***Alligator Tears***

She lay there, the room dark except for a small lamp in the corner and moonlight. She was going to die this time, he thought, and it made him a little bit sick that he felt relief. Jet was a banger; she did everything full-force. Whether it was good for her or not.

 Donny watched the drip from the IV bag; he got preoccupied about a drop being part of something bigger, like a raindrop being an integral part of the sea, how everything is connected, something about karma. He was a bit stoned. He shook his head to loosen the cobwebs and focused on Jet’s face in the dark, half-lit by the moon coming through the window. Her long face was pale and drawn, lips the blue-purple of a bruise. A nurse came in and looked over Jet’s chart without paying Donny more than a glance of vague disapproval. Jet’s long hair was washed-out, stringy, dull white blond with pink dyed tips. Donny needed a smoke to gather his nerves.

 He’d found her at the Salon after hours. She was one of the five co-owners of Vivacious, a hipster hair-styling place three blocks off the square in between a theater that showed second-run foreign films and a dive bar called Mr. P’s. Jet had had this problem before; this was the fifth time in the four years they’d been together. She’d been shooting between her toes this time so no one would notice. She knew better than to let tracks show on her arms and hated wearing long sleeves when she did hair. He’d found her slumped over on her side in one of the barber chairs, limp, with a tiny pool of blood around her toes and a used needle on the checkerboard tile floor nearby. She’d been over an hour late to Mr. P’s to meet him so they could go home. The bright tattoos on her splayed-out legs looked stretched out flat, looking dead.

 Donny was across the street from the hospital on the corner under a street light smoking with a couple others. A recent city ordinance made it illegal to smoke within 100 feet of a hospital. An older black man in a football jersey was to his left smoking menthols Donny could smell and a young-ish out of shape woman with a big nose and sunglasses was a few feet off lighting up. Donny inhaled and thought he should’ve seen the signs. Jet had been bitchier than usual lately, stressed about petty shit with her partners at the salon. She’d recently turned 30. Jet had the most clients and brought in the most money. The others were ganging up against her because they were jealous. No one appreciated her. He’d heard it all before. Jet let anxiety take hold like no one he’d ever known. She acted tough, but was as scared as anyone else.

 She’d been smiling when he’d arrived to pick her up and drive her home. Too cheerful. The summer heat had hung heavy even hours after dark. Donny had offered to help her straighten up so she could close, but she’d told him to wait down at P’s, have a drink. They’d been together four years, but only lived together the last two and shared Donny’s car. They bought a house together for a pretty reasonable price off Shackleford Street right on the imaginary line between good neighborhood and bad on the north side of town. Jet put up most of the down payment, but had been through a couple bankruptcies, so she’d needed Donny to be part of it. He was older than her and had an above average credit score. He couldn’t have owned a house on his own on a kindergarten teacher’s salary and he loved her, so he went all in. They’d renovated the hell out of the place; painted rooms, re-did the roof, blacktopped the driveway. It had been mostly good.

 Donny had gotten into the band playing the little stage at Mr. P’s, a Joy Division cover group with a singer that had Ian Curtis down. He’d had four scotch and sodas before he’d realized how much time had passed. He would’ve only had two if it had been a weeknight. Donny half-expected Jet to be out front of the salon sitting on the hood of their Kia when he stepped out of the bar, but the lights were still on at the salon, so he lit up a joint he’d planned to share with her and sauntered down.

 When he got there, went in, and saw her, he didn’t panic. He finished the joint, looking at her to see if she was still breathing. He lifted her off the barber chair and held her as if he was carrying her over a threshold, hit the lights on the way out and placed her in the backseat of the car. He found her keys in her purse and locked up Vivacious to style another day. At the ER, everything had sped up and come to his eyes in jump cuts like an overly produced action movie. Donny had sat in the waiting room for an hour, did the admitting paperwork as best he could, went and saw her laying in the misty moonlight of the dark room, hanging in there.

He tossed his butt to the sidewalk, ground it down with his boot, and nodded to the man in the jersey. The man nodded back. He thought of going back up to her room to see her one more time but couldn’t bear it. The doctor had said 50/50 Jet would make it through the night and seeing her again like that would only linger in his head. They always said 50/50. It was like they were trying to scare him and Donny didn’t like it. He went into the parking garage, got in the Kia and went home. After the Ambien kicked in, he fell into a heavy sleep and didn’t dream of anything.

