

The Old Huntsman

"The poets down here don't write nothing at all – they just stand back  
and let it all be."

- **Bruce Springsteen, *Jungleland***

CHAPTER III  
**UNDER PRESSURE**

IT'S BEEN almost two weeks since i wrote, dear forum, and i'm afraid i'm starting to lose it. i'm writing this from a psychiatric facility – riverview, if you know it. of course you know it! it's that decrepit complex on the way out to maple ridge, all gothic columns and busted windows. oh, i meant to say – i seem to have murdered your friend campion.

They checked me in three days ago. The wards here are actually quite comfortable, but I'll tell you what, the staff are damned sadists. On admission I was given the choice (they made me choose!) between the traditional phone call and a scrawny pad of lined paper. As you can see I chose the paper, though I'm not going to tell you what I had to do for a pen.

I guess I'd better explain what's been going on. In case you haven't caught on yet, it's all to do with the bloody typewriter.

In the days after the Chicago disaster – not the hockey, you understand, I'm talking about the bombing, and Austin's death – I was transfixed with the stupid idea that the Corona could be destroyed. Destroyed! This is an object so powerful that it can shape the Earth itself to its strange poetry; a relic of pre-war magic capable of bending it all – physics, history, the rules of fucking gastronomy – for its narrative ends. Here: let me put it more exactly.

When I chucked it from Lavender Bay wharf into the black water of

Sydney Harbour, it returned to my doormat by morning, sodden, smelly, and garnished with a wobbling jellyfish. When I placed it carefully against the brickwork by the clothesline, hefting an Ikea hammer to smite it verily, I tripped on the garden hose and near enough fractured my wrist. Bear in mind that I don't even own a garden hose. This *typewriter* flipped a Mitsubishi Pajero into oncoming traffic like it was a Hot Wheels car. It was only after that scene of trauma that I gave up on the Steamroll approach, and every other. I'm not lying. The thing is invulnerable.

I locked it back in its sacred tomb – the same place I keep my vermouth and cocktail umbrellas – and decided to fly to Vancouver. Champion's life was in jeopardy. He must be warned. Ha! Warned! Well, I've already told you how that turned out. My hands are still blistered from the shovel I used to bury him.

#### THE FOGGY DEW

#### Happy Hour: Wednesdays 5-7pm, \$5 Zucchini Sticks + Karaoke

"HELLO, IS this Andy? Um, Andy as in, Champion Andy? From the..." I cringed and pulled the phone away from my ear, "...internet?"

"Yes."

"Oh. Well, great. This is Jezz. As in, bee ess Jezz. From the, uh... Internet."

The line was silent for a moment. I drummed my fingers nervously on the bar.

"Okay?" He did not sound excited. "What is this about, bee ess?"

"I need to talk to you. It's urgent."

"You're talking to me."

"No no no, I need to talk to you in person. How soon can you get to the Foggy Dew?"

"Um, *Ireland*?" he asked.

"No, listen, it's in Coquitlam." Silence. "Honestly, it's right at the border with Burnaby."

"I've kind of got a lot on at the moment."

"Please!" I pleaded. "This is ridiculously important. You can't have any idea how important this is."

"I guess some spare time might come up over the next few days," he said. "But don't hold your little breath."

"Alright, fine. That's fine," I said, and raised a mostly empty pint glass with my free hand. "I'll be here all week."

"Then," I said, brandishing a ranch-dressed onion ring, "I boarded the flight, took three Phenergans and the next thing I remember they were wheeling me to a taxi. I guess I slurred something to the driver about where was best to get a Guinness. And here I am."

"Here you are," said Andy. "Great. Cool story, bro."

"Well?" I asked. "Don't you understand? You're next."

"Oh, I understand. I understand this is a lame effort to get me to pull out of the battle."

"No, no, no... You have to believe me! This is true! It's all true." I munched the onion ring despondently.

"I don't even believe you're Australian," he said, standing up. "Your accent is terrible."

"Listen. Sit down. Hey, miss!" I called over a waitress, busty in her black tank-top. "Miss! Two more mojitos. And whatever Andy's having."

"Sangria," he said, without hesitating.

