

Down Fifty-West

Call the funeral a drag, but there isn't much point in holding one anyway. Elijah would have much preferred not holding one. He would not have cared at all had his ashes been thrown up into the winds; they would've been swept all the way to the ocean down to the Orient. Or maybe gotten stuck in the trees. The latter sounds a bit sad but honestly it wouldn't have mattered either way.

But were there no funeral for Elijah Gold, she would have never known where his soul would find its way back someday. At least now Gloria knows his soul will rest in the drab gray canyons of Nevada, among the evergreen fir and juniper trees, and in the dry hot desert air rising up from beneath her feet. Back where he belonged.

Mighty old Elijah Gold might resurrect someday from the hills of Hawthorne. You never know.

The old county worker muttered a short, almost inaudible "rest in peace" before turning to face the canyon and scattering the first shovel of ashes down the cliff with a loud grunt. It formed a smooth arc before dispersing into a wall of smoke. Then he reached into his bucket and lifted another. The whole thing was dead silent except for the county worker's heavy grunts and breaths. Gathered next to the county worker who stands with their shoulders drooping and watching the ashes billow into the canyon is Gloria and a small congregation of Elijah's fans from Nevada all dressed plainly or in black, some wearing the signature tan rancher hat from his shows like Gloria does. But Gloria abandoned her summer job at a coffee shack and hitchhiked all the way from the Bay Area just to send him off.

01

When she bought her morning newspaper she heard from the old man behind the stand that singer Elijah Gold died; that was all he knew. He was puffing on his cigarette and blasting Chuck Berry like it hadn't gone out of style. Gloria had to search row after row of tabloids before she found one that wrote about Elijah's death in the corner of the front page.

"Folk Singer Dead at 27," it writes. Fortunately he wasn't assassinated or anything, but the article did say that he was reportedly taking medication for exhaustion and insomnia for the past few months. Then it proceeded to call him "difficult," "stubborn," "troubled," "arrogant," and maybe just a few lines away from calling him a *slob*. She promptly put the tabloid back on the stand.

"Any chance you've gotten more written about him?"

"Nah honey, ain't never heard of 'em anywhere, 'm sorry."

"Yeah. 'S okay."

Buzzing was all that was inside Gloria's head because she didn't know how to comprehend Elijah's death. Now? Why now? 1967? She had never imagined his death before or how she would react to it. She never thought he would die. She stood by the newsstand and watched men passing by carrying their briefcases and schoolchildren running around with their bags as shields and armor and pulling on a girl's ponytail. *Same as it ever was.*

That's when Gloria turned to take thirteen long strides into the bar next door with absolutely nothing else in mind, where she ran into two slightly older guys in tie-dye shirts and bell-bottom jeans, the only people lingering by the counter. One has spaghetti hair and the other in a bandanna crooked around his head. They were laughing about something she didn't catch.

"You hear about Elijah Gold?"

The one with the bandanna shrugged. "Who's that?"

At once she regretted even exiting the house this morning. Heat rushed to her cheeks and she felt like crawling into the floor and dying. She wasn't built for such social situations. She was *certainly* not built to introduce him to two weird-looking free lovers.

"He's—" she started, then stopped. "A folk singer. He wrote songs. Good ones." She cleared her throat. "He died."

"Sad," the other guy said easily. "Guess he couldn't hang."

"He was better than that."

They glanced at each other, amused but not unkind. "You a fan?"

She nodded.

"Huh. Is he the guy whose ashes Franky said will *ride the wind* back on fifty east tomorrow?"

She skipped her shift at the coffee hub that day. She came home and said she left her bus cash, but instead she packed a bag for herself and snuck on her rancher hat. She came back to the bar because the boys happened to plan on heading out east to friends in Philly. "Done with the grind here," as they called it, and they agreed to let Gloria hitchhike with them to Hawthorne. His hometown is most likely where the funeral is.

