

## Deserted Cities of the Heart

By Paul D. Marks

Memory is a funny thing. It grabs hold and doesn't let go. Daniel Hayden wished he'd get one of those diseases where you couldn't remember, Alzheimer's, amnesia. Anything. He knew if he told that to certain people they'd think he was nuts. Didn't matter what they thought.

Daniel looked up, thought he saw a mourning dove flying through the Gateway Arch, heading out in the direction of Route 66. It was gone now. He wasn't sure if it was even there in the first place. Like Route 66, there but not there at the same time. What was left of that legendary highway passed right through St. Louis. Once America's Mother Road, much of it now decommissioned, it existed more like a ghost or a shadow on the land. Daniel had always looked on it as an escape route. But escape to where? Besides, escape was nothing more than an illusion. Wherever he went he'd take his baggage with him.

He wanted to forget the last three months had ever happened. Yeah, he wanted to shut those memories out. He didn't want to think about yesterday. Didn't want to think about today. And he definitely didn't want to think about tomorrow. He never thought it would turn out like this.

“I wish tomorrow would never come,” he said out loud. But there was no one around to hear him.

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*Three months earlier:*

Daniel lay on the grass beneath the Gateway Arch, staring up at its clean, sweeping lines. It seemed to rise all the way to heaven, getting lost in the glare of the tawny late-afternoon sun. He liked coming here on his lunch hours or after work sometimes. It was only a five-minute walk from the office.

He liked to daydream about being somewhere else. But he knew he'd never leave St. Louis, never get on a jet bound for anywhere, never get in a convertible, top down, and head west on Route 66. Never. Probably never make it to LA or New York either. No, he was happy enough with his life in The Lou. You didn't hear much about St. Louis in the news. Not many movies or TV shows took place here. But there was that old midnight movie classic, *Meet Me in St. Louis*. His parents would watch it every Easter. He hated it. Just a musical fantasy, nothing about it was real. And nobody he knew spontaneously broke into song or dance, unless they were stoned. He sure as hell wasn't the type to spontaneously break into song, but he did have a dream of being in a band once. Played rhythm guitar in a quartet. Even wrote some songs. He wanted to play the blues like Albert King on his Gibson Flying V, but his friends wanted to play rock. So he bought a Fender Telecaster and they rocked. His parents wanted him to have secure job, something to fall back on. He loved hacking computers, so they convinced him that was where to go. And though he had a passion for it, and even loved his job, it wasn't the same. Eventually, he sold the guitar—it felt like he was selling his soul.

Dreams fade. New ones take their place. He still wanted to accomplish something, maybe move up at work. He was good at it. IT tech for CyberGen Management Systems, a high-powered information company that did a lot of government work. Not the most exciting job in the world, but any job's exciting if you put your all into it, he thought. He was just an average guy. Successful, if not rich. Decent looking, if not movie-star handsome. But not a freak either. He knew he'd never set the world on fire.

"Nice day," the young woman said. Not the most original opening line. And where had she come from? He'd had no idea she was even there.

"Yeah, especially for this time of year."

"My name's Amber. Amber Loy."

He didn't think she looked like an Amber. Amber should be more exotic. She was on the plain side. Not unattractive, just not flashy. Looked about twenty-five—twenty-five going on thirty. Hair a mousy brown pageboy. Hardly any makeup except for bright red lipstick. He liked that. Black patterned nail polish. He wasn't sure about that though. Green eyes, kind of dull. No sparkle. Definitely not an Amber.

"Daniel Hayden." He felt awkward. But what else do you say before you start talking about your favorite movies and groups, how many times you've read *Infinite Jest* and just what the hell it means. And why was she talking to him? What did she want? Sell him religion? Dope? Undercover cop, trying to bust him?

"Mind if I sit here?" She didn't wait for a response. That made him suspicious.

"Can I ask you something?" he said.

"Sure."

“What do you want?” He didn’t know how else to say it. The social graces weren’t his strong suit.

“Nothing. And you’re certainly blunt.”

“No point beating around the bush.”

“You’re alone. I’m alone. I’m new to St. Louis. Don’t know anyone here and was just wondering what there is to do? I was also wondering if there’s some Wi-Fi hot spots near here.” She tapped her messenger bag, so he assumed it held a laptop. “Need to catch up with the world.”

