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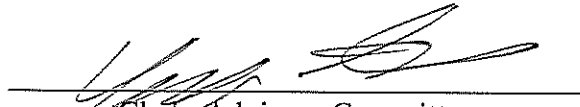
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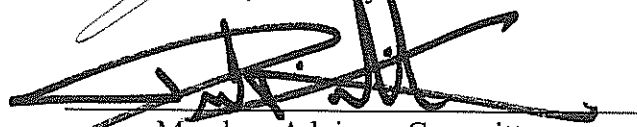
By

Ryan M. Rodgers

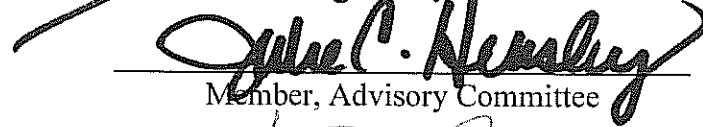
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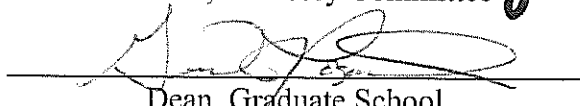
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WE MAY OR MAY NOT ROCK YOU

By

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Bachelor of Arts
University of Kentucky
Lexington, Kentucky
2004

Submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of
Eastern Kentucky University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of
MASTER OF ARTS
December, 2011

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my wife,
Candice Rodgers,
for her unwavering support,
and my band: Fifth on the Floor,
for inspiring me to create stories
out of living life as a musician.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank the head of my committee, Professor Derek Nikitas, for opening me up to several writing techniques and staying on top of helping me persevere to get my degree. I would also like to thank my other committee members, Dr. Young Smith and Professor Julie Hensley, for various help including, work shopping, helping with query letters, and giving much needed words of encouragement. I would like to thank my wife, Candice, for being patient with me while I suffered various mental breakdowns throughout the program. I would also like to thank my folks, Dave and Debbie, my grandparents, Orville, Caroline, Rosalie, Butch and Jack, my brothers, Kevin and Greg, my in-laws, Ron, Brenda, Jeremy and Sara, and any other family members for having unwavering faith in me and supporting me with whatever work or school I choose to pursue. Finally I'd like to thank my band, Fifth on the Floor: Justin, Aaron and Parsons, as well as past members, Ashley, Robin, Chris, and Puddin' for having patience as I finished the program, while taking away working weekends, and for giving me the inspiration to write a fictitious piece of literature based on people who only have one thing in common: music.

ABSTRACT

This project is a series of reality-based fictitious short stories about a group of rowdy musicians. Many of the characters and events are based on real people and occurrences intermingled with fiction to create a fast paced work focusing on dialogue and action while avoiding excessive exposition. I do this by using multi-purpose dialogue that includes elements necessary to further plot, create conflict, develop character, and to keep the action moving. Since the work is a series of short stories I concentrate on being sure that the stories have either a strong point or a change in the characters in order to prevent the stories from becoming anecdotal. I also pay attention to the use of theme to strengthen the fictitious aspects of the project.

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CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

I turned my head and walked towards the dumpster, “I have a buddy in the pen for arson. Here’s how he did it.” Approaching the pile of trash I picked up the phone book. “Yah,” I tossed the phone book through the window, as it went through the air I said, “fuck them...” as I watched it land onto the fire sock.

It caught. I looked to them and, flexing my fist and arm muscles trying not to explode, calmly said through tense lips, “Let’s split!” (Rodgers 88)

Mark Twain is quoted as saying “It’s no wonder that truth is stranger than fiction. Fiction has to make sense.” The work I created is based on truth; the truth I’ve seen and experienced that doesn’t always align with sense. Writing is a creative outlet that allows me to reflect on my own reality and invite the reader into my world to experience situations that are real, and some that are created to structure the theme, and decide if he would have made the same decisions my characters have made. We pass judgment of what is morally and ethically “correct” in reference to our own experiences. The task of a good story is to put the reader in a situation in which he is unfamiliar and test those moral and ethical convictions. I hold to the belief that we all make the best decisions we can based on the information and resources we’re given. The introductory passage comes from “Before the Van,” a story that exemplifies a man doing just that. As a writer, I challenge the paradigm of black and white, good and evil, right and wrong, by immersing the writer into the scene. My thesis delves into the life of a touring musician, a path few have walked. The stories are flashes of real events intertwined with fiction that expounds the truths I’ve found in the subculture of the Outlaw Country music genre and have

applied to the ins and outs of daily living. By focusing on dialogue and action to develop the story and characters rather than a descriptive exposition that allows digestion time, the reader is forced to think on his feet and make quick judgment calls with the characters in hopes of expanding and better understanding his knowledge of the world around him.

In *Poetics*, Aristotle writes that “the reason why men enjoy seeing a likeness is, that in contemplating it they find themselves learning or inferring, and saying perhaps, ‘Ah, that is he’” (IV). This concept is the foundation of my writing. I chose to create relatable characters in situations that the reader may not be able to relate to, so that he can take away something more than an entertaining story from my work. I want the reader to learn something about himself by connecting to my characters. While a reader may not have experienced a bar fight as in “CD Release Party” or buying crack from a drug dealer as in “Before the Van,” the intense action ideally makes him feel as if he is the protagonist, thus understanding why the decisions were made. Laying out a scene through exposition is an easy way out for a writer, but can bore a reader. It is more interesting and involving to lay out a scene through dialogue and action. The message is the same, yet the reader remains engaged. The joy of reading fiction comes from being able to imagine oneself in a situation and be engulfed in a fantasy. A writer must be able to create a believable scene, but insulate it with enough fiction to guide and encourage thought exploration and inquisitiveness. This can be achieved through action. When writers rely on exposition to tell a story, the reader can experience disconnect from the action. He is no longer in the moment, but rather an outsider looking at the scene. As Robert McKee says in *Story* “If you can thoroughly dramatize exposition and make it

invisible, if you can control its disclosure, parsing it out only when and if the audience needs and wants to know it . . . you're learning your craft" (340).

Hunter s. Thompson has been hugely influential in my writing style. His Gonzo style approach to writing clearly puts the reader in the scene. In *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* Thompson creates vivid images of character and motive through dialogue:

"Never mind," I said. "Just picture yourself telling a jury that you tried to help this poor girl by giving her LSD and then taking her out to Vegas for one of your special stark-naked back rubs."

He shook his head sadly. "You're right. They'd probably burn me at the goddamn stake . . . set me on fire right there in the dock. Shit, it doesn't pay to try and help somebody these days . . ." (117)

In the course of five sentences the reader learns that the characters are well versed in illicit drugs, sex and their repercussions, but yet justify their actions as good deeds.

Similarly in "Practice #1" Sol uses dialogue as exposition when he has to justify himself to Chuck:

Chuck chimed in, "Ah, no, you a big 'ole hippy Sol?"

"Well, I enjoy music festivals, good weed and good beer. I also enjoy rock and roll..." I pointed to my Miller Light, "...crappy beer, dirt bikes and shootin' guns. So, I don't know what that makes me." As soon as I said that I realized how true it was. I came from the country a lot more than I realized. (34-35)

Through this defense the reader learns that Sol does not fit into a certain clique and can infer that he is uncomfortable without having a specific group that defines him. The

reader is able to empathetically connect to Sol and relate to the feeling of “not fitting in” even if he has never shared Sol’s experiences. The bit of exposition at the end is seamless making it invisible. The reader finds himself defending Sol, regardless of common experience. In Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, we are so encapsulated by the action and dialogue that we connect with a monster. We understand how it feels to be alone. We understand how it feels to be rejected. We understand remorse. Therefore, we can understand the actions that are created by those feelings.

“But it was not so; thou didst seek my extinction, that I might not cause greater wretchedness; and if yet, in some mode unknown to me, thou hadst not ceased to think and feel, thou wouldst not desire against me a vengeance than that which I feel. Blasted as thou wert, my agony was still superior to thine; for the bitter sting of remorse will not cease to rankle in my wounds until death shall close them forever.” (189)

The monster’s dialogue allowed the reader to feel what it is like to be a monster; that killing everybody Victor loved, is because of this internal anguish. That gives the reader a sympathy that questions what their behavior may be if in the same situation.

This affect is also possible through action. I employ action to keep the reader engaged in a fast pace so he may wonder if he would make the same kinds of split-second decisions. In “CD Release Party” Sol must make quick decisions when his buddies get into a bar fight:

Guitar L. gets a look of fury over his face, and lightly pushes Chuck back. My adrenaline shoots through my body making it seem as if when Chuck grabs Guitar L. by the hair and repeatedly begins pounding his face with his fist, it is all happening in slow motion. The two float towards the ground as Guitar L. swings for a Hail Mary Haymaker, and clocks the shit out of Chuck on his forehead right above his left eye. I wonder if I'm the only one in slow motion, because this happens so fast that I barely have time to jump up before Guitar L. hits the ground. . . .

I dart to Jon, but before I even make my way to him, someone grabs me from behind in a sleeper hold, and takes me to the ground. (49, 50)

Forster writes about the writer of character action as, “show[ing] the subconscious short-circuiting straight into action” (84). This happens to Sol when the fight begins and brings the reader in to do the same. The reader sees in my work what Forster refers to as the “cause” because all action is cause and effect and when the reader sees the cause of Sol getting in the fight it opens up the opportunity for the reader to decide for themselves if, given the same circumstance, would they have done the same.

Action develops character by causing a change in the character. In my first short story “Barflies” Sol meets a person who has influence on the music market in his town. His agenda is to befriend this abrasive character in order to gain an avenue for him to be seen playing in public as a musician. In order to impress this character Sol does something outside of his realm of morality in order to achieve his desire to have this character as an ally.

He reached in his pocket, flipped his knife, and stabbed the tire of a blue Ford truck. My immediate reaction was to run before the cops came or we got our asses kicked. What an asshole thing to do. Then I remembered, I had said something about slashing Domino's customer's tires when they didn't tip. I was really only bullshitting about that. My next thought was that he was calling me out. He looked at me with a fronting kind of look. Normally I would have called him an asshole. But I needed my chance to play music. I smirked, pulled out my knife and slashed the tire of a yellow hummer. (10-11)

In my work I have a proclivity towards Aristotle when he writes about character action needing "peripeteia," or a reversal of the protagonist's fortunes and that a character needs to be changed or moved by the action. (Burroway 271). Forster writes that "In the drama all human happiness and misery does and must take the form of action" (84). He then goes on to write about how the novel has the ability to leave that format and delve into narration and into characters' heads. In order to have a more interesting novel, or in my case a series of short stories, the story taking the form of action should remain a primary focus. Joyce Carol Oates writes a powerful action based exposition in *Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?* when she writes, "She watched herself push the door slowly open as if she were safe back somewhere in the other doorway, watching his body and this head of long hair moving out into the sunlight where Arnold Friend waited" (qtd. in Burroway 77). Connie spends the entire short story trying to get out of leaving with this threatening stranger. Oates uses action as Connie makes the decision to go with an evil man with intentions of doing terrible things to her.

When I read a book for pleasure I agree with Forster “in that we want to know what happens next. That is universal and that is why the backbone of the novel has to be a story” (27). I am strictly interested in what happens next. Therefore, I skip over the long descriptive exposition and only focus on the details intertwined in the dialogue and action that are necessary for me to understand the plot and story. While I understand using explanatory exposition to give the reader details he would not otherwise be privy too, I don’t want to lose the reader so I offer those details in action and dialogue. In “Open Mic Competition” I write, “Realizing my breaks weren’t enough to stop in time I jammed the stick shift into first gear revving my engine into the red, my instruments behind me hopped off the bench seat slamming into the back of the driver’s seat, the latch of the mandolin case cut me behind my right ear” (13). The plot is moved by the action in the exposition and still gives sensory details and the reader happily turns to the next page with an adrenaline rush. Burroway references Thomas Mann’s *Confessions of Felix Krull*, *Confidence Man* as an example of how to use exposition appropriately.

It was a narrow room, with a rather high ceiling, and crowded from floor to ceiling with goodies. There were rows and rows of hams and sausages of all shapes and colors—white, yellow, red and black; fat and lean and round and long—rows of canned preserves, cocoa and tea, bright translucent glass bottles of honey, marmalade and jam. (qtd. in Burroway 26)

Burroway appreciates that Mann goes through all of the senses that it allows the reader to feel like he is in the room. However, this type of exposition bores me. I immediately skipped to the end of the passage to read a much better use of exposition:

I made one rapturous grab into the nearest glass urn, filled as it chanced with chocolate crèmes, slipped a fistful into my pocket, then reached the door, and in the next second was safely round the corner. (qtd. in Burroway 26)

The latter says nearly as much as the first but, using it to pepper the action makes it far more entertaining. The key, as McKee writes, is to dramatize exposition.

Through the process of writing this critical introduction I have had the opportunity to critically analyze my work, study author's work that I admire and refresh my understanding of the craft. It's made me adamant that telling a good story that holds the readers' interests must be focused on dialogue and action to develop the story and characters in order to truly bring a reader into the story. I'm hoping for my readers to be able to relate to these stories and enjoy the action that comes from the characters without ever losing credibility with the audience as to why a character would participate in a behavior or an action because the reader understands what has moved the character to engage in those actions. I now submit a window into the lives of a culture of people who must work together while having only one thing in common: music.

Barflies

Being punched in the face doesn't always really hurt; even if you're being punched pretty hard. Your adrenaline is up a little bit. Unless it's your first time, then it's probably uncharted. But what is really going through your head when things like this happen? You're not really thinking: duck, block, punch, try not to cry. You're usually thinking more like: What the hell did I have for lunch? I should call that girl. I don't know. She did have that big mole on her face. But she was so damn funny; if halitosis is funny; and it is. Ouch! Maybe I should be paying more attention to what I'm doing. Where are the bouncers? They must be on break. I hope nobody spills my drink, etc.

I was blessed with a smart mouth.

I was cursed with a smart mouth. I was also blessed with a propensity for drinking. My buddy Kyle however, was blessed with a really smart mouth. Somewhere between having a bottle broken over my head, and getting a little bit older I learned what some would call: discretion. Not much mind you. I'm certainly no master. But enough to keep the four guys we were hustling in pool from stomping my head in. I needed to have a talk with Kyle about discretion.

I crashed to the ground.

As I looked up from all fours you would think that I would be excited to see whom I thought to be the Incredible Hulk coming towards me, being that I grew up as a comic book nerd. However, my initial reaction was fear. I knew that this might lead to

pain. That is until I felt hands being peeled off me and saw three monsters throwing the other four guys out the back.

I was greatly relieved that the fracas was over and hoping to avoid any other. I always hated fighting; somebody always got hurt. Despite my smarmy mouth I had never really intended to do anybody wrong, or any harm to anybody. I could proudly say that I had never started a fight.

One of the monsters advanced on me and Kyle. I thought we were in for it. Bouncers tend to get-off on inflicting pain. That's why they are bouncers; it's in the job description. But as he approached, Kyle walked to him and tilted his head looking up to his face from his breast line and said, "Hey buddy, how you doing?"

The bouncer spoke with a grizzled voice, "Looks like a lot better than you."

They seemed to be acquaintances.

Kyle turned to me and introduced me to the titan that had just intervened.

"Sol, this is Jon."

"Hey, nice to meet you Jon," I said as I stood up and dusted myself off, inspecting myself for injuries. "Thanks for pulling those guys off our asses."

"It's my job." He said looking down to me. If I couldn't see his feet I would think he was standing on a stool. After a brief moment I recognized him. He played solo acoustic at Kitty's. He had recently been hosting an open mic competition that had become very popular. It seemed as if the guys who participated wound up with gigs all

over town. It struck me as a great resume padder for somebody looking to have success in town i.e. myself. I tried to suppress my excitement.

Kyle kind of chuckled, half nervous from adrenaline and half because he thought it was funny and said, “Yah, those guys have had it out for me for a while. This isn’t the first time I’ve taken their money.”