It had to be fate. Fate was the only explanation that made sense. Otherwise how could it be so easy that she could head off to Nevada right after high school? No clue where exactly she's heading, the rest is probably too left to fate. But it was enough, she never tripped on anything or passed out before and she never called Bob Dylan Judas though part of her still felt like it. She hadn't even skipped school once. But no longer did she have school anymore and she had money in her pocket. That much she knew.

After all, it was Elijah. Elijah Gold. She didn't know what to do with the quiet and the space after this, and it felt scary to know there would be a hole in her heart she could never fill, because a slender man in a clean beige shirt with a rough reedy voice like the preach of a prophet had always occupied it. Without him, she was soulless.

She was on the road through stretches of highway by nightfall. US-50 East, to be exact; that was all she knew. The land flattened into a dusty endless quiet. She tried staying weary of road signs and where they were going with no avail. They stopped at a few gas stations to refill and drove the whole night through, the boys each taking turns to nap. She quickly ran out of things to talk about with them; she could feel that they were not at all interested in Elijah, but somehow they were surprisingly kind enough to try rushing her to Nevada. Not the kind of hippies you'd expect in San Francisco.

Elsewhere further from her neighbourhood, accommodations were bursting at the seams and trippy young boys and girls with flowers in their hair were *not* cleaning up their leftovers. Not the greatest sight for them either, perhaps.

The sun was straight up high again when they came across a small congregation in tan rancher hats, and Gloria's eyes snapped into focus. She gasped. "Wait. Those hats. That's it."

"You take care of yourself, yeah?" Gloria nodded before getting out of the van and giving them a faint smile. She opened her mouth for a couple more words of gratitude and maybe a wave, but they heeded one last look at the crowd and left in a gust of dust.

02

Gloria stood very still and watched Elijah's ashes drift and thin until there was nothing left to see.

Then someone broke the silence.

Someone laughed. The laugh was loud and unapologetic. Someone began clapping. Another voice ensued, seemingly joking about something she couldn't hear the end of.

They came down the van without lowering their voices as if they'd stumbled late into a party. The kind of people who wouldn't wait through the long pauses between songs or listen closely enough to know when he meant something and when he didn't. Someone knelt near the canyon edge and began tracing something into the dirt with her finger while humming something. Someone else lit up without asking, the smoke drifting forward and folding itself into the ash still hanging in the air.

Someone started talking about love; someone else about revolution. They were stacking up words until none of them meant anything.

Gloria watched the space around the county worker shrink around strangers. There was clearly tension in the air and she could see the brows tensing and twisting together on the faces of the grieving Nevadan men and women and—oh dear—someone lost it. A punch ran clean into the bearded jaw of a man in sunglasses and curls and within seconds, blood was flowing out like tap water down his bare chest.

"Will you show some *respect*!"

For a very brief moment, the summer wind was the only thing audible in the canyon. And the man whose sunglasses were blown off by the punch lunged back and took the Nevadan man in a collared black shirt by the neck and tried to pin him to the ground and maybe strangle him. They knocked down a handful of others like dominoes—it was comedic somehow—and they rolled around the dirt until they were barely keeping themselves on the hinges of the canyon. The next thing she knew, the bearded man was hanging on to the canyon rock under their feet for his dear life. He lost his grip and began rolling down the cliff. Ah, you know, like...*like a rolling stone*. That's when someone began screaming. Then someone began screeching for the patrol, someone else for the *big john*. Alas, fate was not there to bless them again with a patrol to clean up this mess.

Gloria didn't know how to react. She stood there with her arms slack at her sides, watching bodies scramble and voices rise and scatter, and felt nothing take hold. There was a strange hollow distance as though she was seeing it all through a pane of glass.

It didn't feel real enough to respond to. It was as though she was watching a scene from some corny TV program featuring bloodless gang violence, but with oversaturated comedic blood redder than a canned tomato soup commercial, not something at a funeral. She thought of the long stretches of road she'd traveled to get here, the easy way fate had seemed to guide her, and felt suddenly foolish for believing it meant something *larger*.