Daniel was wary. He wasn’t the kind of guy women just started talking to out of the blue. He didn’t really like her much. She seemed ordinary and forward and looked like a hipster wanna-be, just trying a little too hard. And now she was intruding on his quiet time. Invading his space.

Awkward silence filled the air over ambient noises: boats, cars, planes, people, the wind tacking along the Mississippi. But he couldn’t hear any of it, couldn’t hear the young woman now seated next to him. Like outer space, his space under the Arch was void of sound. He didn’t know what to say. Figured she didn’t either since she wasn’t saying anything. Had they run out of things to talk about already?

He glanced over at her, the thick hipster glasses and ironic George W. Bush T-shirt that said “What, me worry?” on it. He thought she might make a PBR appear out of her bag at any minute.

“So,” he said, because anything was better than this titanic silence, “what do you like—”

“What? Now you’re going to ask me what bands I like. And, of course, I have to say some dumb shit like some obscure band that nobody’s heard of and as soon as anybody does hear of them, I have to move on ’cause they’re not cool anymore.” She looked over at him. “Go ahead, stop me from making a fool of myself at any time.”

But he didn’t want to stop her. He knew exactly what she was saying. She leaned into him, invading his space even more. Extended her arm, phone in hand.

“Say, ‘I’d rather be dead than cool,’” she said.

“Kurt Cobain.”

“Right, now smile.” She snapped a selfie of them.

“Do I get a copy?”

“Sure, what’s your number?”

He told her.

“Well, I gotta go.” She started pulling her stuff together. “Hey, maybe we can get together for coffee?”

“I don’t think so, I’m kind of busy.” He watched her cheeks flush. He’d hurt her feelings without meaning to.

“Oh, busy, I get it—I can take a hint.”

“Hey, I didn’t mean anything. I’m just kinda stressed from work, let’s get coffee.”

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Coffee went better than he had expected, so they decided to do something on the weekend.

“I can’t believe we’re coming here,” he said, as they approached Meramec Caverns, a little over an hour’s drive from St. Louis. “It’s so...middle class.”

“—Bourgeois,” they said together.

“It’s so lame it’s cool.” She laughed. “And we can make fun of all the tourists, they’re so fucking midtown.”

“While they make fun of us. We’re tourists here too.”

“Exactly. Hey, like them in their khakis and deck shoes.”

She’d wanted to come here, do something touristy, since she was new to the area. She thought it would be funny, but he really did like Meramec Caverns, even if they were a little middle class wack. He used to come here with his family, when things were good. Had fond memories of it. His father always making silly jokes and his mom taking pictures. He began to wonder what he was doing here with Amber. It’d been almost a week since they met under the Arch. He was starting to like her, even though he didn’t want to. Spent the whole week thinking about her. Wondering what it was about her that he liked? Why was he obsessing over her? She wasn’t trying to impress him or put on an act for him. Maybe that’s what he liked about her.

“They say that Jesse James hid out here,” she said.

“Yeah, but despite the sign over there, nobody knows if it’s really true.”

“Must be true if the sign says so.”

She squeezed his hand. Stuck her other hand in the air and took a pic of them with the sign in the background. In big neon letters, it said “Meramec Caverns—Jesse James Hideout.”

“I always thought it would be cool to be an outlaw. You wanna be an outlaw with me?”

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The drive back was long enough for them to find out all the things they had in common, the Avengers, computer games. Even the Rams. He told her about wanting to pick up the guitar again. Since she was driving, they somehow found themselves at Guitar Center.

“What do you like?”

“I don’t know. They’re all out of my price range, at least anything good.”

“Well, like what?”

“Gibson Les Pauls, ES 335s or SGs. Fenders. Those seem to be what a lot of people play, but what I’d really like is a Flying V, like Albert King played.”

“So, why don’t you get one? Live a little.”

“I’ve lived...a little,” he protested.

They left without buying anything, hit Atomic Cowboy for grub. She’d heard it was cool. He’d been there a few times, liked it well enough. Both ordered Atomic Fries and cheeseburgers. “Hold the chipotle mayo,” they said together.

