A Last Set by Daniel Pope

**THE VAN WAS EMPTY** except for me, my purple JanSport at my feet, and the jumble of music equipment in the back. I opened the door and was startled by the cold. I could see my breath leaving me, and I walked to the motel shaped like a big capital L, chalk-white in the darkness. The calm desert air still held the scent of recent rain. Paul and Zoe were both by the office, which was just a scratched-up bulletproof window cut into the shorter outgrowth of the building. The longer side brimmed with white, numbered doors and cars parked before them. Zoe smoked and Paul stooped argumentatively.

There’s no way you’re all full up, Paul said to the glass, which was covered in scratches that reflected the light of the streetlamp, obscuring the face of the person inside. What, is this a hot tourist destination? Where the hell are we, anyway?

Victorville, Zoe said in her scratchy voice, her breath an outpouring of smoke and steam. She was very small, probably just around five feet, dwarfed by Paul.

Booming hospitality market? Paul said. Here in Victorville?

I looked around and did see the shapes of cars in most of the parking spots lining the close side of the building and assumed there were some taken on the other side too.

Listen, buddy, the clerk said, lots of people pass through here. There’s one room, that’s it.

Fuck, Paul said. Fuck it. He unbent his back to stand up to his full six feet and three inches. What do we do? Paul said. Keep driving?

I wondered why we couldn’t just split the room with Zoe. It’s not like there was something between them. Paul was moving to Sacramento with his girlfriend, Vanessa, after the tour. Which made this our farewell tour, even if we didn’t have that many fans to say farewell to.

We could just split the last room, I said. I don’t want you falling asleep at the wheel and getting us all killed.

I’m a careful driver, Paul said.

Still, I said. Why not just split it?

Paul looked at Zoe. Then I did too. She stood, hip cocked, with a blank face. As much as it felt like Paul and I were somehow opposed, at least with him I knew the contours of the relationship; with Zoe, it was like at least 50 percent of her hung above like black balloons on invisible strings, out of reach.

She dropped the cigarette and it burst into sparks. She stamped it out. Sure, she said, I don’t care. As long as I get one of the beds.

It’s a one-bed, the clerk said.

As long as I get the bed, she said.

**That night** Zoe got under the covers and seemed to fall asleep instantly. Her long, thick brown hair spilled all around her like molasses onto the pillow; her thin red lips shaped the sounds of slumber. Paul had fallen asleep quickly too; in sleep, he was totally silent, probably because he was tired from talking 100 percent of the time he was awake.

Only I was left. My head was on my bunched leather jacket. It would have been uncomfortable enough without the kink I had in my neck. Every little noise that stood out from the silence lined up next to the succeeding one, and none of them seemed to fade. The rhythm of Zoe’s breathing bent the room into strange shapes as I teetered on the border of dreams. In one half-dream I walked in a city of shadows and noticed that the buildings were all arranged before me flat like a painting, and as much as I walked toward them they did not grow in size. When I opened my eyes wide, I was staring at the wall.

As quietly as I could, I took a Xanax and a little flask out of my purple JanSport, which lay beside me on the scratchy carpet. I popped the pill and washed it down with rank Old Crow and tried to sleep. Instead of making me tired, the pill just smoothed out the edges of all the sounds and made the darkness chocolatey.

Then, for some reason, I remembered something Paul had once told me about some long-dead scientist’s theory about the planets. This scientist had figured out why some planets sometimes go retrograde, meaning that they appear to stop and go the opposite direction from their regular orbit for a while before proceeding along the original course. It’s an illusion resulting from the relative orbits of our planets and the changing line of sight between them. From our limited perspective it appears to be going backward, but in truth it is steadily progressing, keeping time for the universe. That comforted me for a moment.

But not enough to put me back to sleep. For that, I took another Xanax.

**I woke up,** freezing and with a splitting headache, my alarm screaming at me. As always, I found it impossible to get up but got up anyway.

In the bathroom, as the steam from the shower softened the fluorescent light and made the world vague, my thoughts became sharp around the dull pain of my self-loathing. There were many facts I could have called on to justify it, but central to them all was the thought that I would never make it in music, that I might as well chuck my dreams out the window and get real and figure my shit out, because I couldn’t just keep adding alarms forever.

In the car Zoe said, My dad is coming to the show.

Oh? Paul said from the driver’s seat.

Yeah, Zoe said. I haven’t seen him in ten years.

Only I could see Paul open and close his mouth twice, unable to find something to say. We both knew that her family life had been pretty tragic: she had lost her brother to a heroin overdose when she was twelve, and her mother had been dead for as long as she could remember.

And how do you feel about that? I said.

Paul said, Don’t therapize her.

That’s not a word, I said. That can’t be a word.

It’s a word. Look it up.

I insisted, again, that there was no way it was a word. He insisted that indeed it was. I got my phone out to look it up. Zoe was silent.

*Therapize* was, in fact, a word. I glared at the phone screen. Then, trying to change the subject, I turned around to say something else to Zoe but she was lying with her cheek against the thick fabric of one of my cylindrical drum bags, her eyes closed. It struck me that she had been sleeping more and more as the tour went on, and speaking less and less. I kicked my purple JanSport into the edge of my foot space to get more comfortable.

