



## **Horse Latitudes**

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### **About Kadrey:**

Richard Kadrey is a novelist, freelance writer, and photographer based in San Francisco. Kadrey's first novel, *Metrophage*, was published in hardcover in 1988 by Victor Gollancz Ltd., and went on to various other American and foreign printings in paperback. Mac Tonnies' *Cyberpunk/Postmodern Book Reviews* calls *Metrophage* "one of the quintessential 1980s cyberpunk novels," going on to describe "a gritty acid-trip through an ultraviolent L.A. where nothing is what it seems... . Alongside novels such as [William Gibson's] *Neuromancer* and Lewis Shiner's debut novel *Frontera*, *Metrophage* helped establish the cyberpunk aesthetic: relentless, paranoid and playfully cynical." Kadrey's second novel, *Kamikaze L'Amour*, is described by the same source as "mesmerizing... a surreal (and distinctly Ballardian) account of synesthesia and mutant desire set in the jungle-choked ruins of L.A." Kadrey's short story *Carbon Copy: Meet the First Human Clone* was filmed as *After Amy*. The publisher website, Amazon booksellers, and other sources list a July 15, 2007 publication date for Kadrey's next book, *Butcher Bird: A Novel Of The Dominion* (Night Shade Books). Other works include collaborative graphic novels and over 50 published short stories. His non-fiction books as a writer and/or editor include *The Catalog of Tomorrow* (Que/TechTV Publishing, 2002), *From Myst to Riven* (Hyperion, 1997), *The Covert Culture Sourcebook* and its sequel (St. Martin's Press, New York, 1993 and 1994); Kadrey also hosted a live interview show on Hotwired in the 1990s called *Covert Culture*. He was an editor at print magazines *Shift* and *Future Sex*, and at online magazines *Signum* and *Stim*. He has published articles about art, culture and technology in publications including *Wired*, *Omni*, *Mondo 2000*, the *San Francisco Chronicle*, *SF Weekly*, *Ear*, *Artforum*, *ArtByte*, *Bookforum*, *World Art*, *Whole Earth Review*, *Reflex*, *Science Fiction Eye*, and *Interzone*. Source: Wikipedia

### **Also available on Feedbooks for Kadrey:**

- *Metrophage* (1988)
- *Butcher Bird* (2005)
- *Zombie* (2002)
- *A Cautionary Tale* (2002)
- *SETI* (2002)
- *Mudrosti* (2002)
- *Second-Floor Girls* (2002)
- *Bad Blood* (2002)
- *Ubiquitous Computing* (2002)

- *Chronalgia* (2002)

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Richard Kadrey

May 1995

This story is excerpted from my novel, KAMIKAZE L'AMOUR (St. Martin's Press, 1995). It first appeared in OMNI BEST SCIENCE FICTION, Vol. One.

Fame is just schizophrenia with money.

I died on a Sunday, when the new century was no more than four or five hours old. Midnight would have been a more elegant moment (and a genuine headline grabber), but we were still on stage, and I thought that suicide, like masturbation, might lose something when experienced with more than 100,000 close, personal friends.

I don't recall exactly when I accepted the New Year's Eve gig at Madison Square Garden, the band had never played one before, but it became inextricably tied in with my decision to kill myself. Somehow I couldn't bear the idea of a twenty-first century. Whenever I thought of it, I was overwhelmed by a memory: flying in a chartered plane over the Antarctic ice fields on my thirtieth birthday. A brilliant whiteness tinged with freezing blue swept away in all directions. It was an unfillable emptiness. It was death. It could never be fed or satisfied—neither the ice sheet nor the new century—-at least, not by me.

No one suspected, of course. Throughout this crisis of faith, I always remained true to fame. I acted out the excesses that were expected of me. I denied rumors that I had invented. I spat at photographers, and managed to double my press coverage.

The suicide itself was a simple, dull, anticlimactic affair. The police had closed the show quickly when the audience piled up their seats and started a bonfire during our extended "Auld Lang Syne." Back in my room at the Pierre I swallowed a bottle of pills and vodka. I felt stupid and disembodied, like some character who had been written out of a Tennessee Williams play—Blanche Dubois' spoiled little brother. I found out later that it was Kumiko, my manager, who found me swimming in my own vomit, and got me to the hospital. When I awoke, I was in Oregon, tucked away in the Point Mariposa Recovery Center, where the movie stars come to dry out. There wasn't even a fence, just an endless expanse of lizard green lawn. Picture a cemetery. Or a country club with thorazine.

