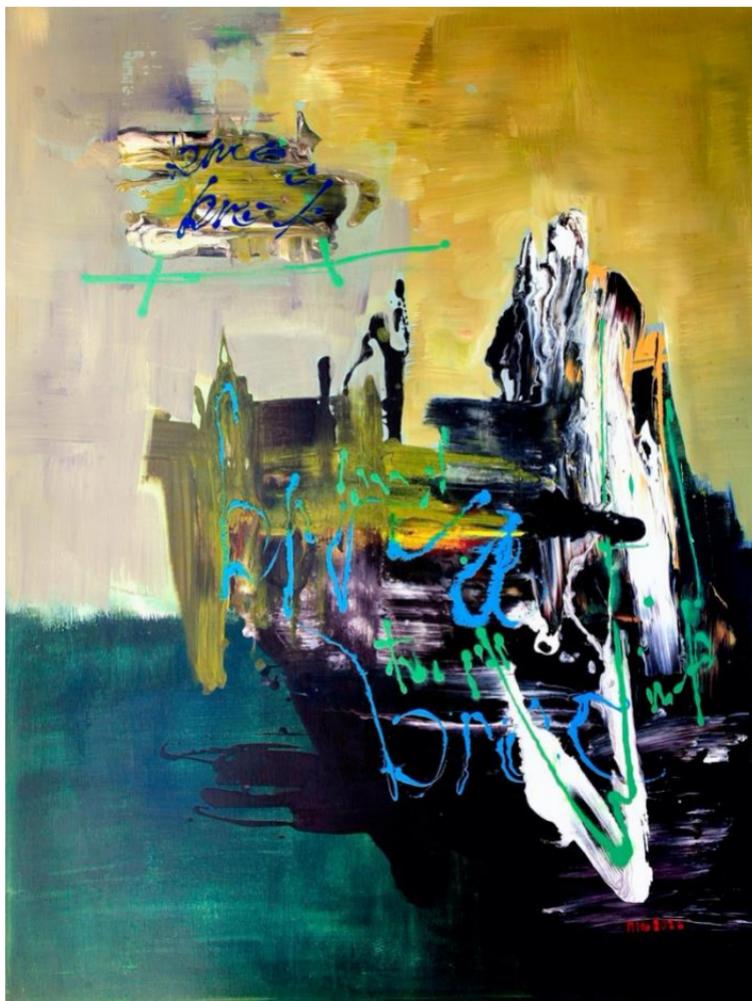


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LONG FORM FICTION

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# SALTON SEA



MIKE MURRAY

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OPEN: JOURNAL OF ARTS & LETTERS  
(O:JA&L)



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## SALTON SEA

When Wale Somers eyes his wife at the bar and passes without even recognizing her, Lana kicks back her Wild Turkey, slams her glass on the counter and decides they're going to fuck. This even though she hasn't seen him in fifteen years, not since he took off a week before their son Grant's tenth birthday. With Wale, seduction was never an issue. Pinning him down was.

"One for the road, darlin'?" the girl in the black leather beret asks, filling her glass again.

"I'd better," Lana says, swirling on her stool to catch a better view of Wale now that she feels invisible. There were ninety pounds more of her when he would have seen her last. She had a blond butch back then, too, not the ass-length train or the stiff cherry bangs that shroud her face now. She felt more vital then, too. Dreams seem possible when you're too young to know better. Her compact reveals a hollowness in her eyes, an already dimming light.

It's no mystery where Wale went off to all this time. He and his Kawasaki travel up and down the coast wherever the winds and the promise of a little cash take him, often pursued by jealous husbands or unpaid motel clerks. Lana's seen his billing on websites for dive bars, roadhouses and hard-up rib fests from Anchorage to Ensenada, heard about him through friends. On a couple of occasions, when her band, Makeady With An S, hits clubs in those same towns, she's found cheap posters with his face on them, the face Wale had before cocaine and Twinkies and every other vice that's got him by the balls distorted his features, the face from back when she loved him, the Wale with smooth, puckered cheeks and

that ridiculous hole in his chin. Troublemaker's eyes so blue and daring you'd forgive him almost anything. Thick boyish hair she used to blow out of his face when his thumb didn't finish the job. Hugging the neck of that vintage Martin guitar, the one that's worth more than the house he abandoned back in '05, more than the two lives he left behind.

