"Greg Taylor stood before the sliding glass doors"

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Greg Taylor stood before the sliding glass doors, staring at the gray and misty dawn, a salt water morning that was leaving a bitterness in his mouth. It wouldn't be a day to drink deeply, carelessly from, but one to be guzzled, downed hastily and quickly forgotten.

His head pounded as he reached for his lighter and lit the day's first cigarette. Morning always came too soon on the heels of a hard crazy night.

Last night had gone okay. It'd been quite a rush, opening night at Chicago Stadium had been sold out. It'd been fine. Yet his stomach suddenly tensed and lurched as he thought of tonight and doing it again. Could he pull it off? He could never really relax until he heard the screaming adulation of 15,000 people pounding in his ears, rolling over him in undulating waves, lifting him up, doing to him what they needed for themselves, what he always gave them. But would he tonight or tomorrow? Times like now he was choked by the fear of being washed away by the waves, being drowned by them. So he swam harder.

Rain began pattering down the glass and soon it was slamming down in a tinny roar. Greg turned from the windows and padded across the hardwood floor into the kitchen. The sound of the upstairs shower added to the pounding of the rain.

"Sarah must be up," Greg thought, wishing for a few more minutes in which to collect his thoughts. He tried to tell himself that this morning would be different. There'd be none of Sarah's dramatics, no ploys to convince him to stay. This morning she wouldn't throw the leash around his neck. No, when Sarah emerged dripping wet and lovely from the shower she'd be the same warm and gentle woman she'd been last night. No pleading or hassles just those long, loving arms.

Yet he knew it was no kind of day for fantasy and as he heard the door of the shower open and shut, he lit a new cigarette and listened to the downpour. It was nothing compared to what was coming.

After several minutes Sarah appeared in the kitchen dressed in snug jeans and a large, loose sweater, a bath towel wrapped around her hair.

"Morning."

Sarah swept through the house like a gust of wind, picking up debris as she went. Glasses, bottles and cans clattered as they were dropped in a heap. Ashtrays brimming with butts and roaches were emptied into overflowing wastebaskets.

"Hon, you know you don't have to mess with all that. The maid'll be here in a couple hours."

Sarah said nothing. She simply glided into a chair across from him, draping her towel around her neck, gave her head a begorous shake and reached for Greg's cigarette case.

"It's empty."

She lightly ran her hands through her damp hair. "What time are you leaving?"

"Eddie's giving me a call as soon as he gets the reservations untangled. There's some big convention in town and somehow our
hotel got overbooked. It shouldn't take too much time to straighten out."

"Great." Sarah involuntarily spat the word at Greg.

Greg tensed. "Sarah, hon, we've been through this so many times. My life is what it is. I've never asked anything of you. You have options."

So quickly, that Greg nearly missed it, he caught Sarah vainly searching his eyes.

"I'm sorry, Greg, I really am." Sarah's eyelids dropped and her thin lips twisted into a little girl grimace. Two years of hurt and disappointment filled her. She slowly rose and stood quietly, morosely, her damp hair dangling. Greg took her hand and they looked closely at one another. There was no feeling of intimacy, not even genuine familiarity, simply the solace strangers extend to each other when they're bound by a shared pain.

Sarah hugged herself lightly and numbly walked up the stairs. An hour later she was gone.

Greg lay dozing on the floor when the phone rang. He jerked awake; disoriented and frightened. On the fifth ring he picked up the receiver.

"Yeah?"

"Greg? Eddie. Reservations are all straightened out. Redmann's is going all out to make it up to us. Say they don't know how it happened. But anyway, we've got the top floor. Hey, I'll come get you about 11:30, okay? Be ready. Flight leaves at 12:05."

"Eddie...?"

"Yeah, what is it?"

"I don't think...nothing, forget it."

"Be ready at 11:30."

"Sure."

The dial tone reverberated in his head, slipped out and bounced off the walls. Greg slowly set the receiver down.

He picked his leather jacket off the floor and slipped it on. He could be packed in ten minutes.

He walked to the front door and hastily opened it. The harsh rustling of leaves met his ears and a sharp wind slapped him across the face. He shut the door behind him and started walking. The rain had dwindled to a fine, cold mist spraying his face. Everything lay sodden, and brown. He felt as though he were a part of the wet leaves that sloshed beneath his feet.

He laughed wryly as he realized how dramatic he was being. He lit a cigarette and took a deep drag from it. Twenty-five years old and feeling like wet leaves. Not too promising. He wondered what in the hell had happened in the last few months. He'd "arrived" at last, but where?

In high school he always felt a little uncomfortable around most people. The things he saw and heard and things he thought never really fit together. People puzzled him.

Sometimes it got funnier 'n hell, especially while he was still in school. Words used to drop all around him. Words falling from the mouths of his friends, his teachers, his parents, strangers and people all over. They were incongruent words and
he struggled to assimilate them. But occasionally he'd see through the words and they made him want to double over with laughter.

He attended a meeting once—a city council meeting, and he overheard some fat Joe tell his wife what a shame it was that more people didn't participate in their local government. Then the guy asked his wife which man sitting at the long table was the mayor. Greg had laughed then and he laughed now just to think about it.

People believed what they wanted to believe about themselves and everyone else. There wasn't much to do but laugh. Only sometimes it wasn't so funny because people had to beg for approval. They didn't want to. They had to. And sometimes they didn't get it, and they hurt because they couldn't understand why they didn't. They forgot to laugh.