I left the sanitarium three weeks later, without telling anyone. I went out for my evening walk and just kept on walking. The Center was housed in a converted mansion built on a bluff over a contaminated beach near Oceanside. I had, until recently, been an avid rock climber. Inching your way across a sheer rock face suspended by nothing but your own chalky fingers is the only high comparable to being on stage (death, spiritual or physical, being the only possible outcome of a wrong or false move in either place). It took me nearly an hour to work my way down the granite wall to a dead beach dotted with Health Department

warning signs and washed-up medical waste. I checked to see that my lithium hadn't fallen out on the climb down. Then, squatting among plastic bags emblazoned with biohazard stickers, and scrawny gulls holding empty syringes in their beaks, I picked up a rusty scalpel and slit the cuffs of my robe. Two thousand dollars in twenties and fifties spilled out onto the gray sand.

I left my robe on the sand, following the freeway shoulder in sweat pants and a t-shirt. In Cannon Beach I bought a coat and a ticket on a boat going down the coast to Los Angeles. My ticket only took me as far as San Francisco. We reached the city two days later, in the dark hours of the early morning. As we sailed in under the Golden Gate Bridge, San Francisco was aglow like some art nouveau foundry, anesthetized beneath dense layers of sea fog. Far across the bay, on the Oakland side, I could just make out the tangle of mangrove swamp fronting the wall of impenetrable green that was the northernmost tip of the rainforest.

Six weeks later, I left my apartment in the Sunset District and headed for a south of Market Street bar called Cafe Juju. A jumble of mossy surface roots, like cords from God's own patchbay, had tangled themselves in the undercarriages of abandoned cars on the broad avenue that ran along Golden Gate Park. Here and there hundred foot palms and kapoks jutted up from the main body of the parkland, spreading their branches, stealing light and moisture from the smaller native trees. The Parks Department had given up trying to weed out the invading plant species, and concentrated instead on keeping the museums open and the playgrounds clear for the tourists who never came any more.

Downtown, the corners buzzed with street musicians beating out jittery sambas on stolen guitars, improvised sidewalk markets catering to the diverse tastes of refugees from Rio, Mexico City, and Los Angeles. Trappers from Oakland hawked marmosets and brightly plumed jungle birds that screamed like scalded children. In the side streets, where the lights were mostly dead, golden-eyed jaguars hunted stray dogs.

Overhead, you could look up and watch the turning of the new constellation: Fer-De-Lance, made up of a cluster of geosynchronous satellites. Most belonged to NASA and the U.N., but the Army and the DEA were up there too, watching the progress of the jungle and refugees northward.

I was walking to a club called Cafe Juju.

Inside, a few heads turned in my direction. There was some tentative whispering around the bar, but not enough to be alarming. I was thinner than when I'd left the band. I'd let my beard grow, and since I had

stopped bleaching my hair, it had darkened to its natural and unremarkable brown. As I threaded my way through the crowd, a crew-cut blonde pretended to bump into me. I ignored her when she said my name, and settled at a table in the back, far away from the band. "Mister Ryder," said the man sitting across from me. "Glad you could make it."

I shook the gloved hand he offered. "Since you called me that name so gleefully, I assume you got it?" I said.

He smiled. "How about a drink?"

"I like to drink at home. Preferably alone."

"Got to have a drink," he said. "It's a bar. You don't drink, you attract attention."

"All right, I'll have a Screwdriver."

"A health nut, right? Getting into that California lifestyle? Got to have your Vitamin C." He hailed a waitress and ordered us drinks. The waitress was thin, with close-cropped black hair and an elegantly hooked nose sporting a single gold ring. She barely noticed me.

"So, did you get it?" I asked.

Virilio rummaged through the inner recesses of his battered Army trenchcoat. He wore it with the sleeves rolled up; his forearms, where I could see them, were a solid mass of snakeskin tattoos. I couldn't be sure where the tattoos ended because his hands were covered in skin-tight black kid gloves. He looked younger than he probably was, had the eager and restless countenance of a bird of prey. He pulled a creased white envelope from an inside pocket and handed it to me. Inside was a birth certificate and a passport.