She turned away. She ran down the highway in the direction that the van she hitchhiked on had left. When she runs, her thoughts always get carried away by the wind in her ear until there is nothing else left but the thirst for survival.

Nothing else could she do at this point but to *run*.

03

Gloria learned she was stranded when she counted the money in her bag and realized it was not enough to get her anywhere meaningful. Enough for coffee, enough for bread if she was careful. Not enough for a bus ticket back west, not even close. She stood outside a diner just off the highway in the afternoon daylight and felt something settle into her chest.

Consequences. She had not thought beyond the funeral. She had imagined leaving afterward, getting back into the rhythm of things, telling herself she had done what she needed to do. But the funeral had not ended anything. It had only opened something up and left it exposed.

The air smelled of grease and burnt coffee inside the diner. She slid into a booth and ordered the cheapest thing on the menu. At the counter sat a man with close-cropped hair and a jacket that looked like it had been mended too many times to count. He was nursing a cup of coffee and reading the classifieds with intense concentration, as if each line mattered.

"You passing through?" he asked when he noticed her looking.

"I was," she said. "I think."

He snorted softly. "That's how it starts."

He had been in Vietnam. Or rather, he had been *supposed* to be. He said plainly without pride or shame that he had deserted. Took off during a transfer, hitchhiked west, then east again when the money ran out.

"That's why I can't tell you my name. You'd report me."

"No, no, I won't do that, I don't want to be found out here either. But running away from a war, isn't that illegal?"

"Law's on paper, but life's in the field. I prefer to do what keeps my skin intact. On top of that, you are sending a pack of kids to die in the jungle, but these kids don't get to vote out the guys who made this decision for them. That doesn't sound right to me."

Nevada had been a good place to disappear, he said. Nobody asked questions if you showed up on time and did the work. Just as long as you shift around jobs every once in a while.

"I'll stick around till the war's over," he said. "However long that takes."

Gloria didn't know what to say to that. Elijah did speak about the war before, but he wrote only a couple of songs before he decided to write more introspective ones. She agrees with Elijah that protest language all sounds the same. She had never thought much about the war beyond what drifted into the margins of her life.

"What are you doing out here?" he asked.

She hesitated. Saying Elijah's name felt too intimate, to the point of being ridiculously embarrassing like stripping herself down to her underpants. But she said it anyway.

"He died," she said. "I came for the funeral. From the Bay Area."

Raymond nodded, as if this made sense. "People come a long way for dead men."

He didn't ask why it mattered. He didn't ask what kind of singer Elijah was. That restraint felt like kindness.

"What does losing someone you look up to feel like to you?"

"You feel the bleeding first. After that, you go kind of numb. You don't stop. You can't—not when someone goes down. You stay on your feet, or you don't make it. You deal with it later. Or you don't.

"I ran. That gave me time to think about it, sure. Maybe too much time by now. But don't kid yourself—you can't think about it forever. You don't run away from *life*."

"But you're young," he paid his check in coins. "You'll figure it out someday."

"There's a motel two miles down," he said, nodding toward the highway. "Go that way. They'll let you clean rooms for a night if you ask right. Diner'll pay you cash if you stick around till closing. Don't tell them you're stranded. Just passing through."

Gloria nodded. Two *miles*. That's...something.

He didn't wait for a goodbye. He just got up, walked out, crossed the road and walked into the distance.

Gloria's eyes trailed behind him for a moment longer than necessary, then wandered back inside.

That was when she noticed another girl. She was sitting at the counter with her pack at her feet, all color in a place that had none—bare shoulders, tangled hair, a bracelet of beads clacking nervously against the laminate. She couldn't be more than seventeen, maybe younger. She kept looking toward the door like it might open into something else entirely.

"Going somewhere?" the girl asked suddenly, as if the question had been waiting.

Gloria thought of the canyon. The road. The money in her bag.

"I was," she said. "I think."

The girl grinned widely and unafraid and twisted her hair around her fingers. "Me too. San Francisco."

