

A BLUES SONG

Bret Johnston

Wesley Wilson made love to Sara one year before her accident. The morning light slanted through the blinds and drew shadows on the sheets covering their bodies. She had flown from Indiana to south Texas for a friend's wedding, and in bed, Wesley thought of how readily Sara had accepted his invitation to stay with him, of how slipping into her old habits seemed as easy as shedding her clothes to move around the house in only her panties and his shirts. Though he noticed changes, too. Sara spoke often and enthusiastically, as if in the three years since their divorce she'd started loathing silence. And during their lovemaking, she bit Wesley's nipples and played Tchaikovsky on the stereo. He liked the magnificent sweep of the music as he liked the icy pain that came with her biting, but Wesley assumed that someone, perhaps the man in Cancun, had played a symphony while pinching Sara's nipples with his teeth. They were gifts, he suspected, like the expensive earrings and changed inflections in her speech, that someone had given her and now she was showing them to him. It was the last time he'd seen her.

And a year later on a humid May night, when Sara's sister Robbi called from an Indianapolis hospital and told Wesley his ex-wife was in the ICU, he worried he'd never see her again. He had returned for the second night that week from The Palapa, a restaurant by the ocean. Wesley Wilson was forty-two years old, a high school English teacher in Corpus Christi, Texas, and as he taught classes the rest of that week the information Robbi had relayed covered his thoughts and movements like soot. Someone had rear-ended Sara's little Subaru and it exploded. Forty percent of her body suffered burns — mostly her hands, arms and legs, though not her face. The doctors had medicated her and intended to keep her sedated until she strengthened enough to endure the pain. As the burns healed, they would hydrate her flesh and perform skin grafts. She would not die. She would need physical therapy and eventually specialists would fit her with a pressure suit which she would wear under her clothes for a year. A man had been with her, and initially the hospital had contacted his relatives because

he wasn't expected to live, but since Monday his condition had improved and they now believed he would recover. His name was Steve Beeson, an insurance salesman from Wyoming, and he was thirty-seven, the same age as Sara.

This news exhausted Wesley, so instead of cooking dinner, he went to The Palapa for the third time that week. It was an old cottage, painted yellow with blue trim and converted into a two-room bistro with a crushed shell parking lot and a wooden deck facing the water. Vases with lilacs stood on the table, perfuming the air. A married couple owned the restaurant, Marc and Moira Rodgers. Wesley had never met Marc, though more than once he'd seen a tall man with a bushy gray ponytail kiss Moira before leaving the restaurant. Moira, Wesley knew, held a degree in drama from an east coast university and had worked in theater for years. When she met Marc, she quit acting and enrolled in culinary school. Marc's money had bought The Palapa — he worked in computers. Moira was petite, with green eyes and a pale, angular face, and when walking she always seemed hurried. Her dark hair had hung to her shoulders, but when Wesley saw her Friday night, it was cropped, moused into messy spikes. She dropped herself into the seat across his table: "I look like a boy."

Moira dried her hands on a towel, slung it over her shoulder. Wesley had finished his meal and was marking poetry, though he believed he was nitpicking — *Eric, I've never touched snow that wasn't "cold," have you?* — and he was happy to take a break.

"No," Wesley said, shaking his head. Moira's longer hair had been more flattering, and he thought the new style did make her look boyish. "No. You look fine. I'd say European. Parisian."

"We've been open a year tonight. I wanted to commemorate it. Next time I'll send myself flowers." Moira slumped in her seat, rested her neck on the chairback.

"That's great. A year." Wesley sipped his wine, and after he swallowed, "Congratulations."

"What are we reading?" Moira sat up and took a page from the stack on the table. A busboy cleared a booth behind Moira.

Recently Wesley had let students curse in their poems, so many were overwrought with 'fuck,' but in eleven years of teaching he'd gleaned that allowing them access to such language elicited work closer to their young, frightened hearts. Twice the school had named him Educator of the Year.

"We're winding down," Wesley said, as Moira's eyes scanned the poem. He didn't think she was actually reading as much as viewing the letters and the words they formed. "Prom is this weekend, so next week's batch will be maudlin and steamy."