"Been looking all over for you," her boyfriend A.J. says loud enough to overcome the techno music thumping over the PA. "Van's loaded. Let's go."

When he reaches over Lana and waves a twenty toward the bartender, his tufted armpit hair buries her nose.

"C' mon!" she yells, spinning away.

A.J. traps her neck between his forearm and palooka-esque bicep, kisses her. Then he reaches for her bag.

"Leave it," Lana says. "I'm stayin' at the motel one more night."

"We gotta check in over at Riverside," he says.

"Go on ahead with the others. I'll catch a ride with Barry when he comes back through in the morning. He ran over to his sister's place across town."

The angle of the scar dividing A.J.'s left eyebrow steepens.

"Go on," she insists.

Of all the men Lana's hung with since Wale, A.J.'s by far the easiest to read. Quick to react, he's learned that when Lana needs her space, he's to resist his caveman-like instinct to hoist her over his shoulder. She appreciates his efforts there, and while her feelings for him haven't the depth he'd prefer, she does love watching how he catches himself in these moments, his body fighting itself, his dopey brown eyes doing grade school math to see if this adds up to bigger problems.

“No, you didn’t do nothin’ wrong, baby,” Lana says, rubbing a few beads of sweat from his bald head. “You know how I get sometimes.”

“I know, but I don’t,” A.J. says.

They kiss good, Lana letting him squeeze her tighter than she can stand, especially in public, but if she’s going to cheat on him tonight—even if it is with her own husband—she’ll accept a little pain.

“Off with ya,” she finally says. “We’ll be fine.”

A.J. breaks quickly. “Fuck,” he mutters as he turns and bounds out of the bar.

Lana takes a slow walk to the door a moment after he’s gone. She smiles at the bouncer as she watches A.J.’s orange Challenger squeal away. Returning to her stool, she sinks what’s left and shakes her glass. One more bourbon before she cuts herself off.

“Your man looked a piece,” the girl says, pouring.

“Oh, he’s all that,” Lana says.

It’s going on eleven, and Riverside’s only an hour away. Her bandmates will be there already divvying up beds and inflating air mattresses. The days of affording more than two rooms for the eight of them are long past, and maybe their nocturnal huddling is what keeps their music tight and their voices in sync. Besides, they’ve got no choice. Record labels don’t sign cover bands, even ones that draw regular like Makeady With An S. Lana doesn’t care about that, though. She long ago tired of the stress of ambition, of being around people desperate to break out. She just loves to sing.

This early set at The Red Barn amounted to a last-minute pit stop between larger gigs. Just happened to fall within dots on the Southern California map, so why not grab a small check and make some new fans? It’s a raucous atmosphere, and they sold some CDs to make up for the pittance they received for forty-five minutes of classic rock tunes. They never play their own material live, because no one wants to hear it. Lana’s not so fond of it herself, prefers the

music of her youth: Guns N Roses, Styx, Fleetwood Mac. She loses herself in the lyrics picturing the past, her old friends, school. Never tires of dwelling in that zone. Everything she loved about her life happened back then, long before reality smothered her hopes—except for having a baby, of course. Everything since feels like just coasting along. Maybe that’s how those rock groups feel, too, she figures. All their hits coming so many decades ago when they were kids, then forever summoning long-gone moods and treasured moments to appease the crowds and absolve themselves of the sins of creative stagnation.