"Sorry, um, we don't have sangria."

"In that case you're outta luck, Jezz boy. See you at the battle."

"Just mix some port wine and cranberry juice," I urged the waitress. "Wait, sit down, Andy. Hey. What if I'm right? Did you think about that? What if it is true?"

"Then why not just withdraw from the battle?"

"It won't work," I muttered. "The thing has decided I will win."

"Oh, but if I pull out, everything will be dandy?"

"No, that's not what I – I'm just here to warn you. Though admittedly, if

you were to –”

“Nice try.”

“– but it might give you a chance of –”

“Nuh-uh.”

“– but your life’s at stake, Andy, please! This is serious!”

“Far out, you want to talk serious?” He leant over on the table towards me threateningly. “Let’s settle this. Now. Winner resigns from the battle.”

“You want to, um, take it outside?”

“No. Why go to the streets when we’ve got a battleground right here? Let’s do it right. The holy combat of...”

“Karaoke,” I intoned. “No... No. Oh no.”

But all eyes were already on the strobe-lit stage, and Andy’s beaming grin telegraphed the tale of the next dreadful hour.

He jotted me down for *Paperback Writer* and I mumbled through the verses, but the crowd enjoyed it because I had the right hair for the act and I cracked a nervous joke about Heather Mills. I threw an obscure Mika track at my opponent to trip him up, but he hit the high-notes uncannily and somehow didn’t even need to read from the prompter. In the interval I smoked five cigarettes in quick succession to get a good croak going for *Born to Run*, but when I lit one during the sax solo the crowd started heckling and the waitress took it from me mercilessly. I fucked up the rest. Andy ended it with a fine rendition of *I Believe I Can Fly*, but by that point we were losing the crowd’s attention, mainly because he’d already sung that one twice when he first arrived.

“So,” I exhaled, slumping down in a booth and wiping sweat from my forehead. “Do we have a winner? Can we call this?”

“Hmm? Oh, the forum thing. No,” he said, “But that was fun!”

“Jesus,” I muttered. “I feel like I’m talking to a colourfully dressed brick wall. Has nothing gotten through to you?”

“Sheesh, fine, fine, settle down. We’ll end this now,” he looked over his shoulder, and motioned to the sports bar. “Play eight-ball?”

“No-ooh,” I moaned. “I mean, yes. But that’s not a good idea.”

“Oh? A bit scared?”

“No, you don’t understand. You’re making a big mist–”

“You’re just a chicken.”

“Oh, you want to play eight-ball? Alright. You’re the boss. Let’s play some goddamned pool.”

“That’s it,” he said. “You’re snookered.”

I tilted my head. I walked around the table, trying to get an angle past his messily scattered bigs. There was not much to work with, I had to admit. But the game had been cake so far and I was just now hitting that zone of precise inebriation. I took a big swig of beer and slammed the glass on the side rail.

“Hey,” I said, chalking up. “Did, did I ever tell you what those initials... the initials Bee Ess stand for? In my, my forum name?”

“No,” Andy said, leaning on the other end of the table. “I guess I assumed it was ‘bull shit’”

“A common mistake,” I said. I stooped across the table and lined up the cue ball. “Yeah, I get that a lot. But it’s not.”

“Enlighten me,” he said.

“It’s Bank Shot. It’s Bank Shot Jezz.”

The shot was strong and guided. Too strong... some strange strength. It bounced up over the red eleven, hit the bank precisely and even punched the black right into the corner pocket like I’d hoped. Only it kept going. It seemed to just accelerate as it clipped the rail and soared low through the air, under the swinging downlight, straight to where Andy had turned to sip on his spritzer. It bounced with a dull thud off the back of his head to the ground, and as he stepped back with his hand now raising, his strained voice speaking “Oh, you fuc-”, he trod on the rolling ball, slipped backwards, and smashed his second vertebra on the hard corner of an *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* pinball machine. And Andy was dead.

“Oh no,” I said, and I dropped the cue with a clatter. “It’s happening again. It keeps happening!”

“Are you two okay, there, um, sir?”

