

THE FLAKES

Isaac Simpson

THE HOUSE WAS ON A STEEP HOLLYWOOD HILL, about halfway down Beachwood Canyon from the sign. It was a sloping-lot craftsman and from the street looked like a small single story, but it flowed downwards in a tube so that half the foundations and one side of the basement were exposed beneath the main floor.

The “basement” was not really a basement at all, but just another smaller floor that opened out onto the hill. Inside it was dusty and decorated in a way that Coda found appalling. Coda thought her grandfather, as a doctor, should have had a modern, glinting home, glass and steel, or at the very least something mid century modern. Instead it had tiger print rugs and ugly yellow sofas with the plastic still on them. There were mirror paintings with tigers popping out of palm fronds, and lions printed on velvet tapestries.

The place felt less like a doctor’s Hollywood Hills mansion and more like a pimp’s plush dream. The funny thing was that her grandfather was not a dandy, not a stylish man or an outspoken one. He was solemn and quiet and the home, where he lived alone until his death, didn’t feel like a reflection of him at all.

The payment for Coda’s free use of it was a “caretaker” role, which meant that she and Si were to stay only in the small furnished basement and keep the rest of the house in good condition to prepare for sale. Despite her dislike of the interior, Coda felt privileged to have the place, already her own hill house where she could throw parties, so she accepted her mother’s condition without argument. The basement, though tiny, opened out onto a covered stretch of cement that overlooked the city. A thin ring of green backyard surrounded the cement pad and Coda had thought it plus the basement would be more than enough space for her and Si.

“Oh, so, one thing,” she said. They were hauling Si’s \$2,000 Carr amp out of the trunk of a milky beige 1989 Volvo station wagon that his parents had bought him as a graduation gift. Actually, they hadn’t gifted it per se. He knew he needed a

car for LA and he had found this one on Portland Craigslist, beautiful in its ordinariness with a rebuilt engine and brand new paint and detail job. He had instructed them to buy it for him at \$10,500. It was a little too glitzy, though, the curves a little too polished, for it to achieve the desired look, and Coda thought it looked trying, like the product of the thing rather than the thing itself.

“What?” Si said, sweating and breathing as he plopped down the amp on the dusty twin bed and watched it bounce.

“So, this will be our apartment... like separate from the rest of the house.”

He glanced around him. It was a postage stamp. A spiral staircase led down to a hairy brown carpet. The bed looked like it had five scuzzy quilts on it. There was a La-Z Boy and an old 13” television. Double glass doors slid open to the cement and the ring of yard and a smog-filtered, impressionist view of the amaranthine city.

“Meaning what?”

“Meaning we should try and stay in the basement.”

“Uh, ok,” he said. Coda went back upstairs for another load of stuff and he followed. Unlike Coda, he was privileged enough that this eleventh hour revelation pissed him off. He thought he was getting a house.

“I don’t want to be weird,” he said, helping her yank one of her massive suitcases out of the trunk, “and I’m super thankful to be staying here for free, but it is kind of small. I sort of thought we would you know like have the whole house. Will there, like, be somewhere for me to practice?”

“Oh ya, we can use the outside all we want. It’s covered.”

“I can’t plug my amp in out there. What if it rains?”

Coda looked at him blankly and that was the end of it. Every night Si would go outside to the little driveway, plug the amp into an inside socket and snake the cord out through the double glass doors, sit on a dirt-encrusted white plastic lawn chair, and write his songs.

* * *

Neither of them had jobs. Coda's constitution made it impossible to appear like she was *seeking* a job, even though she was. She knew it would be a slow process and she selected her social interactions, as she always had, by status, but this time with a goal in mind. Luckily, there was an unlimited supply of parties. The Briar crowd was slowly making its way back to L.A. from wherever they had spent college, and some were already famous for being the offspring of a famous couple—a status far sexier than having had achieved fame oneself.

But neither Si nor Coda could rely on that. They had to pass the time while waiting for something to happen. At least twice a week Coda and Si would smoke dabs and drive the Volvo down the hill to the Arlight and see a movie, and Si would be jealous when Coda would, every time, lean over and whisper “I went to high school with her” as some young thing appeared on screen. High school friends transferring from Instagram celebrity to the big screen seemed only natural to Coda, but it deeply disturbed Si to see such blatant nepotism, as it would any artist still planning to make it on sweat.