I interjected “We have a good system. See, I legitimately suck at pool. So Kyle puts me on his team, and mops the floor with whoever wants to play.”

Jon put his fingers into the side of his Abraham Lincoln beard to scratch his face, eyeing the two of us and said, “Well, those punk, frat-boys come in here and have a few drinks, then, since there is ten of them, in a group they suddenly get tough. Like they just realized their nuts dropped. You don’t think your nuts just dropped do you?”

I did well at keeping my voice from shaking as I stood before the giant, “Uh, no.”

“You were just throwing down, weren’t you?” said Jon.

“My balls sunk a long time ago. Man, I was just trying to defend myself.”

Jon nonchalantly turned from me to Kyle, “I saw those guys break for you and thought ‘that’s my cue.’ I knew it was happening when that guy threw down his mug.”

Kyle said, “I saw that guy take a shot at you Jon, did he stick you?”

“He might have nicked me. Didn’t hurt.”

“Well, you may have saved me from another hospital trip.” said Kyle.

There was a brief pause until Kyle cocked his head thinking to himself and said, “Sol, have you met Jon before?”

“I don’t think so. Are you the guy who does the open mic?” I said extending my hand. I considered that if I could make myself familiar to Jon that I might make it on the bill for the competition.

“I started the open mic,” Jon spoke curtly. He had a firm handshake.

“Kyle’s mentioned you before. Surprised we’ve never met, same circles and all,” I said.

“Sol, is an amazing guitar player. You should have him up for your open mic sometime” said Kyle.

“Oh yah. There’s a lot of guitar players out there,” said Jon.

“Well, I play a lot of things,” I said, while reaching for my beer, trying to sound confident without coming off as pretentious.

“What else you play?”

I spoke lackadaisically, “Ah, you know, banjo, mandolin, sax, piano, harmonica etc. etc.” If I could just get my foot in the door for the competition I knew that I could become a regular, whether I won or not. I just needed a little recognition and I knew it would lead to my success in town.

“Really,” Jon said then snorted out of his nose in apathy. “I hear you ain’t coming on Wednesday Kyle, what’s that about?”

Kyle's face was flush from his poking ears to the tip of his giant nose, "Well man, Comedy Off Broadway offered me an opening spot for an act coming through."

"Is that all night?"

"No, it's only ten minutes, but it's exposure that I can't miss."

"Well come out to the open mic after you're done. We need you."

"Well, I get in free for the act and I was going to watch it."

"I have to manage that night, so I can't direct much of my attention to the competition."

"That sucks man."

"I'm just saying, I have a full bill and I could really use your help."

"I hate to let you down buddy, but I think this is an opportunity I can't pass up."

"Watching the other guy perform?"

"No," Kyle said defensively, "I might get to meet him."

"You going to suck him off," Jon said in an irritated manner.

Kyle looked away to the ground. Kyle had been excited all week about his gig at Comedy Off Broadway. I figured he may have been harboring dreams of having some on-tour comedian picking him up as an opening act. "Man, seriously, the entertainment business is all networking."

I interjected, “Man, I know you have a full bill but maybe I could play a little in between sets, ya know, while the other acts set up their gear and when they’re ready introduce them” I said despite my lack of confidence in a solo gig. I didn’t consider myself to be the strongest lead singer, but I was hoping that I could construct something so that my lead playing strength would pull me through it all.

“Well, Sol, I’m looking for more of an MC type. Can you be an MC?”

“I can do that, if I can pick a little bit in between.”

“Well, I already got somebody else in mind; I just don’t like the son of a bitch and would rather have Kyle do it.” Jon looked to Kyle, “Who is this guy that you’re supposed to meet anyways?”

Kyle said, “Well, it’s not Mitch Hedburg or anything. His name is Guy Brooksbanks. He’s had some bit parts in a few sitcoms.”

“Is he funny?”

“Jeez man,” I said.

“What?” said Jon.

“Get off him a little bit. He wants to meet the guy he’s opening for.”

“Oh, I’m just picking at you Kyle” said Jon. “I guess that guy could do something for you. A steady gig at Kitty’s ain’t no big deal.”

Things got quiet for a second. Behind me the clack of another pool game made my ears perk. I hate uncomfortable silence. Kyle's fidgety demeanor further prompted me to try and move past the awkwardness.

"Shots," I said.

"Only if it's bourbon whiskey," said Jon.

"I don't know," I said. "Will it make my balls drop?"

Jon cracked half a smile.

"Bourbon," said Kyle, "is there any other shot?"

"Jaeger," said Jon.

Jon laughed as he saw our faces cringe.

Kyle looked at Jon with a sideways glance, "I gave up Jaeger for lent."

"I gave up dryer sheets for lint!" I quickly responded, hoping to come off as witty.

Jon ignored me and went to the bartender, "Four Jaegers."

My stomach gurgled at the thought. The only time that I ever actually got sick from drinking was from Jaeger. Just the smell makes me dry heave.

The bartender poured four shots of Jaeger, Jon passed one of the shots back to the bartender's huge, black hand. We gave a cheers and knocked it back. I felt my eyes start to water, and my stomach spasm. Two thoughts: do not throw up; do not let Jon see that you're having a hard time keeping it down.

Before the bartender could turn around I stopped him and said, “Hey, put those on me.”

Jon looked at me and said, “Thanks big guy. I gave up moderation for lent” he smiled and as he lifted up the pitcher of beer he was using as an oversized stein to his mouth. The beer trickled down from the corners of his mouth into his beard.

“Well, I gave up God for lent years ago.”

Jon puckered his mouth in the shape of the word *ooh* and cringed a little as if he shouldn't be standing so close when the lightning strikes. I guess everyone can't be an atheist. Fortunately everyone can be a drinker—except Baptists, and who wants to drink with them. Thank god most people can have this commonality. If I weren't a functional alcoholic I wouldn't function at all.

We all chatted for a while and progressively got drunker and louder. I noticed that Jon had no problem saying loud, borderline racist things to the bartender. It made me uncomfortable. I tend to redirect things that make me uncomfortable.

“I'm Irish, I always said that if I got pulled over while drinking I'd sue for racism.”

“You don't sound Irish,” said Jon.

“Well, I'm not right off the boat or anything. The family has been here for a few hundred years.”

“So, Sol what do you do besides play music?” asked Jon. He acknowledged me.

“Well I have an English degree from the University of Kentucky, so I deliver pizzas for Domino’s. And me speak good!”

“Ha, Man that sucks. I never finished my degree. But I always wanted to,” said Jon.

“Yah, it does suck. Pretty soon Kyle will be joining me with his Theater degree. There ain’t a lot of tippers in my neck of the woods, so get used to slashing the occasional tire....” I put my hand to my forehead and shook my head left to right, “Seven years of undergrad, down the drain. I like to tell people I have a doctorate in Rock and Roll!” I said making devil horns with my hands. Kyle grabbed a pool stick swinging it around like a guitar, trilling his tongue like some kind of metal guitar solo. I joined suit. Jon joined suit.

A feeling of success came over me as Jon jumped in on our stupid, little guitar joke.

Kyle went back to the conversation, “And anyways, speak for yourself slacker. I’m in and out in five years,” said Kyle.

“I can get you a job hosting an open mic competition every week,” Jon began to insist again.

“Man, I just can’t miss this opportunity.”

“Fifty bucks a week for a few hours of work, if you want to call it that.”

I could tell that Kyle didn’t like being pressed on this.

“Man, that guy ain’t no big deal and I need ya buddy,” said Jon.

My attention was drawn from Kyle’s silence to some pretty, little sorority girl walking by with the word “hot” written on the back of her tight, pink sweatpants.

“Alright, man, I’ll do it,” said Kyle. My head snapped back. Kyle had been going on and on about networking with this comedian.

“Oh, thanks Kyle, I really need ya. Let me get you a pitcher.”

I flagged down the bartender. “Let me get these guys a couple more shots,” I said. “It’s a shame that you don’t have room for a few acoustic songs on your bill.”

“Yah, I reckon it is,” said Jon.

The night wore on for another 45 minutes or so and I was getting tired. I was ready to leave.

“Well guys, my old lady’s going to wonder where I am. It’s about time for me to split.”

“You ain’t driving are ya?” asked Kyle.

For once I had actually intended on walking. It was only a mile, and I was starting to see double.

“I’ll give you a ride” said Jon.

“Sold!”

I told Kyle I'd catch him later. He had his own means home and he felt like another game of pool.

We walked to the parking lot. Jon was stumbling drunk. He reached in his pocket, flipped his knife, and stabbed the tire of a blue Ford truck. My immediate reaction was to run before the cops came or we get our asses kicked. What an asshole thing to do. Then I remembered, I had said something about slashing Domino's customer's tires when they didn't tip. I was really only bullshitting about that. My next thought was that he was calling me out. He looked at me with a fronting kind of look. Normally I would have called him an asshole. But I needed my chance to play music. I smirked, pulled out my knife and slashed the tire of a yellow hummer. It was the largest tire I saw in my nearest vicinity and I figured they could afford it.

Jon jumped and shouted, "What are you doing, man? My hummer."

I felt my belly button sink to my feet. But then I looked at his face and realized he was funning with me.

He laughed and said, "Come on, let's get."

He ran and jumped in a red Jeep and I followed, hoping that his next move wasn't hotwiring the thing. He pulled out his keys, started the jeep and drove over the concrete parking mass at the end of his parking spot, peeling out into the street.

Jon's jeep had no doors, and it was well into autumn. It would have been a cold ride, if we didn't drink so much Jaeger and bourbon. As he started the car I could faintly hear Led Zeppelin on the radio.

“Ah hell no, crank it up dude!” I reached over and spun the knob.

Hanging out both sides of the jeep, scraping our feet on the ground, speeding, screaming and singing we blasted Zep all the way to the house.

Jon shouted over the music and the wind “You know Sol, there is this one act that I really don’t like. A bunch of pricks. If you think you can do about six songs I’ll cancel ‘em, I’ll tell ‘em I accidently double booked or some shit like that.”

“Hell yes, I’m there.”

“Alright then, it’s done.”

Kyle was right: the entertainment industry really is all about networking.

Open Mic Competition

Kyle called me about Jon's open mic competition. Jon cancelled one of the bands and there was an open slot. My chance had come.

I crammed several of my instruments into my two-door red Saturn and began driving to the bar. This was my chance. Despite that fact, I dreaded this competition. My steering wheel shook as I drove. Or did it? I wondered if I had a loose belt.

Although the competition was an untapped market for the unemployed musicians it generally catered to lead singers. I was not a lead singer. My backup vocals were fine but my lead singing was like a fourth grade autistic kid who loved Rush. I was a lead guitar player. My stomach turned at the thought of this opportunity. I'd had no luck making it on the bill until this show and if I didn't go over with the crowd it could be my last time playing. I didn't really have anybody on the inside. I barely knew Jon, and Kyle was just a hire-on to distract everybody while the other acts set up. Distracted by my thoughts I nearly ran a red light. I slammed on my breaks as the car slid towards the passenger door of a big, green 1970's Dodge truck. Realizing my breaks weren't enough to stop in time I jammed the stick shift into first gear revving my engine into the red, my instruments behind me hopped off the bench seat slamming into the back of the driver's seat, the latch of the mandolin case cut me behind my right ear. The shaggy, greasy driver of the Dodge truck honked its horn and raised his hand as if to say, "Watch out asshole!" My heart pounded. Beer eased my nerves, but not when I've been drinking and I'm acting a fool in public. I spun my head around in each direction looking for cops.

I pulled into the parking lot and wiped sweat from my brow. I swiped a brown lock of hair from out of my face to behind my ear. Sweat stung as it went into my fresh wound. I winced and looked at the dirty sweat and blood on my hand to see how much I was bleeding. My wound was secondary to my thoughts racing about this competition. I was miserable as a musician who didn't get to play music simply because I wasn't a solo act. It'd caused me a lot of angst knowing that I'd spent my life trying to become this lead player out of the love of playing lead, but to also know that being a lead player was only important to this community if you were in a band. I was not. Since this was the untapped market of unemployed musicians my intentions were to remedy that.

I stepped out of my car and looked to the back door entrance of the bar. There sat the bane of my existence; at least one of them. I've never really been one for arch-nemeses, but Mud would be a great candidate for the position. I shook my head and said under my breath, "God dammit!" Looking back up I saw that Mud was glaring right at me and most likely noticed my expletive.

I had often wondered if it was Mud who had kept me from making it on the bill for the competition. I knew that Kyle had put a word in for me more than once. I wasn't sure why Mud didn't like me. I knew that women talked to me more than him. But that seems hardly a reason to be a dick. Maybe I got drunk and smashed something around him, I don't know.

I approached the back patio entrance with my banjo and my acoustic guitar in my hands. Mud wore a black shirt too tight for his physic. His head was shaved in a Mohawk. I wondered if he worked out so much that he masturbated to himself in the

mirror, probably crying because he realized that it's a little gay, and he was too tough to be gay.

“I.D.”

Kitty O'Shea's had a reputation for being a college kid bar. This meant that a lot of kids tried to sneak by or present fake I.D.'s. I was guilty of it when I was underage. I was good at too. It also meant that rowdy 19 year olds who can't hold their liquor would come in and start fights; sometimes with bouncers.

I sat down my instruments unfolded my wallet and showed it to him. He looked through the plastic and said, “Take it out.” Mud had to know that I was in my mid-twenties, I knew for a fact that he had often seen me on the scene.

I sighed and reached behind my busted credit card holder to pull it out. He took it from my hand and looked at it for a while.

“Do you have any other form of I.D.?”

I puffed out a single sigh-laugh and said, “Yah. I have a credit card.” This was sort of a lie, I had cancelled my bank account because I kept getting hit by the overdraft fees. “Man, I'm 27 years old.”

He perked up, opened his eyes wide, tightened his mouth and said, “Then you won't mind showing me a credit card will you?” I began to fear that he was trying to keep my out on purpose.

I had a Musician's Friend credit card. He looked at it and huffed a little laugh.

"Is that all you got?"

"For the time being, yah," I said. Was this his excuse for stopping me from being in the spotlight?

After a pause Mud said, "I guess that works." He tossed back my I.D. and card and said, "Three bucks."

I kind of laughed, cocked my head and said back, "Man, I'm playing."

"What's your name?"

I was a little offended by this question. I had just run into him the other day and had been reintroduced to him several times, furthermore, wasn't he just looking at my I.D.? I know he knew my name.

"Sol Keenan"

"You're not on the list. Three bucks."

"Listen man, a couple of people cancelled and my buddies Kyle and Jon asked me to be here to fill in for them. Why do you think I have instruments? I know you know Kyle and Jon."

"I know a lot of people, if you're not on the list then I assume you're a roadie."

"Really man, are you really going to make me call Kyle and come to the back while I stand here with two instruments blocking the way of this line of people."

Mud raised his voice and spoke an inch away from my face, “You’re right. If you’re making a phone call, step away from the line.” I wondered if he was looking to hurt me so I couldn’t come in to play. I started to move so that I could call Kyle, but then I saw him from across the patio and yelled his name.

Kyle spun around and looked glad to see me.

I said, “See,” and pointed to him with my banjo case.

The bouncer looked off in Kyle’s direction and made a hybrid smirk-grimace as Kyle shook his head yes and waved his two fingers in a small circle out from his body, beckoning.

The bouncer moved, looked at me with his grimace and huffed out, “Go on then.”

I walked across the patio to the little makeshift stage. I dreaded the fact that I would need to make two or more trips to the car, but Kyle offered to help me carry my stuff. Out of courtesy I gave him all of the smaller stuff. Kyle commented on my quantity of instruments, “Jesus Sol, when does Sgt. Pepper get here?”

“Hey, that bouncer’s an asshole. What’s his deal?”

“Ah, Mud. He’s alright when you know him. He just gets a kick out of being a prick to people.”