"I didn't go to mine." Moira replaced the poem on the stack, straightened herself in the chair. "We skinny-dipped at the beach and a jellyfish stung me. My girlfriend peed on my leg because she'd heard it soothed the pain. It didn't."

"Some friend," Wesley said, laughing then looking away as he dabbed his beard with a napkin.

Moira glanced at a couple leaving through the front door. She leaned close to Wesley, her elbows and weight on the table. "Earlier tonight," she whispered, "a television weatherman ate here with a girl half his age, maybe younger." Sammy passed behind Wesley, and Moira winked at him. "He ordered for her, you could tell, and paid in cash with a big tip. Maybe he keeps it off the record so mama doesn't find out."

"Maybe mama's out with the paperboy." Wesley's voice was too forceful, and as the words came, he wished he'd taken a pseudo-conspiratorial tone similar to Moira's. The restaurant was hushed, most of the chairs empty, the tables wiped clean by Sammy. He thought Moira would stand and return to the kitchen because he'd snapped at her unjustly. "I'm sorry," he said. "Too many bad poems."

"Then find a fabulous one."

Moira thumbed through the stack, and stopped to eye a page. Through the window behind her, a pair of headlights brightened and illuminated the grill of a large car. The passenger lit a cigarette.

"Here." Moira slipped one out. "This sounds like a dandy."

Wesley saw Cindy Park's tall cheerful cursive. Cindy wrote incessantly and with insight about her parents' divorce, a complicated affair which led to her mother's drinking. Wesley wiped his hands and dropped the napkin to his lap. "Oh, yes," he said. "She writes well. She's going to Bard."

Moira said, "Read it to me."

His eyes scanned the first few lines— *A partial sun peered through the window/ penetrating her little-girl-pink room/ a pineapple impulse...* — and the restaurant suddenly seemed noisy, the whir of the fans, the clank and clatter of aluminum and porcelain in the kitchen, Sammy lifting chairs from the wood floor. Moira said, "It'll cheer you up," and Wesley wondered if he looked depressed. She placed her elbows on the table again, rested her chin in her palms. Moira flashed Wesley an encouraging smile and closing her eyes said, "And anyway, a man's never read poetry to me."

Sara first left because she had slept with another man, and Wesley couldn't get over it. It happened when she, Robbi, and two friends vacationed in Cancun, when the women were drinking and the man was not. Sara relayed the day's events mirthfully, told him of parachuting behind a boat and how Robbi had been flirting with younger men, then Wesley's reaction or lack of reaction prompted Sara to accuse him of not trusting her. They fought. She hung up. When Wesley called back — always he called back — Sara was showering, then twenty minutes passed, he rang again, and she was gone; Robbi and their friends watching Mexican wrestling and sipping margaritas in their hot beds.

A month later he heard the voice on the answering machine, a message Sara hadn't played or erased before Wesley returned from school. The man hadn't left his name or number, and though his voice took on the texture of

something mechanical playing through the small speaker, it sounded optimistic and confident; he seemed comfortable talking to their machine, leaving a message that Wesley's voice, not Sara's, invited.

Sara had been bathing when the man phoned. She strolled naked into the hall, her hair in a towel and her nipples dark and erect, but when Wesley confronted her she dressed quickly and sat with her legs crossed. Sara studied her fingernails instead of looking at Wesley while he cornered her with questions.

"Do you want specifics, Wesley? Or should we just skip to the sentencing phase of my trial?"

Wesley didn't want specifics; he *feared* them, and would fear them until Sara moved out, listening and watching her with trepidation, worrying she would do or say something, the name of a male friend or relative, with a slight and dark and knowing inflection which would hurl him into the particulars of her infidelity.

"We just fucked, honey. I was drinking. The night you called. No, okay, I know there's no just fucking, and I liked it — I'm sorry — but I never asked him to call. I never gave him my number."

He did not look at her. "*Your* number?"

The contention lasted for months, cold months despite the benevolent winters of south Texas. The arguing seemed tangible, a structure they entered and left and returned to, with corridors and wings and breadth. It moved beyond adultery and expanded into a vast mansion, became divided into his and her rooms which each frequented or avoided. One night eating popcorn and watching a comedy on television Sara said, "You don't trust me."

