I had someplace to sit. The wall by the door is proving an awkward standing-around location. "I don't know a thing about musical theater, except to avoid *Cats*."

"You saw *Phantom*. You cried at the end."

It was my belated birthday present. We had nosebleed seats for a touring company. The story's exactly as you've heard. He loves her, wants her, gives her her dream, teaches her to sing. Then she runs off with some other guy. Melodramatic hokum. I wept like a fucking child.

"I had an eye allergy," I said. "Not the point. Where I'm going is, I know talent when I see it. You don't need to know anything to know that."

"And?" she asks, amused, taking out her lipstick.

"I seem to recall telling you you were talented. More than once, even."

"And?" she repeats, amused.

"Well, here we are, aren't we. I said you'd make it and now I'm right. Ha."

"I oo oh ay," she says. Putting on the lipstick.

"Excuse me?"

She caps the lipstick. "I do okay."

I still cannot believe I am in the same room with Caitlin Merrill again. "I believe the last time I was treated to your vocal prowess, you were singing a cappella in the student union," I trill. Put on this funny little voice I do, kind of a haughty, snooty guy. "You will forgive me, my lady, for expressing some modicum of surprise at this sudden rise to power, stardom, if you will. You've been out of school, what, six minutes?" I know the truth is longer. God, I'm old.

"You're surprised," she says, futzing with her eyebrow pencil. "Guy shows up on my doorstep all of a sudden, doesn't even call me first. I almost peed in the middle of the street."

"Who'd notice in L.A. You could have called me, missy." Playful. I actually never thought about not being called ever till just now, I swear. Let me point out, in my communicative defense, that this is the one Luddite left who never succumbed to social networking. No drive-by Facebook posting to make it all seem unrehearsed. I never got to poke her and for all I know she's In a Relationship.

Oh, and now she's on MySpace, or so I've heard? I spent many a happy afternoon of my golden youth trying to get her to care about something stupid I did on my computer. Now I earn seventeen dollars an hour and she is the world's most successful woman.

"Well?" I prompt her, expecting her remorse.

"When was the last time we talked? I mean, saw each other, and really talked?" she wonders. I sense she is asking as a matter of record, not emotion.

The answer is two years ago and thus I choose to change the subject. "Don't talk when you're doing that pencil thing. You know how nervous I get when girls do that. I'm afraid they're gonna poke their eye out."

"How sweet, you still care!" she exclaims.

"No, no, it's different with you," I say. "You, I don't want to stab yourself in the mouth. Gotta preserve that singing voice."

It's the first of my worthless jokes she actually smiles at. But she has enough external validation from other people these days; she returns her gaze to the mirror. Yeah, well, I'd rather look at her than me, too. It's about this point that I notice I'm standing on a stray bra. Black. I sort of shove it away with my foot. One day I'm going to meet a woman who picks up her floor.

She purses her lips. "I have to change."

I step in immediately.

"Caitlin... I always liked you the way you were."

She indicates her clothes.

Right. I nod.

To be fair, I'm the one guy on the face of the planet who can toss off a cheesy line like the one above and make it work.

There comes a point in any new and awkward situation where you realize you've gotten used to it. I'm very adaptable. You could drop me in the middle of the desert without so much as a suitcase and within forty-eight hours I'd be as comfortable with it as anything.

I'm out in the hallway under the fluorescents, pretending not to imagine the beautiful naked body just a brick wall away. It's like I've come to this theater a thousand times, and waiting for the season's biggest rock musical breakout is just what I do.

I mean, I'm sure she is the season's biggest rock musical breakout, but I didn't say that, the guy from *CityBeat* did. I'm focusing my attention on a bulletin board festooned with reviews, clippings, photographs. Laudatory quotes, positive notices, etc., etc., that sort of thing. Probably keeps the morale up. I notice the clipping from the *Times*. Same review that got me out here. I feel like calling the guy and asking what now.