“Yah, that’s what I said, he’s an asshole.”

“Well, that may be true, but there have been times when there were some guys giving me shit, and he came over and stuck up for me.”

“That’s his job. That prick probably just wanted to be in a fight.”

Kyle responded with a curt, “Maybe” implying that he was done with the conversation. I ceased with the conversation realizing that Kyle was my only inside-man to the competition. We sat down the instruments and I hit the bar for a drink.

The music started shortly after I’d finished my first beer. A few acts went by. I had a few friends show up for support. I chatted with them as I waited my turn. They helped ease my tension some. But honestly, I was concentrating so hard on what I would be playing that I barely even heard the acts before me. In fact, I noticed that my friends would have to tell me something two or three times before I really heard what they were saying. I have a hard enough time paying attention to anything as it is, this tends to irritate people. At first I blamed the music being loud, but really I was just out of mind. So, eventually I just start agreeing to whatever they were saying. A few times I noticed them look at me weird. For instance, Kyle overheard one of my conversations and said that it went like this:

“Hey man, what happened to your ear?”

“Uh, huh, oh, yah, yah!”

“What? No, your ear, what happened to your ear?”

“Oh yah, I cut it.”

“Well, no shit you cut it. How?”

“Uh, there was this thing that cut me.”

This particular friend cocked his head and turned around to talk to somebody else.

Strangely enough, some of my crowd left before I even got started.

Kyle mostly just introduced who was playing until we were about halfway through the bulk of the acts. During the halfway point Kyle would do his standup bit. He placed my act right after he did his bit. Maybe he felt like everybody having a laugh before my act would score me some extra points.

He approached the mic and began his bit, “As you probably gathered, it’s halftime here at the open mic competition. That means you get to listen to me bullshit for a few minutes.”

The crowd had seen Kyle before and they loved his standup bit. They got quieter for him than they did for the musicians. I guess that makes sense since you can passively listen to music, but you can’t really do that with a standup bit. Kyle continued, “Alrighty ladies and gentlemen, obligatory greeting, pretending to give a shit if you’re having fun or not. And let’s give it up for that city that you’re from.

So I think it goes without saying that I was born with a severe case of SIDS...” there were ‘oohs’ from the crowd as he reached for his beer and took a sip, “You’ll have to excuse me, I’ve been retoxing. I can’t lie, I have a soft spot in my heart for alcoholism.”

He went on in this fashion for a while. He would say something incredibly offensive and sometimes even racist, and then follow it up with something relatively

clean. He continuously received simultaneous mixed crowd reaction: from disgusted faces to hardy guffaws. Since I was next, I was hoping for the guffaws.

He ended on a joke that was pretty universally funny and clean and began to introduce me. “We’ve got Sol Keenan, master of all instruments, coming up here to play for y’all.” I felt odd as I walked on stage by myself with an acoustic guitar, a banjo, a mandolin, a few harmonicas, and a keyboard. I began setting up. Being that I had five instruments to set up it was taking substantially longer than the other acts. A tingle went down my back as I felt the crowd behind staring with antsy eyes. Kyle went back into his bit to keep them entertained. He kept looking back at me to see how close I was to being ready. I felt rushed. I was rushed. I fumbled around trying to get my instruments on stands. I tuned them before I came, so they were mostly in tune. I also knew the intricacies of each instrument, so I could guess what string might be off, if any. Despite that knowledge, my hands shook as I tuned keys for each instrument I picked up. This was taking entirely too long! I had a tray that connected to a mic stand to hold my harmonicas, I had just picked it up when Kyle made some joke about Mickey Mouse being a corporate pimp and Minnie being a prostitute. Then some dude hollered the cleverest of all insults: Your Mom! This insulted Kyle. So he began to berate the guy. This guy was in the largest group of people and Kyle was angering them. One of the guys yelled, “Why don’t you shut the fuck up and play some music?” I had to lean between Kyle and the mic stand to attach my harmonica tray. I heard a shout from the crowd, “What are you going to suck him off now?” I wondered if these guys had ever tried their hands at comedy. A large fellow approached the guys and I could hear him say, “Come on guys, lighten up.” I then realized this group was there to watch one of

their buddies play. That was enough of a distraction for me to finish getting ready and for Kyle to say, “Let’s hear it for Sol Keenan.” There was very little applause.

I wanted to start off slowly by playing the way most musicians there would play: play an instrument and sing a song. That way I could build up to my real act. I went through a few songs and realized that nobody really cared.

I remember announcing that I was about to do something that I had never tried in public. As I began playing a few simple chords on the guitar I heard somebody in the audience say: What’s so special about that? Then I stomped my sampler pedal and went to put down the guitar. This caught everybody’s attention because the guitar part continued to play and repeat as I was putting the guitar on its stand. I then picked up my mandolin and laid down a mando part on top of the guitar. The crowd as became silent, then suddenly grew loud with cheers. After laying down the parts on my other instruments, including a bass part and drum part from my keyboard that made hundreds of sounds, I picked the guitar back up and, without recording through the sampler, threw down some leads over top of the instrumentally constructed piece. I did this until I felt like it was getting tired and then I stomped the pedal stopping the song. I repeated the process a couple more times with different song ideas. The crowd really loved it. Despite my mediocre vocals, I had succeeded in setting myself apart.

There were several more acts—some lousy, some pretty good—before a guy by the name of Clayton Childers closed the show. Clayton had been there for the duration of the show, but his entourage showed up about 20 minutes before he went on. Most of them wore fraternity letters. My crowd was sparse in comparison.

When Clayton sung everybody would quiet down. He was a big enough fellow to be surprisingly graceful as he would swagger around on stage with his Martin acoustic and his neck strap with his name embroidered and studded from back to front. The ‘C’ on the strap was on the back half of his shoulder, so it looked like it said ‘ayton.’ Clayton was an amazing country singer. He had a Waylon Jennings kind of style to his voice. He was the musician to beat at the competition.

Every time he finished a song the crowd exploded.

Towards the end of his set he said, “Where’s that crazy mandolin slash guitar slash banjo slash didgeridoo or whatever else...where’s that picker at?”

I was talking to Kyle in the back. I raised my hand, and a few people turned around hollering to Clayton about where I was.

“You want to come up here and pick a few with me?”

“Yah, sure.” I yelled from across the patio and went to get my mandolin out of the case. Guitar is my best instrument, but I felt the mando would add an extra element to his style. My big concern was if I were to play with him simultaneously would his vocals overshadow my playing. I was especially concerned with this because it was his set and I knew I wasn’t going to know any of his songs. If I shined I just might outdo him, if I didn’t I may be more easily forgotten. A second of wonder occurred to me right before we began playing. He had a bigger crowd than me and he owned them. Could he be doing this as a means to upstage me with crowd support? Maybe sometimes I’m just paranoid.

We cut back and forth on a few solos. He was an alright guitar player. Perfect for what he does: playing rhythm while wailing on vocals. It makes for a better act than singing with mediocrity and wailing on lead guitar. At the end of his last solo we went back into the verse a final time. He held the last note for about three times my lung capacity. A bead of sweat dripped off of the bill of his mesh cap and into the bottom tip of his red beard.

We finished up and waited to see who would win the competition. As much as I wanted to win, I didn't think I really had a chance against Clayton. I just wanted to get the crowd to recognize me as a musician. Really, I just wanted to get noticed. Despite these feelings I still had the remnants of an adrenaline rush that comes from an unlikely hope and the enjoyment of having gotten to do what I loved, like that feeling of the sun going down on the horizon of a final vacation day.

Clayton and I were standing together chatting about the fun we were having and how great it was to play together, and to cut back and forth on our solos. He was excited to find out the winners. He fidgeted around as we talked, waving and saying hey to his comrades as they passed by to and fro the bar.

Jon announced the winners, "Well folks, it looks like we have to share the pot tonight," I'd never heard of Kitty's doing a split-pot. I had that feeling that a child gets right before opening a Christmas present, wondering if it's something cool; or socks. "We have Sol Keenan and Clayton Childers taking home the winnings this evening and coming back next week to compete with the previous winners." My ears started ringing and I could hardly function.

Clayton and I shook hands. After I took a second to gather myself I noticed that his temperament had digressed. His excitement was gone and he was gritting his teeth. He said under his breath, “Congratulations.” I congratulated him as well.

His face was red. It was dark on the back patio so I hadn’t noticed before that he had a huge birthmark on the left side of his face. When his face turned red, his birthmark turned purple.

He had a large crowd of supporters. I had a few people there, but I could only give a few hours’ notice to my people. His supporters took cue at his non-verbal anger and started getting loud about it. This was kind of funny because they were simultaneously trying to express their discontent and maintain a semblance of manners. They would look to me to see if I could hear them, and quiet down if they thought I was close enough to hear. But I didn’t have to go far before their volume swelled with outrage.

Clayton and I approached the people who were in charge of the competition. Kyle was with Jon and Mud. He struck me as the kind of bouncer who chose his profession because he liked to hurt people.

Before I had fully approached I watched as the money from the door was exchanged from Mud to Jon. I was far enough away to hear Jon’s muffled voice, “That’s only eighty bucks.”

“So.”

Their voices got louder as I continued to approach.

“There are definitely more than twenty five people in here.”

“It’s open mic competition,” said Mud.

“I know, and now it’s time to pay the winners of the open mic competition.”

Clayton made his way to the group and said, “What’s up fellows?”

Jon said, “We’re just divvying up the money for you all.”

Jon was visibly upset.

Jon gave me and Clayton our cuts. I cocked my head and said, “Hm. What time do you guys start taking the door?”

“What’s that mean?” Mud said as he puffed himself strait up in his chair.

“Well, we made forty bucks each, if it’s three bucks a head...” I paused and looked at Clayton in hopes that he would join me in this line of reasoning, “Oh, it just seems like there are more than 25 people in here. That’s all.”

“I don’t know what to tell you,” said Mud.

Clayton looked to Jon then back to Mud and said, “At least twenty people are here for me alone. What do you all got people sneaking in or something?”

“I’d ask the front door bouncer.”

“I know we all came in the back,” said Clayton.

Mud jumped up and shouted half a foot away from Clayton’s face “Oh, do you?”

Clayton scrunched his shoulders up, ducking his head, looking to the ground.
Half of his face was purple.

“Mud, you’re acting fucked up,” said Jon.

“Fuck you. You ain’t so big,” Mud sniffed and wiped his nose.

Having had some success, I felt like I was a part of the music crew. Even though Clayton was angry about my success, we were in the same situation here. I felt like my clan was being robbed. I nodded my head with a smirk and said, “Allergies?”

Mud winced his eye and made a *psh* noise with his mouth.

“There’s your money, now fuck off.” Mud threw down another twenty-five bucks and stood up to walk to the bar.

“Man, there are at least a hundred people out here,” I said.

Mud stormed off stomping his boots.

Jon turned to me and Clayton and said, “Man, I hate that asshole. Listen, I’ve been waiting for him to get fired. Everybody hates him. Look the owner just walked to the back room, I’ll talk to him. I’ll try and get you guys what you deserve and hopefully Mud will too.”

Clayton and I waited and hungout while Jon went to get the boss.

I bought Clayton a drink. We bullshit for a while. Clayton was pretty angry about this whole ordeal.

I didn't have to talk to him all that long to find out that he didn't usually have much to say, yet he somehow managed to continuously talk.

The owner walked up and said, "Mud said that was all the money that came in. That's the end of it."

"Really," I said.

"Yah, really, can't you hear?"

Clayton said, "Look around. With this many people we should be looking at three hundred dollars. Don't you think it's funny that we have about half of that?"

"Peculiar maybe, but he says that's the money we made tonight. That's it."

Clayton said, "Well, what if next time we pay one of my guys to watch the door?"

"Ah, no, we have the open mic, the winning musician gets paid, the bouncers are happy, the bar is happy, I got to keep everybody happy."

Clayton and I looked at each other with scrunched up faces, as if we'd just heard a joke with a punch line that made no sense. In this state of bewilderment we were silent and the owner went on about his business.

Jon said, "Man, I'll try and do something to reconcile this."

The twenty five dollars was split to two tens and a five. We split the tens and I suggested that I take the extra five since I'd just bought Clayton a drink and the other two and a half dollars was mine.

“God dammit man, I was relying on that money,” barked Clayton as I picked up the other five.

I heard one of Clayton’s crew say “Fuckin’ hippies.” I’m guessing it was because Jon and I had long hair and Clayton looked like a guy out of the AG department who sang country music. Clayton turned to his crowd and kind of smiled about this.

Jon said, “You want to get together this Thursday night?”

“Yah, but doesn’t it seem a little pointless without a bass player?”

I asked “What are you all talking about?”

Jon said, “We’ve been trying to get a little country band together, but we are lacking a bass player. Do you play bass?”

“Yah, sure I do. But I don’t own one.” This was a semi-fib. I had played bass before and the strings are the same as the first four strings on guitar so I figured: How hard can country bass be?

“You play but you don’t own one,” said Clayton.

“Well yah. I mean I can play bass. It’s not my strongest instrument. But I guarantee you that if I can get my hands on one for a while I’ll be able to play whatever you guys need.” I was convinced of this. I felt like I could play anything. I did, after all, play eight other instruments and I had just used them to take the open mic competition. Having had no success in ten years of projects that I’d put together I figured I should do what I could to get on board, even though I’d never played country music and I’d

probably picked up a bass ten times in my life. I was just anxious to be a part of something.

Jon said, “Well my roommate has an acoustic bass. I’m sure he’d let you play it.”

Clayton looked at Jon with a sideways glance, then looked to me and said, “Well get on it dag gone it. There are a few bass players we want to try out. But we’ll give you shot.”

Jon looked at Clayton as if he had a bad taste in his mouth.

I wondered if they really did have other bass players to try out or if Clayton just didn’t like me.

“Hell, I’ll be glad to. What songs have you guys been working on?”

They gave me a rundown of about 10 songs they had worked up. I went to the bar and got a pen and a napkin to write them down. By the time I’d gotten back Clayton had rejoined his crew. I had to ask Jon to repeat the songs.

“Well Sol, we practice on Tuesday nights. Can you make it this week?”

“Man, I’m excited to be there.” I had to have someone cover my work shift or simply skip it, but I omitted that information. This was my chance to potentially get a band together. Despite that fact I dreaded the prospect of playing bass rather than guitar and I didn’t really care for country music. My stomach turned at the thought of this opportunity. I had been recognized as a real musician.

Practice #1

As I walked into Jon's duplex apartment I was nearly knocked over by a massive boxer dog with a name tag written in big bold Roman letters: Maverick. He was a friendly fellow. Overly friendly. Almost rapey. He unbuttoned the bottom button of my shirt as he jumped up and pawed me. I was thankful I wore a snap button shirt. I did this on purpose. I'm not generally one who categorizes people, but in this case I expected that I was walking into a group of people having more redneck tendencies than me. I figured if I could avoid the patchouli jokes I could fit in with them a little more and secure my place in the band, despite the fact that I was an inexperienced bass player. I felt a small piece of my soul rot-off for putting up this front, as minute as it was, but I was going to do whatever I needed to do to be a working musician. I also brought several of my other instruments in the hopes of shining on one of them in front of the group and putting myself in a role in which I was more comfortable. These guys had been playing together for a while and it was my first time pickin' with them, so I needed to especially stand out to secure my place in the group.

As I walked into the first corridor I saw a huge hole in the drywall, right at eye level. It was substantially larger than the size of a fist. The awkward shape made me wonder if there was something that previously adequately fit in its place or if it were a wrestling match gone awry.

The smell of rotten food made the skin of my face feel sticky as I turned the corner and looked through a small cloud of fruit flies hovering over the kitchen trashcan.

Walking into the living room I was greeted by a small pack of unshowered and unfamiliar guys sitting on a shredded couch playing football on Xbox.

“What’s up man?” No response.

