

ALIYAH, MADELINE, FOUR CANDLES

The crowd hadn't even gotten there yet. It was merely the act of setting up to play Radio City Music Hall that made me realize we were not just a successful band—already a miracle—but that we were a big-dick famous band.

At first I had wondered whether the stage crew may have already had a long day prior to our arrival, or whether they really were just weirdly inexperienced for such a large venue, because as we worked, they seemed almost perplexed by our fairly normal desire to be a part of arranging the instruments on stage, and doubly perplexed by our fairly normal selection of instruments, and had very mixed reactions on Aliyah's great dane, Lion, who was bounding around the stage and sniffing things. Some crew would offer out a hand to him as he neared, and give him a rub if they got the chance. More than one of them would run away—Lion would chase briefly, then bound off somewhere else. But I realized, as far as the setting up goes, that it was because they were starstruck by us. I had known for a while now that fans can be weirdos, obsessives, awkward types, but seeing someone trip over themselves professionally on our account was, I guess, an interesting first, and it made me appreciate that we weren't at such a big venue by mistake. We were here because we really had made it.

We had never played a room half this large—most of our lives we could play shows without microphones. But that wouldn't swing here. A technician was helping me figure out the mics that would best facilitate my piano, accordion, saxophone, and

acoustic guitar. Aliyah, up front of course, was having an easier time with her two guitars (electric and acoustic) and her microphones. The bass guitar (Steve) was to be on a stand halfway between us, so that either of us could have him depending on the song.

Jess, after getting help putting up the platform for the drums, had told the stage hands to go away. She would set up her drum world, thank you very much, yes if I need anything I'll ask.

"Any backing band?" the stage hand helping me asks, as he is managing a cable.

I'm sure Jess, Aliyah, and myself are each keeping our own count of how many times we've been asked this, so that we can compare later. In fairness, this particular stage hand has not asked me the question yet.

"Just the three of us, start to finish," I inform him. "Why, do you play anything?"

He smiles a little. "Most of what you've got on stage. Just rusty on the drums, but otherwise..." He shrugs, and pretends that his full attention is needed on the cable that seems to already be sorted out.

I skip over to the stool with my accordion on it, grab the accordion (it makes a silly noise), and turn to face the stage hand. "Catch!"

His head snaps up and there is amazing panic in his eyes as I am tossing him my accordion. Everything drops from his hands and he catches it.

"Play something!"

Jess adds from the drums, "Play Piano Man!"

He is trying to remain bashful, but his smiling betrays his eagerness. He had fantasized about this outcome, but had not expected it. He straps on the accordion.

After dancing up and down a scale, he is playing Piano Man just as well as I could. Jess whistles and cheers. He sings the words, complete with the La-Dadada-Dadadada's, and lets the final note fade out a long time.

I point at him and shout to Aliyah. "Aliyah!"

"What, dear?"

"Let him do the show!"

"Does he know our songs?"

I look at him.

He is already taking off the accordion. "Sorry," he says, still much happier than he was when he was fiddling with the cable. He hands off the accordion.

"That was really good though," I tell him.

He tells me his name is Chuck. I tell him my name is Willow, and he seems amused, and says that he had heard what my name was before. I have lied to him anyways, as my birth certificate and driver's license say Madeline. Setting up the cables with Chuck is a lot of fun, and my mind is taken off of how big this big-dick theater is, and how many people will be fit into it in a few hours. I find out that he has also lied to me, and he can play one of our songs. He plays it in my place, complete with Jess on the drums and Aliyah on electric and vocals, as I run from the front of the hall to the back, stopping for a while at various seats to make sure that I can hear everything well. (There is also someone whose job it is to do this, but they are waiting for me to stop playing and go on stage so that he can hear it with the correct band and each of the instruments as I would play them, since the band is here anyways)

With everything set up, Aliyah, Jess, and myself play a rehearsal. (We are a punk rock band but literally everyone besides the three of us disagrees with this. We are called Ring Fingernail)

During the actual show (like in front of people) my eyes are closed from start to finish (They open to a narrow squint only when I need to change instruments, particularly when going for Steve)

After the show, we all run outside. Aliyah gets into the driver's seat of her car after letting Lion into the passenger side. Jess and I climb into the back (Jess shows me that she has a bottle of rum) and Aliyah drives us all to our hotel and parks (Jess and I are intoxicated)

Security stops us for being drunk and having an accordion and an enormous dog with us, but after a moment they are informed that we are big-dick famous and we are escorted to the elevator, where Aliyah then informs the security that we are fine thank you, and hits the button for the top floor, and the elevator

closes with Aliyah, Jess, myself, and Lion inside, and also a man with a beard who seems to be unrelated to any of this.

