

Bringing Bowie back. A short story by Gloria Steinbeck (@SteinbeckGloria)

Obviously I'm not supposed to talk about this. Not supposed to tell anyone. But it's hard to keep it all locked up in my head, in that puny, garrulous brain of mine. So I'm writing it all down here, where it's safe, in my spiffy computer diary. Maybe then Mr. Brain will cease his babbling.

Alright. So I was riding a train cross-country, bored out of my mind when I first saw the news. Damn, David Bowie died? Sure that's not another hoax? Only a short while ago someone spread those very same news, and it had turned out to be a hoax. Please, once again.

But no. The confirmations kept flooding in. I stayed on Twitter, started following links to his songs, his videos, the first obituaries and all that. I forgot even my boredom, which had seemed unbearable an hour before. Mind you, this was not a commute or anything, but I was stuck on that train for days! Out on commission for Amtrak, tasked with writing about this fabulous experience. Only it wasn't fabulous at all. In fact it was so bad I didn't want to write anything but *yawn yawn yawn*.

There was this one guy who tweeted: **Fuck this shit. Get me a space shuttle, a priest of every religion, a unicorn horn, and some duct tape. We're going to go fetch Bowie back.** (Scott Lynch, fantasy author) I thought that was cute, heartening and heart-breaking at the same time.

I scrolled through the replies, looking for more cute Bowie fans, I guess. Can't really tell what prompted me, for normally I avoid replies on Twitter like the ugly demonic vitriol they mostly are. But maybe I wished it was really possible. Going in there (where?) like some stardust-fueled MacGyver and bring the Duke back. Cause that's what he was to me. The Duke, the overlord of my den, infusing my space and my brain with his royal, sparkling, truly transporting music. Yes, I was a mighty Bowie fan in my time. My enthusiasm never went away, it merely took a nap. Fell asleep in the face of the everlasting boredom that's become my life. Fell asleep like anything else that ever meant something to me. Meh.

And then this one tweet hit me in some strange, spine-tingling way. One of the replies. **He's not with us. I wish h.** By someone who called themselves @72bulC, and who obviously didn't finish their tweets. When I clicked on it to see who might be behind that handle, Twitter informed me that the account had been deleted. Huh? The tingling got stronger, and I shrugged to get rid of it.

Club 27. Only backwards. The thought woke me up, or maybe it was simply my brain's first action after I woke up, providing me with this useless and random bit of information. Once my eyes were fully open again, I connected it to what I had been doing before falling asleep on the train. Bowie's death, that unicorn and duct tape tweet, the strange disclaimer reply. *He's not with us* ... and something. The account may have been deleted, but my babbling brain wouldn't let go, and was now telling me what to make of the nonsensical handle. It said *Club 27*, only backwards. Some clown who thought they were clever. So what was that supposed to mean then? Bowie, who'd just turned 69, was not in the same compartment of hell or heaven that housed those celebrities who'd died too young? Amy Winehouse, Kurt Cobain, Jimi Hendrix, Jim Morrison, Brian Jones ... all died at 27, so why would an older man like the Duke "be with them?" I cursed my brain for even trying to ponder the logic of some random tweet. I needed a cup of coffee, and something else to occupy myself with. I mean, hell, if falling asleep on the job, on this godforsaken train to Nowheresville, USA, doesn't prove that boredom can all but kill you, what will? Probably trying to make sense of Twitter feeds can kill you, too.

But after this unplanned nap, the thoughts wouldn't stop and the tingling returned, getting to the point where it felt like electricity flowing through my lower back. It wasn't pleasant, I can tell you that much. My brain gave me hell 'cause I wouldn't listen to its conspiracy theories. If it wasn't for what happened later, and what I know now, I'd be ashamed to admit that I began obsessing over that tweet and that handle. That's what I did, obsess. And I knew there was only one way to stop, only one person who could set this thing straight, set me straight.

