

Jackson's Journey

And Other Stories

By

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"A timely new vision of intertwining American lives..." - *Mother Jones*

Prologue

1

Everyone was rushing to and fro, hoping to rapidly complete their mindless tasks. It was a Friday evening and everyone wanted to leave work to see their children, their wives and their TVs. For some, bars or hookers called their names louder than their couches.

The U.S. Bureau of Engraving and Printing was just one of many places with scurrying workers, moving frantically in hectic patterns. On this particular day in 1994, we will focus on one object specifically. Not a worker or a manager. Not an overseer, or a custodian, but a twenty-dollar bill. This twenty-dollar bill has "**FREE YOUR MIND**" written on it in sharpie on one side, a picture of a smiley face with a third eye on its forehead on the other side. It is crumpled and a corner is torn off and missing. You would not be able to lay the bill flat out without parts of it folding back to positions of its past. The bill is marked with as many creases and lines as a human hand. Time's very own specific imprint.

In 1924, all twenty-dollar bills with Grover Cleveland on it were officially replaced with the renowned racist Andrew Jackson. Besides genocide, Jackson was also wished to rid our country of a National Bank. Talk about irony, huh? But that's enough about him.

The Federal Reserve reports that the average lifespan of a twenty-dollar bill will be approximately 7.9 years as of 2013. This twenty-dollar bill in particular is special for many reasons, one such reason being that it has outlived its competition by about twelve years. It took twenty years for the federal and state government to find our mutual friend and retire him permanently.

Today, we look back on this bill's experiences and the people it briefly got to know. It's an ordinary bill that went through the hands, wallets and purses of a plethora of different types of people. It knows the human condition far better than you or I.

This bill lies on its deathbed, a bleak conveyor belt filled with its brethren. It awaits a gruesome execution by way of an industrial grade shredder. At the time of its creation, this bill would have met a fiery doom, but the government has since instituted a system to destroy paper money without harming the environment.

So, let's take a look at twenty special people this twenty-dollar bill has met over the last twenty years. We must make haste, so our friend's story can be told before it ends up torn into micro bits and deposited into a landfill with other items that are too dead to contain the history and experiences of their owners and users.

Join me on an adventure—I promise it won't take twenty years to tell.

2

Our mutual friend is just like you or me in a sense; he's got a beginning and an end. To ignore his creation would be to do him a great injustice. If our mutual friend were to be humanized further, he'd take great pride in the nostalgic memory of the date he was created.

So here we go. We take a trip down the infamous memory lane, the impossible traversing of time. We fly through a hypothetical wormhole, an imaginative time portal. Behind us are things like Facebook, Twitter, internet porn, the *Star Wars* Prequels, smartphones and smart cars, Xbox Ones and Netflix. These things are now completely and utterly inconsequential. They have not been invented yet and are merely the primordial ghosts of ideas getting ready to be created one day.

We arrive in a time where the Cold War is almost at its peak. The Vietnam Conflict is just about finished, Nixon's presidency is on its last legs, and muscle cars and rock 'n roll are flourishing. We hone in on the location of our mutual friend in this new time period, where everything is so different and yet so similar at the same time. At this time, goods that we would value at twenty dollars, are worth approximately eighty-eight dollars and forty-nine cents. Four dollars and fourteen cents is about equal to what we would spend on twenty dollars in the present. That's a whopping difference.

This is a period when a proper red-blooded American bragged about landing on the moon. A time when red commies were far more frightening than any international terrorists.

On March 31st, 1975, our friend was free of graffiti, rumples, creases and bend marks. Mr. Twenty-Dollar Bill was in mint condition, in his absolute prime. He is fresh and ready to adventure out of the Bureau of Engraving and Printing factory, not unlike a youthful teenager prepared for a nice date. There were no thoughts or opinions about Fort Worth, Texas. Our mutual friend had no idea that he would return to his place of creation several years later. He would not have cared either way.

Mr. Twenty-Dollar Bill was quite important and sought-after at this point in his life. In fact, he even had an armored car to transport and distribute him and his friends throughout the federal banks that were dispersed among the west coast. This specific armored truck and its convoy were headed for sunny San Francisco.

Our pal is among 15,999 other bills in his cash pack alone. It's safe to say there is a lot of money in this armored car. Is he destined for greatness? He does not know and he does not care. He is ready to do what he was created to do. That could be argued to be an admirable feature. To not have to think or worry over one's future is truly a blessing. Some might even argue that not thinking about anything is a blessing too.

The trip to San Francisco was a long one. The journey was almost completed until something unexpected happened on the night of April 2nd. His travels would have been uneventful had he not found himself in criminal hands.

Chapter 1:1975 Remmy Brewster

1

It was time for a change of heart. Or at least that's what Remmy's mother used to say. He had come a long, long way from his early days of thievery and other publicly frowned upon late-night activities. Remmy always wanted more than he had. It was the curse of growing up on the poorer side of Los Angeles. Being in a gang was wrong. *Everyone* knew that. But stealing? That's for your own personal gain. It's like fixing the imbalance of karma that dealt you the shitty hand in life.

The first time Remmy stole, it was in middle school. "These kids already have wallets loaded with money from their parents, do you know what I got? I ain't got shit. My parents don't even give me lunch no more. I borrow wallets and use that money to buy myself a nicer lunch. It's more like self-charity than it is stealing!" Remmy had told this to his principal after the first time he got caught. He was punished regardless, and he served his time in lunch detention after lunch detention. Sometimes, he forgot what it was like to eat in a cafeteria.

When he got home that day, after the school phoned his mom, she told him that shitty sentence for the very first time. He told her 'Fuck that.' His mother only looked at him sadly. When he came home the next day, he

realized his mom had dicked him over. She told his father. He got whooped so bad he couldn't see out of one eye after it was over. The belt was the worst part though. Remmy would often distract his injured mind while it was happening by thinking about how much better belts were at "fixing children" then they were at holding pants up. *Fixing children* was what his father had been known to call the physical punishment.

Then, Remmy was fresh out of high school and pumping gas at a local station when he got his first arrest. He got into more and more raps as he got closer to graduating. His father also became more and more fond of *fixing children* while under the influence of alcohol. So, Remmy obtained a gym membership. He went consistently. He got bulkier and bulkier as time went on. One night he put his good ol' pops in the hospital. His dad was too prideful to admit his own son did that to him. But his mother was almost happy to tell the police. They locked him up for two long nights. That was a lot worse than lunch detention, ya dig?

The gym was one of the few places Remmy felt alive. Eventually, his two hobbies melted into one. He'd walk around the locker room in his under shorts until it was vacant. Then he'd pry open any locker that wasn't padlocked until he found something valuable and he'd swipe it.

One day Remmy got really ballsy. He opened a locker and patted down a pair of jeans inside of it. He felt plastic baggies in pockets and took out three large baggies of dope. Remmy was no scumbag user, but he did know

a few and that meant he could make some money. He practically nabbed a shit ton of money, just some that required a little more effort to transform it into such.

It is unfortunate for Remmy that when he got pulled over for speeding, the cop did not believe that it wasn't his. His parents did not pay his bail and Remmy J. Brewster, spent the next four years in the California State Prison of Los Angeles County on a possession charge in addition to an unpaid speeding ticket.

2

Remmy was used to being a loner. But in a state prison facility, it's not that easy to get by on your own. There's always someone tougher than you. In prison, Remmy got by like most men of his nature. He made friends, and he made a couple of enemies. The friends he made were unlike any of the passing acquaintances Remmy had made throughout his life. This time, he had bonds and loyalties to people other than himself. It only took him twenty-seven years.

One such bond was to a man named Gregory Fowler. Gregory Fowler was a repeat offender with no regrets. In prison, Greg watched over Remmy and a few of the other inmates. When Remmy was set to be released, he asked Greg how he could possibly repay him. "By being there for me when I get out," Greg had told him. And so Remmy made sure he was there when

Greg Fowler got released three years later after serving a fifteen year murder charge. That was how Remmy became a part of the Foul Boys crew that was becoming more and more well known throughout the City of Angels.

3

The Foul Boys were finally ready to expand their outfit. They had fifteen full-time members and almost forty part-timers that were anything from couriers, drug runners and enforcers to cops and doctors on the Foul Boy payroll. Gregory Fowler's dream of a crime empire was almost coming true. But in order to expand and compete with the many larger gangs of Los Angeles, such as the Latin Kings, they needed funding. And lots of it.

Some pencil pushing asshole all the way in New York wrote Greg a letter of good faith. He told him about the route of a convoy of armored trucks. Three trucks. An estimated total of five to ten hundred thousand dollars. Only guarded by eight well-armed guards and the secrecy of the route. Greg would make sure the pencil pusher from New York received a nice cut for the heads up and for keeping his mouth shut. If he didn't keep his mouth shut, his cut would end up on his throat. Business as usual.

Greg had sent out a courier, Ronald, the youngest wannabe member of the group to gather everyone Greg trusted. Remmy was the first one at the meet up spot.

*

Within the next hour, some of the other long-time members arrived. Tony, Brick, Sullivan and Greg's cousin Donny.

"Ay, Remmy, what the fuck's goin' on?" Sullivan chimed as he stumbled in drunk. He dragged a whiskey bottle beside him. Sullivan was a balding man with a pot belly and big, muscular arms.

"Must be somethin' big if Gregggy called all of us," Tony said. Tony had slicked-back hair like Donny, but long sideburns and a permanent five-o'clock shadow on his neck.

Greg walked into the closed laundromat's backroom with two of his cronies following close behind him. Remmy didn't care for the people in the organization that were lower than him. They didn't matter as long as they did what they were told. Remmy did take note of the four duffle bags the two large men carried with them. They set them on a table nearby and Remmy thought the table was gonna collapse.

"Hello boys," Greg said through a grin of shark-like teeth.

The boys said hello back.

"We're gonna make some money tonight. More than you've ever dreamed. I'm talkin' almost a million."

The nameless cronies were unzipping the duffle bags. They were all stuffed with high-powered automatic weaponry.

Tony and Sullivan cheered and clapped. Donny puffed on a cigar. Remmy, on the other hand, began to feel the first wave of nerves. Almost a million in one night? He had a bad feeling he couldn't shake.

"Groovy, man. Hit me withit," the man who loathed being called Fat Tony said.

"Five hours from now, at three in the morning, a trio of armored trucks will be attempting to enter our sister city of San Fran. The Foul Boys are gonna see to it that doesn't happen, can you dig it?"

4

Greg, Donny and Remmy were crouched next to a bridge. Donny had two M-10 Submachine Guns in his hands. Remmy had a Mossberg shotgun. Greg had a pack of cigarettes and a lighter.

"Fat Tony's out. If he survives this, one of us is gonna put a bullet in him," Greg said calmly.

Remmy was more than a little surprised, Donny seemed to take the news casually. "Why's that, Boss?"

"Remember what Tony did to Donny's sister? My little cuz Brianna?" Remmy did not. "He cheated on her with a whore. He don't think we know, but that's not the first time he's been wrong."

"Fuckin' jive turkey," Donny said.

"Can't we just break his leg or sumtin, eh?" Remmy asked.

"Nuh. I've learned the hard way that you can't do something like that without them wantin' vengeance or payback or whatever," Greg said. He learned that lesson a few times and had scars to prove it. "Anyway, we've got to be ready. It should be almost any minute now.

"I wish that we had a way to talk to Sully and the others to see if they were on schedule," Remmy said, a bit nervously. This was a whole new level of crime for him. Ever since Greg mentioned the possibility of casualties and surviving the heist, Remmy was a bit on edge.

"They will be," Gregory Fowler said. "Or Sullivan will be as dead as Tony after this is over."

*

Jonathan Warner was a big man that looked the epitome of a truck driver stereotype. He usually was exactly what he looked like too, but not tonight. Tonight, Warner was driving his company's delivery truck illegally. He was cruising slowly down I-580 going a steady twenty miles per hour. Him and his passenger Sullivan kept checking their rear-view mirrors.

There weren't that many cars heading into Oakland, California at three in the morning. They just needed to single out the right pair of headlights. Bam. Convoy spotted.

"There we go," Sully said. He loaded his .357 magnum revolver. The three armored trucks were closing in.

"I hope Enrico's in position," Johnny Warner muttered. Sully didn't answer. He knew if anyone wasn't ready when they needed to be, it would amount to a lot of trouble.

*

"Is that truck driving a little slow or what?" the passenger of the first armored truck asked. Even at this distance it was easy to judge. He had his automatic rifle in his lap.

"Maybe he's fallin' asleep? It is three in the morning after all," the driver answered. That was about half a minute before a bullet plunged into the thick windshield and sliced into the driver's neck. The windshield glass slowed the bullet a lot, but now it was lodged in the poor man's throat. He began choking on the lead and the blood filling his windpipe in addition to the words he couldn't scream. The truck immediately veered off of its path. The passenger reflexively ducked below view of the windshield and tried to grab the steering wheel. "Oh fuck, oh fuckin' Christ. James, hang on buddy. Oh fuck!"

The truck up ahead made a complete stop. It angled itself to block the entire interstate in front of the trucks. As it did so, another sniper shot pierced the second armored truck's tires. The third truck was already in

reverse and turning around. One civilian car with a driver only still conscious because of coffee, was confused. They blew on their horn as the third armored truck whizzed past him going the wrong way.

A sniper bullet penetrated one of the third truck's back tires but it still trudged along. The sniper was apparently unaware that the truck was designed to keep driving, even if it lost all its tires, the third driver thought.

"This shipment's supposed to be a God damn secret!" the driver of the second truck said. He was now trying to reverse too. "Looks like a rat leaked this and fucked us all. Get us the hell outta—" the passenger was silenced as his face imploded from another precision shot from Enrico Velasquez, who was perched on a tree that hung at a nice vantage point over the Interstate.

Tony and his cohorts saw the third armored truck take an exit off the Interstate that was supposed to be an entrance and ignored them. They had to let that truck go, it sucked but it is what it is. Tony's truck did the same maneuver as the other truck and blocked off the route behind the cash-stuffed trucks.

The guard in the back of the first armored truck was radioing in for backup, police assistance, the national guard, whoever the fuck could come and help.

Greg, Donny and Remmy each drove three minivans backwards on the interstate from where they were posted. They were headed towards Sullivan's truck blockade.

Sullivan and his driver Jonathan Warner got out and opened the back of the truck. Two other cronies were in there ready to shoot. Another brought a wheeled cart for transportation. As they did this, the passenger of the first armored truck got out and began firing his gun. The one caffeine addict that was now as trapped as the two trucks between two *bigger* trucks effectively crapped his pants and put his hands over his head.

One of the cronies took three bullets and dropped. Jonathan Warner put an entire clip in the man's leg. Sullivan ran over and took the guy's assault rifle while holstering his pistol. Sullivan was about to shoot him in the head when the driver of the second truck got out and opened fire. Another henchman dropped with his intestines leaking out. Sullivan retreated with Warner and the unarmed cart man behind the small car. When Sullivan realized there was still someone in it, someone that may decide to be a hero and put his car into drive and run over these ne'er do wells, he un-holstered his pistol and shot the man in the head. He gave the hold out pistol to the unarmed thug beside him.

The other two guards in the back of the second truck got out and also opened fire on the car. Glass exploded as just about every window of the piece of junk was shot out.