Greg had been a decent musician since he first started playing. He caught on quickly to anything that had to do with music and it had filled a need for him.

But he had had no profound ambition to become a professional. He'd planned on attending college but had suddenly developed an intense desire to go somewhere—anywhere—everywhere. When he became satiated with new experiences and felt that he could settle down without a westful backward glance, he'd go back to school, and acquire a nice humanitarian job, sharing his experiences with those who could learn and benefit from them.

Greg learned that it takes money to go anyplace so he started playing small restaurants and dingy bars. He got together a drummer, Tommy Watts, a back-up guitarist, J. C. Carlson, and a keyboard player, Smithy Locke. They'd decided to call themselves "Freedom", because that's what they were going to buy. They had some nice times, even in the beginning. They'd sit around after a session 'til early morning, getting stoned and talking out their dreams.

The funny thing was "Freedom" started to catch on. The restaurants got bigger and the bars grew more respectable. Suddenly Greg felt he was walking a very slender, taur thread. He had to make a decision. Would he go back to school and always wonder what he'd missed or pay for his freedom and maybe miss it all?

Greg thought back to that time. He'd felt so blue. One night he was driving home from a distant session and headlights were flowing toward him like a string of beads falling from a neck. He had wanted to break the string, wanted to smash the beads but he stopped himself from veering towards them. It overwhelmed him at times to think he had nearly given in.

Those times were over but the present still balanced on a precarious scale.

The wind whipped at Greg and forced him along. He headed back to the house. The house was built of redwood and lay tucked among some trees. It had strong, clean lines that gave it a well defined air of clarity and simplicity. It had large windows, nearly covering two sides, which overlooked a stream and a landscaped terrace. Few people had seen it, nor would they ever, Greg wanted it closed to strange and gawking eyes.
He forced the front door open wide enough for him to enter and the wind flung it shut behind him. The air inside seemed stagnant after the biting crispness of the wind. Greg's face tingled.

It was 11:05. Greg was packed by 11:20 and Eddie arrived at 11:25.

The rest of the band was in the van when Greg jumped in. They all looked sullen and quiet and stared vacantly out the windows. Smithy was humming some personal tune.

As the van sped through the downtown, Greg caught abstracted glimpses of the gray day lying tucked between the walls of stretching towers.

Although the band had little to say, Eddie talked incessantly.

"Yeah, Redmann's really screwed things up but they're sure going out of their way to fix things up. They know we could've really made them look bad, you know?"

Greg's cool gray eyes disclosed none of his thoughts. As the van arrived at the airport, Greg's thoughts were of Sarah. And as the ladder of the chartered DC-10 was taken up and the guys began drinking and joking and even as the grayness closed in and enveloped them, he thought of her. He looked out the small window into the thick mist. He had met Sarah when the band was still doing warm-ups for groups that had made it. After one particularly tiring performance there'd been a party. Hash and coke were being passed around and Tommy was tripping in the bathroom when Greg arrived. He'd never really been into the drug thing. He simply lit a joint and went off by himself to observe. He took deep hits and held them down forever. Gradually, the familiar relaxation seeped into his face and fingers, filling and emptying him simultaneously. He lay back against two large cushions propped against a wall and watched the world pass by. Suddenly Sarah had entered his field of vision. She was smiling and she glided over to him when he motioned for her. They had talked endlessly for hours.

She was no groupie. She became his best friend. They cried and laughed and made love and Greg thought of her as the most special person in his life.

After a while, though, he began walking the thread again, knowing there was a decision to be made—not knowing what it should be. Sarah began wheedling an hour here, a day there and Greg never really lost his temper with her—never said good-bye. They had just drifted along pushing and pulling for six months until they had abruptly ran aground this afternoon. Better than drowning wasn't it?

Greg sat in front of a mirror in the basement of a stadium. An intermittent whirring could be distinguished amidst the other sounds—fans—airfans. The crew ran around, carrying camera equipment, shouting obscenities at those who didn't move fast enough, laughing nervously, and searching for anything that was lost.

Greg would tell the boys and Eddie after the show tonight. The next tour would be the last one for him. His present contract was good for only three more months and he'd be finished. He needed to find something. He'd paid for his freedom and it
hadn't been a bargain.

Greg rose. He started shaking out, bending over and kicking. One of the roadies ran over, patted him on the ass and said, "Three minutes to go," and went flying off. Greg picked up a guitar and played a few chords. He walked to the doorway of the lockerroom. He heard a dull roar, a chanting. They wanted him. His heart throbbed to the rhythm of the crowd. The waves were rolling toward him. Bodyguards lined the corridors. Now and then he could see a stray hand dangling over a railing, reaching out for him.

The lights were dimmed. Thin clouds of fog rolled off the ocean and climbed to the sky. Flashes of light burst the smoky darkness.

Greg was running—running through the walls of arms that reached for him. The waves rose, splashed over him and picked him up and carried him along. Effortlessly, he rode them.

Had he wanted to tell Eddie something after the show? What was it?

L. A. next week, then Denver and the London Palladium after that...

The primal beat of a grinding song pounded against him drove him on.

Some obscure corner of his consciousness reminded him that people often hear music when they're drowning.

Greg laughed and laughed and laughed...