

Power Ballad

by Meakin Armstrong

HE DRANK A TALLBOY AND PILED HIS CHANGE INTO SILVERY STACKS: SEVENTEEN QUARTERS, ENOUGH FOR BOTH THE JUKEBOX AND THE DRYERS. Nodding his head to Mötley Crüe's "Home Sweet Home," he chewed on pretzels and peanuts and then checked his cell phone: about ten minutes until it was time to empty the washers. He finished the Bud then twirled the empty can on the counter, but the bartender didn't like that: He said, "Playing spin the bottle?" Carl smiled, but the bartender didn't.

A man somewhere in the back, where the old men were, let out a laugh. Carl turned the can upright. The bartender wiped the counter in front of Carl and asked, "Would you do that in your own house?" Carl smiled some more until the bartender walked away.

Mötley Crüe was finishing up. Something about the song made Carl carefree: he flipped a quarter: If it came up heads, he'd play Aerosmith. He'd add that to the mix, because Guns 'n Roses was probably coming up next and Guns 'n Roses is incomplete without Aerosmith. The coin arced in the air. In a silvery flash, it bounced off the bar and hit the ground.

The old men were probably watching him. He crouched in the darkness, feeling them watching him, but a quarter isn't a penny; it's too valuable to lose. Carl swept his hands along the floor, coming across nothing but wet spots and sticky places. A pair of bright-red spiked heels came clicking close: A voice asked, "Buy me a drink?"

Standing up, he noticed the tattoo emblazoned across her chest: a ten-gallon hat jutted just above her halter-top and continued down to her midriff. It ended with horse hooves that touched at the belt buckle of her low-cut, skinny jeans.

He was looking at the cowboy, when she said, "Eyes up here."

He mumbled an "Oh" and looked for the bartender. When Carl came back with a Rolling Rock and one of those brightly colored drinks they say women like, he shouted as loud as he could over the jukebox, "Name's Carl."

"Bridget."

Bridget picked up the quarter off the floor and put it in her pocket. She hiked up her jeans. She scratched at a horse hoof and then ran her finger along her midriff. The large imprint of a cowboy was beneath that halter-top.

His eyes followed the tattoo as it moved with her body.

She mussed up her hair. She hooted a rebel yell. "Stupid hair," she said. The woman was beautiful, too beautiful. She was far too beautiful to be in some old-man bar wedged between a Laundromat and a bus station. There wasn't anything stupid about her hair at all: it was long and blonde, with narrow pink streaks. She was beautiful.

Bridget leaned in, "I said, you have stupid hair."

Carl had shaved his head a few nights before, but kept his beard intact. His head's fleshy pink baldness ended at the tips of his ears where his sideburns began. A hairy reddish-brown morass whirled down to his cheeks and chin, and continued farther down his throat, on past the neckline of his tee shirt. Carl shouted over the music, "Thought I'd give it a try." Bridget's eyes ran up and down the bar, as though she were searching for someone better. Carl looked around: no competition. He said, "Want to rub my head?"

Bridget swallowed her drink and then grabbed his hand. Was she going to make him dance? Carl couldn't dance. He hated it when

women made him dance. Women like this, who wear tight jeans and hoot in bars, were always trying to make him dance.

She grabbed Carl's Rolling Rock. "Don't be expecting anything," she said, "because you bought me some pissant drink. My boyfriend—I have a boyfriend—is a marine. He kills towelheads. Name?"

"Huh?"

"Name? Your name?"

He shouted Carl again. He rubbed his newly shaved head. He loved to rub his head because the stubble felt like Mom's old couch, velvety in some places, prickly in others. It reminded him of lounging in her living room and watching TV while eating Nila Wafers. Carl looked at the floor and then at one of the horse hooves on Bridget's belly. She must do sit-ups every day. Maybe she was one of those people who worked at the gym, making old ladies exercise. Or maybe better, she was a stripper.

Carl looked into Bridget's eyes, but couldn't hold her gaze. She was looking at him as if she were daring him. But daring him to do what? Her eyes were brown. But he wasn't sure. He looked again: her eyes were blue. Her eyes were blue, and looking straight at him. She took another sip of his beer, and then another. She was drinking all of his beer and she stretched out her body while she drank. She used her other hand to raise her halter-top, very slowly.

Carl looked about the bar: No one was watching. She pulled up the halter-top until Carl could see the horse's long legs, then its knees, and then finally, the tip of a cowboy boot.

"I like your ink," he said. That's what people seem to call tattoos: ink.

Bridget finished the Rolling Rock. It was good he'd switched to Rolling Rock: it looks better to have a bottle when drinking with a woman, not a can. Bridget held the Rolling Rock upside down over her mouth as the last few drops dripped down. Her stomach muscles were stretched—the hours in the gym, doing sweaty sit—ups, the nights dancing at the pole. Bridget pulled up more of her top: Carl could see the whole of the Western-style boot, the cowboy's leg, and the horse's muscular neck riding along the bottom of her right breast.

She put the beer bottle on the bar and said, "I'm drunk." She smiled as though she were a little girl. "I'm so drunk." She came in closer until she wrapped one arm around his waist. The other, she used to rub his head. "Feels soft," she said. Her small breasts glided along his shirtfront, her thighs touched at his. Her hand moved around to the front of his waist. She looped her thumb through the belt loops of his jeans. She could probably feel his erection. Carl leaned in close to be sure that she could feel it, when she said, "I'm shaved too, you know."

His voice cracked when he said, "Ah, good."

Bridget laughed. "Dream on. Look at you—the way your eyes got big. Chucklehead." She laughed some more and then drew her finger lightly along the front of his jeans. Guns 'n Roses was reaching a crescendo—Sweet Child o' Mine and then the bar was silent. She pulled away from Carl to lean against the bar.

