

Abstract

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 Fragmented History of an Indie
 Rock Legend

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Are You Stek Mainard?: The Fragmented History of an Indie Rock Legend is a biography of the singer/songwriter Stek Mainard. The text opens with Stek Mainard walking away from his music career at its peak, when mainstream success and fame are all but realized. The book's editor/writer, Timothy Jerome, is Stek's best friend, and this book his attempt to explain to the world why his best friend left his music career behind. Jerome combines stories from fans, bandmates, and critics with his own stories about him and Stek all in order to answer one big question: *Why did Stek Mainard leave?*

Are You Stek Mainard?: The Fragmented History of an Indie Rock Legend

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Stek Mainard and the Introduction

If you're holding this book and reading this sentence, then I'm assuming that you're a lot like me: a music junkie, a record head, a musician (or failed musician in my case), and above all else a lover of the guitar heavy, jukebox ready, fuzzed-out lo-fi stylings of the great Stek Mainard.

Good. These are essentially the prerequisites for the readers of this book.

I'm also going to make the assumption that you've come to this book in search of answers. Or, at the very least, you've come looking for some level of insight that will allow you to understand why a dynamic and gifted musician like Stek Mainard would choose to walk away from his music career when mainstream success was all but realized.

Once again, you and I are a lot alike in this desire.

The thing that separates us, though, is the reason why you've come to *this* book and not the other books and articles out there that seem just like it—it's the fact that from 1986 to the time of his disappearance in March 2009, I was Stek Mainard's best friend.

That is the reason you're reading this book, isn't it? When you clicked your mouse on the "purchase" button or reached for this book on the shelf of your local book dealer or library, I'm sure you had it in mind, telling yourself something like: *who better to reveal why Stek walked off, than his closest friend.* That thought had to be going through your head, right?

And now you're here—reading—thinking the same thing. You're waiting for me to take the Stek Mainard you know—the enigmatic singer/songwriter who took self-recorded albums and rode them all the way to the *Billboard 200* and the top of the indie-rock stratosphere—and reduce him down essentially to a bulleted list of simple reasons or answers, so that you could have some way of responding to that ridiculous and limiting question: *why?*

If this is what you're waiting for, I feel obligated here at the outset to apologize and inform you that you'll find no such writing within the pages that follow this one.

Let me guess, I've got you asking that question again: *why?* And I have to tell you one more time that I'm sorry, because I again have no clear-cut answer for you. What I do have, though, is a story—a story about how this book came to be written. And my hope for you is that in reading it, you'll be able to find your own answer to that question (the one starting with a “w”), which is a question I stopped asking a long time ago, especially when it came to Stek Mainard.

Before I began writing, I was a high school English teacher. Out of college, becoming a teacher was a safe move for me. I wanted to be a fiction writer, but since I wasn't Stephen King and couldn't pump out a book every three months, becoming a teacher seemed like a decent fallback plan. It was also one of those jobs that everyone in my family, after watching me baby-sit my younger relatives at Christmas for years, had told me I'd be good at. On top of that, my parents had

really wanted me to go into teaching. My mother especially wanted that career for me. In her later years she had turned into one of the sharpest little CCD teachers the Catholic Church had ever seen, and she had convinced my father that teaching was the right path for me. They said there was *value in working with kids, a satisfaction in knowing that you were shaping young minds*. They said that *schools need good, male role models, to teach young men how to handle themselves in this world*. And they also said that *it pays well enough, and left the summers free to travel, or write, or to do whatever it is your heart desires*.

There wasn't really much of a fight about it. I listened to what they said and did what they thought was best for me. I started applying for teaching positions the day after I graduated from college.

I taught for seven years, primarily at Owings Mills High School in Owings Mills, Maryland, which was right outside Baltimore and near where I had gone to college. Owings Mills High was one of those good schools most teachers want to teach at, one of those schools where everyone—students, teachers, and even administrators—do what is expected of them because they think it's the easiest way to get through the day and the best way to get to where they want to be in their lives. And it was a good job. Not spectacular by any means, but good in that comfortable kind of way. That is until around the summer of 2007, when Stek Mainard and the Viles released their second EP *Vilelation* and start turning into the band that you and I know and love.

I was still pretty close with Stek up until that point. I went back home to Philly often whenever he wasn't on tour, and if he was out on the road, I always

tried to go to as many shows as I could in Baltimore, DC, and Philly. Whenever we were together in those times, it was just like it had always been: me and him, no stage, no bandmates, no fans, no pseudonyms, just Tim Jerome and Adam Stecker, hanging out and shooting the shit, still joking about taking over the world with the strum of a “gi-tarr.” But when *Vilelation* hit, things definitely changed. The demand for Stek Mainard and the Viles got bigger, and consequently the tour destinations took him further away from home. He had to start thinking about his career more and his friends and his past less. I understood completely. Although I’d be lying if I said I didn’t miss my friend during that time.

I was happy for Stek in all honesty, but his success made teaching feel like a jail sentence. My best friend was out there living his dream, and there I was, content to ignore my own all because I had some cozy job that paid half well and gave me the summers off. It wasn’t long after that until I started craving for something better. Everyone who I had talked to about becoming a writer—mostly my former college professors and the one or two friends I had in writing—said that Master of Fine Arts programs in creative writing *were the best way to go*. They said *these programs were the breeding grounds for young writers*, and that *they were the perfect place to hone your craft*. Everything about MFA programs seemed perfect, so I wrote some stories, put together some applications, and then sent them out with my fingers crossed.

I was lucky enough to get into a couple good schools, not a ton of schools by any means, but enough to give me some nice options. I was more excited than I had been in a long time. Like Stek, people were interested in my work—they wanted to

read my writing and help me to produce more of it. One school in particular, the University of Maryland, College Park, wanted me a little more than the others. They offered me a full-time teaching assistantship position, which would not only cover the cost of my tuition, but would also pay me a stipend that would cover my cost of living. The offer meant a free education, college teaching experience, the opportunity to accomplish my dream, and I could do it all without even having to move. It was *the chance of a lifetime*, everyone kept telling me, one *that most people in your situation would die to have. You have to take it*, they said like I'd be stupid not to, and after listening to them for a while, it was hard not to agree. So I accepted the offer, and in the Fall of 2008 I started graduate school. I had reached that point in my writing career where I had to stop being a dreamer and become a doer. It was exactly what I thought I always wanted, and almost everyone I knew was expecting big things for me.

After the first month or two of grad school, though, I had this terrible, unsettling feeling down in my stomach telling me that I had made a bad choice. The world of the University and academia just wasn't for me. I was a guy who could write, not a scholar, not an academic; my presence in that community was comparable to a musician like Stek trying to join the Philadelphia Orchestra—it just didn't add up. What was even worse, was that in my writing classes, or workshops as we called them, even there I was having a hard time fitting in. I tried to write stories that I thought my fellow classmates would like, the type we always oohed and ahed at in class with eccentric, quick-witted characters and powerfully wrought images. Every time I submitted my work to the workshop, though, people

never seemed to get what I wrote, and sometimes it felt like they just didn't like my writing at all. In class, whenever our teacher would pose a question about my story to the group, people would put their heads down to avoid eye contact with one another and start flipping through the pages of my manuscript like they suddenly realized that they forgot to mark that misused comma back on page twelve. After a minute or two of silence, someone would finally voice some hollow compliment, then follow it up with a "but," and begin tearing into my piece without restraint. Everyone else would chime in then with their criticisms, and the whole thing would tailspin into a half an hour long bashing of my work, which would leave me exhausted and confused and wanting nothing more than to shrink under the classroom's table and hide away.

By the second semester of my graduate career, I was burnt-out and depressed and contemplating dropping out of school just about every single day. The thoughts I had about leaving were real and intense, but every time I'd talk myself into making that decision final, I'd suddenly be hit by the voices of all the people that had helped me get to that position. They were the voices of my parents, of my friends, of my college professors—all of them were suddenly there, in my head, and reminding me of those expectations that they all had for me. I would listen to them, probably more than I should have, and I would soon realize that there was no way that I could leave.

I was dealing with a type of fear that I had never experienced before, one that filled up my stomach to a point where I couldn't eat and woke me up at night with cold sweats that always seemed to get colder each time they'd wake me. The

only thing that could get my mind off of that fear was thought of Stek, who around that time was in the process of putting together his second full-length album, *Permanent in the Chaos*. Although I hadn't spoken to Stek in a couple months, I was reading anything I could find about him online. Just about everyone had high expectations for *Permanent in the Chaos*, and that was do to the fact that his first LP *Radio Ruins* had done so well. The almost unanimous belief that *Radio Ruins* was one of the best, if not the best indie album of the young 21st century had many writers attaching every blind hope they had left for the triumphant resurrection of rock to Stek. These writers, like Rod Gilroy of *RockRag* magazine, were claiming - that the new album had *the potential to be one of the most important albums in recent music history*, and that *it could pick up where bands like The Strokes, The White Stripes, and Franz Ferdinand left off, and once again shift mainstream music's focus back toward genuine rock music*. I just wanted some new Stek Mainard songs to keep my mind off of everything and perhaps another tour that would bring my friend back around to my part of the map so that I could see him again.

During that second semester, in times when I had to get work done in spite of how bad I was feeling, I would put on a Stek Mainard and the Viles album while I was grading, or lesson planning, or writing a story and just let the thing play until all those other voices in my head were muffled by Stek's guitar and it was just me and the work in front of me. Things got easier with that system, and I felt as if playing the music somehow helped to make my writing come out better on the page. For my second story submission of the semester, I wrote a piece about these

two kids that set out to steal a bike from one of their neighbors. The story was loosely based upon this experience I had with Stek when we were kids and tried to steal this guitar from a local guitar shop we knew. I was too embarrassed to write about the real story, because I didn't want anybody in my class to think I was a thief, on top of being a mediocre writer. So I switched a lot of the story around, making it a more humorous story than what really happened, and what I eventually came out with was a short story that I actually had faith in, one that for the first time I was thinking could actually get my classmates interested in my work.

Before I submitted the story to my workshop, I sent it out to my advisor, Hank Lewis, who was the professor I had chosen to oversee my thesis project while I was studying at Maryland. Hank wasn't just a professor at the university, he was a fiction writer as well, and a pretty damn good one. When I decided that I was going to Maryland for a grad school, I read one of his books and fell in love with the way he used language. His writing had a level of musicality to it that seemed to make his sentences hum, and when it came to writing about music like the blues or jazz and how it sounded or made people feel, the musicality of Hank's language came off the page sounding as sharp as any well-tuned guitar. With all the experiences I had with Stek and playing music as we we're growing up, I knew the subject of music was something that I wanted to write about, but I wasn't sure about how exactly to do it. So in choosing Hank as my thesis advisor, I was hoping to figure how to capture music on the page, and eventually be able to get my writing to read and sound like his.

A couple days after I submitted my story to Hank, we set a time where we could meet and discuss the work. That following Thursday, I met him down at a local coffee shop on campus and as I approached the tinted glass storefront of the place, I stopped for second to take a deep breath and to convince myself one last time that this discussion of my work was going to be different than all the others. I walked through the front door, and saw Hank sitting at a two-person table in the back with my manuscript splayed out over the tabletop. He looked up as I started walking toward him, and quickly got up from his seat to meet me with a handshake.

“Want something to drink,” he said shaking my hand, “it’s on me.” I didn’t answer him right away because I was distracted for a second by his large, brown hands, one of which was locked with mine and swallowing up almost every inch of it. I was reminded of a conversation we had had a couple meetings prior, where he had told me how he used to play goalkeeper for a soccer team when he was living and studying in the Bahamas. Looking down at his hand and feeling the strength and size of it, the thought came into my head that it was probably only the hardest and best shots that got past him.

“Let me think,” I said finally and then looked up at the chalkboard to our right. I didn’t drink coffee or tea, the two main items that the blue lettering on the board was displaying, but I stood there anyway, doing my best to pretend as if I was going to order. All the customers around us were cradling their frappuccinos and lattes and taking the same measured sips that seemed to signify their status as regulars at the shop. I dropped my eyes from the blackboard to the cooler next to the cash register, then popped it open and grabbed a water. “This’ll do, thanks.”

“You sure?”

“Yeah,” I said, snapping open the top. I took down a gulp of the water before Hank even slid the two dollars across the counter to the cashier.

We sat down at the table, and Hank gathered up the pages of my manuscript like they were a deck of cards. I couldn’t help but to skim the pages of the story quickly, looking for any of the check-plus marks that Hank usually put next to the parts of the story that he found to be the strongest. I didn’t see any.

“Tell me about this story,” he said, “what’s at its heart?” He leaned back into his chair and folded his arms with the movement.

“Okay,” I said, before taking another gulp of water. I took out my copy of the story from my bag and tried to think of an answer. Once I had it out, I flipped through the pages for a couple seconds more just to stall, because I still had nothing to say. The only thought that kept coming into my head wasn’t about the story at all, but about the story that inspired it. It was the feeling of sitting out front of that guitar shop with Stek, and being scared senseless because I didn’t know if we’d be back at his house in ten minutes playing our stolen guitar or sitting in the back of a police car with handcuffs on. I blinked a couple times and refocused myself, then I pulled my head up and said anything I could remember about the story. I explained the plot, I talked about the characters and their desires, I talked about the setting, and eventually I ended with: “I think what’s at its heart is humor, maybe. It’s a story about being able to look back at your childhood and see how funny or ridiculous you were as a kid.”

I finally shut myself up by drinking another gulp of water.

“Humor,” Hank said, reiterating my shot in the dark. “Really?” He paused for a second and ran his thumb across the hanging hairs of his goatee. It was a look that said he was thinking, but knowing Hank as no nonsense type of guy, I was certain that he wasn’t thinking of a response, but rather how to rephrase the one that he already had prepared. I ran through my story in my head another time, and put a list together of all the moments that I thought would support my point. I tried not to think about how there was a pretty good chance that none of those moments had any check-plus marks next to them.

“There were some funny moments in here, for sure, but I wouldn’t say that humor is at this story’s heart.” He pulled himself back toward the table, then picked up his tall cup of coffee and brought it to his lips for one of those measured sips. “You know I think I have to be honest here, that’s what I try to do with all my thesis students. I think you’re having a problem telling me what’s at the heart of this story, because deep down, you know just as I do, that there’s very little heart in this story at all.”

I felt my heart—the one that was still in my chest and not in my story—seep down into my stomach. I reached for my water, only to find out that I didn’t have any left.

“I read this a couple of times, and each time I went through it got clearer to me that it was written by a student who wanted to complete an assignment, rather than by a writer who wanted to tell a story. You’re covering all the basics in this, putting in all those parts of a story that people in workshops and craft books tell

you that you need, but you're not getting that other thing down—that raw and unfiltered type of writing that takes your fictional story and makes it feel real.”

I kept staring at my story while he talked, focusing myself on all those black letters that added up to make very little on the page. I felt this pressure start to build at the back of my throat and move up slowly toward my mouth. I knew that tears were coming with it, but I could also feel that everything else—the depression, the isolation, the fear—all that stuff that I had been dealing with the last couple of months was coming with it too.

“Hank, man, I can't get it right,” I said, rocking my head toward my chest. The inside of my throat was twitching hard; I was doing all I could to hold everything back. “I keep trying to listen and follow the advice that people like you and everyone else keep giving me—because I don't want to let anyone down—but I feel like the more I listen, the harder it gets.”

Sensing that I was about to break up, he leaned across the table and placed one of those large hands on my left shoulder.

“Hey,” he whispered, “you got to remember what this is all about. It's about you. It's about wanting to figure out who you are. I don't want to become just another talking head here for you to listen to, but the only way I think you can start getting things back to being focused on you is by going back to the things you love and by trying to claim those things on the page.”

I stopped focusing on the dark wood of the tabletop and looked up to see him staring at me with fixed eyes and pressing a stiffened finger down into my manuscript. Hank, unlike me, had been talking about writing the whole time.

“If you want to get heart on the page, then I think you got to start there.” He pulled his hand off my shoulder and sat back in his chair. His stare never left me. “But if you can’t get to that stuff, if you can’t get it out of you and into your writing, then I think you got take one of those long, good looks at yourself and seriously think about whether this program and writing are really the right choices for you.”

I felt like I was back in workshop, which was a feeling that made that pressure at the back of my throat rise even quicker. I wanted again to shrink my shoulders down even further than they already were, and just sink under the table and out of sight. I needed to get out of there any way I could.

“We’ve got spring break coming up next week,” he said, as he handed me his of copy of the story. “Use that time to get away from all this for a couple days. Then when you’re ready and in the right state of mind, think about what I said.”

I took the manuscript out of his big hands and stood up from the table. There wasn’t anything for me to say other than to thank him for his time and the water, and after I thanked him for both, I left. I started running toward my car as soon as I was out of the view of the coffee shop’s windows, and when I got to it, I hurried inside so that I could start moving away from College Park in the quickest way possible. I was hoping as I pulled out of the parking lot in a tear, that if I left that place as fast as I could, with the speed of my car pushing every part of my body back firmly into the seat, that somehow all that movement would also push that pressure rising in my throat, and everything that was coming with it, back down to wherever it have come from. But it didn’t, and before I could even get out of

College Park, it surfaced—with all the tears and feelings and thoughts that I knew were coming with it.

I cried until it hurt, until my shoulders were sore and my stomach ached. I finally went dry when I was about two miles outside of Baltimore and only an exit away from where I usually got off of I-95. Once the tears stopped, it almost seemed like emotion stopped too, and my body was left behind in this stagnant state where I was moving without moving and living without really living. I was dreaming—dreaming of a bed. But it wasn't the big, queen size bed that I had back in my Baltimore apartment that I was dreaming of; instead, it was the little single bed that I used to have in my family's old house right off of South Street in Philadelphia. I was dreaming of being back in that house, in that bed, with the covers pulled up to my ears and my little, beat-up Sony tape player streaming out a song that was helping me fall further into that dream. I wanted to be back there—sleeping—and not worrying or thinking about anything else.

I approached the sign for my exit, “Exit 52 Russell Street.” The white lettering of the sign caught the light from my headlights and flashed it back at me. I passed the exit, and when I gave the gas pedal a nudge to make sure the sign was fully in my rearview, it was like I gave my whole body one too. I felt a rush of heat enter my chest and my lungs suddenly opened to take in a deep breath. I was finally back to feeling something good, after feeling nothing but bad for weeks.

But that feeling was short lived. There were three more exits before the Harbor Tunnel, all of which could have taken me back home to Baltimore and eventually to the full slate of teaching that I had scheduled for the following day in

College Park. Taking one of those exits and going back home was the right thing to do. I had my responsibilities back at school. There were a bunch of kids that would be walking into my classroom the next day and expecting to see me there. I needed to take one of those exits to make sure that I would be in that room when they arrived. But when the exit ramp for Exit 53 came up, I once again pressed my foot to the gas pedal and didn't take it off until the exit was completely behind me and that rush of heat was back in my chest.

I tried to block out any more thoughts about what was right and what was wrong. My head was heavy and cloudy, and my brain was overworked. I had done enough thinking for the day and perhaps even that whole month. At that point I was just doing anything that would cause that flash of heat inside of me to keep growing. I put my left blinker on and cut all the way over to outside lane. I wasn't even going to think any more about those other two exits. My heart was telling me to go home. I was feeling that. There was no more thinking required.

As I entered the Harbor Tunnel, I reached into my center console and pulled out the copy of *Radio Ruins* that I permanently had stashed in my car. I popped the CD out of its case with my thumb and plugged it into the player. I waited to hear the opening hiss on "Son's Arrival" and the cataclysmic crash of Stek's guitar sounding out on the track like an air raid siren. And as soon as both those sounds came blasting out of my speakers, I was absolutely ready to keep driving until I saw that arching Philadelphia skyline burning brightly out over the Schuylkill River.

I couldn't get back to that bed, or the house where my family once lived, but just getting back to that city—to my home—was going to be good enough for me that night.

The road on I-95 was pretty clear and I had done such a good job of shutting down my mind that it didn't switch back on until the music stopped. I had made it all the way to Delaware, which shocked me at first, considering the last time I felt myself thinking I was still driving through Baltimore. With the music off, I was finally able to hear the sound of soft beeping coming from my pocket. I reached down and pulled out my cell phone, and saw right away that I had somehow managed to miss seven calls during my drive. Was I really that out of it? I remembered asking myself as I clicked a button to see who the calls were from.

My cell phone screen flashed and showed me a list that repeated the name Rob Linnehan seven times. Rob was a good friend of mine from college, and was one of those two writer friends I had spoken to before applying to grad school. Rob was a journalist, though, not a fiction writer, and the last time I spoke to him he had just received a job writing a weekend events column for the *Philadelphia City Paper*. Seeing his name on my phone seven times frightened me at first, as I couldn't help but to think that he somehow knew that I was skipping out on school and coming home. But that was pretty much impossible, and I disregarded the thought almost as quickly as it came to me.

The fact that there were seven calls, though, in the span of almost hour had me worried still. What could be that important? I hadn't spoken to Rob in almost three months. Maybe he was mad at me? Maybe he just wanted to know where the

hell I had been? I pressed the send button on my phone and called him. He picked up halfway through the first ring. The phone must have already been in his hands.

“There he is,” Rob said, his voice mixing both relief and excitement. “I was worried that you dropped off the face of the earth, too.”

“Sorry, man,” I responded. “I was away from my phone.”

“No problem, no problem.” It was good to hear his voice. It was making me feel like I was already home. Rob started up again, speaking this time only with excitement. “So, you probably know why I’m calling, and I’m sorry to put you on the spot like this, but I have to ask: what *innnn-the-hellll* is this all about?”

“What’s what all about?” I said.

“*What’s whattallabout,*” he mocked. “Come on, drop all that shit, man. It’s me. I know what’s up.”

That same fear from a couple minutes back hit me again. How could he know what I was doing? I asked myself. Who could he have spoken to? Hank? My roommate Brian? Both were pretty unlikely. There was no way Rob could have any contact with those people.

I played it safe. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Yeah you do. Listen, I’m not going to tell anybody that I talked to you, but I want to know what’s actually happening?”

I felt more pressure at the back of my throat. I was ready to give in. In fact, I probably should have called my mom hours ago so that she could have talked some sense into me before I left Baltimore. The only thing was I didn’t know how to answer his question. I couldn’t decide if I was leaving school for good, or just

getting away a little early for break to think things over the way Hank had told me to.

“*Comme-oonn*,” he started up again, “you’re the guy’s best friend. If anyone knows the real reason why he’s walking away, it’s got to be you.”

My brain locked up for a second. I put my blinker on and pulled over to the slow lane.

“Wait, what?” I said. “Are you talking about Stek?”

“Dude, stop with this bullshit. Everyone down at *City Paper* was talking about it today. We know, I know. Just—”

“Rob,” I yelled into the phone, as I accidentally swerved my car onto the strip of grooves lining the shoulder. “I seriously don’t know what you’re talking about. Can you understand that? Listen to me. Do I really sound like I fucking know something about this! Now tell me what the fuck happened to Stek!”

“*Hoollyyy shittt*,” he said. I strangled my steering wheel like it was his neck. “I didn’t think I’d be the one telling you this, but here it is: word’s been leaking out onto the Internet that Stek’s called it quits and is done with his music career. And it’s not only that, Tim, people are also saying that he’s been missing for almost like three months.”

“That sounds like a complete hoax, man. You can’t really believe Internet bull, do you?” My head was still spinning a bit from the whole conversation, but I wasn’t out of it enough to believe any word of what Rob was saying.

“It’s not. One of my buddies here at *City Paper* today called up a friend of his that works at the record label Stek’s signed with; the friend confirmed that the

rumors are true. They apparently received some letter a couple days ago with no return address that had Stek's next album inside of it and nothing else. They've been trying to track him down for weeks, but nobody's seen him. I'm surprised they haven't called you." Rob paused for a second and then let out this half laugh, half cough. He was still shocked he was telling me all of this. "That's it, man. He split. Everyone's just trying to figure out why?"

Suddenly it felt like my heart was going to kick through my chest. It was beating out of control, and I was sweating to the point where I could feel the moisture collecting in my hair and around the collar of my shirt. My legs were suddenly dead tired, too. I felt this sharp pain running up my shins, and my calves and quads were burning deep down in the muscle. It was almost like I had run that whole way from Baltimore.

"I'm thinking that this album has to be a *tooooootal* dud, and that's the reason why he jettied," Rob said. "He probably didn't want to face the fact that he let all his fans down and all those other people who were saying he was the second coming and shit."

I kept my eyes straight on the bending stretch of I-95 that was curving me around Philadelphia International Airport. I was still sweating, and it was almost as if my mind and heart were racing at the same ludicrous pace. I slowed things down enough to think about what Rob said. He couldn't have been any more wrong. I went to tell him that, but I stopped myself before I said anything. I was trying to think out how I could explain to him why he was so wrong, but I just couldn't get the explanation straight in my head. Plus, the only way I could sort of explain it to

him was by talking about Stek in high school, and about how he used to get all this shit from this one group of kids, and yet never backed down and even fought one of them, despite knowing that it would only make things worse. But that story wasn't about Stek Mainard, it was about Adam Stecker, who was a person that I'm sure Rob didn't care enough about to understand.

“You're an idiot,” I said, defeated.

“*Jeesusss*,” Rob replied. “Sorry, man, it's just an opinion. You got any better reasons why your boy decided to disappear?”

I was already thinking about that question like it was more important than watching the road, because at that point, for me, it was. The memory of the last time I saw Stek kept coming to me. It was just a little over three months earlier, in November, right after he returned from the *Radio Ruins* tour. I remember him being the same old Stek: quiet and reserved at first, but once we got back to what we did best—telling stories, talking about albums, and ragging on shitty music—he was back to being Adam. There wasn't anything I could remember from that meeting that would have set off any alarms. He said he was moving and that he would be changing phone numbers—he'd let me know all the particulars when he got it figured out—but all of that seemed fitting. *Radio Ruins* went to #35 on the *Billboard 200*, which was pretty amazing for an indie band's first LP, and even more amazing for a group that was still set on producing their music in a basement, rather than a studio. I didn't ask him about it specifically, but it seemed plausible that he would have enough cash piled up to be getting a new place. I guess I could have pushed him a little bit more about it, I thought, but when I put myself back in

that scene, and started thinking about what I wanted to ask him, bringing up questions about his new place would have been last on my list.

The question *Why?* was definitely more important and it was something that I wanted to ask him, but as I imagined it in that moment, the first question I heard coming out my mouth wasn't *Why?*, it was *How? How were you able to do it? How were you able to leave it all behind?*

"No," I said. "He never said anything to me."

"*Shhhit*, if you don't know anything, then I guess we're all left hanging out in the dark."

"Yeah," I responded, not knowing what else to say. "I'll talk to you later, Rob." I hung up the phone before he got a chance to respond.

I wanted to talk to Stek right away, but he never did fill me in on any of those particulars, of course, so trying to contact him or go to his place was out of the question. I went right to my contact list on my phone, and thought about who I could call, who I could find to help me track down Stek or at least start answering some of these questions I had. I stared at the white screen. There was nobody that was coming to mind. Stek didn't have any family in the picture, and I never knew any of the people he introduced me to after his shows well enough to get any contact information from them. Vin, our friend and former boss who owned of Vin's Vinyl on South Street, would have known where to find him; but he had died a couple years earlier, and the last time I checked his brother's son Ricky was running the store. Ricky might have seen Stek or talked to him lately, I guessed, but with it being ten o'clock at night, I would have had to wait till the following day to

track him down. And even then, I wasn't confident that he'd be able to tell me anything.

Rob was right about one thing, if I didn't know about Stek disappearing, then there was a pretty good shot that nobody else would either. I laid my foot into the gas pedal. There was nobody I needed to get to fast, but I was thinking if I could at least get back to South Street and be back at the place where Stek and I had grown up, maybe I could remember something that would help me figure things out. I didn't really have any other options.

I-95 shot me past the naval yard and then the stadiums. For some reason Lincoln Financial Field had the lights on, despite it being March, and almost six months away from the start of football season. As I passed it on 95, for a small stretch I could see inside the stadium, to the scores of seats that were being highlighted by the blasting stadium lights overhead. The seats were all empty—row after row. I couldn't help but to speculate why they even bothered to have the lights on if nobody was there. I knew there was something I wasn't seeing, a good reason to explain the lights and the empty seats, so that it would all make sense to me. But I didn't know what that reason was, and there was a good chance that I never would. So for now, the place just felt cold and abandoned, and I sped up a bit so that I wouldn't have to think about it any longer.

I refocused myself on the city and that bright skyline that was I so excited to see when I started that trip. As I looked over, though, and scrolled across the silhouettes of skyscrapers that were dotted with yellow and white lights, I didn't feel any sense of excitement. Instead, I felt like I was still looking at the stadium,

and that the city, too, was cold and abandoned, despite the fact that its lights were on and there must have been thousands of people walking the streets in that very moment.

I got off 95 not too long after that at the Columbus Boulevard exit, and began weaving my car through the narrow city blocks until I was on South Street. I started at Seventh and South and coasted my way down to Second as slowly as possible, so that I could give myself time to think or to spot something that could help me remember a good person to call. I rolled by Vin's Vinyl, and stared at the dirty roll down shutters that Stek and I had pulled down hundreds of times when we were working for Vin. Further down was Condom Kingdom, with its big, arching sign leaning out over the sidewalk. Jim's Steak's wasn't too far after it, and the heat from the grills inside billowed out from the side-vents in long, rolling puffs. Right after them was the TLA and then J.C. Dobbs, two music venues that Stek and I always considered to have the holiest of stages in all of Philadelphia. And finally, I turned my car on to Second and went by Headhouse Square and its long hallway of brick pillars where my mom would bring Stek and I whenever they had the Farmer's Market.

Once I was past Headhouse, I swung back up Lombard and did the whole route over again. I must have done it about ten or eleven times right in row, each time getting a little more frustrated with myself as I turned up Lombard without any ideas about how to track down Stek. I had a memory of him almost everywhere I looked, but all of them were sinking me back into the past, instead giving me some direction for the future and that's what I really needed.

After my eleventh time down South Street I made a right onto Second instead of a left and drove all the way until I was past Christian, and in Queen's Village. I parked my car out front of Stek's grandmother's former house and just sat there looking at the tiny brick row home. It was so old that the grout in between the bricks had begun to erode, so the front looked more like cobblestone, than classic brick. The place had been out of the Stek's family for years, his dad having sold the place shortly after his grandma died in 1996, and I guess whoever had bought it decided to keep the front the way it was, so that it would stick out amongst the other houses on the block. Those new owners, whoever they were, were probably asleep, because all the lights in the house were out except for the front light above the door. I was happy that it was dark in there; I didn't want to be tempted by the light to look inside the window and see how much the place had changed. I liked it the way it was in my mind, and I wanted it to stay that way.

I remembered the basement, that one big freezer of a room that sucked up so many hours of my childhood. It was down there where Stek and I learned everything we needed to know about music—from how to listen to it, to how play it. It was our classroom. And it really was ours. Stek's grandmother couldn't get down there because the steps were so steep that she was too scared to walk down them. So we claimed it as our own, and furnished it with used couches and plenty of posters of our favorite bands. Later on, when Stek and I started writing our own songs and recording them on a four-track recorder, Stek covered those walls with stolen road signs to make our recordings sound as echoey as the old records that we

always listened to. Was it nice? No, but that wasn't the point. It was cool, and it was ours, and nobody could tell us otherwise.

I couldn't remember the last time I was down in that basement. It had to have been almost ten years earlier. It had been so long that the freshest memory I had in my head wasn't of that basement, but a basement just like it, that Stek had put together at his drummer Tom Wood's house in South Philly.

Tom Wood.

There was the type of name I needed. He was one of the drummers in the Viles, and a guy I got to know pretty well from all those times I would hang out with Stek after his shows. I had thought about him earlier, along with the other members in the band, Denny Fisk and Colin Donahue, but like a lot of people I knew through Stek, I just didn't know how to get in contact with any of them. Tom Wood was slightly different than all those other people, I just remembered, though, because of that one time Stek brought me to his house to watch the band record a couple songs.

Where the fuck was that house? was all I could think of right then. The one time I was there must have been before *Vilelation* came out, so it was well over two years earlier. I could remember the way it looked from the street, but how you got there—that's what was stumping me. I was absolutely clueless. I thought about what happened that day. I remembered being down in the basement of course, and watching the guys work. I remembered being in the living room for a while, too, and standing out front of the door with Stek and a six pack in my hand. Where did we get that beer? I started thinking. It was near the house, at some local, Asian run

liquor store that had some Italian sounding name, in spite of the fact that it was run by Asians. I had made a joke about it to Stek, I remembered. It began with an “L.” Lito’s or something. Lito’s Liquor?

I pulled out my phone and called Rob.

“Am I still an idiot?” he said as he answered.

He still was, but I needed help. “No. Sorry about that, man. Could you do me a favor? Are you near a computer?”

“Give me a sec,” he said. I heard him stand up and start walking. “What do you need?”

“Could you look up an address for a Lito’s Liquor in Philadelphia?” My nerves were rattling again in my stomach and I listened anxiously to the sound of Rob dropping his fingers down his keyboard.

“Looking for Stek’s going that bad, huh,” he said with a laugh. I was too worried about the address to give a response. “Lito’s Liquor’s: Fifteenth and Elsworth.”

“Thanks,” I said, as turned my car on. “I’ll talk to you—”

“*Whoooa, whooa!*” Rob yelled. I stopped myself from closing my phone. “You find him?”

“I got to go, man.”

“*Okokok,*” he said quickly. “Just give me a second here. I talked to the editor of the Arts and Entertainment section down at *City Paper* after I spoke to you earlier.”

