

# Flock Music: A Novel

#novels

## Epitaph

"Let my people go."

— *Some hopped-up, bush-watching, self-proclaimed leader of men*

"Too much a-love drives a man insane."

— *Elvis Aaron Presley*

## Side 1: Alice

### Track 1: Alice Gets in a Car

*DJ Jonah here, coming to you LIVE on the air from a SECRET LOCATION up in the BIRD'S NEST, overlooking a beautiful valley which shall NOT BE NAMED... and let me tell you, listener JANE and listener JOHN... let me tell you... it's overrun with birds today, big ones, small ones, green ones and white ones, flocking together, going their own way, this way and then the other... Did you know the ancient ROMANS, Caesar himself, would read the future by the flight of the birds? Anyway, here's The CHORDETTES with LOLLIPOP...*

*Ba-Boom Boom-Boom...*

It's an early-summer morning and the windows in my childhood bedroom are open, inviting smells of fresh cut grass and fat, lazy bumblebees. I'm wearing a baby-blue, sleeveless cotton sundress and white Keds. A record is playing on the little turntable I got for my birthday. I'm dancing with myself, twirling and bowing to an invisible suitor — keeping one eye on my bedroom door, lest it should suddenly open.

*(Gee, my lollipop is—HHHWWWONK!)*

I peer through the window overlooking the street and Cindy's brother's Chevy, red with white top and sides, is parked beside our lawn.

"Be quiet!" I say, laughing, waving my hands at them to pipe down. I lift the needle from the little record,

(*Lolli-SCRATCH!*)

and stuff some necessities into my handbag: a little powder kit, my babysitting fortune of \$17.62, and, after giving it some thought, a change of cream-colored panties.

"We'll all be late, Peaches!" yells Cindy from the car. I shoo at her and climb down the old Elm tree planted beneath my bedroom window.

I run across my parents' front lawn, stealthy and undetected. I slip into the back seat.

Inside it's full of people and already steaming hot. Ricky Nelson is singing on the radio about having been a little fool. Cindy is stunning in a coral dress in the back seat, blonde and blue-eyed and radiating sunshine. I hug her and she says quietly, "I've got something to—"

"Peaches!"

"Don't call me that," I say to Barry, who's sweating at the wheel in a brown suit that looks too big for him.

"Who's she?" says the girl sitting next to Cindy, without looking in my direction. She's got black cigarette pants and a black turtleneck and black sunglasses and black flat shoes. She's reading through *Seventeen* ("The Big FASHION Issue!".)

"Oh," says Cindy, storing her secret. "I want you to meet my favorite cousin." Her voice, warm and loud and Southern, takes on its Party-Hostess quality.

"Eleanore," says the cousin over the magazine. Cindy lays a hand on her knee and says, "After we're done, we're taking Eleanore back to the train station going home. She lives in *New-York-City*, you know". Eleanore winces.

"We've met before," I tell Eleanore.

"Have we?" she says, disinterested. She pushes Cindy's hand away without looking up.

"Alright boys and girls, here we go," says Barry. We jerk in our seats as the old jalopy springs into action.

Sitting shotgun is a mystery boy, tall, very handsome, ginger-haired. He's wearing a tight, white tee-shirt and has his hand resting limply around Barry's back. I give Cindy an important look and signal at him.

"Oh," says Cindy, her voice resuming that Party Hostess quality, "this of course is Barry's friend Tim". She whispers in my ear, "he has *all* the records". To Tim she says, "please meet Peaches. She's a music fan, too".

"Don't call me that," I whisper to her.

"Sorry," she whispers back.

"It's, eh, it's nice to meet you," I say to Tim.

"So what's your real name, then?" he says. From his seat, right in front of me, he can only look at me through the rearview mirror. In the little frame I see his shades sitting atop his beautiful nose. He has a deep voice, deeper than Barry's, and he's wearing a very tight tee-shirt.

"It's, ah," I say, gracefully, "it's Peggy Sue".

Cindy and Barry snort with laughter. "Tell him your real name, Peaches," says Cindy.

"It's Allison," I whisper.

"What? Alice?" says Tim, already looking away. It seems Cindy's betrayal has cost me what little attention he had for me.

"Yeah, I guess," I mumble. "Alice would do".

"My little Wonderland girl," Cindy laughs, holding my hand. I instantly forgive her. "Here's to Alice!"

Barry and Tim and Eleanore join in a choir: "Alice!"

We all laugh. Somebody turns up the volume...

*(Splish splash! I was having a bath!)*

Scenic Greensboro rolls across the windows: the trimmed green lawns and rustic red stone of College Park. "Now, Alice, I'm responsible for you," says Barry. If you listened to them, you couldn't tell Cindy and Barry are siblings: Cindy kept her Alabama accent, but Barry lost his for a moderately adequate impression of a bigger-city, North Carolina speech. "I assume you told your parents you would be riding with me?"

"Of course," I lie. "Mamma sends her regards".

"Much obliged. Now, there might be some rough customers at the Fair today, so you girls stick close to me and Tim," he says. I'm thinking, "Boy, does he like to say 'Now' with such gravitas."

"Oh," says Barry. "And, now, no talking to strangers".

"Alice has never been to a live show before," says our hostess. "This is going to be her first one".

"Aha," I say, "my very first show".

"A greenhorn," says Eleanore dryly. "Well, you know, I myself have been to *dozens* of shows. And Cindy, you've been to a handful yourself, right?"

I wonder at the reason for the obvious slight and quickly find him in the front seat, peering at the map from atop his shades. The sweat on his neck glistens in the late morning sun.

Cindy presses against me. I look to my left: Eleanore and Cindy are sitting a foot apart. Both are locking sights on Tim. It suddenly feels even hotter in the car. "Tim, didn't you say," says Cindy, "it's not the number of shows, it's how *gas* the numbers are. Isn't that right, Tim?"

"That's right, kidd-o", says Tim, without looking up from his map.

Cindy ventures, "Is the show we're going to... in your opinion, of course..."

"Well," says Tim, and looks back at Cindy. This favor does not go unnoticed with Cindy. "well, kidd-o... this will be the show of your young life. Years from now, when you're... like... forty or something... you'll tell your grandkids all about that show you saw today". The sun going through the strands of his orange hair seems to fill me with pleasant tingles.

"What's their name, pretty?" I say. I realize what it is I said when everybody, Barry included, turns to look at me. "What's their pretty name I mean. I mean I bet their name is real pretty". I sink into my seat and add: "Um".

Barry and Tim exchange disgusted, amused looks. To my horror, Cindy and Eleanore do the same. It seems my catastrophe has reunited them... if only for a moment. The next one, Eleanore is saying, "So, Tim, have you been to any of their shows?"

"Who?" I venture. "Who are they?"

"I have both of their singles," Tim says.

"So you've never seen them live. Tsk, tsk."

Tim seems confused by Eleanore's probing. "I did listen to them very seriously," he says.

"To whom?" I say.

Eleanore says, "you know, it's really not the same thing... Listening to them on your little record player, and feeling the music in your *bare bones*."

"Music is music, *Eleanore*," says Tim, hurt.

"Who's music? Who?" I repeat. Eleanore sighs and shoves a torn piece of newspaper in my face: "The Seven-Tops."

"They're from *Nashville*," adds Tim, sounding professional.

The newspaper lists the many ACTS and SHOWS and POINTS OF INTEREST in this year's HENRICO COUNTY FAIR at VIRGINIA'S STRAWBERRY HILL FAIRGROUNDS - ACHIEVEMENT DAY! — among them, and circled in red, are the SEVEN-TOPS, to be playing at 2:30 p.m., right after THE PILLAR OF STEAM. I imagine a train engine, a huge cloud emanating from its chimney, and a bunch of Israelites following, standing on the roofs of the cars, and I giggle.

"What's Achievement Day?" I ask.

"Now, this is the day set apart for Black businessmen, performers and fairgoers," says Barry from behind the wheel. "It is, also, the reason we're driving there today."

"Officially," Cindy says and winks at me.

"Black performers?" I whisper. I feel so rebellious and free that I have half a mind to pull Tim's

face to mine and see if he kisses me.

"That's right, Barry's got a real important job to do," says Cindy. "Father sent him on a top-secret mission!"

"Quiet, sister", says Barry, not looking too hurt. "It's actually *my* mission."

"What's your secret mission, Barry?" asks Tim.

"He needs to personally inspect every cigarette in the fair!"

"You talk to me like that," says Barry, "when you have a job. And I'm inspecting the cigarette *girls*. For Father's company. It's my own initiative—"

"Really, Barry?" says Eleanore. "You're to personally inspect each cigarette girl?"

"Not you, too!"

The car is loud with howling and laughter.

*(get your kicks... on route... sixty—)*

"So, um, Tim," I say. "Cindy says you have all the records".