If the critics were so smart, they'd've noticed her when I did; when I was the smart one, the guy who figured it all out first. I'll go to my grave knowing that this one, I beat the world to the punch on, my secret, mine. Agents and producers and Hollywood cream puffs will be swarming her the rest of her life, I wouldn't have had it any other way, but once I could pretend she was singing just for me.

There is nothing in the newspapers about her early years, how she was once just the girl who walked on pavement like everyone, not CAITLIN MERRILL but Caitlin Merrill, and how some schmuck happened to think she had the most amazing voice, if only because she was the most amazing person. Nothing about how she touched his life for too short a time. Not even in the alternative press. You'd think they'd eat my sob story up with a spoon.

The door swings open. Caitlin's ready to go out. Jeans. A black top showing a little hint of stomach. Still flat. I don't know how she does it.

"Hi," she says.

"Aw, I'm just getting to the good part," I say, casting a hand over the reading material. She smiles thinly. Why do I keep saying things that aren't funny?

I notice her shoes, which is a thing I do. "You, you seem all dolled up," I stammer in manly fashion. "I, did you have plans? I didn't mean to... you know, step on any toes."

"Oh! No, no, no," she says, cutting me off a beat too late. "Just meeting a couple of friends. You can come with, no prob."

"Well, sure thing," I say. "I mean, if you're sure it's okay."

"Nah, it's fine."

I'm not sure why I was expecting anything otherwise. I mean, if people dropped in on me on a Saturday night out of the blue I don't think I'd be up to spend a quiet and personal evening together. Not in a party town.

We walk. "Am I, will I be dressed okay?" I indicate my classy attire. Zipup hoodie. T-shirt indicating my youthful flair and zest for living. Very Los Angeles.

"I'm still a casual girl," she assures me. Her echoing footsteps clack-clack in the empty hallway. "C'mon, let's get out of here before they lock me up with the rest of the props."

And so we do.

Turns out we're just going across the street, which I appreciate. Wasn't up for following cars, I can't afford a GPS, and forget addresses, not with my sense of direction. Apparently where we're headed is sort of a tradition at this theater, there's an interesting history I don't catch. Bands, performance artists, whatever, after the show, people drink here.

This explains why it looks like a bit of a tourist trap for trendy types, but then, I've never been much for the bar scene. It probably gets better depending on who you're with. Caitlin seems to be able to open doors I can't. I swear to God I saw an actual velvet rope get lifted.

"Friends of yours?" I ask.

"I'm with the show."

"You are the show." I forget that this woman is absolutely incapable of taking a compliment. I decide to just enjoy the fact that I'm being seen walking into someplace with somebody.

"It's one of those places that's getting less cool, I have to say," she apologizes. "Everyone heard about it and now everyone wants in."

“Bandwagon, terrible,” I agree. We enter a secluded booth, not quite a VIP room but definitely cordoned off in some form or another, there was definite cordoning going on. Colored lights above. At least it’s quiet. I’ve had enough loud music for the evening. I want to talk. There’s thumping from the lounge but it’s not bad.

Curtain rises. Dramatis personae: Lance Black, slick type in a business suit, cell phone in hand like a security blanket. Poised and professional Marina Scott is a publicist, whatever the hell that means. Lacey Weeks has no perceivable function, but looks cute doing it. They are seated around a table for four.

“You guys!” Caitlin squeals, and I see her turn into a different person somehow, a change in her face. Marina stands to greet her. They air-kiss on both air-cheeks.

Caitlin didn’t tell actually tell me who these people were beforehand, and to be frank I didn’t ask. I am feeling that unique sensation of being mad at people just for existing, and I lift my hand in a very nervous greeting to the table.

“You guys, this is Toby Cusack,” says Caitlin, presenting me with a theatrical flourish. “One of my bestest friends from college.”

“Hello,” I say. I probably put on a silly voice, too. Jesus.

“That’s so fun!” chirps Marina, shaking my hand with surprising vigor. “Marina Scott. I do publicity. Though not hers, sadly.” She shrugs, raises her girly fruity drink in mock salute. She is older than the other people. An authentic grownup. I nod.