“Uh, hey. Is this Jon’s place?” As I closed the distance between us I caught the unmistakable aroma of stale, spilled bong water.

No response.

Everyone simultaneously jumped up and started shouting. There were many ohs, and in your faces, and bullfuckingshits in the ruckus. This lasted long enough for me to feel uncomfortable with the combination of being in the company of unfamiliar people, thus far ignored and still not entirely sure that I was in Jon’s house.

I realized that they didn’t hear me ask who the apartment belonged to. My social anxiety kicked in and it became difficult to speak up for myself. All they cared about for the time being was that game.

After they played for what seemed like an eternity I interjected in between plays.

“Hey guys, is Jon around?”

The guy who just won the previous play looked over to me and answered in a Georgia-style southern accent, “You a musician or a cop?” There were chuckles. You would think that this clue would ease my tension about being in the right place, but I was also being made fun of by unfamiliar people who, I might add, looked like they could

whoop my ass and just might if I gave them a reason. I wondered: even if I am in the right place, am I really in the right place?

“I’d like to think I’m a musician, of sorts.”

“If you’re a cop you have to tell me.”

I couldn’t tell if he was just fooling around with me or if he was making fun of me. It seemed obvious to me that I didn’t fit the description of a cop or a narc, so I went with fooling around and I chuckled.

“What’s so funny,” he said. I suddenly notice how large this person was. He wasn’t as big as Jon, but he was quite beastly.

“Uh...well, I reckon I’m here to play country bass.” The *I reckon* fell out of my mouth. I did have a lot of country family, but it wasn’t my typical lingo. When I heard myself say it I almost laughed at how comfortable I was with it. Then fear hit me when the question arose in me: How long could I maintain as an incognito hippie?

The other Xbox player said, “Jon’s upstairs in his room. You the guy who plays all the instruments?”

“I guess I am.”

“You’re going to have to use my bass aren’t you?” said the Xbox player.

“Yah,” I said hoping my self-consciousness wasn’t showing, “I haven’t been able to afford one yet.”

Then the first guy said, “A bass player without a bass eh?”

“Uh, yah.”

“You seem awfully skinny to be a bass player.” I thought to myself: what the hell does that mean?

“Gawd.” The guy who’d been giving me hell had lost the play since he was too busy trying to piss some kind of line between us rather than paying attention to the game. The screen flashed as if they were about to start playing again. It went back to the field and was suddenly paused.

As he pushed himself up from the couch his crucifix around his neck swung and rested upon his shoulder. He walked over to me, “I’m Chuck. Jon mentioned you. About how you played like ten instruments at one time.”

“Oh, yah, I guess that’s me.”

“I got my drums in the other apartment, if you want to go set up. Where’s your amp?”

“I didn’t think I needed it since I’m using an acoustic bass.”

His face twisted and he said, “Well, I guess I have to try and drum softly.” Jon had mentioned that Chuck tends to beat the hell out of his drums with no concept for dynamics other than loud and holy-fucking-shit that’s loud. I just knew that people were going to give me hell for not having an electric bass, or a bass at all for that matter. I was really hoping that, in case my inexperience at the bass was going to keep them from

having me come back, I may turn up the charm and make them hesitate before deciding they didn't want me around.

Chuck led me to the front door where I had stashed my instruments. I loaded them in both hands and under one of my arms and he walked me outside and into the other side of the duplex. The other apartment had no tenants. Its layout mirrored Jon's apartment. There were high ceilings in the living room and plenty of space. A dilapidated drum set was put together on the far wall. There was a Marshall Stack by the kitchen, and the acoustic bass was sitting across the room on a guitar stand. A breeze whistled through the broken window in the back. The lights were on indicating working electricity.

"Nice practice space. So, I guess the landlord doesn't mind us using it?" I said half in jest and half to find out the situation.

Chuck looked at me and squinted his eyes, "Probably not."

I picked up the bass and started doodling around. I thought of my last practice space. We could barely fit our gear in my buddy's attic room.

Jon walked in with wet hair and a black, Mexican Stratocaster. We chatted a bit while he plugged in and started doodling around. Clayton showed up shortly thereafter with his acoustic guitar and a mini amp.

Jon said to Clayton, "Where's Jerry?"

"Jerry couldn't make it."

“That’s twice in a row.”

“Yah, I know,” Clayton quickly turned his head and looked me up and down and laughed saying, “Nice snackles, where’s your tie-dye, hippy?”

“Well, I reckon it got dirty, man” I said not even realizing until later that I’d said the *I reckon*.

“Well, It got dirty, man,” Clayton mocked me mimicking what sounded like a mediocre Hollywood depiction of a ‘60’s stoner.

Chuck chimed in, “Ah, no, you a big ‘ole hippy Sol?”

“Well, I enjoy music festivals, good weed and good beer. I also enjoy rock and roll...” I pointed to my Miller Light, “...crappy beer, dirt bikes and shootin’ guns. So, I don’t know what that makes me.” As soon as I said that I realized how true it was. I came from the country a lot more than I realized.

Everyone but Clayton laughed about that.

Guitar notes and tom taps began fluttering in the air. I started trying to warm up on bass. I played it more like a guitar than a bass. A few moments passed and Clayton said, “Alright boys, can we kick in ‘Sweet Home Alabama?’” I discreetly sighed in relief at him calling a song I knew. That set the tone. For production’s sake we tried to keep it to things we all knew or things that were simple.

It was difficult to hear me and Clayton, since we were playing acoustic instruments in an electric setting. I didn’t mind that. I was hanging in there. I could do

the 1 – 4 – 5 songs, but after that even the songs that I knew I fumbled through. It didn't help that we were all boozing in between songs. I believe that Clayton suspected my inadequacies because he eventually positioned himself closer to me and he started calling harder and less familiar songs. I saw him trying to discreetly make eye contact with other band mates and give looks of discouragement about me. A few times I wasn't even making mistakes and I saw him give what looked like a wince.

We decided to take a break. Chuck looked down at his phone, “Aw, man, I missed a call from my brother.”

“You going to call him back,” said Clayton.

“I can't. He's in Iraq.”

“Oh, that sucks man,” I said. “My ass would be in Mexico,” I said with a little chuckle. I looked up from my beer and realized that this little chuckle was not met with other little chuckles. In fact, things fell silent. I saw Jon mouth an “ooh.”

“Uh, just saying.”

“What are you some kind of pinko?” said Chuck.

“Naw, man, I didn't mean anything by it. I just thought I was being funny.” Jon turned away and Clayton turned the other way. I saw Clayton fighting a smile.

“What's funny about not getting to hear from my brother because he's overseas protecting you?”

“Protecting me from what?” I heard this phrase leave my mouth and thought to myself: I thought I had gotten a lot better about keeping my mouth shut; I guess not.

“You’re one of those. What do you mean from what? From freedom hating terrorists who are coming over here to blow up your buildings.”

“Listen man, I’m on your brother’s side. I think it’s ridiculous that he’s in Iraq and I would like to see him come home. After all, wasn’t Al Qaeda based in Afghanistan and funded by Pakistanis? So what’s he doing in Iraq?”

Chuck started on about the same old nonsense that one would hear people shout just to hear themselves shout. He spoke in bumper sticker language.

I quit listening and tried to concede. I was torn between animosity over the situation and the fear that nobody liked me, and since I wasn’t that great of a bass player I felt that they would have no reason to have me back.

“You’re right, alright,” I must not have sounded convincing enough.

“You can try and act all intellectual about it, or whatever, but when it comes down to it, you’re a coward.”

I felt my face turn red. I remember thinking: fuck it, these guys don’t like me, I’m not that good of a bass player and really I don’t like them all that much. I snapped and jumped out of my seat, “I’m not a goddamn coward, I just don’t believe in imperialist wars put in place by corporations for them to rape the world out of all of its money,

especially when most of the people who want to defend it believe in magical sky gods,”
the cross around his neck glistened with sweat.

“What?” he came out from behind his drums.

My adrenaline kicked in. This guy could kick my ass. I didn’t want my ass
kicked. I backpedaled. “Listen man, maybe that was a little much...”

“Ya, think?”

“...just because we don’t see eye to eye it ain’t no reason for us not to get along.”

“I think it’s a pretty damn good reason.”

“Whatever man, I’m going to smoke a cigarette.”

On my way out I heard Chuck say, “Pussy.”

Jon came out with me. “Hey man, don’t worry about him. I know he can be an
asshole, but I’ve known him for years and he can be a good guy too.”

“Man, I just came here to try and play music.”

“I hear you, man, I’ll holler at him. I think he just took a bunch of Addy’s today
and it’s making him a bully.”

“Addy’s?”

“Aderol.”

“Is that speed?”

“Yup.”

“I see.”

“Well, I’m pretty sure you rubbed him wrong too. But I thought it was cool when you stuck up to him. Most people don’t do that. Although, I can’t say that I agree too much with your views.”

“Well, I did bitch out a little at the end there.”

“Ha, ya, I guess a little. I’d a whooped his ass.”

“Yah, yah, of course you would’ve.” I drew on my cigarette, “Man, I’ve tried to put my fighting years behind me.” That was the truth. I was wilder when I was younger and I felt like I was too old for that nonsense. But as much as I kept telling myself that, I felt pretty assured that I was not going to wind up on top of that one. There is minimal solace in lying to yourself about your convictions, when deep down you know why you really avoided it.

“Well, good luck with any kind of passivism around that asshole.” That made me uncomfortable. It made me second guess going inside. Did he mean he’s going to whoop me, or did he mean that if we all go out sometime we’ll end up in a fight because he’s one of those types of guys? Either way I had to go back in because my instruments were in there.

I was finishing my cigarette when Jon went inside to talk to him. He later told me that he jumped on him for having a guest over and him behaving that way. When I went back inside nobody really said anything. I walked over to my instruments.

My mandolin fell into my lap. Not literally. A few years before practice a friend of mine showed up at my house. Our conversation went like this: “Hey Sol I’m looking to sell my mandolin do you know anybody who might be interested?”

“How much?”

“A hundred bucks.”

“I’ll write you a check.”

Had this not happened in this way I would have never considered playing the mandolin. Nothing against the instrument, it just never would have occurred to me. I was more of a rock player, so it didn’t seem fitting. That was the inception of my love of bluegrass music.

My approach to learning a new instrument is to find a piece of music that I think sounds difficult to learn and learn it. Then go from there. I remembered that the mandolin is strung the same way as a violin. So within a week of having my mandolin I had transcribed and memorized “The Devil Went Down to Georgia.”

After sitting down from my smoke break I picked up my mandolin and burned through Charlie Daniels. That got everybody's attention. The guys looked to each other and laughed, partially a laugh from being impressed with my abilities and partially a laugh as if the idea of playing that song was absurd.

"I don't know that we could pull that off," said Clayton.

"Sure we can," I said.

Clayton said, "Hell it's got a million changes."

"But, have you ever heard anybody cover that one? It would take a little work, but I'm sure we can rock that one out!"

Clayton actually looked impressed and gave a little laugh while saying, "Alright then."

Jon and Clayton had heard me play my other instruments before at the open mic competition at Kitty's. They knew I was a better guitar player than anything. Jon said, "Man, that's pretty awesome. Do you play electric guitar?"

Still coming off adrenaline and being upset from nearly having a scuff, I welcomed this question. I tried to sound confident without sounding overeager, I found myself being cautious about rushing my words, "There is nothing that I play better."

"Woah, woah, woah, what about Jerry?" said Clayton.

"Well Clayton, Jerry hasn't made it to a practice yet and he's pretty busy with his other music projects. He just don't seem to have the time for the project." said Jon. He

turned to me, “Why don’t you bring your electric next practice and we’ll see what happens with that.”

“That sounds great.”

Clayton winced. “Well, if Jerry makes the next practice...”

“Well then we’ll have two guitars for that practice,” said Jon.

“I don’t know man, Jerry is phenomenal, and I don’t see a reason to have two lead players. It’s an extra way to split the pay.”

“Just bring your electric, we’ll figure something out.”

“You got it man.”

The next practice I brought my electric guitar rig. Jerry was a no-show. I also brought my best buddy since childhood. He was a bass player. I figured I’d slit the throat of any notion about putting me on as a bass player; especially when having me on as lead guitar insured that the lead position and the bass position were filled. Since Jon played rhythm guitar it freed me up to experiment with switching around to other instruments for lead as well. The guys showed up with various notes for learning “The Devil Went Down to Georgia.” My lead playing fit pretty well, but my position as the lead player was the perfect fit for me with these guys, as far as I was concerned.

I had successfully secured my position in a band full of people who didn’t really like me.

CD Release Party

The band is a nervous wreck. We'd been working on this album since Kentucky's last blue moon. We overestimated the availability of our studio, and we paid for it by sporadically putting in studio time over an eight month period. Four to eight weeks is standard for cutting an album. It's the night before the CD release party and we're excited; and drunk.

Most bands we know would want to have a clear head, get plenty of rest, feel good for the event. Our reputation preceded us, and we acted accordingly. Not because of the reputation we had built, but because of how we'd built our reputation. As much as I like whiskey, especially bourbon, I've never been a big fan of shots. I prefer it on the rocks. This is one area where the band and I differ. But I'm a *go with the flow* kind of guy; and, more so, I'd never turn down a free drink. So, here we are. And, this being a commonplace happenstance with me, I haven't been paying attention to the last five minutes of the conversation.

"If I had a tea company I'd put a big rooster on the front of the label."

Everyone looks to me like I'm some kind of alien, or foreigner. "What?"

"You know, so I could call the company Cock Teas."

They look at me weird and chuckle to one another. We've been together over a year, and I'm still the oddball. Jon wasn't listening. For some reason when Jon isn't sitting in the conversation I'm not as much a part of the family. I've been fighting for their acceptance for over a year.

Clayton was never a big fan of me. I think it's from previous political discussions. "Uh, yah. Good one."

Chuck says, "Woah, Sol, you're blowing my mind. I'm like Jackie 'O picking up the pieces over here."

Everyone laughs a little harder at that. Myself included. I guess it makes more sense, since his comment was directed at what was happening at the table, rather than some nonsense snippet coming from nothing that had to do with the current conversation, but was it really that much stranger than what I'd said? If Jon had laughed at me, they would have thought what I said was hilarious, the clan would have accepted me.

For the CD release party we had a rather big deal artist playing for us, Dave Johnson. He'd been on the Billboard top 100, maybe even 50, I forget. I don't much keep up with corporate statistic, which is probably stupid, being that I'm in the same market. Anyway, the party is a Thursday night at Austin City, and in between his first and second set we have an hour to play.

Dave is strictly country. He does everything from Waylon and Merle to anything new. With the exception of the lead singer, our band hates anything new, at least coming out of Nashville. We do, however, skirt the line between southern rock and outlaw country.

In the hour of time that we had, we were going to try and squeeze in all of the songs off of the CD. We're struggling with the set list. We'd all previously emailed each

other with how we thought the set list should go with the expectation of discussion and compromise.

“Well here’s what we all had, and if we move these three songs around like this we’re, for the most part, in agreement.” says Jon pointing to his printed out copy of our emails. I feel like Jon’s suggestions were working towards a nice compromise.

“Naw” says Clayton, “I don’t want to start off fast, I want to warm them up with some of the slower stuff.” Clayton’s idea for the set list was completely opposite to everybody else’s.

Most of us don’t really care for some of our slower stuff. Clayton always tries to play boss, as if we are his backup band rather than as if we are a band. Jesus, some of his slow stuff is hokey. I know this is going to be a fight, everything is with that guy.

We look to each other. I can tell who disagrees and who doesn’t care. It’s not hard to know. Chuck doesn’t care about anything. Jon and I want to come out of the gate strong, fast and loud.

“What if we compromise, start out with ‘Runnin’ Ragged’ into ‘Hammered and Nailed?’” I say. This option would still have us come out of the gate fast, and then move into the slow stuff. It would also compromise with everybody’s ideas, including Clayton’s, into a working unit.

