

Stations of the Cross

Chapter Two

Wild and Radiant Hearts

WHAT DOES IT MEAN to be Dyson Burnette?

That is, how does it feel to be yourself when tens of thousands of people have different ideas of who or what you are? When there are two biographies (not very good) and half a dozen tomes (not all wretched) on your work? (Dyson had even dipped into a couple of them, until his critics' takes on his lyrics confused him so much he thought he might never write again—and that was long before he actually did stop writing.) Think about it: You write a simple love song, and everyone thinks it's about the end of the world; then you write a song about the end of the world, and, oh, how sweet, it's a love song. Or more to the point, you string together words that sound good, give 'em a gently felt shape of a story or a theme—God, now he's sounding like them: *paradigmatic themes, eternal verities!*—but something to make it all cohere, then drop a stomping beat under it, record it with hot-shit players who know how it should sound before you do, and consider it done. Walk away, cash a check, ball a groupie. Ah, the rock life!

Then you have to read some pseudo picking every riff and feint apart.

O.K., his work means more to Dyson Burnette than that; his songs *are* his life, and he's never doubted or forgotten that. And they're *his* songs. He owns them. Not Charles T. Goodwin, Jennifer Pettiwheel, Alex Hope, Robert MacDonald, or the ever present (and wildly wrong; or maybe always right?) Spears Munson.

One thing you can say about the critic Spears Munson is that he *always* knows who Dyson Burnette is. Always has known. Spears wrote the *Rolling Stone* review of Dyson's first album, then a long exegesis (*Gesundheit* to you!) in *Crawdaddy*, the first serious rock rag (Dyson himself subscribed back in high school in Carlisle). It was Spears Munson who first called Dyson Burnette a "genius" and "a true poet."

And Spears Munson who also wrote the infamous review: "I listened to Dyson Burnette's new record, *Sunshine Alley*, the way I listen to any new record, in front of the

turntable, ears wide, open-minded, praying for astonishment and willing to settle for a damn good time. The second time I listened to *Sunshine Alley*, I'd donned a biohazard suit, slathered my nostrils with Vaseline, masked my eyes, and stuck a snorkel in my mouth . . . all to wade through this unmitigated pool of absolute shit! One word, kiddies: This is one alleyway where no good light shines."

Thanks, Spears, you fuckhead.

Which didn't stop Munson from writing two books on Dyson and being the media's go-to person for what the "legendary reclusive songwriter" was up to. Spears Munson *always* knows what it means to be Dyson Burnette.

Dyson himself almost never has the whiff of a clue.

That, of course, was his secret. Some guy who happened to be named Dyson Burnette (all right, he'd named himself that, but still) whips up a host of songs, records them, puts 'em out—and then the world has its way with him and his work. Ever and always the way it goes; Dyson understood that, accepted it. But still this somebody named Dyson Burnette had actually done it. (There were times, Dyson wished, that there really could be somebody, maybe a fan, whom he could hire to impersonate him in public. Odds are *that* Dyson would do a way better job than the real one.)

The best way Dyson found to keep doing what he did was, in the moment of writing, to *not* think or know too much of who he was, or certainly who he was supposed to be, but just get to it—let the mysterious, sacred spirit of *being at work* have its way with him. At times the forgetting came from taking drugs, mostly it didn't. At best it all came naturally, that gaining the full richness of self through a heady loss of self. What Dyson was after was to surprise and astonish himself (and, oh, how confusing it was when in creating *Sunshine Alley* he thought he *had* surprised and astonished himself . . . only to grudgingly agree later that the record, while maybe not Munson toxic, did kind of suck); and mostly, in the pure creation of his tunes and the struggles and celebrations of getting them on tape, that's what Dyson did: forgot who he was (and ever had been) and made up the whole platter of wax out of thin air.

So, yeah, that's what it had meant to be Dyson Burnette: to be a certain form of nobody at all.

A long sigh. To paraphrase the man he'd forever be chasing, good ol' Bob Dylan, that was so much easier then, but he was so much older than that now. . . .

Which was probably why Dyson stopped working. Neither the natural mojo, nor the drug fog, brought the right forgetfulness; the presence of Dyson Burnette in the

world, even as that presence diminished, had become too much for the actual man. In the studio he could no longer escape having to make a *new Dyson Burnette record*. (There were times he'd thought of calling up Spears Munson and asking him how the fuck to do it.) For a couple of records he forced things, and then he simply let it go.