“Lance Black,” says Lance Black, barely looking up. “I’m in mergers.”

“That’s what Caitlin said,” says Marina wickedly.

Mischievous cackles and catcalls from around the table. I don’t know what to think. To be perfectly honest, I’m wondering how this Lance Black person evolved. He seems the exact kind of person that someone of that name should be. Even the shade of his beer looks like it means business.

She asks him a question I don’t hear. “The deal’s still on,” is his response, “but you should see the assholes I have to deal with.” Yeah, I know.

“And that’s Lacey Weeks,” says Caitlin, adding something to the proceedings again, sliding into the empty seat. “Say hi, Lacey.”

Lacey looks at me with a little smile. Thin lips with a little twist at the corner, a crinkle. Very pretty eyes. Not deep like Caitlin’s. More flickering. Blue. The first thing I think of when I see her is blue—not even the color, but the word itself, like she owns it.

I nod. She nods. Raises her coffee in salute. The mug looks completely out of place, even for L.A., but she makes it work for her. I choose to like her immediately, on the grounds that she’s the first one to not say something to frighten or intimidate me.

“She, she’s a bit sick,” Caitlin adds, by way of apology. “It’s a throat thing.”

Lacey mimes one single tear. Squirts honey into her coffee, takes a sip. Where the honey came from I don’t know.

“I should talk, my throat gets all crapped out too, after work,” Caitlin finishes.

“Oh, you’re a singer, too?” I ask Lacey, all polite-like.

“She sucks dicks on film,” snorts Lance.

Laughter. Guess I missed something. Lacey good-naturedly punches him on the shoulder. I follow her arm to his shoulder, look across his back, notice that Caitlin’s sitting next to him. Well, of course.

“She and Caitlin used to temp together,” says Marina. “Come on, have a seat.”

Thanks for throwing me a line, nice lady, but there’s four asses in four seats. I can feel my face falling in recognition that I’m about to pull the ultimate fifth-wheel stunt.

“Oh! Where’s Toby gonna sit?” asks Caitlin.

It’s my turn to mime one single tear. I hear the slightest, airiest chuckle; it seems either my joke or my predicament has amused Lacey. Full dance card this evening. “Do you wanna ask the guy—maybe he can get another seat,” offers Marina. I contemplate putting it and myself between Caitlin and Lance. It’s as tidy a metaphor as I can concoct just now.

Lacey coughs. By coughs, I do not mean the ordinary cough of a human, not a patrician, dignified little cat-sneeze. I mean the sound of rusty gears seven feet in diameter scraping against each other, sparking; hardness upon hardness, tearing hideous gashes in the sound barrier and letting creatures from other dimensions slip in. This is punctuated by the hocking of saliva into her napkin and the formation of a new undersea continent therein by whatever portion of her lungs she has given up for good.

Everyone in the room seems used to this except me.

“She’s been like this all week,” Marina murmurs.

“Look, why don’t we just clear out of here anyway,” says Lance. The man with the plan.

“Look, I don’t want to be any trouble,” I burble.

He isn’t interested. Looking at Caitlin. “We can drink at my place. Cheaper. Pick our own music for Christ’s sake.”

“Poor thing, can’t they give you something for it?” I hear Marina asking Lacey. The quiet girl shrugs lamely.

“What do you say, babe?” Lance asks Caitlin.

Oh, no, you did not.

Caitlin looks up at me. God, those eyes. “Well, sure, I mean, Toby, is this okay? I mean, do you wanna come?” She looks back at him. “He’s new in town. Surprised me.”

Lance has already stood up. Tossed some cash onto the table. He’s the kind of guy who actually knows what’s in his wallet and in what place. I admire that. “It’s not far,” he tells me. “You’re perfectly welcome.”

“Well, I appreciate that,” I say. “It’s Lance, yes?” I still can’t believe that fucking name.

“Yes. Tony?”