Wale plays wherever his name is vaguely recollected, wherever people think they know the song he almost broke through with way back when. Now, there’s Lana’s little none-hit wonder sidling toward a table of four with a horn-dog grin until the men return with drinks and don’t appreciate the faded charm he imposes on their girls. It doesn’t matter their being barely legal and Wale on the wrong side of fifty. His brain’s fried just enough to believe he’s still got it, when Lana and pretty much everyone else knows it never was.

Still, he’s got a voice. Lana downs three virgin mojitos by the time Wale starts his set, the last at The Barn tonight—just him and some spirited guitar playing. She didn’t expect his fingers to be so dexterous. They look plump, but their movement is fluid as ever. Of course, the set list is the same as ever, too. Gravelly covers of Tom Petty, Bob Seger, David Gates and Glenn Frey. Some of these her own band performs, but with the bonus of a full arrangement. Wale wouldn’t be getting booked, though, if he didn’t have some talent and at least some remnant charisma. Mostly, he’s a persistent self-promoter—until he gets what he wants. It’s always been in the delivery of his promises that he’s failed. She remembers that.

Lana fell for him deep once, long enough to put aside her own singing to create a home and raise a child. Do all that Mom shit around part-time nothing jobs: baseball practices, wilderness survival treks, the PT-fuckin’-A. Then, just when the boy hits ten, out the door goes Wale. Blame their son? Blame herself? Blame everyone but Wale because they all saw it coming and couldn’t stop

him. Love didn't mean shit. Responsibility. Commitment. None of that. Grab the guitar and hit the road. Follow a dream that's just an excuse to leave. That's how Lana found him, so what's the big surprise if that's how he's ended up?

There was a postcard that first year, the only message he's ever sent. They haven't even gotten a divorce. "GONNA STRIKE," it read. "SEND FOR YOU. PROMISES...WALE." This on the flip side of a decked-out fisherman casting his fly toward a circular run of bright red sockeye. That was it. No mention of their boy. Postmark: Seward, Alaska.

The kids aren't all that attentive. At this late hour, they're obviously looking for some thump and grind. She can't blame Wale for that. The owners brought him in knowing he's a one-man acoustic. When he launches into "Stop Draggin' My Heart Around"—singing both Petty's and Stevie Nicks' parts with vague impressions of each and accompanied by laughter or complete disregard—Lana's tempted to come to his rescue with raspy vocals. She's also tempted to vomit from the battle of liquids in her system, so the bathroom wins out.

When she recovers, freshens up, she steps outside for a breather and lets the bouncer light her cigarette. She drags her boot heels across the gravel parking lot just to hear the sound, closes her eyes to the sky and waits for a breeze that never comes. The heat's let up, which disappoints her greatly. You're in the desert, you ought to feel it, have it disable you with the fire of a thousand suns, scorch your soul. She could be anywhere right now for all she's not feeling: a Walmart parking lot in Pico Rivera, a Denny's in Modesto, a Supercuts in Salem.

Right now, Lana feels so flat, so fucking flat. Being on the road is usually therapeutic for her, keeping her focused on the music, the particulars of travel. She even misses A.J. now—this second—not because she craves his adoration, but because he keeps her mind and body occupied. Always pawing at her with those meaty hands and wrapping her into his gorilla chest, always asking the same questions about her life, about her son Grant, her inner world so that she's forced to think about herself in deeper ways than she allows on her own. He's exasperating, sure, listening but not absorbing. She

doesn't like to think he's daft, because what would that say about her? But A.J. can't retain information that's offered during intimacy, personal stories that, to another lover with more intellect and perspective, should lead to a deeper, growing understanding between them. When she's had enough, at least for one night, she sends him on alone.

Tonight is different, though. On stage, the man with the guitar is someone she staked her future on once. Yeah, he destroyed all faith she had in him and in herself, but if she forgets for a moment, she can catch just a taste of a girl with a dream and more than a little hope. Those are of no use to her now, but shit, sometimes it's good to feel again. Even bitterness is real.