"No," he answered, regarding his wife for the first time since summer. Wesley noticed small creases on her eyelids, little wrinkles he'd not seen before. "I suppose I don't."

They slept together that night, surrendering to their bodies in ways they'd not done in years, like the last, explosive burst of energy sometimes afforded to the dying. In bed Sara shuddered and cried and Wesley held her until he wept as well. Though she never asked it of him, he wanted to give in and say *I'll trust again. We don't have to do this.* But neither conceded. Wesley woke before Sara did, and he felt her leaving him, though she wasn't yet moving, then the alarm sounded and she was, edging away from him to begin packing in the dark.

He didn't read poetry to Moira. Someone requested her in the kitchen. "My public," Moira said. Then added, "Don't let those kids and their libidos break you, Wesley."

It was past nine o'clock, and he suspected a message from Robbi awaited on his machine. His heart quickened thinking of it.

Then Moira was squatting beside him. "We're having people over tonight to celebrate the anniversary. You should arrive around, say, elevenish?" She kneeled close to Wesley, and her voice was soft. Her hands looked damp,

folded together on the edge of the table; her thigh warm beside Wesley's knee. He thanked her without accepting or declining the invitation. Moira flipped the menu card from the table and jotted street names and her address on its back. She pushed the directions toward Wesley and reiterated her offer, sounding attuned to the idea that he wouldn't show, then returned to the kitchen. Wesley shifted to thank her again, to impress through repetition his appreciation, but before he spoke she rounded the corner.

Driving home, Wesley regretted not being with Sara. He often wished they hadn't split, for although her transgression had predicated the break-up, always Wesley felt like the bereaved, almost at fault. He found himself collecting things to tell her or noticed that he still window-shopped for her, thinking she would like this blouse or that scarf, all before he remembered he was browsing for a woman with whom he no longer shared a marriage. He wanted to sit beside her hospital bed and repeat for Sara their happier times together, when he had surprised her with tickets to Hawaii or when as adults they'd made love in her backseat and a policeman shined his light into their eyes. Wesley thought Sara would do well to be reminded of those far away times when he loved her so much he could hardly breathe.

Robbi's message said only that nothing had changed. The doctors considered this good news, so she felt she might finally sleep and would call tomorrow. Her voice sounded exhausted. Though he could think of no reasonable excuse to disturb her, Wesley wanted to phone Robbi and knew, turning on lights and placing his bag on the bureau, seeing the phone and pouring wine, knew he would not resist his inclination. If he drove to the party and mingled with guests, he would not call and Robbi would get the sleep she deserved. He stripped to his t-shirt and shorts and took the students' poetry to bed. He marked eleven poems before realizing he'd not read a word. He flipped the light and attempted to will sleep. He tried hypnotizing his body, first his toes, then ankles, then calves, but upon reaching his knees he was growing more restless. He went to his window and peered into the abandoned street.

"Did I wake you?" Wesley asked. He glanced at his luminous clock as if Robbi could see him and the action would corroborate his concern. "I'm sorry," he said. "I just got home."

"Oh God, Wesley." Robbi's voice sounded dry, still asleep. "I thought you were a doctor. Didn't you get my message? I left a message."

"No. Oh, no." He waited for her to respond, hearing the ceiling fan in her room. When she stayed quiet, Wesley feared she was dozing off and said, "How are things?"

"Good," she said. "What time is it? I mean, as good as they can be. Nothing's changed, and that's what's good. Sara just looks asleep."

"Of course," Wesley said. Noise buzzed in their connection, a distant nighttime vibration on the line. He remembered how Sara couldn't sleep if her feet were under the covers, and in his memory saw her kicking off their comforter. "Listen, Robbi," he said after a moment, "I've got vacation time, it's the end of spring, maybe I should come out for a few days and relieve you."

“Hold on, Wesley.” Sheets rustled, then a few seconds later a faucet opened and water ran. Robbi was two years older than Sara, less successful and soured on love, but it had always seemed to Wesley, happier. When she returned her voice was smooth. “I wrote letters in the hospital today. An old man pays me to transcribe from a tape of him talking. I answered a classified ad. This afternoon I wrote to a senator, a preacher in Omaha, and the man’s hippie daughter.”