Donny rolled into band practice ten minutes late the next morning at a warehouse in the industrial district that his bandmate, Paul, rented from an uncle. They were a three-piece rockabilly band that played Stray Cats covers and a few originals that the guys hoped sounded like Wilco. They got a couple gigs a month that usually paid in beer and an occasional house party. Paul was the drummer, Donny played guitar and sang lead. Lee was the bassist; a tall, lanky 23 year old kid that had only been in the band three weeks. The band’s name was The Duchesses. Jet had suggested it.

Donny hadn’t found the time to get over to the hospital before practice. When he woke up he’d been oblivious. There had been a short moment lying in bed, letting his eyes adjust to the sun through the vertical blinds when he didn’t remember what Jet had done. It was like any Saturday. He was slightly hung over and smelled Jet’s strong, musky perfume on the pillow next to him. She always went into the salon early Saturdays because her partners wouldn’t be there. Their black lab Misty lay at the end of the bed.

The light dimmed through the blinds, overcast outside, and he came fully awake. Donny’s stomach sank. Jet was at the hospital. The clock said he had to go straight to the warehouse. He’d have to see Jet after. The dog didn’t stir when he left.

 Paul was inside messing with his cymbals. Lee hadn’t shown yet. Paul worked at a used vinyl shop in the hipster part of town near the campus. He was Donny’s best friend.

“What’s happenin’, brother?” Paul asked.

Donny laid his guitar case on the ground next to the drum kit and sat on a chair. He pulled out a cigarette from his pack, offered Paul one. “Can’t complain,” Donny replied.

Paul took the offered cigarette and lit up. “What’d you do last night?”

“Saw a band at P’s. Had a few drinks.”

“Yeah? Anything good?” Paul sat down in the rickety chair next to him.

“Eh, they were all right. Cover band.”

“I wrote a new song last night. Kind of a southern rock thing. I think you’ll dig it. I call it ‘Alligator Tears’.” Paul inhaled. “How’s Jet?”

Donny slumped in the chair a bit, tossed the half-smoked cigarette to the floor and ground it out with the heel of his boot. “Happened again.”

Paul didn’t say anything, just leaned back in the chair, smoking.

“She’s at St. Matthew’s.”

“What are you gonna do?” Paul asked.

“Fuck if I know,” Donny replied, “Help her again, I guess.”

Paul shook his head, leaned forward within an inch of Donny’s face. “Man, I don’t mean any disrespect here, but sometimes you gotta just scrape ‘em off and cut ‘em loose.”

Donny looked him in the eye. “You know I can’t do that.”

Paul stood up. “I know you *won’t* do it. You’re just as much of a fucking martyr as she is.”

“Shut the fuck up, Paul. You got no room to talk.”

Paul shrugged. “Do whatever you want. Keep takin’ shit from her. I got all fucking day, man. The rate we’re going we’ll be practicing in here on Saturdays when we’re 50, going fucking nowhere. You can teach 5 year olds and I’ll sell Clash records to freshmen from the ‘burbs until we fucking croak.”

Donny said nothing.

Paul put out his cigarette, walked over to the drum kit and booted the snare drum half way across the room. It landed with a crash. “Fuck this shit! Let’s be fucking losers! Fucking own it!”

Donny stared. “What do you want me to do?” he yelled.

Paul shook his head again. “You’ll never get it, will you?”

“Get what, Paul? Get what?”

“We were supposed to be something, Donny. Remember when we were kids?”

Then the door opened and Lee stepped in, bass guitar under his arm, smiling like a looney bird. “Fellas! Let’s play some jams!”

Paul shook his head. “I’m going out to get some beers.”

Lee laughed. “Right on, brother. Lube it up today. I hear you.” Lee slapped Donny on the back as he put his gear down. “Think we can work on some Green Day stuff today?”

“We don’t play that kinda shit, Junior,” Paul said as he walked out the door.

“Aw come on, it’ll be rockin’!” Lee whined after him.

“We’ll try some Green Day,” Donny said and got up. “I need to go give Paul some cash for the beer.”

Outside, it was all clouds and beginning to mist. Paul was getting in his car. Donny caught up.