Tony and his three accomplices got out of their truck and began to flank the armored guards. Tony and his AR-18 lit up the guards who thought they were safe behind their truck. Tony smiled. *Unfortunately, it's not easy*

to remain tactically aware like in those Hollywood movies. This slip up will be their last. Tony let out a yell as he fired, and his gun swerved left and right from the heavy firepower he held in his hands. Two of the guards slumped against the truck. The third turned around in time to fire back. Him and one of Tony's guards took each other out. "Aiiight, it's all clear. Go do your jobs."

His two accomplices, one with a shopping cart and the other with a Beretta RS-200 ran over to the back of the second truck. They slowly opened the back doors and were pleased to see no more men with guns. They began loading the cart while Fat Tony watched.

Sullivan and his two guys went over to the first truck and opened the doors. A guard with a Winchester model 1200 Shotgun was inside and fired immediately. The spray hit all three men, tearing Warner to pieces, and only scraping Sullivan and the other, but enough to knock them on their asses.

Fat Tony heard the scream of the cart man with Sully when a shotgun slug tore the man's ear off. Then he heard another loud BANG. "Go check it out," he ordered the man with the Beretta shotgun. The man looked reluctant for a second, then he seemingly remembered he had a shotgun in his arms. Now he looked eager. He turned and fell into a crouch as he headed towards the other armored truck.

5

Oh man this is so fucked up, Remmy thought to himself as he got out of his van and crawled under Sullivan's truck.

Fat Tony's assistant, Ronald, who had been promoted from courier to "one of the guys" tonight seemed eager to earn his place. He held the Beretta tightly in his hands, causing his fingers to go white. When he arrived at the first truck, it was empty save for the two bleeding men parked outside of it. He bent down to Sully and asked, "Where is he, Boss?"

"Ronald, you fuckin' idiot," Sullivan said while holding his lacerated flesh. They both heard the armored truck start up. It backed up and before Ronald could do anything the massive tires rolled over the earless crook and Sullivan who couldn't crawl away fast enough. He jumped to the side as the truck continued in reverse pulverizing the two corpses and crushing their bones with sickening snaps.

Remmy was aiming his Mossberg at the guard who climbed into the truck, when he realized that the guard in front of him was only wounded. He was still conscious. He quickly adjusted his aim to blow off the man's head, but then he noticed his assault rifle was gone.

"Don't shoot! PLEASE! I'm unarmed and I have a family!" His hands lifted from his bloodied leg to the area above his head.

The Mossberg seemed to have a mind of its own. It started shaking violently. It wanted him to pull its trigger. The image of the unarmed security

guard's head popping like a tomato was playing through Remmy's head while he listened to the armored truck in front of him start up its engines and go into reverse.

Remmy heard a light gurgled scream and was almost sure it was this guard a few seconds into the future screaming because Remington Brewster killed his first human being; he crossed a line alright, too late now.

A shotgun had fired. It wasn't his. It slammed into the side of the armored truck which was now in drive and heading towards him. Time finally unfroze and he looked up at the truck as it drove past him and slammed into Sullivan's truck. It dented the white truck deeply, and for a second Remmy thought the truck would fall backward, but it didn't.

Remmy ran to the armored truck and stared at the dazed driver who turned his head slowly. Remmy fired and the man fell back into the seat, next to the body of the original driver he moved there.

Fat Tony ran over (or waddled over if you prefer) and clapped Remmy on the back, causing him to jump and almost depress the trigger again.

"Good shit, Remmy boy! Last one. We got the other truck all loaded."

Ronald and Brick wheeled over the heavier cart. Sirens were now audible as they tore through the new silence.

Donny, Greg, and Enrico pulled up in their vans. Donny set about putting explosives in the truck. Ronald and Brick were talking about how they were very happy they arrived in the truck in the back and not in the

front, because poor Warner, Sully and good ol' *whazzhizname* were as dead as dead can be. Enrico helped Remmy pack the money of the first truck into the bloody cart. "Ah fuck," Enrico exclaimed. "This truck is entirely twenties."

The seven men loaded the money into the three vans. Fat Tony opened the rear passenger door to Greg's van, but his arm was yanked by Donny who threw him onto the ground. He stepped on Tony's throat. "This is for Brianna." Tony's eyes jumped out of his head in fear while Donny aimed the M-10 submachine gun in his hand and fired half a clip into Tony's stomach which vibrated violently from the pressure. His fat stomach looked like a blood volcano erupting with gore.

Remmy flinched and looked away.

As Donny did this, Enrico's van departed. The six men packed into three vans bolted down the freeway and split up as sirens were now approaching the truck that still blocked the rear. As one of the cops began to radio in the situation and call for some people to close up the crime scene, both of the trucks exploded simultaneously in a tremendous explosion. The only surviving guard—the one that Remmy spared—died when he was doused in flames and shrapnel from the truck.

6

"Jesus, what a shit show," Remmy said.

"Maybe you think so," Enrico said. "I'd say it went without a hitch. The only tail followed Donny's van and that sick fuck managed to lose 'em. We got almost all of the money, even if it is in tens and twenties."

"So many died for it though. On both sides. I thought Greg said we'd only have to kill one or two guards before they surrendered and gave up the money. I mean, what the fuck was that shit?"

"Business as usual," Enrico Velasquez answered. "Guess these pigs didn't have yellow bellies." Enrico's sharp goatee was getting stroked by the tip of his Colt pistol. Remmy couldn't help himself from hoping the safety was off, and he didn't know why. He considered these people his friends. But he was about to be alone again, and he didn't know what to do with himself. He held out his hand and was surprised to see how much it was still shaking.

7

A man with slicked back brown hair in an outdated combover was peering at his rear-view mirrors in cyclic patterns. Black Sabbath's "Paranoid" was playing while he tapped his fingers on the gear shift of his 1968 Plymouth Road Runner Hemi. He was not tapping his fingers to the beat of the song. He was tapping them frantically, which ended up being

more audible than the song itself. It set the mood for his present distrust of the other motorists on the road. Specifically, a brown Ford Cortina that was two cars back.

Remmy Brewster was almost certain that car was following him. He had only left the meet with Enrico four days ago. Since then, he had sold his apartment and deposited that money in the bank. Now he was cruising down the West Side Freeway going southbound. The 180,000-dollar cut he was given was still in a duffle bag in his trunk. Almost all the bills were still in their respective stacks and piles. 9,000 twenty-dollar bills were hanging out in Remmy's trunk.

Whenever Remmy would begin to feel haunted by the fact that he killed his first human being two mornings ago, he would try to think about the excitement in Gregory Fowler's face that night. It was the happiest he had ever seen the man he thought the highest of.

"Holy fuckin' cow, there's even more than we thought here. And we didn't even get that third truck. Good job, everyone."

It was too bad the moment was ruined when that poor kid Ronald's mouth got the better of 'em. He muttered under his breath that Greg himself barely even did anything. Unfortunately for the kid, Greg has ears like a cat, that he does. He asked Ronald to repeat himself and the kid rephrased his comment. "All I'm sayin' is, not everyone was under fire y'know, so why does everyone get equal cuts?" is what that poor sap said.

Greg turned his grin on an angle and smiled that shark-like grin again.

“Did I ever say all of the Foul Boys were equal?”

Ronald seemed to have realized how badly he fucked up at this point, because he was very quick to respond. “No sir, you’re right. Whatever cuts that were given out were very, uhm. Just, sir.”

Remmy had exhaled the breath he was holding at the time but before the moment was even over he saw Donny come up behind the boy. He had a petulant look on his face. And a powerful handgun. Every one of them watched Greg nod his head lightly, but only some heard him mutter, “that’s what I thought,” when Donny fired the gun point blank behind the kid’s head. Ronald, who couldn’t have been older than nineteen or twenty, now stained the ground in front of him and Greg’s boots.

Remmy pushed the rest of the memory away. *Couldn’t just let me have the happy part, eh?* He asked himself inside his own head. Oh, how he wanted to be excited that his cut just got a little bit bigger. He tried and failed. He switched lanes absentmindedly and was returned to the present moment when he saw the Cortina’s blinker flash in his rear-view mirror.

8

Remmy decided instantaneously how he was going to deal with his tail. He was gonna shake them loose. If that didn’t work, god damn him, he would tag the driver and escape with one more sin under his belt. There was

a small shopping center with a pizza place, a McDonald's and a liquor store. Remmy pulled in, momentarily getting distracted by the thought that all Californian pizza sucks eggs because it was made by Mexicans instead of Italians, then he swerved around a mini van pulling out. They honked angrily at him, but he was focused entirely on watching the Cortina enter the lot. It was definitely a tail.

Instead of using the other exit back onto the main road, Remmy sped out an exit onto a side road. He swerved around a couple walking their dog and blew through a stop sign like it was nobody's business.

As he turned a few blocks down, he saw in his rearview the tip of the Cortina pulling onto the side road he took. Remmy made another quick turn, then he chose a house with a big driveway and pulled deeply into it. He ducked for a good five minutes, counting and slowly rubbing the cold metal of the Mossberg shotgun that was stowed under his seat.

After he assumed it had to be clear, he pulled out of the driveway. Once he was reversed into the road, he glanced back at the house, and saw a kid's head peeking at him out of a window. The innocent eyes looked at him and the questioning glare said: *Who are you?*

Remmy wasn't exactly sure he knew the answer to that anymore. He left that strange road and continued to live another day.

9

Three months after the heist, Remmy Brewster was shirtless in bed next to a broad he met at the bar two weeks prior. A broad he might have been falling for already.

"How much inheritance do you have left, baby?"

"Enough."

"Enough to not look for a job yet?"

"Jesus Christ woman, I said enough, alright? Stop houndin' me ya god damn airhead."

The blonde in considerably less clothes than him blew a puff of smoke into his face. He gave her a severe look, then swung his legs over the side of the bed.

"All I'm sayin' is that my brother just got back from 'Nam and he can hook you up with a good job! Then maybe you'd have a place to stay other than here."

"Bogus. I don't need no handouts. Remmy Brewster has always done A-Okay on his own. I don't need a crazy jarhead to pull me out of no situation that you assume I'm in. You got that sweet thang?"

She gave him a hurt look. He stood up.

"I'm going for a walk," he said, jingling his keys in his pocket.

She just continued to gaze at him stupidly, cigarette in mouth.

"Fine, a drive. Whatever. Just chill your tits. I'll be back before long."

He started buttoning his shirt over the curly hairs on his chest. "Bring back some coffee willya?" she called out.

He turned his back and walked away. As he exited the door, he was hit by the chilly clear weather. The sky was blue and the wind was light and brisk. He trotted to his car parked in the corner of the apartment's parking lot and then looked around before opening his trunk. Inside it was a safe. He entered his code, then observed the money he had. He took out a handful of twenties. *Coffee? Psh. I need a drink.*

He nearly jumped out of his own skin at the sound of someone's voice.

"Weather's nice today huh, Brewster?"

His breath stopped in his chest. It got caught in his windpipe. He silently closed the safe and placed a blanket over it. He hoped his body eclipsed the safe from the voice behind him. "To whom do I owe the pleasure?" he asked while gripping a hold-out pistol he kept in his trunk.

"Florence Giordano. And you better let go of whatever weapon you're holding onto in that hand of yours."

Remmy felt sweat on his brow. He turned his head ever-so-slightly and saw a man in a full suit and dress pants. He had a 9mm pistol in both of his hands aimed at Remmy's back. "Are you a cop, or something else?"

"A little bit of both," the man smiled. Remmy turned around with his hands up, pissed off that he had no other choice. A dirty agent.

"How did you know?"

"I've got a contact in New York. We've already taken out almost all of the Foul Boys. You're one of the last roaches that has managed to scurry away. This is a little public though, so it'd be best if I didn't have to shoot you, so just step away and keep your hands up. I'm an agreeable guy, I'll leave you with enough to live off of for a while."

"Listen, it doesn't have to be this way Mr. Suit. You don't wanna tag me, and you don't want any heat on you."

"I said back away—"

Remmy dove, then ran around the car as fast as he could. Giordano shot two shots that both penetrated Remmy's pristine Roadrunner. He hopped in the driver's seat and grabbed his shotgun. Florence had just gotten a new vantage point when Remmy yanked out the Mossberg and aimed it at Florence's head.

"You shoulda been a better shot, pig."

"Yeah, you shoulda—" Remmy fired the cannon of a rifle in his arms and watched it blow Florence Giordano to pieces. There was already an onlooker in the parking lot, and when Remmy locked eyes with her, she dropped behind a car and most likely ruined her underwear.

"Fucking shit man." Remmy saw his girl in the window of her apartment. Her face was either staring in horror because he had a shotgun in his hands, or because he still didn't get no coffee. She was shaking and looking at the red corpse beside him. He also guessed she wasn't *his girl*

anymore. He tilted his head back and gave her an apologetic look. She appeared to scream and disappeared from the window. He exhaled. "Ah, sheit."

He got in the Plymouth Roadrunner with two fresh bullet holes and booked it.

10

A new haircut, a bushy beard and a pair of sunglasses may have made Remmy look like a new man, but he still felt like a piece of shit. Apparently, the happiness money could buy didn't last long and nobody ever bothered to mention that on the boob tube. Every night he'd fall asleep sweating and reliving each of his murders. Hookers and drugs were an okay distraction, but if you're not an addict their fun wears off pretty quick.

So essentially, without any contacts that could help him reinvent his persona, and his involvement leaked to the police, his options for happiness became a little more than limited. So, what's left? Leave the country? Start life again in Mexico? Too fucking bad Remmy took French in high school. So, Remmington J. Brewster did the only thing he could think of. He embraced the petulant child still inside of him; the one that said, "I can do what I want, because my parents didn't have any money;" he embraced the kid that made excuses like "Prison life was rough, and it made me even more

violent. I wasn't rehabilitated, I was changed;" the wide-eyed adolescent in the principal's office that said, "Yeah, I beat the shit out of him cause my dad beats the shit out of me. That's just how the fuckin' world works."

Remmy embraced a talent he had that could be sharpened. And that's how he decided to become a hitman.

11

Gregory Fowler was dead. Shot in the chest eleven times. Rest in peace. Rest in pieces. Whatever floats your boat. Remmy was with Donny, Greg's psycho cousin. As they left the cemetery and burial they could not attend because of on-duty policemen, they smoked cigarettes and thought of the future.

"You need to hook me up with a job, Donny boy."

"I don't need to hook up *shit*."

"I wanna be a contractor. The kind that kills."

Donny began laughing, almost hysterically. Remmy was amused because he had never seen Donny laugh at all, let alone this much, but he was also offended.

His laughter died out. "You're the most soft-bellied guy I know. You ain't got the balls nor the stomach for it, Brewster the Rooster." Donney was staring straight ahead at the plume of smoke he just blew out.

Remmy let out a laugh. Donny felt a cold metal circle on his cheek. He didn't have to see the gun in his peripherals to know what it was.

"Just cuz my pecker don't get hard whenever I kill someone like you, don't mean I can't kill," then he took the gun off of Donny's cheek and put the safety back on. "I have nothing left in this world except for money and blood on my hands. The last chapter of my life is over. The Foul Boys are done, but I can't help but feel that I could get pretty good at this killing thing. I wanna go professional, major league even, you dig?"

