

Rock & Roll is the Devil's Work

By

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I

I moved to New York City after second-hand reading a book by some blow-hard named Legs. It named NYC punk rock Babylon, a seedy, grime house where no-name, talentless kids can pick up a six string guitar and then a six-figure check. So I packed my busted Ibanez and flew out with the money I saved rollin' out pizzas in Hazlehurst, Mississippi only to find I was about forty years too late. Punk is dead, the white kids are rapping and the guitarists are busking in the Subway systems amongst churros and crackheads. After three years of busking, I can't smell fried Mexican pastry without wanting to tune to drop-d.

Amelia, my girlfriend, lives in a really nice townhouse somewhere on that skewed Lower-Harlem-Upper-Upper-East-Side line. She has three roommates who each share an unadulterated hatred of me. I hate them but only because they're yuppy do-gooders like Amelia, and because of that, I hate Amelia, and Amelia hates me for being a deadbeat, and because we hate each other the sex is amazing. When she calls me up one evening in November of 2022 I suspect she's planning to break up, asking me to come all the way up to her renovated townhouse on the east side of 116th Street before I bop over to my nightly crawl downtown. I'd just dropped my Ibanez and my portable amp back home in Brooklyn when I get the call. I bitch and moan, not wanting to make the trip across Manhattan and back again for whatever stupid shit she needs to talk about but it's, as she puts it, *imporrrrtant*. Everything is always *imporrrrtant* with her, not *important* but *imporrrrtant* like there is so much importance it can't fit in the word, which is fucking annoying.

"It's not just important to me," Amelia says through my cellphone speaker, crackling and fizzling after being dunked in the tub late last year, "It's important to us."

"Fine," I say. "I'm on my fuckin' way."

"Who you date is a reflection of who you are..." She begins.

"Mhm." I agree with a mouth full of tuna melt I picked up on the corner.

"And when people see you're dating me that's a positive reflection on you because...?"

"You're hot?"

"I'm put together, and you're not. So when people see I'm dating you that's a poor reflection on me because...?"

I take another bite of my tuna melt to pretend to buy time. I already know the answer, you'd have to be blind not to see I'm a channel four hurricane in a Ramones tee. Always broke, always beat up, always stoned, and Amelia isn't wrong when she says she's put together! She's always got these expensive-but-look-cheap clothes you gotta buy in SoHo or whatever. She's skinny-fat but that's okay for girls now and she never sleeps in her day clothes. Like, it's weird - some people sleep in their underwear, T-shirts, hell some sleep buck-ass, but Amelia is one for "nightwear." Little matching bottoms and tops made of fabric that feel like they'll slip you out of

your bed. I tend to sleep in what I wore for the day, just shake the jeans off my ankles and hop into bed. This has led to many arguments where Amelia says I'm putting "city germs" in her "nice, clean bed." But if you're that scared of city germs why did you move to a city? That's where they live.

"Max, come back."

I've dazed off and lost the plot again, still munching on tuna melt.

"What were we talking about?"

"It's over, I've put your things together, you should take them with you."

I'm not particularly upset that Amelia is dumping me. She's been my girlfriend of around three years and things started off pretty alright. We met at a coffee shop we both loved. She loved their Macchiatos, big caramel-glopped iced syrupy things that could lop the leg off a diabetic. I loved that you could sit in there and bug patrons and the minimum-wage Tisch kids never kicked you out for not buying anything.

"What're you reading?" I'd asked her that afternoon in 2019.

"Chaucer." She'd responded, proudly showcasing *Canterbury Tales*. "It's for class."

"NYU?" I asked, gesturing to the brigade of unique Nazis in thrift store uniforms.

"No," she said and then, lowering her voice, "I hate NYU."

"I hate NYU!" I responded - not caring who heard.

"Did they reject you, too?" Amelia had asked.

"Nah, I coulda got in but I never applied. I'm a musician."

"A musician!" She sort of squealed, dropping Chaucer on the table.

She was hooked, a mistake that would cost her the next three years of her life. The first year was pretty great actually, she showed up to some open mics I played, brought me to parties, and paid for our meals on daddy's credit card. She laughed when I said inappropriate things and was inventive in the sack, but when her friends' boyfriends started getting investment gigs and wearing suits and taking them to Cabo or wherever, she started to realize I hadn't really changed since I was twenty, and she was ready to move up.

"Will you just take your things and go?" She asks, pleading with her big brown eyes.

Back to reality, Lower-Harlem-Upper-Upper-East-Side. Bag packed in the corner, tuna melt in hand. Soon-to-be-ex in front of me.

I decide to throw a Hail Mary.

"Who is he?" I ask.

I don't particularly think there's anyone else, and I wouldn't really care if there was, but something in me wants to drag this out as long as possible. I'm not really angry at Amelia, I've been expecting this for a while and it's probably in her best interest to move on to someone who loves her, hell someone who *likes* her, but perhaps the frustration of wasting three years on someone has made me spiteful. Or maybe I'm just annoyed she made me take the train all the way uptown for this.

“Who?” She asks.

“The guy you’re fucking.” I say.

“I’m not fucking anyone!”

“Not yet!” I say.

“Well, yeah.” She agrees and I realize I sort of put myself in a corner on that one.

“We can be civil,” she continues. “Please let me know if a gig works out.”

“I won’t.”

“Will you tell your mom? She keeps asking me about you.”

“Brandi isn’t my mom..” I pop the rest of my tuna melt in my cheek and say with a full mouth, “thanks for the good times and stuff.”

“It’s not because I don’t love you, I do. I just think we’re growing apart.”

“I think you love whatever makes you look good, Amelia.”

“Like you don’t.”

“No, I like what makes me feel good. And you don’t anymore, maybe you never did.”

“I’ve been the best thing about you for the last three years.”

She’s starting to get pissed and I love it.

“Well, you’ll have to be the best thing about some other asshole because I’m dumping you.”

“I just dumped you, Max.”

“No, you tried to, and then I did it.”

“No!”

“Sorry, babe. We’re just growing apart.”

“Shut the fuck up!” She shouts, I hear roommates rustle in the other room. “You’re a fucking child, you have to be right about everything.”

“I don’t have to be, I just am!” I find myself yelling back.

“Take your shit and get out of my house!”

“It’s an apartment!”

“It’s a townhome!”

“Fuck you!”

I walk out of her bedroom to find three blondes in the living room, eyes trained on me like bloodhounds on an escaped convict.

“Ladies,” I say, causing all of their eyes to roll. Amelia comes barreling out of her bedroom, my bag in hand.

“Take your shit!” She says, flinging the bag at me. I watch it roll at my feet.

“Eh, keep it,” I say, walking out of the door of her townhouse and onto the street. Ah, East 116th Street. The sound of an auto repair shop, a Puerto Rican flag hanging off the steps beside me. One of Amelia’s roommates hung it so they were “less likely to get robbed.” I’ve never had time to get into that but I’ve always thought it would make great Twitter Bait. I walk

down the street and fumble in my pocket for the pack of smokes I need to make last. I think to myself, *went better than I thought it would.*

II

Six train; downtown, screeching. Smells like bathwater. I sit on one of those corner seats so my legs can rest on the chair across from me as dim, canned light emanates from the fixtures above. There's a mom with a stroller, an overweight guy playing a Nintendo, a couple of kids looking over their shoulders for Bernie Goetz, and a million other faceless commuter assholes -- the usual fanfare.

"Sorry to bother you..." A homeless person in the middle of the car says to everyone and no one. I focus on my music, mouthing the words to The Who's *Tommy*.

You talk about your woman, I wish you could see mine...

The train lurches and jolts back and forth, past the 86th Street stop. Flyin' as fast as the local will take you. As the train turns it screeches against the track, grating against Pete Townshend's voice. Dissonance, a harmony of hate. I let it fuel me.

"Fuckin' bitch." I say to myself.

You know her daddy gave her magic, I can tell by the way she walks...

Sparks fly from the track, illuminating the otherwise dark car. Shadows twist the faces of the passengers into hellish figures but only for a moment. When the sparks die the faces resume their unassuming appearances, unaware of the devil cast upon them. I try and focus on the music, ignoring The Transient coming closer, crust upon every inch of him, snot coating his upper lip.

"I have no home, I have no family. I need a little help."

I keep my eyes down feeling the hard plastic cut into my ass, disrupting the circulation in my legs and causing a buzzing sensation in one of my feet balanced on the train seat, a neatly cut swastika peeks out from under my Doc Martin, beat to shit exposing a cold pinky toe (my shoe exposing my pinky toe, that is. The Swastika does not have a pinky). Under the swastika, someone has added their two cents in slanted, bleeding Sharpie:

JEWS GAVE ME THE BLUES SO I GAVE EM A GAS!

Somewhere in Manhattan, there is a skinhead with a sense of irony. I close my eyes and hear a new song in my head -- The Dead Kennedys roaring. It clashes with The Who in my earbuds and The Who clashes with the screech of the Six Train. Altogether it sounds a little like this:

She's got the power to heal you!

Nazi Punks! Fuck off!
SKKKKKKKRRRCH!

The Transient is getting closer now, shuffling in a single New Balance shoe, the other foot bare on the subway floor, grotesque skin ballooning into a massive fleshy club -- infection coursing through every uncollapsed vein in him. Another quick turn of the train and more sparks fly up, illuminating the occupants' faces once more, shadows warping otherwise boring mugs. The Transient, now just a foot or two away, is illuminated, too. His face does not distort. Instead, his eyes are fixed on me. No, his pupils did not turn, and his head did not waver, but in that unobtainable moment where light flashed into the car, The Transient's eyes fixed dead into mine, looking deep into me. I avert my eyes between my legs and try to breathe through the cacophony in my head.

SHE'S GOT THE -
NAZI PUNKS -
SKKKKKKKRRRCH -

The car becomes very hot and sweat is beading down the back of my neck. My head feels crowded and pushing a thought through the soundscape is impossible. I look at the swastika under my foot and find one of its little hinges is hidden deeper beneath my Doc than before.

I just moved my foot a little, I think, trying to swallow a dry lump clogging my throat. But the swastika's little antisemitic arm isn't tucked any farther left or right than I remember, it's lower. The middle is cemented in the same spot it was before but the arms seem to be in different spaces, each a quarter turn away from where they were once etched. The fucking thing is spinning.

"Can you help me, sir?" The Transient is hunching over me, snot peaking off his lip and hailing gravity like a cab.

"Uhh," I try to speak but I'm looking too deeply into the subway graffiti. As well, my head has begun pounding, and even catching my breath is difficult. I'm at war with id, convincing myself that knife-etched swastikas do not spin in cracked plastic. But the fucking thing is different, I know it. I reread the bleeding Sharpie:

JEWS GIVE YOU THE BLUES?
 GIVE EM A GAS!

That's what it said before, right? I coulda swore it was past tense, but maybe I'm making things up. It's more logical I misread it, distracted by my colliding underscore. The train leans, turning on the tracks, metal on metal.

SHE'S -
NAZI -
SKKRCH -

Sparks and dark. In a moment of illumination, the train stops. Dead still. The passengers wearing shadows as deviant masks are now absent. The train is black, any light is sucked out of the car as though a black hole has opened and any trace of occupancy is erased. I'm alone. The Who is no longer in my ears, just a small buzz from the auxiliary jack of my phone is left to remind me of anything tactile. Everything is eerily silent.

