

"You're that singer."

Dam Houston sighed inwardly. No three English words scared him more than those three ... except maybe "find another label." He raised his eyes. The teenage boy hovering over him couldn't be more than 18 years old. He weighed 125 pounds soaking wet with a cinder block in each hand. If the boy's hair had been any longer he would be able to sit on it.

Standing slightly behind the boy was an equally emaciated girl. Her hair was as long and as jet black as the boy's. She shared his smoke gray eyes and sheet white complexion.

He only caught a glimpse of her eyes as she scanned the truck stop diner. Neither she nor her companion (he couldn't tell if they were siblings or lovers) were looking directly at him. She was looking everywhere but and the boy was busy scanning his shoes as if he'd never seen them before.

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Perfection/Dexter Goad/2.

Both of them STANK. Indeed, both would have smelled better if they'd spent the past day rolling in pig vomit. They certainly couldn't have smelled any worse. What made this so odd was the fact that their clothes looked brand new.

"I am!" Dam said brightly, his expression giving none of these thoughts away. He would no more insult or be rude to a fan than he'd cut off his right arm. Which, he reflected, such behavior amounted to. "Have a seat, I was just finishing a cup of coffee before hitting the road again." This informed them he was five minutes from ditching them while he made it sound like a magnanimous invitation.

The two kids scooted grimly into the open bench across from him in his booth. They didn't move like eager fan teenagers. They seemed very businesslike. More waves of their ungodly stench reached him as they leaned forward to scoot down the bench. With the tops of their heads exposed, Dam could see clearly that their hair looked freshly washed. Their skin didn't shine from perspiration either. What in God's name was the cause of this smell? It made no sense. It didn't smell like gas or BO. More like rot. Decay.

"Your new stuff sucks!" The girl informed Dam enthusiastically. Her tone of voice belied how methodically she'd scooted into his booth. "But 'Dream Games' and 'Hoosier Hysteria' were the best CDs ever made!"

Dam snorted with amusement. "That's the most honest comment I think I've heard this year!"

"Why spend the five minutes we have with you sucking your butt?"

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Perfection/Dexter Goad/3.

The boy said brightly. His voice also contradicted the manner in which he'd sat. "You probably get that all the time."

"I do indeed." The singer replied in a far less bored tone than when he first spoke to them.

"Where's the rest of the 'Dream Machine'?" The girl wanted to know. Her words were curious but her tone suggested she already knew.

Why did these two make him so paranoid? Make him question their every nuance?

Dam looked out the window into the night sky beyond. "They're probably in Chicago by now. We're doing a show there tomorrow night. I wanted to drive because I do my best song writing while driving alone."

He wasn't lying about his ability to mentally compose while driving. But he was lying about the reason his band was now traveling without him. Cindi, one of the twins who played all his string instruments, had given him an ultimatum. When he had refused to make a commitment, she had informed him she would remain until the end of the tour and then she was leaving his band and his life. Forever. Dam hadn't asked whether Cindi's sister Traci would follow suit. In any case, who needed that drama during a tour? Better to travel separately.

The girl was running her fingers across the tabletop in energetic patterns. She stared obsessively at what she was doing as she said, "I like your songs about Anne Frank the best."

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Perfection/Dexter Goad/4.

Her voice was now shy and trembling, and her eyes were locked onto her fingers so intently he didn't think the Incredible Hulk could force her head up to meet Dam's gaze. He had never seen someone so committed to not looking at him.

"How did you-." Dam began, shocked.

The waitress passed by and tossed the bill on the table. She said, "need anything else?" without even slowing.

"No." He called after her retreating back. Then Dam returned his attention to the girl. "How did you know I was talking about THAT Annie? I've never admitted it to anyone!"

"Why not?" The boy demanded. He was looking straight down into his lap so tenaciously Superman would shrug and move away without trying to budge his chin. "What's to be ashamed of?"

Neither of them had met his gaze yet. As that fact registered higher into his awareness, Dam realized that the haunting malodor was also gone ... as if he had never smelled it. Not even a lingering trace remained. Dam's eyes darted involuntarily towards the exit. "I'm not ashamed of it. It's just that ..." He stopped, at a total loss for words. To cover his inadequacy, he checked the bill and took his time pulling out his wallet.