"Huh?" Tim says. "Yeah, I guess I do, kidd-o. Bear, what's that noise?"

"It always sounds like that," says Barry.

"Because, you know, I'm quite an avid music fan myself—"

"What you do," says Tim, obviously not to me, "is every month, you take apart the carburetor, right? And then you take out all the spark plugs and you arrange them on, like, a blanket. And take some wire brush and some Gunk fluid, right? And you scrub them until they all shine and you are all dirty. Then your engine stops sounding like grandma when she's got a cold.

Because if your engine runs so rough you're gonna stall, you hear."

"How dirty do I need to get for this to work?" asks Barry. I give up on my courting attempts. Cindy sees an opening...

"Tim looks to me like he can fix any engine," she says and gives him a smile. Tim smiles back — Eleanore is perturbed — but Barry runs a blocking pass:

"You want me to take my engine apart every month?"

"Nah, man, no. You only need to do that every *six* months".

We're passing the sign saying we are leaving beautiful Greensboro, NC, population of 79,000, and another, advocating the smoking of Buzz Cigarettes ("A Real HONEY of a Smoke!"). Elvis comes on the radio, his presence announced by an overwhelming procession of staccato guitar riffs.

*(y-y-ouaaaain't nothing but a hound...dog)*

"Because," says Cindy, picking up a thread of conversation long forgotten by everyone else, "I've seen Elvis".

Tim turns to her faster than Barry could do doughnuts in the Greensboro Coliseum parking drive.

"Ah-huh", says Cindy.

"Is that *right*?" says Tim.

"That's right. While I was visiting Eleanore in *New York City* last fall."

"Because," says Tim, excited now. "You know, Elvis is the King, he's the *end*! He's a real gone cat! I mean--"

Puppy slinks back, trying to merge with the car door. Cindy winks at me. Game, set and match.

Way ahead, in front, Barry and Tim are back arguing over the roadmap. In the relative privacy the argument affords, Cindy turns to me.

"Hey listen", she says. "Listen, I need to --"

"Here's a little tip for the music show neophyte," says Eleanore, trying to gain some face.

Cindy abandons her secret again. "What you do," says Eleanore, "is you bring an extra pair of panties along with you. This way you can throw'em on stage and still be comfortable on your way home".

"Why would you throw your panties at anyone?" I ask, disgusted.

"It's just what you do," insists Eleanore.

"Every time?" I ask.

"Not every time, no," says Eleanore, exasperated. "You save it for special occasions."

"Like what?"

"Like," says Eleanore, and her face takes on a dreamy quality, "if they sing a song that makes you feel..." she wanders off.

"Feel what?"

"It's when you feel, like, tingles in your panties", adds Cindy.

I'm horrified: like ants in my pants?

"I threw'em once," Cindy says. "At Elvis."

"Did you hit him?" I ask. We giggle.

"I hit some other dude," says Cindy. "One of the players. Landed on his head. Elvis asked me if I wasn't too cold."

The radio is blaring. "What did you want to tell me?" I say in Cindy's ear.

(*well-she-goan-sendout-aworldwide HOO-do broOM BROOM BROOM*)

"What?" says Cindy. The noise from the engine is unbearably.

*(that'll-be-the-VE..ree thing that BROOM BROOM BROOM BROOM BROOM BROOM-)*

"See? What did I tell you?" Says Tim.

Cindy leans closer to me, grabbing my hand.

*(BROOM BROOM BROOM! BROOM BROOM BROOM!)*

"Yeah," says Barry. "We'll all be better off finding a place to--"

Cindy whispers in my ear, "I'm running away from home".

For the last two miles Barry and Tim had to push the car, with elder girl Eleanore sitting at the wheel, and all of them engaged in a half-angry shouting match.

"You'll push us into the ditch!" Eleanore yells. "Tim, put your back into it! Barry is pushing twice as hard as you!"

"Will you shut your little mouth and steer the car?"

And so on.

Cindy and I are sitting in the back seat, holding hands.

"Why would you leave me?" I whisper.

"I'm not... I'm not leaving you".

"You are".

"Yeah, but it's not... it's not you I'm leaving... I have to--"

"Tim, you lazy boy! Start shoving!"

"Shut up, little girl!"

"I have to... you know, I need to--"

"Thank God almighty, there's a service station up ahead!"

And so on.

When we reach the Shell Durham Service Station (LARRY'S JUKE JOINT ADJACENT!) it's so hot even the tarmac is sweating. We can see a couple of peeling pumps, previously red; the workshop behind the office, where a carcass of a car lays hopelessly dead.

Both Barry and Tim are drenched with sweat. Barry took off his coat and tie and he's leaning on Tim, breathing hard; to our communal delight, Tim has taken off his shirt and is using it to dry his face. We girls leave the car – to get fresh air, of course.

"Fill 'er up?" says the stocky man in overalls who appeared as if out of nowhere. His name patch says his name is Max.

"Nothing much to fill up," Barry says, "unless you got a mechanic."

"I can fix her," says Tim.

"Hell you can," says Barry.

Tim says, "they have a little garage over there, with tools and everything--"

"The mechanic's sort of in," says the man whose name is Max.

"That's great!" says Barry. "Where can we find him? Wait, what do you mean *sorta*?"

"Well," says the man in overalls and scratches his head, "he's in the Juke Joint". He gestures towards a shack further down the road, its entrance marked with crates of empty beer bottles.

"Do you need supervision fixing the car?" Eleanore says to Tim. She is watching him putting on his shirt.

"Come, sister," says Barry. "Let's find us a mechanic". Alice takes my hand, so I come, too.

Larry's Juke Joint is a shack not far from, but certainly not adjacent to, the gas station. We walk through a swinging door and inside it's one small room, cool and dark, smelling of stale beer and tobacco smoke. The sawdust on the floor is trampled and black, a sign that at other times the place is packed with dancers and drinkers. Now, in the morning, it's empty save for a few dirty tables and an old jukebox. The jukebox is loudly playing a record I know — "Wake Up, Little Susie", by the Everly Brothers. Next to the jukebox, at the only full table, two men sit next to two glasses and a half-empty bottle.

"Please, no more," says the older one. He looks at his glass, nauseated.

"What's the matter with you?" says the younger man. "I thought you said you could drink". He's got a foreign accent and he's wearing a mechanic's overalls. The embroidered patch on his chest says his name is Eddie.

We come closer.

"Excuse me," says Barry, official-like. The man whose name is probably Eddie looks up. He's got black eyes and black hair, combed up like a wall above his head, and a clean shaven face. He's striking: not handsome, rather sharp-featured, keen.

"If you're looking for Larry, you gotta holler through the kitchen door," he says. "He's in there making his terrible barbecue".

"Actually," says Barry, "we need a mechanic".

"Tough luck. He's not in today".

"You're wearing a mechanic's uniform," says an indigent Barry and tugs at his tie. I giggle and Cindy presses my hand hard.

"Just keeping his shirt warm. Come on," he says to the sallow-looking fellow next to him, "one last round. I'll give you triple or nothing".

"No more, Eddie," says the sallow man. "Please, no more". He looks at his glass again – it's about one eighth full – and burps thoughtfully.

"Excuse me very much," says Barry. "We have a vehicle in urgent need of repair".

"Oh," says the mechanic. "I didn't know it was a *vehicle*. I thought you just had *car trouble*. In that case, I am *forlorn* to inform you that this very Thursday happens to be the National Day



of Appreciation For the Italian-American Partnership, and *in light* of that, and the fact that Max just told me that I'm a slob, and at that a lazy one, our *vehicle repair services* are shut down for the day."

The other man laughs – a drunkard's laugh, interrupted by belches. He then proceeds to crash head-first into the table. Moments later he's snoring.

Barry looks confused. "Eddie," he says at last. "Can I call you Eddie?"

"Don't know an Eddie," says the mechanic.

"This guy just called you Eddie!"

"That *drunk*?"

"The hell with you, man. We'll fix our *car* ourselves. Come, girls".

Cindy pulls at my hand. I take a deep breath. I say, "Please, mister. We've got an important errand to run."

Eddie's dark eyes turn to me. His attention is intense, not entirely unpleasant.

"What's your important errand, young lady?"

"Well," I say, shifting my weight from leg to leg, "we've got to go see my very first live music show."

Barry looks at me like he would look at an infantile, but the mechanic is mollified.

"Oh," he says softly. "I didn't know you guys were music fans."

"So will you fix our car?"

"Well..." says Eddie. "I'll fix your car. If, and only if, you play our little game here. As you can see, my play partner" – he slaps the back of the poor fellow lying on the table – "is temporarily indisposed".

"We have no interest in playing your games," says Barry.

"I'll play your game," I say. Barry nudges me.

"Good," says the mechanic. "Good". He gets up nimbly and goes towards that jukebox.