“Sorry man. I shouldn’t have said anything,” Paul said.

“No sweat. We’re good,” Donny replied.

Paul started the car. The engine was choppy turning over. “What *are* you gonna do?”

Donny looked up to the sky, let the mist hit his face straight-on. “I don’t know. This shit has to end. Rehab doesn’t work.” He brought his face back down to Paul’s. “She just doesn’t seem to want to get past this. She doesn’t want to get better.”

Sloppy, heavy bass lines came blaring through the walls. Lee was practicing. Or trying to.

“Go see her. Tell her everything will be all right,” Paul said. “I’m not in the mood to do this anymore.”

Paul drove off. Donny went back in the warehouse to tell Lee practice was off.

“I did it again, Fassbinder,” she said when she came to. Donny stood over her with a wilting bouquet of tulips bought at a grocery store he’d picked up after leaving Lee at the warehouse. It was an in-joke between them. She was referring to a Monty Python sketch they’d seen together when they’d first started dating. John Cleese had played a boss, Fassbinder, and kept asking the employee, named Jeffries or something, played by Eric Idle, to do menial tasks like organizing a file, or sorting phone numbers, or getting tea. Every time Eric Idle leaves the room and comes back increasingly disheveled and haggard having fucked up the task. Finally at the end, Idle comes in naked with a bald cap on his head looking like something had exploded in his face and says, “I did it again, Fassbinder.” Then cut, and ‘now for something completely different.’ It had been funny then. She was on Ativan which made her voice airy and surprisingly cheerful. It was used for detox and she wouldn’t remember much of anything once she got out of the hospital.

 He wanted to be happier she was alive. “How you doing, Jetty?”

 She smiled. Her eyes were ringed red with dark bags underneath. “I’m riding the big wave,” she said and lifted her arms out to show him how big the wave was.

 “Put your arms down, baby. You’ll pull out the IV.”

 Jet’s face went blank like she wasn’t in there. Then her eyes came back to his. “Why so blue, honey bunny?”

 Donny sat down in the chair next to the bed. “You can’t keep doing this, Jetty.”

 “I know.” She looked sad. “I’m just lucky you’re here to take care of me, Fassbinder.”

 “But what if I’m not?”

 Her face looked like she was trying hard to think. “I think I would be… free.” She lifted her arms again.

 “Is that what you want?”

 “It would be different,” she smiled dreamily.

 Donny struggled to speak at first, then said, “Sometimes I don’t want to wake up either. You know that?”

 She looked sad again. “Aw, baby. It’ll be okay. I’ll help you.”

 Donny looked out the window. “I told the salon you wouldn’t be in for a few days.”

 Jet giggled. “You’re like my dad telling the principal I won’t be in for school.”

 “Shut-up, Jet. Don’t compare me to your dad.”

 “I loved my daddy. He tucked me in every night.” She tried to wink at him.

 “Jet. Stop. We’re not talking about this.”

 “I’m so glad you love me, Donnybear.”

 He stood up. “I know you won’t remember any of this, Jetty. I can tell you anything and it won’t fucking matter. I can tell you that you’re dragging me down. That you’re a fucked up child that’s never going to change.”

 She looked like she was going to cry.

 He turned towards the window, put his hands on the sill and looked out at the town. There was a small group huddling in the rain out on the corner, smoking. They looked pitiful. “I could tell you that most days I hate my life and I’m worried that it’s never going to change. That one day six months from now or a year from now or five, I’ll find you passed out again and I’ll have to decide if I’m going to just let you lay there and die. And Jetty, right now, at this moment, I don’t know which choice I’m going to make.”

 She didn’t respond.

 Donny noticed the black guy in the jersey smoking out on the corner from the night before and wondered who he was at the hospital visiting. Was it a wife that had just given birth to a child? A mother slowing decaying from the cancer eating her up inside? Was he there to see a best friend that had gotten into a car accident hanging by a thread? Then Donny realized it didn’t matter. That everyone goes through their own pain and everybody smoking on the corner chose to be there to visit someone they cared about just like he did. They came out of faith and loyalty and because they held on to hope that things could get better. He turned back to Jet to tell her he was sorry, that everything would be all right, they’d get through this again, but she was asleep, lightly drooling into her pillow, breathing deeply and he began to silently cry.