Gloria chuckled wryly. No way this all had to be fate. No way. No, Gloria is not buying it this time. Staying on the run doesn't keep you away from things, you learn later on that you're only earning yourself trouble.

The girl kept smiling anyway, undeterred. She slid off her stool and leaned her hip against the counter. She pointed at herself. "Frances."

"Gloria."

"My folks think San Francisco's the end of the world," she said, rolling her eyes. "Like it's gonna swallow me whole. My dad's a deacon. My mom irons his shirts every Sunday morning like it's holy work."

Gloria smiled faintly. "Nice life. Sounds organized."

"Sounds *suffocating*," Frances shot back. "I wasn't even allowed to cut my hair till last year. No dances. No boys. No records unless they came from the Christian bookstore." She laughed, sharp and quick. "I heard The Doors for the first time on a crackly radio under my blanket. Thought—this is it. This is the future."

"The future," Gloria lets it roll around her tongue. She tasted and tested the word in her mouth.

"Yeah," Frances said eagerly. "You know—no war, no rules that don't make sense. Everybody loving who they want, doing what they want. No one telling you you're sinful just for wanting things." She hesitated, then added, almost defensively, "I don't even do drugs. Not really. I just want to be where people aren't scared of living."

"You think San Francisco's got that figured out?"

Frances shrugged. "I think they're trying. That's more than where I'm from." She looked at Gloria more closely now. "You don't sound like you're trying to get away."

"I already did," Gloria said. "Once."

"And?"

"And it didn't turn into anything better just because I crossed a state line."

Frances frowned. "That's kind of a downer thing to say."

"Yeah," Gloria admitted. "I'm just finding that out."

Frances swung her pack strap back and forth with her foot. "I just don't want to end up like them," she said. "Living the same year over and over again, watching the news every night and pretending it's not about you. They say peace like it's a fantasy, like kids are naïve for wanting it!"

Gloria thought of the canyon. The fistfight. The rich tomato soup blood against the dust. "I guess sometimes people want the right things for the wrong reasons," she said. "Or they want them loud enough to drown everything else out."

Frances went quiet for a beat. Then she grinned again, a softer one this time. "You sound like someone who's already lived in the future but didn't like it. Because it wasn't what you wanted."

Gloria laughed bitterly. “Maybe.”

“So what do *you* believe in?”

Gloria opened her mouth, then stopped. Elijah Gold. Thoughts of him filled her chest like a flood and pressed violently against her ribs. There he was lying on the desert ground and watching the stars with a shy grin and a guitar in his hands on the cover of his second and final record. There were his songs like words of truth, of unbelievable lyrical talent, written in private letters.

She still missed him, yes, but grief alone wasn’t the whole story. There was confusion too. She had assumed knowing him through songs and secondhand glimpses was enough. She had loved *his life*, the part of him she thought she could understand but really just couldn’t, not even through interviews and reports. There is no way she could ever know the real Elijah Gold. She hasn’t even seen him live before. He wouldn’t have wanted to tour in San Francisco either, that was not what he wanted—no, that wasn’t the point.

She closed her mouth again and swallowed. She felt hollow.

“I think believing is overrated,” she said finally. “Paying attention might be enough.”

Frances considered her words as she chewed on her lower lip. “I guess I don’t know how to do that where I’m from.”

“You might,” Gloria said. “You just haven’t had to yet.”

The waitress cleared the counter loudly. The day had slipped fully into the night.

“Well,” Frances said, hoisting her pack again. “I’ve got friends waiting for me. If you change your mind, you know where to find me.”

Gloria nodded. “Take care of yourself.”

“You too,” the girl grinned, already halfway to the door. “Don’t get stuck.”

Gloria watched her go and stood up slowly. She didn’t feel stuck—not exactly. Planted, actually. Like something had finally taken hold underground. She stepped out into the cooling night and began walking rightward toward the motel. She felt hydrated. Tomorrow could wait. Tonight, she needed four walls and the space inside quiet enough to get used to the silence.