*(...our friends when they-say... oooooooh la la!)*

"Now this here jukebox," says the mechanic and slaps the old thing, "has a unique, one-of-a-kind behavior. It seems that when you kick it..." he kicks the jukebox like it was a bad dog. Life drains out of it. Its lights dim, the music slows then stops...

*(we gotta go hooooomm–)*

...then, after a moment, it wakes up again, its lights slowly going bright:

*(mmmmwe– gotta go home...)*

"So this is my game: I'll play you the first two bars of a song of my choosing. Then I'll kick the jukebox. If you guess the song correctly by the time that *machina* remembers who and where it is, I'll take a drink, and then attend to your vehicle. For free."

"What if I guess wrong?" I ask.

"Then you, my dear, take a drink, and we live to play another round."

"Absolutely not," says Barry.

"Come on!" I say to him, "I can win this!"

"Now, young lady," says Barry. "I promised your mother I'll look after you. No way am I letting a minor drink".

"You're only three years older than us," says Cindy. "*old man*."

"Excuse me," says the mechanic. "Are you, sir, a minor?"

Barry straightens his back. "If you must know, I'm almost twenty-one years old."

"So you do the drinking."

"Yeah," says Cindy. "That makes sense!"

Barry looks even more confused. Cindy and I look at each other.

"Well," says the mechanic. "Pull out a chair."

We do.

"Of course," says the mechanic, "I would require some coinage, as my play partner ran through his when he failed to recognize Les Paul and Mary Ford's *How High The Moon*."

"Give him some coins", I say to Barry. "I could have guessed that in a heartbeat!"

"That's a bad idea," says Barry.

"Come on!" says Cindy. She's excited, too.

Barry sighs and drops some dimes on the table. The mechanic hunches down and scoops them up with a gambler's trained hand.

"Rrrrrrr-ound one!" he exclaims in his sing-song, foreign voice. He turns and fiddles with the jukebox. Then three fast drumbeats emanate from the jukebox. Then four electrifying, winding plucks on an electrified guitar... the mechanic turns to us, smiles and gives the jukebox a backward kick.

Everybody looks at me. Even the drunkard on the table has got one eye half open.

"That's easy," I say. "Roll Over Beethoven. By Chuck Berry. Now fix my friend's car please".

"Not so fast, Susie Q," says the mechanic. My heart sinks. "You are correct in identifying the genius guitar-slinger involved, but got the song all wrong."

The jukebox, as if to mock me, springs back to action, proving me wrong.

(aaaaah-wn-in-Louisiana close to New Orleans!)

"I told you," says Barry. The drunkard goes back to sleep next to his glass. The mechanic pushes the glass towards Barry and gleefully tilts the bottle over it. Barry looks at his glass,

then at the passed-out man next to him. He downs it and winces.

“Don’t worry, you’ll get the next one,” says Cindy. She holds my hand. I look at Barry, feeling guilty.

“Next song,” says the mechanic and turns around. Intertwining, clean notes, like a Spanish guitar being played on an electric, fill the air.

“That’s harder,” I say. The mechanic kicks the jukebox. Cindy squeezes my hand. Barry looks up at me.

“Tick tock,” says the mechanic. I notice that his cup is full — I guess he never drank from it.

“Eh... I mean...”

“Peaches!” Barry yells. This is getting exciting.

“Oh... Oh shoot...” I say and stomp my foot under the table. “Okay! Okay! The name of the artist is Buddy Holly and the name of the song is That’ll Be the Day! Ha!”

The mechanic stares at me, motionless.

“Ooh,” he says as the jukebox winds back to life, sputtering a slew of drumbeats. “So close”. Barry and Cindy shout a collective “no!”

*(Maybe baybeh, I’ll have you-hoo-hoo)*

“These of course,” says the mechanic, “are Buddy Holly *and the Crickets*. Singing *Maybe Baby*”.

“You’re cheating!” I shout.

“We’re all cheating, little girl”.

And so on.

“And I’ll tell you one other thing!” says Barry. He’s drunk. “There is no such thing as the Day of Appreciation For the Italian-American anything! My papa fought in the war and Italy was part of the axis! So there!”

Eddie looks miffed at that comment.

“I’m sure I’ll get the *next* one, Barry. I’m sorry”, I say.

There’s quite a crowd around us: the drunk, half awake now; Larry, a short man in a dirty apron; the gas station attendant, Max; a couple of early barflies; and Eleanore and Tim, who slinked in looking all guilty.

“And I’ll tell you another!” slurs Barry. “You’re — you — I know your name is Eddie! We all do!” He turns to the crowd for support and finds none.

“Alright,” says the mechanic whose name is Eddie, “I’ll give you *that*.”

“You know, Bear, there’s really no need for him,” says Tim. “I told you I got it.”

“Did you really fix it?” Asks Cindy, cozying up to him.

"Sure did, kid," He flashes a proud smile at her.

"You — you don't — you're not getting it," says Barry. "Now it's the principle of the matter! Beat him already, Alice in Woner — in Wondrous — just beat this clown!"

I take a deep breath. "I'm ready," I tell the set of black eyes.

"Alright, Alice in Wonderousland," says Eddie. "Ready?"

"Ready".

The jukebox plays a guitar sound that bends and winds like... well, like a broken-down jukebox. Eddie kicks it after four notes.

"I don't — you're cheating again! This wasn't two bars! I mean I know it's—"

"Hey, girl," says Eleanore, looking at Eddie. "You can see he's *conning* you, right?"

"What do you mean?" I whisper. Eddie looks at her with interest.

"He's obviously playing songs that sounds like *other* songs, songs he thinks you'll know."

Eddie raises an eyebrow.

"Tim," asks Puppy. "What song is it, really?"

Tim thinks. "I mean, it sounds like *Bye Bye Love...*"

"Time's up," says Eddie.

"But it's really *Rebel Rouser*."

"Alright," I shout. "It's 'Rising Rebel!' I mean 'Rebel Rouser.' I mean Rebel Rouser and that's final!"

Eddie looks at Tim with the angriest look I've ever seen. Behind him, the jukebox wakes back to life, filling the room with a reverberating, bending guitar sound. Eleanore and Tim smile.

The crowd is unhappy: the entertainment part of the morning is over.

"I say," says a defeated Eddie, "it's such a nice, sunny day here in Durham. Why don't we all just stay next to the jukebox and drink".

"You really don't feel like working, ha," belches Barry.

"Where are you thinking of going?" asks Eddie, trying to buy time.

"Come on, we won!" I say. "We're going to the county fair in Richmond. You said you'll fix it."

"What's in Richmond anyway?" Says Eddie. "Corn on the cob? Some mouldy big band music?"

"If you gotta know," says Tim. "Not that it matters because the car's good to go, but if you really gotta know we're all going to see the *Seven Tops*, my friend. They play Rock and Roll. They're from *Nashville*". Eddie looks at him with dead eyes.

I think of a big railroad engine, spewing a cloud of smoke, and a bunch of Israelites following.

"And if you fix it fast," I add, "we might also be going to see someone called *The Pillar of Steam*. I'm not sure where they're from, but..."

I stop to look at Eddie. He suddenly gets very still. He's looking at me again with that intense stare...

"What did you say, little girl?"

"You know," I say. I do feel like a little girl all of a sudden. "If you fix it early..."

"You did say, *The Pillar of Steam*, right?"

"R... right".

Eddie looks at us, then down at his glass. He picks it up and empties it all in one go.

"Come," he says. "We've got a car to fix".

Cindy and I look at each other, confused.

The four of us carry Barry out.

The noon sun hurts my eyes. I think about asking Tim to lend me his shades, but he's busy supporting Barry, who seems very friendly: he's hugging Tim and whispering in his ear. Eddie leads in front, arguing with Max. Eleanore, Cindy and I take the rear. In the back of the gas station, in the garage, the red-and-white Chevy looks like an old prize fighter snoring after a match.

"This will not cost you anything, as promised..." says Eddie.

"Hell it won't!" Says Max. Eddie ignores him.

"...but I will have to ride with you to Richmond."

"Hell you will!" Says Tim.

On the counter at the garage there's a General Electric coffee percolator and some Styrofoam cups, and Barry is pouring himself some.

"If you fix it for free, you're fired, that's it," says Max.

"Alright," says Eddie, and heads out.

"Come on!" I say. "Don't go. We'll give you a ride, right, Barry?"

"Whatever," says Barry and sips. From his face you can tell the coffee is terrible.

"That's it, you're fired," says Max and takes the coffee away from Barry. Nobody pays attention to him. Barry takes another cup.

"Alright," says Eddie and lifts the hood.

"She's fine," says Tim. He's standing next to Eddie. "It was just the carburetor. I adjusted the idle mixture. It runs like a *dream*."

