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Desperado

Melissa Minetola

Danny Spears jerked awake, roused by a dog's barking in the alley. Through the curtains, the moon glowed, peppering the room with borrowed light. Danny yawned, glanced at his wristwatch. Nine o'clock. Beside him, Alexa stirred. They had had sex and then fallen asleep. Or passed out—Danny was not sure which. He lay back and massaged his temples, already feeling the hangover. Alexa stirred again, but she continued to sleep. The sex had been okay, not great, due perhaps to the high quantity of drinks they had consumed at the bar, unfamiliarity, or both.

Danny's stomach growled. He swung his legs over the side of the bed and pulled on a pair of boxer shorts. He padded, barefoot, across the dusty hardwood floorboards of his apartment to the kitchen. Danny opened the refrigerator. Slim pickings. Cream cheese, a jar of pickles, and leftover chicken lo mein from last night's Chinese-takeout dinner. Danny pulled out the cream cheese. There were bagels in the cupboard.

As a bagel was toasting, Danny dialed the number to his mother's house. Roxanne Kaye—she had retained her maiden name after two disastrous marriages and divorces—answered on the third ring.

Her voice sounded wary. Danny could picture her at her house, her hand clutching the telephone, her eyebrows wrinkled, making her look older than her fifty years. The years, of course, had hardened his mother, although they had not taught her much about men and love—the blight of her life.

The bagel popped out of the toaster. Danny balanced the phone under his chin as he set the bagel on a napkin. "I wanted to call and see how things are going."

"Everything is going really well." In the background, the television hummed. "Elliott and I rented a movie, and Kris is out with her friends."

"One big happy family." Danny smeared cream cheese over the bagel. "Is your nose okay, Mom?"

"Everything is fine." The night before, Danny had hovered beside his mother as she bent over her sink. She had held a hand towel to her nose as blood dribbled steadily into the sink, screaming at Danny to go as he tried to convince her to let him take her to the hospital.

The conversation was going nowhere. Probably Elliott was within earshot. "Will you let Kris know I called? Ask her to call me back?"

"Sure," replied Roxanne, sounding surprised. "It would be nice if you two spent more time together. Or any time together, for that matter."

Danny took a bite of the bagel. "Have a good night. And if you ever want to call me...."

"You too." The line died.

Danny shook his head and hung up. Bagel in hand, he walked back to the bedroom, where Alexa was stretching. She smiled when she saw him. "I was wondering where you went."

They looked at each other and laughed. Danny hated the post-sex chitchat requisite of the one-night stand. "Are you hungry at all?"

Alexa shook her head. She stood, the white sheet tumbling to the floor to reveal her taut, tanned beauty in all its nakedness. Danny hardened. Alexa noticed and smiled. "Sorry I can't stay longer, but I have an early shift tomorrow morning. I need to get home."

He had not expected her to want anything more from him either. "Where do you live?"

"Not too far from here." She reached for her clothes.

"I'll drive you." Danny set the bagel on the dresser and reached for his clothes as well.

Less than ten minutes later, he stopped his car in front of Alexa's apartment building. She looked over at him. "Thanks for the ride."

They talked for a minute more, and much to Danny's surprise, Alexa suggested getting together the next day. After finalizing their plans, Alexa opened the door and stepped onto the sidewalk.

"Sounds good." He waved good-bye and watched as she sauntered toward the apartment building.

Danny decided to stop at the supermarket. He parked in front of the Kroger in Carytown. Only a few people were grocery shopping on Friday night, so Danny found what he needed quickly. As he headed for the check-out, another cart bumped into his.

His older brother, Greg, whom he had not seen in over three months, widened his eyes and quickly raised a finger to his lips.



Greg Spears hunched over the small wooden table, his eyes flitting over every inch of Betsy's Coffee Shop. Several other people were sprinkled across the popular Carytown café, but no one was paying attention to the reunited brothers.

"Chill out, man."

"I'm trying to get some money together." Greg watched for his brother's reaction. "I'm going to need to leave the country soon." Danny stared at his brother, dumbfounded. Greg nodded. "That drug kingpin I mentioned before—he has a contract out on my head. Do you know what that means?"