Jess looks to him, and asks, "Screw?"

He appears uncomfortable. He holds up his hand, and with his other hand points to his wedding ring.

"Cheat?"

He pulls a cross necklace out from his shirt collar.

"Ugh."

He gets off at his floor.

Jess passes Aliyah the bottle of rum. Aliyah drinks. Jess drinks again. I drink again. Jess drinks again. The elevator doors open, and we maneuver our way through the short hall and into the penthouse suite.

As soon as I have heard the door close behind us, I look over and Jess is naked (Drunk Jess has Opinions about clothes) and Aliyah has taken her own bottle of rum for herself from the minibar (she salutes me with it before tilting it back and drinking)

I go and close the curtains that overlook New York City and also grab my own bottle of rum from the minibar and then I sit on the couch. I fiddle on the accordion as I replay the night's events in my head (although my eyes were not open for the show, I can vividly recall the presence of the crowd. Their sound was a physical force. Reprocessing it now while drunk, the crowd has only gone up in physicality. I rethink of moments of songs again and again, and how all of those people screamed at us or were silent and held their breath for us)

When I am finished, I set the accordion aside. I am drunk and sleepy. I look around. Jess is in a bubbling hot tub in the corner of the room. She raises an arm and waves at me. I wave back.

I stand, and become immediately aware that walking is going to be an ordeal and I will probably fall over a lot. I begin walking towards Jess, and amazingly I continue walking towards Jess until I am at the edge of the hot tub. "I'm going to bed," I inform her.

She tells me that she's scoped out the bedrooms and this penthouse has one guest bed and one master bed and that she is willing to take the guest bed if me and Aliyah want to share the

master bed. I have not processed any of what she has said when I nod and walk off towards the master bedroom, where the door is open.

I walk through the open door, and there I see Aliyah lying on her back with her legs hanging off the edge of the bed. Lion is standing at her spread legs, and is doing a thorough job of licking her vagina.

“AH!” I say.

Aliyah flinches, and then she and Lion look to me. When she sees that it is me, she raises a finger to her lips, and says, “Shhhh.”

I stand frozen in the doorway.

Aliyah beckons me over.

I mechanically walk forward and stand at the corner of the bed. Lion has sat down, and is looking at me, though he keeps glancing back to Aliyah’s vagina, which she still has spread out in front of his face.

She slinks down the bed and onto the floor, crouching beside Lion, rubbing the length of her body against his sitting body. “Lion and I are more than friends,” she tells me. She is at least as drunk as I am. As she rubs him, I can hear the scratching of the hairs of his fur all rubbing together.

I nod.

“Do you mind if he and I get back to where we left off?” Aliyah asks.

I can’t think of a reason to be bothered. Correction: I can’t think of a reason to be bothered that I actually believe. Jess having sex while we’re in the room is a normality. Aliyah I have never seen in the act before, and it is now plain to see why. I tell her that she and Lion can get back to it.

Aliyah kisses Lion on the front of his dog lips, and his mouth opens and begins licking at her, and soon they are making out, Lion lapping into her mouth and all over her face. I crawl up and sit at the head of the bed, huddled up in comfy blankets, watching my best friend fuck a dog. I fall asleep at some point. When I wake up, I am lying on one side of the bed, and next to me is Lion, and big-spooning Lion is Aliyah.

Over breakfast, while Jess is in the other room, Aliyah and I are talking at regular volume about the concert, and at a quieter volume about the fact that she fucks her dog.

“I trust you to keep it a secret,” she tells me.

“Of course,” I tell her. “Does anyone else know?”

“Just the dogs.”

“Dogs?”

She takes a breath in to talk again, and then her breath catches before she can say anything. She pauses a while, and then tries again. “Missie growing up, and Victor after that. Definitely Daisy too, even if...” Tears have not fallen yet, but she has started to cry. “Even if that one didn’t last long.”

I get up and go and get on my knees next to her chair and hug her. She lets it out, hugging back. Lion comes and sits at her side opposite me, and rests his nose against her, looking sad. She pets him. She thanks us both. We eventually get on with breakfast and the rest of the day. We are doing a much smaller acoustic show tonight, and I am looking forward to it.