"They look real," I said.

"They are real," Virilio said. "If you don't believe me, take those down to any DMV and apply for a drivers license. I guarantee they'll check out as legit."

"It makes me nervous. It seems too easy."

"Don't be a schmuck. The moment you told me your bank accounts were set up with names from the Times obituaries, I knew we were in business. I checked out all the names you gave me. In terms of age and looks, this guy is the closest match to you."

"And you just sent to New York for this?"

"Yeah," Virilio said, delighted by his own cleverness. "There's no agency that checks birth certificates against death records. Then, I took your photo and this perfectly legal birth certificate to the passport office, pulled a few strings, and got it pushed through fast." =46rom the stage, the guitar cut loose with a wailing Stratocaster solo, like alley cats and

razor blades at a million decibels over a dense batucada backbeat. I closed my eyes as turquoise fireballs went off in my head. "You never told me why you needed this," said Virilio.

"I had a scrape with the law a few years ago," I told him. "Bringing in rare birds and snakes from south of the border. Department of Fish and Game seized my passport."

Virilio's smile split the lower part of his face into a big toothy crescent moon. "That's funny. That's fucking hysterical. I guess these weird walking forests put your ass out of business."

"Guess so," I said.

The waitress with the nose brought our drinks and Virilio said, "Can you catch this round?" As I counted out the bills, Virilio slid his arm around the waitress's hips. Either she knew him or took him for just another wasted homeboy because she did not react at all. "Frida here plays music," said Virilio. "You ought to hear her tapes, she's real good. You ever play in a band, Ryder?"

"No," I said. "Always wanted to, but never found the time to learn an instrument." I looked at Frida the waitress and handed her the money. From this new angle I saw that along with her nose ring, Frida's left earlobe was studded with a half-dozen or so tiny jewelled studs. There were more gold rings just above her left eyebrow, which was in the process of arching. Her not unattractive lips held a suppressed smirk that could only mean that she had noticed me noticing her.

"That's interesting," Virilio said. "I thought everybody your age had a little high school dance band or something."

"Sorry."

Frida folded the bills and dropped them into a pocket of her apron. "They're playing some of my stuff before the Yanomam=6 Boys set on Wednesday. Come by, if you're downtown," she said. I nodded and said "Thanks." As she moved back to the bar, I saw Virilio shaking his head. "Freaking Frida," he said.

"What does that mean?"

"Frida was okay. Used to sing in some bands; picked up session work. Now she's into this new shit." Virilio rolled his eyes. "She sort of wiggled out a few months ago. Started hauling her tape recorder over to Marin and down south into the jungle. Wants to digitize it or something. Says she looking for the Music of Jungles. Says it just like that, with capital letters." He shrugged and sipped his drink. "I've heard some of this stuff. Sounds like a movie soundtrack, 'Attack =6rom the Planet Whacko,' if you know what I mean."

"You ever been into the rainforest?" I asked.

"Sure. I've been all up and down the coast. They keep 101 between here and L.A. pretty clear."

"L.A.'s as far south as you can get?"

"No, but after that, you start running into government defoliant stations, rubber tappers, and these monster dope farms cut right into the jungle. Those farms are scary. Mostly white guys running them, with Mexicans and Indians pulling the labor. And they are hardcore. Bloody you up and throw your ass to the crocodiles just for laughs."

"I may need you to do your name trick again. I have some money in Chicago-"

"Not anymore you don't. Not for two or three months. Nothing but monkeys, snakes and malaria out that way, from Galveston to Detroit. If you have any swamp land in Florida, congratulations. It's really a swamp." The kid took a sip of his beer. "Of course, I could always do a data search, see where the Feds reassigned the assets of your bank."

"No never mind," I said, deciding I didn't particularly want this kid bird-dogging me through every database he could get to. "It's not that important."

Virilio shrugged. "Suit yourself," he said, and shook his head wearily at the bare-breasted young woman who bumped drunkenly into our table. "Run, honey," he told her. "The fashion police are hot on your trail," as she staggered over to her friends at the bar. The local scene-makers had taken the heat as their cue to go frantically native; the majority of them were dressed in Japanese-imported imitations of Brazilian Indian gear. It was like some grotesque acid trip combining the worst of Dante with a Club Med brochure for Rio: young white kids, the girls wearing nothing but body paints or simple Lacandon hipils they had seen in some high school slide show; the boys in loin cloths, showing off their bowl-style haircuts, mimicking those worn by Amazonian tribesmen.