"I've seen *The Godfather*, Greg." The flippancy with which Danny made the remark could not conceal his apprehension.

Greg lit another cigarette. "Yeah, so I'm going to need to get the hell out of here."

"Going to the police isn't an option?"

"Going to jail isn't an option," Greg reminded him. He inhaled deeply. Danny scratched at the stubble forming on his chin. "When are you leaving? Where are you going?"

"You always were a nosy kid, Danny." Greg laughed, but he looked sad. "Jesus Christ, what happened to us?"

The bell on the front door of the café jingled. A middle-aged couple walked in and ambled to the counter to place their order. "Have you seen Mom lately?" Greg asked.

"Last night, in fact."

Greg fingered his cup of coffee, which he had not drunk since he got it. "How is she doing?"

Danny did not know how to answer the question. "You know Mom. Same old self."

"The last time I saw Mom," recalled Greg, "was four summers ago. I bumped into her and Kris at the bank."

"What were you doing at a bank?"

"Robbing it."

Danny paused, and Greg burst out into laughter. Danny smiled slightly, as Greg continued to laugh. "Are you serious? Are you kidding me, Danny? You believe for a second I would rob a bank?" The middle-aged couple glanced over at them.

"You're making a scene," Danny nonchalantly informed his brother.

Greg could not stop laughing. "Jesus Christ, my brother thinks I'd rob a bank!"

Danny laughed too. "Shut up, Greg."

Greg reached over the table and punched Danny's arm. "I'm a drug dealer, not a bank robber," he muttered. "Get it right, man."

"You're crazy, man." Danny shook his head. "Crazy."

"Shit." Greg crushed his flip-flopped foot against the lit cigarette he had

dropped on the floor. The smoke curled and swirled up to the table.

Danny watched as the couple sat at a small table. They wore matching "Virginia is for lovers" T-shirts. He wondered what it was like to have a normal life, normal relationships—whatever that was. "I saw Kris last night too."

"Was there a family reunion I wasn't invited to?"

"No...." Danny's voice trailed off, and Greg understood.

"Is everything okay?"

"I don't know," Danny said truthfully.

Greg leaned back in his chair, his arms crossed over his chest. "Is Kris getting beat up too?"

"I don't think Elliott, the boyfriend, hits her, but Mom does, if Kris gets in the way."

"How old is Kris now?"

"Seventeen."

Greg shook his head. "Where did all the time go?" It was a wistful question. "I don't even know her. My own half-sister. What's she like?"

"I don't know her that well either." He and Greg looked at each other. "She asked about you actually, last night." Greg raised his eyebrows. "Yeah. She wanted to know what was going on with you."

Greg gazed out the big window that overlooked West Cary Street. "The next time you see her," he said, "tell her I'm doing really well. Tell her...I'm clean. And I have a job. Something respectable, like a lawyer or something. Wait, I hate lawyers. Not a lawyer. Tell her...."

"You can see her, if you want. Tell her yourself." Danny shrugged. "Maybe the three of us can meet for lunch or something."

"Meet for lunch? I don't know." Greg fidgeted. "Man, I need a hit."

Greg was hopeless, Danny realized. He finished the rest of his coffee.



Danny lived in an apartment on the first floor of a Victorian mansion in the Fan district of Richmond, about a five-minute drive from Carytown and Betsy's Coffee Shop. One hundred years ago, the mansion had been magnificent. Time, of course, had taken its toll on the mansion. Now, the wraparound porch sagged, and the paint was peeling from all sides. Danny did not mind the sagging or the peeling, and he loved the low rent. He unloaded the groceries from his car. He set them on the kitchen table and glanced at the clock hanging above the sink. Eleven fifteen. The milk he had bought had gone bad, sitting in the car the past two hours, and Danny threw it out. He deposited the rest of the groceries in various cupboards.

Greg glanced at Danny. "You try living with a drug kingpin and the police after you, and see how easy it is to chill out."

Danny gulped a mouthful of hot coffee. "Why don't you turn yourself in to the police?"

Greg shook his head. "I'd spend the rest of my life in jail, like my roommate."

"Have you talked to him, or heard from him recently?"

"No. But he isn't going to finger me for the police."

"They probably already know about you though, don't you think?"