She’s tired, Wesley thought, just saying whatever comes into her mind. He said, “I’ll bet you’re good at that.”

“I’ve written five this week, and it seemed so strange at first, but now I just buckle down and do it. We grow accustomed to things quickly, don’t we, Wesley?”

“Yes,” Wesley said, “I’ve thought that.” A motorcycle revved outside Wesley’s window, and he heard the rider accelerating, shifting gears.

“Wesley, sweetheart, can we decide this tomorrow. Everything is stable here, so let’s relax in that and hash it out in the morning.”

“Sure, sure,” he said. Wesley felt himself sinking into disappointment. “Let’s get some rest. Things will be clearer in the morning,” he said because it sounded right.

“Are you heartbroken?” Robbi seemed suddenly awake.

“What?”

“It’s something the old man with the tapes asked his daughter in the letter today. She’s in a commune in Nevada. He’s worried about her, and bitter, so bitter, because she’s shackled up with some zealot in the desert.” Wesley heard Robbi adjust her pillow. “Never mind,” she said, “it was just a dumb question.” Robbi’s voice lifted, and in its rise Wesley heard the conversation closing. He hated having called her, but he rambled and heard anxiety in his voice before saying goodbye. He placed the receiver on its cradle, then lay back and again waited for sleep. Twenty minutes passed before he realized his eyes were open and he could almost discern his ceiling through the darkness.

As he drove, rounding the corner that would eventually give way to Moira’s neighborhood, Wesley tried unsuccessfully to remember leaving his house or locking his front door. He imagined Moira as an actress, not performing, but taking instruction from a director and rehearsing with a cast. He wondered if she had ever acted in local productions, if perhaps he and Sara had seen her perform and not realized it because she was costumed as a nymph or an old, crippled woman.

Cars crowded the curb in front of the house, BMW’s and expensive trucks, so Wesley parked three doors away. A woman cackled as he climbed from his car. His glasses fogged and he cleared them on his shirt. Moira’s was a one-story house, flanked by larger ones, nestled at the bottom of the curve before the dead-end. Wesley strode along the dark sidewalk and reached the front yard, where a gauzy amber light shone from a lamp surrounded by insects.

"I'd written you off, Mr. Wilson," Moira said. Wesley stopped and squinted toward the house. Through a picture window he saw a white piano against a lavender wall, but not Moira. "I'm on the porch," she said. "Sitting down."

Her legs were crossed. A sprinkler pulsed behind Wesley and the smell of damp grass weighted the air. He smiled at Moira and said, "I got lost."

"Okay." Her voice sounded dismissive, but not critical. "I got drunk."

Moira stood and pressed her cheek to Wesley's, made a kissing noise. She swayed and he reached to steady her. They laughed. Through the window, Wesley saw the party—men standing around a gold-tasseled pool table, a group of women holding drinks and admiring an oil painting of naked, pillowy figures lounging in a parlor.

"How's the party?"

"It's a *soiree*." Moira took a pebble from the porch and tossed it into the hedges. "It's exactly fabulous. I want to leave."

Moira wore a long skirt that appeared both dark green and black, and a white blouse with pearly buttons. Her hair was spikier, more feminine.

"But I can't drive," she said. "You'll have to whisk me away."

Moira levered herself up cautiously, and leaned against her door. She exhaled a long breath, and Wesley recalled her habit of blowing odd strands of her longer hair from her face. She was wearing her wedding ring but no shoes.

And Wesley wondered if he'd reached a threshold or if Moira had erected one with her words. He wondered if it was the same line Sara had faced and crossed in Cancun, if Moira was waiting for her proposition to appear uncloaked in his mind. He thought of Sara, so far from Mexico, drugged in a sparse hospital room with tubes in her arms and nose. For the first time adultery seemed simple to Wesley. Always before he'd imagined the tangled maneuvering of conspiring lovers, the strict knowledge of their spouses' schedules and the passionate deception that followed and charged the affair; yet now their actions seemed similar to the rush a child feels upon entering a horror movie, the thrill and exquisite agony of everything's invisibility and the comforting truth that it is only a departure, in a foreseeable time the lights will brighten and the predictability of real life will save them.

"You're not taking me off life support, Wesley."