I stand, walking through the car which has gone from smothering hot to ice cold in an instant. I see my breath in front of me and my reflection in the car window, but the me I see seems to be sluggish, refracted, and working on a delay. I glide to the front of the car, reaching for the handle on the door that allows MTA employees, beggars, and thrill-seekers to walk between cars while moving. Maybe my car lost power? And the people were never there? And whatever Gary and I smoked last night was laced with some fuse-delayed psychedelic? Maybe Gary is having the same trip as me somewhere in Brooklyn.

"Gah!" I find myself saying as I grasp the door handle. It's ice cold and sticks to my clammy fingers. I pull at the door but it won't budge, locked tight as prom night. It takes a little top layer of skin off my fingers, an iced trophy.

"What the fuck?" I ask no one. I feel a presence behind me, eyes burrowing into the back of my exposed neck. I pull the leather of my jacket closer around me and turn to find The Transient at the end of the train car, directly in front of the escape hatch. He hunches but seems magnificently tall. His eyes are dark, not Brunette dark, but pits where the light goes to die. Steam emanates off of him in the icy car and absolute dread enters my stomach. You know when you're being followed? Or when you *think* you're being followed but you're not sure. And you don't want to cause a scene so you turn left one block earlier than you intended but they turn too so your stomach drops out from under you as your sweaty hands grasp your door key in your knuckles as you contemplate fight, flight, freeze, fuckin' die? That's what encapsulates me.

"Give 'em a gas, Max." The Transient says with an open mouth grin causing snot to spiderweb across his lips.

WHAM! The train corrects itself after a sharp turn. I'm sitting, feet up across the seats. The train is crowded, and that same dim, canned light as before emanates from the fixtures above. The mother with the stroller, the overweight Nintendo player, the sea of faces on a downtown Six. They're all back as if they'd never been gone. I'm back, no headache no blistering thoughts, just sweaty and shaky. The voice of Pete Townshend is back. The crackle of the intercom startles me to my feet.

"14th Street, Union Square. Stand clear."

I cut through the people, bolt off the train, and clammer into Union Square. I'm just outside their Winter Wonderland display when I bring a cigarette to my mouth and notice I'm shaking.

Light. Drag. And once I've had a second to breathe I pose the question:

"What the fuck?"

III

Tin soldiers and Nixon's coming...

Crosby, Stills, Nash & (don't forget!) Young play on the jukebox as I walk into The InterContinental, a dive bar on 12th Street. I assume the name is a joke because sometimes tourists will walk in, their Google Maps mistaking it for the magnificent hotel on 44th Street and they'll ask, "is this The InterContinental?" and this bulldyke named Jen who works behind the bar will go, "Sorta." Cracks me up every time and Jen always charges them \$12 for the beer I drink for \$4. I like Jen and I think Jen sorta likes me, even when I can't pay my tab. Or when I buy drinks for new friends I don't have the money to buy drinks for. But no matter how many tabs get walked on or how many fights get started, Jen always serves me. She once told me she has a soft spot for assholes, it's half the reason she stopped dating men.

Jen immediately calls me out as I walk into The InterContinental, sweating and shaking and heading straight to the bathroom.

"Do not be doing that blow in my bathroom, Max!" She yells as I jostle my way through the mostly deserted bar.

"I'm not!" I promise, and this time I mean it. I plant one hand on the door of the one-toilet washroom and partially cover the sign which at one point displayed both a male, a female, and a hybrid stick figure with, "Whatever, just wash your hands" under it, but someone had graffitied it last year to read:

"Whatever, just wash your ~~hands~~ **BALLS!**"

This sort of defeats the inclusiveness of the restroom but is by all means hilarious. I don't have time to stop and think about that, however, as I collapse to my knees and introduce the stained toilet bowl to my recently digested tuna melt. Jen peeks her head through the door to find me slumped over the bowl, yellow dribble clinging to my chin, not unlike The Transient, still haunting the inside of my eyelids.

"Jesus Christ, kid," Jen says. "It's fucking eight o'clock."

"Just some bad fish. Bodega tuna."

Jen thinks for a second before offering, "Bodega Tuna. That's a good band name."

“True,” I offer before heaving back into the toilet bowl. A little splash of vomit bounces off a shit stain in the bowl and flecks my lower lip sending another wave of nausea from my gut to my gullet.

“Come to the bar when you’re done,” Jen says, “I’ll get you water and an Alka-Seltzer.”

“Will you put it in a Heineken?” I ask.

Jen sorta shrugs and walks back to the bar as I stare at my murky, yellowed reflection rippling in the toilet bowl. I look like hell and feel like shit. But not the usual way a punk rock wannabe should. I don’t feel a hangover or a comedown, I feel otherworldly distortion in my sticking to the inside of my leather jacket. After a minute or two, the spins start to fade and I fumble back to standing. I splash some water on my face and shake it off, gazing at the ghoul in the mirror, cracked from some drunk asshole (me) tossing a left behind rocks glass at it a few months prior. Even with the spiderwebs coming across my face I seem better in this reflection, my face still pale but it sorta always is since I’m a nightlife junkie. My hair frames my face and falls to my shoulders, curling and frizzing. I was growing it to Jesus length but it skipped Jesus and went straight to Dave Grohl which I don’t hate. My eyes are dark, but kind brunette dark -- letting the light brighten them to a sort of hazel before bouncing off. I plaster a smile on my thin lips and feel the scabbed split on my lower lip open a little, but nothing too bad. My white Ramones shirt still holds the blood my lip let escape when a cocksucker split it open on my own teeth on Avenue A last weekend. I examine all this in the mirror and then drop my head to assess the state of my jeans, faded black denim held together with safety pins, and my black Docs with yellow laces, the left one split similar to my lip revealing a pink toe, shivering with only a thin sock to keep him warm in New York November, peeking out as if to say, “you think you’ve got it rough, motherfucker?”

This is me in all my gory glory. This is Max Cooper.

Now, how the fuck did that bum know me?

IV

“Heineken smells like Amsterdam pussy,” Jen shares as she slides the fizzy pint towards me, “that’s the only reason it’s cheap. Nobody likes the smell’ve it.”

“Is Amsterdam pussy cheap, too?” I ask. I’ve never been to Amsterdam. I’ve never been anywhere except my home state and New York and New Jersey one time. I kind of hate all those places.

“I don’t know,” says Jen. “I’ve never paid for pussy.”

“Me neither.” I lie, thinking of That One Rough Night.

I sip the Alka-Seltzer-laced beer and let it sort of fizzle in my mouth for a moment. It tastes awful, like medicine. I guess it is medicine, it’s like the worst-tasting medicine that ever existed, how I imagine a beer would taste with peppermint and aspirin swirling in the bottom of

it. I'm considering heading over to Avenue A to a club I know, they have live music every night of the week except Friday which is the best night to have live music. I love that, and I love how they hate everyone who comes to their club and I love how you hate the club because they charge obscene prices for shitty drinks. Jen doesn't work there, if Jen worked there it would be better. But they keep the place real dark and gritty even though it's expensive because they want you to think it's cheap but if it really was cheap it wouldn't be able to exist in the East Village, nothing is cheap in the East Village like it used to be. But this place at least *feels* authentic, even if it's not. And if the closest you can get to something being authentic in Manhattan is that it *feels* that way even though it's not, you take it. Because nothing in New York is authentic, even though that's all anyone is looking for. It's called BUBS which apparently stands for Brussels Under Belgium (whatever the fuck that means). That's too much of a mouthful, so it's BUBS and it's where whiny kids scream over their guitars and do coke in the open and that's authentically cool.

My mood is sort of shit though, which would be great for a place where picking a fight is part of the menu, but I don't feel in a scrapping mood. I feel like cranking the A.C. while it's cold out and hiding under my blanket. I feel like drinking to sleep and waking up having slept to drink. My brain feels numb everywhere except the part that generates fear. I guess I feel scared?

BUBS will be blazing tomorrow night anyways, I can have twice the fun tomorrow if I sleep off this aching dread tonight. But being alone isn't what you want when you're scared, you want to be surrounded by people. This bar feels vulnerable with only a few people and Jen around, but would a crowd of sweating, screaming coke/ket heads feel better? You can feel alone in a crowd.

"Kid!" Jen snaps me back and I find myself staring at her RASCAL FATTS tee shirt, featuring cartoon versions of each of the Rascal Flatts band members ballooned to morbidly obese sizes.

"Hmm?" I ask, swigging back the remainder of my Heineken.

"You good?" She asks, grabbing a few glasses to prepare for a group of well-dressed yuppies walking in. They all sort of look like Amelia except the guys who look like the kind of guys who were constantly messaging Amelia.

"Yeah, I uh... I think it's gonna be an early night for me, Jen."

"Early night? What did you do with Max?"

"Max got dumped today, Max isn't feeling it."

"When did this happen?"

"Today."

"No, when did you start dating some poor girl?" Jen asks, waving the yuppies and yuppettes over.

"Oh, uh. It's been three years I guess."

“Max, I can’t feel sorry for you,” Jen says, turning over her shoulder, “and it’s not because I don’t like you. You’ve been treating my bar like a breeding ground for a year. Whatever this girl did to you, you deserved it.”

“Yeah, I guess so,” I say, letting the air out of my lungs. Maybe this Amelia thing is hitting harder than I let myself believe. “Can I at least get a shot?” I call over to Jen.

One of the yuppies leans way over the bar, daring the ass of his too-tight slacks to rip wide open, asking, “can you do a Moscow Mule, hon?”

“I ain’t your hon,” Jen responds, grabbing a tinny sort of mug from below the bar. “They’re eighteen.”

The Yuppy turns back to his friends.

“What a steal! They’re twenty-two at Sugar Lounge.”

“Well this ain’t Sugar Lounge,” Jen says whilst wiping the underside of a nostril with her free hand. She then reaches into the lime bucket and pulls out a wimpy little wedge, dumping it into the cup. Then she turns to me.

“Your shots coming right up, *hon*. ”

And despite everything, I can’t help but crack a smile.

V

I step out of The InterContinental somewhere between eleven-thirty and twelve o’clock and am somewhat sobered by a whip of wind flying up 2nd Avenue. The temperature has dropped into what would seem to be the low thirties and gooseflesh rips up my arms and legs, a reminder of my Six Train hallucination hours prior. I figure the wind is fending off the blues of the booze, but as The Village East Cinema slants and wavers across the street, I realize cold air is never as sobering as it seems.