Donny was looking out the window as the people dressed in black and their escort of police officers left the cemetery. He didn't care much for more than two or three of his family members there, excluding his younger sister, but it was definitely gonna be hard without Greg.

"Yeah. I dig. I'll put you into contact with a guy I know. Get you in with the right people. They'll train you and sharpen you. I'm liking you more and more Remmy. You and I are a lot alike these days."

Then it's no wonder why I truly hate myself now. But at least I'll have a purpose again. Without a drive, or motive, what is a human being truly living for?

"Just remember guy, you can't spell 'slaughter' without 'laughter'." And at that, Donny gave him a chilling laugh that was mismatched with his sharp killer's eyes.

12

They were in the only illuminated area in the parking lot. The dark-skinned man was standing beside his car with the trunk popped open. As Remmy approached, he mistook the man for an African American. Once the contact spoke, he realized the man was just a deeply tanned Sicilian.

"So, what do we have here?"

"Well, my little killer, I've put together a tidy little, whaddya call 'em? A starter pack, if you will. Two silenced pistols, a multi-purpose pocketknife, a top-notch submachine gun that can be outfitted with a sniper attachment, and finally four fragmentation grenades."

As he opened a large trunk within the trunk of his car, Remmy saw how neatly fit everything was. It was tidy, clean, and shiny.

"Do you have the agreed upon amount of green?" he asked. Remmy realized he still didn't know his name. But it didn't matter as long as the man didn't try to double cross him in the already shady arms deal.

"It's all in this duffle bag. Feel free to count it out."

The Sicilian unzipped it and peered in. Satisfied, he lifted the metallic trunk out. It certainly looked heavy. Seemingly reading Remmy's thoughts, he said, "Not exactly the most portable thing, but holsters are in the bottom compartment. This just keeps it safe and secure. There's a six-digit combination too. I have it set to zero six times. I recommend making a new one, Boss."

Remmy nodded. The first step to his new life was almost finished. They exchanged their goods and Remmy began lugging the case back to his car, which was parked several spots over to prevent the arousal of anyone's curiosity. As he left the safety of the singular streetlamp in the parking lot, and entered the darkness, he heard the man locking his car doors and starting up his engine. That's when four gunshots broke out.

Two shattered the man's windows, another plunged into his tire. The fourth hit the ground by Remmy and ricocheted somewhere unseen.

Three men ran towards them. They each had guns in their hands. Remmy did not hesitate when he ran and slid into the cover behind his trusty Roadrunner. Sliding on the concrete hurt dearly, but adrenaline washed over most of it. Remmy noted they didn't fire at him during his mad dash.

"Remmy Brewster. I've heard a lot aboutya. I've heard the same about you Mr. Adrian Bruno. You both will wanna sit very still, unless you want to end up leakin' like a pool float dragged through a rocky mountain."

Without answering, Remmy poked out of cover and fired his pistol five times. It was all that he had in the clip in case the deal went bad. After firing he quickly returned to cover but not before seeing the astonished look of the man who spoke. Him and his accomplice both flew backwards. Unfortunately, Remmy mentally kicked himself because three of the five bullets went into one guy. He silently admitted he could still use some work, since there was still one left who was more than happy to return fire.

The salesman (if you could call him that) put the car into drive and immediately charged into the man who was left standing. Adrian's car jumped the curb of the lot and plowed into him with enough force to bring the man onto his windshield. Remmy saw this as he made another mad dash for the abandoned case. He quickly put in the code 0-0-0-0-0-0 and took out one of the silenced pistols. He checked the clip; it was already fully loaded.

The man slid off Adrian's car and managed to get up and aim his gun at the car. Before he fired, he seemingly remembered Remmy, and turned just as Remmy planted one behind his eyes. Remmy put the gun back in the trunk and lugged it to his car. He saw Adrian give him a look of appreciation and a salute, then he drove off with one wheel now fully popped and screeching against the pavement.

Remmy was off. He was half-expecting, half-hoping to never see California ever again. His car shot out of the lot.

I

That's only part of the story of Remington J. Brewster. But that's probably enough for now. Fun fact! Our Mutual Friend (who's been in Remmy's possession for some time now), was never actually physically touched by him. And now he belongs to the arms dealer named Adrian Bruno, a resident of San Diego. This arms dealer will make a trade with a cartel member down there, and after several different exchanges of hands, Our Mutual Friend will end up where he was intended: in the hands of your average not-wanted-by-the-police denizens. One such denizen, is a resident of Long Beach, California. Her name is Natalie Robinson. Approximately eight months after Remmy Brewster declared himself a Hitman, Natalie first acquired Mr. Jackson.

Chapter 2:1976 Natalie Robinson

1

"I was only eleven-years old when my mom was first brought to the emergency room. She was walking home from a bus stop a few blocks away from our house when it happened. I vaguely remember being with my younger sister who was only nine at the time, when our dad woke us up and told us we'd have to go take Mommy to the hospital."

"I'm terribly sorry to hear that, really, I am, but I don't really understand how that has—"

"When we put on our pajamas and got in the car, we saw Mommy was crying and bleeding from her nose. I had a lot of nosebleeds growing up though, so I didn't understand why Mommy was crying or in a rush to go to the hospital because of one. But I eventually understood what had happened..."

Kaitlyn Robinson turned to her two kids in the backseat as her husband drove quietly with a cigarette in his mouth blowing smoke into the car. Elvis is playing. The year is 1961. After a second song by him comes on, Daniel shuts the car's radio off. Kaitlyn says: "Don't worry girls, everything will be alright, Mommy is gonna be alright." It's a hot summer night, ten o'clock and Kaitlyn still has a paper towel on her bloodied nose.

"You know none of this would have happened if you had a damn driver's license," Daniel says. "You could be driving yourself to the ER right now while I go look for the fuckin' asshole who did this to you." He spits out the window, and his wife immediately scolds him for language in front of the kids. Nat looks at her younger sister Patricia and sees that she is on the verge of tears.

"Besides," he continues, and Nat realizes that she can see the white of his knuckles because of his fierce animalistic grip on the steering wheel; "If you didn't have such a whorish skirt on, he wouldn't have even looked twice at you, that motherfucker."

"Language!" Kaitlyn repeated.

"What did he look like?"

"I don't know, Daniel. Just that he was African American and wearing a hood."

"So you mean he was a fucking nigger? A piece of shit jungle bunny, huh? I'm going to kill him for what he did. Kill him fucking dead," he said with disdain and a white-hot hate that Nat didn't even know was possible.

Nat knew that the N-word was a bad word, even though her dad said it often. She felt an almost maternal desire to shield her younger sister from any bad language. From anything bad at all, really. She took it as her duty to distract Patty.

“Hey,” she said while she nudged her younger sister. Patty gave her a look that would melt her heart for the rest of her life, eyes gleaming and watery, then Nat simply pulled out a Raggedy Ann doll from nearby her feet and put it on Patty’s lap. She took it gracefully and hugged it very tight.

“In that moment, I couldn’t tell you what my parents were talking about. I was in a completely different world with my sister. It was like the front seats and back seats were separated by far more than just a few inches of leather. It was an entire dimension away. The next thing I remember was...”

sitting in the waiting room, being more than a little scared by her father’s demeanor. He told them to remain in the room, and he left, taking the car with him. He had a murderous look in his eyes. When their mother came out of the ER. They all waited together for Daniel to return with the car. Finally, Patricia asked, “Mommy, is your nosebleed all better?”

“Yes, it’s all better, I told you two not to worry.”

Kaitlyn Robinson was wearing a fragile smile, but Natalie was able to see right through it. She saw the terror and fear hidden beneath it, and it scared the hell out of her. She wondered coldly, if her dad was going to become a murderer that night. She also pondered what exactly happened to her beloved mom.

2

“It must have already been the next day, maybe around one in the morning, when my father picked us all back up and brought us back home. My Mom asked him if he was alright, and he simply ignored her. When we got home, she told us to go to bed, she told us it was very late and the time for dreams was far past due. Then a little later was when we heard it.

The yelling began. My Dad couldn't find the colored young man who raped his wife on her way home, so he took out his aggression on her. We couldn't hear what they were screaming about—but we felt a cross between having a sad desire to know what they were saying and almost begging to not be able to make anything out—when we started hearing objects getting thrown around. I heard a lamp get thrown and a bulb shatter. I didn't want my Mom to have to go to the hospital twice in one night, so..”

Natalie creeps down the hall of her house, towards her parent's master bedroom. As she nears the bedroom door, she can hear her mom sobbing very clearly. Daniel Robinson says, “how are we even going to have sex anymore? I can't jump your bones without thinking about the rape. How tainted you are, and how you let it happen. Hell, you probably wanted it to happen.” Another crash. This time Nat guesses it's her father's glass ashtray in the bedroom or maybe it was a bottle.

“Did you ever think about what it might have been like for ME?” Kaitlyn yells out suddenly, causing Nat to flinch from grabbing the doorknob. She

had never heard her Mom scream before. "Why would I EVER let anything like that happen, let alone want something like that, huh Daniel? Why? Just because I don't like you when you're drunk? Because you've cheated on me before and I've said nothing? I tried fighting back, but I was overpowered and—" Kaitlyn is interrupted by a loud fleshy smack and then the sound of a body hitting the floor. That's when Nat opens the bedroom door to find her Mom on the floor, holding her face. She's in a nightgown. Daniel is standing above her—towering really—with his arm bent like a snake ready to strike again. Neither of them hear Nat.

"STOP IT!" she screams. And now she's crying too. Both of their heads turn slowly towards her, and it'd almost be comical if the circumstances weren't so bleak. Tears are flooding down her face and without a thought she runs over to her Mom and hugs her.

Daniel slowly lowers his hand, then grabs his keys from the nightstand. Kaitlyn opens her mouth to ask him where he's going, then closes it. She knows it can only be one of two places. A bar, or another hunt for her rapist, as if the man lived outside by the bus stop or something.

More than any other time in her life, Kaitlyn wishes she could put the kids in a car and just drive away, but she has no car and she is without a driver's license. Instead, she continues hugging Nat, who will eventually get Patty and they will all sleep huddled up against one another on the couch downstairs that night.

The last thing Nat remembers about that night is gathering the courage to ask her mom what happened, but Kaitlyn only shushes her and strokes her daughter's hair until she falls asleep.

3

"That was so long ago. It was a night I never forgot, but since I was only eleven, it was a long time before I truly understood everything that had happened. It was a while before anything truly pushed me to think deeply about that night again, you know, philosophically or anything like that. But when I did, it was four years later in the year known as 1964. I was sixteen years old and attending Long Beach High School as a Sophomore. I went out to a drive-in with my friends and they met up with some of theirs. One of them happened to be a pretty handsome young man. He told me he didn't wanna go out that night, but ever since he'd laid his eyes on me he decided it was worth it. He was only the third boy I ever kissed, but I let him have me in the backseat of his car. He was just that good with his tongue, in a manner of speaking and kissing.

Everything was going great at first. Things were definitely moving a little fast, but things were still okay. And then.."

He enters Natalie, and she's making faces of pain rather than pleasure. She didn't think it would be like this. She puts her hands on his shoulders

and tries to embrace it, her friends who had evolved beyond virginity have told her that the first time almost always hurts. She thinks she can endure it for the young man she had only met an hour ago.

Then she decides she cannot. Nat says, "Hold on one second," and the boy who is a fresh eighteen stops and looks at her for a moment, then slowly begins again like a machine that was turned from ON to OFF then to SLOW. "Stop, please, you're hurting me," she says, almost pleadingly.

He stops and kisses her on the lips, and the naive sixteen-year-old believes everything is as it should be—he's going to listen, he'll stop now—then he says: "Don't worry. Sometimes it just takes a while.. Just trust me," and then he continues. She moans in pain and he grunts like a wolf. A tear slips down her face unnoticed. His face is on her shoulder completely absorbed in her hair.

"I told him I wanted to stop and he said something again, I can't seem to remember but this time it wasn't enough. When I went to speak again, he put his hand over my mouth and he began thrusting again. His fleshy spear wasn't going to stop until the rivers flowed red, or so it seemed. As I lay there on my back, in the backseat of a car I had never even seen before, with a man I'd hardly known before, I thought. I can't tell you how long it lasted, because once I started thinking the pain kinda went away, although it was only to be replaced by a new type of pain much deeper down. How could I ever trust anyone after that?"

Natalie is lying there with his hand covering her mouth, leaving just enough room for air to enter and exit her nostrils, when her eyes bulge: My mother was raped. She was sexually assaulted. That was what their biggest fight was about. And she realizes she may have consented to this at first, but now it is not much different than her mother. Nat wonders: Is it destiny for the women in our family to be taken and used in such a manner? Is it destiny for men to take what they want and get away with it?

Before she can continue her epiphany, she realizes he has finished and she can't see or feel his toes curling but she can see the satisfaction in his face. The satisfaction he stole from her body. She finally pushes him off her and searches for her clothes. Natalie is furious that she didn't claw his eyes out before he could shoot his sin inside of her. She vows next time something even close to this happens, she won't be so complacent. She promises herself she won't be weak or defenseless.

"So, I rejoined my friends filled with feelings of shame and anger. The movie was Goldfinger. Some James Bond action feature or something. I never saw it. There are a lot of things I hadn't seen when I was sixteen. There were a lot of things I needed to experience, and that shouldn't have been one of them. It was at that point that I decided to fight to make sure that women could be safe, and to spread awareness about what could happen. I knew what was right and what was wrong, even back then, and that's why I became a feminist. I just didn't know what to call myself yet."

4

"I never saw that boy again, and that was fine, very fine indeed. One year later, in 1965, I was criticized by members of my school's board for the clothes I was wearing. It was almost endless. When I wore skirts, they declared they were too short and distracting to the men in school. When I wore jeans and a Beatles shirt, boys in my grade would tease me for dressing like a guy. It felt like they just wouldn't let me live my life, and to me that's not what America should be about. Ya know, not feelin' free and all that.

I was sick of all of it. I didn't know how to fight back without getting kicked out of school, so I went to a local library and checked out two books. One was *The Feminine Mystique* by Betty Friedan. I also got *The Second Sex* by Simone De Beauvoir. These two books helped change everything for me. I wasn't much of a reader back then, but I tried my best to comprehend and absorb everything that I read. They were challenging; even now I'm not sure I fully understand either one if I'm being completely honest. I would come home and go straight to my room to read. One night, my dad bluntly mentioned that books weren't for women unless they were cookbooks. I was furious, to say the least."

Nat stares down her father, who made his unnecessary comment because his eldest daughter brought a book to the table. He sipped his spiked coffee, and Nat said: "And maybe power, privilege and booze aren't meant for men either, it seems they can't handle any of it responsibly." (Natalie would later say a different version to a man hitting on her relentlessly at a bar in the years to come; to him she would call it the "Four P's". Power, Privilege, Pride, and Pussy; The four things men can't be trusted to treat responsibly)

Daniel Robinson looks like he's about to swing his arm at his daughter for the first time, but there's a fire in her eyes, it's almost like she wants him to do it. One last straw for her to fully embrace her hatred of him. He doesn't seem to mind being pushed over the edge, but then he locks eyes with the wife he has not laid next to in almost a year, and perhaps he sees that hitting Nat would be Kaitlyn's last straw too before she files for a divorce. Daniel grabs his coffee and a newspaper on the counter and goes to his study to smoke a cigar.

