

## AUSTIN

## OLD STYLE

Darren and Austin sit on stools at opposite ends of the room and run through six songs. They sing songs from the old, weird America, songs about locomotives, about marriage, about labor and death. Halfway through "Dog and Gun" Austin flubs some notes and loses the rhythm. He slaps the side of his guitar.

—Break time, he declares. He wiggles his fingers, sets the guitar on the floor.

—Sounding good tonight, says Darren.

Austin takes a long draw from his bottle of Anchor Steam. —Thanks, he says. —You too.

Darren picks up his own bottle; it's empty. —I'll be right back, he says. —Thanks again for bringing the beer, by the way.

—No problem, Austin says.

Darren disappears around the corner. Austin listens to his footsteps, the sounds of him opening the fridge and cracking the cap off of a new beer. *Just like old times*, he thinks. He looks at his bottle of Anchor Steam and thinks back to when he and Darren first started playing together, in the Social Retards, along with Lucas, their drummer; the three of them got together every Saturday during the summer of '98, in Lucas' garage, polishing off a case of Old Style over the course of an afternoon, getting progressively drunker and grimmer as the afternoon progressed. He remembers lying on his back on an oily rug, pointing his head at his cranked amp, holding the guitar up over his face, trying to play the strings with his bare feet.

Darren returns.

—Hey, he says. —I forgot.

–What?

–I needed to tell you something.

–What is it?

–Rose called me.

This is not a sentence that Austin was expecting to hear. It is as though Darren has reached into him and removed some key piece, for he suddenly feels like his entire emotional structure is trembling and buckling, in danger of imminent collapse. Things shift. The structure groans. He blinks. He thinks nothing.

–Really, he says.

–Yeah, it surprised me, too. It's been like, what, two years.

–Yeah, Austin says. –Longer.

The last time he saw her was New Year's Eve, 1999. At a party. They'd been broken up for a month. He was drunk and the two of them were up on a corner of the roof and the streets below were a clamor of car horns and firecrackers.

–I'm freezing, she said.

–Come here, he said. He opened up his heavy peacoat and drew her against him. She clasped her hands together at the small of his back and rested her head against his chest and he leaned down to smell her hair. He could feel her body jerk and he knew that she was crying.

–Ssh, he said. –Ssh.

Austin drains the last of his beer. –Where even is she these days? he says.

–Well, Darren says. –She moved back to Minneapolis for a while, back in with her folks. You knew that, right?

Austin shrugs. –Sort of. I mean, I guess I heard that.

–And, I don't know, she's still out there, not with her folks any more, she got her own place, I guess, I didn't really get all the details. But she's planning to come out here. For a visit.

—Really, Austin says again.

—Yeah, Darren says. —She asked about you. I think she wants to see you.

Austin puts the empty bottle up to his mouth and tilts it back.

—What did you tell her? he asks.

—Nothing, Darren says. —That you and I were playing together again. That you were doing OK.

—Give her my number, he says. —She can call me if she wants.

He doesn't ask for hers. He doesn't think he wants to have it. Not yet.