When a man's been rejected by every other woman in the bar, he'll sleep with anyone, even someone his own age. Lana watches the fleeting glow of celebrity peel away from Wale's face as he slides around *The Barn* after his last song, initiating eye contact with the mostly unimpressed before she makes her move. He seems genuinely surprised—and grateful—when she greets him with a huge smile.

“You were amazing!” Lana says.

“What's that?” Wale says.

Techno's back to full throttle overhead.

“Amazing!” she says.

“Thanks!”

Lana locks eyes with him, daring him to recognize her. When he registers no connection, she loses a breath she struggles to get back. “Lemme get you a drink,” she says.

“Come again?”

Lana mimes drinking from a glass, then pokes him in the chest. She keeps her hand there, feels his heart beating—or his body reverberating from the heavy bass.

“You’re gonna buy me a drink?” Wale says.

“I am!”

“Well shit—after you, young lady!”

“What?” Lana says, thrusting her ear up next to his mouth even though she heard him plain. With her boots on she still has to stretch to reach him, and wonders if her scent will give her away.

“After you!” Wale screams, pressing into her.

Lana bunches his Henley, pulls him along. At the bar, she orders boilermakers.

“Sure about this, honey?” the girl with the leather beret asks.

“Bring it on!” Lana says, needing one last bracer.

“Yeah,” says Wale, “bring it on!”

How many more drinks Wale had is a blur compared to the terror Lana feels clutching his generous waist for dear life as they speed through the chill night on his bike, her hair flapping violently, uncontrollably as they soar from Point A to Point B—Point B being her motel room. Lana recalls many nights like these from before their son Grant was born, when she and Wale would take to the road long after the traffic had faded, zigzagging the massive network of freeways unimpeded in the early morning hours like the whole L.A. basin was their private raceway. They’d push off from Long Beach and head for the foothills, for Azusa, and roar right on up into the San Gabriels until they reached snow some months, playing in it wearing only t-shirts and shorts, having sex to keep warm and then racing back to civilization again just as the city was stirring, Wale negotiating the rising tide of automobiles like a space pilot navigating an asteroid belt, effortlessly weaving in and out of danger,

leaning hard, jumping lanes at will, Lana with her eyes closed through most of it, clinging, pretending she had blind faith not just in Wale's riding skills but in his ability to protect her from anything. Exhilarated, they'd arrive back at their tiny apartment on Ximeno and Fifth, where they'd crank up some Nazareth or Black Sabbath and crash until the blazing sun lost its will again and plunked into the sea.

In her room, Wale is barely coherent, which is all right because neither one of them says very much while they go at it. He does more with his hands than with his cock, which registers with Lana as maybe a sign that Wale is finally getting his due. What she grips is hard enough, but once it's inside her he can't claim any kind of victory. The rest of his body is alien to her—as hers must be to him. He's put on as many pounds as she's taken off. His stomach sits high when he rolls onto his back to let her gyrate with what's left of him. Lana heels her palms to his belly and presses herself up before sliding back down again, her hair forming a frayed curtain between them.

She's dizzy as hell not from the booze she had hours ago or the low-grade orgasm she could have bettered on her own, but from exhaustion and complete bewilderment as to how it's possible he doesn't know her. I MEAN, SERIOUSLY – FUCK! She stares right at him, glaring with whatever intensity her bitterness will permit. Wale is kneading her breasts the whole time, eyes mostly closed and him not making much of a sound now, not even a moan, until Lana feels nothing either and realizes he's no longer inside, that his cock has folded into itself and this night has been a waste.

In the bathroom, she rinses in the tub, doesn't feel the need to shower there was so little done, then does so out of regret. Did she somehow think this would punish him? After patting dry, she stands at the sink and studies the lines on her forehead and around her eyes that weren't there last time Wale saw her. The big round girl has long disappeared, shed in the intervening years, transformed into almost half of what she'd been. Layered with heavy creams and camo, she sometimes barely recognizes herself.

When she returns to the bed, Wale is sitting up resting his guitar on his bare belly, strumming mindlessly while he stares at a crooked aerial shot of the Salton Sea on the wall.