“Rob, you fucking prick! I don’t need newspapers calling me right now. I got a ton of shit to deal with—”

“Listen, for a minute!” he again yelled. “I didn’t give him your number, and I didn’t even tell him your name. But I told him that you were a writer and Stek’s best friend. And he wanted *me* to ask *you* if you’d be interested in writing a piece on Stek for the *City Paper*?”

I waited for a minute to respond, just to think about the question. “What would he want me to write?”

“People want to know why he split, man. It’s that simple. I don’t know what you’re chasing down over there, but if you come away from it with a clear answer to that question, then all you would have to do is write it down.”

I waited again, not knowing what to feel about the offer. All I wanted to do was find my friend, but the thought of getting some of my writing published, even if it wasn’t fiction, was something that I had

“Think it over,” Rob said. “It wouldn’t run till late next week, so you have time.”

“Ok,” I responded and then hung up the phone.

I pulled out into the street and headed west until I hit Fifteenth. I took the first parking spot I could find and then went the rest of the way on foot. From halfway down the block I could see the sharp neon lights coming from the buzzing, orange sign above Lito’s, and when I got to its corner, I stopped for a second to try and ground myself back in that memory of being there with Stek. I started to remember the corner and the way I followed Stek up Ellsworth toward Sixteenth

Street. I followed him again in my mind, and began scanning front doors for that faded, blue paint that had flaked off on Stek's knuckles when he knocked on the door.

1520 Ellsworth Street. That was Tom Wood's house. It looked the same from the curb as I remembered it in my memory, with its two-tone colored brick front and those formstone ledges above the windows that reminded me of eyebrows. Everything was exactly the same, that is except for the for sale sign hanging from the front railing that had a "Sold" tag slapped across it. The word floored me like a punch to the gut as soon as I read it.

I went over to the sign and touched it, just to make sure that I wasn't imagining things. It was real, unfortunately. I couldn't believe that I had gotten to that place, to a point where I thought finding Stek was just a knock away, only to discover that I was never that close all along. I felt the adrenaline that had been fueling my body go dry, and suddenly, I was as tired as I could be. I sat down on the front step and just let myself be tired for a minute. Every one of my limbs felt heavy, like they were stuffed with sand and water, so I leaned my back against the front door just to give my body some extra support. There was soft thud when my back hit, followed by even softer snap. I didn't bother looking, but I was pretty sure that there were some faded, blue paint chips on my shoulder.

I took one of those deep breaths that I had learned to trust in during the course of that long and emotional day, which in that moment, I was finally willing to put an end to. I wasn't going to find Stek without any help, and even if I did know of someone else I could go see that night, I knew I didn't have the energy for another

journey. Just as I was giving myself over to that thought, I heard the click of the deadbolt unlocking and felt the wood of the door move away from my back. I sprang to my feet and turned to see Tom Wood standing in the doorway with his fist cocked and his bloodshot eyes staring right through me. I got the feeling immediately that I wasn't the first person to show up at his door that day.

"Get the fuck off my front step you asshole," he shouted, as he stomped out toward me.

"Tom, Tom, Tom—stop! It's Tim Jerome! I'm Stek's friend. You know me!" I had my hands stretched out in front of my face so I couldn't fully see him, but I felt his movement stop when I said my name. I put my hands down and showed him my face, and his eyes went from being bloodshot to being suddenly hollow, like there was ghost or something standing right behind me.

"I don't want to know where he is, so don't say a fucking word," he shouted again, this time loud enough to wake his neighbors. "If he wants to disappear this time for good, that's fine with me. But I'm done worrying about it. I'm out. He knows that. So you can take that message back to wherever the fuck he's hiding." He turned back toward the house, and started walking up the steps.

"Tom! Hold up, man," I yelled. My mind was scrambled for about the tenth time that day. "I don't know where he is either. I'm dead serious, man. I probably know less than you do, if you can believe that."

He stopped at the top of the stairs and looked back at me through the narrowed corner of his eye. "Bullshit," he shouted back at me. "If anyone knows what's going through that asshole's mind, it's you."

I saw a light go on in the house two doors down from Tom's, and a woman's head came popping out from behind a curtain. For a second I imagined I was seeing things from her perspective and that I was looking down on us from her bedroom. It wasn't a pretty picture—two guys standing and yelling in the dark; we looked like a couple of idiots. I wanted to get inside his house as quick as I could.

"I'm one-hundred percent, dead fucking serious. Can I we just talk?"

"If Stek didn't have you come here, then why—" He didn't even have to finish his sentence. He looked at me and saw the fatigue on my face and the confusion in my eyes, and he knew right away why I was there. I watched as his shoulders dropped, and his head started to shake, and his hands, which had been balled into fists the whole time, unlocked and flattened, as he threw them up into the night sky. "I got no answers for you, man. There's nothing I know that's going to make you feel better or help you find him. So that's it. I'm sorry. You might as well move onto the next guy."

"There is no next guy," I said, because it was the truth and I couldn't think of anything else. I felt tired again; I felt that sand and water growing heavier under my skin. It was the worst thing he could have possibly said. I didn't cry, because I honestly didn't think I had any tears left to shed, so instead I just closed my eyes for a second and took the first step in what I knew would be a very long walk back to my car.

"Alright," he said, rubbing the back of his head. "Just get the fuck in here, would you?" He turned back into the house, leaving the door open behind him, and I walked up the steps and followed him inside.

As I stepped through the doorway, I was shocked by the bare, white of the walls, which stung my eyes for a second like I was staring into a light bulb. They had been repainted since the last time I was there, for the sale I was sure, and when my eyes finally adjusted to the white, I noticed how the home I remembered walking into the last time was now gone. The first floor had been cleaned and emptied to match the white of the walls. All that was left behind was a couch, a flat screen TV, and Tom's drum kit, which sat back by the kitchen with a pile of broken drumsticks forming at its base. I followed the vertical lines of the shining hardwood floors all the way down to the kitchen at the back of the room, where Tom was standing, washing his face in the sink.

"You want something drink," he said, shutting off the faucet and bringing his shirt up to the graying stubble on his face. "All I got is water. I'd offer you coffee or tea, but I don't drink the stuff, and I threw out whatever I used to keep around for the guys weeks ago."

"Water is good, thanks." He reached into a shopping bag that was sitting on the otherwise bare kitchen counter and pulled out a plastic cup. I looked over by the foot of the couch and saw that there were a couple cups just like it on the floor, along with a plastic plate and fork, which had the crumbs of a meal still left on them. Tom walked over to me with the water and handed me the cup on his way to the couch. I remembered Stek telling me that he was our age, so in his early thirties, but when I saw him up close in that light, he looked older. There was gray now in the stubble he always let grow on his face, and his hair, which was trimmed down

to almost the same length as his stubble, looked as if it had receded since the last time I saw him. He caught me staring at him and moved his eyes into a squint.

“So where are you moving to?” I asked.

He looked up at me again with that squint, and then slouched down into the couch. “Nowhere, yet.”

“I thought the place was sold?”

“It’s not,” he said, as he reached for the laptop that I hadn’t noticed on the couch. “I put the “Sold” tag up there to throw off idiots like you. It’s working like a charm, so far.”

I stared down into my cup to keep my embarrassment to myself this time. Then I switched over to looking at the drum kit to the left of the couch and the broken sticks that were huddled together on the floor. There was enough broken wood there to start a bonfire.

“Don’t play angry,” Tom said, catching me looking at his drums. He dropped his eyes back down to the glowing screen of his computer.

“So, when was the last time you saw him, if you don’t mind me asking?”

“I do mind,” he said, keeping his eyes on the screen. “It was about two months ago, right before I quit the Viles.” I remembered him saying that he was “out” earlier when he was shouting, but I didn’t realize it meant that he had quit the band.

“You quit?”

“Yeah. Two months before he did. I beat him to the punch.” He pushed the laptop off his lap and on to the couch, then looked over at the drumsticks on the

floor. “How do you not know that? Aren’t you superfan number one? Where have you been?”

“Grad school.”

“They don’t get Internet there?” He got up from the couch and walked back over to the kitchen.

“No, it’s not that,” I said. “It’s just...time-consuming. That’s all. It’s hard to get away from work and everything.”

“I know the feeling,” he said. He walked over to the sink and opened the cabinet directly underneath it. He pulled out a large, black trash bag and flapped it open. “What are you studying?”

“Fiction writing.”

“Fishing writing?” he responded, as he started picking up the broken drumsticks and placing them in the bag.

“No fiction writing—like short stories and novels.”

“You going to write a book?”

“Maybe?”

“Well,” he said, shoveling a fistful of jagged sticks down into the bag. “Fiction’s at least better than journalism. There you’re only fucking up fake people’s lives.”

I suddenly remembered my phone conversation with Rob and the offer that he had left me with. I felt my shoulders go tense, and my heart slightly jumped. I wasn’t there for that, I told myself, but the message didn’t do much to ease the tension.

“Why did you quit the band?” Tom stopped picking up the sticks.

“You sure you’re not studying journalism?”

“I’m sorry,” I said genuinely, throwing up a hand. “I get it. You don’t have to answer the question. I was just wondering.”

Tom studied my reaction for a moment, then looked down at the remaining sticks on the floor.

“Shit, Tom,” he said, finally sensing his own bitterness for a second. “No, I’m the one that’s sorry. It’s just all these journalists keep showing up at my door with little notebooks filled with questions and I...I’m sorry.”

“Sounds pretty brutal. Now I know why you wanted to pop me when you saw me out on the steps.”

Tom laughed, remembering us outside. “Sorry about that, too.” I went over to the drum kit and started helping him pick up the sticks. “Dealing with these people is brutal. You don’t even fucking understand. You try to be honest with them and answer their questions as straightforward as you can, but it’s never good enough for them. They know what they want to hear, and if they don’t hear it, they’ll just read into another one of your comments and spin it into something bigger than it is. ‘Why did I leave the Viles?’ That’s a long fucking story. But in short, it was because it wasn’t working for me. That’s it. They came for an answer to a simple question and they got it. But they can’t understand that because they’re too tied down to their goddamn fantasies. They want drugs. They want fistfights. They want blood on somebody’s fucking guitar strings.”

He threw a stick down into the bag, and then looked up at me.

“Sorry,” he caught himself again. “I can’t get away from all this shit.”

“I know the feeling.”

“You do?”

“Believe it or not, I do.” We scooped up the rest of the sticks into the bag until the floor underneath the kit was as clean as everything else around it. Tom pulled the drawstrings tight and then looped a big knot to seal it.

“Can you do me a favor and just throw this downstairs?” He held out the bag and pointed me to the basement door.

I thought to ask why as I reached for the bag, but I stopped myself before the word came out of my mouth. I grabbed the yellow drawstrings and walked down into the basement. The wooden stairs were old and steep, and little clouds of dust followed my steps as I moved further underground. When I got to the landing step and turned to look into the basement, I was hit immediately with the smell of dried sweat on metal. It was a smell I knew because of my days of playing music in a basement with Stek, but what was coming to me right then was stronger and heavier than anything I remembered dealing with at Stek grandmother’s. I dropped the bag and hurried to the window to let some air into the room. The window was small, but as soon as I opened it and began wafting the air out, the smell’s intensity dropped and I was able to breathe easy again. I took in Tom’s basement for the first time in over two years. Without a bunch of people crowding the space, it was clear to see just how similar the room was to the basement at Stek’s grandmother’s house. As I looked over the couches and how they were pushed into an “L” against the front right corner, and the walls, which filled with speed limit signs, and yield

signs, and stop signs, and more, I felt my mind drag through time and for this time I could remember, I felt old.

If the smell wasn't enough of an indicator that Tom hadn't been down there in a while, the sight of the room definitely was. There was dust piling up on just about everything, and the instruments that were down there looked like they were dropped in hurry a long time ago and hadn't been touched since. There was a guitar leaning up against the far wall, a bass resting on the arm of one of the couches, and Colin Donahue's drumsticks were still hanging off the rim of his snare drum. The only thing that suggested a different story was the open patch of cement next to Colin's drums, which was where Tom's kit had sat the last time I was down there. I thought about Stek, and where he had stood with his guitar the last time I was down there. I suddenly realized why Tom hadn't step foot in that basement in so long.

"I opened up a window for you down there," I said coming back up the stairs.

"Thanks," he said. He was leaning up against the counter. It looked like he had been waiting there for me the whole time. "Yeah, I haven't gone down there in a while."

His lips stayed opened for a second, as if he wanted to say something more.

"I can see why." I said. We locked eyes for a second, and then he started nodding his head. I took it as his way of saying thank you.

"You want to grab a beer or something," he said, closing his eyes to the empty room in front of him.

"Sure."

Tom disappeared up the stairs for a moment and then returned to the first floor with a corduroy jacket on. We both walked toward the door and out into the night. As soon as we started walking away from the house, I think we both began feeling better. Tom made a joke, about Lito's as we passed by it, and about how if we wanted to be cheap we could just grab a beer and drink outside in the corner. But I think both of us wanted to be further away from Tom's house than that.

Tom led me down to Washington Ave and then we walked West and up with the numbered streets until we came to a small place called The Phantom Bar. Tom swung open the door and we went inside and grabbed two stools at that far end of the bar. The place, was dirty, and small, and dark—it was the type of place fit for a couple of guys who just wanted a drink and not to be bothered. Tom ordered us a pair of Pale Ale's and then slid a dollar for the change over in my direction.

“Juke it up,” he said, pointing his thumb over his shoulder.

“What do you want to hear?”

“I trust your judgment. You're Stek Mainard's friend after all.”

I walked over to the jukebox and pushed the dollar into the little slot. I flipped through the albums until my eyes caught the iconic cover of Bob Dylan's *Bob Dylan*. I remembered looking at that album cover in Stek's basement for hours, and looking at it now, I again felt a sense of amazement. Dylan was cool and composed in the picture; his jacket collar was up and his corduroy hat was pulled down low, so that it seemed like he just got back from wandering out on the road. He held a guitar in his hands, and I recognized right away as a Gibson J-45 model.

It was the very guitar that Stek and I had tried to steal from that guitar shop so many years ago.

I scrolled down the album listing, looking for a song to play. My eyes stopped scrolling at the second track from the bottom, which was Dylan's "Song to Woody." I punched in the numbers and then went back to the bar to sit next to Tom. It took a second or two for the track to load, but as soon as Dylan started plucking the melody out on the track, Tom turned to look at me with a smirk.

"Wise ass," he said, and sucked back a swig of beer. I started chuckling to myself, and it only took a few more seconds until we both were laughing. "I guess it's fitting."

I turned to Tom and started telling him the story about how Stek and I had tried to steal the J-45 from the guitar shop back when we were kids. I told him everything from start to finish, about how Stek had wanted the guitar, but eventually got something more.

"I think you just told me more about Stek Mainard in that one story than I learned about him in the five years I was playing with him," he said after my story was over. "Shit, you want to know about why he decided to walk away from music, I think you could find your answer right there in that story."

I took a swig of my beer and thought about what he said. I guess you could find answer hidden in the story that could tell you why Stek left, but it wasn't helping me find answer to the one question that was still ringing in my mind.

"The funny thing is, I don't want know why he left as much as I want to know how he could leave. I've been getting my ass handed to me by grad school,

and all I want to do is get up and leave and never go back. But every time I convince myself that I should go, I don't know how to take the first step toward moving on."

Tom was picking at the label on his beer bottle, and when I looked over at him, I saw the frozen look on his face. It almost looked as if he was trying to stare down the reflection of himself in the beer bottle. "I can't speak for Stek here, but I think sometimes you got to realize that just because you got a million and one people telling you that some opportunity is the chance of lifetime, doesn't mean that it's the right opportunity for you."

He didn't say anything after that, he just downed what was left in his bottle and order another round. We sat there for another beer or two, mostly in silence, and then decided to go home.

Tom allowed me to sleep on his couch that night, but when my head hit the pillow and Tom turned out the lights, I knew I wasn't going to be able to fall asleep. I ran out to my car and grabbed my bag with my laptop in it and brought it back to the house and began writing. I wrote that story about Stek and I trying to steal that guitar through the night, until the sun came up and I was almost a third of the way through the story.

Tom came down the steps and saw me typing away. "I thought you were giving that up?"

"I thought so, too," I responded. "But I think I got something to write about now."

I left Tom's place after thanking him for everything and went back to my parents' house in south Jersey. I wrote through the week, doing everything I could to get that story down and looking perfect on the page. I sent it out to Rob at the end of the week, and the *City Paper* published it, in spite of the fact that they were expecting something completely different.

I submitted the story for workshop the first week back after break, and the response I got in class was unbelievable. Everybody seemed to love the story, even Hank, who in our next meeting together told me that I had finally gotten that heart I needed down into my writing.

I stayed in school for the rest of the semester, but never went back after that. I had realized that the program just wasn't right for me, and that leaving was the best thing for me to do. And besides, I wasn't writing fiction any longer.

Sighting #1

By: Davis Turner

I just want to preface this by telling you that this is a story that very few people believe. Being a musician from Philadelphia, Stek Mainard's hometown, I have a lot of friends in the business that had met Stek or at least followed his career closely back in the late 2000's. Most of them tend to believe that this couldn't have happened because Stek Mainard, a guy who had found the borders of oblivion, walked across them, and never looked back, wouldn't show up playing guitar less than fifteen minutes from where he grew up. And that's a fair point; I can definitely understand where they're coming from when they make such a statement. But, I'll tell you exactly what I tell them: everybody gets homesick—not just soldiers, traveling salesmen, lost puppy dogs, and the like. We all get the ache for home once and a while, and, yes, that even includes elusive, iconic songwriters like Stek Mainard.

This took place back in the summer of '11, about two years after the release of Mainard's second and last album *Permanent in the Chaos* and around the time when a lot of people close to the music scene had decided to just forget about Stek Mainard altogether. The band I was playing guitar for at the time, the Live A Littles, had just broken up. We had been going at this whole pretty, Britpop sound for about three years at that point, trying to slot ourselves around the Coldplay's of the world and feed, what seemed like at the time, everybody's need for soft, glittery tunes. It wasn't a sound that I was particularly in love with, but we were really polished and studio ready in my mind, and it seemed like if I played in the Live A

Littles long enough that I'd eventually turn my guitar over and some money would drop out of it. In the long run though, the band and the sound never panned out.

Because of that, around that summer I was really feeling the pinch—I had no job, no band, and only about a month's worth of rent money creased in my wallet. I needed to find a source of income badly. The drummer from the Live A Littles had decided to blow out of Philly once the group broke up and head back to the Detroit area to work at his father's hardware store so that he could sell screwdrivers and lawnmowers to fill-in-the-blank mile folk, while trying catch on in the city's famous rock scene. Left behind in the guy's wake was a pretty stellar gig as the midday bartender at a bar up in Northern Liberties called The Steady Tilt, which, like most bars in that area, was a dingy hallway of a bar that attracted a relatively solid, hipster clientele. I asked him about the job, then he asked The Tilt's owner about me taking the job, and a couple days later I'm getting the locals wet from eleven to five on Mondays through Fridays.

I was living down in South Philly at the time, and to get to work, I'd bike down to the Oregon Ave. subway stop, hop on the train, and ride it to the Spring Garden stop where I'd get off and bike the eight or so blocks to The Steady Tilt. It was there, at the Spring Garden stop, down in the humid, hollow gully of the subway, that I saw Stek Mainard playing guitar down on the platform. What still amazes me every time I tell this story is that I had noticed the guitarist down there for two days straight and thought nothing of him. You see performers down in the subway all the time, you know? Hell, I've seen everything from just ordinary guys hammering away on an acoustic, to guys with a whole electric guitar, amp, and

drum-machine set up, to even a little person Michael Jackson impersonator, who could hit the Michael *chhh-mon*'s and *eeee-hee*'s so perfectly that you'd think the little guy had been trained by Michael himself. So when I saw another random guitarist down on the platform, I really thought nothing of him and just kept walking toward the ticket turnstiles.

It wasn't until the third day that I started thinking that the guitarist might have been Stek. That day my boss at The Tilt, Matty, had asked me to come in a little early to help him clean out the basement storage room. So instead of getting into the Spring Garden stop around my normal time of 10:30 AM, I arrived at about quarter after nine—right at the tail end of the subway rush hour. The trains were more crowded than I was used to, and because I had my bike with me, I got stuck standing at the back end of this packed subway car. That meant when the doors of the train opened at the station, I had to wait a bit while all the briefcase toting business types in front of me filed out of the car. While I waited, I stared at the opposing platform and the scattered herd of people waiting impatiently for the southbound train. My eyes almost immediately went to the guitarist, who had momentarily stopped playing to readjust the tuning pegs on his guitar. In that moment, I actually noticed him for the first time—instead of just glancing over the guy as I made my way off the train—and as I watched him through the scratched window of the subway car, the likeness of Stek Mainard slowly began to drill its way from the back of my mind to the front.

I had seen Stek play live once back in '09 by complete and utter dumb luck. The Live A Littles and I had just started up, and we had put together a couple of

songs that we were trying out at some small-time local venues to see how our sound was received and how we meshed together live. One random Monday night we were playing down in the Olde City sector of Philly at this drabby bar called the Khyber, where a lot of local indie acts got their start. For that show we had put together about a thirty-five minute set that we ended playing to pretty much the bartenders and a small group of our friends at like 6:30, which is probably the worst time slot ever. And at the very tail end of our set, right during the middle of this ripping, solid solo that I had written into the number for myself, people started piling into the place like they were giving out free shots of Grey Goose or Patron. So I'm out there at the front of the stage, trying to keep my focus and turn some heads by showing off a bit—you know, letting my fingers skip low on the neck of the guitar while pinching and dragging out these razor-scratchy, sharp tones—but I got nothing from the people coming in. Not even a glance of interest or a foot-tap or anything.

Eventually we finished up to a smattering of light-handed applause and a bar-full of shifting backs, and after we had packed up our gear, I walked over to the bartender to see what in the world was going on. The guy, who was getting hounded for beers and info by every card-carrying member of the Stek Mainard fan-club, shouts out to me that apparently there had been some sort of buzz going around the Internet that Stek Mainard and the Viles were playing a secret show there that night. I tried to get more out of him, but the poor guy was practically losing his mind trying to juggle taking orders, pouring beers, and informing ignorant nitwits like myself. He didn't seem like he knew much anyway, so I

started asking around in the crowd for a bit, and one “Stekhead,” his term not mine, said that Mainard had done this deal a bunch a times in the past. Since he was on the verge of transcending the “indie” title and breaking into the mainstream and all, his shows had been losing the small club intimacy that he apparently loved. So every now and then he set up something special on the side, just to get back to his roots and whatnot and to remember what it was like to be just some guy playing music. The only way to find out if it really was a Stek and the Viles show, so said the Stekhead, was to sit back and see if the headliner that night, some band called BOYoBOY, actually showed up. With nothing better to do that night, I decided to stick around and just wait the whole thing out.

Sure enough, at around 9:30 up to the mike walked this stubby, little turd of guy with his Elmer’s white beer gut poking out from under his shirt, who announced to the crowd that BOYoBOY would unfortunately be unable to perform that evening. In their place, gutsy said trying hard to hold back an I-know-something smile, he was happy to announce that Philly’s own Stek Mainard and his band the Viles would be stopping by to fill in. The crowd right then got so rowdy you thought the lid of the place was going to shoot off geyser-style. Then, about twenty or so minutes later, Stek and the boys stepped up to the stage, coming out from the same backstage entrance and the same janitor closet-esque dressing room that the Live A Littles and I had walked out of not but a couple hours earlier.

The crowd was howling madly while the band walked to their instruments and prepped themselves to play. The four of them—Stek on lead guitar, Denny Fisk on bass, and both Tom Wood and Colin Donahue on drums—had parted

themselves in a V around a two-tiered stack of amplifiers that towered at the back center of the stage. I don't know if it was the musician in me or the fact that I had just been up there myself, but there was something about that set up that just irritated the shit out of me. I think mostly it was the way Stek had positioned himself in the front, right corner of the stage, which was a spot so far from the platform's heart that even our bassist in the Live A Littles had at most only momentarily slipped a single toe into that worthless space. As Stek tuned his guitar and talked some things over with the band, I kept urging him in my mind to move to the center and to take control of the stage like a frontman should. But he stayed tucked away in that corner, like he was trying to get out of the way of the sound that he and the Viles were about to produce.

Soon the double drums and bass kicked in, and Stek let out a lone chord that splashed wildly out over the crowd. When the people roared back, the show had officially begun, and the clapping and the yelling and the music blended together so solidly that I got a little embarrassed when I thought about what the place looked like when my band had played it earlier. The sound—Stek's sound—was so familiar, so reminiscent, but at the same time so unpredictable and dynamic. The guitars worked out this gritty, folkie rock that was often kicked way up-tempo and that always seemed to slip out of the rhythm in echoey, sliding shrieks; the drums were hearty and heavy, repetitive like a rap beat, but really poppy and so damn foot-tapping worthy that you just didn't care how many times the beat circled around; and Stek's voice was slick and deceiving. It had that deep coolness to it throughout a song, but at any moment you knew it could skid off into some

inexplicable warble that just made any lyric seem unique. And all of it—the guitars, the drums, the voice—all of it worked perfectly as Stek and the Viles sifted that sound through the dark, mesh of their amplifiers and out above the crowd's raised, clapping hands.

When it was over, and I, like the rest of the sound buzzed crowd, had spilled out into the street to start the movement home, my mind was still obsessing over the awkward way Stek had positioned himself on stage. There was something about him playing in that corner that just threw me completely, and the longer I kept picturing him in my mind, the more things I found about the guy that seemed to be off or awkward or even amateurish in some way. I was a musician that had found my way to an instrument by admiring the way my idols had handled theirs. I loved the way Lou Reed plucked an acoustic as he hid seductively behind his sunglasses' wide, shadowy frames or the way Hendrix towered out of his red crushed velvet bell-bottoms and skipped his long fingers across the frets. These were types of images I thought of when I stepped in front of the mirror with my guitar to practice poses before a show or when I'd be out shopping for the perfect clothes to wear on stage. It was a part of being a musician that I assumed every artist went through, but for Stek Mainard it seemed like something that never even crossed his mind.

To start, the guy didn't even wear jeans. He had on these black, cotton trousers that were tight and sort of stylish, but they seemed like the type of pants he'd wear to a wedding or a Bar Mitzvah, not to play a live show with one of the more popular bands on the music scene. Up top he only had on this dingy, white t-shirt that just barely reached his waist and looked as if it had visited the clothesline

one too many times. And his hair—which was probably the most calculated part of his image—was long, wavy, and thick at the scalp. He kept his head down throughout the show, so that the full strands draped over his face and most of his torso, making the sight of him on stage seem like one large, solitary blur with a guitar neck sticking out of it. Rarely did he pop his face through his curtain of hair to address the crowd, and if he did, it was merely to thank all us or to let us know just how happy he was to play for his friends again.

On that third day down in the subway, it was this image of Stek—this out of place, plain, hairy image—that he shared with the guitarist on the platform and which got me thinking that the two were one and the same.

His hair was shorter, but still long enough to cover his face in that same blurring fashion; his shirt and pants were different and different colors, but both were plain and jarring, just as they had been that night at the Khyber; and, most importantly, his position on the platform, like Stek's position on the stage, was awkwardly chosen. Instead of sitting near the long, tiled hall that led passengers in from the street, the guitarist had opted to sit at the far right-hand side of the platform where the subway tunnel gave way to the open air of the stop. There against the wall at the platform's end he had set up his guitar and amp to play, but instead of facing his audience head on, he positioned himself to face the tracks, so it looked as if he was playing to the subway cars and the rows of cast-iron beams that kept the underground world from caving in on itself.

I continued to watch the guitarist through the window of the idle train, my eyelids squinting so hard in his direction that I started to give myself a little

headache. Just when I was about ready to give the thought up and roll my bike toward the doors, I noticed this smooth striding suit moving toward the guitarist's end of the platform. The guy was doused with a swanky aura that shot off his shoes, suit, and hair in this gloss that was so bright and perfect that it made me think right away that there was something wrong with him. As he walked down the platform, he slipped his right hand into his pocket and dug down so deep that the sleeve of his thousand-dollar suit began to crumple against the pocket's brim. He was right next to the guitarist when his hand reemerged with a flattened scroll of bills clamped between his index and middle fingers. I looked at the guitarist's gig case, which was resting on the tiles at his feet, and noticed for the first time that the case was closed. The suit quickly made this discovery, too, and after looking around a bit for a hat, or a plate, or a Styrofoam cup to drop the little wad of cash into, he just extended his arm toward the guitarist and offered him the money out right. The guitarist, who had yet to play a single note the whole time I had been watching, stopped toggling his tuning pegs to shake off the suit's gratuity with the palm of his hand. The suit just stood there stunned for a minute, and then made the offer a second time; but the guitarist again turned him down, shaking his raggedy locks from side to side before focusing back upon his guitar.

The suit pocketed the money and walked away with a baffled expression that was probably pretty similar to the look I had on my own face right then and there. At that moment, I heard the sound of the doors pulling to a close, and I sprang toward the exit, reaching the doors just in time to see their grimy edges seal firmly in front of my face. As the breaks released and the train rocked back into motion, I

looked again at the guitarist. He was done tuning his guitar, and he had barred his fretting hand on the low part of the neck in preparation to play. His pick hand rose swiftly, but before he could strike the metal of strings, the blackness of the tunnel erased him from my vision—leaving me shocked and silent as I moved toward the Fairmount stop and further away from him.

As soon as the doors opened at the Fairmount station, I threw my bike over my shoulder and started running toward the southbound platform. When the next train settled into the Fairmount stop, I made sure to board the very last car, so that when I got off at Spring Garden, I'd be close enough to the guitarist to really tell if it was Stek. On the short ride back I tried to piece together what I had just seen, but before I could get my mind wrapped around anything, the train shot out of the tunnel, and I found myself staring directly into the rolling waves of his hair.

I stepped out onto the platform as nervous as I could be and rolled my bike slowly toward the long hallway that led to the street. My eyes stayed on him though, even with the suits moving all around me. The guitarist, who had stopped playing for a second to clean his strings with a folded, white handkerchief, suddenly lifted his head and revealed a stubble covered chin and a pale, knobby nose. My mind quickly flashed back to that night at the Khyber and those times where Stek had pushed his face through his hair to thank the crowd. And as soon as I remembered that bit of flesh that had made it into the light, I knew finally, without a doubt, that it really was Stek Mainard down there playing guitar.

The confidence that I felt right then, standing on that platform and staring at a man who everyone I knew thought was lost, immediately gave way to a fierce

burst of nerves. I hurried to the exit, gripping the handle horns of my bike so tightly that I must of put about a month's worth of wear onto their sticky leather. Inside the hallway, I dropped to one knee and began fiddling with the spokes on my wheels, so that I could gather myself without people thinking that I was having a panic attack. When I popped off the floor, the hallway and platform had both emptied and the distant hum of the train's powerful motion still sounded off the turtle shell tiles that coated all the walls and floors of the stop. I heard no guitar.

I poked my head around the corner, making sure to do it carefully to not draw any attention to myself. Stek was still there, petting the strings with the handkerchief again in delicate strokes that looked practiced and ritualized, as if he had to pamper the guitar like that every time he wanted to get the thing to play. I pulled myself back into the hallway's cover, still undecided about how I was going to go about approaching him; then, through the momentary quiet of the station, I heard the short snap of a switch come from Stek's side of the platform and immediately after that, the low buzz of his amplifier.

I peered again around the corner and saw Stek press all four of his fret hand's fingers against the neck of the guitar, muting the polished strings so that the amp let loose a muffled thud. Then, for the first time, Stek began to play, strumming down hard against the muted strings to create this bouncy rhythm that he started off slow and progressed into a grainy gallop. I don't know if it was Stek's intention or just the setting that made me think it, but as I watched him hammer down upon that guitar with his hair swaying and his pick hand cranking like a piston, I couldn't help but to think that the sound Stek was creating right then

and there was the slow mounting chug of some old fashioned train. It was as if he was trying to call this classic steam locomotive, have it follow the chugging rhythm of the guitar out the past and history and somehow have it end up there, in the Spring Garden stop, pushing through the cramped subway tunnel and down toward the heart of the city.

After about thirty seconds or so of letting that rhythm climb in speed, Stek lifted his fret hand's fingers off the fretboard and began arching them into the mountainous shapes of chords. The progression of the notes sounded like an old blues pattern to me, but Stek had changed it—slowed it down—taking out the up strokes and the repeated chords in order to make the song flow like one of his. When he hit a chord, he would hold his hand in place and use the calloused tips of his fingers to grind out the notes out of the guitar. The chord would sound, its notes forming into this soul stirring tremble that would moan out across the tracks and down into the hollow chute of the tunnel. Every now then Stek would return to that chugging rhythm, scratching the pick swiftly across the strings between chords to call the train out of the tunnel: *CHugga-chugga-chugga-chugga, CHugga-chugga-chugga-chugga.*

Behind me in the hallway, I felt the sudden brush of a body moving out toward the platform, and when I turned around to put a face to the movement, I saw that the station had begun to fill up again with suits. Unfazed by their presence, Stek continued playing, speeding up the tempo of his song so that chords slid seamlessly in and out of one another. As he brought the song to an end, Stek started letting those bluesy chords break apart, stunting the vibrations of only a string or

two with his picking thumb so the guitar wailed out in undulating squeals. The shrill notes dashed down the mouth of the tunnel, and as if on cue, the tunnel began to sing back—its mouth ringing softly with the mounting, metallic wheeze of the oncoming train. Stek mimicked the sound, pulling his fingers smoothly down the strings so the shrieks harmonized with the train's piercing cry. Soon, the bursting lights of the train blinked out of the black and began growing brighter and fuller as the train got closer and closer. When the train plunged into the waiting air of the station, Stek finally stopped playing the song, and brought his little, white handkerchief out again to rub down his strings.