"Sure," he said. A dog barked in a nearby yard. "I'm up for a drive."

"Groovy. Let me bid farewell to the *soiree*." She slipped inside and left Wesley alone on the shadowed porch.

He waited for ten minutes, pacing on the sidewalk. Because it was inevitable with the night and because he occasionally thought of it after chatting with Moira in the restaurant, Wesley featured himself becoming intimate with her. They would step into his car and ride to Wesley's house or maybe to The Palapa if she had the keys and unfold tablecloths over the cold floor. Wesley would watch her eyes close and lips part, then feel her face press into his neck, her hands on his back. Or they could be arrested by guilt, Moira struck shy and regretful, or Wesley himself retreating back into his real life, no longer capable

of visiting or viewing hers. Maybe they would drive for a short while then return and Moira would climb from his idling car and time would pass before they saw one another again. He thought to enter the party or to simply leave, but the front door opened and the shrill noise of music escaped into the air outside.

"Wesley?" Moira called. "Yoo-hoo, Wesley?"

Her husband stood beside her, and Moira smiled as Wesley marched up the walk. Marc stood a foot taller than Moira, probably six inches above Wesley, and he wore a gray suit with cream-colored moccasins. The eccentric genius, Wesley thought. He felt conspicuous; he told himself to act friendly. Marc's hair was wild out of its ponytail, and whether he was growing a beard or hadn't shaved recently, Wesley couldn't know. Moira held her arm around her husband's back, but as Wesley neared them, Marc stepped forward. It crossed Wesley's mind that Marc might punch him. He didn't know how to hold his hands.

"Marc," Moira said, "This is Wesley Wilson. He teaches poetry and is a writer." Wesley had never introduced himself that way to Moira and couldn't guess why she said it. He extended his hand. "Wesley Wilson, this is Marc Rodgers. He's my husband and tonight he's an asshole."

"Moira tells me you eat at The Palapa." Marc's was a high voice, a puppet's voice.

"Yes," Wesley said. Then added, "Three times this week."

Marc cocked his head, then grinned slightly and looked at Moira. Wesley wished he'd said something else.

"Will you join us for a drink?" Marc asked.

"Well," Wesley said and glanced at Moira. "Sure, sure," he said, "that sounds—"

"We're going for a drive," Moira said.

"Oh," Marc said. "Oh. Ok, right." Marc clasped his hands in front of him, shifted his weight. "Are you a billiard's man, Wesley?"

Wesley wanted to answer in a clever way, a way to amend with Marc. He said, "Nope. No skills."

Marc nodded. "Smart men don't gamble at someone else's game," he said. Moira glared at him. Marc leaned down and kissed her quickly, without touching her body, then he extended his hand and fixed Wesley with his eyes, sharp green eyes behind glasses without rims. "Wesley," he said. "We're making plenty of changes this year. Let us know what you think."

"Thank you," Wesley heard himself say, then, "I will."

"Moira, we need ice when you're finished."

"Fine, Marc."

"You two have a good time," Marc said. He smiled and nodded, like a father dismissing his daughter and her date. Then he returned to the house, entering quickly as if to avoid losing any more music. Moira stared at the door, a lovely oak-framed prism of etched glass. Maybe, Wesley thought, she was hoping Marc would reappear, then when he did not, she tromped toward the sidewalk into the darkness. Without a word, Wesley followed.

Moira wanted to smell the ocean, so Wesley drove to the bayfront and they sat on cool brick steps descending to the narrow beach. The night obscured the horizon, and the clouds resembled gray whales swimming through black water. Moira dug her toes into the sand, said it felt cold and not like sand at all. They spoke easily with each other and when Moira asked about Sara, Wesley told her of their split and of her accident. Moira gasped and touched his forearm with light fingers. "Oh God, why did I say that about life support?" she'd said. They talked of fires; Wesley had never been near one, but in her youth Moira had seen a plane crash into a field behind her home.

"Everyone died, that was obvious," Moira said. She leaned forward and pulled her knees under her arms. "Sometimes I dream of the passengers standing in the aisles with their little suitcases trying to find seats. Isn't that strange?"

"It might be stranger if you *didn't* dream about it." Wesley wondered if he'd start dreaming of Sara being rear-ended and her car turning to flame.