“Naw, I want to start off slow, then gradually get faster, boss.” He may have said *hoss* but I heard *boss* and it pisses me off. Maybe I’m just tired of his shit and that’s what I want to hear. He is never happy with the set list and I believe it is a power thing. I’m

tired of fighting Clayton for democracy. It's like he refuses to see that we have all earned our place in the band, but now it's time to focus on earning our band a place in the market.

“Clayton, Dave is going to be playing all that CMT stuff, he'll play some of his originals, but I think it would behoove us to explode out of the gate since we're playing pretty strictly originals and we only have 50 minutes” says Jon.

“Yah, but wait, I've played with Dave before and I know what his crowd likes.” Clayton has played with Dave before, but I feel like that is a weak argument.

I feel guilt as I forcefully say, “Wait a minute, you may have played with Dave, but this is our CD release party. Dave may have a crowd but most of that crowd is going to be there for us.” The guilt comes from knowing that Clayton may be a bigger fellow than me, but he's a bit of a coward. I was trying to bully him. I'd seen Chuck flip out and yell at Clayton before and watched as Clayton buckled. My tactic fails. I wish Chuck cared as much about our little tribal situation as he did about his intoxicants. This argument would have been over if he handled it.

“Whether I have a crowd or not, we still have to try and play towards Dave and the venue. Playing this party is our chance to really secure my position as a musician there.” Jon and I caught that he said “I” and “me” and exchanged glances. Clayton believed that since the venue “made” John Michael Montgomery that it was the most important place to play in the world and that it could be our, I mean, his big chance to make it as a musician. This is nothing new to the venue. They knew that's what people

thought and because of that they took advantage of bands, keeping them strict on the clock with hardly any breaks and insisting on altering their set lists—which is quite obnoxious for a band trying to play all originals and make it on their merit, rather than gain attention for singing other people’s songs. I believe Clayton harbors fantasies about taking away Dave’s fanbase and skyrocketing into superstardom. Despite the fact that the venue was the size we needed and it was letting us play the release party there, Jon and I didn’t much care for the place. They bully musicians. It also ingrains that country music, lead singer, individualistic mentality. It’s like a scab to a union.

Jon continues, “Seriously Clayton we’re all excited about this, we need to try and make everyone in the band happy.” I wonder if my tactic did work a little bit, Clayton’s demeanor changed and he started seeming more compliant. Perhaps Clayton needed Austin City to have his back in his career, because he felt it was important to have an institutional benefactor to help his career. All the while we wanted to fight for our careers as a band, rather than a backup band.

Clayton sighed, then frowned, and said, “Well boys, I like the idea of...”

A loud booming “Ha,” Chuck looks away. “Well looky here.”

I turn my head. There stands the bass player from one of our rival bands: Catsup or Ketchup. Surprise, surprise, they’re a jam band. Generally we get along with the other local bands, but one night Jon and I were hammered in the bar where these guys were playing. He apparently made fun of their name. And holy-gee-willickers, how could he do such a thing? It is, after all, such a cool name. The bass player overheard

him. The Fishtank owner was friends with one of the guys in that band, and when the bassist ratted us out, we never played The Fishtank again. It was general consensus that this was a real pussy move. It was ridiculous politics. Every time we played The Fishtank we packed the place, probably beyond maximum capacity. And, let me tell you, my band moves drinks. We interact with the audience, they buy us shots, and they get hammered. This makes the bar money. You see, I had always been under the impression that this was the primary objective of owning a business.

Anyhow, there stands the bass player and their guitar / lead singer with a small group of people. I didn't really know the guitar / lead singer. The bass player is obviously hammered, and is staring at us. My band is a clan of drunken rednecks. This kind of behavior, intent staring, can easily be conceived as an act of aggression.

And there goes Jon:

“What's up man? Can we help you out with something?”

I notice that they have Diego with them. I loosely know Diego from the scene, but I wouldn't really call him a friend. We've hung out a little bit. Enough to know it may be better to distance myself. I like him alright, I just feel like I'm better off not being around him.

Diego has issues. He watched his father blow his mother away with a shotgun and then turn the gun on himself. He was fourteen and has never turned down a fight since because he believes his dad watches him. He's done hard time, which he claims

was good for him. Then he got out of prison and started channeling his rage into becoming an amateur MMA fighter.

I know how this conversation is going to end. I do not know how this situation will end.

“Heh?”

“Well, you just keep staring over here. You need to have a seat or something.”

This was Jon’s mock-overly-nice voice.

“Naw, jus—” incoherent mumbling.”

He turned to his guitar / lead singer, started smiling, said something and pointed at us while turning our direction. This seemed like some weak, drunken attempt at intimidation. The guitar / lead singer, whom I’ve decided to call Guitar L. turns around to see us, and turns back around with that look of *oh shit* written on his face, then shakes his head no, and waves his hand as if to tell him he’d probably better just walk away.

He was right. We lost our place at their bar, we’ll be damned if they’re coming in for trouble at our bar.

The bass player, whom I would like to call Bassy McGee but will instead simply call him Bassy (because Bassy McGee is too long), was around 5’9 with a medium build, black framed glasses and very short hair, bordering on shaved. It was obvious that this was to mask his balding. Guitar L. was 6’1, he had red hair and a beard with a pretty

large build, but not necessarily athletic. Chuck stands up and walks over to Guitar L. I think: it's going to come down to it.

Chuck hates Guitar L. because, I don't know, something about he was rude to him in front of a girl one time, or some stupid shit like that.

Guitar L. turns around. They begin talking. Chuck is pretty close to Guitar L.'s face. Guitar L. gets a look of fury over his face, and lightly pushes Chuck back. My adrenaline shoots through my body making it seem as if when Chuck grabs Guitar L. by the hair and repeatedly begins pounding his face with his fist it is all happening in slow motion. The two float towards the ground as Guitar L. swings for a Hail Mary Haymaker, and clocks the shit out of Chuck on his forehead right above his left eye. I wonder if I'm the only one in slow motion, because this happens so fast that I barely have time to jump up before Guitar L. hits the ground.

It was wrong of Chuck to attack Guitar L. like that. But it was no surprise to me. Often I had questioned if Chuck was bi-polar; which can be a commodity to one who frequents the seedy bar scene. It also fits the stereotype of being a 'crazy' drummer, and the image of the band.

So, those are the benefits. I like to look at the bright side of things.

Jon goes for the bass player. The bass player steps back and puts up his hands and backs away; understandably, being that Jon is roughly the size of a small polar bear. I jump over to try and break up Chuck and Guitar L. Which is a frowned upon action, but I have no plans on going to jail the night before the CD release party. Diego grabs

Jon around the waist and as Jon reaches around to put him in a headlock Jon's feet come off the ground. I dart to Jon, but before I even make my way to them, someone grabs me from behind in a sleeper hold, and takes me to the ground. This concerns me, not with myself, but I have an invested interest in Jon making it through tomorrow without any broken limbs.

Now, first and foremost, I, as a person, live my life through logic. Succeeding this I would venture to call myself a pacifist, that is, until pacifism becomes unreasonable. I've never started a fight in my life, and anytime someone started one with me I did my best to get out of it; keeping my dignity intact. But nobody lays their hands on me.

I kneel to the ground with his arm barring my throat and his body on my back. I try pulling his wrist back to no avail. After a very short amount of time my throat feels like I've swallowed barbwire and I start feeling dizzy. I remember a wrestling move my buddy showed me years before. I grab his arm and bring my right shoulder down to my left knee as hard and as fast as I can. He flips over me and lands with his face upside down, underneath mine. I take my elbow and smash his face in 5 or 6 times. It was Bassy. That added insult to my injuries. After starting shit with us he wouldn't fight the 300 pound guy, but then I guess I must of looked small enough for him. There is no doubt in my mind that I have broken his nose. One of his mates kicks me in the ribs. I can't tell who it is. The pain is excruciating. I lose my wind, and I'm pretty sure I have a fractured rib. I start dry-heaving (God damn shots). I go to block the next kick, and he kicks the shit out of my elbow. A few times. It sucks. His buddy that I'd previously had

a hold of, rolls over, reaching for his bloody face, and moans. Somebody is tackled and they plow through the guy kicking me, knocking him down. Thank God! Diego and Jon crash well passed my location.

Diego has Jon down. I've never seen that happen before. Jon has a gash in his forehead bleeding into his eye. I try to stand up but more people were getting involved and, from the perspective of the ground, it was a crowded mess of bouncer legs, patron legs and fist fighter legs. Chuck heads toward Diego. Clayton stood at the table, the way you freeze when you're almost hit by a car. He acts as if he's going to try and break a couple up, but when he does he almost gets popped and some guy yells in his face, so he backs off. Clayton was a good deal bigger than me. Often he would try and push me around, but when it came down to it he was a loud barking coward. He watches on while we are on the bad end of an ass kicking. Diego keeps Jon pinned and in between Jon's attempts at getting away he squeezes in punches to his face.

The bouncers and patrons come over and succeed in breaking everybody up. This takes a little time and effort on their part, which is obnoxious to me because I just want to get off of that nasty pub floor. My hands stick to the ground as I continue to try and get up. The area clears of people and I can at last stand. It takes a bouncer per arm to lift Diego off of Jon. We should be thrown out.

We aren't.

The other guys get thrown out. They were on our turf. Lynagh's Pub was our band's home base. Every time we played there it was an event. It was packed and, as

always, we sold the shit out of their drinks. If we didn't keep the place in business with our playing, we certainly did with our drinking.

The bouncers shoved the other guys towards the doorway. I was surprised to see Diego leave without hurting one of the bouncers, but then again that might be something that would land him back in the joint. The other guys argue and plead their case. If I didn't have that guilty feeling, I would have found it more amusing. They argue all the way out the door, shouting and cussing.

The bartenders talk to us, asking us if we're alright. Our favorite bartender tells us that he saw everything, but then goes on to tell us how much he hated those pricks.

After everything calms we sit back down to drink, I realize that the next night Chuck would be playing with an enormous goose egg on his head, and I would be barely able to move from the pain in my side and arm. Jon, well, he's just kind of a mess, but nothing broken. This whole mess pisses me off. I was especially pissed at Clayton. We probably wouldn't be so beat up if he would have joined us. I realize that life can be scary, but without some kind of solidarity life is nearly impossible.

Nobody mentions anything about Clayton idly standing-by. But we are all thinking about it.

Clayton leaves shortly thereafter. He must have been embarrassed. We spend the rest of the night recounting who hit who, and how. This was entertaining to me because being on the ground prevented some of my spectatorship, and Jon and Diego went back and forth with each other for a while, until Diego got the better of him.

I feel bad about Bassy and Diego. But, you know, be careful who you're rude to. Or, better yet, be careful which pack you're rude to, or best yet, don't be rude to people.

As usual we close down the bar. We actually had the sense to think that it was time to go to bed. Generally when our bartender was there we would stick around the bar and drink for free until the sun rose. But we know what we have in store for tomorrow: massive hangovers and fighting-soreness.

The next day we spend nursing our hangovers and trying to get-right for the party. We get there early to be sure all of our equipment is in order, and everything is set up right. The excitement is overbearing. None of us have released a CD before. It is a feeling that most people don't get without the use of drugs.

We are all dressed our best, appropriately for being a southern rock band, which, depending on the person, doesn't necessarily mean that we were very dressed up, or very well dressed at all even.

We sit in shifts at the front table to sell our album. Nearly everybody who buys one wants our signatures. There's a lot of time spent writing when we want to be hanging out with people.

Generally speaking, Austin City is pretty dead on a Thursday night. We exceed maximum capacity well before we are supposed to go on. There are people I haven't seen in years showing up to support us. Besides that, we've been frequently advertised for the last week on 98.1.

Dave's first set is going over well. Everybody loves Dave. Every time Dave says our name on the mic the crowd explodes into a roar.

Every band member's face is pink around the cheeks from smiling.

We're at a point in our playing where we typically don't really get nervous in front of people. The bass player is biting his nails, Jon is taking shots and sweating, Clayton is fidgeting, Chuck is nodding his head, watching Dave, and self-consciously fingering his goose egg, and I'm having such a rush that I feel like I'm time traveling.

We take the stage, and the crowd simultaneously hoots and hollers, and sporadically slings beer and water on each other.

The view from the stage makes me think of a very loud, very drunk ocean.

Picking up my guitar hurts my arm, and I know that dancing around the stage is going to hurt my side and wind me.

I realize that in our prior night's chaos that we didn't come to a conclusion about the various set lists. Clayton has set lists printed out. He starts handing them out to the band. He begins to hand Jon a set list and Jon has the set lists that we compromised over in his hands. There is an awkward look between the two. I walk over and take the set list

from Jon. We each pick up our instruments and are almost ready to play when Clayton starts in on his song “Hammered and Nailed.” We are not ready for this, so we all sporadically jump in on the song. It sounds unprofessional. The crowd cheers a little and kind of starts singing along. Jon and I exchange angry glances.

A few of Clayton’s slow songs go by and I’m infuriated listening to Chuck, who is drunk and playing too fast and smashing his drums as hard as he can for every song. I walk behind Clayton to the other side of the stage where Jon is. I can tell by his look that he’s thinking similar things. The slow stuff is not going over like it should be. That being said, we get most of the way through the next song and I’m fighting one of my best solos ever, then the sound from my guitar cuts out. I fidget with my equipment for a bit, but then come to the conclusion that it must be something besides my equipment.

They need to start a new song. We have limited time, but they don’t know what to do to play down the fact that we are without a soloist. Clayton is looking at me as if it is my fault and it’s starting to get embarrassing. I look at him and say sharply, “Just play!” He goes to the next song on his set.

My sound still hasn’t cut back in and I’m looking around desperately and signaling the soundman. I’m primarily lead guitar so until this situation is resolved every solo is falling on Jon or Clayton, neither of which are very good lead players. Clayton is still playing excessively slow country songs. The crowd is swaying slowly and looks bored. People are leaving the front of the stage and going to the bar to get drinks.

I realize that the crowd responds to appearances, so I try my best not to look like I'm about to explode and tear out somebody's throat.

The soundman thinks it's me, that there is something wrong with my equipment.

It's not and there isn't.

Song after song goes by. I'm angrier every second. There are three people on stage looking at my equipment, including myself. I wince in pain bending over to jiggle my instrument cables hoping it's a bad connection that will fall into place. But I'm sure it isn't my equipment. The soundman goes to the other side of the room by the soundboard and fiddles with the XLR box. My sound cuts back in.

After 5 of our 11 songs my sound cuts back in mid song. I am utterly furious. But I make the best of the time I have left on stage. Before the song ends I go behind Clayton to talk to Jon.

It's still mid-song so there are limited things that I can yell and expect to be heard. My first attempt was, "Fuck this. We have to pick it up," my attempt that eventually got across to him was trimmed down to "our set."

After three yells of Jon responding I can hear him say, "He's going to just keep playing his set."

"I'll start without him," I say. Jon smiles and shakes his head yes.

The song ends and I open up to a riff to one of our faster songs: "Running Ragged." Clayton's head jerks to me. This song was not on Clayton's set list. It

matches better with Chuck's excessive drumming. The crowd loses it. People are crushed against the stage. I can smell their sweat, and feel the heat off of their bodies, as they dance and scream. The crowd is so condensed that it moves in unison. I'm hoping my 57 year old mother isn't in the middle.

I spot her at the back standing on a stool for a better view.

People can actually hear my solos. This makes me preposterously happy.

Clayton's set list has two more desperately slow songs in a row. I can tell that the crowd reaction is having an impact on him. Suddenly everything is going exactly right. We are a band.

We switch to the other more upbeat set for the next few songs. Everyone, including Clayton is having the time of their lives. It shows to the crowd that as a unit we are unbeatable.

The song ends. We exit the stage, and everybody runs to us. We can barely get through the crowd. It's humid and wet walking in between the people. We're already hot and sweaty from playing our asses off under the lighting system.