I stumble back to the 14th Street Union Square station and am disgusted to see a full-blast Winter Wonderland before Thanksgiving has even landed. I don’t really care about holidays but it’s annoying that the skaters and buskers and Rasta Men who usually inhabit the steps of Union Square have been evicted to make way for a millennial Etsy Gestapo to sell knitted hats for \$40 a piece. Happy couples walk through the wooden displays all nestled together and it reminds me this would be a good place to find a Christmas gift for Amelia. But then I remember Amelia is probably out dancing with her three-blond-pose, getting groped by a Wall Street type and I figure it’s up to him to find her something for Christmas now. I gaze up at the countdown clock across from Best Buy, ominously counting down to something or other. If you don’t know, below Union Square on the side of a building on the corner of Broadway and 14th is a big clock with numbers counting down. A big timer set for a few years from now. Ask any New Yorker what it’s counting towards and you’ll get a litany of answers. “Stock crash.” “Rapture.” “Climate catastrophe.” I like to imagine it’s the end of one person’s life. A person nobody knows, hell they

don't even know. Someone's hourglass is on full display for all the world to see and when the time runs out, they do too. Sometimes I hope it's me. Only four more years left, and I'd go out at twenty-seven like some of the greats, I'd finally be inaugurated into a club I wanna be in. Only four more years left to make somethin', be someone, do something; Union Square said so.

I fumble down the stairs and find a tiny Korean woman ducking under the turnstiles. It cracks me up when people are small enough to do that. Two NYPD officers are not laughing as they wave her over and she pretends not to see them.

"Ma'am. Ma'am!" They call after her. With their backs turned I take the moment to execute my own turnstile hurdle and lumber one leg over. Attempting to swing my back leg over proves difficult as I catch on the turnstile and proceed to bust ass, smashing my elbow into the grimy subway floor causing a crash that turns the heads of several onlookers. Fortunately, the cops are still busy waving down the little Korean woman and I'm saved from the fare evasion citation as I stand up and dust myself off, playing it cool. I turn over my shoulder to find an MTA employee, safe behind the glass of their little booth, nodding their head back and forth, cutting their eyes at me as if to say, *serves you right*.

"Whoops." I mouth as I limp off towards the Q Train, my ankle a little twisted and my elbow throbbing. I don't pay the fare much when I ride the subway. I rarely have the \$2.75, who the hell can pay five dollars a day roundtrip? I don't have a job. Gary has a job that supplies him with a monthly MetroCard. I don't have a lot, just a couple of lucky breaks. Technically the little Korean lady will pay my fare when they slap her with the \$100 fine. That's really how the MTA keeps moving. Fines. But since moving to the city I've found a lot of things keep running on the unlucky ones. Think about it, the MTA finds one person to slap with a \$100 fee while letting good-doers ride the train thirty-six times to get their \$100 out of them. And if you have to pay the fine (which I never do), as long as you jump the turnstile thirty-six times without getting caught, it evens out. That's fair. And if you're a dumbass who gets caught in less than thirty-six jumps, it serves you right for being a moron. Pay the fare if you can't be quick. That's how I think of it.

Gary disagrees with me, Gary says just get a job.

VI

I wake up the next morning and I want to kill myself. I eat a fried egg and feel better. I look around the bedroom. It's littered with clothes and beer cans and 7-11 wrappers. I stand with effort and fire up my little portable record player. I move a sweatshirt and retrieve a vinyl: Patty Smith's *Horses*. It was a gift from the one person I think I really love. They hate me now and when I play it, it makes me feel sad but better. Even the things that make you feel better make you feel sad. The first chords of *Gloria* ring out of the little buzzing speaker as I leave my bedroom and start down the small hallway of my shithole of an apartment just off Prospect Park

here in Brooklyn. It's a "nice" part of Brooklyn where the buildings are getting renovated and little millennial NYU graduates are making their homes, growing the neighborhood. They wear beanies and walk dogs in sweaters on neon leashes. They look at the crackheads on the ground with disgust, they look at the crowded jerk chicken shop on Flatbush with disgust. They look at everything that was there before them with disgust. I think of them when I hear gunshots echo down the blocks further east. I hope they're scared after moving somewhere they shouldn't be. If you can afford to live in the middle of a city where things are expensive, stay there. Don't move where things are cheap and people still struggle to buy them. Don't put your expensive coffee shops next to my bodega with the loose cigarettes for 50 cents a pop. Don't put your yappy lap dogs on the curb to piss next to the sleeping junkies. Don't look at our home with your snooty, repulsed faces you yuppy cocksuckers; you got Harlem, you got Bushwick, you got Williamsburg, you Carthart Orange Beanie colonizers. Stay the fuck away from Flatbush.

I'm a transplant and I'm white, so I don't get to have these opinions. But I feel at home with the beggars and the guys hustling the corners -- a kinship that says "I'm not here to change your way, just make my own. I don't fuck with you, you don't fuck with me. This is *your* neighborhood, I just live here." The yuppies don't understand that, they're taking this neighborhood and turning the pre-war buildings into doll houses with park views. They're asking \$3,500 for an apartment that was \$1,500 last year and these cunts are paying it, making everyone else pay more. Gary and I have lived together for three years, he's from the neighborhood and got the apartment when his parents moved upstate to "get away from it all." Gary got a beautiful two-bedroom Prospect Park East apartment, rent-stabilized. He just needed a roommate, and I knew this kid Kasha that Gary was friends with from Hunter College, they were a neat sort of ambiguous kid I really enjoyed talking to when I played open mics at a bar he bussed at. Anyways,, Kasha and I got to talkin' about my lease ending and me being on the street and Kasha said he knew Gary who had this place to himself and could use a roomie and I weaseled my way into Gary's apartment. It's been three years and things have been great, but I'm currently six months behind on the rent and Gary won't talk to me unless I'm getting him stoned. I like getting stoned and I like Gary so I feel bad about things and smoke him out all the time, there's never any way I'll pay him back and he knows, but that's life sometimes, right? I sometimes dream I've signed a record label and make \$10,000 and pay Gary back in one fell swoop. That would be the shit.

There's a rumor that H.P. Lovecraft lived in my building once before, you know -- the Cthulu guy? Apparently, his wife paid his way while he worked on his writing. I suppose Gary is my Mrs. Lovecraft. I look around the dark apartment and find half-eaten meals mounting dirty dishes on the tables, and cigarette butts littering the floor. Crumbs, dust, a couple of balled-up paper towels. In the center of the table is Long Bong Silver, our prized bong we scored on St. Marks when we were younger and dumber. The walls are a dim gray and seem to bring the kitchen inward as if it's crushing you in a dingy, pot-tinged mess. I love this shit hole.

I toss my dirty, fried egg bowl in the sink on top of a pile of dishes and watch a cockroach crawl out that I pretend I didn't see. We have a bug problem in this apartment, but Gary would have to pay for the exterminator. Gary already pays the rent, utilities and buys the groceries so Gary doesn't really have the cash for an exterminator, even though he works a *real* job up in Midtown. He sells digital ad space to companies looking to cash in on every new digital craze. He hates his job and his roommate and his shithole apartment. Gary is doing everything right and hates his life. I'm doing everything wrong and hate my life. Does anyone like their life?

"Meow."

I turn to find Guy Ritchie, Gary's fat asshole cat, scratching against the wall where I'd left my Ibanez the day before. He's pawing at the corner of it, causing it to shake.

"Ritchie!" I shout, stamping my foot toward the feline fucker. He scats off, turning on a dime and knocking his ass against my Ibanez. It's a beautiful yellow starter guitar I bought at a pawnshop when my parents sent me some Christmas money in 2019. His name is Shithead Sam. He's named that because he's a total shithead, always popping strings and falling out of tune, and refusing to hold onto a strap. But with some Slinky strings on him and a RAT pedal hooked in, he takes you to heaven and back. He's scratched, dented, and nicked to hell, but much like this apartment, I love him that way. We got character, them and I. My dingy apartment, my beat-up guitar, and me.

Anyways, Guy Ritchie smacks his mangy ass against the Ibanez and knocks him to the floor causing an expensive-sounding crash. I chase him out of the kitchen and retrieve Shithead Sam from the floor, inspecting a new chunk of the beautiful wood stripped and cracked away. I look into the paint and see the small spiderweb cracks splintering and am reminded of the arms of the swastika carved into the Six Train seat below my foot. I set Shithead Sam down gently and step away, remembering. Seeing those turning arms, the bleeding Sharpie words spewing hate. Remembering the cold, the sparks, the dark. Remembering what was too real to be a dream but too strange to be practical. I stare into the guitar and feel the freeze of fear overcome me, I don't feel alone anymore.

"Mrrrrrr..."

Guy Ritchie is standing in the corner of the kitchen letting out a slow, deep yowl. He's facing me but looking behind me into the hallway leading to the bedrooms, the dark hallway with the exposed brick, the heat pipe ominously bolted to the side, daring you to brush against it in the pitch black winter night and singe your arm against it, the price you pay for warmth in a pre-war. I want to turn and look into that hallway, see the empty passageway but an impossibility is blocking mobility. What if something is there?

"MRRRR..." Guy Ritchie yowls louder, the arch of his back raising. I'm staring deeply into my guitar, pressuring myself to turn around, to see the nothingness, to release the tension. But The Transient's voice is ringing in my head, the memory of those words, the familiarity in

his voice. His voice on the train car was deep, deeper than the lowest note a bass guitar has, lower than the low drones they use in horror flicks to ramp the tension. Deep, but warm in the cold I now feel in my safe home, in my shelter. The gravel in his voice shook and boomed through rocks crowding his esophagus, but the combination of it all, the deep dark growl of The Transient created a beautiful I felt driven into, wanting to be wrapped in the drone of his voice.

“Give ‘em a gas, Max.”

I remember the voice so vividly I can’t tell if it is echoing in my head or off the walls here in my kitchen. So close; Darkness and Evil wrapped in Grandeur, delivered by a shaking beggar in rags and snot and vile infection-ridden flesh. The terror was not found in the deep drone of the voice, of the ice-cold air it cut through, in the spine-tingling familiarity of a stranger knowing your name, but instead was found in the compulsion to be engulfed in that voice, to be warmed from the ice in the heat of the tongue of the evil in front of me then, behind me now. It called to me because I belonged to the evil.

SKKKRCH!

A loud scratch and the record in my room ceases its song. Silence engulfs us except for the subtle click of the record player in the other room, spinning but not singing.

I turn and find the hallway empty and though I no longer feel watched, I feel the deep dread of unseen company. I start down the hallway slowly, my eyes darting brick to brick as I creep into the impossibly darker gut of the apartment where the windows no longer live. I creep into the bedroom to find it the same as I left it, except the record player, knocked askew on its dresser. I see its needle resting on the edge of the record, grinding against the vinyl. As it spins a long gouge has found its way from the center of the record to the side, a scratch deeper than any needle misdrop I’ve ever managed -- it’s been pressed deep into the vinyl, clawing into the grooves of the wax and lacerating the fragile record. It’s been destroyed, never to be enjoyed again.

I turn off the record player and inspect the record further, feeling the grooves in my hand, gauging just how deep the scratch goes. I swear to God, it just about split the disc.

Guy Ritchie has entered my bedroom, a place he never goes. He sees me, has a moment of recognition, and bolts between my legs, nestling against my ankles and vibrating them with a soft purr. His little gray fur is no longer on edge and his eyes no longer dart for danger, they’re wide and pleading. His little ugly face looks up at me and seems to say, *protect me*.

“You didn’t do this,” I say, gesturing with the destroyed record in hand.

I take a step towards the door and Guy Ritchie darts under my bed. He’s not allowed in my room due to his affinity to piss on anything. Scratch that, piss on everything. I make an exception this time as I slowly shut the door to my room, closing out the dark hallway, the dingy kitchen. The scary outside world with its subways that seal you inside and force you to talk to strangers who know you, who entice you with words you don’t understand. The fear engulfs you, it closes all the exits and forces you into the perpetrator's arms. It steals you.