"The Santeros say that this shit, the jungle, the animals, all the craziness, it's all revenge. Amazonia getting back at all the stupid, greedy bastards who've been raping it for all these years."

"That's a pretty harsh judgement," I said. "Are you always so Old Testament?"

"You've got me all wrong. I'm thrilled. L.A.'s gone. They finally got something besides TV executives and mass murderers to grow in that goddamned desert." Virilio smiled. "Of course, I don't really buy all that

mystical shit. The FBI are covering up for the people who are really responsible."

"The FBI?" I asked.

"It's true," Virilio said. "They hushed it up—same branch that iced Kennedy and ran the Warren Commission.

"A couple of geneticists who'd been cut loose from Stanford were working for the Brazilian government, cooking up a kind of extra fast-grow plants to re-seed all the burned-up land in the Amazon. Supposedly, these plants were locked on fast forward—they'd grow quick and die quick, stabilizing the soil so natural plants could come in. Only the bastards wouldn't die. They kept on multiplying, and choked out everything else. Six weeks after they planted the first batch, Rio was gone. It's all true. I know somebody that has copies of the FBI reports."

The band finished their set and left the stage to distracted applause. I stood and dropped a jiffy bag on Virilio's side of the table. "I've got go now. Thanks for the ID," I said. Virilio slipped some of the bills from the end of the bag and riffled through them. "Non-sequential twenties," I said, "just like you wanted."

He smiled and put the bag in his pocket. "Just to prevent any problems, just to short circuit any second thoughts you might be having about why you should give a person like me all this money for some paper you could have gotten yourself, I want to make sure you understand that the nature of my work is facilitation. I'm a facilitator. I'm not a dealer, or muscle, or a thief, but I can do all those things, if required. What I got you wasn't a birth certificate; any asshole could have gotten you a birth certificate. What I got you was the birth certificate. One that matches you, close enough so that getting you a passport, letting you move around, will be no problem. I had to check over two years of obituaries, contact the right agencies, grease the right palms. It's knowing which palms to grease and when that you're paying me for. Not that piece of paper."

I slid my new identity into my jacket. "Thanks," I said.

Outside Cafe Juju, the warm, immobile air had taken on the quality of some immense thing at rest—a mountain or phantom whale, pressing down on the city, squeezing its Sargasso dreams from the cracks in the walls out onto the streets. I pulled out my emergency hip flask and took a drink. I was reminded of the region of windless ocean known at the Horse Latitudes, called that in remembrance of the Spanish galleons that would sometimes find themselves adrift in those dead waters. The crews would strip the ship down to the bare wood in hopes of lightening

themselves enough to move in the feeble breeze. When everything else of value had been thrown overboard, the last thing to go were the horses. Sometimes the Horse Latitudes were carpeted for miles with a floating rictus of palominos and Arab stallions, buoyed up by the immense floating kelp beds and their own churning internal gases. The Horse Latitudes were not a place you visited, but where you found yourself if you allowed your gaze to be swallowed up by the horizon, or to wander on the map to places you might go, rather than where you were.

I'd walked a couple of blocks up Ninth Street when I realized I was being followed. It was my habit to stop often in front of stores, apparently to window shop or admire the beauty of my own face. In fact, I was checking the reflections caught in the plate glass, scanning the street behind me for faces that had been there too long. This time I couldn't find a face, but just beyond a wire pen where a group of red-faced campasenos were betting on cock fights, I did see a jacket. It was bulky and black, of some military cut, and one side was decked with the outline of a bird skull done in clusters of purple and white rhinestones. The jacket's owner hung back where vehicles and pedestrians blocked most of the streetlight. It was only the fireworks in the rhinestones that had caught my eye.

Just to make sure it wasn't simple paranoia, I went another block up Ninth and stopped by the back window of a VW van full of caged snakes. When I checked again, the jacket had moved closer. I cut to my right, down a side street, then left, back toward the market. The jacket hung behind me, the skull a patch of hard light against the dark buildings.