“We do have a lot in common.” She smiled at him, pulled him closer. Grabbed another selfie. “We both like the Rams. Both work in IT, or at least I used to and probably will again once I find a job here.”

“I’d help you find something, but we don’t have any openings.”

“Oh, I wasn’t hinting or anything. I still need to get settled. Your work sounds pretty deck though.”

“Nah, I’m just an IT guy,” Daniel said.

“IT guy with a security clearance.”

“I just show ’em how to do what they need or fix the systems when they break down.” He didn’t like talking about it. CyberGen Management Systems did some heavy lifting for the Defense Department, the FBI and other government agencies, as well as about half the Fortune 500. Like Las Vegas, what went on in CMS stayed in CMS. “And we’re both into computers and gaming. *World of Warcraft. Assassins Creed.*”

“I’m into a new game, *Deserted Cities of the Heart*,” she said.

“That’s a mouthful. Don’t know it.” But the title struck him. He imagined a world of bare trees and misty breezes. Disillusioned lovers walking on desolate beaches. His love life might as well have been described as a deserted city of the heart. He’d had a handful of girlfriends. And two relationships that had lasted over a year. But even when he was in them he felt alone and lonely, in a way that he didn’t with Amber.

“I really like it. I go there to get away from the world.”

“I go to the Arch for that. Even though there’s people around, I can shut it all out.”

“That’s how I see *Deserted Cities.*”

They walked out of Atomic, hand in hand. He was close enough to know that she didn’t use perfume. He could smell her, a faintly sweet smell. Almost no makeup. Definite hipster vibe, while he was definitely no style. He didn’t understand it, but he was falling for her.

Other guys might not look twice at her. She might not fill their dreams. But his dreams weren’t the clichéd dreams of those other guys, superficial blondes with superficial intellect. She was understated in every way. And he was falling for her—hard.

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She'd only been in The Lou a few weeks, but her Washington Avenue Historic District place was already decorated. Posters, including Andy Warhol with a Salvador Dali mustache, dreamcatchers and retro furniture. Spare, but it looked like someone actually lived there. His apartment of six years never looked or felt like home. She put out some PBR and bacon-wrapped doughnuts to munch on.

“Tell me more about what you did,” he said.

“I was just a low level IT grunt,” she said, lighting a joint, inhaling and passing it to him—snagging a selfie of them, he with the joint in his mouth. “More like customer service, only it was in-house customer service. Anything complicated they'd call my boss. But you're really in the thick of it.”

“I know what I'm doing, but I still just have a low level security clearance.”

His head swirled pleasantly from the beer and pot. They made silly jokes that they probably wouldn't have laughed at if they'd been sober.

“You wanna play some games?”

They moved over to the Sony PlayStation.

“*Deserted Cities of the Heart?*”

“Sure I'll play.”

“It's better when two play.” She grabbed the controller. “It's a role playing game. You have to pick an avatar. The goal is to find love in a future society where love is outlawed. If you do find a lover, you have to keep it a secret from The Executive. If the Praetorians—storm troopers—catch you, they imprison you, you lose several turns and go back a level.”

“Interesting, different from most of the games, first person shooters and all.”

He chose Orion as his avatar, a strong warrior and great hunter. She was Anwen, Welsh for beautiful, and her avatar was. In cyberspace we can be anybody or anything we want to be, he thought. Live out fantasies and you don't even have to leave St. Louis. It's like turning off the lights, you don't have to see people as they really are with all their flaws.

They swigged PBR, smoked more dope. Munched on those doughnuts, jammed on the game. He was walking down an isolated road in the middle of nowhere. Ghostly trees seeming to talk to him. The ruins of skyscrapers in the distance.

“Jeez,” he said.

“Something wrong?”

“I don't know. All this dope and the game—I feel like I'm really in it. Living it, breathing it. Time stands still—like there is no time.”

“That's what's so cool about it. You're in another world.”

They went deep into the deserted cities, down one level after another. Hiding out from the Praetorians, ducking them as the game sucked them in deeper and deeper.

Daniel felt woozy.

“I need a break,” he said. “This is spooking me.”

“Sure. It can get too real. Sometimes more real than real life.”

They lay back on the couch for several minutes, neither saying a word. Sipping the beer, munching doughnuts.

“You ever try hacking?” she said.

“No, not really.”

“Not really?”