But they were doing fine. They both had thousands of Instagram followers and they were always invited to the socialite parties where everyone still flocked around Coda, and where Si got to play the brooding musician. The right people were hearing his stuff without him even trying, which made him love Coda all the more. He had left the other members of Small Brain back in Portland, but, truth-be-told, none had the chops for the real push anyway. He farmed a new band off Craigslist, mostly older dudes, and re-started the L.A. version of Small Brain. His sound was so unique that he immediately started getting real gigs.

Sometimes Coda suspected that his parents paid venues to let him play. She couldn't stand this possibility. At least at the slummy bars in Highland Park were real gigs, even if nobody was there besides drunks. The other shows were at corny-ass venues in Hollywood and Downtown and were attended by Si's L.A. friends, which often included middle-aged acquaintances of his parents (“I've known

Si since he was this tall!") and the other bright-eyed, now-corporate Reed grads who still remembered him from college ("I always knew you'd make it!"). She particularly couldn't stand the insipid, contrived Facebook invites he would send out to these people begging them to come to the shows. It felt so pathetic, so pedestrian. It irked her even more when he started inviting *her* friends, the Briar kids she had carefully manipulated for so long.

After he invited Borna Rosen to one of his shows, despite having met her only once, she knew that she had to say something. Borna was the daughter of a famous British filmmaker and a former B-list Hollywood starlet. She was one of Coda's blue chip stocks, not one she could risk exposing to the ugly seams of her boyfriend's rise to rock stardom. Being a sweetheart, Borna had accepted, and thus Coda was forced, against her nature, to address it with Si.

It was an ordinary evening and she smoked a bowl and went outside where Si was riffing on his beautiful, \$12,000, 1962 hollow-body Gibson, his most precious possession, also purchased by his parents upon passing some benchmark or other. She had never interrupted him during practice before, and she was surprised to feel her heart thumping.

"Yo," she said.

He was watching his own fingers.

"Si."

He stopped. "What up," he said, still refusing to look at her. "I'm practicing."

"Ok." She turned to go back inside.

"No it's cool. Sorry," he raised his head, "what's up?"

"Just wondering what the deal is with your show."

"Which show?"

"The one at Ham & Eggs."

"You've been there before. Remember? Downtown."

"Yeah I do. When is it though again?"

This was so out of character for her, to question him about his plans, and it made him angry. She obviously knew when the show was, or if she didn't she could check on online, where she lived most of her life anyway. It was inane questions like these that had presaged the end of his previous relationships—questions for the sake of them, questions for attention. A wave of fury passed through him and he shot her an icy glare. "Thurs night. Check Facebook."

The look sent unprecedented shivers down Coda's spine. She almost apologized for interrupting him, but caught herself. "Dope," she said instead.

"Why what up?"

"Who's gonna be there?"

"I dunno. I invited some peeps. Same as usual. Why?"

"Oh... I think Rhone is having a party that night," she lied.

"Okay? So?"

"So some of the people you invited might not be able to make it. You shouldn't always assume everyone is free."

"Some people like who?"

"I dunno. Like Borna, like... I don't know other people."

"Uhhh, ok. If they can't come that's fine I don't care."

Now she was furious. He had taken advantage of her moment of vulnerability. He had made her the problem. She was *never* the shrill one. There was only one move she could make.

"Can you get moonrocks?"

"What? For what?"

"Rhone's party. Duh."

"Why are you asking me that now?"

"When should I ask you about it?"

"Not while I'm practicing."

"Oohhkay. Sorry."

"You want me to get you molly for a party I'm not invited to?"

“You are invited.”

“I have a show, remember?”

“You can come after the show and meet me.”

“Oh... so you’re not coming to the show now?” Now he was the shrill one.

“No worries. I’ll ask Michael.” She couldn’t help but smile as she shuffled on.

He returned, as quickly as possible, to plucking the strings.

* * *

Si always disappeared early on show days. She imagined he sat in the green room at the venue and practiced his set over and over, but she honestly had no idea where he went. Ham & Eggs had neither a backstage nor a green room, but Coda didn’t know that, so the fact that Si was nowhere to be found on Thursday afternoon was not a cause for concern. Her plan was to appear at the show and leave immediately.

It was meant to start at 7:30pm, the most pathetic of all start times, and Coda Ubered downtown early. Ham & Eggs was an ancient, evergreen breakfast joint that had operated downtown for decades. It was the beneficiary of the gentrifying island surrounding the base of the new Ace Hotel & Theater on South Broadway just west of Skid Row. With the influx of the creative class, Ham & Eggs’ owners recognized an opportunity for use of the space at night. They installed a phony industrial stage and began renting it to musicians directly on consignment.

