

MITCH ROBINSON (an excerpt)

ALASKA

[A]

It was just after four when the phone rang on the first morning of dewed grass. Isabelle would have answered the call with unadulterated glee, had she not been in slumber, or if she had a preternatural way of knowing who was calling. She kept the phone on the bed with her as she slept, but had turned the phone to silent when she heard the alarm she had set for class. When she awoke, had seen who called twice. Isabelle reached for the crumpled pack of cigarettes and lit a scrunched cigarette, rapidly inhaling and exhaling, listening to voicemail like a child enthralled by an adult's story.

"Isabelle, it's Charlie, how are ya? Although I suppose you couldn't answer that considering this a voicemail. Sorry for calling so early. Shit, it's four in the morning. Only a nutcase or a victim would be calling this early, and for that, I apologize. I could have sworn it was like eightish. But hey, I visited your dad last week and we chatted about you, and here I am at four in the morning and I was just thinking of you and your Dad said you were studying at Carnegie and well I'll be in the area next week around Thursday, we should get together. I think he said you studying fiction or was it literature? Have you been the Usher House and had their merlot yet? Are you old enough to drink? God, it's been forever. I saw--"

"Did I just get cut off? I think I did, which also means you must really be conked out to miss two calls. So I think I was at the picture, yeah the picture. You resemble Selena, not in looks but maybe the pose. It's Ingrid Bergman and Audrey Hepburn like similarities. I digress; we should go to the Usher House. You always liked hearing about the Usher House adventures, dare I call them adventures. Your father, myself and Selena. Coffee, wine, and romance. Maybe we can do some of that. Call me back and let me know."

Isabelle put the cigarette out against the crystal ashtray she carried around the apartment like a glass of brandy. She breathed in heavily and exhaled by coughing.

[B]

It was so cold as I was walking home that day, that I was sure my tears would form icicles hanging down my cheek like whiskers, which I was sure the girls in my class would break off and stab me with. They loved to stab me with pencils and words. Not sentences, but rather poke and taunt me over my love, the picture of Jonas that I had scotch taped over my trapper keeper. As I wiped each tear away, the only thing that kept me sane was the idea of cooking Jonas dinner that night, although my father frowned on using the stove at such a young age. No problems, I would repeat to myself, no problems. My father wouldn't be home that night, on account of a dinner date. It was foolish, I know that, but I thought of double dates with Jonas, my father and whoever he was with. We would order Cokes and burgers. Steaks if the restaurant was downtown. Jonas would have probably ordered a chicken sandwich. He had an affinity for those. That's when I stopped crying and decided to grill chicken.

[C]

Isabelle never really understood why women paint their toenails. She thought her feet were already pretty and petite. Her roommate, Juliet, sat across from her on their living room table with an untied turquoise bathrobe. Isabelle sat on the faded blue couch holding a small bottle of blood red nail polish with a box of black hair dye in her lap. Juliet's feet bobbed in rhythm to a music video playing on the television. She picked up a book that was flipped open next to her, *The Diamond Thief of Vienna*, by Charles Pittchard, and began to read to Isabelle the inside cover in a grotesque Jane Austen impression.

"In *The Diamond Thief of Vienna*, acclaimed author Charles Pittchard once again brings us a story of adventure, romance, and intrigue. Away in 1960's France, three poor students—"

"Please stop that ridiculous accent, Juliet. You sound like someone from L.A. pretending to be from Wales. And seriously, this is an important work of literature. Charlie is an author of extreme importance to —"

"20th century American lit, I know you've told me a gaggle of times. Let me continue please. Away in 1960's France, three poor students, in an effort to put food in their stomachs devise a scheme to steal baguettes while posing as famous musicians. This starts a quixotic reaction involving stolen diamonds, the Mona Lisa, and lastly some of Charles Pittchard's greatest creations. From the diabolic thief Hans Luke to the irrepressible beauty that is Faith Bergman. Once again, Mr. Pittchard has created a woman of remarkable beauty whose 'black hair and blue eyes form a storm brewing over the Mediterranean Ocean' and a romance that rivals that of Humphrey Bogart and Lauren Bacall."

Juliet thumbed through the book until she landed on the back cover which featured a picture of Charles. He was wearing a green shirt and blue tie, with a dark chocolate beard and milk chocolate hair.