I close the door tight and lay in bed, feeling Guy Ritchie yowl and meow and sniff out a comfortable place to hide. I pull my covers up, imitating him. I close my eyes and try to sleep the day away. I never feel alone, I never feel safe and I never forget the gravel of his voice.

And then I sleep.

VII

I wake in the evening feeling more tired than when I laid to sleep. Guy Ritchie is scratching in here and I can hear Gary outside.

“Max, Max is my cat in there? I’m coming in.”

Gary opens the door, sending a shaft of light directly into my freshly opened eyes.

“Jesus Christ, man.”

VIII

YOU'RE NOT MY MOM

YOU'RE NOT MY DAD

YOU DON'T OWN ME

YOU'RE A FAG!

I can hear New York’s most well-known, unknown band from outside the doors of BUBS on Avenue A. A line of dingy-looking kids smoke cigarettes and discuss their Spotify Wrapped results. It’s a Saturday in mid-December and Carpool Contraband is playing a highly anticipated set. A wiry teenager is working the door, and whenever he gets a break he cranes his head inside, longing to be involved in the sea of mayhem just down the stairs.

“ID?” He says as I walk up to him.

“Tony, it’s me. Max, remember?”

He looks me up and down, looking for anything to differentiate me from the crowd. There isn’t much. BUBS is a cacophony of freaks like me.

“I duh’know.”

I fish in my pockets for my ID. I pull it out, Mississippi still emblazoned across the front, expiration date looming.

“Maximus! Why didn’t you say so?!”

“I did.” I mutter as I pass through the door, down a narrow pitch black stairway and upon a thin sheen curtain, amorphous silhouettes grinding and thrashing to the beat of the music. I cut

through the curtain with the back of my hand and usher away that last layer which separates me from The Underground. I look at it in all its glory; twenty-odd kids on the floor, masculine frames launching themselves into each other with feminine frames standing a few yards back - tallboy cans clenched tightly as they yell over the music answers to questions not posed:

“Did you hear Amy and Leaf are fucking?”

“I’m not ready to leave, but you can!”

That sorta stuff. Behind the crowd is a flimsy excuse of a bar, one guy in a too-tight Beatles tee he personally cut the neck out of slinging Corona and Lemon Drops to underage chicks. That’s a big problem with BUBS, Wirey Teen Tony goes total ID Nazi with the likes of me, but to the fairer sex, a wink and a nod is all that’s needed. Which raises the question of our gender nonconforming friends, where do they land on ID privilege? I’ll have to ask Tony on the way out, he seems like a real Salt of the Earth Kid, I’m sure he’d have a real funny answer.

Speaking of genderlessness, the drummer for Carpool Contraband seems to fall somewhere inbetween it all, long blonde hair on a makeup streaked face with a jaw jutting out over their snare. Stubble on that jaw, a cleft in their chin. They hold their hair up out of their face with a knit bandana sort of giving an ‘80s Glam Metal meets butterchurning look. They have a tiny white shirt hugging their body with the words FLOWER POWER emblazoned across the front featuring a Sunflower holding a machine gun. Their tits poke out around the flower but given the gut sitting on their lap it’s hard to tell if the tits were there before the gut or were a later addition to the outset. The hair on their arms is so thick it seems like it’s been there since birth. Oh, they’re drenched in sweat like the rest of the band, however they specifically seem to be *swimming* behind their drum set. Damn, I wish I could play drums.

YOU’RE NOT MY MOM

YOU’RE NOT MY DAD

I OWN YOU

YOU’RE MY FAG!

The singer rips into the microphone the chorus (with a little added twist for the last time around) and their use of the term *fag* takes a bit of a different light seeing the androgynous look of the drummer. In fact, nobody in the band exactly looks like a high school quarterback. The singer looks like he might’ve tried to shoot his.

The singer has this crustpunk, Gerard Way thing going about him. Rail thin with dark hair falling in his eyes. A white collared shirt untucked from tight skinny jeans and combat boots laced to his nuts. It’s a real 2010’s look I’m not entirely sure why we’re bringing to the year of our Lord, but hey. It’s what you thought cool might’ve looked like if you spent middle school torrenting *My Chemical Romance*.

The bassist has a whole other thing going. A pair of khaki shorts and a plain solid blue tee. His hair is short and sort of *shwipzs* up at the front. He doesn't do much but bob his head with the notes. He kinda looks like he just got off work at the Verizon store. And in a sea of freaks and fiends, it sorta makes him the most punk rock lookin' motherfucker in the room.

Now if you're paying attention (and if you're not at this point I wouldn't blame you) there's one pretty key instrument to a whiny punk soundscape I haven't mentioned. Who's got the guitar?

The guitar was in you all along.

Kidding, the singer is playing the guitar (I very loosely use the term playing), sort of thrashing on open strings, fumbling to throw an A and a D in there. He's got that Ramones, Sex Pistols way of playing. Two chords, fast and loud a hell. Which would be great if he were Johnny Rotten/Ramone but he ain't and anyone who tries to do what they did is shelling out copied shit. That's the rotten truth of it all, every way to play a guitar has been plucked away. There ain't nothing new to do with a six-string but emulate someone who did it better. Ain't that a bitch?

"WE'RE CARPOOL CONTRABAND." The Singer screlts.

"AND WE DON'T LIKE YOU!" The band joins in to scream as they charge into the next song. Good for 'em, they wear their fuck-you-attitude on their sleeve. It's so clearly baloney, so clearly a show for everyone but them. They're so punk they're almost yuppy.

"Scuse me, dude." Says a too tall girl behind me. I'm still standing in the doorway of BUBS, blocking the entrance.

"Muh bad." I sorta mutter taking less than half a step to the side so she has to brush against me to get through. She's gargantually tall, and I smell the unmistakable scent of real garbage (or great) Cocaine. It numbs my gums and gets me hard in one foul swoop.

"Excuse me!" I call after her but she's already swallowed into the crowd. She didn't seem like that much fun to talk to anyways, but that scent had me jonesing for a bump. Ain't it funny how coke'll do that to you? Not like you smell skunk beer and think, *God. I could go for a Natty Light*. It's just Coke. Like that shit crawls on your insides at just the thought and nothing else does that. Well, maybe Heroin. I've never tried Heroin, but the folks that do seem to really like that shit.

With Too Tall Girl gone I survey the crowd, looking for fingers hardwired to fidget or noses unnaturally stuffy. Ain't much I see, but my eyes are drawn towards a sickly little thing near the edge of the bar. Her skin is so pale it seems to glow in the drowsy light of BUBS. Her hair is this kinky black and blue like the bruises on her arms. Her pants are tight black faded out at the knees and she wears Docs kinda like mine, where hers are broken in, mine are just broken. She looks a little broken behind her eyes, soft black pools where the light goes to dance. The real kicker is this sleeveless denim cut she has over a black tank top. It would look so hokey on anyone else, like a halloween costume of Axl Rose but for some reason on her it just fits.

Patched out, a tattoo on her wrist where a kiss should've been and loneliness permeating like radiation out of Japan in the 40's.

Blue Hair Girl gets my heart hard.

I gotta say hi, I think I'll go over and say, "Hi, Axl!" in the same voice Dave Grohl says in the footage from the 1992 MTV Awards, when Krist is hiding out holding a head wound inflicted by his own bass. He's harassing Axl Rose after some Seattle band (Nevermind the name) outrocked *Guns 'N Roses* at their own game and officially dethroned '80's Rock for the Grunge Revolution of the 90's, a crown of thorns Kurt would wear before blowing it clean off two years later.

It's so good it hurts, man. She'll love it, I already know.

I've taken two steps towards Blue Hair Girl when a flash of red takes my eyes off the bar and into the crowd.

"Gah'damn..." Is all I can mutter when I see the Amazonian in the tight red dress dart her eyes at me. Little hellfire pupils in green grandeur lakes. Her body looks taught like the cheerleaders asses we pinched from under the bleachers. Her teeth are pearly white as she rubs her tongue across them obliterating stains from the blood red lipstick adorning the sacred mouth which I'm sure has said some pretty nasty things she wouldn't mind repeating. Black heels, milk skin with freckles outlining where my hands oughta be. And above all, she's got this curling bonfire on her head, rings of fire cascading down her shoulders. She's a goddamn mirage, appearing in a premonition and she's looking at *me*.

A tug in my chest pulls my eyes off of her and back to Blue Hair Girl who is chatting with some smug looking asshole with veins in his arms. Guys who have fuck-me veins in their arms suck and she seems really into whatever he's disin' her which honestly reflects more on her. I turn back to the Lady in Red thinking of that synthy song and if her body wasn't enough to seal the deal, that manicured finger tapping the end of her nose in the universal sign for *let's get high as balls* is as it slides down her chin, then shoulder, lingering at her breast, is.

I take two steps which seem to glide me to the edge of the crowd and face to face with her, a sweet cinnamon scent fighting with that tell-tale Cocaine aroma.

Dude, you may be thinking. This chick is practically holding an oversized Looney Tunes sign that says, "fuck me!" on it. She's throwing herself at you, kid. Have some standards.

I do not have standards. I love drugs and I love fucking and I think I love this redhead. So piss off, reader.

"I'm Max." I whisper-shout over Carpool Contraband.

"Meet me in the bathroom, Max."

IX

The lock clicks tight in a room painted with graffiti and stickers among other foul smelling things. BUBS venue bathroom is a walk-in closet with a shitter, and the shitter doesn't have a lid or seat cover, but that doesn't stop The Lady in Red from shoving me backwards clinking my ass on the open rim. It hurts my tailbone a bit and the new damp sensation around my ass is working overtime to kill my woody, but when The Lady in Red hikes up her skirt up to her waist to straddle my lap and give my denim clad boner a warm cozy buzz of friction, I realize no stench or knocking or nothin' could keep me from sealing this deal.

Straddled high on me like a firecrotch Calamity Jane breaking in a show pony, The Lady in Red reaches into the cup of her dress, nipples poking through the thin red fabric like Freddy Kreuger's blades stretch the walls above poor, sleeping Nancy. I'm a little let-down when it's not a titty she produces, instead a little plastic? A condom? There's something that's a bit of a turn-off, a chick having a condom ready in the bar bathroom - you planned this?

But when the baggy falls between a pinched thumb and pointer it's clear as day, my new friend has an 8-ball on her.

"Fuck, that's hot." I catch myself releasing on unplanned breath. In less than the time it took the words to escape me, she opened the baggie, scooped a healthy helping of Cocaine onto her free pointer, snorted it quicker than Stephen King at his desk in the '80's, and offered the bag to me.

I take it and peer at the bag in my palm, a ziplocked Mount Everest, snowcaps-'n-all peering back at me, its white-almost-yellow hue familiar, letting the kids know this is the good shit. As I stare deeper I see something I don't recognize (and I've seen some *funky* bags of Cocaine, reader). There are little red flecks dispersed throughout the bag.

"What is this?" I ask, offering up the bag.

"It's not Fentanyl if that's what you're thinking."