“Toby.” Fair enough, I wouldn’t get much of a thrill meeting me, either. “Toby Cusack. Perhaps Caitlin’s mentioned me.”

If she has, no story is forthcoming. Already the girls are getting their purses and such together. I don’t like the pace of things in this city, everyone comes and goes real quick.

Despite not having had drink one in this place I still need to hit the head before out we head. I find myself strangely tempted to add some graffiti to the tile in the john. "Toby was here," it would say, which is not something I've ever felt the need to announce before.

Every time she even talks to one of those other people it pisses me off. Like there's this wall of clocks that stops and starts and I only win the game if she spends more time on my clock than anyone's. It feels pettier than I can verbalize. I'll have to live with it.

A lone woman on a bare stage. Nothing exists right now except her and her song.
She's sharing herself only with the audience. Only with me. It's too short.

They meet me at the door and we head out to the parking lot. Lance has pulled out his keys gunslinger-style, beeping open his car. "All aboard the Lance Express," he announces. I'm ashamed to see Caitlin giggling at that. She deserves better.

Actually, I'm surprised to see her giggling at anything. I saw a goddess on that stage, who commanded the world, who was art personified, given vessel, given voice; her music opened doors, let us see the universe with new eyes, helped us understand what it was to be human. And now she's giggling for this douchebag.

Art is officially crap, I decide.

"So how'd you and Caitlin meet?" Marina asks me. Small talk I can handle. So can Lacey, without the talking part, and I appreciate being rescued.

"You know, just, mutual friends and stuff, one of those you're-here-I'm-here things my junior year, and we just clicked," I murmur. "Like this." I indicate our closeness with my fingers, so as to impress upon them the seriousness of our relationship.

Lacey coughs. Softly this time. Really.

"I miss her a lot," I admit. Lacey cocks her head, looks sad. I am getting the sense that she has been training herself on these looks for a long time.

"I'll bet," says Marina, quickly adding, "Don't you dare take shotgun, you whore!"

Lance is holding the passenger door open for Caitlin. She slides in elegantly. Hey, his car, his rules. It's definitely his car. It's the most his car on the entire lot.

"Crazy," comments Marina.

She circles around the car, grabs a seat in the back. Lacey piles in, with the scrappy enthusiasm of a child. I have nowhere to go.

"Oh—Toby, yeah," says Lance. "Car's a bit tight."

I peer in. He's right. I look for Caitlin's eyes. They do not meet mine.

"He can squeeze back here with us!" Marina announces, festively.

I have the suspicious feeling I am about to receive a business card. "You sure?" I ask, genuinely unconvinced.

"We'll squeeze real tight," Marina promises.

Lacey retches invitingly, waves.

They are L.A. women, and they are slim and lithe and graceful, and there is still absolutely no way I am fitting back there.

“You sure she’s not contagious,” I ask, “you sure being in such close proximity with this sack of disease won’t help me to infect all of California? This is important.”

Lacey is the only person I am capable of making laugh tonight and she can’t even laugh. The resulting noise is a cross between a strangled chicken’s squawk and the sound that airplane engines make when they see God.

“Pop the trunk, will ya,” Caitlin murmurs, and I have to admit it’s the most sensible plan of the whole evening. The germ-encrusted filth nods fervently, eyes shining. Everyone in this town is so attractive.

I hadn’t ridden in a trunk since high school. Actually, it was sort of fun. I sprawled out like a philosophical teenager too deep into a six-pack, had me a little tour of the town.

“You okay back there, buddy?” I hear Lance call.

“All good,” I tell my buddy.

“This ain’t the first time I’ve had to lock a guy in my trunk.”

This amuses people in the car to some small degree. Actually, not such a bad line. Who is this person? This has not been explained yet.

“Speaking of cars,” asks Marina, “did you guys see the new Volkswagen?”

Such an adult question. I feel dumb. “New Volkswagen, right,” I hear Caitlin say. “I still haven’t seen the new *Star Wars*.”

That absolutely, positively has to be a dig at me. For my benefit. Louder mass response on this line, too. I even hear a hacking wheeze of mirth from Lacey.