Coda burbled out of the cab into the yellow streetlight. She felt distracted and annoyed, and was digging in her purse as she arrived at the entrance. A hostess asked who Coda was there to see.

“Small,” Coda said.

“Who?”

“Small Brain.”

“Oh...ok. It’s a \$5 cover.”

Coda rolled her eyes. "I'm with the band."

"Oh, okay. Name?"

"Coda Wood."

"Ah okay. For band guests it's \$3."

With an eye roll that could melt steel, Coda dug in her purse again and yanked out three crumpled ones and slammed them on the host stand. The hostess made a check mark next to "Small Brain" where it was written beneath several other band names, and handed Coda a paper wristband.

She made a beeline for the bar, sat on a stool and splurged on a tequila neat, indulging in the handsome actor-bartender's raised eyebrow. She sipped and stared at the stage. People she recognized, all Si's friends, filtered in. It was a particularly lame crowd, she thought, lots of eager faces excited to be checking out downtown.

Si normally came out right on time and began playing immediately, no banter, but by 7:50 he still wasn't on. By 8:00 she was nervous. She got a beer. Still no Si. Something was definitely wrong. Finally, a stage manager with headset on appeared on stage and told the crowd that she was very sorry, but the Small Brain show was cancelled and that The Pheromoans wouldn't begin until 8:45. The crowd groaned. None of them were there to see The Pheromoans. People started looking over at Coda. Before they could approach, she darted out the front door and started walking.

It took all her focus not to call Si. What was happening? She had never felt the curiosity and bewilderment of wondering where the fuck somebody was and what the fuck they were doing and why the fuck they hadn't just *communicated*—and this seemed like the granddaddy of all flakings. She felt nauseous. The world was crooked. He had never missed a show in his life. Was it because of her? Of course it was. But he hadn't even known she would be there. She had made it seem as if she probably *wouldn't* be there. Was he dead? Had he burned up in a Volvo crash? No way. No chance. So what then? She needed to smoke weed immediately. She pulled

out her phone to summon an Uber. She had an unread text message. It was from Borna.

Heyy, so Si is over here. He's really fucked up. Have you spoken to him?

A knife to her gut. What the fuck was Si doing over at Borna's? He was "so fucked up??" Si never got that fucked up. She'd seen him do molly, cocaine, dabs, and brownies in large quantities and never lose his cool. He'd done double tabs of acid and half-bags of Mushrooms and heavy bumps of Ketamine and never gone over the edge. He wasn't much of a drinker, and always tempered everything with continuous cigarette smoking. For the first time in her life, Coda had lost control.

The next move was a crucial one. How to find out what was going on without doing anything? Could she appear at Borna's as if she'd just stumbled by? Was there a party over there? Or had she just caught them in the middle of a brazen affair?

Her phone rang. She looked down to see Si's contact photo on her iPhone. It was his face wrapped with a black shoelace, deforming his features, his eyes rolled back in his head. It was a disturbing image, usually one of her favorites, but gross now. She let the call go to voicemail and waited until a red notification popped up. She opened her voicemail app and pressed play.

"I know what you are," Si slurred through the top of the iPhone. He really was fucked up. "I know Coda. Coda Tallulah Ibarre-Wood. I know what that name means," heavy breathing. A long pause and more breathing. Then he said, "alrightbye," and cackled like a howler monkey. It went on for awhile, this cackling. Then the voicemail ended.

She puked her two drinks into a trashcan. The ejected vinegar left her stomach feeling like cotton. Like an automaton, she texted Si. She would play the concerned girlfriend. She hated when others slipped into that role out of desperation, she always judged them as weak for doing it, and she hated herself for doing it in this moment. Still, strength has its limits.

Are you okay?

A few endless seconds passed before the ellipses appeared. Si texted back.

Come to Burma s.

Coda didn't know Borna's address. Borna had just moved back home from New York. She was now living at her parents' Palisades mansion, in a separate apartment cut into the side of the house, similar to but much larger than Coda's basement situation. It was a party destination that Coda and Si had been invited to several times, but Coda had always made a point of flaking, both for manipulative purposes and because the Palisades might as well have been, like, on Mars.

Coda had an idea. One of Borna's previous parties, a Halloween party, had included a Facebook invite. She fiddled with Facebook and found the invite and...yes! There it was, just below the fold, Borna's address: 1282 Ocean Park Drive. She flicked over to Uber. It was there in two minutes.

In the Uber, she received two more texts from Borna.

You coming?

Then, five minutes later,

Yo...