I watched him from the hallway there for about another twenty minutes, and in that time span about four more trains dashed in and out of the station. Every time the train left the stop brimming with suits, Stek would begin the whole thing over again, starting with that same chugging pattern and ending in those wandering squeals. The trains always answered Stek's song, rolling into the station right at the song's end, as if when Stek started sliding and pulling out those shrill tones, he was really pulling that puffing locomotive through the tunnel and time until it ended up there, in front of him, as the screeching subway train. Every now and then a suit would get the courage up to offer him a couple bucks, but each time they did Stek would shake them off, sending them onto the trains baffled and with their pockets still full, as they moved down toward financial district or wherever the heck they were going.

When the fourth train rolled off into tunnel's darkness and the station was empty again, I finally got the courage up to go over and say something. I walked

right up to him, my hands shivering like cymbals, and offered him some cash that I knew he wouldn't take. I said something stupid like, "nice song, man," and Stek responded with a thank you, before letting me know that he wasn't playing for money. I tried to act surprised when he said it, pulling the bills back slowly and saying "oh." Then I faked as if I was going to roll off out of his space, but before I even took one step back toward the hallway, I turned to him and asked in probably the most non-threatening tone I've ever used: "Are you Stek Mainard?"

Stek's shoulders dropped as soon as I said the question, which I took as a sign that I wasn't the first guy who ever asked it. I tried to explain myself—to tell him about the night at the Khyber and how I had pieced things together—but he didn't say anything to me. He just quickly packed up his gear and headed toward the exit like the tunnel and platform were collapsing behind him. I got excited then. So excited that I dropped my bike and began rambling into his veil of hair—saying stuff that I can't even remember now and that probably didn't make much sense then. I just wanted him to respond, to maybe explain his decision to walk away to guy like me, who never even got the chance to make that choice. But he just kept walking silently, and when we reached the turnstiles, I ran back to the platform to pick up my bike.

When I got outside, I frantically scanned over the crisscrossing streets in front me for Stek's shaggy head, but each direction I looked only offered the gum-spotted pavement of empty sidewalks. I hopped on my bike and rode around for a bit, hoping to find Stek moving toward his home; but after looking for about twenty minutes, I found nothing and I decided to head into work. I showed up to the Tilt

about forty-five minutes past the time I had promised Matty I'd be there, and when I tried to explain myself by telling him about Stek, he damn near fired me right then and there. Like pretty much everyone else I've told this story to since then, he didn't believe me for a second, and told me to get down to the basement in flash if I wanted to keep my job. As I sorted through the dust-coated boxes in the storage room, I thought about Stek and what I would do if I saw him there again the following day. That's when the idea hit me to take my guitar down there the next day and play along side of him until he admitted who was.

When I got home, I grabbed my guitar, put on *Permanent in the Chaos*, and began practicing "Oh, The Deep Down," which is my favorite song off that album. I must of played the song about twenty-five times that evening to make sure that when I arrived on the platform the following day, I had every chord, note, and lyric right. The next morning I woke up around the same time as the previous day, and got myself ready in rush so that I could arrive at the Spring Garden stop again at a little past nine.

I was sitting at the front end of the train when it pulled into the station, and as the nose of the subway car burst out into the stop, I jumped up immediately to look down toward the far end of the opposing platform. The corner was empty though, and thinking that Stek hadn't arrived yet, I got off the train and hurried to the other side. I set up my stuff as quickly as I could in his corner, plugging my amp into the same corroding outlet that he had used and sitting purposely in his spot on the bench. The last thing I did before I started playing was open up my

guitar case, so that if any suits walked by and wanted to offer me a buck or two, they could just toss the bills easily into the furry lining of the case.

I thought about playing some Live A Littles' songs first, so that I could easily transition into "Oh, The Deep Down" when Stek showed up; but sitting there in his spot, with the memory of his playing bringing back the shivers I felt the day before, I suddenly got the urge to try to imitate his song. So I muted the strings with my fingers and began strumming until my guitar sounded out in that climbing chug. The walls caught the clicking of the strings, and brought that sound down upon me in this amplified wave that was so clear that it kind of startled me. I started the song again, and when I shifted into the chords, the notes rang so cleanly that I could easily hear if I didn't have a chord in the right octave or if I was holding a note too long. With the walls helping me, I brought the song together piece by piece, and each time I figured out a different part, the clearer it became to me why Stek wasn't taking any of the suits' cash. He was just there for the sound—to have his music with all its vibrations and twangs and movements swirl up around him and flush everything else out. That was his reason for playing there. It didn't matter to him how many suits were around.

As soon as I had the whole song put together, I picked up my stuff and moved to the center of the platform, thinking that if Stek could get as many offers as he did down in that corner, then I could get double that if I sat by the hallway. The first time I played the song straight through, the suits threw enough money into my case to cover the furry lining of its bottom. And each time I played the song after that, it seemed like more of them kept walking up to me to drop another bill

down into the pot. When I finally decided to head into work, I counted up the money and got a total of \$39.72, which was a lot more than I would have made in tips if had worked my shift at the Tilt.

I was about three hours late when I walked into work, and as soon as Matty saw me, he fired me the spot—telling me to take my guitar and amp and get the fuck out of his bar. I didn't care though. I just turned right around and headed back for the platform, where I'd open up that guitar case again and play Stek's song.

I must have played down in Spring Garden stop for about three weeks straight after I had seen Stek there, and each day I walked down to platform, set up in the center, and began strumming my strings until the train came rolling in. Stek never showed up again though, and after playing at the Spring Garden stop for those three weeks, I finally decided to hop on the train and follow the suits downtown to the financial district, where I could hopefully make more money. I've played in so many subway stops since then that I've started to lose track of where I've actually played. I've managed to make a pretty good living, too, or at least I'm making more money doing that than I would working at the Tilt anyhow. The funny thing is, though, no matter what stop I'm playing at, no matter how far away I am from the Spring Garden stop, I always focus my eyes on the hallway leading out to the platform as I play. I keep my eyes there, looking for Stek, waiting for the day when he'll turn the corner, guitar and amp in hand, and come back to his end of the platform to reclaim what's rightfully his.

Nancy J and The Cherokee Singers

It was Adam's mom's day to drive for the carpool, so when Adam and I walked out of school that Friday, I knew we would be waiting for a while. We sat down on the front steps, and Adam immediately started drumming his stupid set of No. 2 pencils up and down his legs like always. I ignored his drumming, because that's what my mom told me to do, and just watched as our third-grade classmates got picked up by their parents. A line of cars had already started to curl into the front parking lot off the city street, and one-by-one the parents would drive up to the school's front curb in their Honda, or Ford, or Chevy, or Buick and pick up their kids and drive them off into the weekend. Twenty some cars had gone by before I could see the line's end pulling into the back of the parking lot.

Because she usually got to school ten or fifteen minutes after all the other parents, Mrs. Stecker's car was always in the back of the line. So I stood up on my tippy-toes and squinted hard at the last couple of cars to look for Mrs. Stecker's hunk-o-junk Dodge Shadow. I looked as hard as could for a couple of seconds, but didn't see it there. Then I sat back down on the steps feeling kind of angry, and as the rest of the cars in the line pulled up to the curb and left, I got less angry and more and more nervous.

The last car to pull up to the curb was a shiny, red BMW with black tires that made the thing look like it was right out of a magazine ad. The car's front door popped open and a man with slick, dark hair stood up and turned toward the front steps. For a second I thought that maybe that the man was Adam's dad, because I

had never seen him or met him in the three weeks I had been carpooling with Adam, the new kid at school. But then Jason Sellers, the last kid on the steps besides us, stood up and shouted “Dad!” as loud as he could and that thought went right into the trashcan.

I heard Adam’s pencils loudly *clicking* and *clacking* on the steps, and I remembered that he was sitting there next to me. He was watching Jason and his Dad hug on the sidewalk in front of us, and the sound of his drumming started to get louder and louder with every hit.

Without even thinking twice, I reached out and smushed Adam’s pencils silent with the palm of my hand.

“Where the heck is she?” I asked Adam, looking him in the eyes.

Adam’s face went red like the BMW in front of us, then he dropped his chin to his chest. He didn’t say an answer back to me. He didn’t know either.

I heard one of the front doors to the school open behind us, and the head of Mrs. Toms, the principal, came poking out. She told us to come inside and wait in the school lobby while she called Mrs. Stecker to see where she was. We did what she asked and went inside, as Jason Sellers and his dad sped off out of the lot.

The two of us planted our butts on the wooden benches outside the main office and waited while Mrs. Toms made the phone call. Adam gripped his pencils like he was about to start drumming again. But before he could start, I gave him my best death stare and he just tucked his pencils behind his ears so it looked like he had a set of yellow, wooden horns.

Adam and his drumming had been driving me nuts for that entire first month of the school year. It started when Mrs. Babin sat Adam, the weird new kid, next to me in class, but when my mom and his mom got to talking at Back-to-School Night and decided to start a carpool because our families happened to live close together and because Adam and I had “so much in common,” I was pretty much guaranteed that Adam’s drum-solos would be driving me nutso every morning, afternoon, and night. I guess the idea was some mom-way of trying to make us friends, so I did everything I could to be nice to him at first. Each day I tried to talk to him in the car or at school about the stuff he liked and where he had come from, but he’d never really say much besides “yes” and “no.” Most of the time he wouldn’t say anything at all, and would just start drumming away like some kind of idiot. He didn’t just act this weird around me, but everyone in our class. Everybody thought he was retarded or at least stupid and the teachers just hadn’t figured it out yet, so all the kids in our class, including me, just ignored him as best they could.

I told my mom about all of this and how it was hard to make friends with such a weirdo, but she told me to keep trying because Adam was just being quiet because he was still new and because the two of us had “so much in common.” Whatever that meant. Sitting in the lobby there with Adam, I tried to think of what we did have in common. I looked up and down his pale face with his little, round dwarf nose. I looked at his raggedy looking school uniform, with its crinkled shirt collar and baggy khaki pants. Last I looked at his big ears, which were sticking out sideways because of his dumb pencil horns.

I didn’t see one thing we had common. Not one, single thing.

“You’re weird,” I said into Adam’s scrunched face. I turned away from him to look back outside to the parking lot, which was still empty. I started hating my mom for a second, because she was the one that had put me in this position with Adam and his always-late mom. But I couldn’t stay angry at her for too long, because all I wanted to do right then was to see her and to be home with her. My tummy felt hollow and deep all of a sudden, like I was starting to feel like I was lost.

I tried to fight off that awful lost feeling by imagining Mrs. Stecker’s car bursting through the open gate of the parking lot and racing directly to the school’s front curb. Mrs. Stecker drove a crummy Dodge Shadow, with rust encrusted bumpers and a muffler that let you know she was coming from about two blocks away. The first time I saw the car it reminded of one of those clownish looking cars you always saw a cartoon character like Goofy trying to make a getaway in, the kind with that loud puttering that let you know just how desperate poor Goofy was to escape. It was a funny thing to think about at first, but after only one ride in the Shadow, I didn’t think of it as funny anymore. Mrs. Stecker’s car smelled like the wrestling mats in our school’s gym. Not only that, but it’s ceiling’s upholstery was falling down so you had to sit low in your seat, and worst of all it’s puttering made the back seat so noisy that you couldn’t even hear the music coming from the radio.

In spite of all that, I would have given up just about anything to see that hunk-o-junk Shadow cutting across the parking lot, so I tried to make it happen in my mind. I imagined the Shadow peeling into the parking lot with smoke rising off its wheels. I imagined it breaking through the schoolyard’s long, stonewall like it

was nothing and driving straight up to the front curb. None of those things came true of course, not in even in the slightest way. Mrs. Stecker's Shadow, I knew deep down, just wasn't the kind of car that could make that type of entrance.

I snapped out my daydreams to find that Adam was no longer next to me on the bench. I looked into the office to see if he was in there with Principal Toms, but of course he wasn't. I felt my stomach get a little more hollow at that moment, and I started to get angry again, but this time at Adam for leaving me alone.

That was my biggest problem with Adam: I just couldn't trust him. I already learned that earlier that day the hard way, when Adam embarrassed himself and me in front of this kid Damon Allersby and a bunch of other kids from our class. You see, earlier that week I had discovered that Adam could actually take all the those *smacks, donks, clanks, and pings* he was always making and connect them up to make a song.

I noticed it on Monday at the very end of school, when Ms. Babin had assigned all of us to draw pictures for her to hang-up outside our classroom on Parent-Teacher conference night. I was enjoying the "thinking music" Ms. Babin had turned on for the class as I drew a picture of my dad waving to my mom and me from an airplane when I heard Adam's pencils start up beside me. I tried to ignore him as I always did, and went back to coloring in my mom's short brown hair, but with him sitting there next to me, it was really hard to shut him out. I stopped coloring and looked at him while he drummed. His eyes would get so big and crazy-looking whenever he hit something like his pencil cup or the crayon tin or his desk's legs, that it was like he was trying to squish an ant with his pencils on

every hit and had to focus real hard. I kept watching him for a couple more seconds, and all of sudden all his *whacks* and *donks* and *pings* started to sound a heck of lot like Ms. Babin's "thinking music."

The music was your normal kid music stuff, a bunch of kids singing along with an adult about friendship or something on top of a nice tune, and as the song hopped along, Adam hit his pencils against the stuff on his desks to match the song's beat. He'd screw up some, but then he'd find the song's beat again and go back to *whacking!* and *donking!* and *pinging!* it out. I couldn't believe it at first. All of us third graders had started to learn how to play the recorder in that first month of school, but none of us were any good. We'd all just blow too hard into the recorder and squeak out what the music teacher Mr. Mailey said was "noise not notes." But there was Adam, playing notes and a song with only a set of pencils. I searched my brain for a way to explain it, but I came up with nothing.

Over the next couple of days I asked Adam to play me some songs like "Mary Had A Little Lamb," "Jingle Bells," "On Top Of Spaghetti," "Oh Susanna," and other songs like that, just to see if he could play them. It took him a couple tries each time to figure out how to hit things just right, but after a while he could actually play them. I was still amazed by how he could do it so easily, and so was everyone else in class when I started showing them what Adam could do. Everyone was still a bit weirded out by him because he still never talked to anyone but me, but when it came to making music with his pencils, everyone was blown away by his skills. They'd listen to him play the playground's slide, or paint jars in the art room, or juice bottles in the cafeteria, and soon enough Adam wasn't the "retarded"

kid any more, but the “special” kid with “a gift.” I started calling him the “Human Jukebox” and even started charging kids a nickel to make a request, although I didn’t tell Adam about any of that.

Things were going good until this Friday, where earlier in the day stupid Damon Allersby got smart during lunch and requested Adam to play Michael Jackson’s “Bad.” His dumb request was partly my fault because I had been running my mouth about how Adam could play anything. But Michael Jackson’s “Bad,” that just wasn’t fair; I didn’t care if it was the biggest hit on the radio. I told Adam to play the song anyway to show Damon, but Adam just looked down at his pencils and shrugged. Damon, of course laughed like a doofus, and then told me to do something real special and make my “human jukebox” talk. I got angry at that and told Adam to say something to make Damon shut up, but Adam just got all red in the face and didn’t say anything. That of course made Damon and all the kids watching us laugh their stinking heads off. Then Damon called me and Adam a “pair of matching dorks” and walked away.

It was stuff like that made it hard for me to believe that Adam and I could ever become friends, and stuff like him leaving me there in the lobby all alone didn’t help either. Suddenly I heard some soft *smacks*, *donks*, *clanks*, and *pings* coming from down the hallway. I got up from my seat, and followed the sounds, until I found Adam halfway down the hall banging his pencils against the water fountain and a locker.

“What are you doing!” I yelled out to him in a whisper. “You’re going to get us in trouble.”

“I’m sorry,” Adam said, dropping his hands to his side. “I didn’t want to bother you anymore.”

“Oh, now you can talk, huh?” I said smartly.

I could see that the comment hurt Adam because he curled his lips into his mouth and looked as if he was going to cry. But before he did, he said: “Listen, I can play ‘Old MacDonald.’”

He started to bang his pencils, but I didn’t let him get much more than three hits in.

“Stop,” I yelled again in a whisper. “You’re making my brains hurt.” I felt like I was about to go nuts. I think it was a combination of the nerves in my belly and the anger in my head. All of it was too much for me to handle. But I calmed myself, and looked back at Adam and his pencils, and asked him the one question my mom had specifically told me not to ask.

“Why do you got bang those pencils all the time?”

Before he had a chance to answer we heard a honk coming from outside. The two of us scrambled down the hall toward lobby and turned the corner of the hallway expecting to see Mrs. Stecker’s car pattering outside and waiting for us. Instead we saw the boxy frame of a red Jeep Cherokee sitting out front by the curb.

The Cherokee was my mother’s car.

I yelled to Principal Toms that my mother had arrived and sprinted out of the building toward the Cherokee and my mother. She had gotten out of the parked car to open the door for us, but before she could put her hand to the handle, I smothered her with the type of hug that I usually only gave her I after I had the

worst of nightmares. When I finally pulled away from her arms, I turned to see Adam waiting silently on the curb with Principal Toms. His bottom lip was curled back into his mouth again, while his left leg bounced just enough to make his arms and chest shake. Principal Toms began rubbing his shoulders with her old lady hands, trying to settle his body back onto the curb.

“Where’s my mom?” Adam asked immediately.

“Hi Adam,” my mom said, her voice rising sweetly. “She got caught up doing something important, so I decided to come get you guys today. Is that ok?” My mom took her eyes off Adam for a second to look up at Principal Toms, who continued to rub Adam shoulders with her wrinkly hands. He thought about the question, his leg still bouncing and his pencils rubbing against the loose khaki of his pants.

“Okay,” he finally said.

“Great. Let’s get you to her right now.”

My mom opened the back door of the Cherokee and helped Adam and I get buckled into our seats. As she closed the door, she started talking with Principal Toms about something quickly. I tried to figure out what they were saying, but the thick glass of the Cherokee’s windows made their voices too soft to hear. Next to me in the car, Adam brought out his pencils and gripped them like they were a set of utensils and he was about to be served a big meal of sounds.

“Let’s go,” my mother said, hopping into the driver’s seat. She turned the keys and the Cherokee let out a big growl, then we were moving across the parking lot toward the city and home.

“What was my mom doing again, Mrs. J?” Adam asked, as my mother turned the Cherokee onto Lombard Street.

“You know, I forget actually, Adam. I’m sure it was something really important though.”

“But she’ll be at my house when we get there, right?”

“I think so,” my mother responded. Her eyes hung in the rearview mirror. “She should be there.”

Adam was happy I guess with my mom’s answer, because he wiggled down into his seat until he was comfortable and then stared out the window. I waited for my mother to turn some music on like she normally did. It was usually the first order of business on car rides home from school—that is, if you didn’t count buckling your seatbelt as a step. Once inside the car, she’d pop in one of the cassette tapes that she kept piled up in the Cherokee’s center console, then we’d spend the rest of the ride singing—pretending that the Cherokee and its padded interior was our own private recording studio. But since we had been in the car she hadn’t even reached for the console. Her hands stayed stuck to the leather of the steering wheel, coming off only to push a bit of her short hair back behind her ear, or to play with the zipper on her orange bubble vest. She always wore the bubble vest during the fall, even though it looked like she was wearing a life preserver all the time. She said it kept her body warm and it wasn’t as big as a jacket, and “besides,” she always said, “Marty McFly from *Back to the Future* always wore one, and he was pretty darn cool.”

She must have fiddled with the vest's zipper three or four times in the five blocks we had driven, and each time she reached for the little loop of metal, her eyes would appear in the rearview and hold for a moment, looking at Adam.

"Mom, could you play some music pleeeeeease," I said, after listening to only the Cherokee's engine rumble for five straight minutes. My mom's eyes blinked quickly in the rearview like she just woke up, then shifted over to look at me.

"Oh, god. Of course," she said shaking her head. She popped open the console and rummaged through the pile of tapes, their plastic cases scraping loud against each other as she dug for the cassette she wanted. She pulled a green one out from the very bottom, flipped open its cover, and then plugged it into the open mouth of the player. The player swallowed it with a rattle and the car went quiet for a second.

"Who are we going to be today?" she said, finally showing signs of her normal self. "Nancy J and Jeepettes?"

"We're boys, not *ettes*," I yelled, as my legs kicked with excitement. It was what I always yelled at her after that joke.

"Okay, okay, okay. Nancy J and the Cherokee Singers it is." While the tape rewound, I couldn't stop myself from smiling and clapping. Adam was used to our game by then, so he knew what was going on. When we were singing and playing with my mom in the car, that was probably like the only time in the world when he wasn't acting strange. I watched him get excited there next to me. He slid his pencils behind his ears and started smiling just like me and clapping just like me.

Watching him, I started feeling happy at the thought that in a couple of minutes he would be gone and my mother and I would be alone.

I looked back over to the front of the car and pretended that he wasn't there. My mother was pulling out the two pairs of drugstore shades that she kept hidden away in the Cherokee's glovebox. The large black ones, with the silver screws in the frames' corners, were my mom's pair, while the smaller pair were mine. The shades were usually only brought out on special occasions, and though I wanted badly to put my pair of sunglasses on for fun, I was searching through my brain trying to figure out if today really counted as one of those special occasions.

Those special occasion car rides usually took place on the days where my father, who traveled like all the time, was off on long business trips up in New York, or over in Chicago, or down in Charlotte. During those times, especially when my father had been gone for maybe four or five days straight, him being gone and the empty house would get to be too much for my mom. She was always making comments about she hated how her every movement was made louder by the empty corners of the house, or how the leftovers from dinners—meatloaf, mac n' cheese, or whatever—would always go bad in the fridge. Whenever that type of stuff got to her hard, which it did a lot, she'd grab the keys to the Cherokee, slip on her orange vest, and the two of us would go out driving around the city. We'd cruise over to South Street, passing shops with broken glass mosaic storefronts or zebra patterned walls, and stop at Jim's Steaks to stuff ourselves with gooey whiz covered steak sandwiches and long, crispy fries. Then we'd jump back into the Cherokee, speed down South Street, cut across the cobblestone streets of Head

House Square, and make our way to Three Bears Park in Society Hill, where my mom would watch me as I went up and down the playground's slides and rode on the stone backs of the bear statues at the park's center.

The best part of those trips though happened in the Cherokee, where my mom and I, with our shades on, would sing as hard as we could to bands like the Who, the Beatles, the Kinks, and the Rolling Stones, and pretend to be anybody but ourselves. We would laugh our heads off when the songs ended and joke around as well, trying to guess which of the singers' voices my dad would most sound like if he was there singing with us. She'd also tell me different stories about herself that she would remember when she heard certain songs. There was the one she told whenever the Rolling Stones' "Satisfaction" would come on, about how grandma would never let her listen to it, so should she had to go out and buy her own little transistor radio and keep it hidden under her bed. Late in the evening, when the house had gone quiet, and grandma and grandpa had gone off to sleep, she told me she would bring the radio out, turn it on low, and search through the static until she found the song. There was something about that song, she'd tell me, something that made her feel special, that somehow made her feel like she was more than just a little girl, and because of that feeling, there was no way that grandma could keep her from listening to it.

I loved that story. I loved it so much that when she left me alone one day for a minute in the Cherokee, I took one of the mix tapes she had "Satisfaction" on, and hid away in my room. On nights when I got afraid of the dark or just missed my dad, I'd take out the tape, put it into my old Winnie the Pooh tape player, and

curl up under my bedcovers and listen to the song over and over again, hoping to find that same feeling that she had felt all those years ago.

My mother passed my set of shades to me, and when I pushed them over my eyes and still felt totally like myself, I knew for sure that this car ride wasn't one of those special occasions. Next, as the tape player clicked on and released a stream of hissing sound, she handed her pair of sunglasses to Adam, and he took his pencils off his ears and pushed the sunglasses on as quickly as I did. He looked right at me for a second with the sunglasses on and smiled wide, and as he did it, for a moment I could see a reflection of myself in the dark lenses of the glasses.

I went crazy right away.

“Those are your sunglasses, mom,” I shouted, as I reached out to knock the wobbly pair of shades off Adam's face. The sunglasses were for me and my mom. Adam couldn't be apart of it. No way. He dodged my hand twice, the big sunglasses somehow staying hooked onto his little ears, before my mother snatched my fingers and squeezed them until I sat back down in my seat. My mom's eyes again appeared in the review mirror, red and squinty with anger, looking right at me. I knew what that look meant as soon as I saw it. I apologized to Adam right away. She didn't even have to ask.

“Thank you, Tim,” she said as the bouncy sound of Warren Zevon's piano on “Werewolves of London” started coming out of the speakers. “Don't worry, Adam, you can wear my sunglasses anytime you want.” He looked at me again. This time only showing a shaky half smile. I couldn't tell what his eyes were doing,

but mine were giving him the death stare again. Even though he couldn't see the stare, I knew Adam was feeling it.

"Tim's mad at me, Mrs. J," Adam said, sliding off the sunglasses. His smile dropped and so did the rest of his head.

"About the sunglasses?" My mom's eyes rolled across the rearview mirror again. She looked at Adam, then me. "No he's not. He apologized. *Right, Tim?*"

"No," Adam said. "He's mad about—"

"Right, mom." I said as quick as I could. I felt Adam about to spew about Damon and the human jukebox, and if he did that it would make my mom more mad at me than she already was. I lifted my sunglasses and looked him right in the face with my eyes really wide: "I'm sorry Adam. Really. I'M SORRY."

Adam kind of opened his mouth a bit to say something more, but then he looked into my eyes for another second. I was praying to capital *G-O-D* that he got the message and didn't say another word, but if he did crack, I knew that would be the one sign that I meant I could never trust him as a friend.

"Okay," Adam said, still looking at me. "It's okay."

"Good," my mom said. "Now put on those shades and get ready to sing."

My mother tried to make us forget the incident by singing the lyrics of the song in a deep, cool voice like Warren Zevon's and by rocking her shoulders side to side in this goofy way that forced you to smile. Every now and then she'd throw a finger point into her dance, stretching her arm and pointer finger out across the dashboard, signaling through the windshield to an imaginary audience that stood right beyond the Cherokee's front bumper. Her eyes would again hover in the

rearview, only this time they were big and bright, and her eyebrows were raised so high that they hid under her bangs. Adam somewhat rocked with her, but he was looking at me and waiting to see what I would do.

“You know, Adam,” my mother said over Warren Zevon’s howling in the first chorus, “I remember listening to this song on the way to the hospital on the night that I gave birth to your friend Tim there. He came out at *nine pounds and three ounces!* The size of a watermelon! I definitely out howled Mr. Warren Zevon on that night for sure.” She caught onto the chorus again before the second howl, and let out an “aaaaaaaahoooooooooo” that was louder and stronger than Zevon’s, just to show us that her story was true. I tried hard to stay angry, scrunching down further in my seat, and ignoring Adam and her as they laughed out loud. “Oh, come on grumpy,” she finally said, looking at me again in the rearview, “let’s hear you howl. Aaaaaaaahoooooooooo!”

Her howl and Zevon’s piano broke me down, and when the second chorus came around, I howled along with Adam and her, even though my heart wasn’t totally in it. When the song ended, I was almost back to normal, and that, I knew, wasn’t because I was okay with Adam and everything that had happened, but because we had entered Queen’s Village and were nearing Adam’s house.

Adam lived just off of Christian Street in Queen’s Village, which was south of our house on Eighth and Lombard, past South Street, and down near the old shipping piers that shot off the waterfront of Columbus Boulevard. When we pulled up to his house, my mom honked her horn so that Mrs. Stecker would know we were there. On most days when we dropped Adam off, Mrs. Stecker’s was already

waiting outside for Adam, or she would at least come out right away when my mom honked. But today, she didn't show after the first honk, so my mom had to honk a second time, and then a third. When Mrs. Stecker didn't show after the third honk, my mom killed the engine and told Adam that she'd walk him up.

I didn't want to stay alone in the car by myself, so I walked up to the house with them. Ever since we started driving Adam to school, I had always thought that he and his family lived in a rowhome just like my family did. The outside of the place made me think that. Although it was wider than ours, the Stecker's place had a tall, all-brick outside, with three floors of windows going all the way up to the roof. But when we walked up to the house, and into the little covered space in front of the door, I noticed that there were three mailboxes there instead of one.

"We got to go inside here," Adam said. So we did. My mom opened the door and inside was a little hallway, with a flight of stairs and single black door at the end that Adam walked us up to. Adam went to open the door, but my mom stopped him before he could touch the door knob.

"Maybe we should knock first," my Mom said.

She knocked on the door and the hallway echoed with a sharp pinging sound that drilled right into my ears. Adam's pencils were back again in his hands, poking out of the center of his fists like the stick on a candy apple. His leg started to bounce again too, the heel of his right foot seesawing his whole body into motion. It must have been weird for him to have to wait outside of his own house, I thought, as we waited in front of the door. It was something that I never had to do.

We waited about a minute for someone to respond to the knock, but when no one did, my mother knocked again, this time striking the door so hard that the neighbors could have heard it from inside their homes. I plugged my ears with my fingers to avoid hearing the ringing again. My mother, seeing how the wait was causing Adam to shake, dropped one of her hands down onto his back, and softly rubbed between his shoulders. I grabbed her other hand, just to let her know that I was still there. Another minute went by. Still no one answered.

“She’s probably sleeping,” my mother said, trying to solve the problem.

“You wouldn’t happen to have a key would you, Adam?”

“No,” he said softly, as the bottom of his eyelids began to get puffy. I could tell that he was about to cry, because my eyes always swelled that way right before I was about to start bawling my eyes out. It was hard to watch as the tears started to come up, and the quiet of the hallway and my mother standing right there only seemed to make things worse. I wanted to leave right then; it was the only thing that felt right to me. I wanted to yank my mother’s hand, drag her back to the street, jump in the Cherokee, and leave Adam at his door there for his mother to find. That, I knew, wasn’t going to happen though.

My mother let go of my hand and gripped the knob of the door, then turned it slightly just to see if it was unlocked. The door unlatched, letting out a small squeak as my mother pushed forward into a dimly lit room.

“Deborah?” she called out into the apartment. “Are you home?”

When my mom was completely inside, Adam pushed by her, running into the room shouting for his mother through tears. I stayed behind in the hallway for a

second, not sure about what exactly I was supposed to do. My mother waved me into the apartment, and though I still felt like leaving, I stepped through the doorway and immediately grabbed a hold of her hand.

The little living room that we stood in was about half the size of ours and completely filled with boxes. The boxes bordered the room, piled one on top of another in stacks of four, sometimes three, creating these tall brown walls of cardboard that almost made me forget that there were other walls beyond it. There was some furniture, a navy blue couch along the wall to our left and a matching chair across the room, but they were so buried under all the boxes that I could only see a bit of the fabric on their arms and maybe a sliver of their cushions. The room was smaller than I thought it would be, and with all the boxes piled into it, the space seemed miniature and unlivable, like our garage not a home. Looking around, I couldn't tell if the Steckers were moving in or moving out, and they had been living there for close to a month.

We heard Adam's crying coming from behind the row of boxes that was blocking the front windows of the apartment. Holding my mother's hand still, I followed her as she sidestepped around the stack of boxes and out into what little open space there was at the center of the room. The boxes stopped after four or five feet, leaving a slight opening that lead back into a kitchen. I saw Adam standing there, his arms wrapped around the leg of his mother, who was sitting at a small kitchen table next to a window. The blinds of the window were open, so a golden block of daylight fell down through the glass and highlighted Mrs. Stecker's face. She was looking at Adam—her eyes looking tired, the skin underneath them

looking heavy and pink. She held them on Adam for another second, then shifted them toward the living room and found my mother and me standing among the boxes.

“Oh, Nancy, I’m so sorry,” she said, curling a hand over her eyes. “It was my day, wasn’t it?”

“Is everything ok, Deborah?”

“Yes, it’s just been one of those days,” she said, straining just a bit as she spoke, as if she needed to use every muscle in her body to get the words out.

“Did something happen? I’ve been trying to call you for the last hour, but your phone’s been busy.”

“I’m sorry about that. I was on the phone with my husband all afternoon.” Adam was still holding onto her leg, and though he had stopped crying, his face was still wet from the tears. His mother ran her fingers through his hair, tucking his loose, brown strands back behind his ears. When she did that, I realized just how much it had grown since we first met; he probably hadn’t gotten it cut in weeks. Mrs. Stecker looked back at my mom and shook her head. “He’s supposed to be calling me back later tonight.”

“Oh, I see,” my mom said, Mrs. Stecker’s headshake telling her something that I couldn’t understand.

“You okay?” Mrs. Stecker whispered to Adam. “You okay? Everything’s going to be just fine.” Adam pushed his face into his mother’s lap, and she leaned forward so that her arms could get completely around him. My mom and I, not really having any other options, kept watching them from the other room. Feeling

like I was watching something that I shouldn't have been, I moved closer to my mother and hid myself behind her leg, only poking a bit of my head out from behind her to see if they were done. My mom kept holding my hand the whole time, her grip getting tighter as the seconds passed.

“You know, if you need to take care of some things tonight, Adam could stay the night with us.”

“Really?” Mrs. Stecker said, while keeping her arms around Adam. I squeezed my mom's hand back. “No, I can't do that to you. I already feel terrible about making you pick them up.”

“No, it's not a problem. Adam's always welcome, especially if you got something important to do.”

“Thank you, Nancy. That really would help me out.” Mrs. Stecker rubbed Adam's, shoulders, trying to bring his face out from her lap. “What do you think, Ad? You want to—” Adam broke out of her arms and sprinted by us, knocking into one of the towers as he ran up to the hallway that was directly behind me. The stack of boxes wobbled, threatening to tumble uncontrollably right at my feet. My mom reached out to steady the wall, pushing them backwards so their sharp, cardboard corners lined up cleanly again with one another.

“I'm so sorry,” Mrs. Stecker said, coming to help my mom just a second after she had steadied the boxes. “If you could give me a minute, I'll go talk him.”