I am remembering good times, just her and me, long nights just sitting and talking on the dormitory steps, before time seemed numbered. I am looking out the window, into the night sky, noticing neon lights from signs high above beam down, letting their light wash over me in bars and sparkles. I wish Lance had a spare tire back here, so someone else could be the fifth wheel.

“We call this place the Death Star,” Caitlin tells me. The corridors are sort of metal with red touchups and the doors between parts have this octagonal motif. I can’t even describe. It is the most overdesigned apartment building I have ever been inside.

“I’m on quite the little adventure tonight, aren’t I?” I comment.

“Woo-hoo!” she chirps.

I am startled to realize that I am enjoying myself. I mean, I’m cramped, I’m lost in some industrial nightmare and I may well die in the crossfire of disease vectors previously unbeknownst to modern medical science. But still.

I have this theory that you can tell when you really love someone because when they smile, their whole face seems to light up for you. Could be wrong. It sounds good on paper. I have this other theory that the difference between loving someone and being in love with them is the question of exclusivity, like, if you’re in love then you don’t want to be with anyone else.

I find myself considering these questions often, pretending they have some objective meaning. I have grown increasingly philosophical about love these past few years, intellectual. Keeps me from dealing with the hard parts, maybe.

The siren's call didn't bring me here for answers. I'm not smart enough to process ideas. I can only get an experience. I had an experience earlier in the evening, hearing a voice in the night; she's performing for a new crowd now.

A lone woman on a bare stage. Nothing exists right now except her and her song. She's sharing herself with them. With all of them. It's too short.

Lance's pad is well-kept enough for a swingin' single guy. I'm not spotting any hideous accoutrements, no pool table, no posters of dogs playing poker. Maybe under different circumstances, he and I could have been friends. He loosens his tie. I should still kill him.

Everyone's piled in with familiar confidence. People gravitate toward what I take to be their own little place on the couch or the chair. Then there's me, bringing up the rear.

"Let me get you a drink, Toby," Lance offers.

"No. No, I'm cool, thanks." I default to the floor.

"Who needs it sometimes, right?" he says with a knowing nod. Sits. Next to her.

"He was very drunk last weekend," Caitlin explains to me.

"I deserved it."

"Yes, you did." Their banter sickens me.

Marina emerges from the kitchen, a beer in hand. I guess this is the social nexus. She gestures at me—no, a clock on the end table behind me. "Is it seriously that late already?"

It is late. I wonder where the time has gone. I could be home in six hours if I hurry.

"It's Saturday night, relax," calls Caitlin. Lacey nods, thumps the empty seat next to her, twice.

"No, it's just, this stupid magazine hasn't called me. As usual."

"What magazine?" I ask, out of habit.

"Some sports thing."

"I work at a magazine," I say, by way of bringing up things I hate. "That's why I asked. I, I'm out in San Francisco."

"Oh!" says Lance, clapping his hands once. "You must have loved the musical, then."

I realize what he's thinking. But, I mean, really thinking. I do not correct him. I've heard every joke already, believe me.

"I did love it," I say. "Caitlin's as good as she ever was."

Let's see him handle that subtext. Fuck him.

"He came to all my plays," says Caitlin proudly.

"Awww," says Marina, pressing her hands to her chest.

Lacey nods thoughtfully, pops a lozenge.

I'm beginning to notice that I have a cheering section going on. Scores will be taken. They will inevitably discuss this conversation after I'm gone, away from her again.

"So," says Lance. "What's it like in your biz."

Good question. "Well... I kinda hate it."

Big laughs from all around. They think I'm joking. I keep my attention focused on Lance. The others drain away, even Caitlin. I don't know why I want to answer his question so badly.

"Let me tell you what I do," I say. "I lay out fluff pieces for idiots who don't know the difference between a sans serif and a stylesheet, and don't care that I know. The pay is about what it should be and I'm generally off by seven so I have time to think about how I'd like to be doing something else, if I only had idea one of anything else I was qualified to do."