Nat lets out her breath. Kaitlyn looks like she's going to cry. Patty is out at a friend's house, as per usual these days. Nat manages a smile when her Mom gets up and leaves to clean the newly dirtied dishes. It was her first victory.

5

“My studies helped me realize that only two years prior, the Equal Pay Act was signed and passed. It was legislation first introduced in 1942 during World War II and it was laughed at and ignored until recently. I became disgusted with the country we live in. Falsely claiming to be the Land of the Free and the Home of the Brave. The only brave people are the ones who actually fight for freedom. Those who stand against the oppressors who outnumber them in power and wealth, but not in population. These brave people might be soldiers, fighting for the freedom of South Koreans, but in a sense they are also being used like tools by our government. On our home front we have people protesting for peace and love, which is stellar, but we need people fighting for equality as well. A soldier doesn't need a uniform, and I'll tell ya, the Equal Pay Act was only one victory in a war far longer than 'Nam.”

Natalie comes home on a Friday night during her junior year in 1966. She doesn't care for school, or the lack of education about women's rights. History is one of the few classes she cares about, despite its selective teaching. She is no longer friends with many of the girls she used to go out with. She's enjoying the beautiful weather and decides she's going to go upstairs to get a book to take with her on a walk. As she starts up the steps, her mom hears her and calls her name. From Kaitlyn's tone, Nat already knows she's going to be scolded. Her mom comes out from her bedroom

with a face soaked in fury. "Natalie Jamie Robinson, how could you get suspended again?"

"Very easily, Mom," Nat says with little interest as she tries to walk past her mom to her bedroom. Kaitlyn puts her arm against the wall, blocking the way like a boom barrier attached to a toll gate. Then she glances over Nat's shoulder at Patty's room and asks, "Where is your sister?"

"Where do you think? At Jenny's. Or Debby's, or Linda's. Or anywhere except here. You seem to be the only one who doesn't mind being around Dad."

Kaitlyn utters an angry grunt, and her fury-filled face is washed over by a face that's clearly offended. "Natalie! You know divorce is expensive, we've talked about this. Now tell me why you called your principal a monkey right now or you'll be locked in your room tonight, missy."

Seventeen-year-old Natalie sarcastically rolls her eyes, then says: "I didn't call him a monkey; I called him 'a dumb ape'."

"And why on God's green Earth would you say such a thing?"

"Because the man threatened to send me home because my dress was showing my knees, when just last week he did nothing when two boys pushed me down and spat on me for 'trying to be a man' when I wore jeans and a Bob Dylan shirt. He literally said, 'boys will be boys, and if you wanna be one so bad you're gonna have to get used to it'. So, yeah, I called him a dumb ape. A week ago, he thought I was being too manly, then this week

my attire wasn't feminine enough because I was showing too much? King Kong needs to make up his Goddamn mind."

Kaitlyn is staring at her daughter in disbelief. Her eyes begin to flicker, then she looks away. Her mouth moves, opens, then she simply sighs and moves her arm. Nat walked right past her. Another "victory" for Natalie. Although a victory against her Mom, didn't feel as sweet.

6

"Later that week, two very different things happened. On the bright side, I started playing games of baseball with some of my friends after school. On the downside, a friend also got me hooked on cigarettes. A habit I was never quite able to quit. But one of those days, not everything went off without a hitch. One day, the boy that pushed me, Dylan Dorn, or Dylan 'Doorknob', was playing."

Nat is walking up to the field, mitt and bat in hand. Dylan spots her and motions for a friend to come closer. The friend does, and Dylan asks, "What is she doing here? We don't want any ugly ass cheerleaders."

"Actually, she's here to play," responds the league's unofficial pitcher.

Dylan sneers so loud, Nat hears him and asks, "What's wrong Doorknob, forgot your steak at home?"

“Shut up lezzbo. You probably suck. Aren’t you scared you might break a nail?”

“You’re cute when you’re angry Doorknob, but did you know I have the most runs-batted-in out of everyone?” Nat’s hair is in a bun, and she instinctively goes to wipe a loose strand of it from her brow.

“Whatever, slut,” he says and turns away.

In a flash, Nat runs up to him and swings the wooden bat directly into the tender spot behind his knee. He collapses inward, grasping the spot where the bat crashed into his leg.

“You psycho bitch!” he cries.

But she doesn’t hear him.

“Well, what is it Dylan? Am I an unattractive dyke, or am I a dirty slut? Make up your fucken mind!”

“You’re both!” he calls out. All eyes on the field are officially on them. More of the players are arriving in slow trickles. Most are frozen, waiting to see what happens next. Nat kicks out at his face and he catches her foot and stands up while driving her backward. She falls on her butt. Dylan steals the bat from her grip, brings it over his head like a pickaxe, and swings it downward. One of the new arrivals is already there and they’re holding Dylan’s wrists and squeezing tight. Two other players come. One helps Nat to her feet. The other leads Dylan away.

The one who stopped Dylan 'Doorknob Dorn mid-swing, calls out. "Both of you, leave now. Don't come back. Go play baseball somewhere else." And so Dylan complied. Nat listened, but deep inside she realized she no longer had any interest in sports. She had something else in her mind. Instead, she was intent on learning how to properly defend herself.

7

"I went to a self-defense class for women. I met my friend Barbara there. Barbara was a hardcore feminist. Me and her got along quite nicely, although I didn't see eye to eye with her on some issues. She told me all men were born assholes. She believed that they were a plague, and inequality was just one of many side effects. She understood feminist theory better than I did though, so it was helpful for me to listen to her break down some things for me.

Barbara was older and drove, so it also made it easier for me to get to the classes, since at the time I was forced to ride my bike everywhere. Barbara was a nurse, and despite how long she worked as a nurse, the male nurses still made more than her. She frequently got hit on by patients, and once, she told me, even the husband of a patient made a move on her. Back then, and even now, I don't share all of Barbara's radicalized ideas, but I was certain that America needed to go through a series of changes to truly

be the Land of the Free. I mean how could you have a motto and not live up to it? Despite these differences, when Barbara asked me to join her in the field and make a difference, I accepted. I yearned to be an active participant in the changes to come. There needed to be equality between the sexes.”

Barbara and Natalie are walking towards a deli. Krystal Lyons was fired the other day for theft. They were saying she stole from the register, but local news began bursting with her story when she claimed she was fired for trying to file a sexual harassment suit. It just so happens that Barbara was friends with Krystal. So they marched and picketed the store. Nat was overwhelmed by the amount of support that was given. There were over thirty people with signs, and amazingly, they weren't all women either. They marched up and down the shopping center chanting “We want justice” and “NO we will not make you a sandwich AND be objectified”.

Nat noticed that some of the other customers and patrons of some of the neighboring stores were shooting them peculiar looks of curiosity and disdain. Nat, who's holding a sign that says “Don't lie Don't harass Don't bother” walks over to Barbara and says: “Maybe we should do this in a way that won't disrupt the other stores. It's not like they did anything to deserve this.”

“Exactly,” Barbara replies. “They didn't do anything. They didn't raise their voices when a worker at their neighboring store was fired unjustly.

They just ignored it. Like everyone else. Except us. Now they'll have to deal with it until we, the people, are satisfied."

"Then, the owner of the deli, this big, tall man who'd be very fat if he wasn't 6'5, came out and walked up to the protestors. 'Who is in charge here?' he asked. Before Barbara or the other organizer could speak up, one of the girls replied, 'Women are. And it's about damn time.'"

8

The tall man shook his head and let out a mocking laugh. "You dykes aren't even in charge of your own periods. You don't even have any proof of what happened other than that broad's hearsay. She's lying."

"Same goes for you, pig," One of the girls shouted back.

"What do you want from me, eh? Give her the job back? Say I'm sorry for saying something I didn't say? I never touched her. Now don't you hippies have sum'tin better to do like go picket Nixon and the war?"

"You're scared because the public's eye is on you," Barb replied. "Now get my friend Krystal severance pay, or go back to your smelly deli and play nice."

"I'm done playin' nice gals, just you wait and see." He turned abruptly and the girls behind him parted for him to walk back into his workplace. An hour later, the cops came to break up the crowd.

"Anyone that wants to spend a night downtown can stay right where you are. Anyone who doesn't, can drop their signs and go home right now. You're trespassing and loitering on private property. Disrupting the peace too," the cop said, through a megaphone. He had three squad cars with him, and although his subordinates didn't look like they wanted to hit women, their nightsticks were out nonetheless.

"At the sight of the fuzz, a few of the girls left before they even got out of their cars. I heard Barbara call them cowards then told the ladies to stand their ground. She said, 'Alice Paul and her suffragists went to jail for equality. We must honor her memory by standing our ground for what we believe'.

I remember one of the girls mentioning that Alice Paul was practically tortured in prison, and force-fed. Then the cop began speaking on the megaphone, and half of the remaining protesters dispersed. Barbara said that when they abandoned their signs, they also abandoned their beliefs. I said, 'Maybe they just can't handle jail, or maybe they have people to take care of at home.'

'How matronly' is all Barbara said as the police began handcuffing the seven or eight of us remaining."

9

“So, there I was, reflecting on my life to that point. Only a few weeks shy of eighteen, spending the night in a jail cell with my peers. It was a Saturday night in September of 1965 and I was pretty sure they called my mom. A lot of the time I was thinking about how mad she would be. Maybe she’d disown me. I wish she would have been proud of her daughter for rebelling to try to help someone, but I knew that was doubtful.

Was it really worth it to feel like I was making a difference? I was beginning to wonder. As far as we knew, Krystal’s life would remain the same, while we would all have an arrest on our records from this point on. Sensing my turmoil, Barbara came over to me and tried comforting me. It wasn’t one of her strengths. That’s for sure.”

Barbara trots up to Natalie, puts a hand on her shoulder and says: “It’s okay. We’ll burn that motherfucker’s house down.”

Nat, who sincerely hopes Barb is kidding, can only say, “What?”

“He had the audacity to call the cops on us, Nat! He’s never gonna change without being afraid or understanding, and as a privileged man he’ll never experience either! We can’t let him win. We don’t deserve to be treated like criminals just because of that prick.”

“But Barbara, if you attack him or his home after this, we DO deserve to be treated like criminals.”

Barbara shook her head. "Don't go soft on me in here, Nat. We need Valkyries and Amazonians. Not complacent housewives that double as butlers, bartenders, chefs and—"

"Okay, okay, I get your point, Barbara."

"In that moment, I decided I needed to find my own truth. For example, Barbara didn't give enough credit to the men that protested with us. Two of them were locked in a cell not too far from our own. She hardly even mentioned them let alone appreciated them for their contribution to our struggle. I decided at that point, not to fight for equality because I was a woman, and not because I've faced injustice, but simply on the grounds that we should have been treated equally from the start, and that was simply the right thing to do. You shouldn't care about how women are treated only because you are one, just like you shouldn't care just because you have a mother or a sister. That's not true empathy."

10

"So, my parents were pretty mad. My dad served up a couple of dishes of disgust with an extra side of cold. Essentially, he decided that a silent treatment would hurt more than a loud scolding. I'm not sure if it worked in his favor or not, it was pretty weird to see him with his trap shut. On the other hand, my mom was too infuriated to even attempt such a stoic move.

She yelled at me from the time she picked me up with my dad, all the way until I climbed into my bed and put a pillow over my head. But what's the point of being a teenager if you don't get in trouble?"

11

"A few years flew by, and before I knew it, I was a young woman living on my own at the age of twenty-two. The Seventies had just begun, and the new decade felt refreshing. It definitely helped inspire my independence.

My relationship with my parents continued to get tested, but it mostly remained sustainable as long as we didn't see each other too often. I still saw Barbara every now and then, but as time went on, she continued to get into worse and worse trouble. She built up her criminal record while I continued researching history and trying to find myself. The real me. History and Philosophy quickly became my favorite subjects. Confucius once said 'Study the past if you would define the future' and that accurately explained how I felt. History is about learning, and Philosophy is about thinking, sometimes abstract thinking, and viewing situations from different perspectives. A combination of the two, I thought, would lead to the answers I sought.

Unsurprisingly, I ended up going to California State University, which was only a few minutes' drive from the house I grew up in. The school's

motto was 'Speak the truth as a way of life' which certainly resonated well with me. It was cool to be proud of the educational institution I went to.

Once, on a cold November night, I went to my younger sister's twentieth birthday party. It was a tradition for us to have a family party, then we'd have one with our friends. When I turned twenty, I convinced my parents I was too old to have a party with the family. Since then, the new family tradition has been amended so that the party for the twentieth birthday is the last one. Surely my sister could have thanked me for freeing up her next birthday to go out drinking with her friends, but whatchya gonna do?

Remember how in the last five years a bunch of different states have been raising their drinking age? Well, not California. Still twenty-one. Just like it always has been. Eighteen for husbands, brothers, cousins and friends to get drafted and die in Vietnam, twenty-one to drink at a bar with your friends. The responsibility between indulging in a dangerous drug and legally killing someone was a fine line of approximately three years. So freakin' bogue.

Well, anyway. I went back to my house and picked up a bottle of liquid garbage A.K.A. Cold Duck, and prepared myself for another fun family event. I pulled up in front of my house and saw my uncles walking inside the house. They had a bunch of big bags and boxes of beer in their hands. I braced myself like any other college student-about-to-deal-with-family

would. I popped out my Cold Duck and got jiggy with it. Down the hatch it went, then I sealed it, put it in my passenger seat and got out of my car, ready to deal with my family. As far as red wine goes, it wasn't too bad."

12

Nat stumbles into the house she grew up in. She sees her grandmother and hugs her. Her grandmother asks her if she has seen her sister. Nat says she hasn't yet, but will tell her if she does. She manages to scale the stairs before any other relatives spot her. She strides into her old bedroom. What she sees devastates her. The posters in her room are vacant from the walls she left them on. The pictures she had on her desk are gone, as if she took all of them with her—which she didn't. Her second favorite blanket that she was unable to take with her was gone, replaced by a boring white one instead. Upon checking her closet, she wasn't surprised to find that it was empty. All of her excess outfits, shoes, and childhood toys stored there were gone.

"I was furious. I stormed downstairs, but before I could reach my Mom or Dad, my uncle saw me at the bottom of the stairs. 'What's up, Flat Nat?' A nickname he gave me ever since I went through puberty and didn't develop large breasts. Why my uncle felt the need to comment on something of the sort always bothered me, but at that time I didn't want to start a fight, at

least not with him. 'Hi, Uncle Joe' I said, and tried walking around him. He sidestepped and cut me off.

'Woah, woah, woah. Where's the fire, little lady? Did some man look at a girl's butt or something?'

'What? No. I just want to talk to my parents.' I was unaware of what he was referencing back then, too blinded by emotion. But it didn't take long for him to reveal what he felt needed to be said.

'Not as mad as you are right now you won't. Your father told me about some of the disrespectful things you've said to him. No offense Natalie, but I won't have a woman speaking to my brother with such discourtesy. Not you and your hippy ideals or your pestering mother. A father should be respected.'

I realized three things. Uncle Joe was drunk, my father had been telling him things and the third; when my dad tells people things, he's good at getting them to see his one-sided perspective.