My mother nodded, and let Mrs. Stecker by, then she pulled me back out to the center of the room, so that the boxes weren't right on top of us.

“Don't touch anything,” she whispered to me.

I didn't want to. I still wanted to leave. I was getting mad my mom. I wanted to tell her that I didn't like Adam, and that I just wanted that night to be about me and her. I couldn't bring myself to tell her though, because when I thought about saying those words, the image of Adam crying into his mother's lap came into my head, and all I wanted to do then was run back into the Cherokee.

I looked around at all the boxes, and tried to read the writing that was looped out in black letters on the cardboard—*Deb's Christmas stuff, Deb's books, Kitchen stuff, Adam's toys*. I stopped and stared at the box called *Adam's toys*, which was at the bottom of a stack. I couldn't believe that Adam hadn't opened it up. How was he supposed to live without having something to play with? That same thought sort of came into my head as I looked at all those other boxes. Everything the Steckers owned was right there in front of me, pushed down into boxes and waiting to be made part of the home. I wondered why no one had brought the stuff out, why in all the time the Steckers had lived there, they hadn't found a better place for their things than a cardboard box.

“Mom, why haven't they opened any of these boxes?”

“I don't know, Tim,” she said, her fingers tugging at the zipper on her orange vest. “Moving is hard. It's not easy to set up a house.” She leaned slightly to her left to look down the hallway, and when no one appeared, she fell back into place. “Look, they've opened some of them.” She pointed to the top box on the stack next to the hallway; its folding flaps were open and hanging off the box's brim. It was a start, I guessed, but the stuff inside was still there, piled up and

pushing out of the top, as if whoever had started unpacking it had given up when they realized how many things were actually inside.

My mom went silent then, perhaps realizing like I had that the open box was not really a start at all. I looked back at the kitchen and saw that the window was open, and though I knew that the street was right there outside, I couldn't hear it—the sound of cars rolling by or the wind catching in dried leaves. Looking back down the hallway, I also knew that Adam and his mother were in a room talking, maybe crying, maybe shouting at each other, but I couldn't hear them either, not even the softened sound of their voices or the movement of their bodies. It was the type of silence that made your heartbeat noticeable, and made your mind think of the loudest things you could ever hear—police sirens, fire alarms, car accidents.

For me, right then, it was the sound of those boxes falling, of their cardboard corners thudding against the ground, of their contents scattering across the floor. And for a moment I felt like I wasn't just imagining the stacks around me tumbling, but that it was actually about to start happening. I felt a brush of warm air cross the back of my neck, and without stopping to think about what it was, I jumped out into the center of the room, turning around as I moved to watch for a box falling heavily toward the wood floor.

But the boxes didn't budge, and all I saw in my place was the open hand of my mom, which was small and hanging there motionless, frozen in time.

“What are you doing?” she whispered.

“I thought the boxes were going to fall on us,” I said, gasping.

“What? Why would you think that?”

I shook my head, not knowing exactly how to explain myself. Seeing that I was scared, my mom stepped up to me and put her hands on my face, her palms warming my cheeks, while the tips of her fingers combed through my hair.

“Hang in there for just a couple more minutes. We’re almost out of here. Why don’t you go wait in the kitchen until Adam’s ready.”

I walked over to the kitchen table where Adam’s mother had been sitting, and because I didn’t want to look at boxes anymore, I sat in the chair facing the wall. I was still a little spooked, and the end of the day was finally hitting me. All I wanted to do was sleep. So I folded my arms and went to rest them on the table, hoping that sleep could take me out of that apartment for just a few moments.

When my arms hit the edge of the table, though, something snagged the sleeve of my shirt and then scratched me badly when I went to pull away. My forearm stung a bit, although the shock was the worst part, and when I looked down to see what had scratched me, I saw that the entire edge of the table had been chipped and dented.

The dents didn’t just stop there. I noticed that they ran all along the edge of the windowsill beside me, and as I looked around the kitchen—at the chairs, the countertops, the corners of the walls—I saw the same types of marks hammered into their surfaces, too. I pressed my finger gently into one of the dents in the table, feeling how the wood had changed to take the shape of the thing that had hit it. Whatever that thing was, it couldn’t have been that big, because all the marks were small, not even wider than a dime, so it must have been something skinny like a screwdriver, or a stick, or even a pencil.

That's when it hit me: the image of Adam sitting in that same chair, with his back toward all those boxes, drumming against the table and windowsill in search of a song. In my head, I started to hear the sound of the pencils. I heard them *clicking* against table and windowsill, *clanking* against the counter and chairs. In that moment, I also remembered that box labeled *Adam's toys*. All of a sudden things kind of made sense to me—the pencils and all. And for the first time since I had met Adam, I actually started to feel sorry for him.

“I think we're ready to go, Tim,” my mom said from behind me. I turned around to see her, Mrs. Stecker, and Adam waiting for me in the middle of the boxes. Adam had a blue duffle bag hanging from his shoulder and backpack on as well, both looked stuffed, like he was planning to stay a week instead of a night. His pencils were still in his hands, flicking back and forth against the strap of his bag.

I hopped out of his chair.

“So I'll bring him home tomorrow morning around ten o'clock?” my mother asked Mrs. Stecker.

“That would be perfect, Nancy. I can't begin to tell you how much I appreciate this.” Mrs. Stecker followed us out the door, and down the hallway, then stopped Adam to kiss him goodbye. “Adam, tells me you sing?” Mrs. Stecker said to my mom.

“What's that?”

“In the car. You all sing together. He says you call yourselves ‘the Cherokee Singers.’”

“Oh,” my mother laughed. “Yes. It’s just for fun. Helps the car rides go by quicker.” My mom

“Well, my Adam loves it,” Mrs. Stecker said with a smile, though her face and eyes still seem tired and stressed.

“That’s great to hear. He’s a heck of a singer. We’ll see you tomorrow then.” Mrs. Stecker didn’t respond, she only nodded and waved and then watched us walk out toward the Cherokee.

Inside the Cherokee, I could feel that this ride was going to be different than the one over. My mom got behind the wheel and went to start the car, but she stopped for a second and just looked in the rearview mirror at Adam. She closed her eyes, and held them closed for much longer than a blink; then she took a deep breath, opened them, and started the car.

Adam sat quietly next to me. He still looked a little sad from all the crying, and his cheeks and eyes were both still a little puffy and red. He had his pencils out in his hands, but instead of banging them on anything in sight, he just rubbed the two of them together back and forth real slow. I should have been mad at him for still being there, for taking a night that should have been about me and my mom having fun, and making it into something completely different. But with all I had seen in that apartment, I just couldn’t do that.

My mom decided all of a sudden that she was too tired to cook that evening, so she drove the Cherokee to the nearest McDonald’s, bought Adam and me a couple of Happy Meals, and then took us home. When we walked into our house and climbed up the stairs to our living room, everything felt so big and open. From

the top of the stairs, the couch on the far side of the living room felt a mile away and the kitchen, which was right there to our left, felt even further. Adam and I ate our chicken nuggets and French fries silently at the dinner table. At some point while we ate, I looked up at the tall ceiling above the table, which seemed so high and empty, that it felt like I was eating in a cave.

My mom didn't eat anything. She said she wasn't hungry and a little tired, so she sat next to us while we ate and tried to talk to us about school. After we were done, my mom asked us what we wanted to do: "rent a movie, watch TV, play Nintendo?"

"I want to just play with my toys," I said to my mom. Then I looked across the table at Adam and asked: "do you want to do that, Adam?"

He nodded and grabbed his pencils off the table and stuck them behind his ears.

"Okay," my mom said, looking at me. "You guys go downstairs and play. I'm going to go up to my bedroom real quick and call your father, then I'll be down to join you."

My mom gave both of us a pat on the head, then she went up the stairs, while we went down. On the bottom floor of our house there was a little room off the entrance area that my parents had set up as a playroom for me. The room wasn't much bigger than my bedroom, but it had enough space for a little couch, a TV, and all of my toys. The first thing I thought we could play with was my Matchbox racetrack set that had the electric cars that you could race around the track with a

remote control. I sat down on the floor and started playing, shooting a car around the track as fast I could.

“Come on,” I said to Adam, nodding to the other remote. “Race me.”

Adam stood by the door for a second, not really knowing what to do. I couldn't tell if it was because he had never been to my house before or because he didn't know what to make of me being so nice to him, but he was standing there next to the door looking like he was lost. He reached for his ears and his pencils for a second, then he stopped himself and came over to play with me. He sat on the floor and picked up the controller, and the two of us began whipping our cars around on the track. For a moment I took my eyes off our speeding cars and looked up at Adam. I was hoping that maybe playing with him would help cheer him up and put a smile on his face, but he still looked as sad as it had when we walked out of his house.

“In those big, crazy corners, which are the hardest parts,” I said, trying to get Adam talking, “you got to go slowly, so you keep control. If you go too fast and try to do too much, then your car will go flying right off the track.” I pulled my car around a corner slowly to show Adam how to do it. “There. Did you see? It's hard at first, but once you get the hang of it you almost never crash. My mom taught me that. She's real good at this. Even better than my dad.”

Our cars were going around the track neck and neck, but in the turns Adam's car kept coming real close to shooting off the track. I was getting my car to go around pretty smoothly because of the trick my mom taught me, but still every now and then I came close to crashing.

“My mom told me that your dad is gone a lot,” Adam said softly. “She said that he’s always going on airplanes and stuff. Is that true?”

I slowed my car down to almost a dead stop. I didn’t know where Adam’s question had come from, and I didn’t know if I wanted to answer it. I looked over at him and saw his face straining a little bit as he tried to put my mom’s trick to use, so he didn’t go off the track.

“Yeah,” I said to Adam, speeding up my car again. “He’s a big businessman. He’s got to go around the U.S. all the time for important meetings and stuff.”

“So he’s really not here a lot?”

“Yeah,” I said, speeding around a corner and barely keep my car on the track. “It’s not bad, though ‘cause I got my mom.”

Adam and I went silent for a while, the both of us focusing on our cars. I thought about asking Adam about his dad, but in thinking that I remembered that little head shake that his mother had given to my mom when we were back in their apartment.

“What about your dad?” I asked, kind of stumbling over my words. “How come I’ve never heard you talk about him?”

Just then Adam’s car went into the biggest curve on the track. He tried to slow it down as the car pulled around the bend, but his it snapped off the track and went flying into the corner of the room. Adam’s face went red as he watched the car smack into the corner of the wall.

“It’s okay,” I said, jumping up to get the car. “It happens.” I picked it up and brought it back over to the track. I tried to snap it back onto the ridges of the

course, but it was it was always harder to do that than it seemed. There were three little metal pegs underneath the car, and if you didn't get them all to snap back into place perfectly, then the car wouldn't race right. I focused hard on trying to get the pegs back into place, almost forgetting that Adam was watching. Then I heard the sound of his pencils start up, and I looked over to see Adam with his back to me, banging away with his pencils on a couple of my other toys.

I forgot about the car and went over to sit next to him. That look was back on his face. The one where he gets so focused it looks like he was crazy. He *smacked* a Transformer doll, he *pinged* a metal Hotwheels truck, he *donked* the lid of my Lego's container. He looked up at me to see that I was staring at him.

"Sorry," he said, this time smushing his pencils silent himself. "My dad's always gone from my house, too. Except he isn't a business man or anything."

"What is he then?"

"He's a musician, but not really. He plays drums, but his band broke up and he's been trying to get in other ones."

"So he doesn't do anything else besides play music?"

"No. But he's always out traveling and playing or trying to play. That means my mom and I are always alone. She has to work too, because my dad doesn't make a lot of money. So we moved to Philadelphia to be close to my grandmother, so I could spend time with her while my mom works."

Adam went back to playing with his pencils, *smacking*, *pinging*, and *donking* any toy around him. I again watched him, and that question that my mom had told me never to ask came into my head again.

“Why do you do that?” I asked Adam.

He looked up at me but didn’t stop drumming.

“Don’t you ever wonder about things? he said, focusing back on his pencils.

“No. Like what?”

“Like sounds. There’s all these sounds out there. All these noises. I try to find them all, but there’s always new ones out there that I’ve never heard. I wonder sometimes when I’m playing, why they’re there. Why they can come together to make a song. I don’t know. It’s just weird to think about. But I like it. So I keep playing.”

“So that’s it? You just do it because it make you think?”

“Well, it’s not just that,” Adam said, looking over his shoulder toward the door. Then he tried to look me in the eye, but when our eyes connected he quickly looked away. “Can I tell you a secret?”

I sucked in a deep breath for a second, and felt my stomach start to feel hollow. I nodded at Adam.

“Well, whenever I feel weird or alone or just miss my dad, that’s when I play. It’s like if I’m thinking and wondering about the sounds, I don’t think about the other stuff.” Adam lifted his eyes to meet mine again. This time his eyes stayed locked on mine. “What do you do when you miss your dad?”

That hollowness in my stomach got really bad then. So bad that I could feel it not only in my stomach, but also in my throat. I knew the answer to Adam’s question. It was to tell him about my cassette tape that had “Satisfaction” on it, and the story about my mom listening to the song when she was a kid. But I didn’t want

to tell him that. I had never told anyone else about the tape. Not even my own mother.

All that talk about our dads had started to make me miss mine. I hadn't seen him in four days, and when he was last home, I only got to see him one night at dinner because he suddenly had to go on another business trip the next day. That hollowness got even worse when I started to think about that. I almost started to cry right there in front of Adam, but I quickly told him I had to go talk to my mom and sprinted out of the room before he could see any tears fall.

I got all the way up to my mom's bedroom without crying. I was about to burst through her bedroom door and let all the tears I was holding in go, but before I could, I was stopped by the sound of her talking on the phone.

"You just can't keep leaving us like this, Garry," my mom said. Her voice got a little bit shaky, like she was holding back tears, too. "I feel like I'm drowning here sometimes...well that's what it feels like without you. Some days I wake up and don't know if have the strength to get up and do it all again." I poked my head through the door and saw her sitting on her bed, playing with the zipper on her orange vest. "You need to tell your boss that you're not one of these kids right out of school anymore. You have a family. You have responsibilities. You can't be bouncing around the globe whenever he wants you to...well I don't care if that's how it works...promise me you'll talk to him tomorrow...just promise me, Garry...thank you. I love you and your son loves you. I'll talk to you tomorrow."

When she hung up the phone, she dropped her head into her hands and covered her face. I walked into the room, and her head rushed up out of her hands when she heard my footsteps.

“Tim, you scared me,” she yelled. She brought a hand to her chest and calmed herself down with a couple deep breaths. “How has playing been going? Where’s Adam?”

“He’s downstairs drumming,” I said. I walked to the bed and fell into her lap. “Are you sad, mom? You sounded sad on the phone.”

She looked over at the phone and then down at me. Looking at her eyes, I could tell that she had been crying. The skin of her eyelids was damp and a little dark, and I noticed that the pillow right next to her was covered with wet marks.

“Yes, a little bit. Your father being gone makes me sad sometimes.” She stroked her fingers through my hair and squeezed me a bit. I tucked my arms through the holes of her orange vest and hugged her.

“But you got me here.”

“Yes,” she said, with a soft laugh. “I got you here with me. And that makes me happy.”

She pulled me away from her a bit so she could give me a kiss, and when her lips pressed into my cheek I felt the hollowness in my stomach start to go away a little. I wanted it to go away completely. I wanted to stop being sad, and I wanted Adam and my mom to stop being sad, too. That weekend was supposed to be about having fun, about laughing and forgetting about the fact that my dad was gone.

“Mom, can we stop being sad?”

“I wish it was as easy as that, Tim.”

“Why can’t it be?”

“Because it’s hard to pull your mind away from these things.”

“Well let’s do something that does pull our mind away from it.”

“Okay,” she said, liking the idea. “Like what?”

I searched my brain hard for an idea. I thought about all the things my mom and I had done in the past to cheer ourselves up.

“Let’s make a music video,” I said. It was something we had done once or twice in the past with my dad. We’d set up our camcorder, plan out of video for one of our favorite songs, and then record ourselves singing and dancing like we were in the band. It was the perfect idea, and the best part was, it didn’t require us to be ourselves.

“I don’t know, Tim,” my mom said, maybe remembering the last time we did it with my dad, when he sang Bruce Springsteen’s “Born in the U.S.A.” out all rough and loud like Springsteen actually did. He made both me and my mom laugh our heads off.

“Come on,” I said. “You know it’ll be fun.”

She thought about the idea a little more, and I watched as her smile slowly began to grow.

“Okay,” she said. “I’ve got the perfect song, too.”

The song my mom chose was “Get Off of My Cloud” by The Rolling Stones. I was almost sure she was going to pick “Satisfaction,” but she was dead set with “Get Off of My Cloud” so I didn’t argue with her. Besides, it was still The

Rolling Stones, and no band got rid of sadness better than the Stones. I knew that better than anybody. My mom and I ran downstairs and got Adam, then the three of us started getting ready to make our video. The first thing we had to do was plan out our set, and my mom had a great idea to make it look like we were singing on a cloud. She first pinned a big, light-blue sheet up against the wall in the playroom to make a sky, then she dug an old comforter out of the linen closet, cut it open with a pair of scissors, and threw its white, fluffy insides out on the floor.

“Our cloud,” she said, holding her arms out to display what she had created.

From there we needed outfits and instruments. My mom dressed Adam and me in a couple of turtlenecks and blazers, saying that’s what the Stones had wore when she saw them on the Ed Sullivan show. Mick Jagger, however, she said, didn’t wear the turtleneck on the show. He wore a red button-down shirt and jeans, so that’s what my mom wore because she was going to be doing the singing in the video. She gave me, Keith Richards, a tennis racket for a guitar and for Adam, Charlie Watts, she flipped over a couple of my toy bins to make him a set a drums. Lastly, for her microphone, she popped the lampshade off the tall, standing lamp in the corner of the playroom and unplugged it from the wall.

“Alright,” she said, pulling the lamp over to our cloud. “Now when it gets to the chorus and the Stones start singing ‘*Hey, Hey, You, You, Get Off of My Cloud*’ kick up the stuffing like you were trying to kick something off the cloud, okay?”

Adam and I both nodded, and then watched my mom as she went over to turn both the boombox and the camcorder on. She hurried back over to her microphone and got right into place as the drums started playing in the song. The

drumming was quick and rapid, like the sound of a machine gun going off. Adam tried to hit his pencils on the bins as fast as he could to match Charlie Watts' drums, but he song was too quick for him, and his pencils *clacked* out something that didn't sound anything like the song. My mom started dancing oddly in front of the microphone. I had only seen the Rolling Stones play once on television, but I could tell right away that she was copy Mick Jagger's dance moves. She pointed her arm up in the air and twirled it, while sticking her butt out and wobbling it up and down. Then when the words started, she pushed her lips out and began singing in a cool voice like Mick Jagger's, which smooth in some parts of the song, and sharp in others.

Our video had begun, and when the first chorus played, all of us kicked up some fluff and shouted '*Hey, Hey, You, You, Get Off of My Cloud*' as loud as we could. My mom kept dancing funny the whole time, slapping the air in front of her or picking up the lamp and walking over to sing to Adam or me. I just strummed the strings of my racket, and watched the whole thing with a smile. My idea was working, no one was feeling sad anymore.

I looked over at Adam and watched him drum on his bins. That crazy focused look was back on his face, and I could tell that he was trying hard to play with the song. He still kept messing up the beat though, tapping too fast or slow and never getting it quite right.

Then, right before the second chorus came in, all of sudden he timed his drumming just right and when Charlie Watts' drums went all quick like the sound of a machine gun, so did Adam's. I couldn't believe it at first. I turned away from

the camera to watch Adam and stopped strumming completely. Again, when the drums in the song got quick, Adam's pencils *whacked* along with them and didn't miss a beat.

I looked over to my mom to see if she was watching, but she was singing right into the camera as hard as she could. She had the lamp's light bulb pulled right up to her big lips and her shoulders were raised almost up to her ears. As the chorus went along, she didn't turn around to joke with me or Adam, she just stared right into camera as if we weren't there and sang loud and hard like she was singing to someone very far away.

'Hey, Hey, You, You, Get Off of My Cloud'

Adam had his eyes closed when I looked back at him. His drumming was still perfect. I still couldn't believe it. This wasn't "Jingle Bells" or "Old MacDonald" or "Oh Susanna." This was The Rolling Stones. And Adam was playing the song note for note with his eyes closed. I wondered how he did it? How he managed to drum his pencils just right? How he was able to hear the song's beat and then so easily play it on those bins in front of him? Then I remembered what he said about the drumming, how he used it to make him forget about all the sad thoughts he had about his dad. For a moment I tried to imagine what he was thinking right then. I tried to imagine how with every strike of those pencils, how with every *whack* and *clack* he was beating those bad thoughts out his head, knocking them further and further away from him so he didn't have to feel sad ever again.

That's when it happened. Adam brought his pencils down hard over and over again at the song's end and all of sudden I heard a loud *snap* and saw that one of his pencils had broken in half. Adam's eyes opened and looked at the broken pencil, holding it up to his face so he could see its broken end.

He started crying immediately. He screamed at the top of his lungs for his mom, while tears dripped down his face. My mom stopped singing and ran to Adam.

"What happened?" she yelled out over the music and Adam's crying.

"It broke!" Adam screamed. "*It broke!*"

My mom saw the pencil. She bent down and started hugging Adam. She rocked him a little bit to try to get him to stop crying and told him over and over that we could get him a new pencil. But nothing worked. Adam kept crying and screaming, not understanding that the pencil could be replaced.

I stood by my mom as she hugged Adam, frozen in place. I didn't know what to do. I tried to make everyone happier, but it only got us there, to Adam crying and everyone still feeling sad. So I did the only thing that I thought made sense: I went over and turned off the music.

Adam finally stopped crying after a little while and then my mom put me and him to bed. She was tired and so were we, so we didn't fight her about it.

She had made a little bed for Adam on my floor with a sleeping bag and some extra blankets, and he crawled into it right away and buried his head underneath a pillow. I laid there in my bed next to Adam trying to figure out something to say to him that might make him feel better, but I couldn't think of

anything, so I just kept quiet. The house went silent for a long time. There was no movement in the house, no sounds coming from the street. It was just silent. Dead silent.

Then I heard Adam start crying again. It was soft, and he tried to muffle the sound with his pillow, but I could definitely hear him crying.

“It’s okay, Adam,” I said to him in a whisper. “We’ll get you some more pencils tomorrow.”

I heard him move a bit, and through the dark I saw him pull the pillow off his head.

“I know, but I keep thinking about my dad and how he’s gone still. I can’t stop thinking about it.” He pulled his blanket over his head and fell back into his pillow sniffing.

I felt my stomach go hollow again, and I started thinking about my own dad and how I still missed him, too. I reached under my bed for my old Winnie the Pooh tape player and rewound the tape. As I did it, I told Adam about my mom and how she used to listen to “Satisfaction” when she was little and how I listened to it now whenever I got sad.

I hit the play button and stopped talking so we could listen to the song. I wanted Adam to feel like I did whenever I listened to it, which was older and stronger, like nothing in the world could ever make you feel sad again. The both of us stayed silent as it played, listening to Keith’s guitar, Mick’s vocals, and Charlie’s drums. We listened to it and forgot about all the sad stuff—we just focused on the sounds. And when the song ended, I rewound the tape and played it

again, this time turning volume up louder so that my mom could hear it upstairs in her bed and so that our dad's could hear it, too, wherever they were.

Vin' Vinyl and the Education

Adam and I walked past the storefront of Bluebond Guitars with our heads down and our faces hidden behind the raised collars of our red school blazers. When we made it past the storefront's large paneled window and were sure that we couldn't be seen from inside the store, we jumped toward the brick facing of the building next door and pushed our backs tightly against the cold wall like we were a couple of cops about to get ourselves into a shootout. We sidestepped slowly back toward Bluebond, Adam in front and me sliding behind him, and when Adam's shoulder hit the brown wooden frame of Bluebond's front window, the two of us stopped and tried to settle the tumbling nerves in our stomachs with short blasts of breath. Adam calmed his nerves before I could get a hold of mine, which shocked me a bit because he always got the stronger case of the yips whenever we carried out one of my plans. His lungs and chest stopped pumping in like a minute, and then he real carefully popped his head around the wood frame and snuck a peek inside the store. He scanned the place for about fifteen seconds, tilting and rocking his head a bit whenever he needed a better view, then he pulled himself back tightly against the wall.

"I didn't see it," Adam said, his shaggy hair scraping against the brick as he shook his head.

The "it" he was referring to was a J-45 Gibson acoustic guitar with a fire-hot sunburst paintjob that just called out to you whenever you saw it. The plan, my plan, was to gank the thing right out of the shop and to screw over Sid, the store's

owner, who a couple days earlier had banned the two of us from the shop for good. The banning was a load of it, if you asked Adam and I. We had been going in and out of Bluebond, this guitar shop right off of South Street, for like a month straight just to look at guitars. We never bought anything other than guitar magazines, and that seemed cool with Sid because he never said a peep to us about being there. That was until he put that used J-45 on the wall.

You couldn't blame Adam for wanting to touch it; the thing just looked so pretty on the wall with the yellow of its body glowing like a flame. And plus, Adam had said that it was the guitar Dylan normally used, so he had to try the thing out. Sid of course spazzed. That had a lot to do with the nine-hundred dollar price tag that was swinging from the guitar's tuning pegs. He yelled at us and banned us both, all because Adam had flipped the guitar's strap over his shoulder and stroked his hand up and down the thing's long neck like he knew how to use it. It wasn't like he broke it or nothing.

"You've got to be kidding me," I said, trying to sound upset.

"Here, you take a peek." Adam slid across my chest, staying close to the wall, while at the same time pushing me toward the window. My nerves started really getting to me when I got to the window, and all I could think about was how my big mouth had gotten me into some real crap. This plan wasn't like my normal ones where we were ganking P'boys from our buddy Marty Cane's dad or peeping in on Mrs. Salento while she was doing her morning routine. That was nothing compared to this, and if we got caught—which we usually did because of crappy

luck—it wasn't going to be another slap on the wrist like had been when the Mrs. Salento peep show plan fell apart.

I looked over to Adam. His eyes were damn near popping out of their sockets, and they were hitting me with this stare that was pushing my head toward the window. I still couldn't believe he went for the plan in the first place. With the Mrs. Salento thing it took me like two weeks of explaining and begging just to get him in on it, and even with all that talking he still wasn't one-hundred percent sold on the idea. Then he got so nervous when we were peeping in Mrs. Salento's bedroom window, that he had to leave his lookout post to take a whiz, and Mrs. S's neighbor snuck up on me while I had my hand down there and doing what felt right. That was a real crapshow. Now, outside Bluebond, with a real crime about to go down, Adam was all ready to go without a doubt. You had to be kidding me, I kept saying in my mind.

“Alright,” I whispered, and then shot my head into the window for like maybe three seconds before bringing myself back to the wall. I don't think I even opened my eyes. “Crap, man, I don't think it's there anymore. Sid must've sold it.”

“TJ, you barely even looked,” Adam said. “You're better at this stuff than me. I need you, man.” Adam's face was serious; holding steady in a look that just read: “come on.” It was the same look that I always gave when I needed him to go in on one of my plans.

“You sure you want this thing?”

“Yeah,” he said in like a second, “screw Devin Burriss. Right?” That had been our line for the last couple weeks, one that I always said and one that Adam

always listened to. This whole guitar business had started a month earlier when this Society Hill rich prick from our class named Devin Burriss had brought his Fender Strat into music class for his project on Rock n' Roll. As soon as he started playing the thing, the both us knew we had to get our own. I think I just wanted one to show Devin Burriss that real city kids had nice things too, but Adam wanted it for different reasons. Ones he never told me about, but that I could sense whenever I caught him sketching guitars on his notebooks or air soloing with his pencils. Hearing him say "screw Devin Burriss" put it into my head one last time just how much he wanted the J-45 and it made me notice this tightness in my stomach that was telling me that there was only one option here.

"Screw Devin Burriss. And screw Sid," I said. I pushed over to the window and poked my head out to look inside the store. The showroom was crowded with guitars; some hung of the walls like icicles and others rested in stands on the island display at the center of the room. I skimmed for the J-45, trying not to think about how the whole Mrs. Salento thing had ended with my Ma and I sitting in her car one night, listening to Meatloaf's "Paradise By the Dashboard Light" over and over until I got confused by all the baseball terms and she gave up and said, "this is one of those discussions you should really have with your father when he gets back into town." Instead, I thought of how Adam had looked when he was holding the J-45, how with that fire-hot, shiny wood resting in his hands, just like that he seemed bigger and older, like he drank every ounce of milk in the whole city of Philadelphia.

On my last skim around the floor, I finally found the J-45, tucked into the back right corner of the shop where Sid kept the primo guitars that he wasn't displaying in either the front window or the island. I could see only part of its body because of all the other guitars hanging around it, but I was sure it was the J-45. I could tell by the way its slick looking paintjob burned from yellow to black right around the guitar's edges. I stared at it for a couple of seconds longer than I should have. It was so damn pretty that I couldn't stop myself. Every time I looked at the thing it made me think of sports cars and nice watches and all that type of stuff that just seems too nice to touch. And on top of that the guitar, with its smooth, flowing lines, started making me think of Mrs. Salento and the way I felt when I was back at her window and hoping that the top of her towel would slide just a little further down.

Sid walked out into the center of the showroom floor for a second, which in a flash made me remember exactly where I was. I froze up quicker than a Flavor Ice when I saw him, and just stayed motionless there in the window as he moved toward the display island. He stopped in front of a black electric guitar and just waited there a bit looking at it, while running his fingers through his feathered, bright-blond hair. That hair made me hate Sid even more. It was always longer, brighter, and poofier than most of the girls in the latest Van Halen video, and for a guy as old as Sid, that was just a bit too crazy. He moved the guitar's stand a tiny bit to the right and then walked back toward the front counter with his stupid hair bouncing at every step. When I thought it was safe, I swung myself out of the window and pressed back up against the wall.

“It’s in there,” I said as my heart was still going nuts. “In the back right corner.” Adam moved around me and looked in the window again. “You remember the plan right? You go in first, run around going crazy and knocking over guitars, then I’ll come in behind you and gank the J-45 while Sid is trying to get you.”

“Don’t forget about the money,” Adam said, reminding me of the one-hundred and fifty bucks that I had folded in my pocket. “You got to leave it behind as we’re running out. That was a part of your plan.”

I reached down into my pocket to feel the bills. I started kicking myself mentally, thinking about how I had only mentioned the money part back when I was still sure Adam wasn’t going to go in on the plan; I still couldn’t believe that it ended up sealing the deal. I brushed my fingers across the pointy corners of the cash one last time, and then pulled the wad out my pocket.

“Alright, alright,” I said, like I had just been asked to go down to the office. “You ready?” Adam held up his hand to ask me for a second, and then poked his head into the window again to check on the J-45. When he pulled himself back against the wall his eyes were closed and his body was calm, like all of sudden his mind had taken him off to church or someplace quiet and peaceful like that. I didn’t know what the heck was going on.

“I want to grab the guitar,” he said as he opened his eyes.

“What?”

“I want to be the one to gank the guitar?”

“Listen,” I said, looking at his face, which was almost as serious as my Ma’s was that night in her car, “if this about the cash thing, don’t worry. I’ll leave it—”

“It’s not that, TJ,” he interrupted. “I just want to get the guitar.” Looking at him get all serious about it made me feel that tightness down in my stomach again, and I didn’t fight him about it a second time. I just slapped the wad of cash down into his hand and gave him a nod to let him know that I was ready.

I took three deep breaths and then darted for the door, whooshing past the front window so quickly that I was positive that Sid couldn’t have seen me. I grabbed the long brass handle of the front door and yanked it open with a slam, which caused the ring of sleigh bells on the inside door handle to go flying out on the sidewalk. My heart was going so nuts at that point that I could feel it up and down my tongue, and it shot to a hole other level of crazy when I dashed into the store and saw Sid standing there in the entryway with his arms crossed, his legs spread wide, his stupid hair flowing, and his lips cracked into a smile that made me realize that he knew we were outside all along.

I hit the brakes so hard that if it were a cartoon, my heels would have dug down into the floor Bugs Bunny style.

I turned right around and started sprinting in the other direction, trying to get the heck out of there faster than I had went in. Sid ran after us too, shouting at our backs all the things he’d do to Adam and I if he could only get his hands on us. All the cars on 4th Street stopped; the drivers gawking as Sid chased after us through a stream of people on the sidewalk. I turned around to catch a glimpse at Sid’s stupid

hair flapping in the wind and accidentally ran smack dab into Adam. The two of us stumbled just enough to allow Sid to catch up and he snatched at the collar of my blazer, nipping the tip of the fabric with his fingers, but luckily coming up empty. The nip gave me a little extra burst, to the point where I thought my penny loafers were smoking, and Adam and I pulled away, turning at the next street and losing Sid in a crowd waiting at the corner for the light to turn.

When we were halfway down the street and pretty much in the clear, I slowed down and looked over my shoulder to see Sid standing on the corner and looking heated.

“That’s right!” he yelled. “When someone tells you to stay out of their store—you stay out of their store! You got that!” I stopped for a second, dead in my tracks, and turned to face him.

“Hey Sid,” I yelled back, “get this!” I grabbed my crotch with my right hand and added a shake, just to make sure the message made it down the block. Then I turned back the other way and began running after Adam, who was turning down onto 3rd.

I found Adam huffing and puffing in a little alleyway halfway down the block. I stopped running when I saw him, my feet breaking so hard that my footsteps echoed up the alley’s walls, and then walked over to his side. I buckled over and started trying to catch my breath, but I kept thinking about Sid’s face when I had shouted back to him, his jaw all open and heavy and his cheeks as red as a clown’s nose, and I ended up doing more laughing than breathing. I thought

Adam would start laughing at everything too, but when I looked up at him, his face was all stiff and red and his eyes were just locked hard on the pavement.