Greg was quiet. "I mean, last month they busted him at the loft you guys shared."

Greg sighed. "Yeah, who knows?" He wore a green T-shirt and khaki shorts. He had the same curly reddish-brown hair as Danny, except Greg had buzzed and dyed his blond. Except for the incessant shaking of his hands, Greg looked the part of a yuppie.

"When I read about your roommate in the paper, I figured you were laying low."

"I've been staying with a friend," Greg confirmed.

"Can you be any more vague?"

Greg inhaled and blew the smoke to his right, away from Danny, who sat across from him. He paused. After a minute, he said, "I know I fucked up."

"I didn't mean...."

"I did fuck up, Danny." Greg shrugged. "It's okay, I can admit it. I should have straightened myself out. It's hard though."

"Are you still using?"

Greg's eyes flitted around the café again. "Keep your voice down," he hissed. He puffed on the cigarette. "I'm still doing a little shit, yeah."

"And dealing it too?"

"It's my livelihood."

Danny could not help rolling his eyes.

"Don't start on me with that holier-than-thou crap," warned Greg. He tossed the butt of the cigarette on the floor and ruffled his hair. "I need a hit, Danny. I need to go pretty soon."

Since Greg was fourteen and Danny ten, Danny had watched drugs deteriorate his brother. He felt tears begin to choke his throat, so he coughed. The tears kept coming, so he coughed again.

"Are you okay?"

"I'm fine." Danny swallowed the tears.

Usually, Danny met up with his community-college friends on Friday night. They would congregate at Richbrau, a pub downtown, to drink and shoot pool late into the night. The circle of friends was dwindling, though, as one after the other got married and prioritized wife and children over getting drunk with the guys.

Danny did not feel like getting drunk with the guys tonight anyway. He locked the front door. In his bedroom, he stepped out of his pants and sank onto the bed. The comforter had slid onto the floor during his and Alexa's escapade, and the sheets were wrinkled and damp. A strong feminine scent clung to the sheets too—perfume and something else. Danny could not put his finger on it.

All his life, Danny had watched people's relationships fall apart. His parents. His mother and her second husband. His mother and her loser boyfriends, one consecutive one after the other. His own relationships had failed, one after the other, too.

Shit. Maybe he was hopeless too.



"I never would have figured you for an outdoors kind of girl." Danny raised his eyebrows at Alexa, who smiled and shrugged. Danny lay on a blanket in the grass on Belle Island.

The small island was a tourist attraction in downtown Richmond, and the locals liked to take advantage of its natural beauty too. The island featured an expansive meadow—perfect for picnics, as Alexa knew—and several hiking trails. On this Saturday afternoon in late May, Belle Island boasted a plentiful number of visitors. Middle school-aged children hung out near the footbridge that connected the island to the main street, while families walked and talked together, the fathers tossing footballs to their sons and the mothers and their daughters looking on and cheering them on. There were a few couples like Danny and Alexa, one of them, in fact, engaged in a picnic of their own. That couple must have been together a long time, Danny decided. They were completely comfortable together, completely connected, their smiles easy, their affection second-nature. He glanced at Alexa.

"Do you come here a lot?"

"I come here when I want to relax, read." Propped up by an elbow, she stretched her body beside Danny's.

"What do you like to read?" Danny was going through the motions, somewhat, but he also was interested in what Alexa had to say. She was interesting. Not what he had expected.

Alexa looked out onto the James River, which encircled the island. "I like the classics. And Toni Morrison, of course." She turned her gaze to Danny. "What about you? Do you read?"

"Not books, but magazines. Sports Illustrated. Time. Star."

"Men don't read Star, do they?"

"Sure they do. I do."

Alexa shook her head. "You're the first man I know who reads Star."

"That's a good thing, right?" She laughed. Danny smiled.

Alexa ran her hand along his denim jeans-covered thigh. Her hand felt good there. "Want to move this date back to your place?"

Danny closed his eyes. He had never been so lucky before.

The sex, the second time, was better. Second-time sex sometimes was like that, Danny decided, although he made the decision without really thinking about how he came to it. He and Alexa lay on his bed, the sheets tangled between them and their legs. Alexa leaned against his chest. He moved his arm around her and drew her closer to him. Her eyelashes brushed against his skin. Reflexively, Danny tilted his head forward and kissed the top of her head.