'I don't wanna talk about any of this, Uncle Joe,' I said, but when I tried to walk around him a second time, he grabbed my shoulder and clamped his hand down like a vice.

I told him he was hurting me, but he spoke over me and said, 'Well maybe one night in a cell isn't enough learning experience for you then, huh? I didn't fight in Korea for housewives and their daughters to start infringing on the rights of the man of the household.'

'No, you fought in Korea because you got drafted. Now leave me alone or stop drinking. Either way, get your hand off me!'

His bald head suddenly turned as red as a cherry. His grip tightened. 'You little cunt!' he growled. My Mom came over and asked what was going on. Her eyes scanned her brother-in-law's face, then focused on his hand clenched on my skinny shoulder. He observed her line of sight and loosened his grip and finally let go as she walked over. My Mother closed the distance between us, and stood in front of me.

'Natalie, go to your room. I'll be right there.'

HA, my room. I'll never forget thinking that was a joke. As I climbed up the stairs and went to the resting place of my old bedroom, I heard Mother say: 'There will be no fighting on my daughter's birthday, and no fighting in my home.'

I turned as the last of my view dissipated below the staircase just in time to see Joe's lips curl. Then he muttered, 'We both know it isn't your house' and then that was all. I was back in the confines of the plain white room on the second floor. The once sacred sanctuary of a young teenage girl, long gone now.

13

"When my Mom walked in, I expected her to yell. She didn't. She said, 'Joe's always been a you-know-what. Don't let him ruin your day. Now come downstairs and say happy birthday to your sister.'

'You mean a drunken asshole. I guess Dad taught him well.'

My mom's calm demeanor quickly faded, and she turned around. Before she could go off on me, I exploded outwards on her."

Kaitlyn turns around and is met with a fiery glare from Nat who says: "You guys changed my room entirely. You took away everything about it that made it feel like home. Everything that made it mine. And my dear Uncle demeans you because of your sex. Just like Dad."

"Nat, please don't start with the feminist stuff, not today please."

"Then when Mom? When are you going to get your own car? Control the money you make. Stop letting them treat you differently. They treat you like a glorified babysitt--"

"That's enough, young lady. I'm content with where I am, and I don't get all whiny and upset just because I'm a woman."

"It's not because we're women, I'm proud of that, it's because we get treated differently than a man would."

"Well it doesn't matter. If you can't get out of this bad mood, then you can wish your sister a good day and leave."

"What's it matter anyway, my bedroom is basically a guest room now."

"When you have bills to pay you will understand. Until then, I don't wanna hear it, Natalie Jamie Robinson!"

That time certainly wasn't a victory for Nat. In fact, victories are quite scarce in arguments against one's own parents as Nat had learned the hard way over the years.

"Fine. I'm out of here then. Goodbye," Nat said, as she grabbed her car keys off of the once familiar bed and stormed out of the room. Kaitlyn Robinson lowered her head and shook it as her eldest daughter walked past her and stormed out.

14

"This next part is probably the hardest to recall, so I'm very sorry if I tear up. I'm sure you'll remember me in quite a similar fashion on that fateful night. Our paths first crossed back then, nearly six years ago already. Time flies when you're a bird in a cage."

Nat goes out of her room and walks to her sister's bedroom. It's empty, but at least it still has a touch of Patty's personality. Nat exits, then weaves in and around each family member downstairs, occasionally stopping to say hello (as one might do while driving in traffic except with curses rather than hellos). After the entire house was searched, Nat stood by the bathroom she just checked and tried to think hard about where the birthday

girl might be. She opens the backdoor slowly and walks into the backyard. She can hear a low conspiratorial voice, but she doesn't see anyone. She starts walking into the woodsy area of the yard. Leaves crunch under her feet, then she sees something...

It's her sister sitting on a bench. Her face is completely blank and vacant; no one's home, please come back later. Sitting awfully close next to her on the bench is her Uncle Joe. Nat's jaw drops when she sees that Joe has got his hand on Patty's thigh, and he's slowly moving it up her short dress. Patricia is almost facing Nat, but there must be something interesting in the leaves in front of her because Patty's empty eyes don't move off the ground. The invasive hand starts to disappear under cloth.

There wasn't a single moment in Nat's life where she didn't know what to do until this one. Her stomach tightens. Her heart seems to take a dive down into her stomach. She calls out, "Hey Patty where are you!" from behind a tree, and she can't see her disgusting uncle's face, but she can picture it as she hears him mutter a curse. She can hear another leaf crunch as they stand up, then she circles around the tree. Nat takes an invisible knife and stabs herself in the heart as she gives Joe a heartwarming smile and grabs Patty from under her arm and starts leading her back to the house. "I wanna show you something, sis!" she says as energetically as she can muster. She walks Patty back to the house. She's trying her best not to vomit or cry.

Joe is standing there holding a plastic ringed six pack of beers that has been whittled down to only two. He looks at his nieces suspiciously, or perhaps it's a mere look of desire. Nat doesn't know anymore.

Once Nat and Patty are in the new guest room, Nat goes off. "What the fuck was that?"

Patty's voice drops down to a whisper and at first, she can only say one word. "Nothing. I don't know what you mean."

Nat's so tempted to slap her younger sister, but at the same time she wants to hug her closer than ever. A hot tear is already making its way down her face. Patricia sees it and recoils. She turns to look at the plain white wall.

"Patricia, how long has this been going on?" When the birthday girl says nothing, Nat grabs her by the shoulder and starts shaking her. "HOW LONG?" she yells. She can't help herself. Her head is spinning.

"ONLY A FEW TIMES," Patty finally calls out through a series of sobs, and now she too is crying. Nat seizes the opportunity and pulls Patty in close, and now her younger sister's head is spouting a fountain of warm tears onto Nat's shoulder. Nat feels guilty, almost as if she shouldn't have interfered. She probably shouldn't have prodded, she figures. Her mind is racing.

Then, in her quietly maintained voice, Patty continues: "It started four years ago." Nat's arm is going up and down Patty's back in a sweeping

motion. She almost asks if he ever did anything more than touch, how frequently it happened, and so much more, but then she decided she didn't want to know. She couldn't bear to know. Her thirty-nine-year-old uncle has already been doing far too much.

"I have to go," Nat says. "I love you and I'm so sorry this happened." Nat kisses her sister and leaves the room.

"Then, after that, I waited outside. Remember that baseball bat I had when I was a kid? I found it in the shed. When my Uncle Joe came out of the house to go to his car a little bit later, I attacked him. My first swing connected with his head and he went straight down into the asphalt. 'What the fuck?' he slurred, and I could tell he was still drunk, despite planning to drive home. I kicked him in the back and he turned so suddenly that I backed up. 'I always knew you were a cunt. Is this just because I said you'd turn out like your whore of a moth-' I swung the bat into the accusatory finger he was pointing at me and he yelled out in pain. Tears threatened to cloud my vision, but I pushed them back.

'SO, YOU THINK IT'S OKAY TO TOUCH LITTLE GIRLS, HUH? ONES THAT YOU'RE FUCKING RELATED TO, YOU SICK FUCK?' His face was a caricature of surprise, like someone that just heard their diary get read back to them.

'I don't know what the fuck you're talkin' bout, girl you've been smoking grass with those hippy feminists haven't you?' he said.

I swung the bat straight into his kneecap and he grunted in terrible pain. Good, I remember thinking. I told him that he better crawl away to his car and never come back. To leave California and go to some place where sick fucks like him would be accepted. I said if I ever saw him again, I'd kill him without hesitation. He didn't look like he believed me, in fact his eyes kind of said not if I kill you first. I brought my wooden bat down into his ribs and heard a cracking sound. At this point, I couldn't tell if it was my bat, or his ribs, but he began cursing a lot and he tried to get up. I told him to go to his car before, but I couldn't help but kick him and send him back down into the dirt again like he deserved. 'That last one was for any other young women you may have touched over the years. The rest was for my sister.'

I walked back to my car and left. I remember that I couldn't stop shaking. Little did I know that Joe was thinking of how I'd be the one leaving in exile instead. The tears finally overcame me as I drove back to my apartment. I wondered if I should have hit him harder and killed the bastard. If I should have bothered trying to explain to my mom. If I should have taken Patty with me. As I pondered, I felt pangs of regret. Not for my uncle, but maybe I could have done things differently. When I got back to my apartment, the police were already there waiting for me."

15

“So, then I had the pleasure of questioning why you assaulted a man almost twice your age. You were calm and collected. You actually responded, ‘Because he’s a shit-sipper’, which didn’t make your case look too great at the time,” an authoritative male voice said.

“You told me your tale, and at the end you were bawling your eyes out. I could see through your hard exterior. My partner thought you only cried for ‘sympathy points’ but I knew better. I could see it right in your eyes, your tears were real, your struggle was real. Everything happened as you said it. If you were lying you would have probably tried to say you used the bat in self-defense or something, but you didn’t. I guess I’m too much of a softie, but I felt like hugging you and telling you I believed everything, but I had to follow protocol.

The controversial trial that followed our little Q & A was one that I’ll never forget. If your sister didn’t testify, you had a very good chance of going to prison for a couple of years for attempted murder.”

“And it helped that I didn’t beat him within an inch of his life too, right? How I openly allowed him to leave, right?” Nat said.

“Yes, that certainly helped. Your lawyer did a good job of stating that it was in the defense of another. And again, that testimony made my heart turn to stone. Your poor sister.”

“And so, I got off with a battery charge, and a year in a state prison.”

“Throughout those months I found myself thinking more and more about you. From the second I booked you, to the last moment I saw you in the courtroom. I remember the headlines that were coming out around then from The Long Beach Press-Telegram. NATALIE ROBINSON-RAPIST FIGHTER by Joe McCormick. NAT ROBINSON, A FEMINIST’S STRUGGLE by Barbara Ferring. I read every one of them. It led me to consider deeply all of the things you and your friends were fighting for.”

16

“Then you decided to track me down when I was let out early, and here we are, huh?”

“Yes. Almost three years strong now.”

He grasped her hand with his.

“Thank you so much for explaining why feminism is so important to you. I just wanted to know more about your ideology and how it shaped your upbringing. I’ve got one more question, if you don’t mind answering. Natalie Jamie Robinson, will you marry me?”

He produced a considerable diamond ring from his pocket. Instead of a protective cloth, it was resting on a twenty-dollar bill. The twenty-dollar bill had FREE YOUR MIND written on it. Just like it did when Nat scribbled on a twenty they got back for change after their first date. She paid for their first

date since he had helped her so much during her case. He kept it all these years. She smiled and looked beautiful.

“Yes, yes of course you big blue idiot!”

He got off his one knee and jumped up and began kissing her. She thought about how sweet it was that he wanted to know her entire story before asking her to be his wife. How he wanted to understand why she became a feminist. Their relationship was always very thought provoking for both of them. She still had more things to tell of course, but that’s the beauty in marriage.

“I hope you know I’m not gonna be the designated cooker and cleaner.”

“I know,” he said, still holding her face. Other people in the expensive restaurant were looking with delighted surprise, although some might have had slight pangs of jealousy. “Don’t worry, we’ll split everything fifty-fifty. Traditional gender roles? Screw ‘em!” he said, ignoring the waiter who brought the check.

Here was a man only three years older, that she first spoke to when he put handcuffs on her and read her rights. One that she could tell was good-hearted like the men that had gone to jail for what they believed in back during her first protest. He was handsome back then and his looks didn’t falter by the time he asked her to dinner after her incarceration was complete.

She laughed. She was happy. Nat had relived the worst moments of her life in one long conversation tonight, but she got through it all and made it where she was on the day of her engagement in 1976, and that made her very happy.

II

Nat's actions throughout her life helped make many people join the feminist cause. It helped a lot of different people consider and think deeply about the struggle. She just wanted country-wide awareness. Worldwide too, if possible. She planned to dedicate her life to striving for equality.

Her actions helped put a terrible molesting alcoholic in jail. Of course she had to go too, but it wasn't all bad. Many of the women there actually applauded her struggle. Prison wasn't a cakewalk, but Nat had dealt with much worse over the years. She actually managed to keep her head out of trouble for once and get parole. Her parents eventually got separated and she and Pattie forged a powerful relationship with her mom. Patricia took years, but she would eventually thank Nat for saving her life.

When Nat wasn't writing feminist criticism and articles, she assisted at a battered women's shelter and helped the women she met in prison reintegrate into society as a caseworker.

She touched all these lives, and she herself was only twenty-eight. Despite the romantic gesture, Natalie still wanted to spend the twenty dollar bill. It was still worth a lot of money back in those days. Nat was much more of a believer of mental memories than physical ones, but that did not keep her from flaunting her engagement ring until her wedding day and beyond. Nat would spend the twenty on groceries for her new apartment with her fiancé. That twenty would go through several pairs of hands before ending up in a music shop in Boulder City, Nevada. This shop is also frequented by an easygoing guy named Bobby Tortano. Our Mutual Friend will be meeting him soon.

Chapter 3:1977 Dennis Michaels

1

It was a hot summer. Summers in Nevada were always stupid hot, but this one took the cake. If being hot and dry wasn't bad enough, Dennis also had to move away from the large swimmable bodies of water he loved so much back in Cali. But what else is one to do when their mother is sick? Love requires sacrifice, and Dennis Michaels considered his love one of his most valuable assets.

So now he is twenty-three, bored and alone. He took time off from college to come to his mother's aid, because she had no one else. But after two weeks, he couldn't help but feel empty. He brought his drum set with him, but he can't play it around his mom who is constantly bedridden and there's almost no concerts that come through the Henderson area. He has no friends out here, basically no family and the idea that he doesn't know anyone is constantly looming over his head.

Dennis is what you would call a social creature who has been isolated.

He decided to spend the day checking out a local music shop. Filled to the brim with instruments, records, musicians, and girls. He shyly walks into the store and begins his browsing when he spots a man pinning a post on a board. The board is titled: **FLYERS & ADVERTISEMENT**. Next to it is a jar

that says **Donations Please!!**

The flyer the man put up reads: **Four-piece heavy metal band looking for drummer. Must be old enough to drink and know how to play!**

"Hey dude, is that your band?" Dennis asks.

The man with hair almost down to his butt and big sunglasses whirls around and gets into a fighting stance. "Wu-what?" His hands are crisscrossed in a dual karate chop style.

"I was asking if you're in that band," Dennis says, pointing to the flyer. The man looks over his shoulder slowly, as if he still isn't sure if Dennis is going to pull a gun on him or not. Then he looks forward again and relaxes back into a tall slouch.

"Oh, yeah man, yeah. I'm the bassist. The name's Dean Caulfield."

Dennis takes his hand and shakes it, slightly surprised about the British accent. "I see you're looking for a drummer. I just so happen to be looking for some people to jam with, you dig? My name is Dennis Michaels."

Dean scanned Dennis from head to toe. Then he says: "We're trying to be a pretty serious band ya'know? What are your influences?" Dean asks slyly with a hint of an accent.

"Well, my favorite band on the planet is probably Black Sabbath, but I also dig Led Zeppelin, Weather Report, Cream, Jethro Tull, King Crimson, Rush, Yes—"

Dean started shaking his head up and down and smiling. Then he interrupted Dennis and shouted, "Yes, yes, yes! Fan of the Brits, I see!" he says, while Dennis was still lost in his thoughts.