“Ah, what now?” I said, losing my smile, “we didn’t get caught or nothing.”

“It’s not that, TJ. It’s just...I need that guitar.”

“I want it too, man, but it doesn’t look like it’s going to happen.”

“It has to. We need to get it somehow.”

“Well, how? I’m pretty sure there’s no chance we can steal it from Bluebond now, so you can just throw that idea out the window.”

“We could,” he started to say like his idea was golden. Then he caught himself and said, “we could just buy it.”

“Buy it?” I yelled so hard it echoed down the alley. “How the heck are we going to buy it? The thing’s nine hundred some bucks. We don’t have that kind of scratch.”

“We could get it.”

“But, how?” I said again. “We’re not going to get any daddy help on this like Devin Burriss, you know”

“Well, we already got the one-hundred and fifty from your Confirmation money and my change bin, all we’d have to do is come up with eight-hundred more.” Adam stopped for a second to think. “I don’t know. Why don’t we get jobs? I saw this—“

“You’ve got to be nutso,” I said, getting a little mad. “We live in the city, not in the stupid burbs. People don’t got lawns that we can mow around here. We

can't get a stupid paper route or carwash going. Were twelve years old. No one is going to give us a stupid job."

"Will you just listen to me for a sec," Adam snapped back. "We always do things your way. It's always your plan and your ideas. And we've been doing that for a while now and every time we're either getting in trouble or coming up empty handed. So I think it's my turn for once to figure things out."

He took a long breath after he was done yelling; it was the type you take after you've been underwater for a long time and finally make it back up to the surface. It was pretty clear that he had been wanting to say something like that for a while. I tried to make up something real quick, a new plan or something that could get us the J-45 and show Adam that my ideas weren't all bad. But I came up with nothing. The whole situation was getting me pretty pissed off. I was mad because Adam was right about everything and all, but what was really getting me ticked was this picture of Devin Burriss that I suddenly had in my head, this image with him unwrapping that Fender Strat under a great big Christmas tree with his pretty looking parents watching him with watermelon slice sized smiles.

"I think I know where we can get jobs," Adam said, "Do you want to give that a shot?"

"Fine," I muttered, still angry and then followed Adam as he walked out of the alley and headed for South Street.

On South, Adam walked West, which moved up with the numbered streets. We didn't talk. I just stayed at his heels, plodding a step or two behind him, and trying to figure out just where in the heck he thought we were going to find jobs.

South Street was a place you could find work I guess, but not if you were in seventh grade and trying to save up money for a guitar. I loved the place and all, but the only type of people I saw working on that strip were foreign types with harsh sounding accents or the weirdo looking people that my Ma called “artsies”, who had long and crazy colored hair and all types of piercings and tattoos. South Street was pretty much home for Adam and I, since we both lived only a couple blocks away from it, but I still wasn’t seeing how we could ever find a job there.

Walking down South Street at least made me lighten up a bit. I just loved it there—had pretty much since I was a real little kid. It was home like I said, and my Ma and I must have been up and down that street over a thousand times it felt like. What really made me love the street, though, was just how confusing the whole place seemed to be. You’d be walking south through Society Hill, feeling like you were in “ole” Philly, crossing cobblestone streets and picturing horse and buggies clonking by with people inside wearing big old fashioned dresses and Benjamin Franklin type suits where the pants only came down to your knees. Then all of a sudden you hit South Street and you’re in the bizarro world, looking up at shops with names like Zipperhead and Ishkabibble's and storefronts that felt more like the entryway to a carnival funhouse than to a store. Those stores, too—talk about confusing. None of them seemed to add up. You’d walk a half a block on South and there’d be a designer clothing shop on one side and thrift shop on the other. You’d walk another half a block and there’d be a cheesesteak place on one side and Indian food restaurant on the other. Then just when you thought you had it all figured out, you’d walk another block just to find a comic book store across the

street from a sex shop. Really nothing added up, but when you walk up and down the street a billion times like I had, you get used to the craziness, and somehow, I know it sounds stupid, but you start feeling like your home.

We got to the corner of Fourth and South and I looked back down in the direction of Bluebond to the corner where we had left Sid in our dust.

“Stupid Sid,” I mumbled, remembering how he screamed at us. “Who the heck is he, anyway? Trying to tell us what we can and can’t do. That stupid prick doesn’t even know us. He can’t boss us around.”

“Yeah,” Adam said, “reminds me of my dad.”

Adam made this awkward noise that was part laugh and part grunt after he said it, which was the noise he only made when he was talking about something that made him uncomfortable. I laughed with him at first, because that’s just what you do, but then I sort did a double take, realizing he was talking about his dad, the same guy who had left him with his grandmother six years earlier, like he just saw him that morning. I couldn’t remember the last time he actually told me he saw him. It had to be over five years. I quickly picked up my pace to get even with him, and then looked him in the eyes.

“Crap,” Adam said, catching my stare and seeing that I knew something was up. “He’s back. My dad’s back in town.”

“When in the heck did that happen?”

“A couple nights ago. He’s not living with my grandma and me, but he’s been coming around to pick up stuff and to fix some things at the house and to,” Adam sort of stuttered, “and to see me, I guess.”

“Ho-ly crap,” I said stopping there in front of the black tiled storefront of Jim’s Steaks. A group of fanny pack wearing tourists exited Jim’s, bringing with them that heavy scent of fried onions, which always reminded me of B.O. “Is everything ok?”

“I guess,” Adam said, letting the group of tourists move between us. I couldn’t see him for a second as the group walked by. “It’s pretty much been a big fat bag of whatever. He tries to talk to me and stuff, but it just goes in one ear and out the other. I wish he would leave.” Adam dropped his head a bit and locked his eyes on the ground.

“What’s he talk to you about?”

“I don’t know. It’s mostly apology type stuff, where he tries to say sorry for leaving and to explain why he had to go and how he didn’t realize that my mom would chase after him. There’s other stuff—like about life and all,” he said, turning his head to look back in the direction we had been going. “It’s just a load of it. I think it’s gotten to the point where he knows I don’t want to hear it anymore.”

I started walking us again down South, hoping that by walking I could somehow help make that conversation feel less intense. I still didn’t have a clue where the heck we were going, but I kept us moving in the direction that Adam had wanted to go. I wanted to say something to Adam to make him feel better, too. When we got into one of these types of conversations, where we were talking about our dads and how we both sort of got raw deals in that category, I always knew what to say to make Adam feel like my home life was just as bad as his. And that would sort of help him out in a way, just by letting him know that he wasn’t the

only one that got gypped. But the truth behind it all was that our situations couldn't have been any more different.

Adam was abandoned first by his dad and then by his mom. After all that went down, he had to live with his grandmother, who wasn't a bad person, but who was like a hundred years old and just about deaf. She lived in this tiny row house in Queen's Village that was even older than her. The house wasn't the type of place a kid should be growing up in, especially without his parents. It was so narrow that when you walked in, your first reaction was to make yourself smaller by scrunching in your arms. There wasn't much in the place. I guess that had to do with the size. You walked into a living room that had no TV, just a couple of dark stained bookshelves and this set of old lady furniture with stiff, thin cushioning and wood bordering on the edges that made it impossible to rest your head. There was also a dining room with a massive, brown china cabinet and a matching wooden table set with these chairs that wobbled just when you walked past them. Upstairs was Adam's grandmom's room, as well as the house's only bathroom. And just outside that bathroom was a little open area that was kind of like Adam's room. There was no door or anything, but there was a single bed, a desk, and just enough room for a trunk, so that Adam could have some place for his clothes. If he wanted to get some privacy, he had to go down to the basement, which was crammed with all the stuff that his parents had left behind—boxes, furniture, and other crap; but it still had enough space for a little couch and a table, which Adam used as a spot to puts his dad's old record player on.

With me, it wasn't really anything like that. My parents were still together and they both really loved me and all, but they also worked a ton. My dad was still "working his way up" as my Ma always had to remind me, bouncing around from new job to new job whenever the work he was doing at one office made him more appealing for another. So while he was getting new and better jobs, he was still the new guy everywhere he went, which meant he had to spend more and more time away from home. The time away did a real number on my Ma, and it was okay for a while when I was still little and around all the time; but as soon as I was at that age where I could figure things out for myself, she went out quick and got a waitressing job at the South Street Diner so she didn't have to stay locked in an empty house all day. If they had their way, which was never going to happen, I think the both of them would have wanted to be home, in our house on Eighth and Lombard, spending as much time together as a family as we could; but I never told Adam that. I always tried to make things at home sound as bad as possible, especially when it came to talking about my dad. I'd always be talking about how he was never home and didn't care about Ma and I and about how I hoped one of these times he'd just never come back. I would never tell him about how whenever my dad got home on a red eye flight, he would come lay in my bed with me, suit and shoes still on, and wake me up with hugs. I wouldn't say anything about how I'd always press my face into his sport coat and try to smell the places he'd been, so it would almost be like we had been there together. I never spoke a word about how my dad would usually say something to me about how he had heard how well I'd been doing as the man of the house and how proud of me he was because of that.

And I never, never ever, told Adam about how I'd always cry then, partly because I was just so happy he was there, and partly because I didn't know if I was actually being the man he was so proud to hear about.

I couldn't tell Adam anything about that, because if I did, I knew it would change things between us, just like that.

"I think if I were you, I'd be praying for the day he left," I said, finally finding something to say.

"I am in a way, but...I don't know. Maybe, after a while, it could be a good thing that he's around. I mean it's got to be better than having nobody at all. It could kind of be like what you have with your dad. That's better than nothing, right?" Adam looked over at me after asking the question, but I kept my head down, feeling his eyes on my face, and again thought about what to say.

"No, man," I finally said, still keeping my head down. "Screw that guy. You made it this far without him. You don't need him." I looked up to see Adam dropping his chin to his chest.

"Maybe you're right," he said, red rising on his cheeks. We both got quiet again, each of us maybe realizing that there wasn't much more to say. We walked a couple more blocks or so down South, staying in the shade of the stores' wacky awnings and signs that never seemed to stop coming. We went past one of those sex shops on the corner of Fifth. Normally, we would have slowed down a bit to try to sneak a peak inside, but something about that just didn't feel right then. Instead it felt like we almost sped up a bit as we passed the place, as if the store's cartoonish, neon sign was going to fall off the wall and squash us if we didn't hurry past.

We finally stopped out front of Vin's Vinyl, which was halfway between Sixth and Seventh. With all the oddball looking stores on South, Vin's Vinyl's plain storefront made the place pretty forgettable, even for me, and I'd been to that store a couple times with Adam. There wasn't artwork outside with bright, bursting colors or one of those big signs or awnings with eye-catching letters; Vin's just wasn't that type of place, I guessed. There was only this little sign above the door that read "Vin's Vinyl – Buy, Sell, and Trade" in simple, skinny lettering and two big windows on both sides of the door that were covered corner-to-corner with music posters. Adam and I stood there for second looking at those posters. I was trying to figure out if the names I was reading like Pavement, The Pixies, Sonic Youth, My Bloody Valentine, were actually bands or the names of albums.

"Who are these bands," I asked Adam, already knowing that he'd have no idea. "You sure as heck don't hear any of them on the radio."

"It doesn't matter," Adam responded. "This is what we're here for." He pointed to a sign in the corner of the window in front of him. It was one of those Help Wanted signs you could find at any hardware store, only the "Wanted" part of this sign was covered with a piece of duct tape that had "NEEDED!" scribbled on it block letters. Adam reached for the handle of the door.

"Where the heck you going?" I said, grabbing the sleeve of his blazer.

"What's the plan?"

"There is no plan. We just go in and ask about the job."

"Well, what do we say?"

“You say nothing. Just do the stuff I do, and let me do the talking.

Remember,” he said holding out his hand in my direction, “it’s my way this time.”

I nodded, although I was really itching to point out the slim chance we had of actually getting hired. Adam fixed his blazer and his hair to look as pretty as possible, but having been into Vin’s before, I was pretty sure that proper grooming wasn’t going to be something that they were looking for in a new employee. Adam popped open the door with a pull, and we walked into the store to the sound of screeching guitars blaring from the store’s speakers. When you first walked into Vin’s there was a smaller section, not much longer than twelve feet, that was just reserved for tapes, then there was the counter directly behind it and a longer area in the back where all the Vinyl was. Adam went straight to the vinyl area, to the D section and started flipping through Dylan albums. Except for the big guy behind the counter and some artsy guy he was talking to, there was nobody else in the place.

“I think it’s going to be hard to get hired while were looking through albums,” I said smartly to Adam.

“Will you shut it and make it look like you’re going to buy something,” he whispered. “We got to wait till he’s done talking to this guy.” I went to say something back to him, but then just bit my tongue and started flipping through the Cream albums.

We were close enough to the counter to hear the two guys speaking. The artsy looking one was leaning over the counter’s glass top with his hands up in the

air like he was giving up and speaking down to the other guy who was sitting sadly behind the counter.

“He won’t sell it to me, Vin,” the artsy guy said, “He knows I’m buying for you. And he told me he wasn’t going to be selling that record to anybody. Period. I’m sorry man, but there’s nothing I can do.” The man sitting in the chair shook his head a bit and the brim of his beat up Flyers cap rocked a little from side to side. He was scrunched down in his chair and looking back toward us with his eyes set on dusty grey floor.

“It is what it is,” he shook off his stare and got up out of his seat to face the other guy. “Thanks for trying. Mick. I’ll figure this thing out some other way.” They shook hands and the artsy guy headed for the door, pushing it open with a quick shove. Adam and I kept flipping through albums, but it was probably obvious that we had been snooping in on the conversation the whole time. When Adam heard the front door close, he slipped out a copy of *The Times They Are a-Changin’* and went for the counter, tugging on my sleeve as he turned. I pushed back the pile of albums I was looking through so that they rested easy again on the rack and then followed Adam. It was weird, but my heart started going nuts again, just like it had outside of Bluebond, except this time I had no real reason to get nervous.

The guy at the counter, who I was assuming now was *the* Vin of Vin’s Vinyl, was standing up and sorting a stack of records. With him standing up it was easier to see how heavy he was. He was wearing an over sized t-shirt to hide his weight, that had long sleeves that would flash parts of the colored tattoos on his biceps every time he reached for the stack of records. When you looked at his face,

your eyes went first to his big, bushy goatee that was hanging off his chin and spotted with bits of brown and grey. His hair had the same mix color too, and spilled out from under his head like a mad scientist's in stringy waves that barely hit his shoulders. On the wall behind him was a set pictures placed underneath a plaque that said "Vin's Wall." There were a couple of pictures of a drummer up on stage, sweaty and shirtless and pounding away, as well as a bunch of other photos that were taken in the store where the same guy was pictured throughout with a bunch of different bands whose names I again didn't recognize. The guy's face was the same as the drummer's and in each photo that face got heavier and hairier and older until it matched the face of the heavy set guy working behind the counter. His face was always sporting a smile in each of the photos, but there behind the counter, Vin's face was tight with a grimace that looked a lot like the face my Ma made whenever she was disappointed with me.

Adam placed the copy of *The Times They Are a-Changin'* up on the counter and then dug into his pocket for our wad of cash. Seeing that we were ready to checkout, Vin pushed aside his stack of records and reached down under the counter for a plastic bag.

"You guys find everything okay," he said, saying "guys" like they do down in south Philly, where the "s" sound just keeps on going.

"Yeah, it's only this," Adam responded, pushing the album toward Vin. He looked back at me to make sure I was acting normal. "That kind of stinks about that record, huh?" Vin looked down at the Dylan album, then at the stack next to the

register. “The one you were just talking about...that you wanted that guy to get you.”

“Oh, right,” Vin said, piecing things together. “Same old snags of the trading business. It ain’t that big of a deal. I’ll figure it out.” He punched the buttons of the register till the thing pinged and read \$27.50.

“What record was it?”

“An original Chess single of Muddy Waters’ “You Need Love”. That jerk over at Philadelphia Record Exchange has the only copy I’ve ever friggin’ seen and he knows I want it, so he’s not selling it. I’ll just have to keep looking for another copy.”

“That’s a real crappy move,” Adam said as he handed Vin the cash. Vin looked down at Adam with a smile that made it seem like he was almost surprised to be having the conversation.

“Like I said, I’ll figure it out.” He slipped the album into the bag in one swift motion and then dangled it out over the counter. “Here you go, kid. You and you’re little mute friend there got your Bobby D and you’re all ready to unite the movement or whatever it is you Folk lovers do. We’ll see you next time.”

Adam reached for the bag slowly and took it out of Vin’s hands. Then Vin went back to his stack of records, listing the names of the albums on a yellow pad of paper, and acting like we had left the store and were half a block away. Adam turned to me with wide eyes, and shrugged his shoulders. He didn’t know what the heck was going on. Neither did I, but I just gave him a little nudge on his back that pushed him toward the counter. He was doing things his way.

“Um, excuse me. We were wondering about the job you were hiring for,” Adam said in this real proper and polite way that made it seem like he was talking to our principal. “If it’s still open, we’ll take it.” Vin looked up from his notepad. He looked like he was about to lose it with laughter.

“Well that’s settled then. When can you guys start?”

“We could start—“

“Kid, that was sarcasm. I ain’t hiring you for the job.”

“Why not?” Adam asked, his shoulder sinking a bit.

“Why not? How about ‘cause I need a grownup working here. That ain’t the Smurf Village outside that door. It’s Phila-friggin-delphia, guys. I can’t have the St. Peter’s choir,” he said, pointing at our blazers, “holding up shop while I’m gone. I’m sorry fellas, but I’m looking for men here, not boys.”

Adam went to respond to Vin, but he held himself back. I was half tempted to say something to the guy, but I was more mad at Adam for putting us in that situation to begin with. He should have known right from the spot that the guy wasn’t going to hire us, just like I did. We walked out the store. It was the second time that day that we had left a shop empty handed, and when I looked at Adam, I knew he was feeling just as crappy as I was about that.

“I tried to tell you, man” I said, taking the bag from his hands “but you just—”

Adam suddenly took off like a mad man down South Street, heading back down in the direction we had walked from, and motoring as quick as he did when we were trying to ditch Sid. For a second there I just stood outside of Vin’s, yelling

at him at the top of my lungs, and hoping that he would turn back. But once he was half way down the block and getting smaller in the distance, I got my butt into a gear and headed after him. He ran two blocks down and past the sex shop, then made a sharp right to Fifth Street. I thought maybe he was heading home or something, that what had gone on in the last hour or so was just too much for him. But when I got to the corner of Fifth and looked down the street in search of his flapping, red blazer, I saw him stopped and standing in front of store, gathering himself the same way he did before he went into Vin's. I yelled out to him again, and he turned a bit when my voice got down to him. He flapped his hand to shoo me away, I guessed, then he reached for the door and went inside of the shop.

I darted down the street, feeling the sweat gathering on the back of my neck and in the tips of my hair. When I got to the shop Adam went into, I looked up and read the sign hanging over the big front window. It said Philadelphia Record Exchange. It took me less than a second to realize what he was doing. I watched him through the window, still gathering my breath from all the running. Adam was talking to some skinny guy behind the register, who was wearing a leather vest and matching wrist bands. The guy was shaking his head side to side and saying something to Adam that made him go red in the cheeks. Then, like at out of nowhere, Adam brought his hands up to his face and started acting like he was crying. The skinny guy sort of hesitated at first, looking around the store for someone to help him, then he went around the counter and began rubbing Adam on his back all gently like he was petting a puppy. Adam pulled his head out of his hands and showed the guy his face, which was just streaked all the way down to his

chin with tears. I couldn't believe what was going on, and just as I was about to walk into the place and get Adam the heck out of there, he caught my eyes in the window and give me a little wink. What a nut-job, I started thinking. He was pulling the old waterworks number, and leather vest was buying it hook, line, and sinker. The guy left Adam for a second and walked over to a rack of albums in the center of the room that had a sign above it with the word "Blues" written on in it. He skipped his fingers over the tops of the albums, and then pulled out a little record that was covered with in a crimped white sleeve. Back at the counter Adam handed the guy a wad of cash, and then headed to the door with the record in one hand, while he wiped his tears with the other.

"You've got to be kidding me," I said when he got outside the door.

"Let's see if we can get that job now." He held up the record so I could see the bright blue label bursting through the white of the sleeve like a blue flame.

Back in Vin's shop, Vin was still alone and at the counter, sorting through another pile of records that looked bigger than his last one. We walked right up to the counter and Adam held out the Muddy Waters record so it was smack dab in Vin's face. Vin took the record, slipped it out of its sleeve, and held it by the edges with only his palms, like the thing was too hot to be touched with just fingers.

"How'd you guys get this?" he said.

"What's the difference?" Adam quickly asked back.

"Because if you lifted it, then it's going out of this shop faster than it came in." Adam dug into his pocket and pulled out a little white piece of paper.

“Here’s the receipt for the thing,” he said, tossing the paper over to Vin.
“Bought it from Philadelphia Record Exchange, right down the street.”

“No way. My man said Ricky wasn’t selling it to anyone.”

“Well he sold it to me.”

“Yeah, I got that part kid. But I don’t got the “how” part yet.” Adam and looked at each other, the two of us remembering the scene back the other store, and we both started chuckling.

“I told the guy that my dad was dying and that it was his favorite song when he was growing up and that all he wanted was to hear it one more time before he died.” Adam looked a little embarrassed as he told Vin what happened, almost as if he couldn’t believe that he had actually done it.

“Go ahead and tell him the best part,” I said.

“I got some tears going and the guy almost dropped one or two himself.”

“And he bought this friggin’ sob story,” Vin asked, looking at us like it couldn’t be true. We nodded. “That’s quite the fast one you boys pulled.” Vin looked down at the record another time and started laughing. Adam was enjoying the whole thing that he had started, even though he was holding back a bit. I was smiling like they were, but what Vin had said, about how we had pulled the fast one, that had made it hard for me laugh. I had done nothing really, except chase after Adam. The whole thing was his idea not mine. I guess it didn’t really matter in the long run, but I felt like I could have been outside then, too, watching that scene and not a thing would have been different.

“What do you want for it?” Vin asked after he finished laughing.

“Jobs.”

“I can’t do that, kid. I really can’t”

“Why not?” I chipped in. For the first time I wanted this whole plan to work. “You got floors that need to be swept, albums that need to be sorted. We could even keep going out and getting you more records. Nobody knows we’d be working for you.” Vin’s eyes rocked from me to Adam, then back. It looked like he was actually considering the idea for a second.

“Why do you guys need jobs anyway, huh? Shouldn’t you be out playing baseball or chasing after tail? Why do you want to hang out with a slob like me in a dump like this?” We looked at each other, the both us waiting for the other to answer the question, like all of a sudden buying a guitar was the worst idea in the world.

“We’re trying to save up money for a guitar,” Adam finally said.

“Oh, yeah? What kind?”

“A Gibson J-45 Acoustic,” I answered back. “With a sunburst finish.” Vin puffed his cheeks and blew out a big gust air.

“Jee-zuss. You guys sure like to aim high. You think you two can handle that type of guitar?”

Adam and I looked at each other again. I don’t think we even thought about that before.

“You guys know how to play, right?” Vin said, seeing something off about how we we’re looking at each other.

Adam shook his head.

“Shit, guys. You might want to think about getting another axe. Maybe something a little more practical.”

“No way, man,” Adam said, getting serious. “That’s the guitar.”

“Okay. Okay.” Vin held up his hands to give in. “Well, what type of tunes you guys listen to? Who you gonna try to match when you get that sweet guitar? Bobby D? You gonna write songs about the heartland or war or how the world’s gone to shit?”

Again Adam I looked blankly at each other. We hadn’t thought about that either.

“I don’t know,” I said, speaking up for the two of us. “We listen to the Beatles, The Rolling Stones, The Who, Led Zeppelin. Stuff like that. You know, rock.” Vin started laughing as soon as the word “rock” came out of mouth.

“So you guys want to be rockers? Is that it, huh?” We both shook our heads yes. It seemed like the right answer. “Okay. I can work with that.”

Vin handed the Muddy Waters album to Adam while he slipped out from behind the counter and made his way back to the vinyl section. He bounced around the aisles with something in mind, first going to the L’s, then the S’s.

“Does that name Muddy Waters mean anything to you guys?” Vin asked, coming back to the counter with two albums in his hands. Adam and I both said no, which made Vin smile in a way that told us he knew our answer before we said it. He held up one of the albums, and I recognized the cloudy cover of Led Zeppelin II right away. “Your boys.”

He ducked down below the counter with the record in his hand, and turned off the music that had been playing. Then we heard the soft thud of the needle hitting the record, followed by the ultra-cool intro of “Whole Lotta Love”, a song which Adam and I had blasted hundreds of times down in his grandmother’s basement. The vocal kicked in a couple seconds into the song, Robert Plant screeching in his face-melting voice, singing: “*You need coolin’, baby I’m not fooling. I’m gonna send ya, back to schoolin’. Way down inside, honey you need. I’m gonna give you my love...*” Vin cut the record off there, which left me a little ticked.

“Whoa,” I said, “Why’d you cut it off, Vin?”

“To teach you something.” He ducked down behind the counter again with the second record. We heard the needle drop and listened as the speakers blasted an up-tempo bluesy song, where the guitar seemed to growl. Just listening to it I could tell it was old, like all those types of songs my Ma made me listen to on the oldies station where everything sounds a little fuzzy and raw. It was good though and I started tapping my foot to the beat when the singer started belting out the lyrics to “Whole Lotta Love” in a voice that sounded way too close to Robert Plant’s.

“What the heck,” Adam said, looking all confused. “Did Zeppelin record the song earlier?” Vin laughed and again dropped down to switch the album, this time bringing the Muddy Waters record with him. One more time the needle hit and another blues song started playing the same bumpy rhythm as the last song, only this time when the lyrics started, Muddy Waters’ deep, soulful voice howled out of the speakers. And he was singing those same lyrics again, “*I ain’t fooling. You need*

schoolin' ...way down inside, woman, you need love.” Vin let the Muddy Waters song play straight through. Adam and I listened, though I think we both were kind of scratching our heads and trying to think about why there were three different versions of one song. When the song was over, Vin pulled the Muddy Waters record off the player and slipped it back into its sleeve.

“Song one: ‘Whole Lotta Love’ recorded by Led Zeppelin in 1969. Song two: ‘You Need Loving’ recorded by The Small Faces in 1966. And song three: ‘You Need Love’ recorded by Muddy Waters in 1962.”

“That’s crazy,” I said, walking up to the counter to look at The Small Faces album. “The lead singer of this group sounds just like Robert Plant.”

“That’s the late, great Steve Marriott,” Vin reached around the album and pointed to one of the guys on the cover. “He could make the earth rattle with that voice, you better believe that. When Jimmy Page started Zeppelin, he wanted Marriott to be his singer, but the Faces manager threatened to break Page’s fingers if he stole Marriott away. So Jimmy went out and found the next best thing. Both Zeppelin and The Small Faces loved Muddy Waters, too. So did a lot of the bands you guys like. The Rolling Stones got their name from a Muddy Waters song.”

“That’s amazing,” I said. I flipped open The Small Faces album to the liner notes and started reading about the band. Adam stood behind me, sort of frozen in shoes like he didn’t know what to do with himself.

“What’s the point?” he asked Vin.

“Point? Shit kid, it’s a little history lesson about some of the music you love. That’s all. If there’s a point in it I guess it’s that while the greats like The Stones

and Zeppelin are the greats, even they had start somewhere. They had to go out and find a sound that they loved, before they could start playing. Now you say you got the sound, you want play rock, but I don't think you even know what that means. I think if you guys want to play music, you got open up those ears and start doing some listening. And I'm not talking about listening to the radio. I'm talking about coming into a place like this and raiding the shelves looking for music that you've never heard of, because you just want something to surprise you, and make you fall in love with it. That's my point. You got to get some music into your head before you can start making your own."

Vin took off his Flyers cap and pointed to the bald spot at the top of his head. Adam still stood behind me, his arms crossed, thinking exactly what I was thinking—that the guy was right. I looked out over that store and all that pretty vinyl out there that was just waiting for me to listen to it. If had to guess, I probably knew about ten percent of what was out there waiting for me. Maybe less. All I could think about then, was just running over those racks and pulling off the first thing that caught my eye and taking it over to Vin so he could play it. Looking back at Adam, I could tell that he was thinking the same thing.

"And if you're going to work here, with me, you better start listening to some new stuff, because there ain't no friggin' way I'm putting "The Times They Are a-Changin'" on my stereo." Adam and I looked at each other and smiled. "I can't teach you guys how to play the guitar, but I can sure as shit teach you how to listen."

Vin grabbed the receipt from the Muddy Waters album, looked at it, then popped open the register and pulled out a pile of cash.

“What are your guys names?”

“I’m Adam and that’s TJ”

“Well Adam,” Vin said, handing him a wad of cash, “You guys come back here around four o’clock tomorrow and I’ll find you something for you to do.”

Adam took the money from Vin and then we both thanked him. We started walking toward the door, each of us both going a little crazy with the thought that we’d be in there the next day, doing work, and making money, just like we were all grown up. Adam opened up the roll of cash, and rolled his finger across the bills, just to make sure it was all there.

“Hey,” Adam said, before we left, “I think you gave me more than you should.”

“That’s for you guys. For the first day of work.” Adam smiled back at Vin, who was still behind the counter and leaning up against his photo wall with his arms crossed over his big stomach. “I’ll see you guys tomorrow.”

The next day after school Adam and I went back to Vin’s not knowing what in the heck the guy was going to make us do. Adam was pretty sure we’d just be doing basic stuff, like stocking records or sweeping floors or cleaning the racks, stuff that wasn’t too much for us to handle on the first day. I was thinking differently, though; there was just something about the way Vin had looked after Adam had handed him that Muddy Waters record that got me thinking he had other things in mind for us. I hit it right on the head, because when we stepped into the

store, Vin turned us right around to take us somewhere else, leaving the store behind with his brother Max for the afternoon. He grabbed this huge gray trenchcoat that was like the size of a sail and slipped it over his big shoulders, then pulled a set of drumsticks out of his pocket and pointed them toward the subway stop at Lombard and South. We walked to the stop and boarded a train heading north to center city, the whole time Adam and I were asking Vin questions about his music career and about his band Red Edit that he had played in for most of the 70's and 80's. Vin kept his drumsticks in his right hand as we moved, twirling them with his fingers and clacking them together every now and then in a short, snappy beat.

“Why you keep whacking those sticks, Vin?” I asked as we exited the train at the Spring Garden and Vine stop.

“These sticks are my mojo, kid,” Vin held out the sticks and twirled out another beat. “It’s an old blues thing. You got to keep them moving for good luck. A man’s always got to watch his back in this city.” He brought his sticks down to his side again, as we pushed through the turnstiles and made our way to the street. We walked another couple blocks till we hit a store called Spinland, which Vin said like it was the country “Finland”. He pulled a piece of paper out of his pocket that had the name of two albums on and handed it to Adam.

“Work the magic again, guys,” he said, as he hid himself off to the side of Spinland’s storefront. Adam and I worked out another surefire, daddy dying type plan, where again he’d be the one squeezing out the tears, while I’d be his stronger older brother who was just trying to hold the family together. It worked, no sweat.

The guy falling for it hook, line, and sinker and soon we were back on the train and heading once again to South Street.

Back in the store, Vin put the records on while he had Adam and I reorganize album sections and updated the store's inventory. While we worked and the music played, he told us everything he could about the artist or group, talking about what type of music they played, who they influenced, and how you could tell. He was teaching us to listen, just like he promised. "You've got to respect your elders," he said from behind the counter as Adam and I kept working throughout the store. "Even if you don't like their music, you got to know who those classic names are. It's all about knowing your friggin' history. A music man knows his history, no matter what." We learned quick in that first day that he was the type of guy who liked rules and he'd always be saying them to us, over and over. Half of them didn't seem to be about music at all, but about life in some weird way, but then he'd explain it to us so that we really understood how it all came back to music. He'd talk to us about Robert Johnson, Howlin' Wolf, Little Walter, and John Lee Hooker and how their music, like Muddy Waters', helped make Rock n' Roll. He take records of the shelf and show us how you could hear their sound in the music of The Rolling Stones and the Kinks and other great bands from the British Invasion. Then he'd show us how the sound evolved, how you could listen to bands like the Kinks or the Troggs and hear the guitars on "You Really Got Me" or "Wild Thing" in the music of groups like the Velvet Underground and The Stooges. And then he'd even show us how you could trace those band's sound all the way up to more modern bands like the Pixies and Sonic Youth. We left that

store that night with our ears buzzing from all the music and arms and backs sore. And most importantly, our pockets were filled with the cash that Vin had slipped us as we walked out the door, and with a couple more weeks of work, both Adam and I knew that J-45 would be all ours.

For the next couple of weeks, Adam and I worked three to four days a week at Vin's, doing pretty much the same things we did on that first day. We'd go to more records shops around Philly or sometimes out in the burbs, taking the train to get there and walking and talking all along the way. Vin would give us a list of albums and then Adam and I would go in the stores with more sob stories about dying dads and lost records and final wishes, those really heart jerking type tales that always got the store owners to sell their records, and for a price less than face value. Since Vin was so well known by all the record people around town, he'd always have to hide outside in alleyways or behind lampposts and cars, because if the storeowners got one look at him, there was a good chance that they wouldn't sell us the album. "You guys gotta understand. It's a pride thing," he'd say whenever we asked him about it. "Everyone wants the biggest and best collection. It's just men being men."

After he had taken us to enough of those shops, Vin started bringing us along on what he called "dream dives", to places like Salvation Army stores, yard sales, flea markets, or any other type of place where you could find a big box of records being sold by some egghead who couldn't tell a record from a Frisbee. In those types of places our sob stories were no good, and we'd just watch Vin as he'd coast through a crate of old records in like less than a minute, and take long, hard

looks at a single album and somehow just know exactly what it was worth. He'd teach us how to inspect the albums for ourselves and how to haggle with the eggheads, and after studying the *Rockin' Records* reference guide he gave us, Adam and I were out making those "dream dives" on our own, coming back to Vin's with boxes full of records just for him.