Why am I the only person who finds this funny?

"Well, you gotta do what you're good at," offers Lance. Glad my buddy understands.

"I am good at it," I promise him. "I guess that's something."

"Exactly," says Marina. "I mean, you didn't want to just starve after college, right?"

"That's what I did," says Caitlin. I feel proud of myself for having taken my eyes off her for this long. "Graduated, started waiting tables, stopped buying food, lost seven pounds. It was amazing."

"So that's how she got that smokin' body. Outstanding," says Lance, patting my favorite person on Earth on the thigh. "Outstanding, this girl."

I'd almost rather see them kiss. More chaste that way.

My eyes dart around. Marina is staring at her cell phone as if willing it to ring. The stars outside offer no comfort. Lacey seems to have vanished. I feel like if I try to go with the flow any more, it will sweep me away and drag me down under the deep carpet.

A lone woman on a bare stage. Nothing exists right now except her and her song. She's taking her bow, walking away forever. The show's over. It's too short.

I excused myself hastily, let the others devolve into ad lib chatter. Who knows what else. Found the bathroom by myself. Was a little surprised to see Lacey there, washing her hands with a fastidious energy. (Don't know why I was surprised. Where would she have gone to?)

"Oh!" I yelped. "Oh, I'm sorry."

(What am I sorry for?) She shrugs. I stand there stupidly.

"Hey, uh, look," I say. I find her very easy to talk to, though for various reasons I am sure she would not say so of me. "Let me, let me ask you a dumb question. You don't have to answer it, I mean, you just met me."

She nods. Nice girl.

"Is, is Caitlin seeing anyone these days? I mean, right now?"

She gives a wavering hand gesture—the 'sort of' gesture—that slowly morphs into a nod. She knows just the right way to nod. It imparts sympathy. I appreciate that.

“Oh,” I respond. “It’s, it’s him. Isn’t it.” I barely speak. It’s all but a whisper.

Another little nod.

“I see,” I said, and the silence in the room is killing me.

I feel like drowning in the eerie green and yellow light of the bulbs reflected off the tile.

“Look, I’m bothering you,” I say, already backing out.

“No, you’re not.”

What?

She blinks. Her voice is hideously, cartoonishly scratchy and raw, as if something very large has died inside her. She looks so sad. Pretty eyes, so sad. This is the most pathetic bathroom I have ever stood in.

“All I’ve done all week is listen and you’re the first person worth listening to,” she says, and though the voice sounds like ice pelting against pure agony, she takes it in stride, and I figure I can pretend to do the same.

I ask the question I don’t want to. “Is it—is it serious?”

“Doctor says I’ll clear right up.”

“No, Lance and Caitlin.”

She shrugs. It seems to hurt her less.

“You used to go out, didn’t you,” she states. It’s not much of a question.

I struggle to explain. “Briefly,” I say, which imparts the facts but not the significance. There is no reason to tell her why I bristle at such simple terms, that I resent the implication that I could lump Caitlin in with every other girl I’ve taken out for dinner, treated to a kiss or fourteen. (But who’s counting.) There is no reason to tell her that I never brought my heart to San Francisco, that it was Caitlin’s the whole time.

If she wanted to know, she’d ask, unless her throat was acting up.

“You still care about her a lot,” Lacey grinds.

“It’s that obvious, huh.”

“I don’t just listen—I see,” crunches the voice, as serene as she can muster.

I shrug. Now I’m nonverbal.

“Your concern is sweet. You must be a very nice person.”

I guffaw; I do that. “You only just met me.”

“When talking burns your throat with the heat of a thousand suns, you don’t say things you don’t mean.” She opens her eyes wide to accentuate the point.

Bizarre. I suddenly want this very uncomfortable conversation to end, very much.

We stumble out of the bathroom, walking in on Caitlin and Lance mid-kiss. God, I can pick ‘em. I could have drawn you a picture in there. His hand is awkwardly clasped at the back of her head, up in her hair. I know my own hand fit there much more naturally. I hope he can read my thoughts and proceed to eat a bag of dicks.