I ran down an alley between a couple of closed shops and kept going, taking corners at random. The crumbling masonry of the ancient industrial buildings was damp where humidity had condensed on the walls. I found myself on a dark street where the warehouses were lost behind the blooms of pink and purple orchids. The petals looked like frozen fire along the walls. Behind me, someone kicked a bottle, and I sprinted around another corner. I was lost in the maze of alleys and drivethrus that surrounded the rotting machine shops and abandoned wrecking yards. Sweating and out of breath, I ran toward a light. When I found it, I stopped.

It was a courtyard or a paved patch of ground where a building had once stood. Fires were going in a few battered oil drums, fed by children with slabs of dismantled billboards, packing crates, and broken furniture. Toward the back of the courtyard, men had something cooking

on a spit rigged over one of the drums. Their city-issued mobile shelters, something like hospital gurneys with heavy-gauge wire coffins mounted on top, were lined in neat rows against one wall. I had heard about the tribal homeless encampments, but had never seen one before. Many of the homeless were the same junkies and losers that belonged to every big city, but most of the tribal people, I'd heard, were spillover from the refugee centers and church basements. Whole villages would sometimes find themselves abandoned in a strange city, after being forcibly evacuated from their farms in Venezuela and Honduras. They roamed the streets with their belongings crammed into government-issue snail shells, fading into a dull wandering death.

But it wasn't always that way. Some of the tribes were evolving quickly in their new environment, embracing the icons of the new world that had been forced on them. Many of the men still wore lip plugs, but their traditional skin stains had been replaced with metal-flake auto body paint and dime store make up. The women and children wore necklaces of auto glass, strips of mylar, and iridescent watch faces. Japanese silks and burned-out fuses were twined in their hair.

Whatever mutual curiosity held us for the few seconds that I stood there, passed when some of the men stepped forward, gesturing and speaking to me in a language I didn't understand. I started moving down the alley. Their voices crowded around me; their hands touched my back and tugged at my arms. They weren't threatening, but I still had to suppress an urge to run. I looked back for the jacket that had followed me from Cafe Juju, but it wasn't back there.

I kept walking, trying to stay calm. I ran through some breathing exercises a yoga guru I'd knew for a week in Munich had taught me. After a few minutes, though, some of the tribesmen fell away. And when I turned a corner, unexpectedly finding myself back on Ninth, I discovered I was alone.

On Market, I was too shaky to bargain well and ended up paying a gypsy cab almost double the usual rate for a ride to the Sunset. At home, I took a couple of Percodans and washed them down with vodka from the flask. Then I lay down with all my clothes on, reaching into my pocket to hold the new identity Virilio had provided me. Around dawn, when the howler monkeys started up in Golden Gate Park, I fell asleep.

I tried to write some new songs, but I had become overcome with inertia, and little by little lost track of myself. Sometimes, on the nights when the music was especially bad or I couldn't stand the random animal racket from the park anymore, I'd have a drink, and then walk. The

squadrons of refugees and the damp heat of the rainforest that surrounded the city made the streets miserable much of the time, but I decided it was better to be out in the misery of the streets than to hide with the rotten music in my room.

I was near Chinatown, looking for the building where I'd shared a squat years before, when I ran into a crowd of sleepwalkers. At first, I didn't recognize them, so complete was their impression of wakefulness. Groups of men and women in business clothes waited silently for buses they had taken the previous morning, while merchants sold phantom goods to customers who were home in bed. Smiling children played in the streets, dodging ghost cars. Occasionally a housewife from the same neighborhood as a sleepwalking grocer (because these night strolls seemed to be a localized phenomenon, effecting one neighborhood at a time) would reenact a purchase she had made earlier that day, entering into a kind of slow motion waltz with the merchant, examining vegetables that weren't there or weighing invisible oranges in her hand. No one had an explanation for the sleepwalking phenomenon. Or rather, there were so many explanations that they tended to cancel each other out. The one fact that seemed to be generally accepted was that the night strolls had become more common as the rainforest crept northward toward San Francisco, as if the boundary of Amazonia was surrounded by a region compounded of the collective dreams of all the cities it had swallowed.

I followed the sleepwalkers, entering Chinatown through the big ornamental gate on Grant Street, weaving in, out, and through the oddly beautiful group pantomime. The streets were almost silent there, except for the muted colors of unhurried feet and rustling clothes. None of the sleepwalkers ever spoke, although they mouthed things to each other. They frowned, laughed, got angry, reacting to something they had heard or said when they had first lived that particular moment.