And thus was about to lose his recording contract if he didn't get something finished in the next friggin' month.

Auguries and intimations ... Dyson always took them seriously. He believed that the spectral world that had delivered him his greatest songs spoke to him in signs and symbols, and who was foolish enough to ignore *that*? Perhaps that's what lay behind his compulsion to leave New York and escape back to Los Parques: the premonition that he needed to once again forget everything about who he was.

Or, this time, rediscover it?

One way or another, something was working; Dyson was ripe with hope. After just a day down here, he'd had his glimpse of a new and epic song; no music yet, no words, not even a clear idea, but a true glimmer.

That was how it always had worked, a shimmering emanation of a song preceding actual composition; yet three days later that glimmer was *all* he had for the album he had to write and record in just four short weeks...

That, and a long-legged, sweet-gamboling muse.

Dyson had her name now: Serena Rodríguez. She was nineteen, a year older than Dyson was when he was here before. She taught at La Escuela del Sagrado Corazón (The Sacred Heart School) and lived in the monastic teachers' quarters in the back. Even more, he'd found out from Consuelo that Dyson was far from alone in finding the girl fascinating. Serena was known to all as the town prize; her beauty and grace, her selflessness and eagerness to be of assistance (Dyson recalled her kneeling before the distraught girl), her intelligence and dedication to her mother and her students—all this brought her notable respect and love in Los Parques.

How had he gotten all this from Consuelo? Cautiously.

Actually, it started out easy. Dyson was in her café for breakfast a few days later as the girl walked by, in a bright yellow sundress, again leading a small group of her uniformed charges.

"Pretty, isn't she?" the restaurant owner said, seeing Dyson staring after her.

A microsecond to decide whether to deflect his interest or embrace it. He was an old guy now, why not the latter? "Very."

“She’s Serena Rodríguez, *La Florecita de Los Parques*.”

“The little flower,” Dyson said softly.

“You’re interested in her, *sí*?”

It must have been in the way he was staring after the young girl as she loped past the café. Dyson, wordsmith, tasted that word again: *loped*. Yes, she was loping now, that preternaturally easy stride, carefree, as if over a sunflowered plain, fresh and new into the day. Before, she had *glided*, *ambled*, *gambled*, *cantered*, *flittered*, *float*ed—a whole thesaurus of coruscating motion.

And as before his gaze was hypnotically attached.

“Yes,” Dyson admitted.

“She does look a lot like her.”

“She—” Dyson, distracted by Serena Rodríguez, hadn’t quite heard.

“The style, it is much different. The hair, the clothes. Times, even in Los Parques, have changed. But the spirit, the enlivening—”

Dyson looked up at the round-faced proprietress, her worn-stone eyes, her knowing mouth, with a look that could only be called plaintive, heart-wrenching. Was *that* what lay behind his fascination? Did he miss María Siqueiros that much?

“It’s all right, *Señor* Dyson,” Consuelo said, putting a hand on his shoulder. He remembered the same hand from forty years back, then not consolation but a warning: Don’t be too young and careless, treat this glorious young woman right. He hadn’t, of course. María had vanished, but instead of doing nothing in this world but find her, Dyson had left her behind. He’d been on his quest for ... for what? Fame, glory, appreciation? To fully become Dyson Burnette, whoever that was...

“She moves me, Consuelo,” he said softly, eyebrows furrowed. “And ... and it’s been a long time since I’ve been moved like that.”

The proprietress of the restaurant went silent, her worn fingers still on Dyson’s shoulder. They both looked after Serena as she disappeared from sight.

“*Cuidese*,” she said sharply under her breath. “Careful, *señor*, careful, careful, careful.”

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BUT WHAT COULD Dyson possibly have to be careful about? He was back in the simple world of Los Parques, he’d felt the stirrings of a song (even if he hadn’t actually gotten it moving yet), and he’d found a muse, a vision of the butterfly-clipped young woman

that simply made him want to do again what he did best. He saw only beauty, purpose, possibility ... what could go wrong with that?

He was back in his hotel room, on his balcony, his Martin 0-18 cradled on his lap, bare feet up on the railing, staring off into a pastel-blue afternoon sky, the sea a shifting tortoise-back green, the ocean spray kicking up on the rocks at the far end of the golden sand. The beach was dotted with sunbathers, and Dyson thought that when he got some work done, he should go join them, when the sun was lower in the horizon. Even though the purpose of Los Parques wasn't beachgoing, he'd at the last moment remembered to pack a bathing suit, and that morning he had spent a short hour out on a towel on the sand.