"You think it sounds stupid to devote half a dozen songs to someone who's been dead 60 years. Especially a girl barely remembered or mentioned these days." The girl said in a brisk tone. Her fingers were moving faster over the tabletop. "It is so cruel the way the dead fade from the public and private consciousness." She added in a more wistful voice. "And don't mention empty tributes or statues in Augusta, Maine or never visited webpages. I'm talking real consciousness."

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Perfection/Dexter Goad/5.

"Stay focused," the boy snapped at her. He raised his eyes and those two exchanged a glance for a long second. Then they both went back to steadfastly avoiding Dam's eyes. "Rock and roll is about being hip." He said to Dam. Somehow Dam could tell when he was being addressed by these two even without the normal cue of being looked at. "Can't get laughed off the stage for mentioning something as passé as Anne Frank."

"So you slipped it in under their noses. People have speculated for 15 years who this mysterious Annie was and all they had to do was blow the dust off the cover of her diary in the library." The girl's tone was almost hateful now.

Dam lay ten dollars over his bill and replaced his wallet. "You two are very clever. So, can I sign something before I go?"

"What about Samantha? Anyone ever figure that out?"

Dam had actually raised up an inch above his bench before this comment took the air out of him. He sat down heavily. "What?" It occurred to him belatedly that she had said 'statue in Augusta, Maine' a minute ago.

The girl's fingers were tracing lightening quick figure eights now. "Samantha Smith. She inspired 'Samantha Stayed in the Sky.'"

"Was she too lame to credit?" The boy asked hotly.

The girl abruptly stopped tracing patterns. A single tear streaked from her left eye. "No one remembers her anymore."

"How can you say that?" Dam asked hotly. "The Soviets named a diamond, a flower, a mountain, and a planet after her!"

"I TOLD you to stay focused!" The boy said with a grim smile, still staring into his lap. "But since you mentioned it, Mr.

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Perfection/Dexter Goad/6.

Houston, the Soviets don't even exist anymore. Their names are as dead as their forgotten realm."

"I remember her." Dam breathed. "I was thirteen that summer in 1985. I-I loved her."

"You misunderstand me." The girl spat as another tear streaked from her eye. "Being forgotten after you die is not a bad thing at all. What if the dead are chained to this realm until the last living person finally lets them go? Being freed would be easy for those who are known and loved by few. But what if you died and certain sick individuals never let you go no matter how obscure you were?"

"That's an ... original if very odd theory." Dam said hesitantly.

The boy sighed, as if he was giving up reminding his companion to stay on topic, whatever 'topic' was. He said, "you say you love her as if you knew her before she died."

"Not personally." The singer said defensively. "I meant love in the Romantic sense. Romantic with a capital 'R'."

"It'd have to be with a capital 'R'," the boy said with an amused snort. "You could consummate it no more than Sir Lancelot could."

"How could you know I was thinking-." Dam stopped speaking, scooted out quickly and shot to his feet. He had spent many hours as a kid reading about Camelot and had all his life adored the concept of Romance he had gleaned from those stories. To desperately love someone you could never be with. To love another with all your heart and never be allowed to consummate that love. He had used the line 'Romance with a capital R' many times in his

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Perfection/Dexter Goad/7.

life and these were the first people to ever bring up the host concept behind it, Camelot.

These two kids were responsible for a lot of firsts tonight, weren't they?

"Who are you two?" He asked in a heated tone. Out of the corner of his eye he noticed two truckers watching him and laughing.

Neither of them looked up, of course. The girl spoke first, but they traded comments with machine gun rapidity. "You've never had a long term relationship, Dam. Not one."

"No one can compete with the perfection of being dead."

"You've chained your heart to a series of corpses, pushing everyone else out."

"Women never interest you until they die."

"You two are full of it!" Dam raced away, his face hot. Almost all of the truckers in the diner were now staring at him. Most of the spectators were laughing.

At least one of the patrons recognized him because he heard, "I'm telling you, playing that music every day will drive you crazier than a road lizard!"