Marina is studiously staring at the ceiling to avoid the awkwardness. Yeah, I know.

Caitlin breaks the kiss. Looks up at me. Her eyes break my heart. I’m so predictable.

Quick silence.

Lance's cell phone rings. "I gotta take this," he mutters, without even checking who it is, but, you know what, I'd want to get the phone if I was him. He skulks over to the corner. "Talk to me," he says, in that voice that people think is quieted-down but actually isn't.

"So, Toby," says Marina, sticking me with the burden of opening a conversation.

"Toby," I repeat like an idiot, looking at Caitlin. Her skin seems to have softened since we got here. I don't even know what that means.

"Come on, Bob," says Lance from the corner. "Don't tell me he hasn't signed anything yet."

"I want to hear more about you and Caitlin," Marina presses. "A nice little story."

"Don't let him do something we're all gonna regret," I hear Lance implore. I feel Caitlin's eyes burning into some part of me between my chest and my forehead.

"Eh... there's nothing to tell," I apologize, and I don't think it's a lie. I begin wishing I'd stayed in the bathroom the whole night. I could have pretended they never kissed. It would have been very healthy.

I shrug at Caitlin. My brilliant entrance at the stage door seems a million miles away by now. I realize there's no way to make an exit with half the flair.

I don't actually quite remember the thought process that got me here, but I'm here, in the stairwell. Brilliant white light, the kind they use to light up parking garages. Spies and action heroes run up and down staircases like these. I think I remember giving Lacey a pat on the shoulder on the way out. It was too late for me to learn her lesson: keep your mouth shut.

Also, I don't remember actually leaving the apartment, closing the door, coming into the stairwell. But here I am. There was this voice I heard before I got to the stairs, actually, a new voice: loud, female, clear as a bell. "Well, go talk to him!" it yelled. Whole world could hear it. Must have been from the other apartment, across the hall. Right?

I've got my cell phone out, ready to dial 411, talk to information, call a cab. Get me back. I can retreat up North if the car starts, get home, spend Sunday recuperating. Monday I have to deal with people again, and do things, keep my toe-hold amongst the creative underclass.

And that could have been just fine, under the right circumstances. That was the big secret, that's what I couldn't explain to Lance about my stupid life. My lack of any particular goals, ambitions or plans is, I know, a little distressing. But for a brief flicker of time Caitlin was in my space, a phone call away, as close as information. Loving someone is not a substitute for living, but it was something I was good at. Maybe that's what love's for in my limited frame of existence. When someone asks me what I'm doing with my life, I can respond that I'm not doing, I'm being. Spend a night around Caitlin and you could pretend it was enough.

That's about as far as I get before she stumbles out to catch me.

"Leave the dramatic exits to me," she says. "I've got training."

"I'm sorry," I say. I'm saying it a lot tonight, I know. "I didn't mean to do something stupid. I'm being stupid. I know."

“Maybe we should have planned this,” she offers. “Some time we can plan a visit, just the two of us. We can just, you know, slow down for a minute, really see each other.”

But I am seeing her. We even have steps to sit on, like the old days.

But I’m not seeing her as she was then; I’m seeing her as she is now, not Caitlin Merrill but CAITLIN MERRILL. The rock star, the goddess. The face of the new American musical landscape. The one who’ll change your life.

I’m seeing the person the audience sees, the one in the red dress in the dark room, who in a few minutes owns the Earth and everything in it, the one whose song takes the breath away.

“Look, I, I don’t know what I was expecting out of this. But I looked in the paper and I saw your name, and I read about your show,” I mumble. “And I was just so damn thrilled that I’d been right about you. Like there was some prize for it. Isn’t that funny?”

She’s not sure where this is going. Yeah, me neither. Least she smiles. Encouraging.

“I always knew you’d be big. I kept saying that. That was my thing. It’s just, I saw so much for you, I just never knew about me.”