That beach hour, no surprise, had been deeply salutary; he closed his eyes, the sunlight glowing hot and warm about him, almost lifting him in its easy embrace. He thought of that true genius Brian Wilson: the ethereal harmonies of *The Warmth of the Sun*. Yeah, the Beach Boy had it right. Dyson felt his shoulders untighten for the first time in memory. All he could hear were small children darting about and crying children's games, that and the *sssshhhh-sssshhhhh* of seawater scraping up the beach. There was no thought in his head, just cottony glowing warmth; and right then he didn't care if he ever wrote a word again—why would he have to? What was the point? This moment, so close to ideal, so full and suffused, the kind you're simply certain will last forever and—

Ten minutes later the songwriter was on his feet, heading to his hotel. So much for magic. His shoulders were cringing, the annoying sand filled his shoes. Back in his room he thought only: *Idiot, idiot, idiot, get some work done, what's wrong with you, write the fuckin' song.*

Pushing himself to do just that now.

Well, not pushing, because you *can't* push, but making sure he was in the right head, his guitar in his hands, a susurrant sun-rhythm before his eyes, empty sky, ready, waiting ... for what?

A long sigh. Dyson still had no clear idea. Apart from settling into the town, eating at Consuelo's, walking the streets, reading a couple of ragged paperbacks, and of course discovering Serena Rodríguez, he'd done nothing. *Nada*. Not even the beginning of an idea had moved into the shiver of the song he had days back conjured before him.

He scraped his plectrum across the guitar's six strings, a G chord with a high d note, a chord he'd been falling back on for forty years. Today it only sounded tired.

Strum, strum, strum ... like thirty songs Dyson had already written, and thousands written by someone else.

But it wasn't the chord that was the problem. It was that its tones called up no pictures, no words, no hum of possibility; it was simply not inspiring. Another chord? Dyson knew himself well enough to know that wasn't it. Something had to speak to him, but nothing was. If a song is in a way a gift, not only do you have to be ready to receive it, but something—or someone—has to offer it up.

Dyson knew all he could do was wait, a still rabbit hearing the grass stir, anticipating a footstep; a bird lifting to attention at a new scent in the wind; a diviner, hands ready to conjure his vision out of thin air.

Hours later, in a stunning corona of orange and blue, the sun sank below the horizon. Dyson, though he hadn't written a word, held a small—a very small—portion of pride that at least he'd seen the day through.

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AT CONSUELO'S LATER, after handing the songwriter a menu, the moon-faced proprietress did the worst possible thing: She asked Dyson how the work was coming.

"Um—" he swallowed.

Consuelo shook her head. "You don't look happy, my friend."

"No, no, I'm fine."

She gave him that look. Consuelo might only be ten or so years older than Dyson, but forty years back she'd been like a mother—a true mother, sympathetic and knowing, not like his actual mother and her endless afternoon sherry parties and bridge games—and she was that now. "*Señor* Dyson?"

"No, really, Consuelo, I'll be—"

"Is it the girl?"

"No, no, it's not—" Dyson shook his head, but the question struck him hard. Could it be Serena? Could the young girl have any—

Consuelo lifted her wide nostrils, sniffed, held it a moment, then, rolling her eyes, shot Dyson that look again.

"There's something on you, I can smell it."

What kind of question was this? "The beach?" he said tentatively.

"It's a man scent." She sniffed harder, her eyes funneling down. "*A fever.*" Pressing

her hands together. “Please, *Señor* Dyson, you have to start to write.”

“I’m trying, Consuelo,” Dyson said after a moment. He had no idea what was stirring her up so. “I’m trying.”

The proprietress stared at him long and hard, the meaning not clear, then gave the big menu a sharp tap at a corner. “So,” she said, looking away, “what’re you going to order tonight?”

After dinner—and, thankfully, no further spooky interruptions from Consuelo—Dyson got up for his usual evening walk.

It was a balmy, warm night, and Dyson started off into it easily. He’d spent the last couple nights the same way, strolling the streets of Los Parques, peeping into cafés but not settling, sitting feet spread on a metal bench in the town square, all the while watching the normal nighttime unfold, teenagers teasing and flirting, tourists debating restaurants, families sharing ice cream; and in the distant parts of town, neon-lit bars, clubs, stained-pants *borrachos* stumbling about, gaily painted women lurking in doorways, and men with wild Zapata moustaches dealing cards over Van Gogh wooden tables. All in all, his walks were like a scene from a classic Dyson Burnette song: a river of sweet intent flowing over rocks of chthonic debauchery and evil.