"I wasn't until you said that!" I close my fist around the bag and turn my hand over, indicating I'm ready to drop the bag in her palm. Those red flakes bugged me out.

She clasps her hands around my fist and rotates my hand palm up again. Then she slowly unfurls my fingers like a palm reader if my fortune was to do this odd bag of Coke.

"Ta-da!" she sort of giggles upon revealing the bag, like a magician's sleight of hand trick, *the quarter was in the other palm!* I crack a smile, and then my mouth contorts into an *O* shape as she glides her hips back and creeps her beautiful mouth towards my outstretched hand.

"It's just dye," her breath tickling my fingertips. "A calling card so you know it comes from The Seventh Layer."

"In Columbia?" I ask but no answer is given as she wraps her lips around my index finger, her upper lip, ruby red, centimeters from the top of the bag.

The Lady in Red, ever the convincer, stands and takes a step back, letting me get an eye full of the black velvet between her legs. She raises a high heeled foot and rubs it against my

ankle, sliding it up my leg -- some advanced footsie giving the BUBS bathroom a meet me after class aesthetic, turning the pleasure centers of my brain to a Spinal Tap eleven.

"Alright. Thanks." I find myself saying, ripping open the airseal of the 8-ball and sprinkling enough Seventh Layer Cocaine on my hand to get you and your mama cleaning the kitchen for six hours straight. I bring it to my nose, the nasal cavities flaring and dialating. There's a little junkie that lives in the brain of anyone who's tried a hard drug *just this one time*, and mine is screaming like a sports bar on Super Bowl Sunday.

Come on, come on, come on! Bring it home, boy!

As I inhale sharply I feel the intense stinging sensation of molten lava razor blades coating the inside of my skull. A thousand hornets digging stingers into my fleshy septum, deviating it, sewing it shut and popping the stitches in milliseconds. The dopamine floods my brain bringing a bittersweet strings section into the orchestra filling the pockets of sound left by the booming timpany of powdered pain. I tweak for a second, that jolt of pleasure as the drug buzzes my brain and the tip of a high heel teases my crotch. Nevermind the groin, my whole body feels it's about to burts as every muscle tightens, my nipples turn to diamond cutters and my toes curl so hard I swear they tickle my heel.

"*Gah!*" I let out, my head knocks back as if I'd just railed a line of gunpowder, my eyes watering, closed but rolling behind the eyelids, a display of fireworks and Moody Blues album art, like when you ball up your fists and rub them against your eyes and see LCD static.

Head jutting up, eyes closed ('lest I open them to come face-to-face with a very disappointed God), the pain subsides as I enjoy the sensation of The Lady in Red's foot toying with my johnson, the denim so tight and myself so turned on it feels like a Levi's straightjacket. While the aroma of BUBS lavatory was never exactly honeycomb and lavender, I'm surprised to find a rancid scent cutting through the unpleasentry I'd managed to ignore. Something wicked and rotten getting picked up by my still sore sniffer.

"Do you like that?" She asks, the soft brush of her fingernail on my outstretched palm as she takes back the mysterious Cocaine that seems to be cut with fire.

"*Yuh.*" I manage to grunt through the pain gagging me.

"You like that, bad boy?" She asks, toeing deeper into my manhood.

"Sure." I offer, more of a whimper than a sexy call-and-resonse.

She's hot, she's kinky. That's great and all, but all my brainpower is focused on my stinging, throbbing nose and that new odor that only seems to be getting stronger.

Oh fuck, I think, I burned my nose off. I can smell the scorching flesh of where my nose used to be. Nancy Reagan was right, I should've just said no!

No, that's ridiculous. Noses don't blast off your face like a pine tree in a lightning storm. Even the worst cases of Cocaine nose just have you looking like Michael Jackson after an unfortunately hard sneeze. The scent is insanely familiar, too. Like the dumpsters behind the

pizza place is Hazzlehurst. The garbage juice of sunbaked cheese and hamburger left in the open, a melting fungal feast.

It feels like The Lady in Red has lost her high heel which takes me out of the moment, the thought of her bare feet on the nasty bathroom tile. As well, this feet stuff is great and all -- I have no aversion to feet! If you rub it on an erogenous zone I'll probably pop a woody, but I ain't no Quentin Tarrantino, there are many more exciting places on the human body to suck, fondle or fuck.

"Baby, you can leave your pumps on--" I begin, looking down before the source of the foul stench is revealed. Toying with the head that does the majority of my thinking is the clubbed foot of The Transient, bandaged, bleeding, the thin faded black of my denim the only thing separating the indication of my religion with an oozing, puss drenched bandage clinging to an infection balloon of a foot imitating a Halloween display mummy.

As I meet his eyes, yellow-tinged-black saucers, he lunges over me, a grimy city-caked hand plastered over my mouth, himself stradling me the way The Lady in Red had, the word *erotic* which once ticker taped my thoughts has been Boggle slapped and rearranged to *terror*. My guts tighten as a stream of vomit deploys from my stomach, bouncing against The Transient's palm and knocking back into my gag reflex, cueing another full-body heave sending more vomit up the esophagus elevator, my mouth reaching maximum capacity and sending undigested patrons back into my throat to wait. I shake my head, little vomit streams seeping through The Transients fingers and bubbling at the corners of my mouth, but it's no use. I'm suffocating in my own puke, a rock star end with no track marks to show for it.

Panic time kicks in and I'm able to perceive things twice as fast (8x as fast if you count the marching powder in my veins). I search the bathroom for the Lady in Red, thinking she and this Subway Car Transient must be buddies of some sort, looking to rob me or record some snuff film for some Deep Web Dick Chokers. Probably good money in it, too. The odd couple thing is really paying off for Maxim's Cover Girl and Homeless Harry, here. But I don't see the Lady, her red dress and red hair and red flaked Cocaine vanishing the way a ghost might. Or Criss Angel thought he could. What really sends goosebumps up my contorting, asphyxiating body is the door.

The bathroom door is still locked from the inside.

"What's wrong, Max. Don't I turn you on, bad boy?" The Transient cackles through cracked teeth and snot spiderwebs, a little laugh sending flecks into my red, watering eyes.

Warning bells, alarms, smoke in the house. My head feels immensely heavy and my lungs feel walnut shell tight. If I don't breathe now, I won't get the chance to again.

"Tell me you're my bad boy, Max. Go on, say it."

He releases his roadkill catcher's mitt from my face and I send a geyser of vomit three feet in the air, raining down on this too familiar stranger and myself.

"Guhhhhhh!" I suck in air and shake off the buzzing panic fighting the high in my head. Every part of me is revved like an engine, jaw tight, eyes wild, but there seem to be two Evil Kanevil Adrenaline Fiends in my head. Both are railing meth coated Adderall and the only thing they seem to agree on is whatever we do we do fast and furious.

One is Panic, one is A Good High.

"GOOD TIME!" Screams A Good High.

"BAD TIME!" Screams Panic.

"GOOD TIME!" A Good High rebuts.

"BAD TIME!" Panic corrects.

Guys! I scream in my noggin, that little sober you that exists in your head while you're high. The one that can ration, reason and think critically who delves out orders to a body that's having way too much fun to consider.

What should I do? I think/ask them.

"RUN, MOTHERFUCKER!" They respond in unison.

I remember the mantra I was taught in school in Mississippi, "Whenever there's adversity, a fight, a *conundrum*," Mrs. Lockhartt, the making of fifth grade fantasies, always used to say, "use your head."

So that's what I do. Flinging my still buzzing cranium forward the way dandelions headbang to a strong gust of wind, I plant my hairline in the receding crevices of what was once The Transient's nose, drooping and scarred from the Heroin scabbing.

My teeth click on impact and a searing pain erupts from one Marlboro stained incisor. With the new radiating sting in my mouth, the burning of my nose and the pulsing of my forehead, I'm pleased to announce my entire noggin feels like a 4th of July screamer.

And here I was hoping to snort off that low-dull hangover throbbing I brought in with me.

The Transient seems to slink off my lap, the way Santa boots poor Ralphie off his own after informing him, "you'll shoot your eye out." He takes two steps back, but he's not recoiling from my metalhead self defense lesson, oh no. He's much too big for that and although my eyes are crossing after headbutting the oversized tombstone that is his forehead, he barely registers the impact. He's stepping back in pleasant surprise, the way Mike Tyson may take a step back after taking a solid left jab from the lunch meat he's pummeling. A little smirk of admiration as if to say, *nice one, now back to your regularly scheduled beat down.* The smirk creeps up as the The Transient burrows the black lagoon cesspools that are his eyes at me, this aimless drifter psycho seeing every thought that's made me fear there were mind readers in the room, seeing every movie that made me clean out my search history (twice), and making me remember that sorrow I felt when my mom passed, not because she was gone but because I'd always secretly thought it would make the kids like me more, make 'em put up with my tantrums. I'd finally have a reason to scream. Sublime joy reaches his face as we reach the same thought.

After she died I was just the kid with the dead mom. The --

“Troubled one.” The Transient finishes for my internal monologue.

“Yeah.” I respond, standing from the toilet. A suicidal calm washing over me, that clarity I’d felt two times before but could never stick with. If this *thing* could feel my thoughts, track me down and seduce me, there was no use fighting it. It got its coke in me, if it wanted its cock in me I probably couldn’t fight that either. I just sorta hoped he’d killed me first. It was the first and last time I ever thought, “God, I hope he’s a necrophiliac.” You don’t get to think that much.

“I saw you on the train.” I state. “You were doing the Nazi...”

I trail off, thinking. *The Nazi bit? The Nazi joke? What’dya call that?*

The way I leave the sentence hanging it sounds like the latest Hitler dance craze.

“Just breaking the ice.” He says reaching a hand to his nose, that’s when I notice the fleshy bulb is protruding sharply to the left. I guess I had really laid a solid one on him.

Tok! His nose sort of clicks as he screws it back on straight in one swift flick. I remember the cold of the train car and realize the bathroom is now a tundra, the yellow bulb crackling above me now emanating a faint bluish white as it cuts through my breath I can now see.

“We’re picking ‘em good, these days.” He says, dropping his hand to his side following the Army medic cartilage correction he’s just performed on his nose (or what there is left of it. It’s sort of shaped like there once was an entire nose, possibly even a bigg’un given the shape of the base, like it once sloped far and down like a cartoon Rabbi, but all that remains is a fleshy bulb like a pitbull’s bobbed tail). There’s a high wind emanating from nowhere that seems to cut through me, my eyes close against the wind and in the moment of blindness, so fast it’s inconceivable, The Transient is gone. Before I recognize Crackie Copperfield’s disappearing act I hear the ragged breathing over my left shoulder and feel the force of a semitruck hit just under the lowest rib in my back, staggering forward another Mac Truck racks my right shoulder blade and sends me into the wall. The Transient, rather spry for an older druggie, pins me against the wall like a cop pins a black kid with his hoodie up.

“What do you want, dude? I have no money, I’m not that great to look at *and* I put up a fight so if you’re wanting to get your rocks off, I’m probably more trouble than I’m worth.”

He chuckles through a gravel road throat.

“Ah, Max. I’m not here to take your money, your pride, your anything. Not that you had anything to take. I’m here to *give*.”

The way he sort of whispered “give” buzzed my brain and made me think I would not love to be the recipient of this gift.

