



by Tobias Carroll

EVERY NIGHT IS BLUEGRASS NIGHT

They hadn't thought the van would make it this far. Justin had been out on four of these trips with Henrik, had met Amy on the second, and by this go-round had noticed both Vic and Noah Furtin watching her. Almost my wife, he says to himself. By September, we'll be married, and he can't bear to witness the stares, abounding with lust, on the faces of the brothers. He had thought about asking Henrik for intercession but could anticipate his answer: Justin, he would say, Justin, until you've become man and wife, there's nothing I can do. Justin had watched Henrik for years, had sayings of his scrawled down in a series of notebooks, practically considered himself the man's biographer, and even now could hardly understand Henrik's moral center. Somewhere at the crossroads of Zen Buddhism and old-time religion was the best he could venture. And yet he was never convinced that the entire thing--the strange moralizing--wasn't another layer of performance. The music, the touring ensemble, was one layer of Henrik's art. Justin couldn't discount the fact that Henrik's persona might be a second.

Henrik had picked Justin, Amy, and Ernst up in Billings, and they'd continued in the van to Bozeman, where Vic and Noah had joined them. Twelve hours more took them to a town of thirty-two in North Dakota's northeastern corner, where they picked up Corrine and Iris Fourier: twins in their mid-forties, pale thin women with impossibly rich voices. Fourteen



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Ernst had not answered it with one of his own. They enter New Jersey through the side of its head and carve a line across the state, Henrik keeping the speedometer at an even 70, down, down, to a music hall at the edge of a barren stretch of woodland, a green footprint on the southern part of the state. At 6pm, the sky nearly dark, they pull up outside, the parking lot

This was Justin's fourth tour in as many years. He was a teacher those months and weeks he wasn't in Henrik's van: high school history. Amy worked as a chemist. Though they lived five miles from him, he never saw Henrik except for the days that dwelt as prelude to the tours; he could say almost nothing about the lives of the rest of the group's members. He had heard that the sisters were wealthy, last heiresses to something, but had never directly ventured the question. Ernst could be seen around town, but Justin had never been sure what Ernst did for a living. For the better part of a year Justin had taken him for a security guard, but then had seen him mending fences in the middle of winter. When last he'd seen Ernst prior to the tour, Ernst had been at work ticketing parked cars, wearing no uniform. Justin had bicycled past and waved a greeting, but Ernst had not answered it with one of his own.

hours on state and interstate highways brought them within a day of the first of fourteen performances. That was where Chester lived; as he stepped into the van with his microphone and deck, the group was complete. Justin looked to his left and saw Henrik in the driver's seat, a smile crossed his face for the first time on their journey.

empty. "This is where we'll play tonight," says Henrik. "Fifth of five. Chester, you'll need to pay your way inside." Chester nods. Henrik steps outside of the van with his shaving kit and turns the side-view mirror to face him. There, he begins his usual ritual: filing down the hair on the side of the head so that he's evenly bald, slicing off stubble to give his face a youthful smoothness, and slightly, minutely, reducing his eyebrows.

At 8pm the crowd begins filtering in: locals in early middle age mostly, fitting somewhere on a continuum between Justin and Henrik. Some older; one or two with the look of veterans who have been veterans for many generations. Members of the bands playing on that night are mostly indistinguishable from the crowd. One of these musicians talks to Henrik for a good long while; Justin observes their conversation, but doesn't feel compelled to step within earshot. He moves to read a schedule of upcoming events posted in front of the hall and gauges that most of the groups that play here are small; not touring; bluegrass and perhaps the occasional jug band; perhaps the occasional gospel quartet; the occasional solitary bluesman.