Ah, but this night quickly changed. The songwriter felt more purpose in his step. A twitch in his fingers, the sharpness of his gaze . . . no longer a simple stroll but instead a prowl, a hunt . . . wait, was Consuelo right?

She was. The old fever *was* in him, like the unshakable force that sent him down here in the first place; and he walked through the streets hawk-focused, looking about him, searching for something even if he didn’t know exactly what—

Was it the girl?

Dyson hadn’t seen his young muse in over a day, and never at night. Where *was* Serena Rodríguez? Where did she go when the sun went down? What did she do? Why hadn’t Dyson seen her out parading with her friends? Los Parques wasn’t that big a town, it was hot at night, and it seemed like almost everyone lived outdoors till the early hours of the morning.

Dyson’s step picked up. He had to just be missing her, turning a corner she’d a moment before disappeared around, sitting in the plaza right after she’d passed through. Which meant that if he looked hard for her, he’d be certain to find her.

He passed cafés open to the street, and though many were filled with young wom-

en, none was Serena. Down by the beach, the swoosh of the surf, lovers hand in hand, an organ grinder, a bunch of boys breaking hip-hop moves to portable speakers—a rich night scene—but not a sight of the girl.

Back to El Centro. He'd been there those nights before and never seen her, though it seemed like all of Los Parques swept through at least once each evening, people lined up for the town's main movie theater, children carrying fluffy pink cotton candy sticks, families walking arm in arm ... yet no Serena. Maybe Dyson simply wasn't recognizing her. What would she be wearing at night? Probably not one of her chaste sundresses. Her hair—it could be any way at all. He couldn't count on the blue and yellow butterfly at night. And yet her walk ... that high-stepping, unique amble, as if she simply glided above the city pavement ... he'd recognize *that* anywhere. The way Serena moved ... yes, George, *something in the way she moved* ... was what had stirred him, made him certain he'd write again.

From the town plaza, he turned inland, back to the night town, where the streets narrowed, the gaudy lights grew more shadowy, the carousing souls louder, their gestures wider, their appetites a laser-sharp blue and red.

Yes, the fever was on him. Oh, Consuelo, you know me so well. This was the same nervous, unslaked sensation he used to get before a show, or nearing the end of making a new record, or lately just waking up in the middle of the night so electric and twitchy he had to wrap himself in his disguising coat and hat and head out into the 4 a.m. Manhattan streets. The thing with this turbulent energy was that it demanded an out—a release.

Dyson started humming an old Eagles' song his first wife, Ana, had loved so much: *There's Gonna Be a Heartache Tonight*. Going for the heat, the hope ... but it ain't ever gonna work out. Ah, the Eagles—hard to take them seriously, but the song? If Johnny Cash had written it, everyone would've believed it in a nanosecond.

Tonight, Dyson believed it: this steamy simmering beachside summer, haunts and alarums in the air, crazy energies astir, not just in him but in the night itself, nothing to hold things back—and nothing to stop it till it all blew up.

He careered through the twisty night town streets, off for a buster, looking for ... the girl? But he would never find Serena Rodríguez here, the Flower of Los Parques would never be in *this* part of town, among the drunks, high-kickers, the ever-fevered. Still, Dyson kept going. The drive inside him couldn't stop. Through the narrow Fellini-vibed alleys—yeah, remembering the first time he saw *Nights of Cabiria*, then dashing home to

write his *Billboard* Top 10 single *My Rough Diamond*—the beckoning shadowed doorways, the sharp-eyed, wide-curved women, thighs fluescent, the wobbly-tabled fortune tellers, cards flourished, the rat-faced men, gibbering, bellowing, Dyson slowing, speeding, walking faster, toward—

A drink . . . he needed a drink. The songwriter who used to blithely score *Billboard* Top 10 singles *craved* a bloody drink.

Fortunately cantinas were everywhere. Dyson headed into a wide-open one on a street corner, pressed into the steamy room, elbowing past men—they were all men—crowding the carved wooden bar. What was that on the bar? Dragons, carved wooden dragon heads rising off the wood. Strange. And the noise—too loud to hear himself think. Elbows jabbed his sides, shoulders brushed his. As best Dyson could, he looked around: the only gringo in the joint. Good thing nobody paid him any mind. He finally got the bartender to pour him a straight tequila, threw its fire down his throat, then feeling claustrophobic, called out, “*Señor, por favor, otra para llevar.*” Just as in New Orleans, the bartender gave Dyson a devilish wink and dished up a teetery plastic cup teeming with clear liquid.

