

In May of 1980, Tommy Murtaugh finally got the guts to pirate electricity from the power lines so he could play his guitar at night in the abandoned church on Beake Street. His daddy was a guitar player, after all, or so his mom always said. Why the hell shouldn't he be? He got help from Jeff Dolman, who gave him the wiring and stood at the base of the utility pole just in case Tommy died. When he finished he plugged his amp into the wall socket and waited for Dolman to leave.

"I don't even get a song?" Dolman said. "After all that work."

Tommy flipped him off and settled onto his stool, listening to his amp hum. His mom had outlawed it the first day he brought it home, so he couldn't do anything in his bedroom but noodle around and make his body pretend it could feel the notes. Couldn't do anything but look up at his subway map of New York, which his mom gave him on his thirteenth birthday when she told him who his father was: a guitar player from Alphabet City, who tricked her one night when she was sixteen and gave her a baby without ever knowing it.

Alphabet City. The single bulb he'd hung from a two-by-four shone right on that part of the street map he'd taped up on the church wall, next to the subway map. He had the whole place ready for a week before he did the wiring. He wondered where his dad was right then—walking up Avenue B with his guitar slung over his shoulder on his way home, or on the Q train coming from a gig.

"Ain't that funny, dad?" Tommy asked his maps. He planned to play until the skin of his fingers split open and spend the night. "You're from Alphabet City, and I'm out here in this shithole with Road X and Y and Z. How's that for fate, huh?"

He pointed the amp north, away from town—nothing but coyotes and pronghorns out there, foxes and birds and prairie dogs. Then he started out with a low chug, just barely more than a rumble on the bottom string, to get his breathing right and turn his head to the music. Tommy always had to get his head tilted just right before he could get going, though it wasn't the same way every time. His imaginary father told him to make believe he had an antenna sticking out the top of his head, and to keep turning it until he heard the music right.

*That's because the music comes from outside you, his dad told him. You tilt your head one way, you hear one song. Tilt it another, you hear a different one. Because all the songs are written already, even the ones you think you make up yourself. Understand?*

Once he got that rumble going and started rocking on the stool with it, he ripped out the big, deep chord he could never even imagine at home. He and the amp and the guitar became one thing, until the note felt like it came out of his own chest. Then Tommy spidered his fingers down the neck to the highest note that guitar could make and hung onto that note forever, making it wobble and falter and climb back up to strong before he hit the string again and started that same note all over, milking it for everything. He played the note, bending it lower this time, then hit another low chord again and turned the amp up. Who gave a shit if everybody in town could hear him? He had to feel like something other than what he was: a stupid fucking kid from the middle of nowhere, with no place else to go and nothing to keep him from driving into a brick wall than the hope of getting out of Suborney, out of all the bullshit he couldn't stop himself from drowning in.