Months go by. We take a break from touring to work on new material for our next album and to have a vacation. Aliyah, Jess, and myself all live in Portland and see each other often. Jess moves away from Portland to Los Angeles. Aliyah moves away from Portland to a farm in rural Colorado, near a town called Kohath. It is rarer that any of us see each other. About three years after that night we played Radio City Music Hall, Aliyah, Jess, and myself meet up in Kohath for a month to rehearse the new material, iron it out, and record the new album. I love being with them again. I know that this band is no longer the thing it was before when we were touring, but nonetheless, I am grateful for it to still be here, still be the three of us playing music, with Lion lumbering around the recording studio. He walks with a limp now. I pet him. Aliyah pets him. When we are finished recording the album, Jess returns to Los Angeles, and I return to Portland, although I am wondering whether I might like Kohath better. I do not pursue this idea, as I do not want to impose on Aliyah’s seclusion. The band is not what it was before. The river is shallower, still enough to turn a turbine, but less. I will not overexpect of it. I still talk on the phone with Aliyah and Jess every now and then. Sometimes I play small

shows as a solo artist, and Jess tells me that sometimes she does the same in Los Angeles. One day, after I have not been able to get in touch with Aliyah for months (I thought we had been missing each other's calls, but in fact, she was avoiding me) I learn that Lion has died. Aliyah wants to go on tour. Jess is agreeable to this. We meet up in Los Angeles for a few shows as a test-run, and when it goes well, we begin arranging the cross-country route. It is similar to last time—it is good—even if we are all damaged goods even more so than we were the last time. The tour is a lot of fun and I love Aliyah and Jess and I also love that there are still a lot of people in the world who are fans of us, apparently, which is affirming that we must be doing something right, probably. When we have gone from one side of the country to the other and back again and the tour is over, we all return to our homes. Aliyah and I talk on the phone every day for a few days, and then, I can no longer get ahold of her. When I have not been able to reach her for a week I ask around, and learn that nobody has been able to get ahold of her. I travel to Kohath and break and enter into her farmhouse, and go through every room, and she is not there. I call around. Nobody knows if she went somewhere. She is declared a missing person. I am helping with the searches. The searches yield nothing—we do not find her, alive or otherwise. Two months pass. Jess comes to Kohath and we cry and she tells me there's nothing more I can do here, and I should get back to my own life. I return to Portland. I play music in my living room, but nowhere else. Often I sit back on the couch fiddling with my accordion, mentally playing back shows we'd played, conversations we'd had, moments we'd lived. I miss my friend.

A year goes by. Sitting on the couch and playing the accordion so often, I have ended up with a lot of new workable material. I fiddle with the other instruments, and figure out the arrangements. I have never been much of a lyricist, but I come up with some stuff. I begin recording in my living room, recording the different tracks of the different instruments all myself. Eventually, I have a demo for a new album. I send it to Jess. Jess calls me in tears and thanks me for showing it to her, and she says I should get it produced, it sounds really nice, that it shows so much of how much of the band's sound had been

Willow sound. I thank her and I mean it, but I also mean it when I tell her that the band's sound was all because of Aliyah. She disagrees. She says the band's face was all Aliyah, but it would be lost in genericism without the Willow parts. I appreciate that we are talking about this but I also feel uncomfortable whenever I have to speak about Aliyah as though she is dead. She almost certainly is dead. Whether she is alive or dead, she almost certainly would enjoy that we are talking about her. I thank Jess again, and get off the phone with her.

After finding the phone number and gathering the courage, I call up the recording studio in Kohath. I explain who I am (they remember me) and I tell them that I have an album to record if they might be interested, and I can send them the demo. They insist that sending the demo will be unnecessary and I can come down to record at my soonest convenience. I pack up my instruments and go (I leave Steve behind in my living room and buy a new bass guitar on the drive)

I arrive at the studio a couple days later, early in the morning. I am greeted warmly by the owner. We sit down and listen to my demo. By eleven AM we have begun recording. By nine PM I can't stop. The studio owner asks if I will lock the front door when I leave if he gives me the keys. I agree to this. He hands me the keys and goes.

At the stroke of midnight, I am recording an acoustic guitar solo. I finish it, open my eyes, and standing behind the glass in the tech room is Aliyah. I scream for joy and drop my guitar and rush to the door to meet her, but I halt as I actually near the door. She looks different. I am certain of it. I had thought it was just the reflection of the glass playing tricks, but I can now see that her black skin is no longer skin, her black hair is no longer hair, and her dress (she rarely wore dresses) is no longer anything earthly either. From head to toe, I can see through her. She is made of something smoke-like, but also glass-like, but it is certainly in the shape of Aliyah, or at least close enough that I could recognize it.

She does not wait around for me to open the door. She walks forward, and she moves through the studio window as though it wasn't there. I step forward to hug her, but she shakes her head, and I step back.