"So this is the guy, Isabelle? This is your Jonas? I don't see what the fuss is."

Isabelle lit a cigarette and tapped it gently against her crystal ashtray like an impresario conducting an orchestra. She snatched the book from Juliet and opened to a dog-eared crease 2/3's through the book. She read, 'Faith put a wine glass and bottle in each of her hands and put her arms around my neck. The two objects clinked as her lips pulled near mine. As she nibbled on my earlobe, she whispered, perhaps only for herself the French phrase, "Ching-Ching".'

"It's beautiful," Isabelle said.

Filching the book, Juliet flipped to the underlined section that had been the starting point of their day, before they ran to the Giant Eagle and perused the vast selection of discount toenail polish.

"'Her toenails struck out against the beige wood of the patio like blood drops on skin.' Seems to me, Isabelle, that the shade of polish your slathering on your big toe is awfully blood like."

Isabelle thought that Juliet would have understood by now. She had Juliet read the stories and reflections she had written about Charlie. Most of them were set during the time he had stayed with Isabelle and her father, a four year stretch. Nine to thirteen years old. She had even told Juliet, during long nights of cards, stories about Charles's adventurous life in Paris.

"You don't get it Juliet. Charli-"

"Charlie Charlie blah wah yadda yadda dog shit taco."

"Dog shit taco?"

"It means that you make as much sense as eating a dog shit taco. I picked up the phrase at work, do you like it?"

"It's not bad, can I use some time?"

"Sure, it's yours. Have fun with it you tiger. You unstable and dangerous feline."

Isabelle got paint on the floor as a cotton ball slipped from between her toes. She cursed and grabbed the book from Juliet's hand and read and reread the description of Faith Bergman. In all of the books Charles wrote, the love interest to the male protagonist would always have similarities, like orange and red-orange. They would always have some shade of black hair, red toenails and skin that was like sand after the tide.

Isabelle never needed the description of what the love interest looked like. Every time Charles would tell a story, he would take out the same creased photo of his wallet. Selena. It was always Selena.

"Juliet, is there anyway I can have some of that stuff, possibly? I dunno, it might help."

"Help what?"

"Saving him."

"What stuff do you need?"

"Please, please. Don't make me say it."

[D]

I was looking forward to Jonas smelling chicken when he came into my dad's house. I wondered if Lisa ever made him chicken. Lisa was the reason he was staying at my father's house, I know that now. Then, I thought he was just staying over because my father and him were friends, but I know enough to know that it was all Lisa's doing. Lisa. Lisa. Lisa.

Lisa was friends with my father and Jonas when they were in college. They would drink and write together. All three spent a semester abroad in Paris, where Jonas supposedly fell into 'real' love with Lisa, although I didn't know there was a fake love, nor that love could have different levels. I always thought love was a noun, not a number like two-thirds or five-eighths.

Lisa eventually married someone else but kept an affair with Jonas. It tore him crazy, and when Lisa died of a cocaine overdose it drove Jonas into a vertiginous dive, which increased my father's worry, thus asking him to move in.

I don't know if Lisa ever made Jonas a chicken sandwich, it was one of the things I asked her in a postcard. My father had a plethora of postcards that he collected. From Rio de Janeiro to Eau Claire, Wisconsin. I stole the postcards and wrote questions and threats to Lisa but never sent them out, on account of not knowing her address and then later, her death.

[E]

Isabelle walked into The Usher House and saw Charles in back corner table. He was wearing the same dark green shirt and blue tie he was wearing in his picture on the back cover of *The Diamond Thief of Vienna*, only the clothes were now bookshelf dusty, he looked like a novel with double-creased pages. Isabelle simulated a flashback and thought of Charles, her father, and of Selena sitting in that back corner table. She thought of all the stories they told each other. Isabelle shuddered like she was in Alaska during the night sky winter.

The tables were sticky with spilt wine and dripped ketchup and the windows had a coat of nicotine that made every day seem yellow.

"Isabelle, you look ravishing."

"Charlie, is this what dreams are made of?"

"You stole that line from *The Maltese Falcon*, dearie."

"Haven't seen it, promises." She said, knowing that she read the book instead.

Isabelle ordered a gin martini with three olives, up and dry.