"I guess Pink Floyd and The Beatles are pretty cool too, although both of their drummers kind of bore me."

They both laugh in unison and Dean claps Dennis on the back. All of a sudden, his eyes bulge and he keeps his hand on Dennis' back. "Wait."

Dennis felt a flush of unknown fear trickle into his brain. Why was he worried? Was he that desperate to play music again? He guessed maybe he was.

Dean asks, "How old are you?" and peers at the drummer's beardless face.

Dennis sighs, clearly relieved. "I'm twenty-three. Old enough to drink." He winks and nods towards the flyer again.

"Aw, not too bloody bad. You're a young little bloke, aintchya? Don't matter one bit to me though so long as you can play."

"You're from the UK aren't you? And how old are you?" Dennis asks, looking at his bearded acquaintance. The facial hair made it hard to guess Dean's age.

"I'm a proper twenty-six, and yessir, born and raised, but I'm just a Joe Bloggs is all I am, so don't be too intimidated, mate."

"I won't be," Dennis smiled genuinely, perhaps for the first time since he moved to Nevada. He had made his first friend.

2

Dean had invited Dennis to come over to "the band's house" as they called it. Dennis explained the situation to his mother, and Dean had said it would be "as groovy as a cup of cold water in hell" if he brought his drum kit. After a ten-minute drive with his kit packed into his car, Dennis pulled up to the house. The garage was open, and three men were standing in it. Two had cans of beer in their hands, while Dean appeared to have either a cigarette or a doobie in his mouth.

Dennis got out and began unloading the car. Dean walked over. *Definitely a doobie*, Dennis thought while lifting out his heavy bass drum. He had almost forgotten the smell of reefer. He hadn't smoked any since he first tried it during his freshman year.

"Need any help mate? I'll do you a good service now before I get all knackered out."

"You mean tired?" Dennis teased.

"You want help or what?" Dean joked back and picked up a floor tom.

They brought the kit into the garage and set it down, while Dennis marveled at all the amps and speakers they had stashed in the garage. The

walls were also littered with posters and tickets to concerts. The reefer smelled even more potent in their jam space.

“So, your neighbors don’t care that you guys drink and smoke and play music?”

The one with a shaved head shrugged his shoulders and said, “We don’t care either way, they can lick a butt if our jams bother them so much.”

“Well, what Mike means to say is, they haven’t complained yet in the past five months, and if they do try callin’ the fuzz we got enough sweaty arses for them to kiss,” Dean said, and then took another puff of his doobie.

“Shut up already Dean, will ya? My name is Raymond Castle, but you can call me Ray.”

“Nice to meet you, Ray, I’m Dennis.”

“I don’t really care for that much. Makes you sound like a straight shooter. I’m gonna call you Denny instead.”

“I guess that’s alright,” Dennis said timidly, with a bit of a confused look.

“And I’m Mike Salvatore. Or as Dean calls me, ‘The Nookie King.’”

Before Dennis could give out another “nice to meetya,” Dean said, “Our final member is the lead guitarist. But that bloke is always late. That lad’s name is Jason Hammond and he’s got an ego bigger than my fuck-stick so I hope you aren’t easily offended or annoyed, so I do,” then after a pause, “or you’re not gonna last bloody long.”

"I don't think so, at least not really."

"Well then welcome to the tea—" Dean started, but Mike held up his hand.

"Don't forget, we gotta make sure he doesn't bite it behind the drums. No offense of course! We tried out this one drummer who couldn't even keep a beat. He had less rhythm than my grandma having a seizure."

"Okay lad," Dean interjected. "We'll play our most recent. It has no drums written yet. If you think you can write or create something that matches it, then you're in. At least temporarily."

The members gathered their instruments. Dennis thought that combined, the bass, and guitar weren't worth half of his drum set, but he said nothing. Mike still sat there, sipping his beer. Raymond began with a heavy, pounding riff and Dennis could feel the Black Sabbath influences. Then it became a slow, rhythmic chug, and Dean joined in plucking at his bass strings with ease.

Dennis was into the music. He could tell they were all talented, but still slightly unrefined. Just the two of them already showcased an impressive amount of energy.

The duo may have only played to a crowd of two, but to Dennis it seemed like they were playing to a crowd of millions in their minds. They were lost in their own worlds, far from a garage practice space in Nowhere, Nevada. Dennis was watching the ceiling tremble when the final member

trudged in with his guitar on his back and his amp in hand. The band paid him no mind. Although Mike did say "Looky here who finally showed up!" but most of that was lost in the sea of sounds washing throughout the garage and emptying out excess sound waves like a giant funnel.

Without acknowledging Dennis in any way, the guitarist plugged in his gear and started shredding out of nowhere. At first, he thought the dude was just shredding to warm up or grab the attention of the others, but then he realized it wasn't the case. He just synced up with the others immediately and played his part. That meant that the guitar shredder was most likely the lead guitarist while Ray Castle played Rhythm.

Denny decided to impress them back. He got a good feel for the song already, he always was good at that. The meter was simple, for the most part it was in the classic 4/4. The shredder was also playing a heavy riff in unison with Ray now, and he too was lost in his own mind's isolation too. Dennis hoped he wouldn't break their conjoined concentration when he started playing but decided to try to anyway. The drumsticks were in his hand, and his butt planted on the plain black stool. He was counting down so that he could enter at the next measure, but he couldn't help but think, *How long has it been since I was last here? Holding these sticks, looking at what I can hit, kick, roll over, and smash rhythmically.*

Then time was up, and he joined in, making the trio a quartet. He played his heart out.

3

Only Dean turned his head and looked at Denny. He smiled then faded back into his own world. Denny played a simple, but precise beat. He hit the snare at the exact times where the bass had emphasized it to be required, or at least that's how he read it. It was syncopated in a way that seems like it would be an affront to play it any differently. He played fills at what felt like the right time. He rode the ride cymbal and then used the hi-hat and its clutch with perfect precision. He had a perfect feel for the song and he already had thoughts on how he could improve it even more if the song reverted back to this chorus in the latter half. Then the song sped up, almost as if they were saying *can you keep up?* And Denny did. He changed with the time signature and played more complicated beats. After he was content he wouldn't mess up the beat, he looked up and was delighted to see all three of their heads were bobbing up and down to the tempo. Dean and Ray were smiling. Mike Salvatore killed his beer and decided to sing the remaining parts. He was pretty good too. The song was now complete.

4

"Wow! That was incredible. What's that song called?" Denny asked.

"Black Dust," Dean said.

"My name's Jay Hammond. I'm glad you don't suck, cause I'm only settling for the best. So, for right now you're in." He had a look that said, *there's always someone willing.*

"Dennis," he said. "My name is Dennis. Nice to meet you. I'm quite glad that I don't suck."

"His name is Denny," Ray added.

"So, he's definitely in for the next practice?" Mike asked Jay.

"It looks that way. It's time to finally come up with a name, and play some shows," Jay said.

"Don't you think it's a little early to start booking?" Dean asked.

Jason Hammond got in Dean's face. "You know as well as I do the boys work best under pressure."

Dean shrugged and walked back over to Dennis. "Well, looks like you're one of us now."

Dennis smiled and shook Dean's hand. "Thank you for everything, man. I'm excited to find out what kind of art we can create."

Ray whispered something into Mike's ear and he giggled. Then Jay walked back over. "Do you like The Who?"

"Sure, Keith Moon is insane."

"Let's see a drum solo," Ray said conversationally, as if he didn't care that much either way. Dennis looked at Dean who nodded, and he began

with a drum roll. First on the snare, then the toms. He proceeded to use the bouncing technique and played ghost notes on the snare while crisscrossing his other hand from hi-hat to each cymbal. As his tempo increased, he switched from a single bass pedal to double bass utilizing both his feet. It looked like he was running while the machine gun sound bellowed throughout the garage surprising all the members. Then in a moment's notice he slowed down to a sulky droning pace, while playing almost jazzy taps on the ride cymbal. His finale was another drum roll throughout the parts of his kit, getting progressively faster and faster until his hands and arms became blurred after-images.

He was drenched in sweat when he was finished. He didn't notice until the noise was gone. He wasn't sure if he had played for two minutes or twenty. Mike and Dean clapped. Satisfied enough, Jay nodded. "Now let's do it all again, from the top. I want that song nailed by tonight, gentleman."

"But there was something else I was hoping to nail tonight!" Mike Salvatore commented mildly, and they all laughed, because they knew he was serious. When he frowned and pouted, they laughed even harder with Dennis joining in this time as well.

5

Three weeks later, the band was practicing for their very first show. The band had decided to use the temporary name of "Black Dust," after their song of the same name. They would use it until they could agree on one. Jason wanted their name to become "Black Dust" permanently, while Mike wanted it to be "Oceans." Dean, who didn't want a plural band name, was proposing "Vietnam," because he wanted the band to have political overtones. Ray's vote was for "Don Julio," after his favorite brand of liquor. Dennis did not feel comfortable recommending a band name; perhaps because he didn't feel like he was truly a part of the band yet. Or maybe he just wasn't the type of guy to put himself out there. Ultimately, he was just happy to play music and he didn't really care what any of it was called.

They played through the four songs they had twice through. The songs were as solid as they could have been the second time around.

"Okay. One more time," Jay said, and the other members with stringed instruments all collectively sighed.

"Man, I can't. I need to buy more condoms before Clarissa comes over tonight," Mike whined. "I just started using those things."

"Didn't you just buy a shit ton a month ago?" Jay asked with a little bit of a temper showing.

"Nah man, I bought a fourteen pack two weeks ago. I've only got two left," he said, while unplugging a mic and PA.

"We bloody get it, you know a lot of charvers, ye god dang tuna plugger."

"Wait. They don't sell condoms in packs of fourteen," Dennis said.

"Sure they do," Mike said, although now he looked a little uncertain.

"At least the guy around the corner from my job does."

"After Mike left to go pick up his floozie, Dean said, "Well, I hope he at least gets them at a good discount price," and they all laughed.

"He's not too smart, is he?" Dennis asked with a look of pity.

"No, but what he lacks in brains he makes up for in getting laid. In our old band, I don't think we ever played a show where he didn't find someone to sleep with after. Sometimes I felt like there weren't even single girls at those clubs some nights, and he'd still find someone somewhere," Ray said, in a tone of pure admiration.

"Well, we can still play through the set one more time instrumentally. Let's go, then we can all go our ways and enjoy this disgusting Monday night." They played the set again. And it was just as tight as the first time.

6

Dennis and Dean traveled together. Dennis' car could barely fit his drum set, let alone an additional person. Dean was kind enough to ask him if he wanted a ride to their show. Dean's big cargo van coughed and wheezed

but it held both of their gear safely, and it was easy to load and unload. That was good enough for Dennis.

He was nervous, he hadn't played a show since his high school's talent show where he played a drum solo his present-day-self would have sneered at. Or maybe he was just being too critical of himself, if a kid played the same thing right now he would have likely puked up a few well-meant compliments and words of inspiration.

He was already sweating. It was humid. Was the air conditioning even on? What happened if the venue was so hot inside, that one of his drum sticks slipped from his grip and hit one of the audience members in the face? Or worse, right in the eye.

Then that eyeless freak would be bragging about his missing eye getting taken out by a world-class drummer in the decades to come, said the voice of his father. His dad had gotten him into music. Dennis had originally wanted to play a guitar, but he failed and almost gave up on music entirely. One day, when he couldn't play a minor pentatonic scale at the speed he wanted, he smashed his guitar. His dad suggested that since he was good at smashing the guitar, maybe he'd be more suited for the drums. It turned out he was right.

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"So, have you ever listened to any of the bands we're playing with?" Dennis asked, hoping to distract himself.

“Well, Mime King is a pretty cool rock band. But I’ve never heard of the other two. Hope you’re down to stick around mate, I like to see the other bands that play.”

“That’s fine as long we don’t play such a bad set where I have to go home and cry or hide from embarrassment.” He chuckled, then immediately regretted saying it. What would he do if he jinxed them? Dennis forced himself to relax, and told himself that he was only superstitious when it suited his worries.

“Stop yer bellyaching, you’ll do fine,” Dean said and gave him a thumbs up.

They arrived at Club Sulfur, and Dennis absently wondered why they’d give their venue such a smelly name. Dean carried his gear in while Dennis loaded up the drum pieces one at a time. The venue had a few people drinking at the bar, and a stage that looked the size of a master bed, maybe a little bit bigger. Dennis wasn’t looking forward to setting up, but he did anyway and found that his concentration took away from his nervousness. Plus, they were almost playing to an empty crowd.

Ray trudged in with his equipment in hand. He set it up, then downed a cup of beer that Dennis hadn’t seen him buy. There were unfamiliar faces walking into the venue also bringing gear. Dennis figured it must have been

the next band playing. A man dressed in a nice buttoned-down shirt walked over to the stage.

“Hey, are you guys *Angel Dust*?”

“No sir, we’re *Black Dust*,” Dennis replied.

The well-dressed man looked confused, but nodded his head anyway.

“Right. Well I’m the promoter. My name is Henry Williams the Fourth! Pleasure to meet you. Is the rest of your band here, because everything needs to be set up for a sound check at seven P.M. on the dot, my friend!”

“Yeah, I’m sure they’re heading over here right now,” Dennis said in the most confident voice he could muster. Sir William The Preppy walked away, and Dennis noted how the other band loading in were dressed semi-formally too. He felt out of place, with his blue jeans and Black Sabbath shirt. Dennis entrusted the safety of his kit to the venue now that it was set up and power walked out the back door. He looked around and could not find his bandmates. He walked into the parking lot and saw Mike’s car parked in an isolated spot. He saw the back of Mike Salvatore’s head and began walking over.

Dennis was about to knock on the window when he realized there was a female head in his lap. Mike was evidently playing a game of “Hide the Salami,” and he was winning. Dennis turned as quickly as he could and walked to Dean’s van instead. He felt awkward and was kind of glad Mike

hadn't seen him. Something told him he probably didn't mind an audience too much though if he was doing that in a parking lot.

Dennis found Dean and Ray in the van. Dean was smoking some dope and Ray had produced a tall boy seemingly out of thin air. They both said what was up and asked if Mike or Jay had arrived. Dennis said, "I don't know about Jay, but Mike's definitely coming, if you know what I mean."

Ray laughed heartily but Dean started pondering what Dennis did mean. Dennis left it at that and asked, "Has Mike always been like this?"

"Well," Ray said after another sip of the Budweiser. "He brought a girl to band practice once and they went in the bathroom together and we all did our best to ignore it, but then our conversation was interrupted when we all heard the loud metallic clang of his god damn belt hitting the bathroom floor."

"Maybe it was his turn to pee?" Dennis suggested.

"Who takes off their belt entirely to piss?" Ray asked.

"The Twat King definitely might have a problem, but if he gets to shows early to get head and he's not hurting anyone then we gotta let him do him. Or let him do her, I guess," said Dean. "I can probably make a pun about him getting here *ahead* of the rest of us if I try hard enough."

Ray chuckled. "Michael Salvatore practically coined the phrase getting caught with your pants around your ankles. The amount of times I've seen that fucker in the middle of—"

"We should probably get back inside," Dennis interrupted, and opened the van's door to leave. Then Jay pulled up next to them. He wore sunglasses and had a sandwich in hand.