I got this friend. He knows everything, because he works for one of those government agencies that are so classified not even the government knows they exist. I like to call him Ed, as a way of trying to prod him into whistle-blowing, or otherwise touting, his mind-boggling, brain-exploding knowledge of things most of us have no idea about. If you wanted to know which conspiracy theories or weird-ass movie plots were real, he would be able to tell you. That's Ed for you. Can't tell you his real name, for then he'd have to kill me. Serious.

Anyway, so while Ed won't talk about all the unbelievable things he knows, he sometimes lays my obsessive speculations to rest, just by telling me, nope. Not true. If he doesn't give me his *nope* though, my obsessions get worse. With Ed, it's either his nope or his silence. You have to make sure you can handle it before you consult him. By the way, if you're thinking of trying to blackmail or threaten me into revealing his whereabouts, no need to come over, Buddy. I went to school with him, but haven't seen him since 1998. We communicate via mega encrypted computer shit I don't even pretend to understand. And we have been doing so ever since 1998, so that should give you an idea of what league he and his secret-ass agency are in.

Right. So since my brain wouldn't leave me alone about Bowie not being with Club 27, I sent a message to Ed. Couldn't take a screenshot of the Twitter feed, but I summed it up for him in a few sentences, asking for something ridiculously simple for the likes of Ed: Could he please find out who was behind that just-deleted handle. All I really wanted to do was tell some mofo to eff off, because I figured there was a sweaty-handed jerk somewhere in his parents' basement in Idaho. Who thought it was funny to pretend to be a bunch of musical legends that died early, and tragically. Club 27, hah, hah! At least that was what the sane part of my brain wanted to do. The obsessive-compulsive babbling machine wanted something else, I wasn't even sure what. Bring Bowie back? The tingle became a brief, painful flash. Ouch. Ed, please gimme an answer.

*

Ed gave me an address. It took him less than twenty minutes to respond, and when he did, it looked cryptic. 10 Turtleback Rd. TorC. Again something that ended on a capital C. I was so wired by the tweet thing that I tried reading it backwards first. Crot Dr. Kcabeltrut 10. Okay, a physician with a really foreign-sounding name. And? Thankfully, I had gotten myself a styrofoam cup of black coffee in the meantime, so after my initial *huh?* moment, the dark liquid kicked my brain cells back on track. Aha, a simple street address in ... Torrance, California or something. To avoid further wrong tracks, I put it in Google.

America surely has some strange town names. TorC, or rather, T or C, also known as Truth or Consequences, New Mexico. Wasn't there a movie once with that name? Was Ed having me for a fool? If not, Truth or Consequences sounded ... ominous, portentous, and unanimous. It seemed to be calling me to find out.

Fuck this shit, I told myself, echoing the initial tweet about bringing Bowie back. I needed to step off this train, stat. In case you were wondering, this wasn't the California Zephyr I was on. The Zephyr would have taken me from Emeryville (close to Frisco) all the way to Chicago in three days. Neither was this the Lakeshore Limited, which would cover the remaining distance, from the Windy City to the Big Apple. Nope, this was Amtrak's most recent brain child, the coast to coast train they had grandiosely called the "Gold Rush," though there was no rushin' going on in here. Or on the tracks, for that matter. The trip from East to West coast would take me all of ten-and-a-half frigging days! Maybe you can understand my boredom now. All I was supposed to do was stay on that train from hell and write about the "experience." What did I get in return, you might ask. A free ride and free food, that's what I got.

Okay, screw that. Now I had an address in New Mexico, a tingle in my spine, and *Changes* playing in my head. Turn and face the strange. All bets were off and I was leaving this casket on wheels. If necessary, I'd even pull the emergency brake. I sent my friend Ed a brief message, letting him know that I was going after the bone he'd thrown me. I thought it was only fair. And then decided I'd give him another ten minutes, in case he wanted to tell me to knock it off, or give me some more clues. Meanwhile, I checked the itinerary to see where and when the next regular stop would be. Oh good, Denver, but that would still be several hours. Kansas was such a drudge, no wonder my boredom had reached tipping point on those plain plains. We'd left Kansas City very early this morning. The damn train was doing its thing, rolling slowly towards the West, while I searched the web for cheap flights from Denver to Albuquerque.