Eddie looks at Tim. "Alright," he says and shuts the hood. "Let's go".

"Wait just a minute!" Says Barry.

"Yeah," says Tim. "You didn't do anything. Why should we let you ride with us?"

Eddie turns to Barry. "Here's how you should look at it," he says. "Either your pretty friend here fixed the car, or he didn't. If he did, fine. Great. But if he didn't — wouldn't it be a good idea to have a *certified* mechanic in the car?"

Barry and Tim look at each other. Barry shrugs. Tim is not amused.

"Okay," says Barry. "But you're paying for the gas".

"Sure," says Eddie. "Max will fill her up for you."

"Hell I will. I don't want to see you here ever again," says Max.

"It's settled then," says Eddie.

"Good," says Barry.

"Whatever," says Tim.

"Are we going or what?" says Eleanore.

But Cindy is quiet, pale: she looks at Eleanore, then at Tim. In the sunlight you can plainly see a couple of dark lipstick marks on his neck.

It's beginning to get pretty crowded in the car: on the bench seat in front, Tim is squeezed between Eddie and Barry. Cindy and Eleanore won't sit next to each other anymore, so I'm the cheese in that particular hate sandwich.

"Are you okay to drive, Bear?" Asks Tim. "Want me to take over?"

"My father says, if you can't drive after a few glasses, you couldn't drive very well to begin with."

"That's the spirit!" Says Eddie. "So they say your name is Eleanore?" He flashes a smile at Eleanore and Tim stares at him. He turns on the radio...

*("Alright alright, listener JANE and listener JOHN... Now here's Elvis again, his last hit... 'Great Balls of Fire...'")*

*(yyyyou sha-ake my bones and you-a rattle my brain...)*

"See, that's what I told you, Cindy," says Tim. "He... he is the King. Listen to that guitar fly!" Cindy ignores him and he looks dumbly confused.

"Pffff," says Eddie. "Weak". He flashes his signature smile at Cindy and she obligingly smiles back, not before making sure Tim sees.

"Now, have you ever heard that Jerry Lee Lewis version? He recorded it just before he disappeared. Not many people heard that one. That's a shame, a shame. Now, Jerry Lee really *made* something out of these notes!"

"I love Jerry Lee," I say, meaning it a little more deeply than I'm willing to show.

"There's a girl who knows what's what!" says Eddie. I finally get the signature smile to myself. I blush. "I listened to *Whole Lotta Shakin'* so much I got the record scratched," I tell him.

"But, Alice, I think even *you* know," says Tim, so eager to save some face that he's actually

talking to me, “that Elvis is the superior artist.”

“Pfff,” I say. “Weak”.

Eddie and Cindy laugh.

“Why are you going so slow?” Eddie asks Barry.

“It’s that damn van”.

Up ahead, a big, dirty old van is driving slowly on the one-lane road. Peeling black lettering on the back read AFRICAN METHODIST EPISCOPAL CHURCH and a dark-blue plate says GEORGIA - THE PEACH STATE. Black faces peer at us through the tarp.

“My father says,” says Cindy, looking academic, “we should have segregated roads”.

Eddie raises an eyebrow.

“Cindy!” Yells Eleanore. “That’s disgusting!”

“What?” Says Cindy, still angry at her.

“Leave her alone, Eleanora,” says Barry. “She doesn’t know.”

“What did I say?”

“To think,” Eleanore says to Eddie, “that in nineteen-fifty-eight, people can still talk like that...”

“You sure didn’t mind him talking like that when you took his money for your college,” says Cindy and immediately regrets it. “I’m sorry, Eleanore,” she says. Eleanore looks out of the window.

“Overtake them,” says Eddie.

“Now, I’m a responsible driver,” says Barry in a drunk voice.

“Come on, man,” says Eddie, and waves to the people in the van. They wave back. “Live a little”.

“Yeah,” says Cindy.

“Come on, you two,” says Tim. “Stop listening to this grease monkey.”

“No,” says Eddie. “*Start* listening to this grease monkey. Step on the gas. Start living.”

“Fine,” says Barry. He steps on the gas and turns the wheel. I feel the pressure of the seat against my back...

“There you go,” says Eddie. “Now take it down a notch. Don’t live too much, you’re not used to it.”

But Barry doesn’t brake. He belches loudly, then hoots, then gives it even more gas. Tim looks worried; Eddie, too. The van disappears in the background... then the car swings and sways... Then we all rock in our seats. Cindy falls on my lap. I grab her hand. For what seems to be an hour, we spin out of control. There’s an awful noise as the wheels dig into the asphalt.

Tim puts his hand on the wheel.

“Nice and slow,” he shouts. “Pump the brakes!”

The car rights itself. We drive away slowly.

We all sit there, breathing hard. Cindy still holds my hand, and I notice that it's moist.

"Well," says Tim.

"Well," says Eleanore.

"Well," says Barry. "That was—"

"That was great," says Eddie. "You lived a little today". Tim looks at him, angry.

Barry says, "I just hope no one saw us."

*(WEEEEEEEEEEEE! Unnnnnnnngg...)*

I look back through the window. There, a big police car is heading towards us fast, with its gumball on: a little red sun floating over its white roof.

"Well," says Barry again. "Fuck".

"Barry!" shouts Cindy.

"Think fast," says Eddie and laughs.

"What's wrong with you?" says Tim. "Are you enjoying yourself?"

Barry says, "Can you smell that I'm drunk?"

Eleanore shouts, "Yes, Barry! You totally stink up the car!"

"You'd better pull over," Eddie says. The police car is closer now, like a chasing chrome hippopotamus.

"Don't stop," says Tim. "We can outrun him".

"Shut up, Tim," says Eleanore.

Barry slows down and diverts the car to the gravelly shoulder. The police car pulls behind us.

The driver opens the door and ambles out. He's a big ivory-handled cowboy gun with a lot of cop behind it.

"Damn you, Eddie, that's all I'm going to say," says Tim.

"What do I tell him?" says Barry. "What do I tell him?"

"Hold hands, you two. Do it now," says Cindy. She looks scared but her voice is calm and collected.

"What?" says Barry.

"Tim and Barry, hold hands! Both hands!"

It's hard to argue with someone like Cindy. On the side of the road, while a big-bellied Sheriff is rolling towards us like a steam engine, Tim and Barry face each other and hold hands. I look at Barry and see something in his eyes right then, some tenderness, something that I didn't know existed... but that musing ends with Cindy's voice:

"Okay, you two. Now Barry, wipe your forehead".

We all get it: now they've both got greasy hands. Barry smirks and wipes a greasy mark



across his forehead. Eddie nods in appreciation. He reaches into the glove compartment and takes out a packet of Buzz cigarettes, lights one up, takes a drag and passes it over to Tim. Tim places it in Barry's mouth, tenderly, again the same tenderness: I wonder at it and then comes the white butt of the gun tapping on the window.

We all look at Barry.

"Good luck, brother," says Cindy. Barry blows a few puffs from Eddie's cigarette and a little cloud forms near the bowed, white vinyl headliner of the car. He fumbles for the crank and rolls down the window.

A big head, its eyes covered in chrome sunglasses, its mouth covered with a waxed white mustache, and all of it scary, comes in through the window.

"Well," says the head, "It's the damnest thing. I see we have a little joy-riding party going on here — why, little Barry McAllister Jr., is that you swinging that wheel?" He has a slow, drawling aspect to his speech, much like Cindy's.

"Good morning, Sheriff Emerson," says Barry.

"Good morning, Sheriff Emerson," says Cindy.

"Hello, children," says the big chromed head. "What is it, then? Should I be telling your father you were driving wild? *And* smoking?"

At the mention of his father, a quick transformation goes through Barry: his back straightens, his shaking hand on the wheel smooths. He takes the cigarette out of his mouth and puts it out in the Chevy's clean ashtray. He turns to the Sheriff, their faces nearly touching.

"I'm sorry, Sheriff Emerson," he says, losing his North Carolina accent almost entirely. "I forgot you're not partial to the smell. I'm in fact so glad to see you here on this sunny day, because our car, it's the *damndest thing*—" he takes his right hand off the wheel to gesture at the engine — "I mean I thought we fixed it, didn't we, Tim?"

"Thought we fixed it," repeats Tim in a choked voice, trying not to make eye contact.

The Sheriff looks at Barry's grimy hands and face, then at Tim's. He nods. Then at Eddie —

"Why, you have a mechanic with you," he says.

Eddie takes out another cigarette. "Train mechanic," he says.

"He's useless," says Tim.

"It's the damndest thing," says the Sheriff. "Do you kids need any help?"

Eleanore and Cindy exchange glances. Barry did it.

"Oh, I wouldn't want to impose, Sheriff," says Barry. "I mean, there's a service station right down the road at South Hill, and we're heading there right this very moment."