"Marc doesn't know." She rocked back and forth, still hugging her legs. "I mean, he knows about the crash, but not the dreams. You're the first. It's because I'm still a little mixy. Don't get worried."

"I'm not worried."

"Groovy," Moira said, facing the water. Her face was invisible to Wesley, though he suspected she'd closed her eyes and was letting the breeze and ocean sounds wash over her. "So, Wesley," she said, still looking away, "Is this your first fling?"

The words, or maybe the ease with which she spoke them, caught Wesley. His muscles flexed and he felt suddenly aware of every part of his body. He asked, "Is that what this is?"

She shifted and held him with her eyes; her elbow propped on her knee, chin in hand. Moira looked as if she'd just woken, smiling weakly. Then she blinked and faced the water again.

"After I got stung by that jellyfish, remember, on prom night, we all sat in the bed of someone's truck, drinking," Moira said. "And do you know what we saw? Coyotes. A whole little pack of them. Everyone got very quiet and still, but I wasn't scared. They were so skinny, those coyotes, just sniffing the sand and walking right in front of us." Moira dusted something from the bottom of her foot. Wesley noticed the gentle curve of her arch. "Then one by one they all slunk into the water and played in the waves. You should've been there. I couldn't take my eyes off of them."

"Not something you see everyday." Wesley leaned back, felt the exposed aggregate notch into his elbows. He remembered reading that a coyote four feet long can hide behind something less than a foot high, and the prospect of sharing the information excited him. "Coyotes can -"

"Wesley, I don't care about coyotes," Moira interrupted. She turned and touched his cheek with the back of her hand. "I'm sorry." She smiled, a different smile than Wesley had seen at The Palapa. "But that night, smelling the water and sand and even their fur, I thought to myself 'This is the most beautiful sight you'll ever see.'"

“What about the theater?” Wesley sensed the opportunity for an important discussion, one they would remember years later. He sat up.

“I’ve never been in a play.”

“I thought you had a drama degree.”

“I do, but I’ve never acted. I couldn’t cut it. Before all of his plays, Lawrence Olivier peeked at the audience through the curtain and said, ‘Not one of you poor bastards could do what I’m about to do.’ With me, he was right.”

The smell of bait wafted over Wesley, and he heard footsteps behind him. His mind flashed to an image of Marc or a policeman tapping on his shoulder. When he turned, it relieved him to see two large women, wearing baseball caps and carrying fishing gear. One said, “We don’t know that for sure. You get what you get. Nothing is objective.” The women reeked of cheap cigarettes. Moira leaned close to Wesley and whispered, “Dykes.”

Her hair smelled of shampoo. The fat women walked along a pier, one behind the other, toward a lamp and a man reeling in his fishing line.

“Marc and I used to have this fantasy woman,” Moira said, out of nowhere. “Just someone we created in our imaginations and we would have sex with her. Sasha. ‘Maybe we should invite Sasha over tonight.’ Marc would say. It was fun and silly for a while, then I started *hating* that bitch. I was *jealous* of her. So I blew up over it, and we haven’t slept in the same bed for years.” She made a mound in the sand, then smoothed it. Moira glanced at Wesley and her eyes had changed, now soft and reflective. She looked back to her feet. Wesley saw that her toenails were painted silver. “Of course there are larger problems, too,” she said. “So every so often I have flings. Marc doesn’t care. Maybe he likes it. Maybe he has them, too.”

“Isn’t that dangerous?”

“A little.” Moira’s voice strengthened. “Dangerous that these hairy-legged boys have gotten attached, but not disease dangerous. I don’t sleep with them.” She giggled and patted his thigh. “You’re not going to fuck me tonight, Wesley Wilson.”

“What a relief,” he said, slipping a laugh in his voice. Moira nudged Wesley with her shoulder, then pressed herself against him and draped her arm over his chest. Wesley liked the warmth of her body, the firmness of her breasts — though it felt unusual to sit like that. “Why don’t you leave him?”

“Sometimes you open your eyes and see that this is your life. There’s comfort in that.”

“Is that why you don’t wear your wedding ring at work?”

“No,” she said. “No, that’s because of the ground round.”