He gave them a piece sign, then grabbed his gear and began bringing it inside. The rest of the band followed, including Mike, although his "lap girl" was nowhere to be found. Dennis took his place behind the kit, and Ray asked him if he wanted a "show beer." Dennis thanked him but refused because he liked to be sober and focused when playing. At that, Ray and Mike laughed out loud.

Instead of interpreting their laughter, he made sure all his pieces were in the right places.

Bass drum-check.

Floor tom-check.

Left and right tom-check times two.

Snare drum and hi-hat-two more checks.

Ride cymbal, crash cymbal, splash, and china. All drumming systems a-go.

"Okay, sir, let's check those drums," the sound guy said from his obscured booth. Dennis played each tom and his snare slowly until the sound guy said that was good.

"Okay, stage right guitar," and Jay did the same.

"Stage left guitar." Ray's turn.

"Bass?" Dean played a slow down tuned lick.

"And vocals," then Mike said: "Check check check. Ladies I'm checking you out, check check check, your boyfriends are checkin' me out."

The crowd became an impressive five people. Two in the back, one against the wall, and three in the center of the floor. There were others at the bar, but almost all of them were engaged in loud conversations. Dennis noted that some of the members in the next band were sitting at the bar, turned to face the stage.

"Hello Paradise, Nevada! My name is Mike and I'm here to rock your world tonight. We are currently called Black Dust and we like to party!"

Then they began playing their first song.

7

Sweat and disappointment. *Was this what it's like? How it is supposed to be?* Dennis took a drink from the water bottle he brought and began packing up his drums.

Ray hopped on the stage, then almost fell backwards. "I just heard someone talking trash about us. I went to the bathroom and these two fucks over there were saying how sloppy and weird our music was. They said our last song was the only okay one. Our last song was a fuckin' Sabbath cover,"

he said, while pointing at two kids chatting. They barely looked twenty-one.

"Of course, it's the best one. Not just simply *okay!*"

"They just don't know talent, don't take it personally, Ray. And stop drinking, don't you have to drive later?"

Ray simply grunted and finished packing up, occasionally looking up at the two people who didn't enjoy his band's first performance.

"I get where you're coming from mate," Dean said. "Those cunts have no right. They're not seeing a movie. They can't just bitch and moan as soon as it's done. What they did was like seeing a movie and complaining about it while every seat in the theater was filled with the cast and crew. We worked so hard on that set. Other bands have worked so hard on their stuff. Too hard for showgoers to be bloody disrespectful, huh? So what if one of Ray's strings broke, and our drummer momentarily dropped a drumstick because it's hot as balls up there, we still performed for them and tried our bloody best! No need for them to take the piss out of us."

The band looked at Dean in awe, and quite frankly, surprise. Dennis went over and put a hand on his shoulder. The one guy who was leaning against the wall approached the stage, and Dennis saw Ray look at him with angry suspicion.

"Hey guys! That was a really cool set! I had no idea music could be that..." he seemed like he was searching for a word, then seemed to have found it. "Heavy!"

For a second the band simply looked at him, and then each other. Dennis was the first person to snap out of it.

"Thank you so much, my friend." And with that, he shook the hand of their first fan.

8

They stayed and watched the next band set up and begin playing. The promoter got up on the stage when they were done, and spoke into the mic.

"Let's get another round of applause for tonight's opener, *Angel Dust!*"

A few people cheered mildly. The band collectively sighed. "Next up is The Houses!"

They were all pretty embarrassed, but the bar patrons flooded the floor so it made them stick out a little less. The crowd had clearly tripled.

"1-2-3-4 let's go!" the band's singer said, and the band started playing offensively simple music. The lyrics were a cliché throughout, and Dean actually wondered out loud if they were a full-on Beatles cover band at one point.

"I can't stand this much longer guys; this is the softest band I've ever heard. It's so boring I'm gonna fall asleep," Mike complained.

"Soft music can be pretty entertaining, if done right," Dean said, but his face implied he didn't think they were doing it 'right'.

"Whatever. These chicks look boring too. None of this is worth my time tonight anymore. Better luck next time, I guess. See ya," and then Mike left.

"These are actually my friends," the only person who complimented their set said, and Dennis blushed. Before he could apologize on behalf of his bandmates, the fan breathed into his glasses and wiped them with a handkerchief. Then he said, "Yeah, I came to support them, but I don't think I can ever enjoy them properly again after seeing *Black Dust*."

"Wow, that's awfully kind of you. I'm apt to buy you a bevvy at a good watering hole for that. My name's Dean, and this is Dennis. Our two guitarists by the bar are Jay and Ray."

"Funny names you got. My name's Bobby. Bobby Tortano. Nice to meet y'all!"

And so the three of them stayed for the rest of the show together. Raymond and Jason left soon after Mike did. Jason had asked the promoter if they were going to get paid, and Dennis saw the well-dressed man shake his head. After that the duo of guitarists left. Dennis, Dean and Bobby stayed the rest of the show making fun of some of the preppy show-goers, and enjoying their beer until the last act. They made it a point to get their money's worth, especially since they weren't getting paid. Finally, they exchanged contact info since Bobby insisted on being informed the next time they played a show.

Just another day in the life of future rock stars. One new fan, thousands more to come. After their first show, Jason Hammond went home to practice until he reached perfection. He didn't stop until his fingers actually began to bleed. Raymond drove home tipsy, then opted to get drunk again when he got in his bed. He spent the night throwing up in his toilet and eating junk food to fill his empty stomach. Mike Salvatore wasn't knee deep in vagina that night, instead, he was studying to prepare to go to college. He hadn't continued his education since high school. Dean went home and smoked dope and listened to his favorite records with Dennis. Their newest fan Bobby went back to his lonely apartment and attempted to teach himself basic bass skills again. When he got too frustrated to continue, he went to bed.

Life goes on, even after the music stops.

9

After four more shows that yielded similar results, the band had decided to go with the name *Cyclone of Doom*. Michael had suggested stage names where each of their last names be replaced with severe weather conditions, but Jason Hurricane, Dean Tornado, and Dennis Monsoon all refuted that gimmick's alleged coolness. Raymond was the one who proposed the name change, stating that their music would take over the world as suddenly as a cyclone, and leave disasters in the hotel rooms.

Cyclone of Doom's fan base seemed to increase by about one or two fans at every show, excluding Bobby, who had not missed a show yet. Raymond, Dean, and Dennis were at the house fighting over the next show's set list when Jason pulled up.

"I think we need to stick with originals. We can't be labeled as a cunt cover band. It'll hurt our image," Dean said.

"Problem is, no one gives a crap about our originals compared to Sabbath and the heavy metal versions of Pink Floyd we play. As long as we don't do more than two covers a show, no one will consider us a crummy cover band," Ray said, before taking two quick sips from a bottle of Bud Light.

"What do you think, Dennis?" Dean said, turning towards him.

"Bullshit, you know Denny will side with you!" Ray spat.

"I don't care either way, both are fun to play," Dennis said honestly.

Ray let out a sigh. Then Jason burst through the front door.

"Yooooooooooooooooo!"

"What?" the trio asked in unison.

"I got us our biggest show yet," he said, with a huge smirk on his face. They all couldn't help but imagine the metaphorical hard-on he probably had. Jason was notorious for his hunger for fame. Dean once told him that if the band didn't ever get as big as Jay had hoped, he was certain that he would quit.

"Well, what is it, fuckface?" Ray asked.

"We're gonna need to practice three times a week for this one. We'll get so much coverage and spotlight, we might even get a record deal. Then we can go on tour. Or record an album. I'm already thinking about some cool shirt designs. We could—" Jay said, hammering on until Dennis interjected.

"Hold on cowboy, slow down before you have a stroke. Maybe we should wait for Mike to come over too."

"Yeah, you're right," Jay said, appearing as though he regretted his enthusiasm.

"We're opening up for Black Sabbath!" he said all of a sudden, grinning with white teeth showing.

"Oh my Satan!" Ray said.

"How the fuck did you pull that off?" Dean asked.

"Long story short, one of the people who saw our last show at Dinkle's Pub told their tour manager that we'd be a good fit for the local opener. They usually don't like opening bands, but the venue insisted on it so they could sell more drinks to drunk fans waiting for Sabbath to hop on."

"This is so damn sweet. That show is gonna be huge. Where is it? If you say Henderson, I'll call B.S."

Jason Hammond looked Dennis in the eyes and said, "Las Vegas, baby. The Skin City; Adult Disney Land; The City of Second Chances; The Sin City itself. Boo yah!"

They all drank to celebrate.

10

It was a cool Nevada night a few weeks later. The stars were out twinkling in the sky, challenging the Las Vegas neon lights to last a fraction as long as they had. Las Vegas retorted with a query about which lights are more easily recognizable in the States. Timetables aside, Las Vegas emitted the brighter lights as far as *Cyclones of Doom* and the sight from their touring van were concerned.

As they entered the inner city, they could barely contain their excitement. They parked down the block from the large spacious Neon Ballroom.

"I literally can't believe today is happening," Dean said excitedly.

"Me neither," Ray chimed. "Can someone pass me a beer?"

"We didn't bring any. Just buy some at the venue you cheap prick," Dean said, only half joking.

"Shouldn't the venue's sign say something like 'Black Sabbath tonight!' or something like that?" Jason asked.

"I don't see any lines outside either," Mike added.

"Maybe they changed the time for doors?" Dennis said, with a touch of optimism.

When they entered the venue the person in the ticket booth asked them if they were Stevie Wonder's backup band. They immediately overwhelmed the ticket guy with their responses.

Dennis: "No, sir."

Dean: "I wish!"

Mike: "He wishes he could sing like me."

Ray: "Who the fuck is Stevie Wonder?"

Jay just shoved his hand into his forehead.

"Uh, I'm sorry gentleman. Then who are you guys?"

"We're the opening band for Black Sabbath. Black Du-I mean Cyclones of Doom."

"Hold on one second, gentleman, I'll be right back."

Mike grabbed Dean's Yes shirt and pulled him in close.

"If that guy calls me a gentleman one more time, I swear to God."

"My manager has informed me that the Black Sabbath show has had a change in venue. It is now a few blocks away at the Shoshone Music Hall. We're sorry for the inconvenience. Have a good night gents!" the ticket booth attendee said, while adjusting the bowtie on his buttoned shirt.

"Shut the fuck up robot," Mike said flipping him off.

Jay grabbed his middle finger and tore it down. Dean and Dennis apologized and they left. "Why, I never!" the attendee commented while watching them leave.

"What the hell, Salvatore, what if that venue books us again in the future?"

"They won't now," Dean muttered. "We better get to the other venue before we miss load-in."

"Agreed," Dennis said, and they all left the biggest venue in Vegas behind them.

11

"What do you mean, Black Sabbath isn't playing in Vegas anymore?" Jay asked angrily.

The slightly less well-dressed man working the door of the smaller venue simply shrugged. "I can't keep track of the why's, just the essential news. If you guys are Cyclones of Broom, then the replacement band's manager wanted to talk to you. He should be in the office right now."

"What in the fuck would make you think we would have 'broom' in our band's name?" Jay said, watching the guy working the door reply silently with another shrug.

"Replacement band?" Dennis asked, looking at Dean.

"Ah! I was looking for you guys," said a short plump man. When they all turned around, the door man mouthed "fuck you" at them. Mike sent a

look over his shoulder and the door man was already reading a magazine and whistling apathetically.

"You were?" Dean interjected.

"Yes! I'm the renowned owner of The Wizard, the ultimate Black Sabbath tribute band!"

"Oh Christ, we're opening for a cover band?" Ray said.

The plump man did not take offense, instead his smile grew.

"*The* cover band, my friends. The Wizard is known throughout the country. The members are even authentically British! Well, except the drummer. But you find me an English drummer who doesn't start fires in hotel rooms or go whoring and I'll hire him right here and now."

"Awesome," Mike muttered, clearly impressed with The Wizard's ex-drummer's experimental hotel room pyrotechnics and nightlife.

"Anyway, I'm getting ahead of myself. The name is George Feeney. Trust me, you guys are gonna have a ball. You get to play to a crowd who'll actually like you, AND you'll get paid. What else could ya want, eh?"

He patted all of them on the back then retired back to the office.

"Well, we might as well start loading in," Jay said. "At least it's a Sabbath cover band. And he does have a point. I think we deserve some recognition and payment."

"Jay, we've had like five shows," Dennis said.

"Doesn't matter. Georgie obviously heard from his associate at our show at Dinkle's, and so here we are. Now load in, gear up, and get ready."

12

"This may not be the size of the Neon Ballroom, but I'm pretty sure it could still fit the other venues we've played in inside of it all at once," Dean said into Ray's ear.

"Yeah, just like your mother," Ray said while tuning his guitar and checking his strings. Dean only shook his head.

"That still doesn't say much, considering we've played at that McDonalds on route six twice," Jay interjected.

"Our second show there was canceled, remember? They accidentally scheduled it on the same day as that kid's birthday party," Dean said. "I think he was turning eight."

"Fuck that kid," Jay said. "They should have let us play anyway."

Dennis climbed back on the stage and handed everyone their water bottles. They were compliments of George Feeney.

Mike was standing at the tip of the stage, facing the crowd. The venue's capacity could fit about four hundred. There were maybe fifty people in the crowd so far. Some teenagers were up close by the stage. Men and

women with splatters of white in their hair and beards were on the sides, which were also mini bars. In the back there was seating and food vendors.

Jason watched the trickle of people coming in with great interest. Using the stage lights to look at his watch, he noted that they were set to go on in ten minutes.

"Agh shit," Dean spat, and Jay felt a pit in his stomach. *Did that idiot break a string already?*

"I forgot to smoke the rest of my Mary Jane," he said, frowning.

Jay shook his head angrily and Ray laughed while sipping his stage beer.

"That's a whole new level of forgetfulness, dude," Dennis commented.

When the sound check was complete, all the in-house lights dimmed, then faded. Jason was happy to work with such a professional and efficient stage team. He hoped his future had more respectable crew like that in the future. There were almost a hundred people in the large room now. Many had entered from the smoking area outside. The room was a tornado of chatter until the lights faded. When they went out, everyone went quiet, as if they all fell inexplicably mute. When the lights stayed off and no music played, some blurbs of comments were indistinguishably vocalized by people's friends, girlfriends and boyfriends in the audience.

Dennis noted that Mike wasn't on stage yet and hoped that he would arrive on cue. He wasn't needed for the first song anyway, but that didn't mean he was certain to show up. Dennis worried that he might have gotten lost from the time of their mic check to the lights going out. Whether he was lost in the chasms of the venue, or amongst all the new female showgoers was a whole 'nother story.

Then, two powerful guitars spitting slow notes tore through the silence like a warm knife in butter. The feedback reverberated throughout the hall. The crowd stood at attention and quieted down. The doom had begun.

13

People cheered after the heavy intro finished. The sounds of clapping and support washed over all of them. It was only the first song, and they've already received far more positive feedback than ever before. In the second song entitled "*No Light Left*," Dennis and Dean kicked things off with bass and drums. The solid beat blared, each deep impact of the drums echoing throughout the room.

Dennis was focused entirely on his part, but Dean was looking around frantically. He couldn't see Mike, but he was counting down the seconds until his part was coming up. At the last second, two people parted and Mike

climbed onto the stage. The bass and drums stopped, and Mike began his part only a second after his cue.

