



Chapter 11: It's a Chelsea Morning

The early morning air in Coconut Grove carried a heaviness, a kind of latent humidity that clung to everything, even before the sun rose high enough to burn off the mist. I arrived at Peacock Park before the day had fully begun, in that quiet hour when melancholy hung

over everything like a low cloud. The park was still, with only a few figures scattered along its edges. The marina was visible in the distance, boats moored silently off shore. The marina stretched into the distance, boats swaying gently in place, some secured to the docks while others rested quietly on their moorings, all awaiting the day's first stirrings of life on the water

I found a picnic table at the back of the park, close enough to the ocean to smell the salt in the air but far enough from the tourists who would eventually drift in—though few ventured to this stretch of shoreline, where there was no sand, just jagged Chunks of coral. I pulled out my guitar, its familiar weight a small comfort, and began to play a song I'd been working on. It wasn't quite finished, but the melody had taken root in me, and as I strummed, the lyrics flowed easily, almost as if the guitar itself was singing along.

*Sailing, playing, blowing on the breeze,
I'm never staying, going where I please.
And with every town I come to, there's a woman there to love.
I cried the day you left me; it's you I'm thinking of.*

*If you could see the love in me, I'm sure you would have stayed.
But you seemed to find other things that time would soon decay.
And since you've gone, I've wandered on in the memory of your love.
I cried the day you left me; it's you I'm thinking of.*

As I played, I noticed a figure moving in the distance. It was a young woman with a guitar slung over her shoulder, her long skirt swaying with each step. She seemed to be heading toward another table, but when she saw me, she altered her course, her curiosity drawing her closer. She had a wide-brimmed hat that shaded her face, though it couldn't hide the brightness in her eyes.

She introduced herself as Joni—appropriately, her favorite artist was Joni Mitchell. There was an easy openness about her, a natural grace as she sat across from me. Without hesitation, she pulled out her guitar and began to play some of Mitchell’s songs. Her voice was strong and sure, and as she played, it became clear that she wasn’t just mimicking the music; she was living it, breathing it in as though each note carried a piece of her soul.

In response, I played James Taylor’s “Blossom.” I had a fine voice back then, the kind that filled the air without effort. Music had always been my bridge to others, a way to connect when words failed me. With Joni, it worked. We played, laughed, and talked, the guitars resting between us like old friends.

She wore a long, flowing skirt, a whimsical hat, and carried a large fabric bag. There was something free-spirited about her, a sense of untethered existence that mirrored my own. By the end of the afternoon, we found ourselves alone in my van, parked along the park’s edge.

Later, I drove her home to a ranch house that sprawled across ten acres, near the edge of the Everglades. The place had an easy, rural charm, with outbuildings, chickens, ducks, and a horse she adored. There, in the stillness of the open land, I felt how different she was from Debbie, in whose mansion I had always felt restricted. Joni asked for nothing from me but my presence, and in return, she offered a kind of freedom I needed at that time. Our time together was filled with passion—endless afternoons and nights in the van or even my jungle hideaway on Key Biscayne, where the wildness of the landscape matched the wildness in our hearts.

Those were heady days, the kind where youth allowed us to live recklessly, without fear or constraint. We ran naked through the

jungle, full of life and desire. On the way to and from her house, which lay on the southeastern edge of Miami near the Everglades, I often passed quarries—pits of fresh, clear water teeming with fish and alligators. I'd bought a snorkel and goggles for ocean diving, but the waters around Miami were too Murky for my liking and being inexperienced with oceans I imagine sharks in the Murk. Those quarries, however, were Crystal clear fed by hidden freshwater springs.

Being young and brash, I thought nothing of swimming with the alligators—small ones, of course. But Even a three- or five-foot gator could do serious harm, something I learned later. They could run faster than I'd imagined, and people say crocodiles can reach up to fifteen miles per hour, faster than most humans. But in those days, I didn't care. I'd sneak up to the gators sunning along the shore, pull their tails, and leap away from their defensive snaps. Looking back, I realize how foolish I was, How close I might have come to becoming an alligator's lunch. Occasionally, I'd park my van in Joni's driveway at night, though only when she wasn't in school. Her little sister, A sneaky devious brat, was always sneaking around, spying on us with wide, inquisitive eyes. Joni's stepfather was a kind man, welcoming me into their home. He stood in stark contrast to the father figures I had encountered in the past.

But when Joni's mother returned from somewhere I don't recall, everything changed. She was a stern, watchful woman—divorced from Joni's real father and now separated from her stepfather. There was something hard and bitter about her. She took control of the household the moment she walked through the door, and it became clear she didn't like me. Mothers never did, as if they could sense the transient nature of my presence, the inevitable departure that was

always on the horizon. Joni's mother demanded that she end the relationship, and though it hurt, I knew it was coming. It always did.

In a way, it was a relief. The Florida sun was becoming unbearable, the humidity pressing down on me like a weight, urging me to leave. It was late April, and I knew I wouldn't be spending the summer in Coconut Grove. The road was calling me once again, and this time, it was Ohio that beckoned—a return home to see my family.

I wondered how much I had changed in four months. When you're only eighteen, four months feels like an eternity. It was the longest time I had ever been away from home. I had started thinking about something that had never crossed my mind before—changing my name. My birth name was David, but there were so many Davids in the Grove that I felt like just another face in the crowd. Then I met a guy named Shannon. He hadn't been around long, but because his name was unique, people knew exactly who you meant when you mentioned Shannon. "David," on the other hand, didn't stand out at all. I was actually David Junior, Sometimes being confused with my father, and we hadn't been getting along lately anyway. So, I decided to change my name to Shannon. It felt like the first big change I would bring back to my family.

I spent the next week panhandling, trying to scrape together enough money for the journey to Ohio. But the going was slow. And I was eating as much as I saved. I had a friend who worked at a Royal Castle restaurant near the University of Miami. He told me he could get me a job, and back then, anyone could find work, even me with my long hair. I needed about thirty dollars for gas and food to make the trip from Miami to Columbus. I ended up working six days a week for three weeks, earning \$1.60 an hour, and managed to save \$167 without any taxes being taken out. It was more than enough to get me where I needed to go and then some.

The Grove was full of drifters and hippies from all over the country. Through them, I heard stories about other places where the counterculture was thriving. There was always talk about Colorado, and the more I heard, the more the idea of the Rockies stirred something in me.

As I stood at the edge of the park one last time, guitar in hand, I knew that leaving was the only thing I had ever been truly good at.