We stay the remainder of the night getting drunk and hanging out with our fans, friends, and family. Person after person tells each of us how great we are. How we're really going somewhere. How we have a unique, marketable sound. Some people ask us why we haven't been on American Idol? The idea of being on the world's largest karaoke contest after releasing our first CD of all-original music and playing it to a crowd of frenzied fans sort of insults us, but we know it isn't meant to. Not to mention we're a

band and I've never seen someone go on American Idol and just start playing a lead guitar solo.

It's eventually closing time and we're all drunker and happier than pigs in shit. I assume pigs in shit are usually drunk or they wouldn't be in shit.

The manager in charge of booking, Mama Kay, approaches Clayton. I can see them starting to argue. I can hear a little of what is said. Mama is mad that we didn't stick with the more country set. This is bizarre, we didn't have the crowd until we picked it up and I felt like we upstaged Dave. I wonder if Mama is worried about trying to gain our crowd and turn it into a Dave crowd. I wonder if there was an agent in the crowd that didn't like what we were doing. I don't know. I wonder if Mama is mad that we may have upstaged Dave by playing our own kind of music: our music that we created together without invasive outside forces and without inside discord.

Clayton is told that next time he ignores Mama he will not be able to play there again. The last thing I hear Mama Kay say is, "Change your lineup if they won't listen to you!"

Clayton is in the dumps. I'm the only one who heard Mama Kay, so I'm torn between having had the best time of my life and being upset over my eavesdropping. Everyone else is still overwhelmed with how well the show went. We stumble to our rides, and get in to go home. The cars start and we exit the parking lot realizing our moment is over.

I realize: this is the first time I've ever truly felt like a rock star. It was only successful when we were banned together democratically with solidarity, the way the songs were created. I realize that I may never feel this feeling again.

Well Boys, I'm Not Quittin' The Band

Clayton called a band meeting. He was adamant about it. He texted us and sent us emails. He still hadn't quite grasped democracy within the band. He believed the lead singer is the band leader and the rest of the musicians are hire-on automatons. It was that Austin City contemporary country mentality that led him to subscribe to a dictatorship. He didn't have the balls to really behave with an iron fist, and if he ever tried he was ridiculed with laughter. So he would speak and write in a jest / serious tone. We were having a meeting about serious issues at The Awkward Moose. His email about the meeting on Saturday read as such:

From: Clayton Childers [mailto:clayton.childers@owen.kyschools.us]
Sent: Thursday, June 26, 2008 4:49 PM
To: Sol; Chuck Batel; Jon
Subject: Serious!

Moose's is on Saturday at 1pm. That's 1 pm SHARP! Or death to you...this is God's way of weeding out the weak.

Thank you, that is all.

C

His discontent with the band was nothing new to any of us. We speculated that he would be quitting soon. Jon and Clayton had become good friends and they talked to each other often. Jon had previously forwarded an email to me from Clayton reading that he was unhappy in the band. I had told Chuck about this. Jon was a little mad because he had forwarded the email to me in confidence. But what did he expect? We all took this job seriously and it affected everybody. It was important to me to try and ban everybody together like a family to keep this from happening. The band had given me destination in life, a productive feeling that goes with caring about the potential future of

a career, as opposed to working trash meaningless jobs for poverty wages. It begot the feeling of importance that comes with trying to do something and being a part of something.

I was scared. I was hoping that if he were going to quit that we might be able to talk him out of it. He was too talented to let go. I was convinced that if he quit the band we would fall apart. Chuck had previously stated his opinion: we were all riding Clayton's coat tails. If we were going to make it in the industry it would be because of him.

Whether we made it in the industry or not, I finally felt a sense of purpose. Having no sense of purpose is miserable. It's waiting around until you finally drink yourself to death. At least in the meantime I wasn't merely waiting around.

Gary Moose owned The Awkward Moose. Moose had a drinking problem. When we pulled up to Moose's a sign hung on the door reading, "SORRY FRIENDS, GOT TOO TRASHED LAST NIGHT, NOT COMING IN UNTIL MY HEAD STOPS POUNDING." This preemptive sign led me to believe he probably left the bar at five or six in the morning and knew he would be severely hungover. Moose thought it would be fun to own a bar, but he hated it. Although we were there by 1pm SHARP, we waited around on Moose for a bit and then left to find another patio to have our meeting. There's nothing like the MIA head of a bar to suck the life out of it. We went to a corporate steak place, sat down, and ordered a round of beers.

Once we were all present we bullshit each other for a while. It was our regular cut-up chatting. This went on for a good twenty minutes. I remember thinking: aren't we here for a meeting to discuss some serious issues? Another ten or so minutes went by. Chuck finally got pissed off and said, "What the fuck are we doing here? I thought we had this big important meeting. Let's get through with this. I got a God damn wedding to be at in 45 minutes and I'm not even dressed."

Clayton shrugged up his shoulders and tucked down his head taking a deep breath. His face turned red. It's astonishing how he wants to be the leader of the band with no questions asked and how poorly he handles confrontation. I wondered if everybody who tries to be in authority fears their perceived subordinates.

Clayton stumbled, "Well, fellows, I came here to tell you that, well, I'm not quitting the band."

I looked around the table at each person and realized that everybody was doing the same thing, looking around in awe at this waste-of-time spectacle. We waited for a few seconds in silence. He added nothing. An awkward amount of time went by. I have a slight fear of silence. If the atmosphere were a rubber band I sensed that it were about to snap. I quickly interjected in hopes of lightening everybody's mood. I felt that any kind of blow up could potentially end everything.

"Hey," I said drawing out my *ey*, "so, uh, how about this beer huh?" the guys didn't want the tension relieved, I got the feeling they wanted it snapped, "I think the keg tap is dirty, but I never met a beer that I didn't like. Right guys?"

More awkward silence. I failed. More time went by. I was relieved that he wasn't quitting. Despite my dislike for Clayton and his poor leadership I had developed a loyalty to him out of respect for his talent. If he would have quit I know he would have one of those Austin City bands where all of the musicians are hire-on rather than being a family unit. I was relieved when I thought further about what would happen to me if he quit. Who would that make me become? I loved my job and my position in it. People who say, "you aren't your job" hate their jobs. Since it was so important to Clayton to be the leader he handled all of the booking and most of the actual work that comes with being a musician. I loved it. My relief was replaced by my uncomfortable fear that Chuck might have one of his blow ups; a lesser of two evils. That is unless it resulted in Clayton's resignation.

At last Jon rolled his eyes and said, "Well, now that we got that over with, let's talk about some important things."

Clayton said, "Yah, the Kite Festival that I put together..." Jon interjected, "Yah, the Kite Festival that I put together is next week. We need to start promoting the hell out of that one. We also have to start taking out for new t-shirts, we're just about out of the old ones." Clayton squinted his eyes and drew in his breath, angry: authority unacknowledged.

Jon continued talking about things that we needed to do as a band. Eventually Chuck and Jon moved from irritability to work mode and the excitement of tossing ideas around. Clayton, tight lipped, sat looking to the ground, bobbing his head, squinting his eyes.

We decided to go to Louisville to try and book some shows. Rather than coming with us, Clayton went to Shelbyville.

We got hammered and drove all over Louisville handing out press kits. I wound up driving. Jon was afraid of getting his second DUI and I was afraid that Chuck would drive us into a tree. We went to at least 10 places, from Molly Malone's to Phoenix Hill Tavern. We were having so much fun hanging out at the bars, drinking, and trying to push the band on the venues that we'd forgotten about the previous meeting. We finally stopped at Stevie Ray's to call it quits for the evening and get some drinks. After a few rounds Jon received a text from Clayton saying:

This is between me and you, that's why I haven't sent this to the guys, but if you ever undermine me like that again in front of them I will walk.

This pissed Jon off. I happened to be standing right next to him while he received the text. He showed it to me and I felt chill go up my spine. I tried to talk him down, but Jon did not like being threatened. His text read:

This isn't between you and me, this is between all of us, we are all the band. But as far as I'm concerned if you're going to pull this kind of shit go ahead and walk.

After a few moments my phone beeped it's obnoxious cricket sound, then Chuck's metal song began playing on his phone. The text messages read:

Look, I'm sorry guys, I'm going to have to quit the band. I want to go in a different direction. It's nothing personal, I just feel like I need to pursue a different route. Best of luck to y'all.

Jon and Chuck were furious. I was freaked out. We all thought it was the end of the band. I couldn't believe that he was taking this from me.

I took it upon myself to try and talk him out of it. I called him; no answer. He would only respond to texts, so I texted back and forth with him for the next half-hour trying to talk him out of his decision. No avail. Then I asked him:

Are you going to at least honor the gigs that we have booked?

His response:

Why?

My response:

Because when you quit a job you give at least two weeks' notice.

His response:

Well, I guess I won't be asking y'all for a reference then.

I read the text once, appalled that he would address me like that. I felt the onset of exhaustion as I read it again, feelings of betrayal, rejection and abandonment twisting the inside of my body. I sat away from Jon and Chuck on a brick windowsill on the back patio of the bar. I put my phone in my pocket and sat. I never had much of a family or that many friends. The band gave me those things. I belonged. Not just in the band, but I had been enjoying a minor celebrityship. I belonged to the town.

I sat for a while and thought about what he texted me. After a while of being upset I found myself becoming angry. I opened the phone and reread the text that was the end:

...I guess I won't be asking you for a reference then.

It was the text that took from me.

I became infuriated. If he had been standing in front of me I would have slapped his birthmark off of his face. My response:

You need to lay off the coke.

I assumed he was on coke because he wouldn't have had the audacity to say something like that else wise, text or no text. We went back and forth for a bit, he almost seemed to enjoy that I was trying to talk him out of it, but after his reference remark I was done with him.

I talked to the guys at great length about how to keep the band together. They wanted to quit, but I suggested that we try out other musicians and push forward. They weren't having it, so I bargained with them. I told them that we needed to forget about him and do our own thing. I told them that we didn't need him. I didn't really believe that we didn't need him, but out of vengeance that's what I told the guys and told myself. I told them that if they stick with me throughout the remaining gigs I'll take a pay cut for them. That was too tough for them to pass up.

Like babysitting a toddler, Clayton made a huge mess and left me to pick up the broken pieces. We had two gigs that we had to hire a popular keyboard / singer to cover some of his parts. Playing without him felt like being a new deer with wobbly legs.

We had to cancel a weekend at a place that we'd never played before. I suggested that we used that as an excuse to keep the P.A. that he and Jon had split the cost of. That's a good deal of money. You could argue that we stiffed him. But, the amount that he cost us for having to cancel gigs and hire someone else for a few gigs was pretty close to the amount that he would have been paid out. He never even asked about the P.A. money. That would have met with confrontation.

At first the guys didn't know what to do. They wanted to try out a new lead singer. But I insisted that Jon was a great lead singer; he was just caught in Clayton's shadow. Things were starting to work out as a three piece, but not quite as well as before. We didn't have the same camaraderie without Clayton. We decided to stick with it; however, the guys didn't feel ready to start booking heavily. I disagreed with this. I booked us everywhere as much as possible and I started booking us out of state. In the entire time of Clayton's booking he had only gotten us one out of state gig at a fraternity party. I wanted everybody to know our name for the sake of his name being obsolete.

He developed his own solo band: Clayton Childers and the Potential Destiny. Guess where they played? Austin City. He eventually made the grade as the house band. He worked Thursday through Saturday and made good money. Better money than we were. But I booked us farther and farther out of state. I tried everything to push us further than him. The band had become resentful of me. I insisted on sacrificing all for

the band and I often ignored some of my band mate's requests for days off work. Clayton had the money and comfort of a house band gig and the authoritarian position of having a hire-on band. We had the name, dignity and purpose of a traveling band. However, the united front that should come with that still wasn't the same. Although we were a part of something bigger and better, our micro-society lacked what it once had.

Months later, I'd heard that he was jealous of our success. Right when I'd nearly forgotten the incident I received a phone call from Clayton.

"Man, Austin City has hired a new front man for their band. They've hired on a few of my musicians too. Do you know the guy who books Copperheads? I hear they do some solo acoustic stuff and I need the money."

"I don't really know him that well."

"Hey man, come on, I'm seriously hurting here. I need the money."

I heard a tremor in his voice.

"I'll see what I can do."

I got off the phone and felt my eyes glaze over as I stared at the speaker to my stereo. I thought about the resentment that I'd created by trying to be better than Clayton. I yearned for the direction of having him in the band and the less responsibility, but I was proud of my success. I did not like my position in the band and who it was turning me into. I considered asking him to rejoin. There was something disheartening about his failure. To go from having a full band to an acoustic act is an enormous backpedaling.

I started to call the venue, and then stopped. I remembered the text. I felt a gradual chuckle become a full laugh. Rather than call the venue I decided to text Clayton:

Man, I thought you weren't going to be asking us for a reference?

He never responded. In my final shot I threw belonging out the window. Who needs a family or friends? I thought: they will only resent and ultimately betray you, no matter how hard you work or try. These thoughts were followed by feelings of remorse, a strange feeling of loneliness and a lasting depression.

Until one day I accepted that the band wouldn't be what it was. I realized that Clayton had turned to me to book him because he couldn't book himself and he knew that I could.

He stole my family, but my success and purpose were affirmed and I achieved them without him.

Before the Van (Chicago)

Before owning the van we decided that it was time for us to branch out. So we put together a mini-tour. We booked one week worth of gigs out of state. We made our way up through Ohio, into Indiana, and pushed our ways into Chicago—which was the holy grail of the tour.

It seems so obvious that you would need a van for an expedition like this one. Instead Jon borrowed his dad's truck and I borrowed my ex-girlfriend's trailer. This was awkward, but we had no other options. Allegedly the truck could comfortably fit four people. So naturally Jon had over prepared for the excursion and brought a double-sized army duffle bag so full that it wouldn't fit in the trailer, thus winding up in the cab with everybody else making it wildly uncomfortable. Calling shotgun went from being fun high school nostalgia to an absolute necessity.

After six hours of riding in the back seat with my knees scrunched up to my chest I found that my feet and ass would go numb more frequently than when we first began our drive. It was also the beginning of August, so the heat was like standing too close to a campfire with no relief, particularly in regards to Chuck's nonstop smoking, the sweat would slide into every bend in my body and as I moved I could feel my skin slide against itself.

The main road to Chicago was closed. The GPS didn't understand how to get us there. The female British voice would have us turn left into a graveyard with no road, we no longer found her accent charming. So we were three hours behind our expected

arrival time. We were staying with Kyle. I hadn't seen him since he moved. The excitement of travelling to a big city had died down after this seemingly perpetual driving. How long could I twiddle my thumbs while we decided on wrong turn after wrong turn? We were lost in the bad part of town. I had visited a friend before in this part of town and remembered him freaking out about a girl walking through the wrong park at night, terrified that she would get raped or at least stabbed. On the phone he specified for her to stay in the light until he came and got her. I like to think I'm a pretty tough guy, but this frightened me. I wondered if having a red truck was dangerous in a Crypt neighborhood, or if we were anywhere near one of the gang territories. I voiced this to the guys and they acted like I was being a baby, but they hadn't had the experience in the city that I did. I just wanted to find some clever little back road back to the highway. A tough guy with a stab wound or bullet wound suddenly isn't so tough.

We passed groups of people hanging on nearly every corner. The potholes were larger than our tires. As far as I was concerned, if we busted a tire we'd be in the middle of gangland. Everybody looked like they belonged in a documentary about being prison bound. I wanted this resolved. I called Kyle and he was trying to lead us out of the area. Either it was my own personal paranoia or he sounded alarmed that we were where we were. The heat was becoming unbearable. I had little else to strip down to, I hadn't had a drink, and I wanted out of our situation: sweat and nausea.