For a moment they listened to water sloshing and breaking on the concrete slag. It seemed strange to Wesley that he would find himself there tonight, a place he could not have predicted, and strange, too, that Sara was away from him in bad shape. Then Moira said, “Poor Sara, stuck in that goddamned scuba suit.”

Wesley felt his body tense, and he guessed Moira felt it too because she took his hand and laced her fingers through his. He thought of Sara padding around their rooms in her underwear.

"She'll hate it," Wesley said. "I spoke with her sister tonight. She asked me to fly out there." He didn't know why he lied.

"You're sweet." Moira hugged him. "No wonder all your little poets lust after you."

"What does that mean?"

"You've got the biggest heart and you're too dumb to ignore it. It's nice. You're a knight in shining armor, a sad and fucked-up knight, but who's counting?"

Wesley shrugged and squinted toward the pier. And as if he'd waited years to give it voice, he said, "I'm a martyr."

The words were too heavy, overwrought. Moira laughed a full wide-open laugh that made Wesley uncomfortable. "And what, my dear, convinced you of that?"

"Earlier tonight," Wesley said, unsure where it would lead, "I wished I had been burned in the car with her."

"That just means you still love her. There are worse things."

"Maybe it means I've always loved her more."

"Maybe, maybe not," Moira said. "Maybe love is only the opposite of being alone. Maybe you *can* love someone too much, or maybe love is just a moment in time, or a direction. Who knows? Maybe you're in love with me right now."

The moon hung directly above them, and suddenly Wesley felt alone in the universe under a spotlight, confined in a cramped, bright sphere. He thought about the old man dictating letters to his daughter, felt sorry that his daughter had gone off to the desert, looking for God. He could see one of the women on the pier, and it surprised him how quickly someone so fat could disappear from view. It occurred to him that when the women had strolled by earlier, they'd probably assumed he and Moira were married. Then under that pale moon, which illuminated Moira's face and hands and odd sections of the jetty and colored Wesley's flesh a milky gray, he imagined tourists happening upon Sara and the man in Cancun, seeing them as husband and wife. Wesley thought maybe it was Steve Beeson, the insurance man in the car accident, who'd been in Mexico. *Maybe love is a direction.* Eventually they would return to a life of their own, not one with intimacy as the ultimate and everything else as shadow, but a regular life of mortgages and rented movies from which passion, happily, subsided.

With all of this swirling in his mind, Wesley kissed Moira. Her mouth tasted faintly of beer. She moaned in his mouth once, sighed. Cars swooshed behind them, their tires sounding like waves, and there were the waves, too. Moira unbuttoned the top of Wesley's shirt and slid her hand inside, palming his chest. He shivered. His glasses pressed against his nose, but soon they were sitting on the cement, though Wesley didn't remember who had removed them. Moira leaned her forehead against his and traced his face with her finger. She inhaled him. Wesley felt Moira studying him, although his eyes remained closed to avoid glimpsing some condemning recognition or sorrow.

“Well, Wesley Wilson,” she whispered, sounding a little drunk again, “You’re just another blues song. ‘You done lost your good thing now.’” She nuzzled his nose, then touched her lips to each of his eyelids. “You’re having a fling.”

And if he felt alone earlier, now Wesley felt crowded and untethered at once, as if he could see through the walls and the city was overrun with lovers, in restaurants and dark taverns, in cars, and at unexpected places, grocery stores and little league games. And on the beach, on damp descending steps with a breeze blowing from the ocean. He thought of his students who were fantasizing about tomorrow’s prom and who would find themselves in motel rooms or darkened hallways or on the beach groping each other in what they mistook for love. How many things we mistake for love, he thought. His mind returned to Sara—in the hospital, in the back of her car with the policeman’s flashlight blinding her, in Cancun and in the arms of men Wesley would never know. He knew she would live, but he knew, too, that he would never see her again. It was as if Sara *had* died, but only for Wesley. Soon he could think of nothing else, even with Moira’s blouse and bra open under the glowing moon, her breasts full and her nipples the brownish purple of coral, even with her skirt bunched to her waist. And when she peered into his eyes and spoke his name, her voice quietly longing, he could not bare to hear it, so Wesley brought his finger to her lips and hushed her, as if they were at a funeral.