04

Hell, she was *not* hydrated. She walked fifty minutes straight in the cold Nevada desert on a single cup of coffee and less than two hours of sleep, for crying out loud. A while ago she was indeed trying to save money, but now she is simply *desperate* for something cold to drink at whatever cost. Gloria reached the motel in faint flickering neon signs just as the night thickened. Thank God the sign at the door said Vacancy. She slid into the lobby and asked for directions to the diner.

She pushed the door open. She asked for a bottle of iced Coke and took a while absorbing herself in the cool fizz that brings herself back to her senses. The world stopped spinning. Her eyes rested on the single swinging bulb that lit the bar counter and inhaled the smell of old wood and lemon cleaner lingering in the air.

Someone was tuning a guitar at the back. Gloria gazed at the dark from where scattered notes drifted out. The sound of nails scratching against the strings as chords are pressed out against the fretboard. Fingers drumming along the guitar body like the gentle caress of the wind.

The chords vaguely reminded her of the chorus of an Elijah Gold song, but she decided she would not think too much into it. Not the right time.

For a while, Gloria wondered whether a pair of eyes was staring back at her. Eyes like a bird of prey.

“You know,” a hoarse, warm voice came from the dark where she stared. “I don’t think he’s dead.”

Gloria snapped back into focus out of surprise. Then followed disbelief; for a brief moment, she considered the possibility that she was seriously talking to ghosts. “Ahem. Who’s dead?”

“Didn’t I see you at Elijah’s funeral this morning?”

Holy cow.

“People don’t just disappear like that,” the voice went on. “Not the good ones. I think maybe his soul’s looking for somewhere else to land.”

The guitar was put down on a seemingly rough rugged surface, probably a cushioned seat. Out walked from the dark a woman with sun-streaked hair, her pinky tapping absentmindedly on the edge of a glass she held in which ginger gold liquor swirled.

The woman slid onto a stool next to her, the bulb catching the lines at the corners of her eyes, the kind that came from sun and wind more than age. She wore a plain dark dress and boots scuffed pale at the toes. Up close she smelled faintly of tobacco and something medicinal.

“I was there,” she answered the question Gloria hadn’t asked. “Stood at the back. Didn’t want to crowd the family. Supposedly those in the front were his family, but they didn’t look like him at all. Not sure if anyone else he knew even made it.” She tipped the glass once, not quite a toast. “Ugly business. Not the ashes. The people.”

Gloria nodded slowly. “You knew him.”

“Not like that,” the woman said. “Not personally. But I knew his songs before anyone wanted to print his face next to them. Played a few of ’em in diners and bars like this when nobody cared who wrote what, long as it made the room quiet for three minutes.” She smiled thinly. “He hated that, you know. Being treated like background noise.”

Gloria looked down at her Coke as its sweat mixed with the sweat from her own palm. “He didn’t seem like someone who liked being misunderstood.”

“He was,” the woman said. “But he was worse at correcting it.” She leaned her elbows on the counter, joints clicking. “People like to say he burned out. That he couldn’t take the pressure. Easier story. Cleaner. Truth is, he was tired in a way sleep doesn’t fix.”

She flexed her fingers and cracked her knuckles like she was tired herself. “They gave him pills so he could keep moving. Gave him more so he could stop. Funny how that works.”

Gloria swallowed. “He didn’t write like he was trying to escape.”

“No,” the woman agreed. “He wrote like he was trying to stay. He wanted to cement his existence among the currents.” Her eyes flicked up, sharp despite the drink. The eyes of a bird of prey, hazel under the light like embers. “You look like you’ve got the same kind of insistence. Like if you paid enough attention, his songs would reveal something greater to you.”

The words landed closer than Gloria liked. She felt heat creep up her neck. “But I thought he did try to write something greater.”

“He did,” the woman said gently. “Just not in the way people want meaning handed to them. Songs aren’t instructions for anything. They’re proof. Proof of someone’s existence.” She picked up her glass, hesitated, then set it down untouched. “You remind me of him, a little.”

