

# *American Moon*

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## Chapter 1

On the back seat of the old Cherokee wagon, a canvas duffel stuffed with shirts and jeans. His favorite boots on the floor. The guitar in the front, out of its case, resting on the passenger seat. So far, on his way from Chicago to the West Coast, he had played at two bars, one in Champaign where the crowd was young and drunk, mostly college kids. Maybe he'd go to St. Louis and see what he could find there. Maybe Lawrence, another college town. He could get a gig or two. For a long time, Austen had thought about taking off like this. But it required the kind of guts he didn't have then. Now, with the girlfriend gone and the false talk of living together, it was as if he had little say in the matter.

The bridge from Illinois to Missouri stood like a steel monster, a benevolent creature, passive to his progress. It symbolized little, this big unmistakable structure. Instead, it was the river below that marked the shift in Austen's existence. That massive muddy waterway, running down the middle of the country. That is what triggered his change. As he crossed it, his heart and head shifted. A bass player he'd once performed with had a contact, the name of a man in Los Angeles who knew some singers and bands who might want Austen's songs, might wish to record them. It seemed a bit suspect, but what did it matter, and what would he think later if he simply dismissed it? So, as the stick-on compass on the dashboard stared back at him, just as it had for more than 500 miles and as the tires thumped along the immense span's concrete surface with the big river below, Austen began to see for the first time more of what might be in front of him than what had been behind.

At Bird's Point, Austen filled his tank at the Phillips station, bought iced tea in a bottle and a pack of American Spirit, the yellow box, and paid with cash. "Couple of hotels ahead?" he asked the clerk, an older man with long gray hair and black reading glasses hanging at the edge of his nose.

“Sikeston,” the man mumbled, lifting his eyes away from his phone for a moment.

“Twenty minutes or so?”

“Yep.”

“Anything cheap?”

“It’s Sikeston.”

“Bunch of chains?”

“All the finest.”

The clerk pushed the receipt under the counter’s protective glass. Austen held up a packet of mints he’d chosen and showed a handful of coins. “That cover it?”

“Probably.” The clerk counted in his head.

“There’s maybe seventy-five cents or so,” Austen said, searching the front pockets of his jeans, thinking he might have more.

The old man grunted. “Forget it.”

“Sorry. Just don’t carry change much, you know?”

“Uh-huh.”

“I appreciate it.”

“Uh-huh.”

Austen slid the coins under the glass.

The motel room smelled like overripe lemons, recently cleaned by a maid Austen had seen rolling a cart of mops and brooms, towels, linens, and bottles of Windex and Lysol along the walkway. But clean was about all anyone could say about it. TV didn’t work, a bulb was missing from a table lamp, and the safety-chain lock on the door was broken. Austen thought it best to put the room’s only chair against the door before he slept. It was well after midnight. Austen was in and out of sleep, tossing from one side to another, tucking one and then another pillow under his head. For a while, it was quiet, only the occasional clank of the air conditioner rattling on and off until somewhere in the dead of things, through the wall came a soft cry, a whimpering. Austen first heard it when he used the bathroom. He put his ear to the wall. A baby. Must be a mother with a child, a family.

He returned to bed and pulled the covers up tight to his neck. The clatter of the air conditioner silenced for a few minutes, and he heard the cry again. Louder. Sharper. Austen placed one of the pillows over his head. The cry continued, the intensity building, growing quickly from a soft sigh to a near scream. He listened

for someone, the comforting voice of the mother, but there was only screeching. The child was now gasping between the squeals. Austen pounded his fist on the wall.

Austen's girlfriend had said she didn't want kids. Too troubled a universe, she had said. Why would anyone want to bring a child into this world? Austen wondered about this now with the cries more desperate. He sat up in the bed, listening. He picked up the phone on the nightstand and dialed the motel office. It rang and rang. He hung up and dialed again. Still, it rang and rang. The baby wheezed for air between cries.

Austen stood at the bedside, pulled on his jeans, slipped on his shirt, brushed back his sleep-tangled hair, and put on his boots. He stepped out the door to the walkway and turned to the adjacent room. The light from the motel's sign flickered off the chrome doorknob. For a moment he listened. More cries. One knock on the door and it slowly opened, allowing for a view into the dark room.

"Hello?" he said. Austen knocked again. "Anyone here?"

He pushed the door enough to lean inside. "I'm from next door. Hello?"

Just inside the door now, Austen could see with the help of streetlights from the parking lot shining over his shoulder that the child was fastened in a car seat on top of one of the double beds, a pink blanket draped over its body. He looked toward the bathroom. "Anyone here?"

The child gasped again and then pushed out a squeal.

"Hey, hey, there," Austen cooed, bending down. "It's okay. All okay."

On the dresser was a half-empty child's sippy cup and a small pile of clothes, a woman's blouse, and a pair of neatly folded socks. The other bed appeared to have been slept in. A partially eaten sleeve of Oreo cookies had been left on a small table near the window.

Austen dialed the office again. No answer. He stepped outside the door and looked out to the parking lot. Anyone? Someone? It was quiet except for the sound

of the occasional rumble of a truck along the motorway on the other side of the motel.

How is no one else hearing this?

Back inside, he began to sing to the child, a girl, he assumed, considering the blanket. “Here Comes the Sun” was always one for uplifting his spirits. He knelt on the floor and could see her better now, her eyes brown and watery. Austen sang breathy notes. The child’s red face scrunched tightly as she cried. Austen continued to sing. He unbuckled the strap of the seat, threw the pink blanket over his shoulder, and lifted her to his chest, rocking as he held her, singing and singing. The child trembled and wriggled, but soon the cries softened. He carried her with him to the doorway and looked out toward the lot again. “Hello?” he whispered. I should knock on the door of another room. Find someone.

Instead, Austen stood motionless in the early light as morning began to break, deep blue on the horizon, suggesting a warm day ahead. His mind swirled with wild thoughts. Crazy thoughts. What if he put the car seat in the Cherokee, strapped her in, and drove away? He could take her west to something new. West to the land of change. New beginnings. He would call her Claire. He always liked that name. She’d be a wonderful girl, grow up strong, confident. Claire would change the world. She would be happy.

Across the parking lot, Austen now saw someone at the entrance to the motel office. He could hear the distant clinking of keys on a chain in the still early morning air. With the child in his arms, he began to walk toward the figure, someone who could help. But after a few steps, he stopped, sensing the child’s now steady, rhythmic breaths. She was falling asleep. This astounded him, a stranger soothing a child as if he had been with her many times before, as if the child knew everything was all right.

Austen stood along the walkway that ran outside the doors of the motel rooms, closed his eyes, and began again to gently sing—Little darlin’—as the rush of highway traffic rose above him, building in the new day with all those people and all those places to go.