Vin would pay us depending upon what we had picked up, usually we'd get like forty bucks or so for a couple hours worth of dream diving, and he'd always throw records in on top, which was real cool. We'd take our cash and our records over to Adam's basement, and throw on album or two while we counted our loot. Once we had tallied everything up, we'd hide the money in the inside lining of Adam's record player. It wasn't that we didn't trust Adam's grandmother or nothing, it just seemed like a good place to hide the cash, considering how we were saving up for the guitar. Then we'd just let the record play and do homework or just crap around for a while. It didn't matter, as long as the vinyl was turning. In about a month and half, we had had enough history. We had picked up and listened to enough records from the blues, rock, punk, post-punk, and new wave movements that we knew the major groups and their sounds, and it got to a point where we just wanted to hear something new.

"You want something of your own. I see," Vin said, when we asked him in the shop one day what new bands he thought we should be listening to. "I think I'll let you guys figure that out for yourselves. You'll know what's good when you hear it. But you got remember: the bands that are worth listening to are original and versatile. They're not out there trying to be someone else. They're making their

own way, while not put putting all their eggs into one basket. They can play fast and slow, and still come out sounding like themselves. You'll understand that when you here it."

"Thanks, Vin," Adam said, as we were leaving for the day.

"Where're we at with the guitar fund?" Vin yelled before we could make it out the door.

"Close," I said. "Nine Hundred and twenty nine dollars. One more payday and it's ours"

"Why don't you guys meet me down here at around nine o'clock tonight. I got a job for you that'll push you over the mark," he said. "Plus it might give you a chance to listen to some new tunes." Adam and I thanked Vin and headed for home.

We pulled a fast one on my Ma and Adam's grandmother that night, calling them each from the pay phone outside of Jim's Steaks and telling them that we were staying the night at each other's houses. Adam's grandmother didn't really care, which was typical, and my Ma was so gassed from work that she was just happy she could get to sleep without worrying about dinner. After the calls we walked down to Lorenzo and Son's Pizza on Third and South and both got two huge slices of pepperoni pizza that were so heavy with grease that you couldn't eat them without a plate underneath. Then before we headed back to shop to meet Vin, we took a detour down Fourth, and stopped out front Bluebond Guitars. The store was closed and dark, but Adam and I pressed our faces to the glass to look anyway, that sunburst finish glowing bright in our minds.

Vin was waiting for us when we got back to the shop with his trenchcoat on and those drumsticks twirling.

“What’s the plan old man,” Adam said, as we walked up to him.

“Let’s go and I’ll show you.” Vin clicked his drumsticks and started walking back in the direction we came. We stopped right by Lorenzo’s, at a bar across the street called J.C. Dobbs that I had walked past with my Ma a bunch of times. I had always loved the outside of Dobb’s, even though it was kind of plain. The whole storefront was made up of these rows of thick, blocky glass that surrounded the door and reminded me of those ice cube trays we always kept in our freezer at home. When we got there, a huge line had formed that was wrapping around the corner at Third. It was filled, with young kids, maybe in the late teens or earlier twenties, whose frayed jeans and crummy looking flannel shirts, made me think that the thrift store down the street must have been having a sale. I expected Vin to take us to the back of the line, so that we could wait outside for the next hour or whatever like everyone else, but he headed straight to the door, where greeted the bouncer with a big hug and a hand shake. The bouncer was a pretty hefty guy, a scale tipper just like Vin, and you almost would have thought they could have been brothers if the bouncer goatee wasn’t an Irish orange.

“Shameus,” Vin said to the guy as he pushed used in front of him. “These are my boys I was telling you about, Adam and TJ.”

“Yo guys,” Shameus yelled at us, “Vinny here tells me you’re the best record traders in town.”

“Don’t tell that to any of the other record storeowners in Philly,” I said looking up at Vin. “You’ll put the old man out of business.” Shameus let out a laugh that came straight from the gut, then he slapped Vin on the shoulder and whispered something in his ear. Vin thanked the guy, and pushed us through the front door.

Inside of Dobbs was almost as narrow as Adam’s grandmother’s house, and I got the feeling I usually got whenever I walked into his front door, where I felt like I had to scrunch in my shoulders or at least walk sideways. The place was so crowded and dark, that I couldn’t see much other than the backs of all the people that directly surrounded us. Adam and I just hooked onto Vin’s trenchcoat and followed behind him as he used his big stomach to push a path through the crowd. We got through to the far end of the bar, where it was a little less crowded. Looking around I could sort of see the place: the walls were wood paneled and completely covered with picture frames, set on the wall in no order. On the far wall from us, there were booths that ran down the tunnel-like room almost all the way up to the raised stage, that was really small and had a giant neon “D” glowing at the back of it. Other than that, I couldn’t see much else, except the scummy floor at my feet that made me think that Dobbs wasn’t the type of place you wanted to see with the lights on.

Vin yelled to the bartender, and the guy came over to our end quickly with a smile.

“Are these my workers?” the guy asked to Vin, the bristles of his mustache stretching out with his smile.

“You got it, Johnny,” Vin said, looking down to us. “Adam, TJ, this is Johnny. He’s gonna tell you what you guys need to do.”

“Alright, boys. This job ain’t too hard if you can move fast. You see these,” he said, holding up a couple of pint glasses that were streaked with dry beer. “I need you to run around the place and pick these up and bring’em back to me. In about ten minutes, when the show starts going, those tables over there in the booths are going to be covered in these glasses. I want you work your way through the crowd, clear all the glasses, and bring’em back up to the bar here. You think you can handle that?”

Adam and I both nodded our heads yes. Johnny, shook our hands, then Vin’s, before going back to the middle of the bar to start pouring drinks again. Adam and I looked up to Vin to make sure everything was okay.

“Don’t worry,” Vin said, squatting down to our level so we could hear him. “Do what Johnny said. You guys can handle it. I’ll be right here watching you.”

Adam and I pushed off through the crowd toward the tables. It was kind of hard at first to make our way around the place, but after we figured out how the crowd moved and how to squeeze our bodies through the tiniest of gaps, we made out fine. When we got to a table covered in pint glasses, we’d each take a side and start stacking the glasses, pouring any extra beer left behind into a single glass. Then one of us would take the big stack of glasses while the other took the one filled with beer and led the way through the crowd. I was usually the guy taking up the full glass, which was the hardest part of it all, and I felt like I had to spill half a beer on myself just to make back up to the bar.

We had probably cleared around four or five tables, when the lights seemed to get even darker and the big “D” at the back of the stage started flashing. The crowd pushed forward at that moment and Adam and I hopped up into a booth to avoid getting crunched in the rush. Three guys walked out onto the stage with their long hair swinging and wasted no time getting the show started. The guitars were heavy. We had heard those heavy type of guitars on albums, sitting down in Adam’s basement or back in the shop, but never live and up close like that. They were so loud that it felt like every part of me was shaking and I turned to Adam to say something to him, but he was just frozen in excitement. I hopped over to the next booth, where a new batch of glasses had found their way to the table. I started stacking them by myself, and when I got to a glass that had a little beer left in it, I downed it in a swig instead of putting it into another cup. The liquid was a bit warm and bubbly, and when I swallowed it down it left my mouth kind of dry. But it wasn’t that bad. Anything was better than spilling it all over my pants. Seeing me take the drink, Adam reached for a glass that had a little beer in it, and drank it down.

“It’s not that bad,” he yelled out to me. I tried to yell back “I know” but he couldn’t hear me. We kept going from table to table stacking those glasses and drinking whatever we could find. We’d hop over the booth seats to get to another table, to avoid the crowd, but once our stacks got too tall we finally had to push our way back to the bar.

After a while my head became heavy, to the point where it felt like my brain was bobbing around inside my skull. I looked over at Adam and knew he was

feeling it too, because his eyes just looked so blank, like they hadn't been shut in days. We stopped working then and only watched the show, the two of us staring at the lead guitarist and singer and finding it hard to take our eyes off him. He'd start a song off singing in a raspy, ultra-cool voice that would just change at some point into screams that were raw, but more exciting than scary. His guitar strap was loosened so much that his guitar was swinging down above his knees, which made him play sloppy, and fill the song with little squeals that you could tell weren't supposed to be there. But it was cool in a way, and what I liked about it was that it made it seem like you didn't have to play perfect to play well.

"I think this is a type of music we could get into," Adam yelled into my ear. I smiled back at him and went to take a sip from one of the glasses in front of me when I felt somebody grab at my back and snag a hold of my shirt. I turned around to see Vin standing there over us, pulling both Adam and me off the seat of the booth. He dragged by our shirts across the bar, like there was nobody in there, all the way to front door where he pushed us out onto the sidewalk. When we gathered ourselves, we looked up to see Vin there in front of us steaming, his hands rolled up into fist like he was still grabbing us by the collar.

"What do you guys think you're friggin' doing, huh?" he screamed at us. His eyebrows were sinking low over his eyes and for a second I didn't know he was just angry or going to cry. "Drinking? *Drinking!* I go out to my way to get you this job, and this is how you repay me?"

"No," I said, all of sudden feeling sick to my stomach. "It wasn't like that...we're sorry."

“What did you think, you got a job and all of sudden you’re grown up enough to take a drink. Huh?” He stared us down until we couldn’t pull our eyes up to look at him. “I didn’t teach you that.”

“We’re sorry, Vin. It won’t happen again,” Adam said.

“You bet it’s not, I’m telling them never to let you guys back in there,” he said, finally calming down a bit. “Let’s get you two idiots home.”

The three of us started walking back to my house. Vin was pretty mad at us, but he wouldn’t let us walk all the way to Adam’s house alone in the middle of the night. He just walked ahead of us and rarely stopped to look back at Adam and I. After a couple of blocks, when I finally had built up enough courage to say something, I spoke up and asked Vin what band had been playing.

“That was Nirvana, kid,” he said, “don’t get your hopes up. They’ll never make it.”

“Why not?” Adam asked. “I really loved their lead singer.”

“Fall in love with the music, not the musicians. The music will always be there for you, while the musicians will always let you down.”

We didn’t say anything else after that. Vin walked us to the corner of Adam’s block, said goodbye to us, and then waited there until we got into the house. Once we were inside, Adam and I just wanted to get to bed, so I fell into the couch in the living room, while Adam went upstairs to go to sleep.

I woke up the next morning and saw Adam sitting on the chair next to me crying. These were real tears, too, not the kind he used when we were out swindling.

“What’s Wrong,” I said.

“He took everything,” Adam said through sniffles. I looked past him and saw the basement door open. I walked over to the door and went down the stairs and saw that all the boxes and all the furniture had been removed. The record player, too, was no where to be found. My heart sunk into my knees.

“What do we do now?”

Vin had given us his address a while back, just in case we ever needed anything and the store wasn’t open. We had never needed to know it really, but on that day both Adam and I were glad that we did.

“Do you think he’s still pissed at us,” I said as I knocked on his door.

“I don’t care,” Adam responded. “This is an emergency.” The door opened and Vin was standing there in his rob, looking tired as heck. Adam told him everything, about how his dad had cleaned the basement and taken all the money we had been saving for the J-45. We both started crying and even though Vin was still a little mad at us, he started consoling us and squeezed us all together in one big hug. He went over to the closet in his room and pulled out a big black case. He opened it and inside was beat old Fender that looked a lot like Devin Burriss’ but the paint was faded and scratched.

“I know it’s not a J-45, but you can have this if you want.” Vin brought the guitar over and handed it to Adam.

“It’s perfect,” Adam said.

The Disappearing Act

By: Tom Wood

Whenever we got back into Philly after being on tour, Stek would vanish. I'm not exaggerating here when I say vanish either; I mean he'd seriously up and fucking disappear without a trace. And we're not just talking about being gone for a couple of days or weeks. We're talking about months—usually three of them—where Stek's whereabouts would be completely unknown to anyone in the band. The disappearing act usually went down like this: Stek would always schedule the last few shows of the tour close to Philly, but never in Philly. We'd play Philly first not last, because Stek's mindset was that at the end of a multi-month tour, the last thing you wanted to do was bring your work home with you. So we'd always play the New York's, the D.C.'s, the Baltimore's, the Trenton's, last, so that as soon as we got done playing we could hit the rode for home. When we'd pull into Philly later that night, or should I say early the next morning, Stek would have Fat Moses (our van driver and lone roadie) pull the Exodus (yup, you guessed it, our van) over to some random corner so that he could get off and walk the rest of the way home. Denny, Colin, and I would be stretched out and passed out on the bench seats in the back, and by the time any of us woke up and realized that we were home, Fat Moses would already have the Exodus back in gear and Stek would be gone.

It wasn't really until our third tour (2001 promotion tour of our second EP, *Vilelation*) that I began to get worried about Stek's disappearing acts. That was probably because it was right around that point that Denny, Colin, and I stopped feeling like Stek's hired help and actually became the Viles. So at the start of that tour, right when things were going really well, that's when I got a little nervous about Stek's whole Houdini routine. But as we kept rolling from show to show, the Exodus leading us through parts of the States that we'd never seen and the music guiding us to new heights as musicians, somehow all of those nerves just got lost in the madness of making it.

They came back on the last night of the tour. We were headlining a show at Irving Plaza in New York that night in front about two thousand people—the largest crowd we had played to all tour. From behind my kit, the hall of the venue seemed massive. We had gotten used to playing little bottom of the barrel clubs, places that with the right amount of touches had become concert venues instead of basements or bars. At the most, those types of places could only hold maybe three or four hundred people, but Irving Plaza's hall felt wider than four of them combined. It was so packed that night that you couldn't even see any bits of the floor from the stage. It was almost as if all those people, all those heads and hands were just floating at your feet, rising and falling with the music, pushing closer to the stage with every song like waves reaching for the shore. During the final song of our set, which that night I think was one of the bigger songs off *Vilelation* like "In the Name" or "Secret Codes", it felt like there was no separation between the standing room and the stage. I could have sworn that as we were bringing that song

to a close, that the crowd had actually spilled over onto the stage, and that they were no longer in front of me, but around me, roaring right into my ears as I pounded out the final beats of the song.

I splashed out at the end of the number, striking my cymbals over and over until the metal was vibrating so hard that it felt like my drumsticks would break if I hit them again. I looked up from my kit and saw that the crowd wasn't around me at all, but still down on the floor, shouting and clapping at a level that started to make my hands sting and my throat feel rough. To my right, Colin sat at his drum kit with a wide smile that was as almost as long as his cymbals' shivering edges. His chest and shoulders heaved forcefully like mine, both our bodies trying to catch the breath that our performances had poured out of us. Denny was smiling and looking spent too, he buckled his torso over his bass, as he tried to laugh the air back into his lungs. Stek walked over to him and slapped a hand on his shoulder, then looked back at Colin and me. I don't know how the guy managed to do it, but he looked as calm and collected as he did when we first hit the stage, like he had spent the last hour or so just changing the strings of his guitar instead of wailing on them. He hooked a bit of his hair back behind his right ear, showing us a glowing, red cheek, while keeping the rest of his face covered from the crowd. His lips were pinched and tight, as if he wanted to let loose with excitement but couldn't figure out how. He was never much of a smiler that Stek Mainard, but if you could catch a glimpse of his cheeks flushed like that you understood that he was happy.

We started walking off the stage, heading for the long curtain that hung off behind Colin's set of drums. Before I ducked off backstage for good, I took another

second just to look back at the crowd. They were all still there, standing together and hoping that the lights wouldn't turn back on. I didn't know how we made that happen. I had played the show. I had sat there behind Stek with the others and played my part the same way I always did. But for the life of me I couldn't think of how we made all those people feel that kind of excitement. I was just baffled to be completely honest, and there was something to that, believe it or not, that made that whole night even better.

When I finally pulled myself completely behind the curtain, Stek was there alone, standing next to the brick wall that led you down toward the dressing rooms. His back was toward me, the faded red of his thrift store tee blending in with the brick so that his back seemed to span the whole length of the wall.

“Can you believe this, Stek,” I said, walking up to him. I grabbed him by the shoulders and shook him jokingly, turning him a bit so I could check out his reaction. He wasn't crying, but the through strands of his hair I saw that he was pretty damn close. The red was still filling the skin of cheeks and I understood right away that he had been trying to piece it all together just like I had. “How the fuck did this happen, man?”

“I don't know, Woody,” he said, focusing himself enough to look up at me. “I can't explain it. It sure is unreal, though.” When he lifted his head his face came through his hair in full, which was a rarity to see, even for one his bandmates. You were always catching a cheek there and an eye here because his hair always found a way to hide a portion of his face. With the whole thing exposed, I remembered how young he looked in comparison to me, even though I actually was slightly younger

than him. Both of us had hit our 31st birthdays on that tour, but with his skinny, long face and that thick, wild hair, he definitely wore those years better than I did. My widow's peak and signature sandpaper stubble had earned me the nickname the Geeze that tour, and Denny and Colin, who were both still in their mid-twenties then, had made a game out of the name, calling me by it over and over until they got a rise out of me. With the two of us there backstage and Stek's face beaming like a kid's who just played a song all the way through for the first time, I understood just how fitting that nickname was.

"Stek and the Geeze," Denny said, coming up the stairs next to us with beers in his hand and Colin by his side. "Beer time, beer time, beer time." He popped the caps off two bottles and then passed them our way. The lights to the stage went on then, pouring enough light down past the curtain to make me have to squint my eyes. The crowd booed, and then started clapping together to make one loud, thumping pulse.

"Sorry guys," Denny said, peeping around the curtain, "I wish we could give you more, but we played every song we got."

Stek placed his bottle down on the monitor next to him and walked out on the stage. I looked over at Colin and Denny. None of us had an idea of what to do.

"Stek, where the fuck you going man?" Denny yelled out to him. "What the hell is he doing, Woody." The three of us popped our heads around the curtain, as the crowd volume shot up even louder than it was before when we left the stage.

"I have no clue," I said, "he didn't say anything about this to me." Stek flipped the strap of his guitar over his shoulder and started tuning up with his back

toward the crowd. "I'm not going out there. Not if I don't know what the hell I'm going to play.

"Fuck it. Let him go," Colin said. "It's him they want anyway." The lights flicked off again, and I lost Denny's and Colin's faces in the darkness. Stek moved out into the center of the stage, took his pick to his guitar, and plucked out a thumping rhythm that buzzed deep in my chest. The crowd matched the sound with their hands, creating a thick beat that felt louder than what Colin and I could have pumped out with both our kick drums. Stek took it from there, strumming off into the opening riff of a song that I'd never heard him play before.

Looking down into the crowd, I caught the face of girl who was up front near the stage, a little blonde with short hipster bangs and a tattoo sprawling up her neck. She had her hands up above her head and was clapping them together, hitting the beat with the rest of the crowd in perfect time. The movement of the people around her was a little much for her tiny frame, and because of that she was constantly in motion, shifting and jostling in order to keep herself upright in the madness. The struggle of it all made her sweat, her cheeks and neck appearing glossy under the spotlight's swirling beams. Yet through all of that heat and all that pushing, her eyes never left Stek for a second. She didn't care about anything that was going on around her, as long as she got to watch Stek play.

It became pretty clear to me then that she, and all those people around her, also didn't care that the instruments behind Stek were unmanned and that Denny, Colin, and I were nowhere to be seen. Colin definitely had it right, it was Stek that

the crowd wanted to see, not us, and when I looked over to watch him play, it was easy for me to understand why.

The thing was, I could play Stek's music. I could understand it. I could break it down for another musician and teach it to him. But I could never own the music the way he did. And while, yes, when I say own I'm partly talking about the fact that he alone wrote that music, but I'm also talking about something completely different that I guess in a way could be compared to a kind of musical confidence. When you own a piece of music, you're connected to it on a level that most people can't get to. You get deep down inside of it, so that you not only understand how it should and shouldn't sound, but also how it could sound, how you could manipulate a note in such a way so that you play it like no one else could. And when you go to play that music, your body just knows how to make those sounds, your muscles move your hands into the right places so you make a sound so perfectly that it seems like the music's playing you and not the other way around.

Out there in the middle of stage, Stek owned that final song of the night, overpowering his guitar with his hands like it was some fake Fisher Price piece that he picked up at a toy store. There was no struggling to his playing. He just worked his fingers smoothly up and down the fretboard until it was time to bring the song to an end. I had been playing with Stek all tour, sitting right behind him on the drums while he played to the crowd just like he was doing right then, but the crazy thing was, that was probably first time I had really watched him play all tour. I'd be so wrapped up in my own part that I'd only snap out of it during breaks between songs or when the set was over and the crowd was roaring. Having not really seen

Stek playing, it was easy to think that I was big part of the reason why the crowd was going wild, after all it was what I had thought that night, but watching him play then made it pretty clear that all along it was Stek's performances that the crowd had really loved.

Stek finished his song by letting one final chord drone out heavily into the hall, and as the guitar's sound slowly faded out, with it went every good feeling I had developed that tour about the band. Stek walked off the stage with crowd screaming at his back, and as I watched them going crazy there down on the floor, I realized that like them I didn't know what was next in store for Stek Mainard and the Viles. All those nerves that I had pushed away over the last few months hit me all of sudden, finding their back into my stomach and holding there as Stek walked toward us.

"Sorry guys," Stek said to the three of us. "I just wanted to play one more before we had to go home."

As soon as we hopped into the Exodus after the New York show, Denny and Colin hit the hay hard, falling across the Exodus' dingy leather seats like a couple of kids ready to sleep away the car ride home from grandmom's. Up in the front, Fat Moses stretched his seat belt out over his big belly and Stek snapped on a Guided By Voices mix, toggling the volume knob until the sound of the guitars just made it through the speakers. Fat Moses then yanked the shifter down into drive and pushed the Exodus off toward the Turnpike.

I was sitting in the first bench seat in the back; my nerves keeping me up. I couldn't stop looking at Stek and thinking about if that ride home would be the last time I'd see him for months. I had to ask him about it before that ride was over, and the way I saw it, I really had only two options: get the stones up to ask him right then or wait until we were almost home and both Denny and Colin were up. It was going to be awkward either way, but going into that conversation by myself didn't seem like a stroll through the park. So my brilliant idea was to wait it out, keeping quiet until the Exodus rolled into Philly and Denny and Colin were awake.

“Mo, how long until we hit home?” I asked, trying to figure out how much time I had.

“Don't know,” Fat Moses said, his fingers digging through his beard, “ ‘bout an hour and half, maybe two.”

“Thank God,” Stek said, kicking his foot up against the glovebox. “Get me home, Mo. Take me to the promised land.” He leaned his head back until his long hair was pinched against the faded leather of the headrest. His eyes stayed out on the road, looking tired but focused, watching as the white lines of the Turnpike streamed under the Exodus.

I told myself right then that I couldn't go to sleep, couldn't even close my eyes unless Stek closed his. So I did anything to keep myself up—moved around in my seat, smoked a cigarette, hummed the songs on the tape, thought about what I wanted to say to Stek—whatever it took to stay awake. After awhile I found myself watching the road with Stek. The white lane lines never stopped coming, and pretty

soon I started to feel as if I was counting sheep. And with Fat Moses rocking the van in and out of lanes it wasn't long before my eyelids were feeling heavy and my body was slipping down into my seat. I hate driving in the dark.

Stretched out like Denny and Colin, I kept trying to fight off the sleep by looking at Stek. He eyes never left the road, never seemed to blink either. I don't think I ever saw him sleep once on that tour, and yet there I was in the Exodus hoping that he'd drift off to sleep before I did. I never had much of a chance. I gave in not too long after, convincing myself that I'd wake up in time to confront Stek. At that point anyway, all I wanted to do was get home, just like everyone else. And going to sleep, after all, was the quickest way to get there.

I woke up a little while later to the sound of Moses clicking the shifter up into park. When I pulled myself up off the seat, I noticed that he pulled the Exodus over to the curb of an empty street corner. I took a look around the intersection, just to get a feel for where we were at, but there was nothing about the area that jumped out at me to make me feel like I was home. The streets were narrow and made even narrower by the rows of parked cars lined against the curbs. And the houses around us that walled in the intersection, looked too much alike in the dark. They all had simple red bricked facings, with those tall bay windows in front that came out over the sidewalk. Their doors were painted differently for the most part, but other than that it was the same simple façade all the way up and down the blocks, without even a bar or corner store breaking up the pattern.

“Where the fuck are we,” I said.

“Home,” Stek responded, as he popped open his door to get off the Exodus. I did a quick scan of the corners for the street signs, but the only thing I saw was a sign-less post on the opposing corner that looked as awkward and useless as drumstick without a tip.

“Mo, where the hell are we?” I asked again.

“Bossman said he was home, Woody, so I pulled over. I don’t ask any questions.” Stek had made his way to the back of the Exodus to get his gear from the trailer, while I stayed inside listening to the huffing and puffing of Denny and Colin and searching for something to let me know where I was. Stek reappeared at the side of the Exodus with his luggage in his hands and his electric guitar slung across the broad surface of his back. He stopped for a second to readjust the straps of his cargo, and when everything felt good, he shot a little nod Fat Moses’ way and then walked off down one of the nameless streets.

“Stek,” I yelled out, remembering the months of silence between our last tours. “Where you going, man? Could we get a number or an address or something? How are we supposed to contact you?” With each question my voice got louder, but Stek never responded to any of them, he never even turned or paused either. He just walked on, straight and determined, with the case of his guitar slapping against the knotty muscles of his back. I made a move toward the door, thinking that I had to get some kind of information from him before I lost him in the morning darkness. But before I could even get to the handle of the van, Fat Moses hooked me on the shoulder with one his meaty mitts and pulled the Exodus off down the road.

“Shit, Mo! Do you realize what just happened!” I screamed. “We may not see him again for months, man, and now we got no way of reaching him.”

“I don’t ask questions, Woody. Bossman gave me the nod, so I left.”

“Aren’t we all your fucking Bossman?”

Fat Moses started laughing at the question, his crimped nest of a beard pushing into the chunky top of his chest.

“I think you and I both know who the Bossman of this group is Woody,” he said, still laughing.

“Fuck off, Mo. Take me to the promised land.”

“You know it. You’re place is up next anyhow. Ain’t too far from here.” I looked out the Exodus’ window when he said it, studying the street signs and buildings as they passed, trying to remember the weaving path of the Exodus so I could get back to Stek’s corner. After about ten minutes of driving, in which Fat Moses seemed to make as many left hand turns as a merry-go-round, we finally hit the street that my apartment was on. I was shocked when we got there, because the way we had came seemed so foreign to me. Maybe it was because I had never taken the route before or because I had been out of town for so long, but when we pulled up to the door of my apartment with sun rising over the flat, tarred roof tops of the buildings on my street, for some reason I just didn’t feel like I was home.

I got off the Exodus and went to the trailer to collect my stuff, just like Stek had done only minutes before in the dark. Fat Moses had gotten out of the car too to help me, and once we had dug through the rat nest of equipment in the trailer and

separated my drum stuff from Colin's, we hauled it all up the narrow stairwell of my apartment in three careful trips. From my window I watched Fat Moses squish back into the Exodus, and when he rolled the battered, old girl off to the next stop, I walked out of my apartment and headed for my car. The drive seemed pretty simple when I pulled my car off the lot: change all the left hand turns into rights and keep going until I hit the nameless street corner. But as soon as I got out there on the street and started trying to backtrack my way through the city, I found myself dizzy and clueless. Following Fat Moses' turns through those unfamiliar parts of the city was hard, but trying to remember them coming from the other direction was even harder. It didn't take long until I was lost, and after I passed the same little Italian deli about three different times, I decided to give up and scramble for home.

Eventually, I made it back to my parking lot, and I climbed out of my car cursing Fat Moses' with every expletive I knew. Up in my apartment, I went ahead and unpacked my things from the tour.

So how do you get by when the frontman and lead songwriter of your band splits out on you for months at a time? Well, I tell you what you shouldn't do, and that's sit around and think about it.

That's what I did for about the first two weeks after we got back from the *Vilelation* tour—just sat around my apartment eating nothing but oatmeal and thinking about the places I could most likely find Stek. It was really just a horrible look to tell you the truth, the type of thing reserved for montage scenes in bad

romantic comedy films not real life. I must have been spending about seven to eight hours of my day up in my head asking myself questions about Stek and coming up with my own bogus answers. *Where the hell did he live?* With his parents down in South Philly, and he just could never find the right way to tell us. *How did he compose songs?* After sleeping for three days straight and waking up with a fever. *Why didn't he want our help?* Well, that one I never got an answer for or least I never wanted to face the one that was easiest to see, and that was that just didn't really need us.

The worst of it would come on when I got to thinking about that last show and how the tour ended with Stek there by himself on stage. I'd find myself overanalyzing the ten minutes that elapsed between the time we walked off the stage together and when Stek walked off it by himself. I'd think about that to death, disbelieving every time that my whole understanding of that tour and our development as band had gone all topsy-turvy on me in only just ten fucking minutes. I guess I was hoping that if I thought about it long enough that I'd finally be able to come to be peace with the whole ending, and that I'd somehow be able to find that feeling again that had come to me when I first walked off that stage. But, of course, it never did come back and the disappointment of that would send me scurrying out of the house for a long walk that usually ended up with me looking over my shoulder every five and half seconds or following every person I saw with a head full of long, light-brown hair.

Again, this is not the way to go about shedding bad memories.

How you really should shake those dark days is by taking your mind off it anyway you can, and when I went back to work, I was finally able to get Stek out off my head for a while. Before I started drumming with Stek and the Viles, I had made pretty decent living as a session musician. I had fallen into that line of work years earlier, back when I was just another band boy looking to make work out of music. This friend of mine who I played with every now and then was already deep into the business, and when the regular drummer from his studio split for greener pastures, he slid me right into his spot. I was a perfect fit for the place, which was called Bird's Eye Studios, because my versatility as a drummer made it possible for the studio to open up its services to a wide range of clients. I could play rock, of course, but also country, jazz, classical, and even Latin and other world music styles, so I was just the type of musician the place was looking for.

So what did I do as a session musician for Bird's Eye Studios? Well, say you run a family owned jewelry store in the Philadelphia area and you wanted to put together a TV or radio spot with catchy little jingle, or if you're a small-time local filmmaker looking to get some backing music for your film at a cheap rate, you'd come to our studio with an idea in mind and we'd find a way to put it in to music. If you've ever been in town and lucky enough to hear the Thompson's Automotive jingle on the radio, then you've heard my work. Or if you ever saw Alonso Esperanza's documentary *Camden Boys*, then you've heard me there as well. Doing session work at Bird's Eye wasn't the work of dreamers or visionaries, but it was a job in music and it paid. Not much, but it paid. My whole life I had been studying how to play drums. I started lessons at age nine. I had been in organized bands or

orchestra since then, too. I was as technically trained as you could be, and all you had to do to get me playing was set a sheet of music down in front of me. And that's exactly what happened at Bird's Eye day in and day out.

When I went back to work that first day, just about everybody in the place came up to me with their congratulations and questions about the tour. I got rid of them as quickly and politely as I could, usually lying about having to be in studio immediately, and suggesting that they hunt down Colin and talk to him about it. After the first couple days of doing that, things settled down, and everything just went back to being work.

Colin worked at Bird's Eye as well, and he was the one that actually got me set up with Stek in the first place. At Bird's Eye, Colin not only played on the tracks we worked on, but he also wrote a bunch of them, too. He loved to play drums and could play them almost as good as anybody, but like Stek he also knew how to handle a bunch of other instruments almost just as well. He played a fiery guitar and could make a piano soar, and though he wasn't composing print ready singles like Stek or anything, he could put a song together that could make you feel something. Before either of us had ever even met Stek, the two of us would hang around Bird's Eye late into the evening just waiting for the place to clear out, and when everybody had gone off home he and I would jump into the studio and just play.

Since we had come back from the *Vilelation* tour, there hadn't been any of those late nights, though, with two of us together. I usually ended up going right home, maybe hitting up the record store beforehand to grab some new tunes and to

hopefully run into Stek. The nearest record store to my apartment was El Train Records, which was about two blocks away. It was a pretty tight little shop, with a well-stocked selection and cute tattooed chicks working the counters that just loved talking music. But since Stek ducked out on us again, I had been walking the ten extra blocks over to South Street to go to Vin's Vinyl, which was a shop that Stek had talked about all the time. I'd always take weirdest routes too, winding myself two or three blocks off the most direct course to the shop, just to keep myself out there in the streets just a little longer. It was a pathetic way to go about looking for Stek, but it was the only thing I could think of. I'd get to Vin's Vinyl and stay for over a half an hour, flipping through every section of the store multiple times over, all the while keeping one eye on the door. After circling around aisles enough times to make whoever was working the counter suspicious, I'd find an album, buy it, and head home, weaving back to my apartment as slowly as possible, no matter how cold it was.

Up in the apartment, I'd put on the record and play it straight through, looking for a track that just blew me away and that seemed too perfect. If I found one, I'd play it on repeat over and over, and get behind my drum kit and start figuring the song out. It would sometimes take me all night to get everything just right, but I wouldn't get up from my stool until I knew that song inside and out. Every now and then, when I couldn't find a song that I wanted to take apart, I'd try writing my own stuff, sitting with my kit for hours just trying to put a couple patterns together. Rarely would I get things right, and more often than not I'd give up half way

through, trying hard not to think about how Stek was out there somewhere writing just like I was, but only doing it heck of a lot better.

The days came and went, and finally, three and half months after the last time I saw him, Stek showed up at my apartment with a tattered notebook that contained all the lyrics, rhythms, and riffs from our first LP, *Radio Ruins*.