So, Paul said, is it a word? I was right, right?

**Zoe’s hometown** was some depressing little square of tract housing out in the desert. The show was at a pirate-themed bar whose name, Pegleg’s, gave the impression that the owners knew nothing about pirates. It had seemed like a bad idea, but we couldn’t argue with Zoe—it was nonnegotiable, this pilgrimage back to her place of birth.

We pulled up to the venue two hours before load-in time. Paul went in to ask if we could get our equipment in early. He was given the okay, so I lugged in my drum set in all its various bags and containers and set it up, unbending metal folding legs and spinning little wingnuts to lock cymbals onto cymbal stands. Paul and Zoe set up their amps and leaned their instruments against them.

When I was done, I took a good look around the bar. On the walls were portraits of ships, Jolly Roger flags, a *Pirates of the Caribbean* poster. I saw the same reproduction of a painting of a ship in three different locations around the bar. The only thing not pirate related was the pinball machine next to the front door. It featured a zombie family, a cast of characters that as far as I knew belonged only to this pinball machine. When you hit certain bumpers or triggers, little members of the dead family would rise from the grave and make moaning sounds. If you hit them while they were up, you got even more points, and sometimes they died again and sank back into their graves.

I blinked for what felt like the first time in hours and looked around the bar. I didn’t see Paul or Zoe, but some haggard-looking locals, probably regulars, had in the meantime entered. I sat at the bar next to a heavy man in a Slayer T-shirt and pulled out my personal cash.

I thought: I’m just going to have a drink. Or a couple. Then maybe a couple more.

I thought: Though it may seem that I’m moving backward, that’s only because of my limited perspective.

I rotated my vinyl stool and inhaled the sour, beery atmosphere. The members of the other band playing that night showed. I think they were called Crabapple. They all wore black and had chains running from belt loop to back pocket, hooked to their wallets. They all had faces full of piercings. I itched for a Xanax.

When Paul and Zoe finally showed, Zoe had her usual dead-eyed stare, but her mouth seemed a bit more twisted than usual. Paul looked bewildered. His red beard kept twitching. I registered a scent of guilt on him. I decided against asking for the keys to the van to get the Xanax out of my bag. Instead I ordered another drink.

We were supposed to start in half an hour. Zoe sat at the bar, and Paul sat next to her. I waited a moment to let them finish whatever they had to say or not say to each other. Then I sat on the stool to Zoe’s left and put my elbows on the sticky countertop.

So, I said. I looked around. Zoe rubbed something out of the corner of her eye and Paul yawned. So, I said again. Not too many people here, eh?

Not yet, Paul said.

Well, if nothing else we can consider it a practice, I said.

My dad is coming, Zoe said again.

I told her okay. I asked if she wanted a drink, I was buying. She asked if they had Moscow Mules. I waved the bartender over. He was an old man with a fisherman’s cap. His long gray beard was braided and reached down to right between where I imagined his little shriveled nipples were, under his gray T-shirt printed with a jumping salmon. How a fisherman ended up in the Inland Empire was beyond me. Do you have Moscow Mules? I asked him.

Sure do, he said.

We told him we were in the band, but he just said, Okay, and he charged us full price. Paul ordered a Guinness and Zoe a Mule and I a PBR. Together we drank.

Then it was time for our band to start. Crabapple sat a few stools away and kept looking over at us.

Zoe, I said, do you think, maybe, we should get started?

My dad’s not here yet, Zoe said.

Have you texted him?

I called him earlier. Texted him like an hour ago.

Any response?

No, but he’s never been good at it.

Paul said, Hey CJ, chill out. He held up his hand and waved it up and down.

It’s okay, Zoe said. But let’s just give it some more time. He’ll be here soon.

Someone would enter the door and Zoe’s head would turn toward it, then back.

Finally, at ten-thirty, the other band came up to us and the lead singer, a guy with brown hair to his butt and a huge silver belt buckle, said, Hey, do you think maybe it’s time to start?

I said, Do you think, maybe, you could fuck off?

Jesus CJ, said Paul, how much have you had to drink? Take a chill pill.

But I couldn’t because my purple JanSport was in the van.

It’s okay, Zoe said, we can start.

We mounted the stage and they dimmed the lights, but not dim enough to hide the fact that there were only twelve people there, including the bartender and the headlining band. (And it was a big band too.) We started playing.

Our first song started out with a fast drumbeat for a few bars, then a slim moment of silence, before the bass and distorted guitar crashed in through that slim moment like battering rams through a splintering door frame. As I played, I began to grasp the dissolute thought that the noises the drums made and the noises the guitar and bass made were in some sense the same.

At one point, we skipped a chorus completely, all of us deciding at once and together that it was better to extend the bridge and give Paul a longer solo. Zoe watched him, and for the first time I thought I understood what she was thinking. I could swear I saw the moment she realized that, no matter what there had been between her and Paul, she was glad he was leaving, because it would force her life to change. When I saw this, it occurred to me that I would miss him and that I wouldn’t see Zoe anymore.

Around us, the bar shone like a church filled with sound. The sound was everything.

And then everything was over.