“Thanks, no thanks.” I said pushing off the wall and being rewarded with my chin busting open against the cracking drywall as The Transient roots his elbow into the base of my skull.

“We haven’t even laid out my offer, Maxie.”

The term “Maxie” brings back memories of kids in the Clorox reeking hallways calling out, “Maxie Pad!”

“Maxie Pad, you’re in big trouble.” They would say, pink strawberry milk cartons in hand, jutting past me with a vice principal over my shoulder, making me watch the kids all get their lunches first before I made my way down the line, explained I didn’t bring any lunch or money to buy it, and some lunch bitch would begrudgingly put a cold slice of American cheese between two dry slices of wonderbread with a dixie cup in the side.

“Water’s down the hall.”

“You know one of those cunts died?”

“What?” I ask.

“Lunch bitch,” He continued, gyrating his hips against my ass at the talk of death. “The one who gave you the dry cheese sandwich.”

“What happened?” I asked, soft and soothing the way you might entertain a lunatic with a gun.

I gave her everything! Now she’ll see!

‘Course buddy, you deserve better, anyway! Now let’s put the gun down.

The Transient leans his face in close and seems to breathe in my consciousness through my hair.

“Choked her.”

He almost speaks like he did it, like he drained the life from her.

“She short changed everyone of you kids,” he continues, “skimped out on helpings and while your little tummies rumbled she scarfed down what was left over. Adults never noticed, and even if they did, what’s one missing Dinonugget? Fucked a hundred kids over, glutoned on meals made for growing bodies. And you, Max, made a little example out of ya. Fat cow, making a big deal out of upholding the system, making every kid pay their fair three-fifty or it’s hungry ‘til the day’s over. She could’ve helped you, Darling Max, but she couldn’t fathom cutting a sliver from her greenbean casserole and plastic pizza’d bounty. That’s why I lodged a Stegosaurus deep in that bitch’s gullet and watched her keel over in the little broom closet just behind the cafeteria’s kitchen.”

The story starts to dust off a faint bell, ringing a rumor I’d heard leaving middle school, the tale of a lunchlady choking to death on a school meal, but I’d always brushed it off as hear-say, a hyperbole of the rancid school lunch. But this?

“I’ve had your back before you knew it, kid.” He carries on, his large pussing, crunching fingers wrapping around my waste, posing us as some fucked up prom dates.

“I am the great equalizer, the darkness of the yin keeping the yang ground. I give terrible beauty and filter blinding light into palatable shimmering gold. I’m the veil, the ugly truth that keeps this world afloat. A fallen angel who rose with tattered wings.”

He spins me around and I find myself face to face with the Lady in Red, the nobbed nose of The Transient now a cute button, her figure supple against my shaking body. Her dress is tight

and expensive looking, the rags adorning The Transient nowhere to be found. In fact, the only memory of him is in the faint, fading rancid scent just now fading, fading, gone.

I think of the tattered wings and am reminded of some Greek story.

“Your name is... Ficcarus?” I take a stab.

“Lucifer.” She smiles and I believe her. I have to, she said it with the voice of an angel.

“You’re the Devil...” I respond emptily. That suicidal calm is replaced with that defeated confusion where you’re having a wild dream and someone turns to you and breaks the illusion.

This is a dream, you know?

“You’re not dreaming,” she responds to my thought, straightening the hem of collarless shirt. “And I’m as serious as a heart attack, baby. I’ve been watching you, Max. You have nothing but what you wear on your sleeve. Such determination, such heart, such anger and nothing to show for it. A voice of a poet, fingers move pretty quick, too.”

A wink.

“But you’ve capped. Plateaued. You will die as you’ve lived, Max. Trust me, I know.”

A shiver down my spine at the idea. Even us who don’t care about making it big, living that lavish life, we all hold out a little bit with the hope that someone shines a light on us and shows the world the blackclad diamonds we are, that we still get to be rockstars someday. But to hear it now, in such irrefutable truth, it kills me.

“But you have one last chance, Max. Your final shot. I will give you everything you’ve desired. You can play my music with the best of them. I just need one thing in return.”

“One?”

“Hmmm...” She sorta purrs. “A couple little things, rather.”

“What?”

“Souls, Maxie. Just a couple a year, once a month or so.”

The calendar sounds oddly like when I rationalize sobering up.

“Okay, say I do it. How will I know when you need more?”

“You’ll feel it.”

“This is fucking crazy. Souls? Is that killing?”

“Offering, more so,” she says, tucking some of my hair out of my face.

“God damn, can I have some time to think?”

She looks annoyed and she brushes the tips of her opposite hand fingernails across my abdomen.

“Boys know better than to keep me waiting, Max.” She plunges her nails into my gut, a cat scratch turned zombie gouge.

A shriek escapes my lips, it feels like her fingernails are butcher knives someone’s held against a blowtorch. My mind races and I scream through the pain.

“*GUH!* So wha- I kill a couple people and you turn me into a’yuh wha- *Guitar God?*”

Through the pain I feel immense embarrassment at the term *Guitar God*.

“Max... You can already play. I’ll just show the people the artist they’ve been too busy to look up at. Wouldn’t that be nice.”

“*FINE!* FINE, YES I AGREE. I’LL DO IT!”

The pain dulls as the Lady in Red retracts her claws and I drop to my knees in front of her. Oddly how I’d hoped this would look before the bait-and-switch hijinks.

She drops to her own dirty knees and cradles my head in her hands.

“What do you need...” I start out of breath. “I gotta cut my hand, prick a finger and drip some blood on sumthin’ or whatever.”

“Hmm...” The Lady in Red ponders my face as a smile stretches her plump lips. “Not precisely.

With both of her hands framing my face she lifts one and brushes the pad of her thumb against the divet of above my upper lip. She pulls it away to reveal bright red glistening off of her digit and I become aware of the fact my nose has been gushing like a faucet since I snorted that Seventh Layer shit many long minutes ago.

Cokebleed.

“Congratulations, kid. You’re making a deal with the Devil.”

And with that she leans forward and unravels an unnaturally long tongue which hooks my upper lip, sticks on the stubble of my unshaven face, and dips into my left nostril, a warm wet worm peeking into a vast cave. I hear a slurp as she brings her tongue back in, a slimy mechanized measuring tape retreating, smacking all around her teeth and cheeks. She swallows a slow, heavy swallow as her eyes roll back.

“You are delicious, Max.”

X

“You’re done, go home.”

I’m staring into Paul McCartney’s face, stretched long and flat, the victim of Rob Zombie fish hook botox. I look up and find the mouth speaking belongs to the bartender with his shitty Beatles shirt. The other Beatles look strangely plastered to the bartender’s chest, too, creating abstract reconstructions of our favorite Liverpoolians. Except Ringo, he looks relatively normal. Or maybe he always looked weird.

“Go home, kid. You’ve had enough.”

I’m standing outside the bathroom, just sort of staggering through BUBS as a spectator. My face is bleeding, my eyes are gaunt holes and I find myself doing the Ray Charles shake from the hornets in my bloodstream. People seem to be glancing over at me, the bloody phantom. Carpool Contraband seems to have finished their set and is breaking down, a few rag tag speakers seem to be playing some mumble rap I can’t quite understand. I can’t quite break through the wall of

noise in this place to pick out anything of sustenance. Only blurry streaks of light and sound, the grotesque Beatles and this clown kicking me out.

“Yo!” The bartender continues, jolting me.

“I’m going.” I mutter back, sort of walking through him, my elbow knocking into John Lennon with his stupid Yellow Submarine.

“Your shirt is gay.” I offer once I’ve passed him.

“I’m gay, asshole.”

“Oh. Congrats, I guess.”

And I leave BUBS, ready to see what’s next.

XI

Nothing happened for a minute after BUBS. If this were a movie things would’ve been off to the races, but this is just life and life tends to be the downtime between events, and I’ve had a lot of downtime as of late. The only thing I took from my deal with the Devil was a terrible aching sickness and an inability to get out of bed. Days spent in the fetal position on a bare mattress, sweat soaking so deep it pooled on the floorboards beneath. Shakes, shivers, chills. The way withdrawal is always described in MTV’s *Behind the Music*. Guy Ritchie, Gary’s asshole cat, stopped coming in my room but occasionally perches in the doorway, glaring towards me with an expression that says, *all is not quite right with you*. Sometimes in the mornings when the sun gleams through the windows of my bedroom I catch my reflection in his serpent eyes and find the one looking back is not the Max I remember. My reflection used to have a chip on his shoulder but life in his eyes, there is no longer life in me. Just shriveled, shaking Max with an empty sliver where my soul once lived. Guy Ritchie keeps an eye on me but I don’t feel safe, in fact he seems to not want to protect me, but protect Gary and himself *from* me. And we used to be friends in a weird way.

Days fade into weeks and my back aches from the mattress curving it. My ribs are sore from disuse and my mouth feels dry and filled with a rancid smelling paste. *Is this depression?* I ponder. I’ve never been depressed, just bummed and blue, but not enough to stay in bed. Even if I’d wanted to, Amelia would always offer, “there’s thingggs to do, Max!”

Ain’t nothin’ to do now but try and skirt the thought of her off my mind. I got no reason to think about her, or the one girl I think I ever really loved, or Blue Haired Girl whose kind face makes me wonder if I really ever knew what love was, or the Lady in Red apparition who makes me question if that shit matters. The thought of Red sends a wave of nausea through my body, enough to sit up for the first time in ages to try and at least guide the incoming upchuck off the side of my bed and not directly over myself. I sit for a second, the wave passes and I look around

working the cricks out of my neck and register it's early evening, maybe just past 6:00? I wonder if Gary will be getting home soon and am answered when I hear my name through the door.

"Max?" Gary wavers through the wood, "Max you in there buddy?"

"Yuh..." I try to return but my throat is still locked with sleep. I give it a good clearing and continue, "Yeah, I'm here. What's up?"

"Hey..." He begins, opening the door cautiously, "how ya been?"

"Little under the weather, I suppose." I snifle, sending cool air up my scabbed nose.

"Yeah, I thought that. You seem... Rough."

As Gary steps into the room I see he's in his business professional, straight-from-work clothes. His hair has grown a little, beginning to 'fro a bit but not enough to take away from his straight laced appearance. When I met Gary he had dreads and they were bad ass. I remember when he cut them off. The last bit of artist he wore on him, left on the barbershop floor as he moved on to a steady job and away from his passions. I notice a box tucked in his Van Heusen suited arm.

"This was at the office for you, did you order something?"

"No. I don't think so."

Gary gets all of his deliveries to the office, there's a pretty big issue with package theft in our building. I don't think it's the neighbors, but more so Amazon Pirates who cop the deliveries and sell the goods on the street. It's not a bad hustle if you leave your conscience at the door.

Gary has one foot in my bedroom and the other tethered to the doorway by a slinking Guy Ritchie, purring and wrapping around Gary's Steve Madden.

"Well, here." Gary steps towards my bed sending Guy Ritchie into conniptions, yowling and crying at the doorway.

"Jesus, cat." Gary says. He sorta tosses the package at the foot of my bed and turns back towards the doorway, satisfying Guy.

"What the hell's gotten into you lately?" He says, scooping Guy into his arms, his little kitty head propped on his shoulder, shooting me daggers.