“Well, white hat I guess. Except—”

“Except?”

“Well, I guess everyone does a little,” he said. “I broke into my nephew’s school. Changed his grade.”

“That would be more fun than just playing games. It’s real life and it’s dangerous. Makes you feel alive when there’s a threat hanging over you.”

“Threat?”

“Yeah, like of being discovered.”

He was feeling no pain. He wasn’t in the room anymore. She wasn’t there. He was driving a vintage ’65 Mustang convertible, tooling down 66. The road never seemed to end. He could drive and drive and drive and never arrive anywhere. That’s what he liked about it.

“Let’s do it,” she said.

He snapped out of his reverie, the dream of the open road fading faster than the last chord on a blues riff. “Huh? Do what?”

“I thought you said you could get in and out of anywhere without leaving a trace.”

“Yeah, but—”

“Live dangerously.”

“Where do you want to go?” Daniel took a hit on the joint.

“Let’s go into Dalloway’s.”

“What, you wanna steal some credit card numbers?”

“No, I just want to see if we can do it.”

“Easy,” he said.

She brought her MacBook to the couch. They bounced around inside the Dalloway's Department Stores' *secure* computers, checking out people's spending habits. They went deeper into some of them, could find out almost anything about anyone.

"Scary. We're all open books. Better not have any deep, dark secrets," she said.  
"Show me how."

He showed her how to hack into Dalloways'. Stoned or not, she picked it up fast. He didn't stop to think, or maybe his mind was too foggy, that, as an IT tech she would know how to do most of this already.

"Let's hack into where you work," she said. "I bet there's a lot of secrets there."

"I can't do that. I'll get fired."

"I thought you said you could go in and out of anywhere and not leave a trace."

"I can, but—"

"I dare you. I'll bet you a hundred dollars you can't." She said it jokingly, but it was one of those jokes that was serious underneath, at least that's how he took it.

Between the PBR and the pot his inhibitions were down for the count. He knew a back door into CMS's servers. He was inside in less than a minute.

They poked around, starting with the people who worked there.

"Jeez. They know everything about us, don't they?"

"I think we should get out," he said. "We've seen enough."

"Look, I'll bet that guy's a real loser. Phillip Tannen, what kind of name is that?"

"It's a normal name."

"Not when you're stoned."

"He's my boss."

“Definitely a loser. Oh my god, did you know he was into magic—a magician. How dorky is that?”

That cracked them up, though he’d never thought it was funny before.

They looked up several people, making fun of them for this or that. ROTFL at everything.

“Hey, let’s look up people in the Witness Protection Program,” she said.

“I can’t do that.”

“A thousand bucks says you can.”

“No. Why should we?”

“Because we can.”

“Because we can?” He hesitated, but was soon back at the keyboard. Via CMS’s system, they probed around in the Federal Witness Protection Program.

“Wow,” she said. “Some of these guys are real creeps. Now that guy looks like a mobster. Anybody else here in St. Louis?”

He continued scrolling through the list of protected witnesses.

“What about her?” she said.

“Carole Cooper?”

“Yeah, let’s see what she’s up to.” She stared at the screen.

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He barely remembered the night before as Amber made him breakfast. He scarfed his food down, had to be at work in less than an hour—wearing the same wrinkled and dirty clothes from the night before, people would notice. They’d know he’d been with a

woman, but they didn't need to know that he and his girlfriend—she was his girlfriend, wasn't she, or at least on the road to becoming his girlfriend?—hadn't slept together yet.

They made plans to meet at Atomic Cowboy for dinner after he got off work.

He could hardly remember last night, his head still filled with cotton candy, as he made his way to the office.

The day dragged on, his fat hangover making time slow to almost nothing, like in *Deserted Cities*.

He walked out to the CMS parking lot, half expecting to see Amber there, even though they'd agreed to meet at Atomic. He got to Atomic about five minutes late.

Traffic. Amber was late, too. He took a table, ordered a PBR while he waited for her.

Half an hour later she still hadn't shown. He texted her. No response. Should he be worried?

He decided not to wait any longer. Driving toward the river, he could see the Arch in the distance. The Arch. Where they'd met, just a few weeks ago.