"That beard makes you look like a psycho-Santa. Or maybe an Amish or an Iraqi." Bridget said it too loudly, loud enough for the bleary-eyed old men to turn around on their barstools. "All you men are chuckleheads. All y'all, except my boyfriend."

"The marine."

“Could snap you in half.”

Journey's “Don't Stop Belivin' ” came on the jukebox. Carl liked it because it made him laugh.

Bridget sat on a bar stool and closed her eyes while she mouthed the words.

“I picked that. I picked that song.”

She put up her hand to quiet him while she mouthed the lyrics and used her index finger to trace out the song's melody. Her halter-top. Her skinny cream-colored jeans. Her high-heels. She was probably twenty-five, ten years younger. What she must be like in the morning, coming out of the shower. Drying off the little hairs on her muscular belly.

Carl tugged at his beard and looked in the mirror. No, it wasn't a good look. He'd smoked a lot of weed that night he'd shaved his head. He'd started out by first shaving one side of his head. It seemed funny at the time to be half-bald. His roommates laughed. They said it was good to see him be funny again, after the break-up with Candy. Someone came up with a quarter bag and all of them smoked while they watched reruns of *The Gilmore Girls*. Afterward, he shaved the rest of his head.

Carl stared into the mirror while Bridget swayed to the rhythm. Women don't want him with a look like this. Candy wouldn't have. Candy didn't even want him to wear denim cutoffs. His head seemed fleshy and naked. He had a mole on the top of his head he'd not known about. Making matters worse, he had something of a stomach—a slight crescent shape could be seen in outline against his dark food co-op tee shirt.

Bridget swayed on her bar stool. Maybe she'd gotten high, just like

he did, but instead of shaving her head, she'd gotten a tattoo. She liked Journey, in a serious way. Carl's roommate Jeff told him that it's best to go for women who like reggae, though. "Always go for the reggae woman," Jeff said. "They like the reggae, they like the sex." Bridget leaned forward and her halter-top opened slightly. Carl peeked: He could see the face of a firm-jawed cowboy. It was probably the same face as her boyfriend.

Bridget mussed her hair. Pink streaks flew. He noticed for the first time that her fingernails were painted with American flags. She closed her eyes again and waved her index finger in figure eights. Her nails flashed red, white, and blue. Her mouth moved slowly to the song.

Everyone else in the bar was looking everywhere else: it was as though they were alone while Journey played loudly all around. "Streetlights, people," she sang. Time didn't move. What she must be like while driving, singing to herself with the windows fogged, and the radio blaring, small towns whipping by.

The song came to an end. The bar was silent. An old man hacked and spat.

After a moment, she said, "Thanks for the drink." Her eyes were still closed.

Carl couldn't think of what to say. "Sure."

She leaned forward on her bar stool. "Come here."

He moved in.

"Closer."

They were two feet away. "Lean forward." He bent over. Bridget

touched his scalp. Then rubbed it. Her fingers were damp and sticky from the bar. "For good luck," she said. She got up off her stool. She seemed somehow smaller than before, even though she was still in her high heels. He imagined her coming out of the shower in her heels, the cowboy on the horse, dripping wet.

"Thanks for the drink," she said. She put out her hand. She wanted to shake hands.

"Nice, yes." They shook hands, damply. He would never see that entire tattoo. He wanted to lick that cowboy's boots and kiss his face and fondle her nipples, but that was only for the marine. "I like your cowboy." It was something to say.

She pulled out a cigarette and put it in her mouth, unlit. She sucked in her breath as though she were smoking it then let it out again, slowly, as though she were blowing smoke rings. She said, "Got a match?"

Carl nodded no. If he'd had a match, maybe she would have stayed. He'd think about her for weeks. He'd wonder where he'd gone wrong. He shouted out into the bar, "Anybody got a match?"

"No smoking in here," came out a voice from the back that had a lot of finality to it.

"Never mind," she said. "It doesn't matter. I got to go meet the boyfriend, anyway. He's back." She started toward the door and then stopped. "Grow your hair out," she said. "You look really stupid."

Carl tried to smile then he rubbed his head. He ran his hand over the soft part on the top, then on the scratchy parts on the sides and back.

"I'm just calling it like I see it," she said. With her still unlit

cigarette, she pointed towards a small pile of clothes on the top of the bar. "And what's with that, anyway?"

"Doing laundry. Next door. I do my laundry and have a beer while I wait."

She nodded toward a red thong in the clothing pile. "You do your girlfriend's laundry?"

Carl balled up the thong and put it in his pants pocket. "No. We broke up."

Bridget smiled. "Perve."

"I found it under the bed. We used to live together. Seemed like I should wash it."

She shook her head. It looked as though she was going to say something.

"I could buy you another drink," he said.

"Some other time."

Light was coming through the doorway and it surrounded her like a halo. She could join him at the bar while he did the laundry. She could drink from his bottle even though she would also have one of her own. She could laugh with him about the people at Laundromats and bars. She could sit on Mom's old couch, which must be somewhere. He said, "See you again?"

Bridget probably smiled but he couldn't see because of the bright, outside light surrounding her. She walked off.

He looked where she had been standing. Outside on the street, it

was bright, almost too bright. People were rushing by. It was the middle of the day. It was the middle of the week. It was probably time to dry the rest of the clothes. But all of that could wait: Carl went over to the jukebox to put on some better songs. Ones that made him happy. Maybe he should have played Aerosmith's "Dream On." Maybe it would have gone better with Aerosmith. Aerosmith is always better than Journey. He should have put on "Dream On," because that was the greatest of all of the world's greatest hits: *Dream until your dreams come true.*