"You promise to take good care of her?" says the Sheriff, looking around.

"The car will be as good as new," says Barry.

"No, you idiot," says the Sheriff and looks at us. "Of your little sister. I'll be seeing your father tonight, and I'd hate to tell him his little girl is in trouble". Cindy smiles a forced one.

He takes his leave and rolls back to his car. We wait with baited breath until he drives past us, almost glib to the fact we got away.

Then Barry steps on the gas.

Almost everybody howls.

“You did it, Bear!” says Eleanore. Tim clasps him on the shoulder. Eddie, cigarette in mouth, claps his hands. Even I try my hand at howling.

Only Cindy looks scared.

“What is it, Cin?” I whisper.

“Father doesn’t know I’m not at home,” she whispers back.

I suddenly come to a prematurely grown-up realization: while I, like everyone I know, am afraid of my father, Barry and Cindy are actually terrified of theirs.

Somebody turns on the radio...

*(Caaaatch-a-falling-staaar and putitin-your-pock-et...)*

"Boo!"

“Weak!”

“Turn the dial, man!”

Outside the car window, a metal sign rolls by, black with green lettering, saying “WELCOME TO VIRGINIA - THE OLD DOMINION”, followed by the face of Kim Novak, blonde and slim and black & white, telling us Buzz cigarettes are “A *Real HONEY of a Smoke!*”

## Track 2: Alice Gets a Book of Matches

"...and no talking to strangers," Barry says and laughs. We [...]

[arriving at strawberry hill]

...“I enlisted them myself,” says Barry. “All college girls, from Bennet College back at Greensboro, all polite, fine, fully representing the Buzz Cigarettes brand...”

“All polite, fine,” mimics Eleanore, “giving four quarts of milk a day...”

“Shut up, girl,” says Barry, “my father says this initiative just might make me the youngest executive ever in Buzz history.”

Eddie lights another one of Barry’s cigarettes. “Now there’s something to aspire to,” he says.

Barry takes the cigarette away right from Eddie’s mouth. “Why,” he says and puts it in

his own mouth, “what do you aspire to?” he coughs.

Eddie reaches out across Tim’s face and takes the cigarette back. “Me? I want the normal things. Money, fame...” he puffs on the cigarette, then offers it to Eleanore. “Equality between races...”

Eleanore puffs on the cigarette with an elegant city-girl experience. She plays along: “equality between races... independence... working for the United Nations...” she hands the cigarette to Tim. Tim takes it between his thumb and forefinger, gives it a very cool drag:

“Independence,” he says and puffs. “Driving very fast... napping in the sun...”

Eddie looks at him. “I may grow to appreciate you, boy,” he says. Tim puffs in his face and gives the cigarette back to Barry.

“I’m going for independence *and* watching my very first live show,” I say. “Can I have the cigarette?”

Everybody except Eddie gives out a collective “no!”

“Independence,” says Cindy. She’s looking at her brother. “That sounds pretty good”.

We’re moving through

[interacting with black people]

[...]

Eddie is chatting up Eleanore. Save for him and Eleanore, nobody is happy with this situation. “Edwardo!”

The voice is fierce, low, piercing through the racket. It is soon thereafter joined by the biggest body I’ve ever seen — a tall, fat black guy in overalls — moving swiftly towards us. I notice with interest that the only one who stops to flinch is Eleanore.

And following Eleanore, Eddie raises his head towards the big guy —

“Edwardo!”

“Holy shit, it’s Besame Mucho,” says Eddie, smiling a big smile. He gives Eleanore a little look —

“See ya later, kids. Mucho, you old fart.”

The man called Besame Mucho runs to Eddie and picks him up like a ragdoll, giving him a bone-crushing hug.

“Where are you man? I don’t see you since the woodshed!”

They walk away, talking. We all look at them.

“Hey, wait,” says Eleanore, a little too late.

“Excuse me, sir, may I interest you in a *honey* of a smoke?”

The cigarette girl is young, lithe, wearing a yellow-and-white uniform proudly featuring the yellow hexagons of the Buzz Cigarettes brand. Her hat is a particularly ugly, yellow pillbox, with the Buzz logo sewn on it like a military insignia. White straps around her neck hold a yellow plastic tray displaying the many fine products offered by the Buzz Cigarettes Co., and she's holding on to it with two hands covered in white gloves, like a cartoon bee. Suddenly, it's like stepping into Cindy's and Barry's house.

Barry's chest is pumped; with two fingers he's smoothing an invisible mustache.

"As you can see," says the cigarette girl, "we have today the best tobacco products money can buy: fine Domestic Virginia cigarettes, and for the man who knows his smoke we also offer Turkish Blend cigarettes, and an assortment of snuffs and chewin' tobaccis. Would you care for a free sample?"

"Chewing tobaccos," says Barry, very sternly. "Not chewin' tobaccis. When you represent the Buzz brand, it is important that you keep to decorum."

"Are you tellin' me how to sell?" asks the cigarette girl, cocking her head at him, more curious than angry.

"Well," says Barry, "I *am* your boss."

"Oh," says the cigarette girl. "Then you must be Mr. B. MacAllister." She turns to us and gives me a very inappropriate wink and adds, "...junior."

"I am," says Barry, and starts arranging items on her tray. She puffs her bosom, letting him. "Then you should know," she says, "that so far I've given out *forty-two* samples and had to restock *three times*. And it's only an hour and a half past noon. So there."

"This may be the case," says Barry, still arranging the products on her tray, "but when you represent... hello. What's this?"

He lifts a loose cigarette from the tray. It has a hand-rolled kind of look and the sun going through the thin paper wrapper makes the content look more green than brown. The cigarette girl's expression changes. I find it hard to decode whether she's stone-faced or just terrified.

"This is completely unacceptable!" says Barry. "Completely! Why, look at this—" we all look at the uplifted cigarette, like a sword – "as you can plainly see, this cigarette does not showcase the hexagon design nor the name 'Buzz Cigarettes!'"

The cigarette girl is relieved. So is Eleanore, who gives her a private look.

Then a heavy hand lands on Barry's shoulder—

"Is this Mr. B. MacAllister, Jr., I see before me?" says the owner of the heavy hand behind us.

Eleanore acts fast: she grabs the green cigarette from Barry's raised hand and stuffs it in his coat pocket. We all turn around to find two besuited, bespeckled, respectable-looking, identical-looking white men.

Barry's expression changes from shock to serenity, smoothes itself out: "Hello, Mr. Farley! Why, gang, this is Mr. Farley, our advertising executive! Mr. Farley, please meet my sister, cousin and their friend."

"Well met, ladies," says one of the identical besuited men and gestures towards the other. "Mr. B. MacAllister, Jr., I'd like you to meet Mr. C. Evans, the Fair's executive manager."

"Well met," Mr. Evans says.

"Well met," replies Mr. B. MacAllister, Jr. and gives a well-honed, respectable nod.

"Mr. B. MacAllister, Jr. here is our fastest-rising young star, you know," says one of the identical men to the other, "a chip off the old Mr. B. Sr., I should say. Why, this whole cigarette-girls project today was his idea, you know."

"Is that *right*?" says Mr. C. Evans.

"It sure *was*, Mr. Evans," says Barry. "Opening new doors for the Buzz brand is what it's all about. Why, our representative here — he shoves the unwilling cigarette girl into the spotlight — "has already given out *forty-two* samples and had to restock *three times*. And it's only an hour and a half past noon. And she is only one of our fine, fine..."

"I'm bored," whispers Cindy. "Tim, won't you win me a teddy bear?"

They walk away. I come, too, because I'm also bored, and Eleanore comes, too — for different reasons.

Under the string of bare lightbulbs, the hand-painted sign at the nearby booth says "10 shots - 25¢," and the red-faced man in the open-collared shirt under it is busy counting exactly 10 shots of .22 into the hand of a young black patron, who's chatting excitedly with his girlfriend. The shots fall from a small cardboard box, red, with lettering saying they are "Spatterproof". A bunch of old rifles lie at the counter. Another man is picking up one of them and shooting into the depths of the booth, where metal cutouts, shot to tatters, are supposed to imitate ducks and quails. Every time a rifle fires, the red-faced man jumps.

"Excuse me," says Cindy in her most charming voice, "this young man would like to win me the largest teddy bear you have."

"That would be the Bear-gineer," says the red-faced man and wipes a handkerchief across his sweaty forehead. He gestures towards the top shelf above his head, where a large bear, wearing a train engineer's hat and overalls, is sitting. "Gotta warn you, young man, 12 days so far and no one won him yet." The man next to us fires a round into the line of automated duck-like things and it spins around its axis with a *ping!*

The red-faced man shudders.

"What do I need to do to win him?" says Tim and puts a quarter on the counter. The man at the counter counts ten shots into his hand.