I heard the sound of the window coming down and watched as Chuck lit another cigarette. I wondered if I was becoming asthmatic. The light turned red on the corner of 100 something St. Then, out of nowhere, I heard what I assumed to be a ninja, being that

½ a second ago there was nobody there, next to my head saying, “What you want dog?” I jerked up and spun towards him. He was standing by the window talking to Chuck in the front seat.

“I want this light to change,” said Chuck.

“No, don’t be wasting my time. You want rock?”

Chuck’s ears perked up. He considered the question. I wondered if there was a part of town in Tokyo where the crack peddling ninjas hung out from street corner to street corner, or if it were like some kind of exchange program: crack peddling cowboys. I looked to my right and could vaguely see down the alley. In the dark it looked as if there were six or seven guys watching us.

Was the traffic light rigged? I don’t know, but I know that I was anxious to leave. Then I heard Chuck say, “How much?” So, now we’re a bunch of white country boys in a big red pickup truck about to pull money out of our pockets to some less than savory people, which infuriates me because I only buy my drugs from the most upstanding of drug dealers.

The man smiled and the street light reflected off of the metal in his teeth, bringing me to the conclusion that he wasn’t a ninja after all; he simply must have had cracklike stealth. The dealer said, “Fifty a rock.”

Chuck said, “Thirty-five.”

Jon watched the traffic light intently.

The people from the alley began to manifest out of the darkness. I leaned up to Jon and said, in what I believed to be a whisper, “Jon, these guys are coming, I think we’re getting jacked.”

Jon looked right and swore under his breath, waiting for the light.

The dealer said, “Nah, man, don’t be playing with me like that. Don’t do me like that dog.”

“Man I can do forty.”

The alley men approached the vehicle. I watched Chucks fists ball up. This frightened me. Chuck had done time for assaulting a police officer and stabbing somebody. This wasn’t going to be a bar fight, this was going to be a survival fight. Even if we could match their weapons, they had us in numbers and I don’t think that mattered to Chuck.

The dealer looked to the alley men and looked back to Chuck, “No, dog, why you trying to be playing me for.”

The alley men seemed to grow larger as they came closer. I said, “Hey man, I live off of 52nd and Main St., I ain’t never had crack, I thought the first rock was free.”

“You live up by the Corner Market?”

“Oh, I don’t know man, I just moved here, but if what you got is good I’ll be back tomorrow.”

He contemplated for a second. The alley men slowed their approach. He looked to them, then to me. I wondered if the light changed and we peeled out if they might take a shot at us. I couldn't visibly see guns, but they're demeanor and stance implied they were packing. The light changed, I reached up to Jon and when he looked back to me I gave him the most serious look that I could and said, "Wait."

I looked back to the dealer, "Man, we got places to be, what's the deal?"

He took a small rock and put it in Chuck's hand, "Aight."

The alley men slinked back towards their dumpsters and we continued to wander the area for Kyle's house.

Almost immediately leaving the dealer behind, I saw a weasel on the side of the road. Either that or somebody's pet ferret had escaped, but it was brown with a long tail. I had just bought a book on Spirit Animals as a gift for my girlfriend. So I would look up animals that I saw on the road. Weasels are known for their cunning and guile. The book says to turn to the weasel if you're suspicious of the motives of the people you're working with, you're in a tight spot and need to get out or you're unsure whether to trust your own senses about other people or what's going on (Farmer 395).

We arrived at 4:30am. Kyle was standing on his porch with a handle of bourbon and a case of beer in his fridge. We parked the truck and started drinking. Kyle lived on the north side of Chicago right next to a Jewel Osco. The mart was a little over a block away. So we walked to pick up more beer and a few frozen pizzas. Kyle insisted that Home Run Inn frozen pizza was the best frozen pizza ever created. It was Chicago native

and they didn't sell it in Kentucky. Arriving at the grocery, the first thing I noticed was a shopping cart with a child's automobile on the front of it to double as a stroller.

Naturally I hijacked it for the shopping spree. We passed the employees in their green polos and khaki pants all watching with annoyance. I'm guessing they've experienced early morning drunkenness.

Kyle would run down the aisles with me as I knocked things off the shelf. Chuck pushed me for a while, but he just kept running me into stuff. Boxes would fall on top of me. It was fun, but significantly more painful than when others would drive. I wondered if he would run me into somebody just to start something. We were at that point in our drinking. Jon took over for a while and ran with me up to a lady standing in an aisle wearing a green polo.

I said, "Excuse me ma'am," she looked down to me with an irritated look on her face. I believe she might have found my behavior to be somewhat immature. "Can you direct me to the frozen pizza aisle?"

She sucked in air saying a backwards "Oh." Reaching her arm up to her chest she shook her head from side to side as if deeply offended and said, "I don't work here."

Jon tried to roll by her quickly but started laughing, slipped and fell down. As he fell he tried to grab the bar of the shopping cart to catch himself rearing up the front end of the cart where I sat pseudo-driving the little car. "Shit" I yelled and the lady jumped back startled.

The cart tipped over and before falling completely on its side the car door opened. As I tipped the rest of the way over my hand got in between the car door and the ground. The car door bent backwards turning the red color at the bend to a whiter pinker color before busting off of its hinges.

Standing up from the car I looked to the ground and saw blood. I felt a tinge of pain in my fretting hand. There was a gash in the thumb pad an inch long and a centimeter deep. It was a bad enough cut for me to be able to see past the first layer of skin and examine the yellow flesh underneath protruding out of the wound.

“Oh shit Sol, that looks bad.”

“Ah, I’m fine. It hurts like hell.”

“That looks like it needs stitches.”

“Doubtful.”

“No really, that looks bad.”

“I’m fine, I ain’t got healthcare. I’ll just put a bandage on it” I looked to the woman who was still looking on in horror, “can you direct me to the bandage aisle?”

We acquired our provisions. As we were heading out the door we were accosted by a manager. I wasn’t really paying attention, he said something about breaking something, and cops, or something.

I noticed one of those quarter rides for kids; the kind that’s usually a horse, or a plane, or a little car. Hell, they may be fifty cents now, who knows. It was a giant

weasel. How odd. That was two that trip. The Spirit Guide book says that spirit animals usually comes in threes when it is trying to tell you something.

The first thing we did when we arrived at Kyle's was toss the pizzas in the oven. Kyle insisted that Home Run Inn pizza had to be overcooked, burnt even, or we would not receive the maximum effect of how awesome it was. We moved back onto the porch

Chuck was drinking more excessively than usual; he took down about a fifth on his own. Eventually he got sick in the front yard falling over and breaking Kyle's fence.

"Ah, bad drummer, bad Chuck," Jon laughed, "get in the drummer's square." There isn't a lot of space unoccupied by buildings in the suburbs of Chicago. Jon pointed to one small square patch of grass about 5 X 7 feet. "Go on Chuck, get in your square" we all chimed in. This was one of those occasions where Chuck had a sense of humor. When he was hammered he went either way. That could have been a fight.

Chuck sat cross legged on the patch of grass smiling with remnants of vomit down his chin. He put his elbows on his knees and his forehead in the palms of his hands. Until, at last, he slumped forward, then slid off to his side, and passed out on his bad-drummer patch of grass. We were on the good side of town, so we didn't feel too bad leaving him there.

Kyle had a couch and a dirty floor covered in cat hair. This was where we would be sleeping. I wound up on the dirty floor, so I was glad that I brought a sleeping bag.

We were all up between 6 – 7pm. This gave us enough time to shower and get to the venue. My hand throbbed.

The venue was pretty neat. It had a nice stage that stood about 4 feet high. When we arrived they gave us each a coupon. The coupons would cover free meals and a couple of beers, depending on how pricey the musician's tastes were. The wood of the bar looked as if it had been refinished recently. I noticed there were a good deal of hipsters and a few bikers. We went over well with just about any crowd.

I was anxious to play, so I picked up my guitar and started to warm up. It hurt. I thought I was going to muscle my way through the pain for the gig, but I was afraid that I might not play well. So I walked outside and went across the street to the gas station and bought some super glue. I remembered Frank Zappa doing something similar. I super glued my hand back together. It stung like hell, but it drastically helped my playing.

Walking back into the bar Kyle began telling us a little bit of what he knew about the bar. He insisted that it was kind of a rough joint. This surprised me, I'd been in places far rougher looking than this place. Then he started talking about the bouncers having involvement with drugs and cops.

None of us minded a rough bar. We were actually rather accustomed to them.

The opener had a kind of The Cure sound. The venue didn't have the best sound quality. The music was too loud for any decent conversation involving anything more than monosyllabic screaming.

As the opening act finished packing up their gear we promptly set up.

About half way through the set we started hearing a harmonica part. At the time none of us were playing harmonica in the band. Our previous lead singer had a few harp parts and I had planned on trying to pick them up after he quit, but I had yet to do it.

I'm not sure if our confusion was obvious to the crowd or not. Eventually I figured out that it was the sound man playing through a mic in his booth. I turned around and pointed it out to Chuck. He looked to me with a scrunched up face and mouthed "What the fuck?"

We finished our set and started to get off stage. Then we heard a voice over the monitors, "Where you going boys?"

We looked up at him and continued to break down.

"Where you boys going? You still have another fifteen minutes."

"Where's the other band?" Jon said on the mic.

"There is no other band."

"We were told not to play more than fifty minutes."

“I don’t know what to tell you. You guys have fifteen more minutes before your first break.”

We didn’t want to piss off the first venue we ever played in Chicago so we awkwardly picked up our instruments and started playing. I leaned over to Jon and said, “Fuck this guy. He was jumping in on us with his harp and now he’s calling us out in front of the crowd and demanding shit out of us.”

“Well man, I don’t want to piss off the first venue we play in Chicago.”

“I hear you. Alright then, how about this, fuck them, we’ll play one song for fifteen minutes.”

“What song?”

“It’d be hilarious to do Feliz Navidad.” We did a Texas blues sounding Feliz Navidad every Christmas. It was August.

We played Feliz Navidad for fifteen minutes. It was one of those things that was funny at first, then stopped being funny, but then it went on for so long that it became funny again. There’s a stop in the end and then the guitar lick reopens the verse. The last few minutes every time I’d start the lick we would all double over laughing, I think they thought that I was going to stop the song.

Kyle met us after getting down from the stage, “Man, these guys are kind of pissed.”

“Fuck them,” said Chuck.

“I’ve heard of this place not paying bands before.”

“Oh, they’ll pay us,” said Jon.

The thing about the musician market is that there’s not really anything you can do if you get stiffed on your pay, at least the majority of the time. There are occasional contracts.

Kyle walked back to the bar to get us a round of shots.

“So what are we supposed to get paid?” I said.

“The agent booked this gig. He said, we get a hundred twenty five dollars and free beer and food.”

“Well, so far he’s wrong about the free beer part.”

“Who do we talk to about our money situation?” said Chuck.

“I’m not real sure. Since our agent booked this gig I have no rapport with the venue” said Jon.

“I don’t really see a reason not to play the set. We have the material. I’d definitely like to build a fan base in Chicago” I said, “I think we made them look like assholes when we did Feliz Navidad. The crowd saw what happened. They thought it was hilarious.”

“Man, fuck these guys! I don’t like the way he talked to us, and that dildo was playing harmonica through the speakers during our show” said Chuck.

“Yah, I don’t really think that this is what I would consider to be a professional venue. It’s more of a bar” said Jon.

“Well Jon, you think you can see if they’ll pay us more?” I said.

“Naw, man,” said Chuck, “Fuck them!”

“Alright, I’m just saying, we’re going to need the gas money and ...” a variety of shouts of anger and pain echoed behind me at the bar.

Turning around I see Kyle in the process of falling to the ground. One of the bouncers stood hovering over top of him and a mess of blood. The three of us darted towards the scene. Kyle reached for his face. Jon grabbed the bouncer maneuvering his way behind him. The bouncer landed one last kick to Kyle’s ribs. Jon brought the bouncer to the ground. Chuck and I ran up watching for others to come our way, surveying the room with fists cocked. When I felt safer I spun around to help Kyle off of the ground.

As Jon and the bouncer calmed themselves and got to their feet the shouting began.

“What the fuck was that about?” yelled Jon.

“Fuck him, and you, coming in the bar like you own the place?”

Kyle held his face, his hands dripping with blood and tears.

“What are you talking about?” I chimed in. “We turn around and you’re bashing in our buddy’s face.”

Kyle wheezed and coughed, his face contorting in pain.

I reached for a large stack of little square drink napkins.

The manager came out from behind the counter, “It’s about time for you guys to be on stage.”

“What, we ain’t playing shit” said Chuck, you could see the rage boiling inside of him as he heaved each breath.

The bouncer and manager looked to each other cracking smiles.

“Let’s get the fuck out of here” said Jon.

We walked up to the stage and began breaking down. “Don’t forget to pay your tab” said the manager.

“Are we going to get paid?” I said.

“We’ll get paid,” said Jon. Jon cracked a smile and said to me “I was reading this band’s autobiography and at one point this bar stiffed them, so the band comes back and steals a TV and a bunch of whiskey.”

Jon didn’t take issues with moral ambiguity. To me, no matter what, stealing is wrong. Jon on the other hand didn’t really have a problem with it, depending on who it was being done to. I’ve never been clear on where this line is to him. I’ve always been pretty clear on where my line is: it is the wrong thing to do. I generally believe in going through the appropriate channels, and when that fails to seek other means. That being said, I can’t think of a situation where I feel like I can justify theft. However, there are no

appropriate channels to go through as a musician to defend ourselves against being taken advantage of, at least not in the stage where we at the time resided.

Kyle's version of what happened was that he went to the bar to get some shots and the bouncer just started riding him looking for a fight. Kyle mimicked the bouncer's voice, "You know those guys," referencing us. "I said, 'Yah'" said Kyle. Then, again mimicking the bouncer, "Those guys suck. They could use a harmonica player" Kyle continued, "He started laughing. So I said, 'Well those guys are my buddies so you can eat a root.' The bouncer was like, 'what'd you say?' so I said, 'let me break it down for you in simpler terms: suck my dick' and he grabbed me and started beating the shit out of me."

Kyle had called the cops to file a police report against the bouncer.

We finished packing up and Jon went to the bar to get our money. I watched them argue from afar. Jon progressively waved his arms around as his face, like a fire, gradually changed into different shades of red. I wasn't sure if I should intercede. Eventually I began to approach. As I came towards the bar Jon turned around and said, "You have to be kidding me."

"What's up?"

"They say that we were only guaranteed a hundred dollars and that our tab is bigger than that. Then they refused to let me see the tab."

"Well I know I didn't go too far over my coupon. I'm sure I owe a little bit, but we haven't been here that long. How much did Chuck drink?"

“I don’t know. Either way, I doubt we’ve spent a hundred dollars.”

The cops came and interviewed Kyle about what had happened. They said since they weren’t there for the assault that they would file a complaint and if he wanted to consider any kind of court proceedings that this, along with the other complaints would be considered evidence.

That sounded like bullshit to me.

We all convened about what we should do next. Naturally, if somebody drank outside of their free tab they are responsible for it. It wouldn’t be fair to take out of everybody else’s pay. Everybody agreed that they may have drunk more than their free tab, but there is no way that we’d run up \$100. Why wouldn’t these guys let us see our tab? We concluded that they were ripping us off.

“So,” I said, “to keep score here, we have a bar that has rudely encroached on us on stage with the harmonica, then publicly humiliated us over the main speakers, insisted that we were supposed to play more than agreed to, kicked our buddy’s ass, and now is refusing to pay us.”

“That sounds right to me,” said Kyle. “I wonder if those cops even wrote anything that I said down.”

This was a time that made it easy to like Chuck, “I say we go get a whole mess of whiskey, then wait outside until they close and kick the shit out of them.”

“I don’t know guys, if these guys are connected to the police don’t you think they’ll assume it was us?” I said.

“Maybe, but they don’t know anything about us” said Jon.