Boredom dragged on, nearly driving me insane, but things went well once the train reached the Mile High City. Really, Denver? That was the name you chose when cities went about choosing cool monikers? I'm picturing a plane lavatory ... well, never mind. Took a cab from the station to the airport, went through check-in and sec, boarded my plane. The flight took an hour and a bit, and then I boarded one of those Greyhound-like coaches, only cleaner, that took me directly to this small town by the Rio Grande, in just two and a half hours. Truth or Consequences, New Mexico. Looked pretty much like Nowheresville to me. It was dark, it was after ten in the evening, and I hadn't planned beyond getting here. And then the stories came back and gave me the creeps. I'd made the mistake of googling all I could find about this place, to try and figure out what might be waiting at the address Ed had given me. Some of the things I found were almost cute, like the story about the town's name change: The place used to be called Hot Springs, because of just that. Hot water bubbling up from the ground. The people there wanted to cash in on that feature, but tourism just wouldn't come to the sleepy jumble of houses, so when a radio game show host challenged America to find a place that would change its name to the show's title, Truth or Consequences, in 1950, Hot Springs jumped at the chance for fame ... but fame didn't come, tourism still wouldn't catch on, but now they were stuck with that name. I couldn't decide whether the story was hilarious or tragically sad.

But then there was this other story, unfortunately just as true: For a still unknown number of years, David Parker Ray, the so-called Toy Box Killer, kidnapped, tortured and killed an estimated 60 women in the vicinity of T or C, helped by his girlfriend and daughter, plus several other accomplice "friends." The grisly crimes took place in a pimped-up trailer home located at nearby Elephant Butte, which he had outfitted with a gynecologist's chair and all manner of chains and whips and stuff that hurt. No bodies were found, but one victim escaped after stabbing an accomplice in the neck with an ice pick. The stuff of only the most twisted nightmares. To be sure, Ray died in prison in 2002, though with the

224 years to which he was sentenced, he should have stayed there until 2223. He took the easy way out and had a heart attack.

So now I was standing in the dark on a deserted crossroads, just a few miles from the place where this happened, and supposedly the trailer was still there. I told my overactive brain to forget about serial killers and focus on the mission, only to finally ask myself what the mission was. I'd been bored, and curious, and tingly. And sad, yes, sad about Bowie's death. So why was I here? What was the mission? Bringing Bowie back?

Before I could give in to the hysterical laughter that threatened to escape from my throat, I switched on the GPS on my phone, and then entered the address Ed had given me. Wonderful, that looked as if it was closer to ... Elephant Butte. For the fraction of a second, I wondered if Ed had sent me to the Toy Box killer's trailer, to play a really sick prank on me in return for all the stupid questions I had asked him over the years. But I immediately shook it off, and started walking. Yeah, call me crazy, but I was about to cover at least three miles of unfamiliar terrain in the pitch dark with nothing but my damn cell phone to guide me along the way. Obsession had taken over, and with a vengeance. Or maybe it was true what they said about New Mexico. Land of Enchantment was messing with my ready and willing brain. I kept walking, thinking of the Goblin King, his labyrinth, and his outrageous eye shadow. Thinking about Major Tom, floating in a tin can. No big cities around, so the stars were bright and myriad out here. Thinking about the China Girl smudging her red lipstick with the back of her hand. Walking, thinking, hearing the Duke's music in my head. Wondering if I had gone off the deep end. What the hell was I doing out here? I should be on that slow train to Fool's Gold, write something nice about the experience, and then get paid.