He tried her cell again. Still no response. Drove to her place, rang the bell. No answer. She'd given him the code to her building's lobby door. Once inside though he couldn't get into her place. He waited outside, but she never came home. Sitting in his car, he called hospitals and the police. But there'd been no reports of an Amber Loy having been in an accident. Was she with another guy? Was he jealous? He'd never been jealous before. He finally went home.

His apartment seemed cold and lonely. For these past days with Amber it seemed like home, a place he wanted to come back to. He pulled a PBR from the fridge. He texted her. E-mailed her. Called her cell. No response. He flicked on the TV, hoping to

get his racing mind off her. He never thought he'd fall in love. Aren't they the ones who fall the hardest? He passed out on the couch.

The moon trickled in through the half-open blinds, as Daniel woke around midnight. Groggy, he picked up his cell, called Amber—still no response. What the hell could have happened to her? He rolled off the couch. Tired, rubbing the sleep from his eyes, he flicked on the bedroom radio, went into the bathroom to brush his teeth. Something on the radio caught his attention. Daniel walked slowly from the bathroom to the bedroom.

“...The body found in the Mississippi near the Captains Return Statue has been identified as Christa Czerny. Ms. Czerny had been in the Federal Witness Protection Program, living under the alias of Carole Cooper in the Lafayette Square neighborhood of St. Louis. She had been relocated here from Chicago, where she was due to testify in the trial of Morgan St. Jacques, a well-known, *alleged* crime boss. When questioned, FBI spokesperson Leticia Adams said the Bureau had not yet discovered how Ms. Czerny's cover was blown and had no leads on the killer.”

He stared at the radio. Wasn't sure what he was staring at, what he was hearing. His head was filled with bricks, still fuzzy from last night's *party* at Amber's.

He had to sit on the edge of the bed to keep from falling over. Something about this story, this Carole Cooper. Something about it was familiar. He'd heard the name before. Couldn't remember where.

Damn! It came to him. He ran for the bathroom and puked into the toilet, not knowing if it was the beer or guilt. Grabbed his cell. Dialed Amber. Still no fucking

answer. He washed up quickly, flew out of his apartment. Drove the ten minute drive to Amber's in six minutes, lucky not to have gotten a ticket.

He entered the building using her keypad entry code. Went to her unit. Banged on the door. A neighbor poked her head out. He didn't care. The neighbor went back inside. "I'm calling the police," she yelled.

He thought he might have to kick the door in, but that would definitely bring the cops. Tried the handle and it opened. He was surprised at what he saw—or didn't see. The unit was empty. Cold, clean and completely cleaned out. As if no one had ever lived there. No clothes. No bacon-wrapped doughnuts. No artwork on the wall. Nothing. He thought he was hallucinating, still high from last night's beer and THC. This couldn't be. He sat on the bare, hardwood floor. Leaned back against the wall, feeling very alone.

He didn't know what his next move should be. Call the cops? Try to find her? What would he do then? Beat a confession out of her. Tell her he loved her and they should leave the country. His mind spun in circles.

It didn't matter. He was in love with her, much as he'd never wanted to be. But he would find her. He would confront her. If he had to, he'd turn her into the cops.

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He came back the next day with a bag full of gear, searched every inch of Amber's apartment. Nothing there, not a hair in the drains, not a stray sock. Found a couple of partial fingerprints with the print kit he'd brought. He talked to the building super. Got her to show him Amber's application. She even made a copy of it for him on her all-in-one printer. She liked his eyes.

He figured he had three choices: Go to the cops. That wouldn't work. He didn't want to spend the rest of his life in jail as an accessory to murder, or whatever they would charge him with. He wouldn't last two days in prison. Or, he could go to Morgan St. Jacques and his mobster friends that Christa Czerny was due to testify against. Yeah, that was a good plan. The other choice was to start with Christa Czerny and work backward from there. But where would that lead? Back to the mob guys. But he didn't care about them. It was Amber who betrayed him. Yeah, Amber—like that was her real name. And it was Amber he wanted now. He wondered if she was the actual hitman, or just the decoy they'd used to get him to find the person they wanted to off.

He had to track her down. She had probably done research on him. Knew all about him. She'd insinuated herself into his life. That first meeting under the Arch was no accident. What a fool he was. What a loser.