The phone rang, breaking the silence and ruining the moment. Danny was going to let it ring, but after the third ring, Alexa asked, "Aren't you going to get it?"

"I can't talk right now, Greg," Danny told him, realizing he should not have answered the phone.

But Greg was panicked, insistent. His roommate had killed himself in jail. Hung himself. It was awful. It was, agreed Danny, holding the phone away from Alexa, so she would not be able to hear. And now Greg had to run, leave the country. The police were after him, big time. Worse than before. His friend was kicking him out of his hideout. He needed a new hideout, a new place to stay for a few days before he got the money together to leave the country.

Reluctantly, Danny said it would be okay if Greg stayed with him for a few days. No, now was not a good time to come over. Tomorrow.

"I'm sorry about that," Danny said to Alexa, hanging up the phone.

She outlined his jawbone with her fingertips. "No problem." She did not ask about the phone call. Danny was not sure if she was being polite or if she simply didn't care.



Danny was eating Cheerios in the kitchen when he heard the knock at his front door. He leaned the spoon against the inside of the bowl and got up.

Greg was standing in the corridor, a backpack slung over his shoulder and a duffel bag in his hands. "You travel light," Danny remarked, stepping aside to let his brother in.

"You have to, when you're on the run."

Danny did not know how to respond. "Do you want something to eat? I'm having Cheerios, but I also have lunch meat...."

"Nah, I'm okay." Greg deposited the backpack and duffel bag on the floor, and Danny closed the door. "I really appreciate what you're doing for me, Danny. I want you to know that."

"I know." Danny nodded toward the kitchen. "I was just finishing my lunch."

"Still like those Cheerios, huh?" Greg slid into a seat across from Danny.

"Some things never change."

Greg looked around the apartment. "How long have you been in this place, man?"

Danny spooned the last of the Cheerios into his mouth. "Four years in September."

"Nice place."

"Better than my first apartment. Remember that one?" When Greg shook his head, Danny went on, "I was eighteen years old. Moved in with Kevin Sweeney on the South Side."

"I remember Sweeney." Greg leaned back in his chair, against the sink. "Couple of years older than you. Frizzy black hair and a stupid goatee."

Danny laughed. "Exactly. He was a good friend. But our apartment was a dump. A dump," he repeated. "Rent was, like, two hundred dollars a month. But even that was hard back then."

"You were going to school...."

"Going to school and working part-time at the dry cleaner's where Kevin worked."

Greg gazed at Danny. "Must have been rough."

Danny shrugged. "It was better than home."

"Did you ever go back there? Home? When you lived with Kevin...."

"I went back a few times and for holidays. I just—I just couldn't stand it after a while. Mom was a mess. Always hanging onto some loser boyfriend. And Kris—it broke my heart to look at her. She always looked alone."

"How is Kris now?"

Danny shrugged. How was he supposed to know?

There was a knock on the door. The brothers exchanged an apprehensive glance. "You expecting company?" hissed Greg.

"Not on Sunday afternoon." Danny jerked his head toward the bedroom. "Get in there. I'll get the door."

But it was too late. The front door opened, and Kris Holliday poked her head in. "Danny?"

"What are you doing here?" Danny barked. Kris looked at him, bewildered, and then she saw Greg. Her jaw dropped. "Get in here and close the door!"

"All right, all right, calm down!" snapped Kris. She did what Danny had told her to do. Then she stood awkwardly in the living room, looking from Danny to Greg. Kris had the same curly reddish-brown hair as Greg and Danny, which she tugged and twisted between her fingers—a nervous habit. Unlike the brothers, Kris was small-boned and petite, and today her eyes drooped, weary and bloodshot.

"Kris." She nodded, and Greg joined her in the living room. They stood across from each other, a distance of about a foot separating them. "Last time we saw each other was four years ago." Kris shook her head slightly, as if to say four years ago seemed like a lifetime ago.

Danny sighed. "What are you doing here, Kris?" He lumbered up alongside her. "You should have called before you came."

"I'm sorry." Kris smoothed a hand across her pink tube top. "I was on my way home, and I thought I'd stop by."