(I’m the kind of guy who can actually make these speeches.)

“Look, I’m halfway through my twenties and I don’t know what I’m doing with the other half. Guess I never found my voice. But when we were together—”

“Toby—”

“I don’t mean ‘together’ like—”

“No, I know.”

“I was happy. That’s all. I was happy.” I shrug. It’s fucking true.

She looks younger when she smiles. I wonder if anyone has ever looked into my face and seen such possibilities. God help them.

“I didn’t think this through and I’m not quite as happy as I was expecting, if you haven’t noticed,” I add, because I just can’t let a nice quiet moment happen.

“I hope you don’t think I forgot all those things you said to me,” she says.

I probably have thought that a few times, but I motion for her to continue anyway.

“I mean, Jesus Christ, you drove me crazy.”

I nod eagerly. Set my eyes to puppy dog mode.

“But. You were right. Not, like, self-fulfilling prophecy right. But maybe it helped in some, I don’t know, butterfly effect. Maybe I wouldn’t have been on that stage tonight without you. You know that, right?”

That’s probably a gross exaggeration, but I’ll take it. “I dunno,” I say. Have to deflate the myth a little bit. “I guess I couldn’t have hurt. But, I mean, it was a long time ago. It really was.”

“Well, you said it. And now I’m saying it to you.”

I want to tell her that this whole conversation is a joke, that no person in their right mind could have ever heard Caitlin Merrill sing and not think she was God’s gift to the art form. I want to say that I was just pointing out the blindingly obvious, that she had so much to give, that the future was hers from the moment she took the stage. I want to call her bluff, scream that it’s ludicrous to believe that she could see anything remotely analogous in me.

But that's the thing about Caitlin. Spend enough time with her and you started believing good things about the universe. Real pain in the ass.

"Gee, I had good advice back then," I say with my patented shrug.

"I may have had the voice. But you always had the right thing to say."

Now who says stupid shit like that? Part of me really did rub off on her.

The kiss is over quickly. More impulse than anything. It's the first time anyone's kissed me without an apparent motivation. I want to ask if she realizes it happened.

"Do you still kiss like you used to?" she asks, searching my eyes.

"We're all good at something," is my reply, and wow, I'm really proud of that one. Another kiss. This time we do it right. Close our eyes and everything. I can see her thinking as our lips part.

"You know," she murmurs, "they say kissing on stage is like taking a shower in a raincoat. You know you're supposed to be feeling something, but it's just not there."

I just nod. I know I'll have time to puzzle this one out on the drive home.

"I miss you so much," I say. Completely out of clever lines.

She knows she doesn't have to respond.

"By the way, the poster for the show," I add. "Make them change it. You look terrible."

She smiles. "I'm glad you noticed."

And then we sit on the steps, bathed in harsh white light, between two floors, between two stories. And we just talk.

I'd love to pretend it just faded out there and everyone was happy. Not in my life. We did go back in there after about ten minutes. I'm hoping no one asked any questions.

Caitlin sat in her place and I sat in mine (I found some couch space). We were all talked out with each other. Sometimes she looked at me, sometimes I looked at her. I never actually told her I still loved her, not in so many words. She probably knows anyway.

Reconnecting with Caitlin was never actually gonna fix my problems. Even on the drive down I wasn't thinking that. I wasn't thinking anything, that's the real tragedy.

I mean, even if we actually stayed in touch this time, it's not as if I'm in L.A. so often. Which doesn't explain why I bothered to get Lacey's contact info. (Probably because Caitlin would have smacked me if I hadn't, on general principle.) By her own tacit admission this isn't the best time in her life to call her, but I've got lots of down time at work just ripe for the typing, and after all, the Internet should be good for something.

Tomorrow's Monday. The stage is dark on Mondays. No song then. I hummed a little bit of it in her ear before I kissed her goodbye—on the cheek, I promise. She hummed back, let me share the music with her.

She has so much to share. So much to make of herself. So much she can be, so much she can show me I can be. If I can only hold on. It's been too long.