He tried to recall everything she said. More lies probably, at least most of it. But maybe there was a shred of truth here or there, something he could latch onto that would lead him to her.

Amber Loy certainly wasn't her real name and everything on her rental application was a lie. So no point in trying to follow up on any of that. But people who changed their names often used parts of their real names. No, she was too smart for that.

He had a friend on the St. Louis PD who could run the prints he'd found through AFIS, the FBI's Integrated Automated Fingerprint Identification System. But he didn't want to bring anyone else in on his nightmare. He hacked into the system, ran the prints. Nothing came up—he knew it wouldn't.

His skin crawled, throat tight with desperation. He'd been played for a fool and didn't like it. He had no idea where to turn, how to find her. But he would. He had to. He loved her. Maybe he'd fallen in love too quickly or too stupidly. And now he was obsessed with her, even though she'd betrayed him. Obsessed in love and obsessed in hate. Either way, he had to find her. He'd start with the places they went.

He drove to Atomic Cowboy.

“Have you seen the woman I've come here with?”

“I don't even remember you,” the manager said.

He described her to the manager, but it didn't ring a bell. He wanted to show him her picture, see if he'd seen her. Realized he had no pictures of her. They'd taken several selfies, but they were all on her phone. She'd promised to send them to him, but never did. She was smart.

She could be anywhere. Probably out of the city by now. He should give up, but he couldn't. He went home, crashed on the living room couch. Flicked on the TV from the remote, Turner Classic Movies. An old Bogart flick called *In a Lonely Place*. He heard one line of dialogue before going under: “I was born when she kissed me. I died when she left me. I lived a few weeks while she loved me.”

Nerves firing, unable to sleep, he woke up an hour later. Saw his PlayStation in the corner and knew one way to find her, sort of. He fired it up. Went into *Deserted Cities of the Heart*, melded into his avatar. A hunter now—on the hunt for Anwen.

He walked through streets filled with rubble and toxic waste. Acid rain and hail pouring down. Dodging the Praetorians.

He found Anwen—Amber—in an abandoned train station.

“Orion, I would have recognized ur signature anywhere.”

“That obvious?” he said.

“I’m sure u didn’t come here 2 make small talk. U want something?”

“Yeah. You sold out to The Executive.”

“U want 2 kill me. Gotta catch me first.” She ran off down the platform, jumping onto the tracks. He chased her until the tracks stopped dead at the edge of a bottomless ravine. She climbed into an old rail car. A gun materialized in her hand. She fired at him, grazing his arm.

She threw the gun. He ducked. Charged her. She hit the wall, cornered.

“Okay,” she said, almost admitting defeat. But Anwen—Amber—would never admit defeat. “U can ask 3 three questions.”

“What’s your real name?”

“Well that one’s out of bounds, ha ha.”

“Why Carole Cooper or Christa Czerny?”

“Because she was about to testify. It was just a gig for me, nothing personal.”

“And now there’s nothing at all. Like she never even existed,” he said.

“She existed in the computer.”

“No, she existed in the real world and that’s where you killed her.”

“I didn’t kill anyone. Get 2 ur next question.”

“Why me?” Daniel asked.

“U had access.”

“Did you ever love me, even for a second?”

“That’s number 4. Ur out of questions.” She vaulted past him, jumping back onto the tracks, yelling as she went. “Have fun finding me. The chase is half the fun.” Her avatar smiled and she was gone. He couldn’t catch her.

“User Anwen has logged off,” appeared on his screen in vivid red letters.

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All he thought about was her, Amber or Anwen or whoever the hell she really was. Obsession became his life. She’d tricked him. Made him break the law—no, he did that on his own. Either way he loved her, couldn’t stop thinking about her. He logged onto *Deserted Cities of the Heart* every day. Couldn’t find her. Then every hour of the day. He saw her avatar once more. Asked if he could at least have a relationship with her in the virtual world.

“It was so easy 2 get what I wanted from u. Men are so e-z. That said, I did like u. Still do. But I had a job 2 do. I’m a professional.”

He had no response for that.

The phone rang. Phillip Tannen, his boss, asking where he was. He made excuses. Tannen bought them, for now. Ten a.m. and he still hadn’t showered or shaved, or even eaten breakfast.