The GPS told me I should be reaching my destination any minute. But Turtleback Road was a dust track that probably led up the hill ahead, a fat, low-lying blob that boasted the name of Turtleback Mountain. I was more than skeptical, all my fears and misgivings crashing in on me like some tidal wave of misery and only-now-apprehended foolishness. I kept walking anyway, for what else was I supposed to do? Just then, a raspy, phlegm-filled voice from the dark beyond called out: "Hey! Who's there? Jim, is that you?"

I froze. The tingle became a cold hand creeping up my back. I wanted to answer, but my throat was dry as the desert suddenly. "Jim?" the voice repeated, sounding impatient now. Fight or flight? But the guy sounded old. Portly and slow. If he didn't have a shotgun, I figured I could easily outrun him. So I swallowed and ventured closer, finally able to form words again. "No. It's Barry. Barry Decker. Please don't shoot me."

He swore under his breath and it sounded as if he was trying to run, but a few seconds later and I had caught up with him. He looked the way he had sounded. Old, pudgy and slow. When I shone my phone's display in his direction, I could see that he wore a dark navy polyester tracksuit with several red stripes on the sides on the pant legs and arms. The effect was a cross of Sue Sylvester from *Glee* and the Marshmallow Man. He averted his face under that dark navy beanie, obviously afraid of me now.

"Sorry, man. Didn't mean to scare you, honestly, but I was kinda freaked out here myself. You okay?" He was breathing heavily now, so I was starting to get worried. Maybe he was lost, or deranged, or ... Elvis. He was Elvis. When he finally gave a heavy sigh and turned his head so I could look into his old face, there could be no doubt about it. The king, alive and ... reasonably well, if I hadn't given him a

heart attack just now, with my sudden appearance in the dark. He looked okay, just a little grumpy, and maybe miffed at my seeing his stubbly old grandpa face. I on the other hand had probably turned white as a sheet, for I could feel the blood drain from my face, while my heart pounded like crazy. Had he given me the heart attack? I felt dizzy, and his expression changed accordingly. He grabbed me by the arm and said: "Come on, boy, don't faint on me now. Snap out of it, will you."

And that was when I heard another voice from further away. "Aaron? Get back in here, now! *Goddammitmotherfucker.*" Maybe I only imagined that last bit. Elvis flinched, gave me a wink and a shrug, and turned around to walk away, back in the direction of where the second voice had come from. No, no, no. I had to know where he was going, and what in the devil's name was fucking going on here. I said, "Wait!" and easily caught up with Elvis. He turned to me with a hectic gesture, as if to shoo me away and silence me at the same time, but before either of us could say anything more, the world got bright all of a sudden, blindingly so, and I squinted my eyes against the floodlights. I remember thinking, *whatthefhellhaveIgottenmyselfinto*, but then Elvis took my arm again and shielded his eyes with his hand, yelling: "It's okay. Turn off them damn lights, Janis!"

*

It was true. He wasn't with them. The Duke was not part of the weirdest halfway house in history. But Jim Morrison was, and Jimi Hendrix, Janis Joplin, Kurt Cobain, even Amy Winehouse, bless her wino soul. She was the restless one who'd gotten bored and opened up a Twitter account. She was the clown who'd used the reverse of Club 27 as her handle. She was the one who'd tweeted, **He's not with us**. Turned out she'd wanted to add, **I wish he was**. But Janis, "the controlling bitch," as Elvis dubbed her, had caught her and swiftly deleted the account. Nobody was supposed to know, so tweeting from Camp Dead to the World was out of the question. They had internet, they had been keeping up to date with its help for a longer time than most mortals it seemed, but they had never once sent out anything, on any channel, email, social media, what have you – until now, until that one fateful, aborted tweet that Amy had written. She looked contrite now, but I could understand her so well. My recent train boredom had already seemed so acute, so how much worse must her boredom be? How much worse must Kurt's be, or Elvis's, or Jimi's? It boggled my mind, more than the actual fact of all of them living here, together, in a nice enough underground bunker compound thing, the walls all painted Baker-Miller pink, right under Turtleback Mountain. Alive. Older, some of them much older than I remembered them, but unmistakably alive. Especially Janis, who kept bitching and bickering about Elvis sneaking out at night to get his dangerous fix of fresh air, dragging in strangers, and hadn't she warned him a million times that this would happen eventually?