The fix Coda would have normally got from this, Borna, of all people, sweating her, was drowned out by the thumping in her ears. Thirty minutes later the Uber pulled up in front of a house that, like Coda's, looked quite small from the hilly, winding street, not more than a garage accompanying a one story flat. The thrust of the mansion trickled down the hill, getting fatter and fatter on the way down, dotted with warm yellow portals like fireflies looking over the dark ocean. Coda rushed towards the door. She opened it and walked right in.

The sounds of a party. A couple of scuzzy dudes sitting on a chartreuse couch in the foyer, ramming a BMW key into a dimebag then up their nostrils. When she entered they looked up with googly eyes and said, simultaneously, "What up Coda!"

She brushed passed them into the kitchen. Three girls in black wide-brimmed hats stood chatting around an open stainless steel refrigerator that looked like it belonged in an industrial kitchen.

They shrieked,

"Coda!"

"You're here!"

"Yayy!"

"Come take a shot of Mezcal with us!"

"It has a worm in it!"

She whisked by them too. She knew what she was looking for. These parties were always structured the same, concentric circles tightening down to a core. The core would be the hosts of the party, whosever house it was, along with the kids closest to famous and the hangers-on that were benign enough to blend in. The core would be in some room, a bathroom or library or bedroom, that was off limits to everyone else, and the core members would rotate out of that room in turns to face time with the lesser guests outside. Coda knew that Si would never be caught dead in an outer circle, nor would she.

She found it, down two flights of slippery cherry stairs, in Borna's bedroom. There it sat, the core, a lump covered in black felt, ripped denim, tattered fur, oversized camo jackets and stained lace. The room reeked of cigarettes and marijuana, and there were half-consumed lines dusting both nightstands. T.I. was playing on speakers connected to a computer, Spotify open to one of Borna's personal playlists titled "Trap Bitch." The open double doors to the large balcony allowed in a non-existent breeze. There must have been eight people reclining on the bed, like a Roman orgy, except everyone was very clothed and very much not having sex.

Borna, lying with her back to the princess headboard, sprung up as soon as Coda walked in. She wasn't pretty, she'd inherited her father's hawk nose and protruding oval cheeks, but she had the look—the pink Cobain cut, dainty septum piercing, and a lumberjack shirt over a tight white tank that showcased her flat stomach.

“Oh my God, *there* you are! I've been texting your ass!” Borna said.

Coda relaxed every muscle in her face, then curled the most bored smile she could imagine.

“What up girl!” Coda forced. “What up errybody!” She forced harder. The clump cheered her arrival.

“Are you here for Si??”

“What you mean?”

“He's here! I texted you...”

“Oh, I didn't see. I hate my phone.”

“Dude, he's really fucked up. He didn't tell you he was here!?”

“No he did tell me. I just...”

“Do you know why his show got canceled? I asked him but he won't tell me.”

“Oh I dunno, I couldn't make the show tonight. I didn't even know it got canceled.”

Borna's eyes flashed pleasure, which was followed by a thespian's furrowing of the brow. She almost shrieked it, “He didn't tell you?!”

“Maybe he did, I haven't looked at my phone.”

“Oh ya. Well I texted him earlier to say I was sorry I couldn't make the show, because my cousin is in town from London. You've met Ava.” Borna tilted her head towards a blonde playing with a kaleidoscope on the floor. “His show was cancelled anyway so I invited him, I invited *ya'll*, to come hang out with us. He showed up already wasted and we drank Mezcal and he started puking. I think he's still in the bathroom.”

Coda glanced over towards Borna's bathroom, the green room's green room, and saw the door tilted open. She walked over and peered inside. It smelled like vomit and weed. Si lay in the bathtub. Some sycophant or other, a harmless boy with long shaggy hair, sat on the toilet next to him. They were mid-conversation. In Si's hand was a glass pipe with a piss-colored bumblebee melted onto the handle. He was sprinkling weed into the bowl when he looked up. He stopped articulating whatever point he'd been making. The shaggy kid, catching the point, stood up and said, "Um, I'll give you guys a moment."

They stared at each other for a long time, the longest they ever had. Finally, Si spoke.

"Get those moonrocks?"

"Ya."

"From Michael?"

"Ya."

"Did you take them?"

"Not yet."

"Are you going to Rhone's party?"

Si's head was lolling. She'd never seen him like this. A feeling of care, of almost pity, opened the door to her stomach. It peeked in, realized it was in the wrong place, shut the door and ran away. The ice returned. Her face relaxed and she turned to walk back into Borna's room where she planned to smoke one thousand cigarettes, but Si spoke again.