It was near Stockton Street that I heard the looters. Then I saw them, moving quickly and surely through the narrow alleys, loaded down with merchandise from the sleepwalkers' open stores. The looters took great pains not to touch any of the sleepers. Perhaps they were afraid of being infected with the sleepwalking sickness.

Watching them, cop paranoia got a hold of me, and I started back out of Chinatown. I was almost to the gate, dodging blank-eyed Asian children and ragged teenagers with armloads of bok choy and video tapes when I saw something else: Coming put of a darkened dim sum place—a

jewelled bird skull on a black jacket. The jacket must have spotted me too, because it darted back inside. I followed it in.

A dozen or so people, mostly elderly Chinese couples sat miming silent meals inside the unlit restaurant. Cats, like the homeless, had apparently figured out the pattern the sleepwalking sickness took through the city. Dozens of the mewling animals moved around the tables, rubbing against sleepers' legs, and licking grease off the stacked the dim sum trays. I went back to the kitchen, moving through the middle of the restaurant, trying to keep the sleepers around me as a demilitarized zone between me and the jacket. I wasn't as certain of myself inside the restaurant as I had been on the street. Too many sudden shadows. Too many edges hiding between the bodies of the dreaming patrons.

There were a couple of aproned men in the kitchen, kneading the air into dim sum. Cats perched on the cutting tables and freezer like they owned the place. Whenever one of the sleepwalking cooks opened the refrigerator doors, the cats went berserk, crowding around his legs, clawing at leftover dumplings and chunks of raw chicken. There was, however, no jacket back there. Or in the restroom. The rear exit was locked. I went back out through the restaurant, figuring I'd blown it. I hadn't had any medication in a couple of weeks, and decided I'd either been hallucinating again, or had somehow missed the jacket while checking out the back. Then from the dark she said my name, the name she knew me by. I turned in the direction of the voice, and the jewelled skull winked at me from the corner.

I had walked within three feet of her. She was slumped at a table with an old woman, only revealing herself when she shifted her gaze from the tablecloth to me, doing a good imitation of the narcotised pose of a sleeper. She motioned for me to come over and I sat down. Then she pushed a greasy bag of cold dim sum at me. "Have one," she said, like we were old friends.

"Frida?" I said.

She smiled. "Welcome to the land of the dead."

"Why were you following me?"

"I was raiding the fridge." She reached into the bag and pulled out a spring roll, which she wrapped in a paper napkin and handed to me. As she moved, I caught a faint glimmer off the gold rings above her eyebrow. "You, I believe, were the one who only seconds ago was pinballing through here like Blind Pew."

"I'll have my radar checked. Do you always steal your dinner?"

"Whenever I can. I'm only at the cafe a couple of nights a week. And tips aren't what they used to be. Even the dead are peckish around here."

The old woman with whom we shared the table leaned from side to side in her chair, laughing the fake, wheezing laugh of sleepers, her hands describing arcs in the air. "So maybe you weren't following me tonight," I said. "Why did follow me the other night from Cafe Juju."

"You remind me of somebody."

"Who?"

"I don't know. Your face doesn't belong here. But I don't know where it should be, either. I know I've seen you before. Maybe you're a cop and you busted me. Maybe that's why you look familiar. Maybe you're a bad guy I saw getting booked. Maybe we went steady in the third grade. Maybe we had the same piano teacher. Ever since I saw you at the cafe, I've got all these maybes running through my head."

"Maybe you've got me mixed up with someone."

"Not a chance," said Frida. She smiled and in the half-light of the restaurant I couldn't tell if she knew who I was or not. She didn't look crazy, but she still scared me. I'd gone to the funeral of more than one friend who, walking home, had turned a corner and walked into his or her own Mark David Chapman. Frida's smile made her look strangely vapid, which surprised me because her eyes were anything but that. Her face had too many lines for someone her age, but there was a kind of grace in the high bones of her cheeks and forehead.

"You're not a cop or a reporter, are you?" I asked.

Her eyes widened in an expression that was somewhere between shock and amusement. "No. Unlike you, I'm pretty much what I appear to be."

"You're a waitress who tails people on her breaks."

She shrugged and bit into her spring roll, singing, "Get your kicks on Route Sixty-six."

"Now you're just being stupid," I said. "Virilio didn't tell me that part. He just said you were crazy."