“Well, if they were paying any attention at all, they know the name of our band, and they know the name of our booker,” I said.

“If you don’t want to be involved then let us worry about it” said Jon.

Jon thought I was a pussy. Statements like that kind of pissed me off. It wasn’t that I was too scared to be involved. It was that I was simply trying to hash out the smartest way to go about this situation. I far prefer physical justice, especially from a physical offense made, than some kind of theft—although if they were stiffing us on our money that would be a robbery offense, which would be putting me in a moral bind.

“Now, wait a minute dammit. I was just going to say that we go get the whiskey and after a little thought take it from there. There’s no reason to be rash. We should handle this in a way that could really get these guys, at the same time protect ourselves,” I said.

We left and consumed whiskey in large quantities. Kyle’s face was in bad shape and he said he was having a hard time breathing from his rib. The more we drank, the more furious we became about the whole situation. Kyle went inside to lay down for a bit.

The time approached for us to meet the bouncers.

There was a dark alley behind the bar. As we entered the alley I thought I saw what looked like long grey and brown rats scurrying off. This seemed to be where the closing employees would exit the building. There was a window placed high on the brick wall of the back alley and a much smaller one placed at the bottom of the wall allowing the light in from the adjacent lamp post. The lower window led into a basement. We stood by a dumpster reeking of sour milk and rotted meat. To my feet sat a torn trash bag spilling broken glass, a phone book, and a bum's feast of forgotten leftovers. Jon, Chuck, and I passed around two handles of bourbon, both about half empty. Chuck pulled out his ball of crack and lit it in his makeshift aluminum foil square and ink pen shaft (which he called his toot). Jon hit it too. I'd had two different cousins ruin their lives with stuff like that and spend months in rehab. It struck me as the stupid thing to do. I hoped the guys didn't think I was being weak, but I passed it right up.

The guys were jumping at the chance to hoist me to the high window. There was only the one bouncer and a bartender left in the building. They were closing everything down. The manager was nowhere in sight. I felt the adrenaline turn my stomach. Two of us would be high on crack and very soon we would be kicking the shit out of a bouncer and an innocent bartender. I was particularly concerned knowing that Chuck had done time for assaulting a police officer, so I knew that he had no qualms with extremities.

Although I was hammered I always manage to have some semblance of rationality, more so than most people. Well, maybe not always. But in this particular

instance I did. I didn't want anything to do with hurting the bartender. Maybe he was partially responsible, maybe he wasn't, all I knew was that the venue shafted us and that the bouncer kicked my buddy's ass for no reason. I wanted vengeance on the venue and on the bouncer.

I didn't know what to do.

They periodically hoisted me up to peek my head in the window. The venue was getting cleaner and I knew that my time was limited. I had a choice to make. My nausea worsened. The boys were in a blood-frenzy. I would be too if it weren't for the injustice of hurting the bartender, and, maybe if I smoked a little crack.

I believed that we were seriously going to hurt the bouncer. That seemed to be the plan anyway. We were going to put him in the hospital. That's a scary thing to think about. What if we accidentally killed him?

As the time approached I couldn't think of a way around hurting an innocent. But I couldn't bail on the guys. I felt sticky, humid beads of sweat rolling down the side of my face. To my surprise I saw the bouncer headed towards the front door with the bartender rather than the alley door. They hoisted me down.

"What's up?" said Chuck.

"They're still wiping shit down."

"They're taking their sweet ass time," said Jon.

My limbs felt weak as I prepared for my next lie, “Yah I know. It looks like they’ll still be in there for another ten or fifteen minutes or so.”

“Jeez,” said Chuck as he kicked the dumpster.

“You know, this isn’t going to get our money back.”

“Fuck the money,” said Jon. “This isn’t about money, it’s about principle.”

I ignored the ironic double entendre.

“You can go on then Sol, if you ain’t wanting to do this.”

I couldn’t be weak in front of the guys. “Did you hear that?” I said.

“What?” I took off around the corner.

“Hey,” I whisper shouted, “I heard a door. Come on!”

They crept around the side of the building. “God dammit,” I said, “They’re going to get away.”

The guys dropped the crack and ran up to me. “Let’s go!” I shouted and took off in a sprint.

The guys followed. Fortunately they could only run about half as fast as me. I found this display of athleticism rewarding. I turned down a road and saw some people leaving another bar and getting into a car. “Come on,” I waited for the guys. The car drove away from us.

“Jesus” I wheezed putting my hands on my knees. “There the fuckers go.”

“God dammit” said Chuck as he slammed his fist into the side of the brick building.

A trickle of blood dripped from Chuck’s hand to the manhole he was standing on as we caught our breaths. We began our return to the venue. The guys were pretty quiet. My stomach was back together. I had fooled them and for the time being was relieved.

Walking back to the venue we reached the alley and the guys ducked back in. Naturally I followed. It’s never smart to be walking around a city openly drinking two bottles of whiskey. I figured we’d hang out back there for a bit and head home to crash.

“Maybe we can break in,” said Jon.

My stomach began to turn again.

“I thought we were going home to pass out” I said.

“Hell no,” said Chuck, “over an offense like this? Fuck these guys. We got to do something.”

“Yah, we can’t let this Yankee shit go” said Jon.

“Guys, I don’t know, I’m not trying to do anything that will put us in jail.”

“Well, you don’t have to be involved. Go back to Kyle’s” said Jon.

I am not weak. I started getting worked up. I evaded the first situation because I didn’t want to hurt the innocent bartender. But now the only enemy was the venue itself.

The guys were looking for a way in the building. The basement window was too small, even for me. I waited and thought.

Chuck said, “I always wondered if this would work” he took off his shoe and sock and soaked the sock in bourbon. Then he put the sock into the neck of the handle. Jon said, “Holy shit Chuck.”

To this point I’d played it safe, I’d played it smart. I found myself envying Chuck’s mentality. There was no longer a risk of hurting an innocent. Yet I still found myself afraid. I was done with being walked on and avoiding my problems and trying to stay cool all the time just because that’s the way you’re supposed to handle things. I thought of the spirit animal book. If Weasel is your guide you possess certain qualities, specifically being someone who is not easily angered, but when provoked having a tendency to go for the throat and not let go (Farmer 396). I wanted the relief that comes with chaos. I picked up the remainder of the crack on the aluminum foil and hit the toot.

Chuck lit the sock, walked to the smaller basement window, and chucked it as hard as he could, shattering both the window and the bottle. The bourbon spilled on the ground trickling towards the drain and with it the remnants of my fear. The sock was still on fire but it didn’t light the bourbon.

I gritted my teeth and said, “Well, we need to get out of here pretty quick. That didn’t seem to work like expected...” I turned my head and walked towards the dumpster, “I have a buddy in the pen for arson. Here’s how he did it.” Approaching the pile of trash I picked up the phone book. “Yah,” I tossed the phone book through the

window, as it went through the air I said, “fuck them...” as I watched it land onto the fire sock.

It caught. I looked to them and, flexing my fist and arm muscles trying not to explode, calmly said through tense lips, “Let’s split!”

Kyle’s wasn’t far away. We ran through the alleys until we got to the sidewalk closest to his house. Then we walked, real cool-like, the rest of the way to Kyle’s. We went inside, we finished the other bottle while coming off of our crack, we bullshit and laughed and we went to bed.

We woke up early and left for the next venue. Kyle called me about three hours into the drive. In the back of the truck I struggled to get my phone out of my pocket with my knees pulled up to my neck, every joint popped and cracked as I answered the call on the last ring. Apparently this incident was already all over Chicago’s morning news.

Kyle asked me if we had anything to do with it. I held my breath and told him that I didn’t know about the other guys but I passed out right after he lay down. Luckily he went to sleep after lying down so he couldn’t call me out. The other guys would have to worry about their own asses.

Nobody died. I wondered if somebody had how long I would go through my life in paranoia. The news said that the place had thousands of dollars of damage to it, but they had insurance. At least we put them out of commission for a while. I was hoping that the guys were blackout drunk and didn’t remember. The fewer people the better. I knew that was unlikely, no matter how drunk that’s something most people don’t forget.

Jon couldn't keep his mouth shut for nothing. Would that land us in jail? Arson has to be at least six months and probably a lot more if they thought they could prove that we were out to harm somebody. Is that attempt at murder?

The guys were relatively quiet; I figured it was from their hangovers. I knew a couple of beers would get them chatty again, but I was glad to be left alone. Coming off of booze and crack makes you irritable. I found solace in knowing that we were on our way out of the city. I enjoyed how pleasant the quiet was. It helped me to settle down and kept me from absolute panic.

Jon said, "Hey guys, that was crazy wasn't it?"

"Yah, I've never burned a building down before," said Chuck laughing.

"Sol, that was awesome when you threw that phone book in there. I thought it was a lost cause and a waste of bourbon. I about flipped my lid when it caught. That was something."

Despite feeling as if their voices were rattling my brain against my skull, I felt a smile begin to form on my face, "That was pretty cool wasn't it?"

"I thought you were going to leave Chuck and I up to stomping those guys, then you certainly upped the ante on the whole vengeance thing."

"Well, I appreciate . . ." I noticed traffic slowing down and I looked to the distance. I wondered if there was wreck. I saw emergency vehicle flashing lights. Each person stopped and provided I.D. to the officers. I had managed to make it my entire life

without ever seeing a road block. I thought I could hear my heart in my chest, but I told myself that it was a product of coming off of drugs that I had no prior experience in taking. “Look at that,” I pointed.

“I see it,” said Jon.

My mind raced as to why I’d never seen a road block until today, when I’m more anxious to leave a city than I have ever been in my life. The traffic was jamming. Squirring in the back seat, I wanted to jump up and run, my back ached and I thought I might scream. I seriously began to consider jumping out into traffic and making a break for it. In any kind of situation like this you always have to play it way cooler than the situation itself. I considered that it was most likely nothing, but it wasn’t a holiday weekend, so it seemed unusual to be looking for drunks. Fortunately Jon was sober. Chuck’s eyebrows were raised and eyes open wider than usual. He was paler than earlier. I considered that it was probably the drugs that he was coming off of, but I sensed fear. Maybe I was sensing my own fear. If that were the case I needed to force myself out of it. I couldn’t have the guys see me be weak, if it were contagious then it would give the cops a reason to pull us over and investigate, although Jon was sober, if we began to act a fool and they had a reason to drug test us, we would all test positive for crack. I began pouring sweat when I realized that we left the crack foil and toot in the back alley of the bar. What if the cop were to smell the booze on Jon’s breath from last night and then give him a breathalyzer? Jon has refused a breathalyzer before, that would give them a reason to check his blood and if they found crack why wouldn’t they check our blood? Would they make the connection to the bar? I tried to regulate my breathing.

I remember meditating in Karate class when I was a kid. I tried to meditate through the cold sweat and anxiety. We were approaching the road block. I tried to astrally project, but then I remembered that that's ridiculous, and even if it wasn't ridiculous in and of itself, if I succeeded my body would still be in the truck and I'd probably still go to jail. I imagined the weasel. I thought about a giant weasel running up to the truck while I jumped out onto its back and rode off to freedom. Are weasels a natural prey to pigs? Then I opened my eyes and saw that we were almost to the road block. I slowed my breathing and prepared for the worst, I couldn't look weak.

Jon turned down the music and rolled down his window. Chuck's fists balled up. Did these guys want to fight the cops? Had the crack worn off yet?

“I.D.’s.”

Jon gave the cop his I.D. The cop said, “everybody.” My phone was still out from Kyle's phone call. I turned on the video camera just in case we could use something as evidence in the future. What if he doesn't read us our Miranda rights? People get off the hook for that sort of thing. I reached for my I.D. The cop walked away.

I said, “Jon, don't tell him we have music equipment. We don't know what they're looking for, but they might make a connection to last night, and besides that, cops love a reason to fuck with you and being a musician is a great reason to search the car for drugs.”

“You’re being paranoid Sol. We’re fine, I’m sober, it’s just a road block, I’ve been through them a million times before.”

“All three of you are out of Kentucky huh?” Jon jumped and nearly hit his head on the ceiling. In Chicago even their Gestapo gets ninja training.

Jon’s face changed, “Uh, yes sir.” The word “sir” is key in dealing with cops.

“Where were you guys last night?”

My paranoia had become an epidemic within the world of our little red truck. Jon looked to Chuck, “Uh, you know—“ I did not want the cops to think we were musicians. Another cop approached Chuck’s side of the vehicle. I wondered if Chuck had pepper spray or anything like that. I hoped that he didn’t. I said, “We crashed at my good friend’s house.”

“What are you doing in Chicago?”

“My buddy’s aunt died and he had a bunch of furniture he wanted to give me, we thought that it would be a fun road trip. So, we came up here, loaded the truck and went out on the town,” I immediately regretted saying that we went out on the town. “Is there a problem officer?”

He ignored me, “Where did you guys go ‘out on the town?’”

Chuck took my queue, “We didn’t get to go out, besides the liquor store, we were all feeling sick and we just got a few bottles of liquor and stayed in,” he said sounding disappointed.

I looked to Chuck and Jon and recognized that they were both sweating and pale and looked pretty devastated. I turned to my reflection in the window and saw the same. I was pretty impressed with Chuck's clever approach. It was quite a change from throwing a Molotov through a window.

“We're looking for three white male out-of-towners and you guys fit that description. Are there any drugs in the vehicle?”

I recognized his tactic: speak quickly to scare them and look for their reactions. However, it occurred to me: I really didn't know if there were drugs in the vehicle or not, yet, I knew that the answer was a resounding no. We all three simultaneously said, “No sir,” as we looked to each other as if such a question was preposterous.

“Do you mind if we search the vehicle?”

Jon jumped in and said, “Yes sir, I do mind.”

“May I ask why?”

“Well yes sir, I want to go home and it is a violation of my fourth amendment right. I find it grossly offensive.”

I wanted to chime in with “And I don't pay my taxes that pay your paycheck for you to violate my civil liberties.” I was glad that I didn't say that. What Jon said was right and as non-offensive as could be stated.

“One moment,” I watched as the cop stormed off to the other cops and addressed his grievances over our vehicle.”

He stormed back, “Well, we can search your vehicle or we can get the drug dogs.”

He stood there for a second, we all looked to each other, and I said, “You are not searching the vehicle.”

“Well, let’s get the dogs.”

I held up my camera phone and said, “You do your job, but if you violate any of our civil liberties I will sue the police department and I will hold you personally responsible and sue you personally. I come from a family of lawyers and we’ve done this before.”

The guys looked afraid.

“You need to turn that camera off right now,” he acted like he was going to reach in the vehicle and take it. I leaned back and said, “I rigged my phone so that it streams live and goes directly to my email account.”

The cop took a step back, crinkled his face and looked to his other cop buddy. The other cop’s face shrugged as if to say: I don’t know.

The cop said, “Sit tight!” and they both walked off to the other officers.

Jon said, “That streams live?”

I didn’t come from a family of lawyers and I knew little of technology. I didn’t even know if it was possible for my phone to stream live, but I was banking on the accuracy of my prejudice towards the I.Q.’s of police officers. After watching the cops

talk amongst themselves while pointing to our vehicle the second police officer walked back to the vehicle, tapped the top of the cab and said, "Move along."

Jon drove out of the road block and slowly accelerated to 70 miles per hour. We were headed home. The wind from the window blowing on my face felt like freedom.

"Damn Sol!" said Jon. "That took some balls." I was surprised to see that we had avoided our general M.O. Following my lead we avoided all violence. I had a feeling that some things may change. We were all on the same page and there was no violence. We were leaving Chicago when that may not have been an option. Jon turned up the radio. Big city radio is always so much better than smaller cities. I smiled as the volume went up and I realized that Frank Zappa's "Weasels Ripped My Flesh" was blaring. What an odd thing for a DJ to play. As I fell asleep I dreamt of riding atop of a fire breathing weasel with Frank Zappa's head flying through the air like a Japanese dragon at a parade.

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