"Can we go?"

She froze, then returned to the side of the tub. "Ok ya let's bounce," she said.

"Can we get burritos?"

She laughed.

* * *

After that, Si was under the impression they had made up. He held her hand as she drove the Volvo back to Hollywood. Back in the basement, he lay on the bed and played music and tried to make chipper conversation. But Coda wasn't even closed to finished with him.

She let Si pass out, then she crept upstairs to the main part of the house. Si had so far been remarkably compliant about staying in the basement, so Coda felt secure that she would be alone. She made her way to her grandfather's king bed, covered with what looked like the pelt of a woolly mammoth. She crawled in, spread out, and slept.

In the morning, she crept back into the basement. Si was still asleep and she stared at him for awhile. Those deer eyes of his, how beautiful he was, a unique and special creature. She yearned to crawl in next to him, but she didn't. Instead, she picked up her laptop and charger from the floor and crept back upstairs.

Later, she heard Si practicing outside, beneath her on the cement driveway. She was disappointed. She wanted him to be searching of her—for his relentless ambition to have been interrupted by her just as her indifference had been penetrated by him—but his practicing indicated that he was still functioning. Even after the practicing stopped, he did not enter the main house. She wondered what he was doing. She found herself Googling surveillance cameras.

Later on in the evening, she stomped around a bit, clanged some pans in the kitchen, and finally got a reaction. Si called her twice. She didn't answer, of course, which must have been infuriating, but he stayed in the basement. As evening fell she heard him go outside to the car. Nighttime came and, even though she was starving, she went to sleep without dinner.

She awoke to the sound of the Volvo backing slowly out of the driveway. She rushed to the window, but realized the main bedroom didn't look out on the driveway. Afraid of being seen, she waited until the car left, then walked out the front door. The back of the Volvo was just visible at the bottom of the hill, making a left at the stop sign. Peach rays bounced off the clear glass and traveled up the hill

into Coda's eyes. She could just make out the back of Si's head, his wild hair. She looked at her phone. It was only 6:00am.

She sprung into action. She had no idea where he was going, so she would have very little time. She googled a 24-hour locksmith and used her best girl-on-the-verge-of-tears voice to get them to send someone immediately. As she read her mother's credit card number to the locksmith, she was already frantically packing Si's stuff. He had so little, it didn't take long. She thought she had remembered more, some music notebooks maybe, but she couldn't find anything else. She stuffed his small suitcase and rushed it outside to the cement where his guitar and amp sat. The guitar offered her total security. As long as she had it, she knew, she had him.

While waiting for the locksmith she ordered thai food, also on her mother's credit card, enough to stake out for a day. The thai arrived before the locksmith and she devoured the Tom Ka and put the rest in the refrigerator. Then the locksmith arrived and changed the lock to the basement door, leaving her with a set of three freshly cut keys that she placed on the night stand next to her grandfather's bed. She packed a bowl and waited anxiously for her glorious fix, surely one of the best ever, the total shock that would tremor through Si as soon as he realized she had silently removed him from her life.

She smoked and smoked and watched YouTube videos. She found a series of particularly warped Japanese game show videos, and watched them all in their entirety, sharing them one by one on various Facebook walls, before she finally looked up to find it dark outside.

* * *

It wasn't until days later, when the thai food was almost gone, that she finally looked at her phone. There were many texts, but none from him. The hurt was nuclear. She had to sit down. She curled into a ball on her grandfather's bed, and, to escape, instinctively opened up Instagram again. She scrolled through a few dark,

blurry pictures of girls wearing skullcaps and sticking their tongues out. Then she saw it. Uploaded only 9 minutes ago from an account Coda had inspected many times, Borna_2bwild. A fuzzy photo, as if taken in motion. Her eyes caught on the deer-like creases of Si's eyes. She would've recognized them anywhere. He was lying in the bathtub, the same one she had found him in three days earlier. He had a guitar resting on his chest and a cigarette in his lips. His eyes were squinted to tiny slits. He looked completely trashed.

The caption read:

Small residency in The Bathtub, this Summer #datrap #palisades #smallbrain #summahtime 🎸🎸🎸

She dropped the phone and threw off the covers. She ran through the kitchen and down the basement stairs. She passed the bed and thrust open the double doors, sliding the panel so hard the pane cracked, leaving eight feet of spider webs in the glass.

There was nothing out there. The amp, the guitar, the suitcase were gone. She stumbled inside and fell down face first on the dusty basement bed. She opened her mouth and shrieked, down into the springs.

The next morning, she called her mother.