On the *Radio Ruins* tour I found it hard to get comfortable. During the first months of that tour I constantly felt like I didn't know the world around me. Yeah, I could tell you the name of the city or town we were playing and the state that we were in, but when I stepped out the door of whatever dime-rate hotel we were staying at, I couldn't tell left from right. If I wanted to get a good cup of coffee or go to a record store, I either had to ask someone or wander the streets like an idiot. That always left me with this feeling of being lost, or even worse, helpless, like I was a little kid that needed his mommy to get from point A to point B. It pissed me off more than anything and after about two months of being out on the road, I was ready to be home, in a place that I knew. But after the *Radio Ruins* got amazing reviews pretty much across the board, and both the tour and the concert venues began to grow larger and larger, leaving the tour became pretty much impossible.

On top of all that, I was still upset about Stek's disappearances, and my anger and nerves had grown into legitimate fears. I voiced those fears to Denny and Colin on the night after we found out that we would be going abroad for the first time that summer. Both of them were stoked about the growth of the band and the fact that they were about to get paid to go on a European vacation, but when I told

about them about the fears that Stek's disappearing act had stirred up in me, they immediately sobered up.

I think our fears were pretty justified at that point. We didn't want more money, or more credit; I think we all just wanted to make sure that we could count on the band to be an actual career, not just some outlet for creative expression. We also wanted to know how to reach Stek. And the reason for that wasn't because we were afraid that he would leave us and start doing his own thing; after all, I don't think any of us started thinking that until much later. Stek, in all honesty, didn't seem like the type of musician who had it in him to go solo. Yes, he was the frontman. Yes, he wrote the songs. Yes, he sang all the songs. But when it came to the other "frontman" things—the peacocking, the arrogance, the wildness, the insecurity—Stek really didn't fit the part. He rarely drank, and never did drugs, instead opting to treat touring and being in a band with a more serious and focused mindset. He rarely did interviews, and if did, he spent most of the time deflecting questions our way, so that we would be the ones forced into the limelight, not him. And with the exception of his frequent disappearing acts, he never really made us feel inferior; instead, he probably gave us more credit and money than any of us really deserved. So no, we weren't worried about him going out on his own; we only wanted to be in the know, so that we could feel like more of a normal, cohesive band.

Because I was the one to get the fears out there amongst Colin, Denny, and I, I took on the responsibility of making our fears known to Stek. When we got back from the summer abroad, we had scheduled a couple of random east coast

dates to round out the tour and to put a little extra cash into our pockets before the break. Feeling like it was now or never, I started putting our mindset out there, keeping it subtle at first so it didn't appear like we were ganging up on Stek. In Atlanta it was: *"Dude, what do you when you go off? Hibernate and wake up with a bunch of songs in your head?"* In Charlotte: *"What is it? You got a girl or something. You know you can bring her around us. We won't scare her off."* In Richmond: *"That sounds like a great idea, you should give me your number so we can work on a sound like that during the break."* In D.C.: *"Hey, we were thinking we should try to book studio time in December now, so that we can get an early jump on the next album. What do you think?"* Come our last tour date in Baltimore, Stek had done such a thorough job of skirting around my subtle hints that Denny, Colin, and I had no other choice but to lay it all out there and force Stek to listen to our thinking.

We approached him in the dressing room that night, the three of us breaking the dingy, little room's typical light-hearted air and replacing it with an unavoidable wall of tension. It was hard that scene—Denny, Colin, and I standing on one side of the room and Stek standing on the other. That was hard. We were friends. We were bandmates. We were partners. We hadn't planned on turning that whole thing into a sabotage mission, but standing there behind Colin and Denny and watching as Stek hid uncomfortably behind the thick drapes of his hair, I don't think there was any other way of describing it.

"What it all boils down to," I said genuinely, "is that there are just some things that we got to know about. All of us respect the way you work, but at some

point I think we all want to feel like our needs as musicians are also being respected.” Finished with my point, I waited for Stek to respond, the four of us standing quiet and taut, with the walls around us buzzing with the muffled sound of the opening band’s songs. Stek shifted his weight from his right leg to his left, and his hair followed the movement—wobbling with the rock of his body, but still managing to keep his face thoroughly covered. I remember just staring at that hair, wanting nothing more than to know what was going on behind it, but also being terrified by the thought of what Stek might say once he had pushed it to the side. That look, where Stek dipped his head and offered only his hair, wasn’t for us—Denny, Colin, and I. It was for the fans, the journalists, the photographers, the critics—the people he couldn’t let in completely—not us. I always liked to believe that we got to see behind it, to experience Stek Mainard on a different level, to know and understand him the way others couldn’t. But standing there, looking at that wall of brown locks and thinking about what we had just asked from him, it was pretty clear that we weren’t much different than all those people Stek shut out.

Stek pulled a tuft of his hair behind his right ear and revealed half of his face, which for the moment was white as snow. His mouth moved—his lips curving to release a word, a thought, a defense—but he stopped himself and resorted to saying nothing for the time being. He moved to the corner of the cramped room where we had thrown all our bags when we first arrived, and after he found his faded, blue duffle, he unzipped it and pulled out the tattered, little notebook that he brought with him everywhere. The little book’s cover was creased and torn, but there was still enough cardboard on the metal binding to keep Stek’s ideas hidden

safely inside. He flipped to the back of the book and started writing something on a blank page in big, swooping letters. He stopped for a second mid word, looked up at us, and asked bluntly, “You sure this is what you guys want?”

“Yes,” we said. I don’t think any of us hesitated.

After he finished the note, Stek tore it out of his book and handed it to Denny as he walked out of the room. Denny held the piece of paper tightly in his hand and quickly read it while Colin and I crowded around.

“I guess this means he’s willing to compromise,” Denny said, holding the note out so we could see the phone number and address that Stek had scribbled down.

“Thank god,” Colin said in relief. “That was brutal.” He fell into the dressing room couch, exhausted from the tension of that moment and relieved, for the time being at least, that our worries were over. The three of us just stayed there in the dressing room for a while, laughing and joking—relishing in the fact that we finally knew how and where we could reach Stek. And after we heard the music from the stage give out and the sound of people shuffling in the hallway outside our door, we all prepared ourselves to take the stage.

Watching us perform that night, you would have never been able to tell that we had our little tiff beforehand. Stek’s voice was on point and strong, and from the way he effortlessly transitioned in and out of his erratic wails it seemed impossible to believe that he had been singing for almost four months straight. Denny and Colin were locked in too, the both of them using our newfound arrangement with

Stek as motivation to play their instruments tighter and louder than they had all tour. I, on the other hand, being a routine man, didn't think about that at all. I just played like I trained myself to do that tour, by watching Stek's back and letting my hands do all the work.

Stek's back had become a fascination of mine. I had started watching it that tour so that I wouldn't miss his performances the way I did on the *Vilelation* tour. After a while though, I seemed to forget that reason and began focusing on his back because its ridiculous size just flat out baffled me. Stek was a skinny guy—that's what you would notice when your first met him, or when you first saw him up on stage. But when he turned around and had all his hair out of the way, you couldn't help but notice how wide his shoulders were and how the muscles of his back were defined enough to push through his shirt. During a show, Stek would typically keep his head down, causing his hair to fall forward and leave his back totally exposed. Staring at him from behind my drum kit, I'd watch as his back expanded and shifted when he inhaled during verse breaks or struggled to form difficult chords. My mind would wander then, getting lost in the possibilities of how it got so freakishly big. In a way Stek's back became this little mystery I couldn't solve. You know, Stek was a very mysterious guy, and while I got caught up thinking about a lot of the inexplicable things about him just like everyone else, when I was up on stage the only mystery I concerned myself with was the size of his back.

Watching and thinking about his back also helped me play better believe it or not, and that's exactly what happened that night in Baltimore. I focused on the way his massive back ballooned throughout a song, and instead of overthinking my

playing, I just built up explanations for the back in my mind. Somehow the drumming came easier for me that way, and before I knew it, the lights were on, the crowd was roaring, and both the show and the tour had come to an end. Afterwards, Colin, Denny, and I hung around the venue's bar a bit, talking to some friends and fans and celebrating the end of the tour. Stek had opted not to join us, and while he said that he was just tired and wanted to rest, I think all three of us sensed that what happened before the show had got to him. At around two, we called it a night and headed back to the dressing room to collect our stuff. When Stek wasn't there, I didn't really think too much of it. I just assumed that when we got out to the Exodus that we see him sprawled out on one the bench seats sleeping. But when I got outside and saw the Exodus' long seats bare and unoccupied, I knew right away that Stek had done it again. Fat Moses was sleeping in the driver's seat, and when we woke him to start the drive home, we didn't need to ask him if knew where Stek was. We just told him to take us to the promised land, before laying our heads down to drift off to sleep.

As you probably could have guessed, the phone number and address Stek had given of us were both bogus. Denny and I spent the better part of a week calling the number non-stop, hoping that eventually Stek's voice would break the looping, pulse of the telephone's ring. That, unfortunately, never happened though. With the phone number not working, the only other option we had was to drive to the address he had listed and hope that he would be home when we arrived. When we got to the address and matched the street number to an abandoned, old church not too far from my apartment, all of us kind of sensed that we weren't looking at

Stek's home. We stayed optimistic though, getting out of the car so that we could search the place for Stek. But, of course, the doors were locked and the windows for the most part boarded; we didn't even bother to stick around and see if he showed up. We just piled back into my car and headed for home.

That car ride back was a pretty awful scene. For the most part we all remained quiet, keeping our rage well contained behind a set of solemn grimaces. Eventually Denny let loose, unleashing a bunch of empty threats about leaving the band and about how he was going to "deck Stek" the next time he saw him. He was saying what we all were thinking, but I don't think any of us really had the stones to follow through on any of those thoughts. We were still members of band on the rise, even though in that moment it didn't necessarily feel that way. That band also happened to be led by one of the most powerful songwriters in recent memory, and all us understood that if Stek could put together another album like *Radio Ruins*, then Stek Mainard and the Viles had a real chance of leaving a major mark on the music of the early twenty-first century. On top of that, the royalties were still coming in, and though they weren't anything outlandish, they were more than enough to keep us from having to get real jobs. It was pretty clear: nobody was leaving the band. Not Denny, not Colin, and certainly not me. And maybe that's what Stek had known all along.

November came and went without any word from Stek, and around mid December, snow hit the Philadelphia area hard, cloaking the streets with enough to snow make you forget what the city had looked like in warmer months. You couldn't get anywhere really. Not without a fight. And for about a week straight the

city had all but shut down, giving into the snow and the cold, and banking on the fact that eventually the weather had to give. The snow, as well as the whole thing with the band, had sent me straight into a vat depression. I rarely got up out of my bed, unless it was to eat or go to the head, and I spent most of my time watching the same three DVD's I had in my apartment over and over and over again. I didn't even get up to play drums or to call Denny or Colin, I just lay there miserable—balled up in a blanket—while my drum kit got dustier and my apartment got colder and colder.

One afternoon when I was deeply lost in this miserable state and watching what must have been my thirtieth or so viewing of *The Shawshank Redemption*, I heard a hard, sharp knock at my door and a voice calling out to me from the other side. Being how I was wrapped skillfully in a multilayered cocoon of blankets, I decided to let the door go unanswered and to continue watching my movie. The knock and the voice were persistent though, both rising in tone and speed steadily over the course of about five minutes. Out of frustration finally, I broke through my blankets and answered the door, swinging open the cold, heavy slab of wood to find Stek standing there in my doorway. Not thinking twice, I slammed the door in his face and headed back to bed.

“Woody, man,” Stek pleaded through the door. “Come on, let me in so that I can apologize.”

“Fuck off, Mainard. You're a real piece of shit in my mind,” I yelled as I wrapped myself back into my cocoon.

“Listen, Woody, I know you guys hate me right now. And that’s understandable. And I’m sorry that things got that way. But that number is really my number and the church is really where I work. All bullshit aside. You got to believe me.”

I let my silence do the talking for me.

“Come on, man,” Stek continued. “I’m here now and I need your help.” It was the “help” part that got me out of bed again, and that made me open the door.

“Bullshit that’s your number. We called that thing for like a week straight and got nothing.”

“Woody, am I really the type of guy that would sit at home all day by the phone?”

“Well, what about that piece of shit church,” I said, still angry. “No way you do work there. That place is damn near condemned.” Stek smiled at me, the rising corners of his lips bringing life back into his frozen cheeks.

“Come on,” he said, “I’ll show you.” At that point, in all truth, I was pretty intrigued. The way he had invited me, with confidence and that smile, had made it hard for me not to go right with him. But the thought of the way he had left us in Baltimore was still fresh in my head, and somehow I found the strength to stand perfectly still and to shut the door once again in his face.

“Woody! Shit, man. I’m trying out here. I know it’s hard for you to understand me, but you got to believe me when I tell you that what I’m doing now, coming to you for help, it’s my way of showing you guys that I’m ready to start

doing things differently.” I leaned up against the wall next to my door, thinking about the way Stek had looked all puffy and huge in his winter clothes, like a little kid on a snow day. There was something genuine about the look. It couldn’t have been easy to geared up like that and to trek all the way to my apartment, knowing that I was sure to give him hell for all the shit he had put us through. As I listened to him plead through the door, my curiosity about the church began taking over my thoughts, and it wasn’t long before I popped open the door again and let him in. Fucking rockstars, they always get their way.

I put on the thickest set of clothes I could find and headed off into the snow with Stek. There was no way my car was working in that kind of weather, so Stek and I resorted to trudging through snow for the fifteen or so blocks it took to get the church. We walked slowly of course, making every effort to drop our feet down into the foot-holes that had been left behind by others, and after about an hour of high-stepping, and plodding, and pushing through the snow, we finally made it to the church. In the snow, the old building looked brighter and taller than I had remembered, its weather beaten steeple standing out impressively against the white world that surrounded it. Stek led me around back and walked me toward a little patch against the base of the church where the snow level was significantly lower than everywhere else around it. He reached down into the snow and pulled upward to reveal a long, metal door that opened on an angle and that led down underneath the church. I followed him down the steps and waited as he struggled for a second to get the key to turn in the frozen lock.

“Here we are,” he said, opening the door into the basement of the church.

I could sense that the room we had walked into was large with tall ceilings, but with only a small amount of daylight breaking into the room I couldn't completely make out the space all around me. He told me to wait at the doorway and then weaved his way off into the darkness that overpowered the room. I heard the strong snap of an old light switch come from somewhere in front of me, and after a flicker or two, the lights shot on, illuminating every corner of the basement. All around me were instruments, big and small, covering almost every tile of the floor except for a small grouping that were left open at the heart of the room. In one corner he had pianos—both a grand and a vertical—as well as what looked like two Hammond electric organs standing back to back; in another corner he had drums of all kinds—bongos, steel, kettle—and even two complete kits that looked a lot like Pearl sets that both Colin and I used in the band. The last two corners were reserved for classical instruments—strings on the left and horns on the right. Some of them were stored in cases, while many others just leaned up against one another exposed and gathering dust. As I looked around at the room, I couldn't help but be amazed by what Stek had down there. He had a marching band in one part of the room, an orchestra in another—he had ark's worth of instruments right there at his fingertips, just waiting for him to sit down and play.

Joey Piccoletti and The Sickness

What started our whole beef with Joey Piccoletti was this one Tuesday morning before school when Stek and I caught him rocking out in his car to a Gin Blossom's song.

We were walking through the front parking lot from the bus-stop and going halveses on a bacon, egg, and cheese, when we saw Joey cruise into the lot in his supped-up Civic hatchback, blasting tunes loud enough to make the whole parking lot buzz. Stek and I kind of slowed down our pace and stared through the car's window like we had just sat down at the world's strangest freakshow. Joey was in full-blown rock-out mode. His hands were fisted around a set of air drumsticks and he was using every part of his car to fill out his drum kit: his dash became a set of toms, the steering wheel his snare, the rearview his symbols, and the gas pedal his kick drum.

And there, alone in his car, Joey Piccoletti—the biggest douche in the entire Freshman class according to Stek and me—wailed on his imaginary drums like the entire rock n' roll movement depended upon it.

Stek and I stopped walking completely. I tried to make out the song that Joey was pouring his worthless heart and soul into. All I could hear for the most part, though, was the muffled bump of the bass, but when the song hit the chorus, Joey whined out the lyrics loud enough so that Stek and I could hear every shitty word he was pushing across his strained lips.

“Whispers at the bus stop, I heard about nights out in the school yard, I found out about youuuuuuuuuuu, found out about youuuuuuuuuuu.”

“Nooooooooo,” I said in disbelief, “the fucking Gin Blossoms? He’s rocking out to the Gin Blossoms?”

Stek said nothing because he was locked into his own state of disbelief, in which he could do nothing but stare. I didn’t need him to respond anyway. It was the Gin Blossoms all right. The song was “Found Out About You” a god-awful tune by those alt-rock softies from Tempe, Arizona that had showed up on the charts early in that year like a bad case of herpes. To Stek and me, the Gin Blossoms were everything that was wrong with contemporary music. In our minds they were hacks, poseurs, turncoats, leaches—a bunch of guys who took grunge, the loudest, angriest, manliest music of our young lifetime, and decided to make it more vagina-friendly in order to sell albums. It was only a few weeks earlier that Kurt Cobain had sucked down a shotgun slug for his last meal, and yet DJ’s everywhere were already labeling the Gin Blossoms as the poster boys of what they were now calling the post-grunge movement—the latest and lamest new musical genre that was bound to cause that shot Kurt had sent through his head to keep flying on until it had struck down every person who had ever cared about grunge music.

As the song shifted into the last chorus, Joey’s performance got really heavy. He started banging his head back and forth so hard that his cheeks went red and his preppy bangs splashed all over the place. I thought about the video for “Found Out About You,” remembering how the lead singer was wearing some faggy, black

turtleneck and whining about how he had unknowingly fallen in love with the town slut. The turtleneck choice was fitting I always thought, considering the only douche dumb enough to fall head over heels for the town skank would be a guy who wore turtlenecks, but beyond that I couldn't remember one Gin Blossom who had put half as much effort into his performance as Joey was right then. Realizing that only made what was happening there in that parking lot even more pathetic.

The song thankfully came to a close, finally putting an end to Joey's shitshow of a performance. Unfortunately, though, I knew what I had just witnessed was going to stick with me for a while. I tried to shake it out of my head as I turned and began walking once again toward the front entrance of the school. I got about three steps in before I realized that Stek hadn't followed me. He was still staring down Joey with red in his eyes, watching him as he flicked off the engine and stepped out of his terrible Civic hatchback with those low dropping bumpers that tried to cover up the fact that he was driving his sister's old car. Joey stretched with his back toward us, and then turned around to put on his dress shirt and tie.

That's when I saw the front of his t-shirt for the first time and read the big black lettering that spelled out "Kurt Cobain: 1967-1994" right under a close up shot of Kurt's stubble covered face.

"Motherfucker," Stek mumbled. "Fuck, fuck, motherfucker." He pulled his hands up and tugged the greasy strands of his long hair back behind his head as Kurt's face disappeared beneath the buttoned front of Joey's dress shirt.

"Oh, why doesn't the guy just piss on the guy's grave," I said, getting angry like Stek, "just piss on his grave."

Once Joey was buttoned up in his crisp, blue dress shirt, he flipped on his hundred dollar blazer and started walking toward the school entrance and right toward where Stek and I were standing. I turned quick and faced school so that Joey wouldn't notice that Stek and I were watching him. I gave Stek's beat-up corduroy blazer a tug on its tail too, to give him the same idea, but he didn't budge a bit. He just kept staring at Joey like everything he had ever hated in the world was suddenly walking right by him in a Calvin Klein sport coat.

Out of the corner of my eye, I watched as Joey finally caught Stek staring at him. Joey realized right away that we had been watching him all along and immediately toughened up: pushing out his chest and scrunching his face into a scowl.

"What the fuck are you two pole-smokers looking at?" he said, as he stomped past Stek and me. His stare hit us like the bursting spray of a busted-open fire hydrant, where the water's icy cold, but shooting at you so hard that it knocks you back and stings like a bitch.

Stek matched his stare, staying quiet and letting the heat from his anger take over his face, which was his way of going berserk. As their staring contest kept going, I felt one of those bad feelings rising up into my throat that was telling me that what was going on right in front of me wasn't going to end there in the parking lot. Joey definitely was a grade-A douche, but he was a big kid and an even bigger ball buster. He had already given Stek and me shit on a regular basis for a number of things like our long hair or the second-hand flannel button-downs that we always wore to school instead of dress shirts. This little staring contest was doing nothing

but painting the biggest, cherry red bull's-eye you could imagine right onto our foreheads and that was something that I wanted no part of.

I tried to break Stek's stare with one of my own, one which was urging him to cut it out and just let the thing die. But he never got that message, he just kept his eyes fixed on Joey, watching him as he passed us and made his way up the steps and into the building.

"Stek," I said, as soon as Joey was out of sight, "man, have you gone nuts? That's going to bring shit down on us like no other."

"I don't care," he said, shaking his head. The stare he had been giving Joey was suddenly landing on me. "Don't you get it, man? He doesn't know the difference! He doesn't even know the fucking difference!" His shouting knocked me back a bit, and I stepped away from him for a second as he brought his hands up to his hair again and tugged the greasy strands back behind his head. He looked back at Joey's now empty and silent Civic Hatchback and kept shaking his head over and over again like he was trying to force himself not to remember what he had just witnessed.

"It's over," he said, turning back toward me. "Can't you see? It's finally fucking over."

He pushed past me with a shove and stormed his way to the front steps. I stayed behind in the lot for a second, shocked as hell by Stek's reaction. I looked over at Joey's car and heard the shitty lyrics of that god-awful Gin-Blossoms' song again in my head. What I had always hated about that song in particular wasn't the crappy lyrics or the pussy guitar riffs, it was the way the lead singer's voice came

way too close to sounding like Kurt's at times. The guy didn't have Kurt's intensity or his rawness, but in some moments you couldn't help but to notice the similarities between the two. That's what I hated the most, having that realization pop into my head and being forced to think about it.

I pictured Joey back in that car singing that god-awful song with all of his heart. That's when I finally got what Stek had meant. A guy like Joey, some idiot that trusted in his radio dial and probably never bought albums, a guy like that couldn't tell the difference between a Nirvana song and a Gin Blossoms' song, and what's worse he didn't care. Grunge was just another word he heard on the radio as he flipped from one station to the next. It was a word that meant *now, rock, cool*; it certainly didn't mean *me*, which was how Stek and I always understood it. Unlike us, he didn't bother to learn about bands like Soundgarden, or Green River, or The Melvins—bands that had helped to start it all. Unlike us, he didn't care whether the guy singing the song he was listening to was actually hurt, or angry, or depressed. And unlike us, he sure as shit didn't care if the guitars tried to capture those feelings by beating them out of the strings with heavy, violent strums.

It was all the same to him—all the fucking same. And that's why it—grunge—was dead. That shot that Kurt had fired into his head just weeks before had finally made it to Philadelphia. It had traveled the 2,800 miles from Seattle and finally hit its marks; first Stek and then me, right in the chest, right in the heart. It was dead and standing there alone in the parking lot, I couldn't have been more pissed.

“What do we do now?” I asked Stek later that day at lunch. The two of us were sitting alone at the back table by the trashcans, eating the caf special that day, chicken parm subs, which were really just the caf’s same, old chicken fingers tossed into a roll with some watery marinara on top.

Stek didn’t answer me. He was too busy digging around in his marker-covered backpack, which was always packed with an arsenal of mix tapes, instead of books. He was looking for a mix for us to listen to, one that could blast away all the anger and hate that we were feeling in that moment with a couple of high-powered chords. That was our way of curing ourselves of all those shitty feelings. That was what we called “musical medicine.”

In a school like our high school, St. Joseph’s Prep, an all boys catholic school stuffed out the wazoo with swoopy-banged, suburb bitches, a couple of outcasted city kids like Stek and me were afflicted with anger and hatred on a day-to-day basis. In school, you couldn’t let those feelings really surface, though. You couldn’t flip your lid on one of those pleated-pants wearing prepsters right there in the caf, because if you did, then you’d be giving ballbusters like Joey Piccoletti enough material to terrorize you with for months. So you had to find a way to deal with it, all that frustration and bitterness, which is what we called “the sickness.” You had to find a way to make that sickness go away before it got too much for you. Our solution: pop a tape into a walkman and listen to tunes with the volume knob spun so high that the music just spreads throughout your body and finds every bit of pain—just like strong ibuprofen.

The tapes, making them and compiling them, that was Stek's thing. He took pride in it, almost thinking of himself as some musical pharmacist who could cure you of any type of sickness you had. He could make a mix that could give you courage, make you happy, or ease your stress, and whenever you needed healing you just dipped into his backpack for some musical medicine, took your usual dosage, and then went about the rest of your day. He'd even go all out on designing the cassette jacket like they were little prescription vials, giving each mix its own fake musical drug name like "rockacillin" or "grungenol", and writing out only one direction on the label each and every time: "Inject through the ears."

"Well, what do we do now?" I asked Stek again, thinking he didn't hear me the first time. He kept pawing through the tapes in his backpack still, looking like some junkie who needed a fix. Suddenly, he pulled his empty hand out of the bag, and in a fit of frustration, stood up from his seat, walked to the nearest trashcan, and dumped every last tape he had out his bag.

He didn't have to tell me why he did it. Every one of those mixes contained nothing but grunge. As a regular patient, that I knew for sure.

"I think we need to get some new drugs."

I watched as he sat back down at the table and plopped his empty backpack onto to the table. The thing deflated and let out a stale puff of air.

"But what?" I said, trying hard to think what other tunes were out there.

We had been so submerged in grunge for the last couple of years that we might as well have been that swimming baby on the cover of Nirvana's *Nevermind*. We had been too busy sinking ourselves into everything that came out

of Seattle and going to see bands like Nirvana, Pearl Jam, and Soundgarden play live that we didn't take the time to make it back up to the surface and see what other stuff was out there. There was always older stuff that we could get into again, but what we loved about grunge was that it was really ours. We weren't reliving the glory days of the sixties or trying to bring back punk or post-punk or whatever. We were living and loving our own generation's music, which is the way it should be.

Stek kept staring at the center of the table, then he popped up his head to say something. He caught his tongue before he said anything, though, and then went back to staring.

"What?" I said.

"Well," he said, kind of hesitating, "we could check out the big board at Vin's and ask him what he thinks." He didn't make eye contact with me as he suggested the idea, because he knew what my reaction would be right away.

Vin was our boss and friend down at Vin's Vinyl on South Street, which was where we had worked on and off for the previous two years. He had taught us just about everything we needed to know about music, and had even given Stek his first guitar and taken us to our first Nirvana show. He was sure to know of what new stuff was worth giving a listen to, because he always wrote out his top twenty new albums on this big chalkboard he had hanging over the registers in the shop. The only problem was that we had been ignoring that board for a while, opting not to keep "our ears to the underground" like he always told us to do, but instead choosing to just keep our ears to Seattle. He was bound to give us one his usual music talking-to's.

“Come on, man. You know he’s going to give us shit for that.”

“What other choice do we have?”

I growled a bit, still hating the idea, but realizing it was our only choice. I was about to concede to Stek and let him know he was right, when Joey Piccoletti popped out of nowhere and snagged the locker loop on the back of Stek’s white and blue flannel and started pulling on it like he was playing a round of tug-of-war. He kept pulling as hard as he could, which caused Stek and his chair to go scooting backwards out in to the caf. Stek tried to reach behind his back to loosen Joey’s grip, but it was useless. Joey kept pulling him out into the center of the caf by that little loop of fabric until a loud *riiiiiiiiiippppp!* was let out over the commotion of chairs moving and kids laughing. I ran out to help Stek, who had finally gotten his bearings back and was now standing and facing Joey with that same stare he had given him that morning.

With his back facing me, I was finally able to get a good look at the damage that Joey had caused. A big portion of Stek’s shirt was ripped and left hanging down over his waistline. The rip had created a hole that exposed Stek’s undershirt, and with the flap of the white and blue flannel hanging down off that hole, what was left of Stek’s shirt looked to me like a mouth—a mouth of a dead man—who’s lifeless tongue was left hanging out after he drew his final, deep breath.

“What’s your problem, Joey?” I said from behind Stek, who was still quiet and throwing the biggest silent temper-tantrum I’ve ever seen.

“What?” Joey said like he was genuinely shocked, then he looked down at the piece of ripped fabric hanging in his hand. “Oh that. I’m *sorry*. You see the

boys and me over at my table had a bit of a spill and I saw your buddy's ugly shirt here and thought it would make a perfect rag." He looked down again at the now detached loop of fabric and pinched it between his fingers. "Oh, shit. This won't be enough to clean this spill up. Let me just get a little more here."

He reached for the flap of Stek's shirt, but before Joey could get his hand anywhere near it, Stek pushed the hand away with a smooth one-handed shove. I felt my body jump slightly right after that. I was expecting the worse to happen, I guess. I was thinking that Joey would come back with a swing of his own, and that's why I flinched. Stek didn't react like me at all, though. He just stood there tall, punching Joey with his eyes and daring him to make a move.

It was a reaction that I didn't know Stek could get the balls up to pull off. He was tough to a point. He had been one of the best wrestlers on the school's freshman wrestling team until he quit because the coach wanted him to cut his hair short. So I had to believe he could somewhat handle himself in a fight. But I had never seen him do so because that wasn't our way. We chose to lay low, to deal with the sickness in the way we knew best, which never required stand-offs with douches like Joey Piccoletti. What Stek was doing right then was anything but our way. He wasn't laying low. He wasn't reaching for the walkman. He was showing me first hand what happened when the music ran out.

Joey faked like the shove startled him, then looked Stek in the face with a jackass smile.

"Oh well," he said, still smiling at Stek's anger like it was cute. "I guess I'll just get some napkins instead. Here's your fag-tag back." Joey threw the little loop

of fabric back at Stek's feet, then walked through the maze of round tables back to his own. The eyes of all the other boys in the room finally found their way back to their sandwiches and half-eaten bags of chips, and that's when I noticed how hard I had been breathing the whole time.

Stek snapped out of his stare by reaching behind his back and ripping off the shirt's hanging flap with a quick snap of his wrist. He held the torn flannel patch in his hand for second, feeling the softness and thickness of what used to be the back of his favorite shirt. Then he walked over to the trashcan and hurled the patch down on top of the pile of all our old tapes.

"Vin's. First thing after school," he said, sliding on his blazer to cover the damage. I gave him a nod, and watched as he grabbed his empty backpack and headed toward the stairwell.

I could have followed him, but knowing Stek like I did, whenever he got real mad, he'd always need some time to go off by himself and lick his wounds. There was usually nothing I could do, and with him being madder than I had ever seen him, there was definitely nothing I could do to cheer him up. So I went back to finish my soggy chicken parm by myself.

I pulled out my copy of *To Kill A Mockingbird*, which was the book we were reading in English, and tried to read a couple of pages while I finished my sandwich so I didn't look like a complete loser. I didn't get much reading done though, because with everything that had just gone down and with the way Stek had stood tall through all of Joey's shit, I found myself constantly glancing over at

Joey's table and trying to think of what I would do if he ever came looking to give me and Stek shit again.

From my view, Joey was at the center of the table doing all the talking while the five other 'burb bitches around him were smiling and laughing like Joey was in the middle of the best damn comedy routine you could ever see. The first thing that jumped into my head when I saw all that laughing and smiling was that it was at my expense, that Joey was telling those 'burb bitches about the looks on me and Stek's faces when he threw that loop of fabric down at Stek's feet. It's thoughts like that make you want to punch through walls, that lead to the sickness, and that ruin your day unless you get some medicine in you right away. I reached down into my backpack and got out my Walkman and fished around at the bottom of my bag for an old mix of Brit invasion tunes that I was supposed to have given back to Stek weeks earlier. When my fingers found the case, I pulled it to the surface and checked the label. It read: "Britadryl – Inject Through the Ears." I snapped the tape into my Walkman, rewound it until I found "Where Have All the Good Times Gone?" by the Kinks, and then went back to fake reading.

I kept looking back a Joey every now and then, which didn't help the medicine spread as quickly as usual. I couldn't help it, though; I was just so pissed at the guy that I couldn't look away. What caused that hate for Joey to be so intense for Stek and me, wasn't just the Gin Blossoms thing, or all the shit that he gave us, it was the fact that just months earlier, when we first walked into that hellhole of a school, Joey Piccoletti was just like me and Stek—a city kid trying to find a way to fit-in at a school filled with preppy suburb jerks. We had known Joey for years,

having gone to grade school with him in the city at the St. Peter's School. Though we never got to be buddy-buddy with him at St. Pete's, during that first week at St. Joe's when me and Stek were the only familiar faces around, Joey locked on to us like we were old pals. That first week we sat together at the same lunch table and at all the orientation assemblies, as well. We even let him listen to some of the mix tapes that we were loving at the time, even though Joey didn't know any of the stuff we listened to.

After that first week though, Joey started skipping out on us during lunch, choosing to sit with some 'burb bitches that he had met in his Latin class instead of us. He said he was just trying to meet people, something that he told us we should have been doing too, but after the second week of school, during which Joey spent more time with them and less with us, we knew he was doing more than just meeting people. He never told us that his family was moving out of the city to Wayne, Pennsylvania, which was out on the Main Line, one of the richest stretches of the Philly suburbs, but I guess we didn't need to ask. We should have been able to tell as soon as he started letting his bangs grow long so that he could swoop them over his forehead just like all the other 'burb bitches in that school.

I don't think he ever realized how much Stek and I hated him for all of that. He probably didn't care anyway. He had become one of them, and like the rest of his new friends none of what Stek and I did ever got through to them clearly. Our clothes, our hair, our words, even our hate, none of it was able to get through to them without being off or strange or different, and after being in that school for almost eight months, all we wanted was to somehow be understood, to somehow be

seen and heard for who we really were, which underneath it all wasn't all that different.