I was grovelling over his corpse like a zombie at feast, not knowing what to do but looking for any impossible sign of life. I glanced up white-faced and red-eyed to the woman, smiling a ghastly smile.

“I’m fine, yeah! We’re fine,” I said. “Buddy here just had one too many spritzers, a-hah!”

I hauled him up with his cold arm around my neck and turned away from the watching waitress. I shuffled to the door as fast as I could shuffle, but a grown human is a heavy creature, and heavier dead. I’d only gotten halfway there and was right amidst a gauntlet of sloshed business groups and uncomfortable elderly diners when a bright spotlight shone across me like God’s own judgement. I halted.

“Now, we’ve got one last track listed here for Andy and the Australian,” was the amplified voice of the karaoke emcee. “Try to hold your excitement, guys. This is the duet I’m sure you hoped got lost in the pile. It’s the Queen and Bowie classic, *Under Pressure!*”

There was a moment of hesitant applause, and a shift in the room’s thrumming attention. I stood there and thought: I’m going to have to do this. I’m going to have to lurch up on stage, perform some miraculous puppetry and dance with a dead man for the entertainment of some Coquitlam drunks. That haunting bassline began to play, and the rising chime of the two high notes pierced my already crumbling heart. I looked into Andy’s wide, dead eyes, as if to seek his approval.

“Oh hell fucking no. No way,” I uttered, and I busted my way out of there to the bemusement of the watching patrons.

Imagine this: I’m drunk and unlicensed, driving a stolen Dodge pick-up with the lifeless body of a man I’d known for scant hours propped up in the passenger seat. Imagine I’m on that first, endless stretch of Highway One,

burning at a hundred miles an hour into the deep valley night. Imagine the windows are rolled low and the tinny radio’s volume is cranked up to garish noise, mostly static, drowning out the voice which plead from somewhere within for me to stop. Imagine I miss all the near misses, beat all the traffic lights, and make roadkill of every poor fucking beast that gets in my way. Imagine I stop just once: at an all-night gas station lit by spasming fluoro tubes, to buy a tarp and a green-enamelled shovel. Imagine it, because that’s how the demon typewriter imagined it, and imagine it because that’s how it happened: all the way to Hope, British Columbia, and a mountain trail where even the cougars dared not tread. Not that night.

I hiked down from the mountain in the orange light of new morning. I was streaked with dirt and my every muscle ached, and my head throbbed and split with an unholy hangover, and I was cold and thirsty. But there was a peace in me that I can’t really explain to you, dear forum. I buried something with Champion, a part of my anxious heart that I’ll never have back; some little soul which could not exist comfortably inside the automaton I’d become.

As I walked through the sun-drenched town of Hope I smiled at the joggers, and nodded to the drivers who stopped for me to cross the road, and gaily skipped out of the way for zigzagging children on their shiny BMX bikes. I entered a busy café, took a seat in a plush leather armchair and asked for a macchiato and the morning paper, please. It seemed hushed, and far too quiet for the number of people that were there, but I did not mind. I didn’t even mind when every one of them left in the same urgent moment, and there was nobody to collect my empty cup. I was just as happy to see the blue and red lights flashing around the glass outside, and the RCMP officers standing by the closed door with big guns and serious faces. I read the day’s political comic and laughed genuinely; I started slow work on the cryptic crossword. I put my hands in the air when requested. I lay down on my belly and admired the linoleum.

“Sir, I’m arresting you on the charge of murder,” the nice man said as he

wrestled my arms behind me and clasped down the cuffs. "You have the right to remain silent."

"Oh arrest me," I said. "That certainly seems appropriate. But you ought to also arrest the typewriter. The Corona made me do it, you see? Oh, it'll get you too. It'll get us all."

i must stop writing for a moment. i've been issued with a most wonderful surprise: a package! they told me sternly i would not be allowed personal possessions in this part of the ward, but here it is; brown wrapped and beautiful. only it's heavy. heavier than a mere package... no. no, it's a completely normal package, yes. the tag says: From Your Old Friend Larlar! what a good bloke, to think of me here like that. well i frankly cannot wait another moment to open it. i do hope it's a lovely cake. do you think it is? i really, really hope it's a cake