"On your way home?" Danny narrowed his eyes at her.

"So, you're seventeen, Danny tells me."

Kris nodded. "And you're...."

"I'm thirty-one, but I look twice my age, I know. I look like crap." Greg sank onto the couch. "Drugs do that to you. Mess you up physically. Everything. But enough about me. Sit down...."

"What I'd like to know," interrupted Danny, "is why you didn't go home last night." He looked at Kris. "Were Mom and Elliott fighting again?"

Or...."

"No, Danny, I just spent the night at a friend's."

"Is your friend male?"

Kris sighed. "You're worse than Mom." Her tone was tired, defeatist. She did not want to argue.

"You know something," Danny said angrily, "between him"—he jerked his finger at Greg—"and you"—he pointed to Kris—"I've had it. I've had enough. The two of you—you come back into my life for a few days, and already...."

"Already what?" demanded Kris, as equally angry as Danny. "You haven't been a part of my life since I was nine, and you aren't a part of it now either. So don't worry."

"You guys, come on." Greg gestured for both Danny and Kris to sit down.

"How can I not worry?" Danny retorted, ignoring Greg. "I don't want to see you end up like Mom, pregnant and forced to get married when you're still a kid."

"Who the hell do you think you are?" Kris glared at Danny. "And what the hell kind of life do you have, that you think you're doing so much better than Mom—or me, or Greg?"

"Hey, come on." Greg raised his voice. "Sit down, both of you." They both looked at him. Greg flushed. "I mean, I know I'm not in any place to be telling anybody what to do, but...come on."

Danny looked at Kris. Her cheeks were flushed with anger. "Look—are you hungry?"

"I don't want your food," she snapped.

"He has Cheerios," Greg told her.

Kris rolled her eyes at both of them.



Danny had started collecting mementos for the shoebox when he was twelve. Roxanne had just kicked Greg out of the house, and Kris was still a baby. At the time, Roxanne was between boyfriends, so life was less crazy than usual. Greg's sudden absence contributed to the quiet around the house as well.

It must have been a combination of Greg's absence and the quiet that prompted Danny to take a step back and assess the situation. For a twelve-year old, he must have been fairly bright. At twelve, Danny Spears decided that he needed to remember. He needed to remember the beginnings and the middle because one day—at the end—it would mean something. It had to mean some-

thing, he told himself. He had not gone through hell again and again for nothing to matter.

So he had turned to the shoebox. It was nothing special, just an old black shoebox he found in the basement, amid a pile of old school supplies—Greg's—never used. Binders, notebooks, pens—all gone to waste, like Greg.

Danny filled the shoebox with photographs of the family—all the ordinary special occasions like birthdays, first days of school and Christmases. The men in the photos changed as the years went on. First there was Greg and Danny's father, Freddy Spears. Next came a variety of Roxanne's boyfriends—Wayne, Glenn, others whose names Danny had long forgotten. Then there was Ron Holliday. Also in the shoebox were mementos like Danny's first pair of glasses—he had since switched to contact lenses—a red marker that Greg used to drag across the walls of the house, to Roxanne's horror—and a certification of participation that Kris had received for playing basketball in the third grade. Danny wondered if she still played.

Danny kept the shoebox in the back of his bedroom closet, on a stack of other shoeboxes filled with old bank statements and unpaid parking tickets. On Sunday night, after he said good-bye to Kris and good night to Greg, Danny squatted down and pulled the shoebox out.

He hunkered down against the closet door and opened the shoebox in his lap. The photographs had become brittle over the past fifteen years, and some even ripped as Danny flipped through them.

Danny smiled. One year—he squinted at the date at the top of the newspaper clipping—his junior year of high school—he had made highest honors on the school's honor roll. He had cut the article out of the paper and stuck it in the shoebox. "Lot of good that did me," he muttered to himself, though not in a self-deprecating or regretful kind of way. His tone was matter-of-fact.

"Hey. Danny."

Danny looked up. Greg was standing in the doorway.

"I don't know if I can do this."

"Do what?"

Greg sighed. "I don't really want to go." He noticed the shoebox. "What's that?" He walked over and squatted beside his brother.