Well, they shut her up with a glass of good Whiskey, and Jim Morrison, whom you wouldn't recognize if they didn't tell you it was him, reminded her that he went out into the world on a regular basis to get their supplies, so venturing out wasn't a bad thing, or a liability only, it was also a damn necessity. We all had a few rounds of Whiskey then, clinking glasses, swapping stories. Well, they were swapping stories; I was merely the sponge who listened with his mouth hanging open. So mind-bending, so glorious, so weird and so exciting! They fed me their tales, and the funny thing is: It wasn't the ones from their glory days of fame and music that surprised me the most. No, they had been living another unbelievable life after their alleged "deaths" and their relocation to this pink underground palace. They were now working for an intensely classified government agency, so top secret indeed that not even the government knew of its existence. Sounded familiar. Sounded worrying for a moment, because if Ed said he'd have to kill me if I knew anything about his job or

whereabouts, then what would these giants do? But the way they toasted me before they took another sip, the way they bloomed and blossomed with the opportunity to tell their tales of cyber warfare and heroic hacking to someone outside their own little group ... I couldn't believe they'd harm me afterwards.

So they had become Anonymous, you might say. They played the keyboards of their computers as if they were pianos. I wondered if their virtuosity as musicians translated easily to top-notch coding and phishing and cracking. They all said that they missed the singing. I mean, they still sang, for themselves mostly, but that was different. You never knew if you could still move anyone with your song. If you still "had it." And they had stopped singing to each other a long while ago. It only made them itchy and irritable. I thought that was sad.

Then I remembered my wobbly mission. "So, if David is not with you, did he really die? What do you think? Do you *know*?" They exchanged glances. Then Elvis shook his head, and Jim the Lizard King shook his, too, and then the others shrugged apologetically.

"We don't know," Amy admitted. "We did what we could to check all sources, follow all leads. Nothing points to him faking his death and slipping away to some place like this. So it seems he's really dead. But who knows, there might be different networks, and agencies, and stuff ..." She trailed off, giving me a commiserating look from under those swallowtail lids of hers. Her hair however looked oddly deflated without the honeycomb and tease. Almost ratty, but in a very attractive way. Elvis sighed, and I nodded slowly. Another question formed in my mind, but I was reluctant to ask. I didn't want these giants, these kings and queens, laughing at me. My babble brain said, *what the heck? This is as wacked-out as it gets; nobody here is going to call you insane for asking...* So I asked.

"Is there a way to get to the ... realm of the dead? You know, to make sure?" They merely looked at me, Jim swirling the amber contents of his tumbler as if it held the answer. Nobody laughed. "Is there maybe even a way," I continued, heartened by their lack of judgment, "to go there and bring someone back? You know, that's what I set out to do: Bringing Bowie back."

Amy gave me a wistful smile. Janis made a face that could mean anything. Kurt remained as aloof as he'd been the whole night, while Jimi rubbed his chin thoughtfully. Elvis and Jim exchanged a look. I couldn't shake the feeling that they had the answers I was looking for. My heart beat faster.

Jim drained the last of his Whiskey, licked his lips, and then said: "Your friend Ed may have convinced you that computers can tell you everything. But as Amy said: We checked. We've also been researching death for a while now ... Some of us here are getting curious whether it might not be the more interesting alternative ..."

Janis gave him a scolding glance. Elvis looked tired. Whoa, no shit. Jim straightened his shoulders and smiled his Lizard King smile. "There is no path into the Netherworld, not for the living. You have to die to get there. Period." He shrugged, but that smile told me that it wasn't his last word. It told me I needed to talk to him alone. "Um, is there a restroom in here? I really need to go pee."