"Ten shots at the ducks and quails," says the man and jumps at another ping!, "and I'll be

counting”.

“That will not be a problem,” says Tim, picks up a rifle and immediately drops half his shots to the ground.

“Have you ever fired a rifle before?” asks Cindy.

“Sure have!” says a blushing Tim. He pulls the lever on the old rifle and drops the rest of his shots. He ducks, takes one shot from the ground, cleans it against his shirt and puts it in the rifle. He smiles at me, trying to save face. Eleanore smirks. He aims, fires, and takes the Bear-gineer’s eye out. The shot teddy flops in its place like an injured cowboy.

“At the ducks and quails!” shouts the red-faced man. “Not the trophies!”

Tim smiles weakly at Cindy.

Cindy says to Tim, “why don’t you put another quarter on the counter?” And to the man at the counter, “mind if I try?”

”Why not,” says the man, shuddering again, “to be worser off than him... you’d have to be *spectacularly bad*.”

”Sorry, Cind,” says Tim. “You want me to try again?”

”Oh, you sweet, summer child,” says Eleanore.

“That’s okay, hon,” says Cindy. She winks at Eleanore. Eleanore catches the gesture, not quite sure what to do with it.

“Remember we used to do these back in ‘Bama?”

”That was a long time ago,” says Eleanore and walks away, towards Barry and his identical executive friends. But she looks back, somewhat appeased.

Cindy turns around and picks up the old Winchester like a trained soldier. She sends her left leg back, like a ballet dancer, like an expert shot. She puts the rifle to her temple and her cheek and you can see there’s a longstanding familiarity about it. I look back and Eleanore is behind me, watching too.

“Turn around, girl, you’ll miss the show... it goes by awful quick.”

I turn around to watch Cindy squeezing the trigger, once, twice, ten times, barely breathing, and five ripped-metal ducks and five tattered quails going \*ping!-\*ing and spinning away. The red-faced man backs away. So do some of the patrons and competitors at the shooting booth. In this moment, even I can feel there’s something very much intimidating in soft, sweet, blue-eyed Cindy.

Cindy puts her gun on the stand. The red-faced man reaches above him without taking his eyes off of her and gives her the one-eyed Bear-gineer. She smiles softly and gives it to Tim.

Tim takes the teddy, all red. Some people laugh — not many, though.

“Hey, hey,” he says to the faces around us. “I deserve it, right?”

”Go give it to Eleanore,” says Cindy. “Say you won it for her. I think she likes you.”

"You think so?" he says, scratching his head.

"Your neck seems to think so," she says.

He smiles. She smiles. He walks away.

We stand alone by the shooting booth. Life has resumed its course at the booth, ducks-a-pinging and the red-faced man a-jumping, but some people still avoid Cindy and me when they walk by, giving us a wide berth.

"Hey, Hey, Cin, why-yyy-yyyy did you give in?" I sing to her, half-mocking.

"That, Alice, of Wonderland, that was strategy on your sis's behalf. Pure strategy."

"How do you mean, sis?" I say, and link my arm through hers, "and can you tell me while we buy some warm peanuts?"

"First thing," says Cindy, "and least important, it makes Eleanore think she won. And that is important because she's my ticket out of here."

My eyes suddenly fill with so much tears that I can't see anything and to hide that I'm looking back, and as I wipe my eyes I see Tim and Puppy standing next to Barry and the executive twins. Barry and the twins are shaking hands, and Eleanore, turning to leave, is holding the one-eyed Bear-gineer, hugging it, and looking at Cindy, nodding to her. Cindy is nodding back.

Over the past hour I have come to a decision. During the show, I will wait for that tingle in my underwear that Eleanore warned me about. At that moment I will reach into my handbag and throw my extra pair of panties onto the stage. It will be my rite of passage into adulthood.

We're standing on line for the peanuts.

"What do you mean, your ticket out of here," I ask her shoes.

"Listen, Peach—I mean listen. The second reason I sent Tim away, and the most important one, is so I'll have a moment to talk to you".

I shuffle my feet. "You still owe me an explanation," I say.

"I do," says Cindy. "But why do we have to talk about such sad things? Eleanore has an apartment, next to Emerson College. Dad's funding it anyway..." she holds both my hands. "You could come with me, Alice of Wonderland".

But our moment to ourselves is destined to be a short one. Just as I'm handed a packet of warmish, saltyish peanuts, the rest of the gang is back. And not a moment later:

"Hey! Hey! *Prego!*"

The shout comes from across the line of booths, where there's a clearing and a red-and-white circus tent and an off-white truck. A few people are sitting on folding chairs next to the tent. One of them is Eddie, and another is the huge man called Besame Mucho.

"Hey! Kids! Come over here!"

We do.

"These are Alice and her friends," says Eddie.

"We heard a lot about you guys," says another man, who's sitting next to Eddie. I've never seen a man dress like that: a ceremonial garb of another people perhaps — a white cotton dress, full of red and purple emroideries.

[...]

"And these," says Eddie, "are actual, factual members of the Pillar of Steam Band".

"Just cogs in the machine," says Mucho.

[...]

"You enjoy telling others what to do," sighs Babatunde.

"Well — I mean —" says Barry.

"I used to like telling people what to do, too," says Babatunde. "It's human nature. Don't feel too bad about that."

"Right. Right," says Barry.

"What kind of people did you get to order around?" I ask.

"Well, Alice, *my* people. I'm a prince of my people, you see. And when I told them they should jump — they didn't even stop to ask, 'How high?'"

"You're a prince?"

"I am. But you know, Barry, I was never happy telling people what to do. I was never happy until I came to this land and started playing music. Can you guess why?"

"Why?"

"Because it's only when I stopped ordering people around and started playing music with them when I... well..." he looks at Johnny Terry — "well, in your religion there's the idea of being subject to one another. Of submitting to one another."

"As Christ is subject to his Church," agrees Terry.

"...when you play music with others, sometimes you lead. Sometimes you follow. When you lead you do so without authority, and when you follow you do so without coercion. And thus, my friend, beautiful music is made."

Barry stops to think about it. Absentmindedly, he reaches for his coat pocket and takes out the hand-rolled cigarette he confiscated from the cigarette girl. He takes out a yellow Buzz Cigarettes matchbook and lights it.



“Boy, that tastes real funny,” he says. He hands the cigarette to Tim, who puffs on it, then opens his eyes real wide. Some of the band members laugh.

“Smells funny, too,” says Tim. He hands the cigarette to Eleanore and winks at her. “What do you think?”

Eleanore takes a few expert draws.

[...]

“Hold on. Hold... on. I have an idea. My idea is this.”

I wait.

“Barry?”

“Yes.”

“You didn’t say what your idea was.”

“Coca Cola.”

“Coca Cola.”

“Ayess. Somewhere in this fair, hiding somewhere, there’s a bottle of magic and wonders, because that bottle offers whomever drinks from it the cold, crisp taste of Coke. And it’s callin’ me. It’s saying, Barry, drink me”.

“Is that what it’s saying?” Says Puppy, laughing.

“Uhuh,” says Barry. When he doesn’t notice, his Alabama accent slips through. “Let’s take a little detour.”

“If we’re late to my first show ever I’m killing ya,” I tell him.

[...]

“Last cold Coke of the day,” says the vendor.

“Must be my lucky day,” says Barry.

“Let’s come back already!”

“Alright, Alice, keep your shirt on.”

“Fresh!”

The tent is the largest thing on the fairground, a big baloon in stripes of red and white, its flaps raised to welcome patrons. Inside, it looks cool and dark, and rows and rows of seats are already filling with teenagers and families.

“Hey you white kids!”

The two policemen stand at the rear of the tent, just behind the last row, in matching khaki shirts and pants and matching straw hats. One is redheaded, lanky; the other, the older

one talking to us, has a wooden baton stuffed in his leather belt. On his shoulder there's a patch that reads "Sic Semper Tyrannis."

"Hey you white kids! Come stand next to us!"

We do.

"What are you kids doing here today?"

For a short man, the older cop has quite a menacing presence. His voice booms and reverberates over the noise of the crowd.

"We're—we are on official—" starts Cindy.

"We've a permit," I try to end.

Puppy adds a pantomime act: she sours her face at the cops, letting them know on *whose side* she is.

Barry walks straight at the cop, then smiles. How easily he slips into that pose, I think.

"We're here on special permission from Mr. C. ICHKURIMLO, the fairground's general executive," he says. He calmly toys with his bottle of Coke. The cops respond in relaxing, too. The young cop looks more interested in the cold, crisp taste of Barry's coke bottle.

"I don't want any trouble," the older cop tries weakly. He's looking at the cold, crisp bottle as well.

"Of course," says Barry. "Are they treating you well here?"

"salright," says the cop, defeated.