"Did he say that?" She looked away and her face fell into shadow. I leaned back, thinking that if she was crazy, I might have just said the thing that would set her off. But a moment later she turned back, wearing the silly smile. "Virilio's one to talk, playing Little Caesar in a malaria colony." She picked up a paper napkin from the table and, with great concentration, began wiping her hands, a finger at a time. Then she said: "I'm looking for something."

"The Music of Jungles?"

"Jesus, did he tell you my favorite color, too?"

"He just told me it was something you'd told him."

"Red," she said and shrugged. "I am looking for something. But it's kind of difficult to describe."

"California is on its last legs. If you want to play music, why don't you go to New York?"

She reached down and picked up a wandering cat. It was a young Abyssinian, and it immediately curled up in her lap, purring. "What I'm looking for isn't in New York," she said. "I thought from your face you might be looking for something, too. That's why I followed you."

"What is the Music of Jungles?" I asked.

She shook her head. "No, I'm sorry. I think I made a mistake."

I slid the hip flask from my pocket and took a drink. "Tell you the truth, I am looking for something, too."

"I knew it," she said. "What?"

"Something new. Something I've only seen in flashes. A color and quality of sound that I've never been able to get out of my head. I started out looking for it, but got distracted along the way. I figure this is my last chance to see if it's really there, or just another delusion."

"You're a musician?" she asked.

"Yes."

She picked up the flask, sniffed, and took a drink, smiling and coughing a little as the vodka went down. "What's your name?" she asked.

"You already know my name."

"I know a name," she said, setting down the flask. "Probably something store bought. Maybe from Virilio?"

I shrugged and took the flask from her. "Your turn. What's the Music of Jungles?"

She looked down and leaned back in her chair, stroking the cat. "First off, " she said, "it's not the Music of Jungles. Jungles are in Tarzan movies. What you're trying to describe is a tropical forest or a rainforest. I don't use rainforest sounds in my music because I think they're beautiful, although I do think they're beautiful," she said. "I use them because they're the keys to finding the Songtracks of a place."

Frida set the cat on the floor and leaned forward, elbows resting on the table. "Here's what it is," she said, "Some of the tribal people in Amazonia believe that the way the world came into existence was through different songs sung by different gods, a different song for each place. The land, they believe, is a map of a particular melody. The contours of the hills, the vegetation, the animals—they're notes, rests and rhythms in the

song that calls a place into being, and also describes it. Over thousands of years the Indians have mapped all the songs of Amazonia, walked everywhere and taught the songs to their children.

"Where we are now, though, is special," Frida said, and she drew her hands up in a gesture that took in all of our surroundings." The forest that surrounds San Francisco, it's Amazonia, but it's new. And it has its own unique Songtrack. That's what all my music is about. That's what I'm all about. No one has found the song of this part of Amazonia yet, so I'm going to find it," she said.

"When you find it, what will the song tell you?" I asked.

She shrugged, pressing her hands deep into the pockets of her jacket. "I don't exactly know. Maybe the story of the place. What what went on here in the past; what'll happen in the future. I don't know exactly. It's enough for me just to do it."

I put the flask in my pocket. "Listen Frida," I said, "the atmosphere in here is definitely not growing on me. Would you like to go someplace?"

"I don't live too far away." She paused and said, "Maybe I could play you some of my music."

"I'd like that," I said. As she stood she said, "You know, you managed to still not tell me your name."

I looked at her for a moment. An old man shuffled between us, nodding and waving to sleeping friends. I thought about the Music of Jungles. Was this woman insane, I wondered. I'd been dreaming so long myself, it hardly seemed to matter. I told her my real name. She hardly reacted at all which, to tell you the truth, bothered me more than it should have. She picked up a bulky purse-sized object from the floor and slung it over her shoulder, looped her arm in mine, and led me into the street.

"This is a digital recorder," she said, indicating the purse-thing. "I go to Marin and Oakland whenever I can, fewer people means I get cleaner recordings. I prefer binaural to stereo for the kind of work I'm doing. It has more natural feel."

"Teach me to use it?" I asked.

"Sure. I think you can handle it."

"Why do I feel like I just passed an audition?"

"Maybe because you just did."

In the quivering light of the mercury vapor lamps, the activity of the Chinatown looters was almost indistinguishable from the sleeping ballet of children and merchants.

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