“I’m still drunk,” he says.

“Little high, too?” says Lana.

“Probably,” Wale says. “Even when I take a break it clouds my system.”

“I don’t doubt it.”

Lana shivers. She quickly covers herself with the sheet, doesn’t want Wale to take her chill as an opportunity to wrap himself around her. The scene feels too familiar suddenly, a harsh echo of days past. Him talking to hear his own voice, her pretending to adore his words until she’s numb.

“I’m off for Phoenix,” he says. “Two shows somewhere I don’t remember right now.” He scratches his temple with the headstock. “You live here in Palm Springs?”

“No,” Lana says, lying back.

“Used to be just rich celebrities and those types out here. Like any other town now lots of ways. All types.”

“Uh-huh.”

With fatherly care, Wale sets his guitar at the foot of the bed, rolls toward her, hesitates while he checks that his feet didn’t kick it when he moved. Lana tenses.

“I’m due in Colorado after that,” he says, scooching close. “Wyoming. I don’t know much country—maybe one or two if that. They keep asking for it. Think I could get booked easy lots of other places east if I picked some up. Oklahoma, Texas. That’s not me, though. Never has been. I don’t like to stray too far from the Rim. Know what I’m saying? Pacific Rim?”

“Sure.”

“You bring me in when you want the classics, the good stuff. Been doing it all my life, the songs of my youth. I feel it, right? Rock. Feel it deep.”

She smells him now, a whiff of body odor and boozy breath. That’s Wale twenty years ago, too. Same focus, too—on himself. Not even a “you were great,” baby”? She reaches into her bag for some Advil, crunches them down. Five ought to handle what’s hurting and what’s coming.

“Working on some new stuff,” he continues. “Sounds like the old, the way we like it, huh? But new. Just...new. I got no other way to describe it. You’d have to hear. I’d play it now, but this ain’t the right setting. Motel room. Middle of the night. Pretty girl.” Wale smacks his head. “Shit!” He pulls a wad of paper from the pocket of his jeans, which are draped over the bedpost, grabs a motel pen from the nightstand that he has to gouge across a magazine to bring life to. He taps the sheet where her ass should be with the back of his hand, makes some notes against her thigh.

“New classic, huh?” Lana says.

“Chart topper for sure,” Wale says, “if only I could spell. How many i’s in DESPICABLE?”

“None, but I think there’s a YOU.”

“Hmmm...That don’t look right.”

Lana rolls over, faces the far wall and reaches for the blanket. Wale helps her find it, pats her down as she pulls it up to her chin. Him talking himself blind won’t keep her from sleeping. She remembers that, too.

Hours later, a commotion wakes her abruptly. The lights are on, and Lana can barely open her eyes. Mostly, she hears...heavy footsteps, thrashing, A. J. barking, glass breaking. Sees...Wale squeezing through the broken pane back of the room before A.J. can get at him again. Halfway out, he stops and looks toward her, his skin bloodied, his face a panic that makes her jealous—for on the bed,

among the sheets, is Wale's guitar. Lana slides it out and clutches it to her breasts, flipping her hair aside to lock eyes with him.

She spots it then—or convinces herself of it each time she replays the moment, which she does repeatedly while singing to a stoned crowd up in Riverside the next evening instead of focusing on her laments—that mournful wash of regret just before Wale slips away again that she claims for herself. It's enough to get her through the set and the coming days. Yet here, amid the irony of seeing her husband chased off by a man she'll never love back, Lana fears that once she lets go the bitterness she's long held, and lifts the veil of satisfaction this small revenge allows, she won't even recognize herself.

## ABOUT THE WRITER:

MIKE MURRAY is the winner of Colorado Review's 2022 Nelligan Prize for Short Fiction, and his work has appeared in *OPEN: Journal of Arts & Letters*, *The Rag*, *A River and Sound Review* and the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*. His one-acts have been produced for the stage. Mike is a writer, web developer and book designer living in Pittsburgh.

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