"Uh, thanks." I call out after him.

"Don't worry about it." He makes his little *I should know better* sigh before continuing, "I was gonna cook something up. Can I make you a plate?"

"Yeah, thanks. I'll be right out."

Gary shuts the door behind him, catching me in that almost-dusk dark. I look at the package at the foot of my bed before swinging my legs over the side. Just sitting on the edge of my mattress has my body feeling like I ran a marathon.

I pull the box onto my lap and start trying to get my fingernails under the tape. I give up and grab my apartment key from the pocket of my pants piled on the floor. There's no return address, just a little Fed-Ex label with my name and Gary's work address. I split it open and peer inside. Two long skinny tickets, perforated to be torn like the old school tickets in movies, not

like the printer paper, stubborn barcode you print now. They're for a venue I've never heard of: *Paradiso*. Below *Paradiso* is the name of the headliner.

My name.

"Maximus," I sort of chuckle. The name sounds stupid, like my parents thought I'd be a lot more than I turned out to be, but printed on a ticket? It looks epic.

There's something sliding around the box still, something heavy. I reach in and wrap my hand around cold, black metal -- rigid and ornate as a dragon's tail. Lifting it from the box I realize I have my hand on the hilt of a seven-inch dagger, beautifully intricate and obsidian black, giving way to a sliver blade -- jagged on one side, razor sharp on the other. Silver as Satan's tongue.

I stare at the dagger in my hand in disbelief, the way Arthur must've stared at the sword pulled clean from the stone. A tiny slip of paper in the box catches my eye. I reach in, gripping the dagger with all my might, as though it may jump from my hands and slit the nearest throat.

With the paper poised in front of me I dare myself to look away from the knife and read, in dainty cursive, the only explanation for my strange delivery.

A deal's a deal.

XII

Stop the senseless violence is adorned on the T-shirt of some yuppy girl walking down First Avenue near Fourth Street. She has fancy over the ear headphones and a big pair of sunglasses giving her the look of a movie star dodging paparazzi. The giant iced coffee, an ultra-light-almost-white brown, looks like it's freezing together inside the cup and to her pink mittened hand on this 20 degree day in the last week of November. She keeps her head down but peeks over her obnoxious sunglasses as we pass, a peek of interest in them as she notices the guitar strapped to my back, but complete disinterest glazing them as she registers the rest of me. When we lock eyes, milliseconds from passing in and out of each other's lives forever, she rolls hers and I'm reminded why I would probably hate anyone who wore pink mittens and drank iced coffee in the cold. I hope she hates me, too.

I'm headed to BUBS to promote my gig at *Paradiso* this coming weekend. I have a bunch of flyers I sharpied a graphic onto and begged Gary to Xerox at work. I have the twenty-five copies in my left pocket and the original in my right. I'm saving that one in case I see Blue Haired Girl again.

It's not quite 5:00pm when I make it to BUBS and no one is working the door yet so I just let myself down the stairs and into the empty venue, still littered with last night's litter. I see the Beatles Guy setting up his bar and make a hard right away from him and towards a grimy little hallway people often mistake as the way to the bathroom. Towards the end of the hallway is an old school office door with wood paneling and a frosted glass pane, the word OFFICE

stenciled on it. I see the blurry figure of someone moving inside so I give two soft knocks and turn the handle, letting the door open itself and peek my head through the crack.

A robust man in a half-unbuttoned dress shirt is leaning over a box of papers buried in the shag of a carpet that may predate the building it resides in.

“What, Jonah?” He barks into the box, not looking up.

“Uh, ‘Scuse me. Jonah sent me back here.” I say, stepping slightly more into the office.

The Robust Man erects and I’m able to get a better look at him. He isn’t much taller standing at attention than he was hunched over, his unbuttoned dress shirt is a creamy orange revealing a matt of chest hair resembling the shag of his carpet, a hint of gold gleams through the forest from a gold chain sticking to his Alfred Hitchcock style neck-chin. His face is red and sweaty and his dark hair looks either wet or greasy, the shine tells me greasy and the hairline, fighting it’s way back tells me he won’t need to grease it much longer. He sort of looks like a mobster cursed to transform into a bowling ball.

“Who the hell are you?” He asks, an unlit cigarette bouncing from his lip.

“I’m Max, I’m a regular here.”

“You ain’t allowed back here.” He says, walking towards his desk and closing the lid of an ornate silver box, “No one’s allowed back here.”

“Sorry, I just wanted to hang some flyers. Are you the owner?”

“Owner’s out of town, I do the bookings. What’s the flyer for?”

“My show this weekend. You guys are closed so it won’t fuck with your business to promote it.”

The Robust Man lights his cigarette.

“Respect the foresight, mosta these kids don’t think for shit.” He says pulling a long and slow drag, “Lemme see the flyer.”

I take the twenty-five out of my pocket and start to hand him the stack. Then think better of it and peel the first one off for him. He takes it in his greasy palm and scrutinizes it dangerously close to the amber of his smoke.

“You do this art?” He asks.

“Yeah.” I answer.

“It’s shit.” He says flatly. “Yeah, you can leave them with Jonah at the bar and he’ll hand ‘em out or whatever.”

He hands back the flier with a fresh crease where his thumb was.

“Thanks, Mr...”

“Carnevale.”

“Thanks, Mr. Carnevale.”

“Don’t call me that, everyone calls me Captain.”

“Oh, okay.”

“Wanna know why?”

“Sure.”

“I used to manage bookings for Max’s Kansas City. You know Max’s?”

I nod but it’s kind of a lie. Captain goes on.

“Met Andy Warhol there. He called me Captain. Sorta stuck. No one knew why but it made sense to him, but so did soup cans so who the hell knows.”

I shrug.

“Alright, get out.”

“Thanks, Captain.” I say, turning on my heel.

“Oh and kid, some free advice. Next poster, ditch the wacky art and focus on the venue and the time. That’s all anyone needs to see.”

“Got it.”

XIII

Late Wednesday night it dawns on me that I may need some songs for my gig in three days. The mysterious ticket (now on my nightstand) delivered with the strange knife (tucked under my mattress) seems to suggest I’m headlining and a quick Google shows Paradiso’s hosted some pretty legit bands. New York staples like Lottery Hack, Wanna Peg in Winnipeg, and The Defendendents have headlined. Some out of towners include the club on their tours, most lately some soft-boy Minesotsa trio called The Shackletons.

Anyway, I figure if anyone shows up they’ll want more than my handful of covers and the broken mess of notes I riff over and over. I have some original shit, but they’re not quite songs. Just bits and pieces of some hook or lead that probably won’t make the cut. I’ve only really finished one song, it was for a girl - the one girl I think I ever really loved. She asked me to write her a song so I sat down and did it one night. It wasn’t anything special, stupid syrupy sweet lyrics with easy rhymes. Three whole chords.

It sucked, but I sorta liked it. She did, too.

I don’t really like to play it anymore. Getting tired of playing something you wrote is common for a lot of musicians. Only thing is they usually have more than one song.

So sitting on my bed amidst the final ticks of Wednesday night I open a journal I’d borrowed from Gary with assumed permission, tear out some business notes scribbled on the first few pages, press play on Kurt Cobain’s *Montage of Heck: The Home Recordings* and attempt to be inspired.

“*S’like fucking rod, ya know?*” Kurt says into a cassette recorder somewhere in Aberdeen, Washington sometime in the 80’s. His voice sounds heavy and overlapping, not quite slurring but like the end of his words are holding hands with the beginning. He sounds fucked up. It seems a little early in his tragedy to be mixing up with Heroin, but who knows?

“Cooooooooool...” Kurt continues, his voice warbling sorta like the cassette ribbon whispering in the back. I love that sound, the idea of Kurt preserving his mumbling on the innards of a Maxell to play back later and pluck from the incoherent ramblings a *Something in the Way* or *Frances Farmer Will Have Her Revenge on Seattle*.

Then he starts yodeling. No joke, listen if you haven’t. A quick yodel makes way to an acoustic guitar twanging out Kurt’s *attitude over accuracy* playstyle – yet to be made famous by *Teen Spirit*.

With the little acoustic straining its neck under Kurt’s heavy strums it doesn’t sound like the sound of a generation or the pride of Seattle. It sounds like a guitar that can’t hold a tune and a kid who can’t really play it.

Sounds like fucking around, I jot down in Gary’s journal.

Can’t play that well either, I add after a moment.

I check the corner of my phone screen and see Wednesday has concluded and Thursday has arrived. Two days til my gig and I’m no closer to one completed song, much less a set. I sigh and look back to the page as *Yodel Song* cuts to *Been a Son - Early Demo*. I know the tracks have been digitally remastered, but I swear I can hear where the ribbon stopped. Every time a cassette plays its ribbon wears out a little, the sound distorts and the warble gets a little more noticeable. Now think; what’s the first thing someone does when they record something?

They rewind that shit and give it a listen. And they keep rewinding and playing it until they can close their eyes, hit play in their head and hear it clear as the first time they put it in their Walkman. So if you listen to a cassette, the quality improves a little with every song, and I swear I can hear it here in Kurt’s tape, that little snap in time and space where the cassette skips. I hear it, I feel it, and when I look back to the journal page I see it – a snap in time in space, a physical impression as the evidence of recorded musings.

Below my two measly sentences a new one has appeared in handwriting I don’t recognize.

Who cares?

I know I must have written it – why else would my hand be squeezing the pen so shakingly tight it imprints BIC into the side of my fingers?

I want to rationalize but at the rate strange shit has been happening lately it seems more reasonable to just lean into the insanity and hope for the best, so I write down a half-response to the question.

Not me.

A moment. I stare at the page as if the letters will lunge the second I turn.

The seconds slow as I try not to blink.

Nothing.

I let myself blink, bracing for impossibility as my eyes open, but when they do?

Nothing.

I glance at my phone, the artwork for *Montage of Heck* still seems demented but no more than usual. My eyes dart back to the page to find...

Nothing.

I breathe a sigh of relief and feel my muscles release, I drop the Bic onto the open notebook face and let out a little laugh at the conversation on the page, rationalization flooding my brain – *people get distracted and write things they don't remember. And if you're not looking while you write, ya your handwriting is gonna be different, dummy. I gotta get a grip.*

I glance at my right hand, red and throbbing from clutching the Bic pen so tight white bends have imprinted into the gray plastic as the word grip echoes in my head. Then my head goes blank as my left hands darts out, picks up the pen and begins scrawling beneath my response:

It's pretentious.

The handwriting is similar to *who cares* but remarkably improved and I'm beginning to accept someone is using me to pass notes.

I shift the Bic to my right hand and write down the obvious.

You took my hand.

I give the pen back to my left hand and look expectantly. It dislocates from my brain.

I'll give it back.

Right hand.

Who are you?

Left hand.

Nobody.

Right hand.

Is this like the others?

Left hand.

Maybe.

My left hand begins to hand the pen to my right, then thinks better of it and returns to the page, adding *it's something*.

The pen is offered to my right hand, but I don't take it. I'm not sure what to say.

My left hand waits a moment before flicking up then dropping limp in the wrist, hanging. To anyone else it probably looked like a politically incorrect wave or taking a muscle relaxor and slurring your sign language but I understood, my hand just fucking sighed at me.