"Down the hallway, second door on your right," Elvis said. I nodded and rose from the comfy armchair. "Wait, I'll show you," Jim chimed in, eager to help. "I need to see a man about a dog." Janis scowled, but it wasn't clear whether she disliked the sophomoric euphemism for peeing, or simply the fact that we went to the restroom together.

And just as I'd expected, Jim wanted to tell me something. We went into the turquoise-colored stalls – no urinals in there, so we both sat down automatically in our respective stalls, and I was sure of his sitting down by the sound his piss made when it splashed into the bowl, and then I was weirded out by the things my brain paid attention to, but then I finally focused on his voice – and he said: "Hey, Barry!" It was cute, the stage-whispered call to attention. I whispered back: "Yeah?"

"Okay, listen. You know we're going to have to make sure you won't babble afterwards, right?"

I swallowed. Was this merely a warning, was he telling me to get out of there while I still could? He went on, never veering from his stage whisper tone: "So we'll give you this potion that will make you forget what you saw and heard in here. It's actually a pill we'll put in your drink. Now here's my suggestion: You're going to drink it down like a good boy, and then you'll get back in here, put your finger down your throat and puke it out. Most likely, it'll still affect your memory a little, 'cause it acts awfully quickly. But with any luck you'll remember what I'm going to tell you now. So listen good!"

I swallowed again, getting more and more excited.

"There's a lady in town. Most people would call her a drugged-out hippie, I suppose, but if anyone, she can show you how to *break on through to the other side*, if you know what I mean." He paused, so I croaked: "I do, yeah."

"Go all the way through town tomorrow morning, and then hit the Rio Grande south of the hot springs. The ones that have been turned into a resort. Used to be a really powerful place, but now it's all about the money. So you want to go past the resort, past the springs, and then sit by the Rio, got it? Just sit there and wait for her. She'll come in her own sweet time, so you better bring a lot of water, and maybe some spirits for her. You wait and she comes, and then you can tell her what you want. This is my only advice for you. This is the only way it might work. Okay, son?"

"Okay," I croaked, feeling strangely touched by the incongruity of the Lizard King calling me *son*, like some old Southern general gentleman. I shook off a shiver that kept running down my spine. "Let's get back then," Jim urged me, and we did.

I took all of his advice. Someone had refilled my glass when we got back. So it would hold the potion now. Janis gave us a look that said: I'm on to you, I know you said too much. But she seemed more relaxed now, probably because she knew I would forget everything afterwards. Or so she thought. Elvis looked at his fat gold watch and said it was time for bed. The sun would be up soon. We'd spent the night chatting and sipping and contemplating life, and death. I thanked them for their hospitality and for their existence, then and now. They smiled graciously enough, except for Jim, whose Lizard King smile promised that this story was not over yet. I raised my glass, toasted and nodded, and then drank it all in one swallow. "I'll hit the bathroom one more time and then I'll be on my way," I said, before hurrying for the turquoise tiles in this sea of pink. Barker-Miller gets to you after a while, don't let anyone fool you.

I managed to vomit, hoped I would retain my memory, and splashed cold water into my face before I left. Elvis saw me to the door, and the rising red sun greeted me as I stepped outside. A new morning, a few miles to go, and somehow, a different world. I struck out.

*

For as long as I walked, things were okay, but as soon as I reached the riverbend just south of the Hot Springs resort, I felt like breaking down sobbing. I sat down on a rock and buried my face in my hands, and the tears came. What was I thinking? I had seen some of the greatest dead musicians of all times (yay, memory!), still alive, reasonably well, and aging instead of being the dead legends everyone else thinks they are. And now I was waiting for a woman who might take me to the underworld? I must be insane. I should grow up, accept that my idol is dead, and move on. Then I remembered the job I had run away from, and cried harder. Move on to where? I was a loser, did shitty jobs that were somewhere between marketing and journalism. Hadn't I once wanted to be an artist, too? I didn't know whether my sadness was for my own miserable little existence, my dead Duke, or those singers back there in the underground pink soft cell. Man, Elvis had some serious jowls going on.

