

The Number Nine and The One After That

by Darryl Price

Johnny K. didn't much like taking his exotic drugs any more. He now thought that the common reality was already an intense enough trip without wrapping it all up in enough gauze to cause permanent daydreams to the head. He liked his cheap hamburgers well done and didn't care what vegetarians in the group thought about that little culinary detour either. He found the constant on the road obsession with too much free sex to always be a sorry sort of grand disappointment—all those incredible passions fizzled out in the end and didn't last long beyond the exciting bouts of heavy to slow breathing, then the sad crush upon the heart of the fact of ultimate loneliness that is human existence everywhere, afterwords and always. Still he tried his best nightly to deeply kiss his one and only girlfriend like she was the only person left in the whole universe that he had ever once believed in other than himself. Still it was his battered black guitar that mattered to him the most and where he had found the best sort of lasting companionship for his particular poisoned way of leading a rebel life out in the open air market he called the world. He had made this perfectly clear in all his amazing music. At only 22 years old he had already sold well over 20 million records worldwide, but still felt strangely alone, doomed and unloved from the moment he opened his heavy eyelids until they closed on him again. His body was always being dog tired these days. He felt like an ugly tree, already bent into a statue, with the best years of bearing fruit well behind him. He found himself crying over silly scenes in old sitcoms and laughing without even thinking about the context. That's when he decided to let go of the pouring curtains of gold coins and diamond beads that followed him around and walked straight away into nothing he'd ever seen

before in his short lifetime on this little blue planet. No one noticed that he was even gone until he was a long time gone. His sweet girl didn't let anyone see her cry, she only grimaced in front of any of the others she saw looking at her and packed her suitcases one time and quietly left the rent controlled building by the front doors, getting into a yellow taxi with a soft wintry flourish of her longest cotton dress and all its attendant skirts and purple button down coat. She didn't look back or up for that matter for a very,very long time from her frozen spot on the faded red couch at her parent's wood paneled suburban home.

At first it was all simply,wonderfully puzzling to Johnny K., a bit of a small circus like wonder, all the wonderfully loud noises coming from so many different places at once, the whizzing coughing cars, the empty grimaced faces, the blackness surrounding so many jagged stars. Had those always been there in that vast a quantity? He found that if he didn't look them directly in the bloody eyes nobody really recognized him at all anyway. They simply didn't care who he was or had been once upon a time in this wretched broken down life before or after today. If he was walking among them now then he must not matter anymore. His mind immediately began shaping a brand new song out of this strangest of experiences, but he stopped the familiar process with his familiar willpower brought like steel to the spinning grinding stone of creative urges. Bits and pieces of unwrapping musical ideas still tried to seep into his lost head's heart from time to time, but he was always able to turn them far away again, back into the pool of a million quick thoughts like little minnows poured from a Styrofoam cup into an enormous body of fresh water.All gone in an instant, never to return. His face in the mirror began to resemble someone he might have met once from a long ago party aboard a paddle boat that was moving under a string of colorful lantern lights up the Mississippi river. His long unhinged beard now hid someone it's true very well and right up up up to the painful looking eyes staring straight out, but he wasn't sure if it was him or just whomever lived on the other side of every mirror he

passed on his way to the bathroom. That person never gave him any indication. Truth was as elusive a creature as ever.

One day he saw his much younger face slyly smiling up in an absurdly twisted laughing position from the tattered corner cover of a pulp magazine that had been left alone on a ketchup smeared table in a fast food restaurant where he liked to sit and watch himself eat in the reflecting surface. His thin hands now seemed to belong to someone or something else. Still they did continue to put the warmed up food near and into his mouth for him, something he didn't seem to have the strength or desire to do so for himself any more. He was quietly thankful for the bizarre service to his wasted stolen bodily existence he always seemed to be carrying around with him forever and ever, somehow, some way. Inside on page one there was printed a lovely little pleading letter from a teenager in Ohio begging him to please return to the waiting world of long time music lovers with just one more perfect record. At first he just smiled a taunt line. At first he put the magazine on his tray with the rest of his trash. But then it happened. He heard it, oh yes, and this time it wouldn't go away no matter what reasons he gave it. And this time he didn't want it to go away. It kept revealing more and more of itself as he ran down the windswept streets. By the time he got up to his cheap one room apartment, clicked open his battered guitar case and started strumming along it tumbled out as nimbly neat as a freshly laundered shirt fully formed into an art form of its own and ready for some immediate wear out on the very best of waiting to be painted red towns. The next new songs began to come each and every day after that, sometimes in the middle of the night, sometimes in the middle of a shave, but one right after the other until at last he picked up the phone one hot summer night and left a message on the other end of the buzzing line: book studio 9 time, I've got a shit load of new material to record! Johnny K. is here to stay!

On a beach far away the assassin stood squeezing the plane ticket in his hand and looking for something out on the horizon that he had never in his entire life been able to successfully identify.