Lefty retreats back to the page and without a moment's hesitation presses into the college ruled sheet:

You don't know what you've done

Our pretty songs will come

I once did the same

Can I show you my pain?

Lefty shoves the pen into my hand and gestures towards the page as I try to digest the words, I feel the impatience and fight the urge to slam the notebook shut and report a case of Bruce Campbell Hand to the CDC.

I bite down on my fear and write one word.

Later?

I hand the pen back to Lefty. It seems to stare at the page.

What? Lefty writes.

Can you show me your pain later? I write.

It's more yes or no... Lefty writes.

It's yes but yes for later, I write back.

That's not... Lefty starts before pausing. Then, *how much later?*

Idk, I write.

Lefty taps the pen on the page for a moment, deliberating.

What the fuck is... Lefty starts before scratching it out and writing, *nevermind* – dropping the pen. Then my left hand closes the journal and balls itself tightly into a fist, digging my fingernails into my palm. I guess I pissed it off.

I sigh, reopen the notebook with my right hand, fumble to the page I was on and study the conversation eating up the entirety of the page before I quietly write, slanted and crammed in the bottom corner of the page.

OK.

The Bic pen drops and my eyes shoot wide as a searing pain erupts in the ditch of my left arm and like wildfire spreads throughout the entirety of my left side, my hand contorting and twitching as the veins bulge and pulse through my skin. My brain is split but not down the middle – my brain is consumed by an alien presence who sends the neurons into suicidal spins, forcing themselves to self mutilate, but rather than completely possess the entirety of my brain, the Presence leaves me a small haven in the center where I am imprisoned and surrounded by the assault – able to watch and feel the mutilation in a burning paralysis.

The burning in my arm turns to inner scalding as small pools erupt in the skin where my veins protrude and begin to excrete a substance the same color and texture as chocolate syrup, but with the smell of rotting meat and a white-red residue trailing behind, the white-red of pus that seeps from a pimple popped and bleeding.

The funny thing is my mangled, regurgitating arm is a welcome distraction from my head, a pain disguised in a realm of thoughts more aggressive and lethal than any physical bodily horrors. It infects me with an unrecognizable want, a need. An all consuming obsession similar to a Cocaine craving, but rather than fight the urge to disappear with the baggie you harassed your friend to go halves with you on, you become a passenger to every urge inflicting your disease ridden self, a corpse fulfilling the wishes of an inner deity and a voyeur of your own actions. You can't fight it.

You pray the urges stay tame.
 You plead with the one behind your eyes to open them.
 You fool yourself into believing the prayers work.
 You feel your eyes opening but only see the dark that paints your eyelids.

The urges don't get tamer, your stomach gets stronger.
 And you keep trying to open your eyes, but they won't – so you start to pry your eyelids open with your fingertips only to realize they were open, they just rolled back when you died and the top of your skull is painted the same as your eyelids.

But you want to see the daylight again, you know you can't fight the urges but you know deep down the prayers aren't working and you've been rationalizing worse and worse things, if you want the urges to stop you have to give the festering obsession a way to escape.

So you open a window in your skull and let the sunlight in.

SLAM!

I slap the Bic pen down and am jarred back from wherever I was. The first glimpses of sunlight are peaking through my window as pigeons chirp on the fire escape outside and I breathe a wave of relief when I realize those hours in the night where yesterday became today are far away. I assess myself already straining to remember the details of my brush with a stranger's pain. I feel rationalization creep over me as I unconsciously begin to say, "what a strange dream" when I feel a cold metal spiral brush against the inside of my leg. In the center of my bed, between my legs and next to my dead phone lies the notebook I borrowed from Gary. I look at my nightstand beneath the Paradiso ticket which is beneath the Bic pen which is still beneath my flattened hand, the side of which is completely smudged and stained with black ink.

I grab the notebook and bring it to my eyes, straining to read in the low light with bleary eyes. I touch the pages and feel words practically carved into the paper. I look them over with unfamiliar eyes until I reach a passage towards the bottom of the page:

<i>OPEN A</i>	<i>SKULL</i>
<i>WINDOW</i>	<i>AND LET</i>
<i>IN</i>	<i>THE SUNLIGHT</i>
<i>YOUR</i>	<i>IN</i>

I'm stopped cold with realization. I'm holding lyrics, *my* lyrics doused with a stranger's pain.

I make out the song title at the top of the page:

LEFTY

I look to my right hand – cramping, sore and covered in ink and am filled with a pride and dread as I realize a terrible truth every musician who’s put pen to paper realizes:

Writing a good song is a pain.

Writing your pain is a good song.

XIV

I found good music pretty late in this dumb life. Until 2016 I just sorta listened to a nauseating mix of what was popular at school and a *Now That’s What I Call Music* CD that permanently lived in a Discman that’d been lent to a thirteen year old me on a family road trip I was never asked to return. I wasn’t even a fan of most of it, but I can hear the few songs I did enjoy just as clearly as I see the trees and mile markers that cut past me as I gazed out the backseat of a Rav 4 heading towards North Dakota, my uneasy excuse of a family muffled by the cheap plastic headphones conducting pop hits of 2011 from the knotted wire to the chewed and chipped plastic and finally through yellow foam pads meant to comfort and cushion the ears but didn’t really fuckin’ work. After countless plays on that road trip I still remember all the lyrics to Bruno Mars’ *Just the Way You Are*, The Ready Sets’ *Love Like Woe* and Eminem’s aggressively catchy (and just plain aggressive) *Love the Way You Lie* featuring Rihanna. Or is that Rihanna’s song featuring Eminem? Can’t really remember, it was already a few years old when it was new to me.

Anyways, my music taste was pretty atrocious but not necessarily my fault. I didn’t know there was good music out there yet! My convocation to the world of good music was a gift from my uncle on my mom’s side. My real mom, not Brandi. Mom’s brother Donny lived just past Ashley towards Rockport where their family was from way back in the day. Rockport doesn’t really exist as a town anymore and most Mom and Uncle Donny’s family passed away or moved to be with the families of those they married, but Uncle Donny pretty much stayed put in an old house off the interstate clinging to the landscape behind it. I have maybe one memory of the inside of Donny’s house but it’s too hazy to get into describing anyways, but that’s probably how the house and Donny wanted to be; a memory ripe in feeling but faded in detail.

The last time I saw Uncle Donny was when I was around nine or ten. Like all my memories in the pocket of childhood after mom/before Brandi, the memory is over exposed and slowed down, not like slo-mo slowed down, but more floaty-slow. Like a dream, or a flashback in a crime thriller when the protagonist remembers his dead wife.

Anyway, we were headed East out of Hazlehurst, probably on a trip to visit my dad’s parents, and we stopped at a pizza buffet in a strip mall off the highway and ate shitty pizza

while my dad and Uncle Donny talked about anything but what was on their mind. I complained there was no play place even though I was a little old to be playing in a plastic jungle gym. And then we walked to the parking lot, Donny hugged me and his belt buckle kind of pushed into my collarbone which hurt, but I didn't say anything. I knew enough to know when adults hug you so tight it hurts a little, they need it. Then he shook my dad's hand before standing outside the front of that shitty little pizza buffet, lighting a long all-white cigarette with the lighter leashed to his deep blue wranglers and smoking the whole thing staring at the ground, refusing to meet the gaze of nine or ten year old me peeking out the window of Dad's car as we drove away. I don't know what he was driving that day, but it may have been the 1976 Chevy Silverado I slipped into the bench seat of six or seven years later – the temporary license of a recently passed drivers test crisply folded in my pocket and an eagerness in my fingers as they wrapped around the steering wheel bleached and beat from 40 years of sun pounding through the windshield.

The truck was a gift from Uncle Donny who had passed away three months earlier in a hospital room about 2 hours from his Landscape Home and 40 minutes south of my high school. I didn't hear he'd died until about a month after he had, never even knew he was sick. I never asked or confirmed this suspicion, but I have a feeling he died alone. I feel guilty when I think about it, me passing time in the halls or the back of the gym while 40 minutes away my uncle died alone, neither of us knowing what became of the other. I wonder if he wondered.

The news traveled through the Facebook Grapevine until it hit my dad who agreed to meet some cousin-who-wasn't-really-a-cousin at Donny's house.

He didn't have much and what he did have wasn't much to anyone but him, so it only took an hour to fill one box with items of possible monetary value, another with items of possible sentimental value, and a trash bag with things the men figured they'd want someone to get rid of when they passed – the TV dinner boxes, ashtrays overflowing and porno magazines left in the open – the sort of things that make living people embarrassed. Everything else would be left for the state or the bank or whoever takes care of that stuff when no one else cares to.

As Dad and Donny's may-as-well-be-a-cousin slapped their hands above their knees and gave the tell-tale, *welp* of a day's work done, they decided to head out through the garage in hopes of passing by a secondary fridge parked in the shop, a staple in most American homes north of lower-middle-class. As they stepped into the garage and pawed in the dark for the large garage door opener, someone's hand happened upon it and sparked to life the machine on the ceiling, sending a long and blinding ray of light across the floor of the garage and steadily up, illuminating what must have been Uncle Donny's hideaway from the world, the garage clothed with art and posters advertising a litany of bands from the 70's to the mid-2000's, a heaping amount of motorcycle and Sturgis memorabilia, and many banged up movie posters that must have come second hand from a Blockbuster Video. Next to the men in the doorway was a steady workbench, metal and plastered in stickers and magnets, an old bar stool with a ripped red cushion half tucked beneath it and tools strewn about it. Hanging on the workbench was the only

piece of decor that wasn't an advertisement or biker mantra, a photo of Uncle Donny and a woman smiling wide on a sunny day somewhere.

In a garage of a million little artifacts stood a solid hunk of steel, a burnt orange 1976 Chevy Silverado pick up truck.

Lucky me, having just turned sixteen and lucky my ol' man that a perfect gift fell into his lap. The only unlucky one was Uncle Donny, I suppose. You couldn't start Betty-Shelly (a name for her I plucked from my great grandmother Betty and the ever lovely Shelly Duvall) without flooding the bitch. And even when she ran the radiator hose would blow on a whim sending coolant and steam bubbling out the hood. It liked to blow up just to remind you it was there, we had a lot in common that way.

It was on the second drive I found my real gift, hiding in the tape player that had been loosely bolted under the center console with rusty sheet metal begging to knick your shins as you drove. Curiosity got the better of me and I loosely reconnected the tape player to the frayed speaker wires and sent throughout the cab a mixtape of Donny's choosing, Sun Radio bumpers unceremoniously starting and ending the tracks. There on my bench seat in a 1976 Chevy Silverado I discovered The Toadies, Nirvana, Marcy Playground, Presidents of the United States of America, Clutch, Black Flag and all the rest, all the best.

I found the rest of myself tucked away in that cassette left by Donny. And I listened everyday in high school and got to know him and at the same time I got to know me.

And the day that engine caught on fire, totaling my beautiful Betty-Shelly, I busted open that tape player, slipped the tape in my pocket and watched Betty-Shelly burn against the landscape of Mississippi.

Love that tape like I love the Patti Smith record and my parents wedding album and my first broken high-e string.

They're all somewhere in my room.