

P R O L O G U E

A man's soul can be painted in dingy shades: half-bitten apple cores strewn on sidewalks, tear-streaks on dirty faces peering neath the caps of time, of forgotten dreams and hopes gone by - the blinking blue and green of "Murray's Liquors."

Auden tightened the tourniquet on his arm. He wouldn't feel the prick of the needle like he wouldn't see the color of the fluid draining into his veins. *Yellow.* Maybe his soul had a bit of that too. The needle clattered to the floor of the sedan and the tourniquet came off. Bosco would take care of the rest.

"Good old, Bosco," he whispered through a side smile. His head fell back and his eyes slid shut. When he opened them, he was staring at a flashing neon sign. The Q was out - *again.* He thought of telling Murray - or whatever the fat man called himself - to fix the damn thing so he wouldn't be bothered the next time he shot up. And he was bothered - by broken lights and colors. He saw the world in colors. *Once.*

A low chuckle came from somewhere deep. It whistled through rows of even, white teeth only to end in a whimper. He could picture himself in shades and suit, stepping from his ritzy ride to seize the liquor owner by the throat. "*Hey, your bulb's out!*" It wouldn't be his first scene. He could create them on cue. After all, the show was everything. And the show must go on.

There was a time when he saw the other side of blue and green. Back then, the only yellow was that of the sun, his hair was dark - not the wavy, wispy gray of now - and his face unlined. He bit his lip, twisting a fist into the seat cushion. Ten years ago. *Had it been so long?* There had been darkness before the light. There would be darkness after. The one constant in his life: a tunnel with no beginning or end. He had been born into it.

Some said he never cried as a baby - that he would lay in his crib and stare at the ceiling. But he remembered crying. He remembered the breathlessness of nearing the bottom and finding no tears left. So the damp at the corner of his eyes surprised him. But he did not stir. He savored its long, moist path down his face and into his hairline. And in its movement, he remembered her.

Neon blinked frenetically - as if the very thought of missing a bulb proved insulting. Blues and greens swirled together in psychedelic madness, reflecting in the blue of his eyes and throwing back shapes and patterns that danced across his vision like elephants in a circus show. He laughed and pointed as he tried to catch a floating image, but it popped mid-air. This made him laugh harder and he threw himself into the glass that separated him from the driver. Bosco jolted awake.

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“Hey, Bosco! Let’s go! Big brother is waiting on me! Come on!” he cried, thumping the seat. The sunglasses came down like the mask of a woman with yellow veins deciding it was fun to cut and burn her little boy. A mask blocked tears. It told lies and dared anyone to question them. It could hide the colors of a man’s soul.

With a glance over his shoulder, the curly haired, droopy-faced giant slowly revved the ignition. “Whatever you say, Boss,” the reply was sluggish.

Times had changed. Ten years ago, Bosco would have never called him “Boss.” But Auden had given him good reason - out of necessity. He stared at the side of Bosco’s head and through the sweep of multicolors streaking the sedan, envisioned a young man, hands gripping the handlebars of his XTrend motorcycle, dirt blowing wind devils and Bosco, smiling into the grit, his head thrown back as he laughed and laughed...

Thump! Auden banged the window again. “Hey there, Bosco! What’s wrong, huh? You’re not laughing! Why aren’t you laughing, pal?” He chuckled erratically, bunching into a ball.

“Will you just shut up, Audie? Huh? You know I don’t like driving you out here to shoot up. And if Spike ever found out you were still using juice, he’d...”

“He’d do what? You’d tell him? Come off it already, pal. You always keep my darkest secrets, don’t you? Never tell anyone?”

Bosco responded with a hard right. Auden was thrown off balance. His head smacked the door.

“Hey!” he objected, blinking to clear his vision. “What’d you do that for?”

“Maybe to knock some sense into you!”

“Maybe I should knock some into you!”

“You’re smaller than me! Besides...” Bosco grew serious. “You’re throwing away a good mind, Audie. You’re better than this.”

Auden gripped the armrest until his knuckles turned white, until the fabric buckled and cratered. How could Bosco pretend not to know? He was better than nothing. *Nothing!* Any authenticity of soul died the moment she vanished from his life.

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Another swerve of the sedan and he managed to hold on. Once he had fallen into the other side of green, warm with concern and care - for him. Three days. *That was it.* And she was gone.

But he opened his eyes to yellow. Through the mask, everything was tinted like an old lens. His veins were bursting with color and he felt his pulse quicken.

“Just step on the gas, buddy! Come on!” he snapped from one emotion to the next.