The two teenagers caught up to him, though he curiously didn't hear them running after him, next to his car as he fumbled through his ridiculously encumbered key ring for his car key. Why in God's name did he have so many keys? He bet that half of these went to locks he didn't even own anymore. Cindi loved to tease Dam about his inability to throw anything away, and now because of it he was going to have to listen to more of these two lunatics' blather.

Or worse.

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Perfection/Dexter Goad/8.

"Just answer one question and we'll let you go, Dam." She said. Now that they were standing up she seemed to lose her inhibitions. She was staring directly into his face now with her abyssal gray eyes.

Dam had glanced up as she spoke and now he couldn't tear his gaze away from hers. Her smoky eyes were like meat hooks and the price of what they would rip away if he forced his stare from hers felt too high.

She asked her question. "Did you 'love' Samantha before or after she died?"

"What?"

Her eyes ... now they felt like twin tornadoes. He was within the double eyes of the tornadoes, but if he wiggled in any direction he would be torn apart by the surrounding maelstroms.

"It's a very simple question, Dam. Anne Frank died before you were born, but when did you first take notice of Samantha? Was it when you saw the Nightline report on her the night she died?"

"Ted Koppel was off that night. I almost turned it off when I saw that." Dam said dreamily. "But then they started talking about her..."

"Are you okay, Mr. Houston?"

Dam blinked. The two teenagers were gone. His waitress was standing six feet away, a nice safe distance, and was unconsciously wringing her hands as she peered at him. "I'm fine," he muttered distantly. Great, that one patron had told everyone within earshot who he was. The rags would be running this next week. "Dam Houston wigs out in midwest truck stop. 'He's never been right since he

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Perfection/Dexter Goad/9.

came out of that coma!' A member of The Dream Machine said privately."

Just great. Whoever said there was no such thing as bad publicity had never had their sanity questioned on a regular basis.

"It's just that ..." She stopped, unwilling to voice whatever he had done to spook her. "Should you be driving?"

Dam found his car key easily now, as he had every other time except just now when the kids had been chasing him. It was right next to his long boat key, how could he ever miss it? "I'm fine. I have to go, thanks ... for ... um serving me." He finished lamely as he ripped his door open and almost twisted his ankle in his hurry to crawl inside.

Without another glance at the waitress or the laughing diners at the windows, Dam fired up his Lexus and roared out of the parking lot. He settled into a pleasing 80mph rhythm and let out a long dry sigh.

Of course he'd heard of Samantha Smith a long time before her death! He'd planned to watch her show with Robert Wagner all summer, right? She had been his age, not many famous 13 year old girls back then. Of course he would have had an interest in her. Just like he'd always had an interest in World War Two, long before a librarian had suggested he read Anne Frank's diary when he had gone through all the Joan of Arc books.

"No perfection like death." Dam mocked aloud. He'd had some crazy fans in his time, like the one who tattoed 'Damn Houston' 100 times all over her body. Dam had not had the heart to write her back and say that his name was not spelled with an 'n'. But these two Marilyn Manson rejects really took the cake!

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Perfection/Dexter Goad/10.

He'd never been in a long term relationship because he did 300 shows a year. Not even a marriage as strong as Billy Joel/Christie Brinkley had survived that kind of road schedule. Why go through all that? He never lacked for companionship when he needed it, and the crowds soothed any deeper loneliness he felt from time to time. The crowds and his ... hobbies.

They were just hobbies. He had an interest in history, that's all.

So he had ten bedrooms set aside as shrines to ten different dead girls. So what?

It was just a hobby.

A way of remembering the girls ... honoring them.

It had nothing to do with loving them and definitely nothing to do with why his relationships lasted about as long as the new car smell in his annual car purchase.

No woman could be as perfect as a dead memory.

Those two freaks were insane.

Screw this. Dam Houston hit the radio button with one urgent stabbing finger. He'd jam something loud and strong and it would wash away his thoughts as it always did.

"...I never knew it'd be the last time I'd wave goodbye, Samantha left Earth and found heaven, She rose high above us and stayed forever in the sky."

Another stabbing finger abruptly turned off the radio.

Somewhere behind him, Dam imagined, those two freaks were laughing at him.

THE END