“You cannot defeat me, you cannot beat me.

You cannot demean me, for you have not seen what mine eyes have seen.”

Then all four of the instruments kicked back in as they had written. The drums were predominantly snare and ride. The guitars and bass were downtuned and slow, but loud.

“Darken the skies, our time is up.

Darken your heart we've all lost our way,

Blacken my eyes, I've already drowned in the lies.

Rip out my heart, I'm nothing more than a pile of rotting flesh.

Fight back the tears, just like you've been doing all these years.

Until you realize it's not working, and the world has filled with your fears...”

Mike’s voice was captivating. It had a droning quality to it, but it was also melodic at the same time. It sounded beautiful, but somehow dark and oppressive. It was like Mike used the same charisma in his singing voice, that he used to woo promiscuous ladies into one-night stands.

They continued playing and the new audience they had ate up every bit of it.

Bobby Tortano showed up in about the middle of the set. Unfortunately, he had to follow the same path the band did, going to the Neon Ballroom first, then arriving at the show. He was bummed that Sabbath wasn't playing, but the quality of *CoD's* performance almost made him forget it.

"Thank you, thank you all so much. Thank you, guys, for making 1977 such a huge year for all of us. I certainly won't forget tonight," Mike said.

Bobby thought he saw Mike wink at the audience. He wondered if it was at someone specific, all of the fans, or just all of the fans with female genitalia.

"We specifically asked *The Wizard* what their setlist was, and we chose one of our personal favorite Sabbath songs that they weren't gonna play. Wouldn't wanna steal their thunder, ya dig? Anyway, here's "Sabbath Bloody Sabbath" from the masters themselves. If the crowd was gasoline, that announcement was a live match. They exploded in uproars of cheers. At the end of the song Mike jumped into the crowd. *By God, they actually caught him!* Dean thought.

As he climbed back onto the stage a girl squeezed his rear end and he simply said, "Oh, thank you!"

"Don't forget we are *Cyclones of Doom* and we'll be hitting the recording studio as soon as we have some cash! Thank you all again, enjoy *The Wizard* and have a good fucking night!" And their first groundbreaking set was finished.

14

After the show, the delighted bandmates joined the members of *The Wizard* as they took over a local bar a few blocks away. Some people from the show found their way there and talked to both bands with eyes gleaming with disbelief and excitement.

It was 2 AM, and Ray Castle was face down at the bar with a mug of beer in his hands. Next to him was Jay Hammond who was still thanking George Feeney and trying to buy him drinks for the amazing opportunity. Dean and Dennis were talking to fans a few feet over, both being as modest as they could. Dennis met a lot of impressed drummers that night, and Dean met some fans with bass guitars of their own at home. Bobby was also there, but doing drunk karaoke since he hadn't stopped drinking since he arrived at the proper venue several hours earlier. The overall mood of everyone at the Drink Yourself Silly Bar and Pub was consistent: Drunk and happy.

Mike came in from seemingly nowhere and sat down next to Ray. He slapped him on his back, and he awoke with a dazed expression. He looked at his band's singer, then noticed he had a beer in his own hands and began to chug it.

"Guys, I have big news," Mike said. "It may come as a bit of a surprise."

"You didn't get laid after the show tonight?" Dean joked, while turning around to hear the big news. Most of them laughed wildly at this.

"Guuize, I theenk dis is where he tells us he's been a fag this whole tyme," Ray said, stuttering the words out and slurring them badly.

"Shut up, Ray, you'll probably piss yourself before this conversation is over."

Dean, Dennis and George broke out in hysterical laughter.

"Bloody right!" Dean said.

"I've got a girlfriend," Mike said, and it turns out what he said was right. That was quite a surprise.

15

"Since when?" Jay asked after almost spitting out his beer.

"Well, I met a girl before our set, and then asked her out after our set. I think I might love her," Mike said.

"You can't love someone already, h'yupppp this ain't no Romeo and Juliet," Ray attempted to say.

"Mike, you do know in relationships you're not allowed to, you know, shag other people, right?" Dean asked.

"No worries my man, we already talked about that. We're allowing each other to do whatever we want outside of our relationship," Mike said smiling.

"Congratulations dude, hope she liked our set!" Denny said.

"You damn idiot," Ray said. Dennis noted that when Ray got drunk he could get quite mean as well. "You can't love someone and then, and then give them permission to fuck other people. It doesn't work that way." He belched and attempted to call over the distracted bartender.

"Why not? Why are humans brainwashed to be so overprotective and selfish? We should all share the fun. If we screw other people, it doesn't take away our bond. Some people can barely get over the fact that someone's not a virgin when they meet them, let alone cope with the fact that his dick was in that or she was deflowered when she was fifteen, who cares! Sex is sex, man, it's all cool so long as it's consensual!"

"Big words coming from the guy that barely knows what a condom is," Jay commented.

"Listen, guys. Don't you understand the thrill of it all? It's not the sex itself. It's everything that leads up to that point. The fact that a girl wants to

go all the way with me. The fact that every single female body is different. No two are the same. There's all different shapes and sizes. People kiss differently, screw differently, moan differently, by God, they even say different things after too! I'm just tryna chase tail while I can. Getting intimate with as many different people as possible, white, Black, Asian, Indian, Chinese, Spanish, all of God's daughters across the lands... I wanna fuck `em all."

"So, what you're saying is, dudes are next?" Jason said.

A few muffled bits of laughter preceded Mike nodding his head.

"I don't get what's so hard to understand. That's why I love this chick, man she gets it. And she loves our music. And she's more beautiful than any person I've ever been on top of. She's different."

"So, shouldn't that be enough for you?" Dennis asked.

"Nothing's ever enough for him," Ray said, without noticing the irony of his statement while he paid for another drink, Dennis thought.

"Whatever man, let him do him. We always knew Mike was born in the wrong generation. As for us as a whole? We need to go on tour. I'm tellin y'all, we've got to spread our music," Jay said.

"I wanna come!" said Bobby. He seemed as drunk as Ray, but he hadn't bought any new drinks since arriving at the Drink Yourself Silly Bar & Pub. "Here. Take this. I wanna buy everyone drinks. On me." He took out a twenty-dollar bill with **FREE YOUR MIND** written on it.

"Rad man, but I think everyone's drunk enough. Keep it," Dennis said.

"I insist, if not at least keep it as the band's first tip!"

"Done," Dennis said and gave him a high five. He'd frame it or hang it up in the practice space and show Bobby later. Then he thought about what it would be like to tour. Could it possibly be as awesome as the show they just played? What about traveling? Dennis loved seeing new places.

"Let's set up a tour as soon as we can!" he said, smiling. To that, they all picked up their drinks if they had any left and cheered.

16

Two months later during a cold November morning, the band stood together all dressed up in suits of black. Faces were solemn and distant that morning. Dean walked over to Dennis and put a hand on his shoulder.

"I'm so sorry for your loss, man. If there's anything any of us can do, please let us know."

Dennis looked at the spot where his mom had just been buried. Family he hadn't seen in years turned up for the funeral, but there were still people missing.

Tears glistened in his eyes, but Dennis turned unabashed, and nodded his head at Dean.

Mike and his steady girlfriend Britney were looking at Dennis with sympathetic eyes. Jason looked uncomfortable and almost refused to meet Dennis's eyes. It was almost as if he'd killed her himself. Dennis just chalked it up to being uncomfortable around death. He walked away to say hello to some other people he knew from a life that seemed so distant, almost like it was a parallel universe.

"Do you think he's still gonna wanna go on tour next week?" Jay asked.

"I don't know, would you Jason?" Ray said.

"Absolutely. Nothing would stop me from going on tour. Besides, I like to run from my problems, not confront them."

"You and me both, brother," Ray quietly wondered why they didn't sell drinks at funerals or graveyards. An alcohol vendor would surely make a killing at these sad types of events.

"I think we should let Dennis tell us what's best for him," Dean said.

"What if he doesn't want to though? Do we cancel or find a replacement? Either way it's gonna be hard," Jason said.

"Well, too bad Britney doesn't play drums as well as she blows Mike," Ray said with a smirk.

"You're just jealous because you know you're gonna drink yourself into homelessness," she said, matching his smile.

"Ignore him," Mike muttered, but his mind seemed to be elsewhere.

It was too sunny of a day for a funeral. Things didn't feel right, and every one of them shifted uncomfortably. Dennis hugged his sister tightly. The rest of the band was surprised to find out he had a sister in the first place.

"I hate to be the one to rush him," Jay began, "but if he isn't gonna tour we need to find out as soon as we can. We can't cancel this tour."

Dennis rejoined them and Jay looked away as if he saw something interesting among the rows of gravestones to his left.

"Hey guys. About the tour.." Dennis started, and at that, Jay's head snapped back to attention like someone had pulled on it with an invisible string. "I can't wait to have the time of my life with you guys. I need to get out of Henderson and Nevada as a whole. I could use a good adventure. I'm gonna sell my mom's house here. Is it cool if I stay with you guys until I find a new place? I'll pitch in for rent and clean and stuff."

"Bloody hell, of course you can!" Dean said immediately.

"Happy to have you," Mike said, with a salute.

"Now we're really a family," Jason said, clapping a hand on Denny's back, clearly happy he wasn't bailing on the tour.

"I say we get drunk to celebrate," Ray said, then he noticed the band's disapproval and remembered they were still at the funeral. "You know, later of course."

Dennis teared up. "Thank you so much, guys. It means the world to me. I'm stoked to be on the road with you guys. *Cyclones of Doom* is all I have left out here now. It's all I have left." He tried hard to prevent more tears from coming and failed.

17

They were all packed into Dean's van like a can of sardines. A medium-sized trailer filled with gear and equipment was being dragged behind them. Dean was driving westbound and smoking grass when he could. Dennis was in the passenger seat. Mike and Bobby were in the middle two seats, while Ray and Jason were in the back next to two giant suitcases containing all six of their clothes. It certainly didn't look glamorous. But then again, many things behind the scenes don't always look as they appear.

"So, Bobby, my boy, can we really trust you to sell our band's 8-track demo, and you know, handle the money properly?" Jay asked, while leaning forward to read his expression."

"Of course, man, I wouldn't think of shorting you guys and I know how to do basic math, so I won't make a mistake," he replied. "Besides, I can talk you up to folks."

"Either way, it beats having Britney do it," Ray said while laughing. Mike simply put his hand up in Ray's line of sight and flipped him off.

"Hey Denny, shut off this jazz crap, why don't we listen to our 8-track again? I wanna hear how awesome its quality is again," Jay yelled over the music.

"First of all, Jay, it's not crap. Bill Evans is a legend," Dennis said. "No matter how much blow he's doing these days. Secondly, the 8-track is outdated, man. Cassettes are gonna take over any day now. We'll be lucky if we sell any. I doubt anyone younger than us will buy 'em. Thirdly, we're almost to San Fran, so stop being such a spaz."

Jason Hammond simply folded his arms and looked out the window again with a sigh.

"Where the fuck are we supposed to park around here?" Dean asked.

"Cool it man, I think I see a spot over there." Dennis pointed to an empty one on the other side of the street.

"Hope you can parallel park this hunk of junk," Ray said.

"May The Force be with you!" Bobby chanted, and Dean did a perfect park, even with the trailer.

"That was dope," Mike said.

They all exited the vehicle and went to McDonald's right by them.

"Don't forget guys, we need to make our cash last us eight days on the road!" Dennis warned.

"Does that include motels?" Bobby asked, and the band exchanged glances with one another.

"Did we forget to tell you?" Jason asked.

"Mate, we're gonna be sleeping in that van unless we make money selling those demos or get paid for any of these shows," Dean said.

"That George Feeney guy didn't say if we were gonna get paid or not?" Bobby asked, surprised and feeling unprepared.

"Well," Jason began, "no. He says it depends on the venue and promoter. But five shows in nine days, we'll have to get paid at least once, right?"

"Maybe we can make some friends that are cool enough to let us crash on their floor or something?" Dennis said, using as positive of a tone as he could manage.

"Maybe, we'll find some girls who are down to boogie and we can sleep in their beds like real rock stars!" Ray said, and Jay nodded his approval.

"Keep dreaming! Also, don't forget you blokes still owe me gas money. It's dumb expensive out here," Dean said.

"Yeah, seventy-five cents a gallon is ridiculous," Bobby said. They each gave him a dollar bill and some change.

"Thanks. Now, let's eat. *Bon appetit.*"

18

“Well, I’d say it’s pretty safe to say that we’ve had some mixed reactions this past week,” Dennis said, from behind the wheel. Dean was sleeping in the passenger seat.

“Yeah, man, Cali has been weird. San Francisco loved us, LA hated us, Phoenix was barren but paid us the most, and...uh, where else have we played?” Mike asked.

Jason thought about it, then said, “You’re forgetting San Diego. I’ve never seen so much dope inside a concert venue.”

“I’m just glad that we haven’t had to sleep in the van *every* night. And I think I’ve been quite the salesman!” Bobby was confident. Dennis admired how honest and in awe he was when he talked people into buying their 8-tracks. If they ever made shirts or other merchandise Bobby would probably make them hundreds.

“So, now we just got Vegas left. Not bad for our first coastal tour,” Ray said. He’d felt like a different person on a budget. Most of the band had never seen him sober eight days in a row. He said he was saving all of his funds to get wasted on the final night of the tour and the band collectively dreaded it.

"I still can't believe how much driving we've done. So many hours cooped up in here, I feel like I don't wanna be in a car ever again," Mike said.

"We're almost done. Only fifty miles to Vegas. We got insanely lucky with Phoenix being the second-to-last show," Dennis said.

"But like, I just never thought touring would involve so much...driving...and so little money. We only got paid twice, we're coming out of this on the down," Mike said. "And I miss Britney. I didn't think people actually missed their girlfriends."

"Dude, didn't you neck some girl in LA? Shut the fuck up," Ray said.

"Yeah. But I think I only want to be with Britney now, it's weird. It's just not the same with other girls anymore." Mike was frowning, clearly perplexed by the notion.

"Anyway, before Dean wakes up, we're gonna chip in for the San Francisco parking ticket, right guys?" Dennis said.

"Yeah, Denny," Ray said. The rest agreed too.

"How have you been, Dennis? For real, I hope you're glad you came man. I certainly had a groovy time with you."

"Thanks, Bobby. I feel more alive than ever before. We've played for so many different people and it's such a privilege. Not everyone dug us, but I've enjoyed every single show. Even the one in LA where we got boo'd and the parking ticket mess, and when the van broke down, all of it; they're all

memories I plan on cherishing. As long as we survive this last show, then I'd say the tour was a success no matter how much money we all collectively lost. We appreciate you coming and helping us even though you're not in the band. I only wish we could afford to pay you for your help. You really earned it, brother."

Dean apparently had awoken, yawned, then said, "You're such a sweetheart, Dennis," and they all laughed. Life was good.

III

The unshowered musicians continued their journey, having made new friends, new fans, and experienced the music scene of five different cities in three states. For the *Cyclones of Doom*, it was just a small step on the ladder to fame. Jason Hammond wasn't wrong; they were meant for greatness. Unfortunately, not all of them were destined to achieve it. The twenty-dollar bill would be testament to that fact, because it wouldn't remain pinned up on their wall forever...