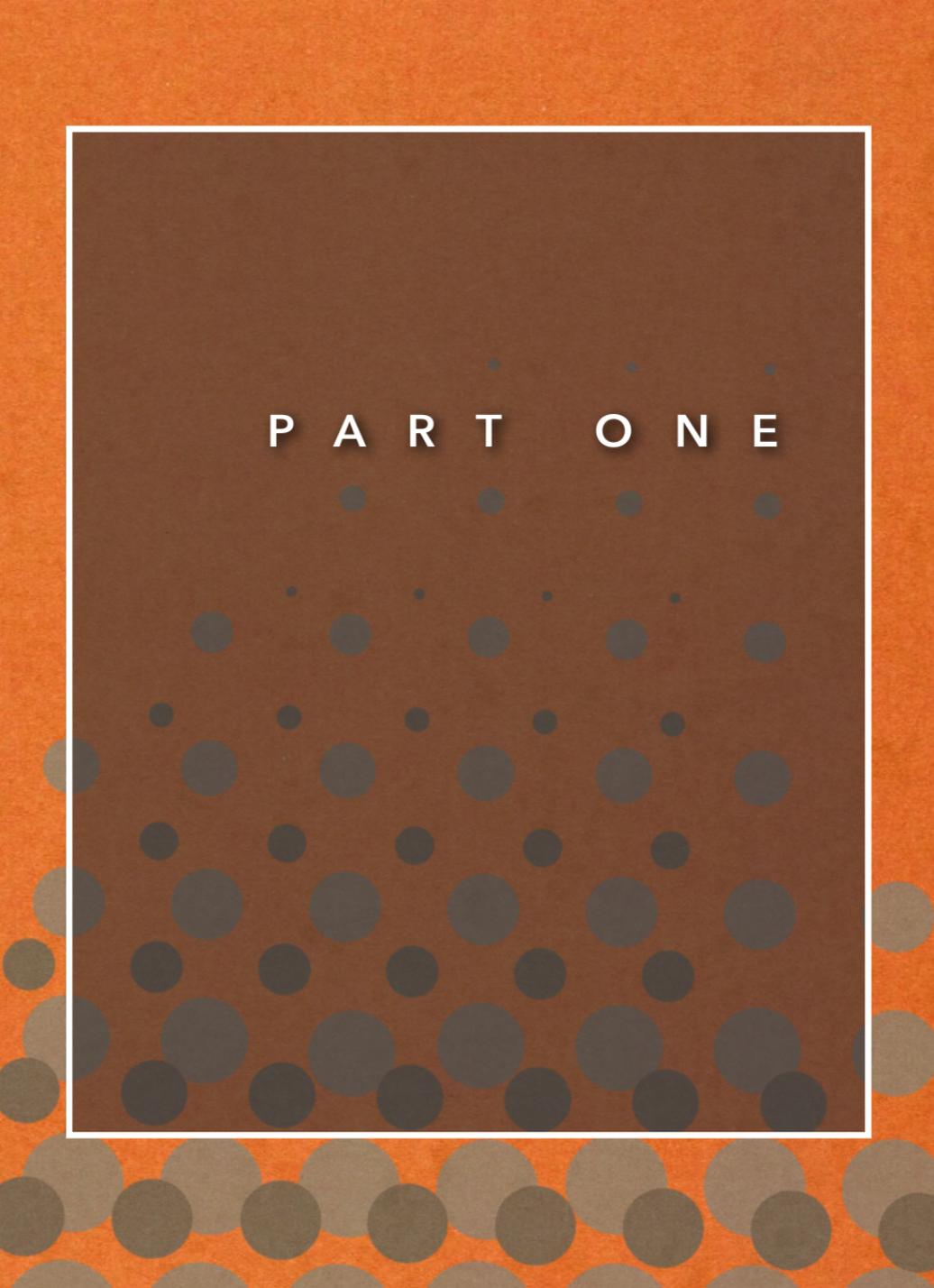
Bosco was leaning out the window, craning to see through traffic. Something was wrong. “What the...”

Screech! Glass shattered in his lap. Metal crunched from both sides and he found himself in a heap. The colors stopped flashing. He thought he heard yelling. Once he even saw her face.

“Don’t worry, Mister. You’ll be all right.”

He felt cold and clammy. Sirens were so close they shattered his hearing and the fingers that circled his wrist felt like another’s - *how they hurt!*

“No,” he breathed as something hard slid under him. “Please, no.” And the darkness covered everything.



PART ONE

ONE