"You are looking for me." It was a statement, not a question. I raised my head and saw the hippie woman, one hand on her hip, the other over her eyes for shade. It had to be her, not just because of the portentous greeting. She totally looked the part, with flowing skirts and a long shawl, wild hair and searching, penetrating eyes. Loads of bangles on one arm. Younger than I'd assumed, for someone who consorts with the dead. Or something.

I wiped the tears from my face and nodded. "Yeah ... someone told me you might be able to send me to the ... uh ... realm of the dead." I must have sounded very confused, and I felt like a Blues Brother, telling everyone that I was bringing the band back together. She merely looked at me, as if waiting for more bullshit to come from my mouth. And it did. "I want to see if Bowie is really there, and if it's possible, I want to bring him back. You don't happen to have any idea how I might do that, do you?" The way she smiled at me, she managed to reassure me that it did not sound insane at all. But that's what it felt like anyway. Aladdin Sane. A lad insane.

"I might. The question is, are you ready? It won't be what you expect."

What did I expect? I had no fucking clue. I was insane, remember? But I was ready, oh yes, I was certain of that. Give me anything but the boredom I left behind. "I'm ready. I can take it. I mean, fuck, I saw Elvis last night!"

She smiled. "Okay then. Don't be mad with me after though." And with that, she held out her hand, palm up. There was a small pill there, suspiciously pink, reminding me of the Barker-Miller walls. I took it and put it into my mouth, almost greedy, almost panicking. Then I took a few sips from my water bottle, and down it went. Down, down the rabbit hole.

So was I hallucinating? I turned and faced the strange. I saw him, ashes to ashes, face to face. I floated far above the world. He gave me that sharp, assessing look, that made me think of a Bible verse ... *weighed in the balance and found wanting*. But then he smiled at me, a smile full of bared teeth and unbridled hilarity, and I stopped fretting. He touched me. Put his palm flat against my chest, right over my heart. Our eyes locked as the colors swirled and undulated around us, between us, within us. Psychedelic, discoesque, feverish. Just him and me, ashes to ashes, face to face. There was a decidedly erotic vibe in the air, I felt myself respond, and I didn't mind at all. And then the colors faded, drained away to the fawn of sand dunes and trench coats, the color of his hair. The only points of contrast were his eyes ... until he closed them, and I closed mine in response. I knew it was over. I didn't need to open my eyes again to know he was gone, and I was back by the river, lying on the sun-drenched rock. The woman was nowhere to be seen either. The encounter had been too

brief, the mere blink of an eye in the face of eternity. But the tingle ... The tingle was in my chest now, and would be forever.

*

You don't believe me, right? You're not supposed to believe me. Don't go looking for the halfway house under Turtleback Mountain: Don't go looking for a hippie woman with a knowing smile. Just see this as a nice little story, a wacko tale of a daydreaming loser, okay? Because that's what I became afterwards, a teller of tales. I'm a writer now, have been ever since that morning. I guess that was my Duke's gift to me. No more boredom, and Mr. Babble-Brain is happy, too. He can babble all he wants now, and believe me, he does.

Since I was still wary of the possibility of losing my memory, I wrote this all down on the way back. Not back to the train, but back to my place, back to my den, where I put his music on. I was in the mood for something upbeat, so I picked *Let's dance*. And then decided not to keep it in my diary. No, I'd make it public, I'd send this story out to the world, tell everyone. There was absolutely no danger in doing so, because people would think it was fiction. You can say anything in fiction. That's the beauty of it.

So here I am, about to hit *Enter*, while his voice is telling me *Just you shut your mouth* ... No, David, I won't. I'll put my electric blue glitter eyeshadow on, smile at the mirror, and then I'll dance. But first, *Enter*.