"What do you think he meant?" asks Eleanore.

"Who?" I ask.

"Eddie."

"What do you mean?" I say.

"He said, 'after *this* show, there won't be another one.'"

At the other side of the tent, Eddie, Jimmy and some other stage-hands are making the people in the first rows get up, and they do, moaning and shouting at Eddie.

"Gotta have a place to do the dancing," Eddie says to the patrons. "Sorry sorry sorry, gotta make some room for the dancing..."

Eddie and his friends move efficiently, lifting the heavy wooden benches that make up the first rows. They push them to the sides, making them look like battlements protecting the stage.

"Maybe it's like Carol Burnett on the Ed Sullivan show last year," says Tim.

"Huh?" Says Barry.

"Her act followed Elvis's," says Tim. "You could see in her face she *did not* want to be up there on stage. So maybe *this* show will be so good, the Seven-Tops wouldn't want to come on after—"

“You kids and your *Elvis*,” says the older cop, still eyeing the sweating bottle of Coke in Eddie’s hand. “With him hip-wagging like a *woman*. When I was your age we had real *men* up on stage. Frank Sinatra, now he had *star quality*. Dean Martin...” He’s taking a departing look at Barry’s Coke and stares at Besame Mucho coming up on stage. Some people applaud, but Mucho is there just to shove the upright piano to center stage. He does it with three fingers. The piano makes an awful dragging sound. It’s a weird audience warm up, I think, but this is my first show, what do I know, I think.

Jimmy is arranging the mic stands on stage, around the piano; then he carries a big upright bass and stands next to it; Eddie walks over towards us, full of purpose. Then he stops. He stands next to Barry, looking around, smiling at the cops.

When the cops look away, he leans over, very secretive: “hey. Hey, Barry.”

“What?”

“Don’t — don’t look at me. Keep staring at the stage, keep smiling, now that’s a trooper. Hey, Barry. Hand me that Coke.”

“What?”

“Shh—“

“I’m looking at the stage, I’m looking at the stage. Here.”

He hands the bottle, hand to the side and face facing forwards, and Eddie grabs in the same pose. Then he walks back to the stage.

“Thanks,” he says.

“What just happened?” Says Barry.

Puppy says, without taking her eyes off the stage, “I think he just took your Coke.”

A well-dressed man in a seersucker, all white-and-blue stripes, and a slim, yellow tie, comes on stage now. He’s got blood-red shoes. He’s wearing a porkpie hat, slightly cocked on his small head. Some people clap. Some people call “Tom!”

I’m already excited.

“Now you folks, how ya feel this afternoon?” He bellows into the mic. Someone yells back, “I’m feeling fine!”

“That’s good, that’s good,” says the MC. “I’m your man, Tiger Tom, and folks, we’re here in the cool shade of this big tent, cool as the James river when it’s morning, we’re here, folks, to celebrate the best in music and achievement, to feel the *joy* of music, the *best* of our community!”

“Hell yeah,” says Tim. He’s holding on to Eleanore. I slide up to Cindy and give her a squeeze. Barry stands alone next to the cops, erect, sweating in his oversized coat.

“And let’s get our spirit rising! Let’s have our hand a clapping! Let’s give a *Richmond* welcome to the first band comin’ your way: The Cloud Pillar!”

"Pillar of Steam!" Someone yells from behind the tent.

"That's right, the Pillar of Steam coming to play to us live music, folks!"

"And they're not here yet!"

Tiger Tom is unphased. "And, folks, gentlemen and gentle women," he says, voice rising, as behind him he's signalling at whomever is there to get the hell *on* with it, "we will momentarily enjoy their tunes and their numbers, which will serve to *elevate* us! To *educate* us! To *edify* us! Thank God, here they come!"

He scurries off stage. A long procession of people, all wearing funny railroad hats, is emerging through the flaps of the tent and climbing on stage. Some scattered applause is heard: mostly lazy, slow claps. I count the men: three, five, seven, ten — men with instruments and men without. Mucho sits down behind the drum kit, still taller than the man with the trumpet standing next to him. They look at each other and smile. Johnny Terry stops next to them. Another man comes on and takes his position next to the upright bass. Jimmy lets him hold it and scatters. Babatunde climbs up and stands next to Mucho. It's very, very tight on stage: the three men of the horn section are nearly cheek to cheek. Babatunde looks happy, with his one arm around Johnny Terry and the other holding a huge, round drum, as foreign and ceremonial as his clothes.

Now the crowd gets into it: "ooh!" And "shhh!" And "here we go" and one or two "bring Tom back!"

A woman comes on, taking her place in front, wearing overalls and holding a shiny, gold electric guitar, slim and small in her large hands.

"Holy hell, it's a Broadcaster!" Says Tim. Eddie throws the woman a line and she catches it, plugs it to her guitar. The tent explodes in an electrified howling scream, not at all pleasant. Next to us the cops cover their ears. The crowd is stirring. Eddie slaps a large crate, covered in yellow tweed. The howling stops. The crate sits there, buzzing and vibrating.

"That's a Bassman amp, Eleanore, see?" Says Tim.

"Shut up, Tim!" I say, very excited. "Don't ruin my first show!" I slip my hand into my purse, feeling my change of underwear. I imagine my panties landing on Mucho's head and giggle.

The last musician to come on stage is a very pretty woman, dressed in a beautiful, blue evening gown. You can feel the excitement in the crowd as she takes her place next to the guitarist, flashes a charming smile at us all, then turns back around.

As if on cue, all the other musicians turn their back to the crowd. We all fall silent. My first show is starting.

A low moan is intensifying, reverberating in the tent. It comes from the twelve people on stage. It sounds like an engine, warming up, readying itself to move a huge hunk of metal.

The stagehands cut the chords that keep the flaps of the tent folded. Suddenly it's dark in the tent — dark and sweltering hot.

*(Moooooooooooooooooooo-)*

I hug Cindy. We're looking at each other.

*(ohoooooOOOOOOOOH-WAP!)*

All the players turn around. The horns give a howl. Mucho comes in, hitting the drums. Babatunde joins in with low, heartbeat-like drumming of his own. The two beats twirl and dance in my ears.

*(Ba-BOOM! Ba-BOOM!)*

Now the guitarist hits the strings. I've never seen an electrical guitar being played before. I watch in awe as the movements of her hands translate into the huge sound suddenly filling the tent. The sound twangs and dances, and she's dancing along with it. I notice her fingernails are painted red. The red dots dance on the strings. Some people shout and howl, some jump to their feet and start dancing.

And then the lady in the evening dress grabs a microphone with all the intensity of her tiny frame; real close to it, she begins to *howl*:

*(Yyyyyy-eeeeehhynt nothin buh-a hound doooooooooog)*

I look at Cindy and notice that she's dancing. Upon closer inspection, it seems that I am dancing, too.

"Stop that, girls." The cop points his wooden baton at Cindy and me. "I don't want to tell you twice. The last thing we need is... is some sort of mixin' in here. You girls get me?"

"Oh," I say to the cop and stand still. "Oh," I say to myself when I realize I'm still dancing.

"Do you ever say anything?" Eleanore asks the tall, young cop. She's dancing up to him, teasing him.

Tim is transfixed.

He is half-dancing, in one spot, next to the beam supporting the entrance to the tent. He is watching the guitarist, nodding along to the beat.

"No," the young cop says to Eleanore. "But if you keep dancing, I have a pair of bracelets which will fit you just fine."

"Alright, jeez," says Eleanore, disgusted. But she's still kind of dancing, too.

I look at the crowd. Everybody is dancing. The crowd is swaying with the guitar and the singing, thumping their feet to the rhythm of the drums

[...]

"That's *it!*" says the older cop. "I'm shutting it down! Murphy, go get the captain! Double-speed!"

The younger cop runs out. The remaining patrons scurry out, making sure to give the cops a wide berth.

"And you, you kids, I told you once, go home, get the hell out!"

"That wasn't a show!" I shout at the cop. "That was *two songs!* That doesn't even *count!*"

"I'm sorry about your first show, Alice," says the cop, his face taking on a medically dangerous shade of crimson. "Now out with all you all!"

Barry holds Cindy's shoulder. We turn to leave.

As we claw our way through the flaps of the upturned tent, blinking at the sun, Jimmy comes very close to me, so close I can smell his sweat. He grabs my arm. I feel goosebumps.

"That doesn't count!" I say to him. "I mean two songs?"

He smiles a secretive smile and shoves something into my hand. It feels like a book of matches.

"Time to stop idling at the station, Alice of Wonderland," he whispers in my ear. "Ready to come on board?"

When the cop ambles out of the tent, Jimmy disappears.