Each tour has taken on a different name, Henrik's wishes made flesh. This tour, it's the Bozeman Bluegrass All-Stars. Why not, Justin thinks. Henrik has stenciled it on the side of the van. When the tour ends, Henrik will repaint it over the course of a weekend. Justin will, as he has for every preceding tour, offer to assist. Henrik will politely decline, and they won't see one another until the following summer. Henrik had

the cue to begin. Chester press record, and his eyes move to Henrik. He waits for

They all sit there, poised, the tension climbing. Justin sees back at Amy and returns her smile. They will walk down the aisle together, he thinks, to Henrik's music. always been fond of that particular composition. Justin looks in three years. Vic keeps it with him for each show; he had a couch, used in one piece of Henrik's that he hasn't played a snare, one high-hat, and a set of chimes. Below his stool rests ready. Vic sits behind a drum set that's beyond minimal: one single mic they share; Ernst and Noah hold their banjos at the them ready their guitars; the twins give a line check on the only imagine what's on their minds right now. The three of Chester. Justin's eyes take in the rest of the crowd, and he can in his right hand. Even with the equipment, no one notices row, recorder over one shoulder, omnidirectional mic rigid looks into the audience and sees Chester sitting in the second biggest smile she's got, and he feels his comfort return. Justin him and flashes her half-smile, the one he can't resist, the Amy is tuning. Justin looks over at Amy; she looks back at They're onstage now, set to play. Justin has tuned and contemplating Henrik and Henrik, as always, inscrutable.

Henrik towards the venue; they walk there in silence. Justin Henrik's bullshit, he was going to think. He turns with

Henrik gestures back toward the van and the music hall. "Let's walk," he says, and they do. The sun is crossing the horizon, and in the distance Henrik sees Ernst, Amy, and the twins hoisting equipment toward the music hall's backstage. "We're music that pulls the rug out," says Henrik, still looking forward. Justin wishes he'd say this with their eyes meeting. "When was the last time you heard music that you weren't expecting?" They're closer to the van now. Henrik raises his hand and Vic, smoking outside the music hall, reciprocates. Justin keeps his head high and looks for signs of Amy. He'd like to help her with something. He'd rather be talking to her at this moment.

"We smuggle this music into their lives," says Henrik. "Hidden. We're a secret transmitter in the wilderness, a mystery broadcast primed for the right ears."

Maybe, thinks Justin. Before he can finish his next thought, he remembers.

Years before, he had been in New York on vacation, visiting friends--a walkup apartment, Third Street, the East River nearly in view. A 10pm walk to a jazz club somewhere downtown, not knowing what to expect. Watched a man stand alone on the stage behind a massive bass; watched him begin a standard chord progression, then gradually turn it into fragmentary notes. This wrongness suffused him: he felt ill but he could not stop watching. And for the next forty minutes, he remained fixated, his attention unwavering.

money in his pocket. As much as he hates watching the stares this is the first time he anticipates coming home without less a salary of sorts. None of them are salaried; in fact, for Justin, of Henrik as his boss: that would imply employment, imply “Boss is in something heated,” she says. He’s never thought

good to be here in summer’s early days, he thinks. lightly, casually. He runs his hand down the side of her face. It’s watching its contours when Amy comes to him. Kisses him old now, obtained on a dare when he’d been in college. He is He sees the tattoo on the underside of his arm, over a decade van, savoring the air, the feel of the breeze on his short sleeves. door and steps out, keeps walking. Justin stands outside the phone which all of them share, then opens the driver’s side they will play. Inside the van, Ernst naps; Henrik talks on the collection of recordings purchased from the groups with which paid his way inside. By the end of tour, he will have amassed a back to their grandfather’s day. They will return thirty minutes antiparallel scales and balances, sets of weights that hearken impressed at the regularity of it. He pictures them withdrawing for it on foot. Justin is long past shaking his head; by now, he’s The twins have left to buy weed. Every night, they set out at that late hour.

tour with the group, the two of them the only ones conscious played in bluegrass groups in his youth: he had let that slip once at Sam somewhere in West Virginia during Justin’s second

of the Furtin brothers, he won’t question their dedication to Henrik and to his music. “Been on the phone for over half an hour.”