Danny shrugged. "Nothing."

Greg rummaged through the shoebox. Danny watched as Greg's expression shifted from one of tension to wistfulness. "Why'd you do this?"

Danny shrugged again. How could he explain it to Greg? "I

figured...when I'm older, I want to have something to say about myself. I want...to know what happened."

Greg looked at him. "When you have kids and stuff?"

"Sure."

Greg stopped rummaging. "There's some good stuff there. You're leaving good stuff behind." He rose.

Danny looked up at him. "Thanks." Greg nodded and turned to go. "Hey. Did you want to talk, or....?"

"No." Greg jerked his head toward the living room. "I'm watching reruns of MacGyver."

"MacGyver?" Danny laughed.

"Shut up." Greg closed the door behind him.

Danny set the shoebox back in the closet.



"This is the final boarding call for American Airlines flight 2083, non-stop from Richmond to Dallas/Fort Worth."

Danny clamped his brother's shoulder. Greg turned to him. "I'll call after I get to São Paulo. Let you know I made it."

The brothers hugged, and in another moment, Greg was gone.

Alone, Danny walked outside. It was about three o'clock on Friday afternoon. He had left work early to drive Greg to the airport. Rain began to fall in a slow, rhythmic pattern. Not minding it, Danny took his time walking to his car. He hoped Greg would have a safe trip. He knew it would be months before he heard from his brother again.

When he returned to Richmond, the rain stopped, and Danny stopped by Alexa's apartment, instead of his own. She worked the morning shift as a laundry attendant at one of Richmond's five-star hotels and was home when Danny knocked on her door. She smiled when she saw him.

"Can I take you out for dinner?"

"I'm always open to being taken out for dinner," Alexa assured him.

"Let me grab my purse." As she walked to the back of her apartment, she called, "Where are we going?"

"You pick." Danny leaned against the doorframe. "Anywhere you want."

Alexa's favorite restaurant was the Strawberry Street Café. The restaurant, situated in the heart of Richmond's unique Fan district, was famous for its bathtub salad bar. Danny and Alexa sat across from each other in a booth. She looked at him from over her menu. "You've been here before?"

"Once or twice." Baskets of fresh flowers and candles decorated each

table, and the sun shone through the stained-glass windows, spilling multi-colored light across the restaurant. "It's a little artsy-fartsy, if you ask me. I'm more of a Bob Evans type of guy."

Alexa smiled. "I like Bob Evans too."

"So what's good here?" Danny peered at the menu.

"I'm getting the salad bar. I always do."

Danny looked across the table at Alexa. Her sable hair was pulled back into a sleek ponytail. Gold posts sparkled from her earlobes. She noticed him looking at her and smiled. Danny's cheeks reddened. "I don't mean to stare, but...I was just thinking."

"About how beautiful I am?" They both laughed, but Alexa's affable coffee-colored eyes encouraged Danny to elaborate.

Danny set the menu on the table. He still had not decided what to get. "I was just thinking about how people come and go. And—it's funny, isn't it?—you can never really pinpoint—for me, anyway—how exactly they came to be important to you. To mean something to you. They just come and go."

Her forehead furrowed in thoughtfulness, Alexa remarked, "It depends on the person, I think. And the situation."

Danny leaned back in the booth, frowning. "I guess. For me, all the relationships in my life have been...thorny."

"I understand that." Alexa tugged on the bell sleeves of her sheer black blouse. "I've had a little of both, myself." The late-afternoon sunlight glimmered off the gold post earrings. "I don't know which you are yet. Thorny or un-thorny."

"I," Danny said with a smile, "am as thorny as they come."

"You have a complicated past?"

"And an uncertain future."

Alexa folded her hands over Danny's. After a minute, she sighed. "I wish I could say something profound," she said. "I really, really do."

Danny laughed. He felt himself beginning to fall in love with her. "It's the perfect moment to say something profound," he agreed.

"I know!" exclaimed Alexa. "And I can't do it. But I'm feeling something...."

"I'm feeling something too." Danny knew exactly what she meant.

Danny would remember that afternoon. It was one of those moments—perfect and beyond description—that arise every now and then. One of those moments that cannot be captured with words or stored away in an old shoebox.