Gloria almost laughed. “I didn’t write anything worth burying.”

“Neither did he,” the woman said. “That’s the point.”

A silence settled between them, worked into place like the pause before a final verse. The woman’s face had gone slightly gray under the bulb, a sheen of sweat breaking at her temple. She pressed a hand flat against the counter then to her chest as if annoyed by it.

“Hell,” she muttered. “That’s not right.”

Gloria set down her Coke and stood halfway. “Are you—?”

The woman sharply shook her head once. Her breath came short now, shallow, eyes unfocused as though the room suddenly tilted. The glass rolled from her fingers and shattered somewhere near Gloria’s boots. The crash was as loud as a gunshot in the small room. The woman slid sideways and knocked hard into Gloria’s shoulder before crumpling to the floor face-down with one hand still clenched at her chest like she was holding something in place. She looked ordinary like this—too ordinary—like someone who had lain down on the floor to rest but forgotten how to get back up.

Bird of prey, bird of prey. Shot in sky, shot in flight. Are you going to die?

For a split second, Gloria couldn’t move. Gloria backed away. One step. Then another. She had clearly seen too much today and now it seems that if she stays she’d become a suspect of murder. Her heart hammered so loud it might have sounded clearly across the empty diner.

No one else is in sight; there’s a back door behind the counter. *To leave now is to end everything.*

She moved fast. The guitar was still leaning against the chair. She lifted it by the neck and was surprised by its weight and how ordinary it felt. She swept the glass shards into her bag with her feet. Then she braced herself and started dragging the elder woman by the arms.

The body was heavier than she expected. Awkward, resistant, catching on chair legs and door frames. Gloria muttered apologies under her breath without knowing why.

She dragged the body outside beyond the treeline, far enough that the motel lights no longer touched them. The ground was hard and rocky and uneven. She found a shallow dip between stones and juniper roots.

Her nails were on the verge of breaking and bleeding. She worked until her hands shook.

The woman lay in the pit she dug out like a child in a womb. She buried the woman with dirt scraped loose by a spoon from her bag, fallen branches, whatever the dark allowed.

She laid the guitar beside her.

“I’m sorry,” she said aloud this time, though she wasn’t sure to whom.

Then, a few feet away, she lay on her back with the grit still clinging to her sleeves. The sky above was vast and indifferent but for the wide, wide span of shimmering stars.

Somewhere above her, a nighthawk cut a wide arc through the dark. Once. Twice. Three times.

“Thrice shall nighthawk circle sky, she will tie life back to mine.”

She almost smiled. It was ridiculous, she knew. The kind of thing Elijah would’ve pretended not to believe in while quietly writing it down anyway. Still, the number lodged itself in her chest.

Maybe he was still with her. Or maybe she was refusing to let him go. The distinction mattered less than she’d expected.

She had spent days trying to reconstruct his suffering, his last thoughts, the precise angle at which the world had finally worn him down. But all the time, she had a sense at the back of her head that the true story of Elijah Gold was slipping out of her reach. In fact, it was never meant for her or anyone to take hold of it in the first place.

It wasn’t noble. It wasn’t fair. That was the thing with entertainment.

He sold himself to songs knowing someone would help them outlive him even for the wrong reasons. In exchange, his existence was for the world to remember. If a song could make silence last three minutes in a bar or convince a Californian girl lying in the dry cold deserts of Nevada that she wasn’t entirely alone, that would already be more than enough.

Gloria closed her eyes. The nighthawk slipped back into the dark. She slept without dreams.

05

The desert looked harmless again when she woke up in the morning. Gloria stood and brushed dirt from her clothes. She took the guitar with her. She’ll go back to California and smash her guitar somewhere on her way. Back to the coffee hub, to university, to *life*. She walked to the highway and stuck out her thumb. *Just don’t look back.*

A van slowed. She got in.

The road carried her back west.