Justin shakes his head. “Henrik.” He smiles. The three of them should get to tuning soon. Their relationship to Henrik was not exactly paternal, but he remained older than any brother either had known. Henrik would hover over the pedal steel; Amy playing the slide; Justin, the resonator. He holds her close, thinks of intimacy: a flash of them walking in tandem to be wed. He remembers how the ritual goes, that he is to wait for her, for her arrival, and it makes him pull away from her for a moment, his head almost shaking. To have forgotten something so basic; one of society’s major rites. To have forgotten this. Amy looks towards him.

“You all right?” He can hear a strain of anger as she says those words. With that movement, he realizes, he deserves it.

“Fine,” he says, and lets loose a sigh. “Nerves.” He knows it’s a lie, and a lie spoken to someone who knows his lies even when he doesn’t.

“You didn’t have nerves in Youngstown. That was a tough crowd. This?” She points to the entrance. “They might even like us here.”

“Yeah,” he says, close to a whisper. “I don’t know why.” Digging a hole, he thinks. Find Henrik, he thinks. And now she’s looking at him with most of the concern withdrawn.

“You don’t know why what?” Her posture more rigid now,

her eyes shaded and impossible to read. She doesn’t normally pull posture on him: Justin is ten pounds over lanky, while Amy spent her collegiate days rowing and spends many a weekend even now kayaking in solitude.

“Oh hell,” says Justin, turning away in increments, then shuffling himself back. “Nothing. It’s nothing.” Amy looks at him and gives him a pass. Fortune smiles, he thinks. Her expression breaks into something closer to comfort and then abruptly slides into a parody of toughness. They face one another now, breathing more easily. “I need to find Henrik,” he says. Amy nods and lets him go. He walks to the other side of the van, sees Ernst fitting a new string on his banjo, and stares through the window, seeking his band leader.

Adjacent to the music hall is a large shopping center, sprawling out into a parking lot, a gray lizard taking its last bask in the fading sunlight. The parking lot is empty, and it’s there that Justin sees a solitary figure, stooping slightly, shoulders rounded, stark. A silhouette even at this time of day. He hears Henrik say, “Good luck,” and watches him close the cellular. Justin walks to meet him halfway; as he goes, the twins pass, whispering, smelling of new cars and talcum powder. He’s three-hundred feet into the parking lot and still Henrik hasn’t noticed him. Finally, he clears his throat and Henrik looks up. “Justin,” he says. His eye twinkles, and he raises the cellular as though it was a rare specimen. “Heh.” He lowers it. “Issues with friends elsewhere; associates,” he says. “Attempting to

more suited to the music you compose.” “I assume there’s a place for what we play; venues him, and Justin would swear he sees undue compassion in “Were not a bluegrass band,” says Justin. Henrik watches echoes, no mimicry or contempt.

Henrik’s head nods on the diagonal. “The mirage,” he gumption to ask. “Why the mirage?” only Ernst having a longer tenure, and he only now feels the body language is betraying his speculation. Four of these tours, affectionate irritation losing its affection. Justin wonders if his the band seared, eyes canted up at him, watching him, an nights; that he may spend five minutes introducing the music, Justin realizes that this may be one of Henrik’s metaphorical in its crib.”

guy in Youngstown will have called ahead. Smothered the tour “Nerves about tonight. They’ll find us out beforehand. That Henrik’s mind finds the same place Amy’s had previously.

“Not so much,” says Justin. “Feeling anxiety about your affianced again?” Henrik says. maintain his best posture.

stand facing one another, about four feet apart, each trying to with a scripted tale of strife. They’ve stopped walking now; they have convinced a friend of his in Savannah or Denton to call wouldn’t put it past Henrik to have set the whole thing up, to “All right,” Justin says. It’s more of Henrik’s mystery. Justin make things fake.”