“That song is coming together beautifully,” she tells me. She is smiling at me, but she is not happy.

“What happened to you?” I ask.

She frowns. “I got super murdered.”

Tears hit me. Aliyah and I sit down next to each other on the couch in the tech room. I ask, “Who killed you?”

“Not gonna say. Don’t need you getting involved too.”

“I’ll kill the bastard.”

“Yeah, so, like I said.”

I snarl.

We sit quiet for a little while.

“I want you to do something else for me besides killing,” she says.

Anything. “Go on.”

“Well, first off I should tell you I’m not in a major rush about it. I want you to finish recording your album before you go and do my thing. Okay?”

I am listening.

“Okay,” she says. “Okay. First, finish your thing here. Then... then I’ll tell you where my body is buried, and I’d like you to dig me up, and bring me to Crater Lake National Park, and rebury me there, near the water.”

I look at her.

Now it is her turn to be in tears, although it appears she cannot actually cry. “Missie and Victor—Crater Lake is where my family scattered their ashes when they died. It’s where I scattered the ashes of Daisy and Lion too. And I don’t want to spend the rest of eternity away from them.”

I nod. “I can do it now. We can leave right now.”

She smiles. Again, she is not happy, but nonetheless I don’t think that the smile is meaningless. “I want to hear your album finished before I go. C’mon. Let’s get back to it, if you’re still staying up tonight.”

I agree to this, and step back into the recording booth. I retune the guitar and put down another take of the solo.

In three days I have finished all of the recordings, and in four days I have finished editing everything together exactly as I want it and recording some touch-ups, with guidance from the studio owner and from Aliyah. I have bullied Aliyah into writing

the lyrics of a song for me. A song about love and empathy and fucking dogs. It is by far the best song on the album. I hope that everyone who thinks it's a joke becomes more tolerant without realizing it. I hope that everyone who gets mad about it gets it stuck in their head forever.

I pay the studio owner generously for letting me take complete control over his studio for the week. After packing up my things from the bed and breakfast I've been staying at, I sit on the edge of the bed with Aliyah, and the two of us listen to the album, start to finish. She thanks me, and I thank her. She tells me that she is buried in the dirt cellar of an abandoned farmhouse five miles out of town.

I pack up my van, buy a tarp and a shovel and a big flashlight from the farm supply store in town, and drive out to the house. I break into the cellar. During the initial searches after Aliyah went missing, the police searched this building and a few other abandoned ones, and I should not be surprised that they did a shit job of it. Sweeping the flashlight across the floor, I don't even have to ask Aliyah where exactly she is buried. There is a raised mound of discolored dirt the size and shape of a grave. It is so conspicuous that I am stricken with certainty that a cop killed Aliyah and covered it up during the search, but I do not bring it up, because I know she still won't tell me who did it (I already asked a lot more times as we were doing the recordings)

I dig her up. I am careful not to damage her body, although she insists that this actually does not matter in the slightest. When she is unearthed, I lift her body out of the grave, and place her onto the tarp. I wrap her up and carry her out of the cellar and into my van. I go back into the cellar and fill the grave back in. I drive north out of Kohath, bound for Crater Lake National Park.

On the way, as Aliyah and I are talking, I make a comment about how unfair it is that she died so young.

"I did not die young," she tells me.

I shrug. "Okay, maybe not *young*, but you weren't exactly elderly."

"I was ancient and sick of life anyways," Aliyah tells me, and I am shocked. "You're not thinking about life the way that I lived it, dear. You're thinking in human years. Human lifetimes. I

lived four lifetimes with people whose candles burned short but brighter than anyone else in the world. With each and every one of them, I was right there burning with them.”

I apologize. We keep driving.

When we arrive at the lake, I make my way down a gravel road and eventually I park the van. I grab my shovel. I dig Aliyah a new grave. In the time it takes me to do this, nobody has come by. I take Aliyah’s body out of the van, lay her to rest in the woods near the lake, and bury her properly.

She stands atop her grave, facing me. I am covered in dirt and sweat and death germs. I am smiling at her. She is smiling at me. She is still not happy. Not yet. But she is smiling, and she is optimistic.

“Thank you,” she says.

“Thank you,” I say. “For everything. Have a good afterlife.”

“You too, when you do.”

I snicker, and I wish I could hug her, but she is gone. I go to the lake and get into the freezing water to wash off, and then I return to my van, dry off, and return home. I call up a local venue and they book me to play an acoustic show. I play our old songs that were Aliyah’s favorites, even though I know that she is not listening, that she is somewhere else where she, by now, is probably burning with the happiness of four lifetimes rediscovered at once.