"Selena used to order that when we came here."

"I had no idea." She had read it before.

"In the picture, you had luminous red hair. When did it turn black?"

"Over the summer, it just kinda happened."

She two-fingered a cigarette and lit with a match, hoping her face would illuminate. Charles had written about the illuminated face of the love interest many times. He always wrote that he felt it was like a low angle camera shot. Isabelle now worried that her red roots would show.

They talked about the merits of a Fellini film ("Poetic mis-en-scene", "Only cares about male sexual frustration") and the true hero in A Farewell to Arms, ("It's Fredric". "It's Catherine.") Charles carelessly took gulps of his merlot while Isabelle gently held her glass like she didn't want to leave fingerprints.

"Dad said you haven't been writing." Isabelle's glass had a lipstick.

"Dan says you have been. You take a penny, you leave a penny, so the world goes."

"I have been, for class, mostly, lots of autobiographical things."

"In fiction nothing has to be true nor does it does need to be fiction. You grew up with me around you. Really you should be a great author. Have you been published?"

"Not yet, but I'm hoping soon. I'm young."

"True, you're what, twenty-five, twenty six. You have at least two years before your time is up. Selena and I had spent some time in Monte Carlo at that age. My first novel was set to be released. Have you read it?"

"I have it, you signed it for me, 'best wishes'. And I'm twenty-one."

"Selena was once twenty-one"

"I know. I know."

"I'm working on a story, but I don't really want to publish it. It's about this woman named Sel-her name Margot, and see she's an actress. And Margot is an actress, like Selena. And one day she meets Rosmus, who is a playwright. And let me tell you, I take like three pages on description for this woman, it's the best writing I have ever done. When you read it, take notes. She is splendid and superb. Button nose, hair that can change color depending on the reflection of the sun, it can be burgundy, black, and at night it screams purple. She wears these dresses with flowers on them. Oh the story is called "Garden Flower Dress". Rosumus, well he wears a suit and tie everyday, out of respect to those who have done great things, but he doesn't have a lot of money so his suit can change color too, depending on

dirt that clings to it.”

“Madrid? Moscow? New York?”

“Alaska. Upstate Alaska.”

“It’s so cold in Alaska.”

“Isabelle, coldness is only a feeling. You can always change the way you feel, you always have the choice to put warmer clothes or sit by the fire. If you don’t like being cold, then don’t be. But that’s not the point of this story. Margot and Rosmus fall in love and together they are just adorable. People comment on how wonderful they are and how they will be able to do great things, which excites Rosmus because he wants to wear a different suit. This is all foreshadowing, you’ll learn all about that. Rosmus writes a play for Margot to star in called *Tin Roofed Houses*. And it’s a smash, its brilliant. Arthur Miller would have leaky eyes. People feel a happiness that they didn’t know they had and a sadness that is that happiness’s other. They get so popular they film one of the productions and put it on television where everyone watches it. Even world leaders watch it.”

“The President of France watches a filmed theatre production from Alaska?”

“I guess he likes basic cable. Anyway, everyone is crying and hugging and world peace is finally achieved. We all realize that whatever religion or sex or whatever we are, ultimately we all live under ‘Tin Roofed Houses’. I love quoting myself. Everyone is loving each other. There is a marriage between a terrorist and a dog groomer from Iowa.

But then here’s the thing. In the middle of the story the narration breaks. I, myself the author fall in love with Selen- Margot. She’s everything the writer, myself, ever wanted. So I get to thinking, why not just insert myself into the text and have Margot fall in love with me? I’m basically God, right? So I try, but I can’t change my Margot, otherwise the narrator, myself, wouldn’t love her. And she is steadfast in her love for Rosmus. So I write an assassin into the text and hire him to kill Rosmus, but the assassin refuses, once he sees a rerun of *Tin Roofed Houses*, which in theory, I wrote. I try to write a war, but none of my characters will fight. So I write myself in as a sheep and set a scene where the setting includes a storm with lighting and thunder and a rain that is like sludge. I set myself on a road that Rosmus is driving on. Knowing Rosmus, as his creator, better than Rosmus knows himself, I know that he wouldn’t hurt a sheep. So he swerves off the road and in the same moment he dies it thunders with reverberation that’s like a nightmare.”

(an excerpt)