He turned back on to *Deserted Cities*. It was the only place he might have her now. She was gone. The empty streets taunted him. He was alone.

He fell asleep at the PlayStation. The doorbell woke him early the next morning. He looked through the peephole: his boss, Phillip. He didn’t answer the door, went back to the PlayStation, back to *Deserted Cities*. He couldn’t find her. An hour later, the doorbell rang again. UPS. They left a large rectangular package. He carried it inside,

opened it and pulled out a vintage Gibson Flying V. A note printed on the mailing label read simply: “Forget the past. Live your dreams”. He kicked the cardboard package, tossed the guitar on the couch. Went into the bathroom, showered, shaved and headed to work.

Waiting at the elevators, he saw a woman on the far side of the lobby. Mousy brown hair, thick Buddy Holly glasses and a fedora with a feather. Amber? The elevator arrived, but he was sprinting across the lobby after the woman. She disappeared out the door. Or had she never been there? He charged out the door onto the street looking for her.

No matter where he looked, Amber was everywhere and everyone. And nowhere and no one. But he knew where to find her: *Deserted Cities of the Heart*. One day, she’d be there again.

He finally went home. Picked up the Flying V, plugged it into the little amp he’d bought and slammed out a blues riff. Went into Albert King’s *I’ll Play the Blues for You*.

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Guilt ate at him like the cheap beer and spicy food ate at his insides, killing him from the inside out. He’d hang at Atomic as long as his money held out. And that wouldn’t be too much longer. He’d lost his job. His apartment wasn’t far behind. His hair was grown out and shaggy now. He wore the same clothes most days, because most nights he slept in them, right next to the PlayStation, so he could check in on *Deserted Cities* at any time.

He kept going back to Atomic Cowboy, hoping she'd pop in some night. False hope, he knew. She probably didn't live in St. Louis, and even if she did she was probably out on another *gig* now. Doing someone else. Another victim. Another dupe.

He got out of his chair, headed toward the front door. Put his hand on a woman standing there. She turned abruptly.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I thought you were someone else." The scorn on her face said she didn't buy it. But damn, she sure looked like Amber, especially from behind. They all did. And none of them ever were.

It had been three months and he hadn't seen the flesh and blood Amber again. But visions of her continued to haunt him. She was everywhere. Every hipster woman with big glasses. Every hipster woman with brown hair.

Every woman who barely fit her specs was Amber.

Every mote. Every speck of dust that glided across his field of vision.

He saw her everywhere. But all of them were mirages.

Amber was nowhere. Nowhere at all. Not even in the deserted cities of the heart.

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And even if he'd found her, even if he could stifle his love, sick as it was, and sear her eyes out with hot pokers, he knew it wouldn't bring Christa Czerny back. The only thing that brought her back was a joint and a pint which, these days, he had to get with a five-finger discount. And in the swirling pot smoke he would conjure up her face, not Amber's. Christa's. Her story. Make up things about her. Good things. Give her the life he'd stolen.

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Eventually, Daniel found himself back at the Arch almost every day. He didn't even know how he got there. Every woman he saw was either Amber or Christa. He'd walk toward them. They all turned away. He looked like a bum.

He hoped to see Amber—Amber was easier to handle than Christa. Guilt ate at him for his part, inadvertent as it was, in Christa's death. But Amber—there was no guilt there. Only stupidity and vanity. Still, if he had the chance to get back with Amber—

He'd lost his job. His apartment. His self-respect.

There was no escape. Not down Route 66. Or in the bottle or a blunt. Because in the haze of smoke there were always the faces. Carole. Amber. Amber. Christa.

Good or bad, he couldn't forget Amber. Couldn't stop looking for her.

He followed the shadow of the Arch across the lawn, wishing—praying—there was no such thing as memory. Hoping every day for Alzheimer's or amnesia. There was nothing left of him. It was like he had never existed.

“Move along,” a cop said. They didn't want transients littering their park. He thought he was invisible, but you're never invisible to a cop.

The Arch's shadow drifted over him as the late afternoon sun morphed from yellow to gold. He thought about going inside the Arch, up to the observation platform. Wondered if there was a way to get outside the observation area so he could jump. He stared up at the Arch, realizing that it went up on one side, but it came down swiftly and steeply on the other.

End