The second shot hitting the songwriter hard halfway down the block, the febrile liquor flushing his cheeks, fever outside and in, blooming in his chest, tingling his fingers. Was this Dyson’s first true sensation of the day? It certainly felt more real than trying and failing to write that friggin’ song.

It felt damn good.

And . . . look, another cantina right in front of him. Los Perros Perdidos. A sad, bewildered pooch sketched in yellow neon, but inside . . . another silvery, shimmery tequila shot spiked his brain. Yeah, now he definitely felt something, and it was even better.

Señor, otra, por favor.

Back on the street, careful, one foot in front of another. Cobblestones popping like jelly beans. Christmas lights strung from building to building above the street, each bulb a glowing corona blooming with each breath—a nest of multicolored stars pulsing and shivering.

¡Vivo! Everything was *alive!* Every sense on fire! *¡Vivo!*

Another cantina, a knife-scarred bartender who laughed in Dyson’s face at his grotesque disguise glasses yet served him up a double Don Julio, the pesos flying from the songwriter’s pocket. *Smooooooth.* And alive. *¡Todo vivo!*

Back on the street, eyes blurred as if vaseline were painted over his pupils, swaying

a little, his brain pleasantly helicoptering down the murky street. . . .

¡Mira! Look! A tall girl loping along, then slipping down a dark alleyway. A scarlet skirt way above her knees. Slim-sandaled legs. A sway of black hair . . . to his befogged brain just a little famil—

Dyson hustled after her, turned a corner, into the narrow red and green lit alley, no sign of the tall miniskirted *chica*, but pulling up cold, hit with a feeling deeply familiar, as if out of a dream . . . wait, he'd actually *been* in *this* alleyway before.

Exactly this one.

It was those forty years back, his second night in Los Parques, before he'd even met María Siqueiros. Led to this fetid, crushing back street by a tout inside a bar, a grubby, beer-smelling man bursting with whispered promises to the eighteen-year-old boy. First, the bar. Glasses of mezcal. *Otro. Otro más. Another one.* Mezcal was wicked stuff, not Yuen-glings swilled in the beds of pickup trucks back home. Dyson's callow boy head spinning worse than now. More promises, teasing, tempting. *Señor; venga conmigo. Come with me. Yo sé secretos. I know secrets!* Whispers before Dyson, teasing promises, his old teenage bed at home, dreams, longings, creeping hands . . . *secrets. Las chicas con secretos. Con placer . . . sin fin. Girls with secrets, pleasure without end. Sus sueños a la vida. Your dreams. . . . Me recordarás toda la vida. You'll remember this night all your life. Sí, sí, sí.*

Pues vamos, hijo! Get going, son! Dyson stumbling after the fat little man down a street, into an alley . . . *this* alley, to an unmarked door a hundred feet in.

The same unmarked door today. Still painted a rusty red. One ineffective yellow bug light above, swarming with hissing mosquitoes. A golden door handle that turned almost without touching, as if moved by simple desire.

The perfume was the same. Exactly the same! That's what hit Dyson first, almost choking him in its overrich dusky orange and sandalwood musk. The plump girls, draped in shimmering silk. The bar. Behind it the same neon sign, glowing blood-red: EL CORAZÓN RADIANTE. *The Radiant Heart.*

Dyson stood spiked stiff in the doorway, forty years flushing away, when up came an older woman with a coil of black hair and a million creases to her face.

“Hola, Señor Burnette,” she called to him. *“We heard you were in Los Parques. ¡Bienvenido de nuevo!” Welcome back!*

Back went Dyson's head; his body shuddered. Was it the shock that he was recognized? The tequila tipping his brain? Or was it being in the exact place where at eighteen he'd discovered so much? *Los secretos de la verdad. . . .*

Dyson stood there, his jaw slack, his eyes bulging, a fool, an idiot, a bumpster, a miscreant aborning; and there it was, the old searing, stomach-turning contempt for himself, the voice of his mother, or someone even further back: *Daniel McDermott, what are you thinking? Your thoughts are vile and impure. Your desires are sick and perverted. You'll ruin yourself and you'll break the Lord's heart in the deed. It's not too late to halt and repent. The Lord is all forgiving. It's not too late, son, it's not too...*

But too late it was.