

The night Ben Casey died bodies poured into the streets and thronged around Tower Hill where he played his first show. Handheld candles carved out rivers of fire, and I took refuge in a West Bank bar, hiding from televisions and drinking guilt from a pint glass.

“Another?” The bartender asked. I wasn’t half finished, the bar was empty except for a couple of tourists in a corner booth wearing Mall of America sweatshirts, and a bike messenger nursing a PBR and a gallon of ice water.

“Sure.” I knocked back the pint.

“Bet you’ve got money to spare.”

The bitter turned to cement half way down and I bit my lip against retorts, excuses. It was stupid to think I wouldn’t be recognized, it was my town too. Or it used to be.

I slid the glass across the bar, “I’m doing okay. One of the same.”

“Cheers,” he said, filling the glass. His voice was hollow, the scrape of the glass across the bar felt like falling.

“Thanks.” What I meant to say was, “Leave me alone.” What I wanted to say was, “Can’t you see I’m grieving too?” What I needed him to hear was, “I didn’t mean for any of this to happen.”

“Sure.” At least he left me in silence after that.

Three quarters of a glass later the door burst in and a couple of kids staggered through covered in crowd sweat, with wax burned fingers and scuffed up jeans. “Hey chief,” one of them called - the shorter one, hair would have been blonde if he bothered to wash, “Haven’t you heard man?”

“Heard what?” The bartender knows, but suddenly the alliances in the room had shifted, I might be Judas, but at least I wasn’t a nineteen year old jackass with a fake id. Bartenders are mercenary creatures, they love you if you tip.

“Man it’s the end times,” the kid rolled up to the bar, I buried my face in my beer and ignored the bartender’s pleading looks.

“Right,” the bartender said, “can I get you folks anything?”

“Can we get three shots of southern rye?” The second one said. He was taller, darker, and hung back a bit like he was used to playing second fiddle.

“And one for Ben,” the girl said.

I kicked myself for thinking of her that way, what would Kit say? *Nothing, she’s got nothing to say to you, none of them do.* She, like everyone else I knew, was wishing I’d hung myself by my belt and that Casey was here to help them through it. *And maybe they’ve got a point.* Anyway, I wasn’t going to turn my head to get a better picture of the three kids, so she was going to stay “the girl” in my mind.

“Sure thing, can I see some IDs?” The bartender said.

“Man, you don’t gotta ID us tonight,” the leader said, “all the cops are up on the east side ‘cause they think kids are going to start looting or something. It’s 1999 man, it’s six months to the millennium, we gotta hang together.” And then he said the magic words, “Have a drink on me, okay?”

The bartender relented, “Sure.” He lined up four shot glasses and poured them long.

The girl raised her glass, “To Ben.”

The leader raised his, “Wherever you’re going it’s gotta be better than here.”