As we are nearing Richmond, the highway becomes somewhat more packed and slow. The exit we take is taken by a lot of other cars, some converted buses and old, rugged sedans with hand written signs on them, saying things like "St. John's A.M.E. Choir Bus - On the Road to Freedom!" or "Music Heals the Soul!". We are definitely not in Kansas anymore, and I feel my heart sinking, like a lion. There is no mistaking where the fair's entrance is, with all the cars heading that way, and it definitely is a relief to see some uniformed men directing the traffic. The closest man's expression changes from firm to a grin as we come close, he gives Barry a nod, commenting something like "you young kids be sure to watch out" and points us to the parking lot entrance.

We drive in and it's full of cars, and people walking between them. Cindy comments "I would

expect there will be a designated parking spot for people like us, near the entrance", but Barry hushes her and says "Today everyone gets to park and celebrate the same, we'll just go down the field and find a spot". As we drive slowly, the masses of people walking part in front of our car, keeping their distance.

We find a parking space, right after a truck full of hay and the smell of fresh manure. Barry makes sure everyone tightly shut their windows, and we start moving, following the sounds of music, farm animals and crowds cheering. It takes us at least five minutes to walk back to the gate.

## Track 3: Alice Goes Down a Rabbit Hole

*Thursday, August 7th, 1958... from Strawberry Hill, Richmond, VA, to Shockoe Bottom, Richmond, VA.*

Eddie looks miffed. "Why do you want to go to your first show so badly anyway".

"You wouldn't understand," I shoot back. "You're a *boy*".

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"What do you think I should do?" says Tim. "I mean, Cindy is beautiful, but Eleanore is so sophisticated".

I start laughing. "And you come to me for help?"

## Track 4: Alice Goes@| to Wonderland

"He sure looks like him," she shouts.

But my ear, that has heard this voice so often, knows different. It was the same set of fingers on that keyboard, the same playful southern drawl.

"It is him," I say.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean it's friggin Jerry Lee Lewis up there on stage!" I shout, and then clasp my fingers around my mouth: I've never cussed in public before. My heart races... a deep fantasy, ancient and hidden, has just been fulfilled. I compare the Jerry Lee in those deep memories, compiled from his likeness on album covers, to the camouflaged man on stage.

*"Kiss me, baby—ooooh! Feels good!"*

I do feel good.

What is *up* with this band?

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I stuff my panties back in my bag, feeling all grown up already before I turn to Tim and kiss the hell out of him.

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"There," shouts Cindy, "now we've all kissed Tim! So we won't have to do that, ever again!"

"I'm not sure I like what I hear," says Tim.

"Shut up," says Barry. He clasps him around the neck, a manly, friendly gesture. I'm struck by how different Barry looks now. I'm sure it's not just the lack of coat and tie that makes him look so... so beautifully loose...

I'm looking at Cindy and Eleanore hugging. Eleanore kisses Cindy's cheek. Tim and Barry are dancing very close now, locking sights.

I choke. "I love you guys," I say.

Cindy comes over and kisses me. The need to dance subsides. We hug, but we also still kind of swoosh and sway.

"I've been to my first show," I say to her. She looks at me and pats my cheek.

"You have, Alice of Wonderland," she says. "You have".



"This was the most beautiful moment of my life," I say. "And now I fear it's gone". I start crying and she hugs me and doesn't say anything. I think she's thinking the same thing.

After a while the dancing ebbs out, like the energy running out of a lightbulb... first in a steady decline and then in sputters of sudden idleness. The thirty or so people in the room are looking at each other as if they all woke up together from a weird dream. Shy looks at first, but then looks that say *yes, I've seen what you've seen myself and you're not crazy and it did, in fact, happen, and by the way, brother or sister, how cool was that?* followed by a quiet, almost mute display of hand-shaking and cheek-kissing and shoulder-clasping... someone at the back of the room shouts, "I love everybody here" and it doesn't sound strange. In fact, it sounds oddly and quietly true.

The redheaded girl runs over to me, her freckled face beaming.

"I'm Kimberly," she says and hugs me. Her friends come over. Their names are Martha and Duke.

We all hug.

The thirty of us leave as a group.

Cindy, Kimberly and I walk outside together. In the parking lot, the Conductors are waiting for us: Eddie and Rosetta and five or six others, all holding bunches of braids and looking holy and filled with purpose. Eddie beelines towards me. I run to him and hug him and kiss his stubbly cheek.

"I've been to my first ever show, Eddie!"

He smiles broadly and hands me a braid. It's a simple, uncolored wool braid but it has two coins slotted on it. They jingle against one another in my hand.

"What's this for, Eds?"

"For being, as I already predicted, young lady, chosen".

Then his smile fades. He says, "we leave tonight for Fuckington".

"You sound like you're saying goodbye," I say. He says nothing, just turns away. He turns to Kimberly's friend Martha and gives her a big wide smile and hands her a braid and says, "we leave tonight for Fuckington".

All around me, Conductors are handing us all braids and saying that they're leaving tonight for Fuckington.

I shout at Eddie, now far away, "hey!"

"What, Alice of Wonderland?"

"How do you get chosen, Eddie?"

He smiles and walks away. All the Conductors are leaving, having depleted their stock of braids.

"You choose," he shouts back through the empty street. Rosetta throws her arm around his shoulder as they walk. "That's how you get chosen. You choose".

Then, for the first time since the show started, it's *actually* quiet.

Kimberly is putting on the braid Eddie handed to her. I see she already has one. The coins from her two braids all jingle together.

"Will I see you in Fuckington?" she asks. I look at Barry with a sinking heart. Now that he's outside, breathing normal people air again, what would he do?

"Will you paint on your car tonight, Alice?"

We stand there, all looking at each other.

Then this one guy walks over to his car. I think he's leaving but he bends over, reaches behind the wheel, pops his trunk open. He takes a big can of red paint and a brush and he's singing, singing to himself or to us,

*"I'm-a gonna paint me*

*grRRREAT balls of fi-re*  
*I'm-a ...bout to paint me..."*

"Another bird joins the flock," says Kimberly.

When he's finished, some other guy comes and takes the brush, turning towards his car. Somebody found a few more paintbrushes in his trunk and he puts them in the middle of the little clearing. Some more paint cans are found – candy-apple red, mint-green, midnight blue – and then some aerosol spray cans, too. One girl paints a striking image of a Tropical Turquoise heart melting over her front door. Someone transforms his '52 Bel Air into a rainbow. A group of young workmen are busy filling every surface – doors, windows, roof – on their little van with all the lyrics they could remember. They use paint, they use Magic Markers. They are humming the songs as they do that. I suddenly realize how filled with song that little car-lit parking lot has become. At that point I am hit by an image I will never forget: a flock of birds convening mid-flight, matching their speed, sharing their direction, and always changing, rearranging: a leader becoming a follower. A follower becoming a leader.

I whisper to Cindy, "talk to him. Tell him. Tell him you'll be leaving either way".

But Cindy knows her brother better. She walks over to him and takes his hand. Suddenly they seem to me like they were when I first met them, these two kids from the country, holding each other's hand in this big city.

Barry is looking at the people in the clearing and nodding, as if to an unheard beat.

"Yes, yes," he says, maybe to his sister and maybe to himself. "Any why the hell not?"

He walks towards the middle of the parking lot, where paint and brushes are waiting.

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## **Side 2: Tim**

### **Track 5: Morning, Gorgeous**

I first fell in love with Alice at the sunrise after we decided to follow The Midnight Engine. Sometimes an early sun would catch my eye just right and I would instantly see it again, how she was asleep in the back seat of Barry's old car, how her head was slumped on the window with her big patches of freckles on that very white skin — how her fingers and hair were dipped in radiant pink. Barry has been driving right behind the band's van, and every now and then Eddie would pop his head out of the window and shout something back, something like, *we stop for gas in a mile or two*. We've been driving all night, at first so excited we talked in hushed, urgent voices, like we were sharing a secret. Everybody was congratulating or joshing Barry about his newfound freedom. It took a long time for the girls to fall asleep. Now it was just me and Barry, my hand hanging on the seat behind him, taking in the view. Then I looked back and I saw Alice, all freckles and paint, and a pain I never felt before went coursing through my veins. I thought, *I've never seen anything so pretty*. I thought, *I've never been happier*. I thought, *I've never been quite so miserable*.

Around us were cars driven by fellow fans, sometimes overtaking, sometimes slowing down. Every now and then Kimberly's car, its doors painted with red hearts, would drive by us, and she would lean out of the window and blow kisses at us. Lots of other drivers of those painted cars would signal and wave as they passed, but Kimberly sent kisses.

Our car had its own ornament, right there ahead of us, taking up all of the space on the hood. Barry painted it and Alice gave the finishing touches.

At first he was

## Side 3: Prof. Eleanor Rose

## Side 4: Barry

In her Book of Questions, Alice asks us, "why do people enjoy fighting?". Reading this question...