After school we went straight to Vin's. We hopped on our usual number 2 SEPTA bus at Girard Ave. and 17th and headed south through the city until we got to South Street. Vin's shop was dead when we got there: every aisle in the place was empty, the headphones at the listening stations were still wrapped and on their hooks, and not a single row of albums or CD's were flipped forward out of place. It was a typical scene for a Tuesday afternoon, which is why we only worked Thursdays through Sundays when the store was always being raided by the usual never-ending train of recordheads. Vin was behind the counter with his feet up and the rest of his chunky upper half hidden behind the spread front pages of a *Melody Maker*. He didn't even drop the paper until we right there at the counter next to him. It was probably hard to hear us walk into the shop with the charging, heavy guitars of a Mistfits' tune blasting throughout the shop.

"What?" he said like we were disturbing him in the middle of something that was really important. He picked up his issue of *Melody Maker* to start reading again and readjusted the smushed Flyers cap that was smushed on top of his bald head.

I looked at Stek and gave him a nudge. He shot me a grimace to show me he knew what he had to do, then he looked up to the big board. I followed his eyes up to the board and scanned the list of new albums that Vin considered worthy enough to listen to. I saw albums from bands like Soundgarden and Alice In Chains, which just hurt to look at considering they were Seattle bands that we had liked. There

were other names up there, too. Band names that I didn't now like Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds, Archers of Loaf, Pulp, and Pavement. I looked up at those names like they were spelled out in Chinese.

"What do you think about this new Nick Cave album," Stek said real cool, trying to downplay the fact that he didn't know dick about the group or the album.

Vin looked away from the paper and slowly rocked his eyes from Stek to me, then back.

"What do you guys think about it?" he asked back through with his thick Philly accent, where the O's go on forever and S's find their way onto the end of anything. He put down his paper and locked his fingers together. Suddenly I got this weird feeling like we were on the damn Jay Leno show.

"Not bad," Stek said bullshitting. "It's...pretty good."

He looked at me for help, but I had nothing I could say. I looked over to Vin to see that he was staring right at me.

"What about this Pulp album *His n' Hers*? You guys like that one?"

Again Stek looked at me for help and I drew a blank. When we looked back at Vin he was shaking his head with his eyes closed.

"What's the friggin' deal here guys? You guys think I'm stupid enough to believe you actually listened to these albums? With you two idiots if ain't grunge it don't find a way into your ears without me forcing it down for you."

Stek and me were hiding our faces behind our hair to fight off Vin's eyes. I felt that talking-to coming on—that one we were dreading all afternoon long. It would start off with Vin reminding us of how it was our job to listen to everything,

to know everything so if a customer asked us a question about some band or song, we could answer it for them, no sweat. Then he'd go into what it meant to listen—not to listen as a fan, but to listen to really understand the caliber of the music, to judge the strength of the instruments and the songwriting and the production and all that stuff that we knew was important but not as important as how the song made you feel.

All that talk was about to come out of his mouth and though I loved the guy for all he did for me and Stek, on day like that one, where all that shit had already hit us like a Pete Townshend guitar smash to the face, that talking-to was the last thing we needed.

We needed medicine, and we needed it fast.

“You're right, Vin” I said, cutting him off before he had a chance to get going. I apologized for Stek and me not keeping up on the big board, and then went into it all: about Joey Piccoletti in the car, about grunge being dead, and about Joey giving shit to us. I went through it all with a sadness that made it seem as if my dog just died and I didn't know what to do. By the end of it all I was ready to shed some tears, and they weren't fake tears coming on like the kind we used to trick other record storeowners to sell us their records for cheap. They were real tears, because I was really hurt, because for the first time in my life something that I really loved was dead and gone and never coming back.

“Come on, Vin,” I ended with, “can you help us out?”

Vin stood there for second looking at my face and all the emotion coming into my eyes that was bringing me close to tears; after staring that picturing down

and maybe remembering some time where he too had to give up on sound, he finally gave in.

“Alright with the friggin’ emotion,” he said, throwing down his Flyers hat onto the counter. “Keep the tears in your friggin’ head. Everybody’s listened and lost. Your next love’s just a spin a way.”

He shifted his big belly out from behind the counter and walked out into the store. He scratched his hand through the remaining locks of wild gray hair that crowned his head as he looked out across the empty aisles and thought about where to start. He looked over at Stek and me for second, looking at us, but sort of not looking at us at the same time—it felt like he was trying to read our minds or something. Then he went over to the nearest rack and start pulling albums for us. Stek and I watched him as he bounced from aisle to aisle, flipping a pile of albums forward and then flopping them back into place once he had pulled what he wanted. The whole time this was going on I was just standing beside the counter, feeling the hurt from that morning once again burning in my heart, like that bullet was still there inside me, still pushing and working its way through me.

Vin came back to the counter with about six CD’s in his hands and slid them over toward us as he went back behind the register. Stek jumped immediately on the stack, shifting the cases around so he could check out the titles and covers. I hesitated for second, still feeling that pain and trying not show it, but then Stek pushed the albums my way and I felt obligated to look at them, even though my heart wasn’t in to it. As I looked through the stack of albums, Stek went over to the magazine rack that was by the front door and pulled off almost every new music

mag he could get his hands on—*Rolling Stone*, *NME*, *Q*, *Melody Maker*, *Guitar World*, *Spin*—and then brought them back over to the counter. Vin rang us up, giving us our employee discount and the magazines for free like he always did, and we dug down into our pockets to pay our bill.

We thanked Vin and piled all of our stuff into our backpacks and headed for the door.

“Oh, there’s one more,” he said, stopping us before we got two steps away from the counter. He squatted down below the counter and came back up with another CD in his hand. “We just got this in. It’s a pre-release.” He slid the album my way on the counter top. “Give it a shot. You guys may like it.”

I reached back and plucked the CD off the counter. I stared at the front cover, which didn’t have much going on it by the album and band names and a set of blue lines stretching down next to it.

“Guided By Voices,” I said, reading the upside down letters on the front, not knowing if that was the album’s name or the band.

“Yeah,” Vin said as leaned into the counter. “They’re a bunch of old guys from Ohio, but they don’t sound like it.”

I turned the album over in my hand and studied the back, then thanked Vin one more time before I headed out the door.

We walked the seven blocks from Vin’s to Stek’s grandmother’s house in Queen’s Village, which is where Stek lived ever since his mom and dad abandoned him years earlier. When we got to the house, we went right to the basement. We

didn't even to stop to give Stek's grandmother a kiss hello, we just gave her a pair of half-assed waves as we hurried through the narrow living room and dining room of the old rowhouse and then straight down into the basement.

I was worried that I was going to feel that bullet and that pain again in my heart when I walked down the basement stairs, because it had been there, in that basement, where Stek and I had worshipped, studied, and played grunge for the last two years of our lives. There were posters of Pearl Jam and Nirvana and Soundgarden and Mother Love Bone hanging on the walls down there, which I feared were going to push that bullet a little deeper into my heart the minute I laid eyes on them; but when I made to the bottom of the steps and looked out at those walls and those posters, for some reason it didn't hurt as much as I thought it would. Maybe it had something to do with the fact that I had already been through so much hurt that day or because we had all those CD's and were about to get some medicine in us, but more so it was just being in that basement that helped blocked the pain.

For me and Stek, that basement was our everything. As a room itself, it really didn't provide anything to the house besides a place to stash some boxes. It was just wall-to-wall cement, with an exposed hot-water heater in the corner under the stairs that buzzed twenty-four-seven. Stek's grandfather had dug the basement out and put together the room himself back when he was still alive, so everything about it was shoddily done, from the mismatched wood boards on the staircase, to the rickety, exposed piping along the ceiling, to the unlevel concrete floors. The walls, too, looked like they were just thrown up without a thought. They were made

of stacked cinderblocks, which were slanted in some areas and barely flat in others. The cinderblocks were rougher than sandpaper, even with a thick coat of water proofing paint on them, and because they were hollow on the inside, every sound that hit them came back in a pinging echo that would ring and hold up by the pipes along the ceiling.

It wasn't a palace by any means, but Stek and I didn't really care. We liked how shoddy everything was, because that meant there wasn't another place like it in the world. It was just ours and ours alone.

Stek's grandmother hadn't been in the basement in a couple years because the stairs were so steep and poorly constructed that she didn't want to take the risk of falling. And after Stek's dad split town for the last time and moved all of his crap out of the basement, the place was empty and just waiting to be filled. Stek and I didn't waste anytime. We brought in a pair of trash picked couches for sitting and moved Stek's bed down there, too; then we just added the other pieces—the posters, the stereo system, etc—over time. We even had enough space down there to set up a little place for our instruments—my bass, Stek's guitar, and the piece of shit drum kit we both chipped in for—which was great because it finally gave us a place to practice.

We got everything in the basement set up just the way we wanted it around the time we had our first day of school at St. Joe's, which was perfect timing considering how shitty life was about to become. After you spend a whole day getting trashed upon by a bunch of 'burb bitches because everything you say or do doesn't seem to get through to them clearly, you need a place where you can just be

yourself and be understood for once, even it's only by one other person. And I think that's why as I was standing there, looking at those posters, that I didn't feel that bullet or that pain anymore. It was because no matter how bad that day had been, I was finally in the one place where I could just be myself and not have to worry about anything else.

Stek dropped his backpack and flopped chest first onto his bed. He lay on his stomach there for a moment, breathing heavily into his pillow, before springing to and reaching for his bag and the CD's. I took my normal seat on the couch across from his bed and watched as he went to work. Next to Stek's bed was a coffee table that held all of our stereo equipment—which was this sweet Sony system we bought second hand at a pawnshop that allowed you take vinyl records or CD's and transfer their songs to tapes. This was Stek's lab. It was where he made the medicine.

He pulled out the stack of new CD's and ripped into the top one, stripping it of its plastic cover with his teeth before popping it into the player. Then we both just laid back, me on the couch and Stek on the bed, and listened, the two of us hoping that the drugs would kick in quickly.

The first CD, which was some bright sounding Britpop band, got about three tracks in before Stek got up off his bed and lowered the music.

“What do you think?” he asked, which was his way of saying he was ready to move on. Knowing him, he was already trying to organize a mix in his head, one just for the sickness brought on by douches like Joey Piccoletti, and that first CD, with all its up-beat chords and clever synth lines, wasn't making the cut.

I waited with my eyes closed for a second before I made my decision. In my head Joey Piccoletti's stupid face was looking at me with a big, douchebag grin and I was waiting to see if that music was going to make that face go away. When I gave it another fifteen seconds and that face was still there and grinning, I opened my eyes, looked at Stek, and said:

“Axe it. That's not us.”

Stek tore into the next album and popped it into the player. We again laid back and hoped for the medicine to kick in. But again the music didn't take. We went on to the next album and the next, but each time we got about two or three tracks in, Stek was reaching for the next CD and I wasn't doing anything to stop him. There was always something there that didn't allow the music to click—shitty vocals, soft guitars, lifeless drums—and without that click, the smile on Joey's face kept stretching in my mind until it was practically wrapped around his ears.

After a while that smile started driving me crazy, and I popped off the couch and started rubbing my eyes as hard as I could to try to get that picture out of my head because the music couldn't. After I opened my eyes and all the blurriness faded, I saw that Stek was stopping another CD and that the albums that were once stacked neatly in front of him were now open and splayed out across the coffee table with their plastic wrappings all around them.

“Is that it?” I asked Stek. He was sitting up now in his bed with hands covering his face, looking as heartbroken as you could be.

“Yeah, that’s it,” he said, falling back into the bed. After a couple of silent seconds, he flopped one of the magazines he had been reading across his face and through the pile of its pages said: “We’re screwed.”

I couldn’t help but to think the same thought in that moment. We had gone through Vin’s picks in just under an hour and there wasn’t one song that could help ease the sickness even the slightest bit. Things couldn’t have been any worse. I suddenly felt really tired, which I guessed was due to the fact that the sickness—all that frustration and anger—had been going inside of me all day and my body was finally just giving in to it. I fell down into the couch, closing my eyes on the way down and hoping that I could just nod off right there so that I wouldn’t have to deal with everything for a couple of hours.

My eyes weren’t closed for more than a minute when I remembered that I had never given Stek the last album that Vin had recommended for us at the shop—that Guided By Voices album, which he had slipped to me right as we were walking out of the shop.

“Oh wait,” I said, getting up and reaching for my backpack. “There’s this one, remember?” I fished down into the bottom of my bag and pulled out the CD. When I tossed it over to Stek, he didn’t seem too optimistic. He rolled his head with his eyes as he ripped open the wrapping of the CD, then once he had popped the disc into the player, he rolled back onto his bed and put the magazine back over his face.

I stretched out into my position again, too, and closed my eyes to see Joey’s smiling face there still waiting for me. The album shot on with a quick splash of

hissy white noise that seemed to catch on to the guitars chords that quickly followed it, covering them with a layer of fuzz that sounded rough, but cool in a way. Those fuzzy guitars started mounting right off the bat, the lead fooling around over the rhythm, while a pair of twin voices, coated in that same fuzz, started singing and mounting with them. There was something that was off about the sound, something strange and different. The guitars were going, the bass, drums, and vocals too, but they all felt so distant and rough, like none of them were making it through the speakers clearly.

I thought for a second that maybe one of the audio cables in the back of the speakers had somehow come loose, and I got up off the couch and reached over to the stereo to give it's side a tap. When the sound didn't snap back in after a tap or two, I reached around the back of the stereo and started feeling around to see if the cables were plugged in right.

"What are you doing?" Stek asked me as he watched me fiddle around with the stereo cables.

"The sound's off or something. Can't you hear it?" I kept feeling around the wires, searching for the loose cable so I could put it in place like all the others.

"Wait a second," Stek said. He reach out and pulled me off the stereo by the sleeve of my shirt. "Wait a second. I think it's supposed to sound that way."

"Really?" I said. I stared at the stereo and listened hard. "No way. Something's not right there. It's not coming through clear. It's not normal."

"Just let it run, man," Stek said. We both focused back on the music just in time to hear the end of the first track. The second track started up, the guitars

charging in with the lead singer's voice, which had a little strain in it that gave the vocals some edge. The fuzz was all over the place again, on the vocals, guitar, and bass, but what was throwing me off in that song, wasn't so much the production, but the lead singer's voice, which for some reason sounded it like it had a British accent.

"John Lennon," Stek said. "The guy sounds a little like John Lennon, like when he gets all revved up and starts singing at the top of his lungs."

"But they're from the U.S.," I said, remembering what Vin had told me before we left the shop. "From like Ohio or something."

Stek shrugged his shoulders and didn't say another word about it. I listened again to the song and heard the John Lennon in the voice like Stek did. The rhythm of the guitars had that poppy Brit-invasion feel to it too—quick, repetitive, and jumpy enough to hook you in—but the recording and all the fuzz made them sound rougher, heavier and grittier, more like something you'd hear on a Nirvana track. Listening to the song made me think of the stories my mom used to tell me about how when she was a little girl, she used to listen in bed at night to the Beatles and The Rolling Stones on her little transistor radio. She told me about how the radio was so staticky back then, even at night when stations supposedly came through clearer; but she didn't care about all that static, because all she wanted to do was listen to her favorite bands. Listening to that album right there with Stek put me back into one of her stories, and it was almost like I was there with her in her bed, with my ear up to the radio, just listening and humming, and not caring about anything else.

I got back onto the couch, stretched out, and closed my eyes to find Joey's face still there. Only this time the smile wasn't as wide, and his eyes weren't as shiny. I listened on, hoping that the fuzz from the music would start creeping into my head and blur out Joey's stupid face. The album was a bit all over the place. Some songs were upbeat and poppy, some were out there with heavy guitars and weird lyrics, and others were nice and slow, with acoustic guitar riffs that just forced you feel something. The voice of the lead singer changed too every now and then, sounding British in some songs and more American in others. The only thing that stayed the same throughout the album was that layer of fuzz, which was constant in every track, hissing like the basement's hot water heater, and binding all the songs together.

I kept thinking about my mom and her little radio, imagining that I was there with her listening to a radio program, because with all the songs be different and fuzzy, I kept imagining that a radio program had to sound like what I was listening to right there. We made it to the end of the album and then ran through it again straight through. The second time around Stek announced that his new favorite song was the third to last track, called "I Am A Scientist" in which the lead singer says: "I am a pharmacist/ Prescriptions I will fill you/ Potions, pills, and medicines/ To ease your painful lives."

It was a fitting song. I didn't know which song fit me best. I liked them all, even the weirder ones. I was just happy that by the second time through, there wasn't a trace of Joey Piccoletti's face still lingering in my mind. There was only the sound of that music and all its fuzz, buzzing in my head, buzzing deep down.

“This is us,” I said to Stek.

“What’s the name of the band again?” Stek asked, scrambling through the open CD cases.

“Guided By Voices. The album’s called *Bee Thousand*.”

“*Guided By Voices*,” Stek said over and over again, like he was trying to keep himself from forgetting the name. He shuffled through the pages of one his magazines crazily, like he was trying to find something particular. He stopped on a page and paused to read.

“Here it is. ‘Guided By Voices,’” he said, reading out the headline, “‘Kings of Lo-Fi.’”

“What?” I said as I got off the couch. Stek handed over the magazine and I looked at the photo, which was of some middle-aged guy leaning forward into the shot so his wild, curly hair looked huge. “Lo-Fi? What’s Lo-Fi?”

That was the question that we took back to Vin’s immediately that night. We sprinted all the way from Stek’s grandma’s to South Street and got to the store around quarter of seven. We barged through the door in a hurry to see Vin still there behind the counter, pulling out the cash register drawer with his big, grey trenchcoat on. He was getting ready to call it a quits.

“How’d we do guys?” Vin asked as soon as he saw our sweaty faces.

Stek and I walked over to him, still huffing and puffing from the sprint, and placed our copy of *Bee Thousand* onto the counter.

“That’s the one,” Stek said, still catching his breath.

“G.B.V.” Vin picked up the album and started flicking through the liner notes. “Thought you guys would go for this one. These Lo-fi lovers don’t know when to stop. After all those years, though, I think they finally got it right in this one.”

“Lo-fi,” I said, jumping on the term. “What is that?”

Vin paused for a second and looked at me and Stek like we were brain-dead.

“You guys listened to the album, right?”

“Yeah,” we said.

“And you guys heard all the hissing and white noise on all the tracks.”

“Yeah,” we said.

“Well that’s it guys. That’s Lo-fi.”

“But how does the sound get that way?” I asked, still not getting it.

Vin again looked at me and Stek like we were brain-dead, then he let out a sigh that rumbled through his lips.

“I thought I was going to get out of here early tonight, but I guess not.”

Vin took off his trenchcoat, sat back down on his stool, and started going on about Lo-fi, about how it stood for Low Fidelity and how it basically meant that the artists recorded their music on their own. According to him, if you were in a band or whatever, yet you weren’t big enough to afford studio time, you could buy a little four track recording system that would allow you to record all your music quickly and cheaply.

“All you need is a place like a garage or a basement and—”

“A basement?” Stek said. He looked over at me and I saw right away how

wide and wild his eyes were.

“Yeah. A basement,” Vin said. “You set your machine in there, hit record, play your instruments one at a time, then you mix everything together on one track when you’re done. It comes out rough, don’t get me wrong. You guys heard it. But if you do it long enough, and get good at it like G.B.V., it comes out sounding kinda vintage in a way. Like the way some tunes sound on old, old records, when people didn’t know a friggin’ thing about recording music.”

“That’s exactly what I was thinking when listening to it,” I said. “It was like old Beatles stuff.”

“Yeah. Robert Pollard calls Lo-fi the final frontier of punk. Because in punk, you didn’t even need to know how to play your friggin’ instrument to be a musician, and with Lo-Fi you don’t even need to know how to record the friggin’ things either. People try to rag on Lo-fi, saying how it sounds like shit and it’s just not normal. But I think if you can get past all the sound quality stuff and just listen to what’s there, then you see that it’s just music—as good as any other.”

“Who’s Robert Pollard?” Stek asked.

Vin smiled a bit and reached for a magazine that was on top of a pile next to the cash register. When he pulled it from the top and opened it up, I noticed that it was the same magazine that Stek and I were looking at earlier. He flipped through the pages until he got to the one he was looking for, then he placed it down on the counter and pointed his finger at that same picture with the older looking guy with all that curly hair.

“Robert Pollard is Guided By Voices.”

Stek and I both looked down at the picture. The glossy surface of the photo caught the light, and when I saw it flicker and drag over Pollard's dark eyes, I felt my head go heavy with questions—questions about him, about his band, about his music. It was the same feeling I felt when I went to my first Nirvana show and heard the word “grunge” for the first time.

It was the feeling of being so close to uncovering something new and amazing, but being locked dead in one spot for a moment by the mystery and possibility of that thing. That feeling right then was exactly what I needed, especially on a day like that, when just hours before I was thinking I would never feel like that again. It brought hope to me in a way, and the belief that no matter how bad the sickness got, no matter how much shit Joey Piccoletti dropped on us, that there always be some medicine out there to cure us, as long as we were willing to listen for it.

Stek gave me a nudge to let me know that he was feeling the same thing I was. Right away I knew that we were ready to start submerging ourselves in anything Lo-fi, anything Guided By Voices, anything Robert Pollard. That had had been our way of getting into grunge, too: buy, listen, read, repeat, until you woke up with that sound in your head in the morning and went to sleep with up there as well.

It was getting late and Vin had to leave, but before he left he gave us two earlier G.B.V. albums—*Propeller* and *Vampire on Titus*—plus a bunch of magazines that had some articles on the band in them. Then both Stek and me headed for our homes, each taking an album and a stack of mags with us, as well as

that feeling, which at the point was damn near spilling out my ears.

I listened to my album, *Vampire on Titus*, about five times that night, not getting much sleep at all, just listening and reading those mags over and over. When I met Stek at the bus stop earlier the next morning, we both started going on about Pollard and all the different things we read about him and the band.

“He’s thirty-six,” I said to Stek first thing when we got onto the bus. “Thirty-fucking-six and he’s been playing music almost as long as that, and now all of a sudden he makes it? That’s unreal, man!”

We grabbed a seat in the back and switched up our mags and albums for the day. Stek had snuck a new mixtape into my pile entitled “Lophidren.”

“He was teaching fourth-grade for fourteen years on the side, too!” Stek damn near yelled. “Imagine that for fourteen years of your life, your job is to teach a classroom filled with bratty fourth-graders, then one day you’re a musician and your life’s completely changed and your making records and playing concerts for thousands of people a night. That just doesn’t happen in real life.”

We went on like that for the rest of the bus ride and the rest of the morning. During my morning classes I’d keep a magazine out on my lap so that I could read up while the teacher went on about whatever, and when I walked through the hallway between classes, I’d pop on my headphones and sneak in a song or two. If I’d pass Stek in the hallway we’d again talk about something new and unbelievable

we had read about Pollard. About how in a basement in Dayton, Ohio, he and his drinking buddies formed a band for the hell of it, just to have a hobby. Or about how he and his band had recorded over two-thousand songs and put together nine albums, in spite of the fact that barely anyone was listening. Or about how he thought up his songs quick and recorded them even quicker, rarely going back to editing anything because he wanted to catch the song in a state of newness, before the essence and excitement of it all got lost.

Pollard wasn't like any other musician Stek and I had come across. We were used younger guys, who were unshaven and wore their hair long, and played their instruments loud and sloppy because they were angry and pissed off. Or those old big-name rockstars we grew up worshipping like Mick Jagger, Pete Townshend, and Jimi Hendrix, who banged groupies and did drugs because that's what rockstars did. We had never seen a guy like Pollard—a thirty-six year old man, with a beer-gut, and teaching background—who had a band, a basement, and four-track and needed nothing else. He was something special. He *was* a rockstar—a rockstar of a truer kind. One who only rocked and never starred, and who for fourteen years kept playing his style of music until someone finally understood him—until someone finally heard him—and realized how good he was.

“This guy's my new hero,” Stek said after lunch that day in Science, our last class of the day and the only class we had together. Our teacher, Mr. Byrd, was up at the front of the class explaining to everyone about why oil and water don't mix, but almost everybody in the class was either talking or sleeping or not paying attention altogether.

“Yeah, me too.” I said to Stek. “He keeps playing over all those years for himself, and his buddies, and so he has something to do on the weekends, and after fourteen years his dream of being a full-time musician finally comes true! That’s a hero.”

“I hear you,” he said and looked down at the open magazine we had hidden behind our textbook. “Robert Pollard. Rob-bert Pollard. *Bobby fucking P.*”

“*Bobby fucking P.*,” I said back to Stek.

For second I looked up from the magazine at the class, and saw Joey Piccoletti looking over in our direction. Science was thankfully the only class we had with him. He was sitting next to a couple of his pretty looking ‘burb bitch friends, and they were elbowing each other and shining grins our way. I saw Joey raise his hand and start shaking real hard, then he added a couple *oooh-oooh*’s to get everybody’s attention, too.

Mr. Byrd, looking happy to see a hand up, called on Joey and waited to hear what he had to say.

“Mr. Byrd,” Joey said, sounding serious, “can you tell us why shampoo and Adam Stecker’s hair don’t mix? ‘Cause I’m having a hard time focusing with his greasy pube-hairs in front of me and I’m wondering why he can’t wash them.”

Mr. Byrd immediately sent Joey down to the office, which was what the douche deserved, but it didn’t stop everybody in the class from laughing at Stek and me. Joey got up from his seat and walked toward the door swinging his arms like he was some kind of marching war hero. Everyone was watching him, which was exactly what he wanted, and as soon as Mr. Byrd turned for a second to call

down the office, he flicked me and Stek two long middle, fingers, and started playing an air guitar with them as he shuffled out the door.

Looking back at Stek I could see that the sickness was already hitting him hard, and with twenty minutes left in the period and no way of getting any medicine, I knew he was on his way to exploding.

“We got to lay low, right?” I whispered to him as Byrd tried to get the class going again. “This shit will get old real soon. We got to just lay low. Remember...Bobby Fucking P, right?”

Stek pulled his head into his chest so his hair covered his face and he locked his fingers into fingers into a fist.

“Bobby Fucking *P* say it.”

“You’re right. You’re right,” he said, finally loosening up. “Bobby Fucking P.”

The next day in school we really tried to make ourselves invisible as much as possible. We got to school late, took the round about way to every class to avoid the main halls, and even ate lunch down at the bottom of east stairwell so no one would find us. After school was over, we hung around at the bottom of the stairwell again until the late bell rang, hoping that the school would clear out enough for us to get out there without catching shit for an entire day. To pass the time we sat on top of the old, huffing radiator at the bottom of the steps there, getting about our tenth dosage of Lophidren in us that day and talking about G.B.V.

“You ever notice how all of Bobby P’s lyrics are about crazy shit?” I asked Stek as we hit a song on the tape called “The Queen of Cans and Jars.” It was a tune that worked liked a lot of G.B.V. songs, catchy guitar riffs over an undeniable rhythm, highlighted by a whole lot hiss and Bobby P singing in his fake British accent about something straight out of the mind of the craziest kid on the playground. Here it was about a queen of cans and jars who guarded the dead, but on other tracks it was about robot boys, buzzards and dreadful crows, hardcore UFOs, weedkings, and other looney shit.

“How couldn’t I,” Stek said, readjusting his part of the headphones. “I guess that’s the type of stuff you write about when you’re around fourth graders for fourteen years. I kind of like it anyway. It’s original. Fuck mountains high and rivers wide and all that sappy lyric bullshit. I’ve listened to my last song about love and I ain’t going back. I’d rather hear a song about this crazy old bag and her cans and jars anyway.”

The late bell finally rang, getting to the bottom of the stairwell as one long, muffled buzz, and we scrambled to get our stuff so we could finally get out of there for the day. Stek had to hit up his locker before he left, so we went up to the third floor and headed down the Science hallway to the wall of lockers at the far end. We were about a quarter of the way down the hallway when we could see the big black lettering on Stek’s locker and about halfway down when would could make out word “pussy.” It was printed out in big letters that stretched from the top all the way down to bottom.

Stek gave his locker a punch when we got to it. We heard the hallway door

swinging open behind us and turned to see Joey and a couple of his boys walking toward us. Joey was out front with his middle fingers popped, waving his two fingers around like they were a set of lovebirds.

“You two lovers keep hiding from us. It makes things more interesting.” He and his boys kept walking by and headed toward the east stairwell, smiling and laughing.

“Really fucking original, dick,” I said under my breath when they were almost halfway down the hall. Stek opened his locker with a slam, grabbed his book, and then closed it with an even harder slam. I saw the sickness attacking his face, his jaw going tight and his nostrils going wide. He was about to explode again.

“Bobby Fucking P,” I said to him, keeping locked on his eyes.

He went to open his mouth, but then caught himself. Then he went to punch the locker again, but caught himself there, too. He looked back at me and then at the floor and finally after biting down his for a full ten seconds, he grabbed the walkman from my hands and said; “Bobby Fucking P.”

Friday we decided not to go through all the hassle of dodging Joey. I had been all for laying low for another day, but Stek said Joey was going to give him shit no matter what we did, so he said we might as well just show our faces and hope that Joey got it out of the way quickly. I was tense as hell all morning long. I was looking over my shoulder so much that I slammed into this little kid Greg Mapes from my English class, which caused the binder he was hugging at the time

to explode all over the hallway. And then later, when I was switching from English to Latin, I was walking by the east stairwell when the door to the stairs suddenly snapped opened. My whole body snapped with it, and I turned quickly to see that it was just some kid running late for class. I paused after that and tried to get myself together, because it felt like my heart had just caved in on itself. In that moment I tried to think about what Stek must have been thinking, because after all, he was really the one who was getting things the worst.

When I got to talk to him at lunch, the first thing he told me was that nothing had happened, at least not yet. We sat down and both started eating, Stek with his back to the caf, faking like he was ignoring the place and Joey Piccoletti in particular. I sat facing the big room, watching Stek's back for him by stealing a glance over at Joey's table every now and then to make sure something wasn't going down. Stek was nervous. I could tell by the way he just nibbled at his turkey sandwich. He was also starting to get pissed too, about how Joey was putting him through all this shit and about how he was making him wait and think about it.

I could tell that by the way he was talking about Bobby P, his voice getting serious as he called Pollard a "real American man." He started talking about how the guy came from nothing, from middle of nowhere America, and made something of himself in spite the million and one obstacles in his way. He talked about how Pollard drank beer by the caseloads, got in fights, and played rock n' roll with his drinking buddies because those are the type of things real men do. And he went on and on about this story he read about Pollard, that talked about this time that he and the rest of G.B.V. fought the band opening for them one night because of one of

two possible reasons: the first was that one of the opening band's members stole some of G.B.V.'s beer and the second was that they had run late on their show time, which left less time for G.B.V. to play.

“Either way,” Stek said at the tail end of lunch, “the guy stood up for what was his and sent a message that couldn't be misunderstood.” He paused after saying that, staring at the rest of his sandwich like it had just called him a dick. I stayed quiet as he continued to stare, just chewing on the same bite of chicken finger that I had been eating for over five minutes and trying to keep myself from thinking about what Stek was really talking about. The lunch bell finally rang and we both gathered up our stuff to leave. After Stek had put his backpack on and was set to head off to class, he bagged up the trash from his lunch, walked over to the nearest trashcan, and threw the bag down into the can as hard as he could. The trashcan let out an “*umph*” and slid back a couple inches, like it was a guy that had just been rocked in the gut by a big punch. I immediately looked around the emptying cafeteria to see if anyone else had noticed it, but it didn't seem like anyone really had. Kids were gathering up their books, or throwing away their lunches, or pushing in their chairs, or talking to their friends—no one was looking in our direction, not even Joey Piccoletti.

I was the only one who saw it and heard how loud it was, and as I followed Stek out of the caf, I felt myself getting more nervous than I had been all day, because I knew that things were only going to get worse.

By the last period of the day, Science, Joey still hadn't done anything, which made both Stek and I positive that he was going to do something during that period.

We we're continuing our unit on immiscible liquids, and in this lesson we were getting hands on by mixing several liquids together ourselves and writing down our observations on what mixed and what didn't. Stek and I really half assed the whole experiment, mixing the different liquids we had together messily, and barely taking our eyes away from Joey to observe whether or not the liquids were mixing together. Joey, on the other hand, didn't pay us any attention. He just went about stirring and mixing his liquids together like everything was completely normal, and he never once pulled his eyes away from his beakers to look in our direction.

At the end of the period, Stek and I both watched out of the corners of our eyes as Joey gathered up his stuff and walked calmly out of the classroom.

"What?" Stek said as soon as Joey had left the room. "Nothing? He did nothing?"

I took my deepest breath of the day and blew it out as hard as I could.

"I told you," I said. "I knew it would get old. Let's get the hell out of here before he has the chance to change his mind." I slid my books off the table and bent down to place them back into my bag. When I had everything packed away, I stood up and saw that Stek was looking flustered and his eyes were darting around the room.

"My bag's gone."

"What?"

"My fucking bag is gone!" Stek kept looking around room, his eyes getting wider and wider as he continued to look. The room was completely empty. All the kids had left. Mr. Byrd was even gone, too.

“Where the fuck is Byrd?” I said looking back behind his desk to the open door of the science department. I didn’t see anyone moving inside. I looked back at Stek and saw that his face was as red as I had ever seen it. That’s when I remembered what Stek must have been thinking about at that moment too, which was that all of our medicine had been in that bag, and our magazines and walkmans, too, and now all of it—all of it—was most likely in the hands of Joey Piccoletti.

“We got to find that fucker before he leaves school with my bag,” Stek said. We both tore out of the room running as fast we could, and as soon as we turned down the hallway and toward the lockers, we saw what we were looking for right away.

It was Stek’s bag, and it had been taped to his locker with thick, overlapping strips of duct tape. Even from a couple feet away I could see that it had been stuffed with the crumpled up pages of all our magazines, and what was the worst thing about it all, was that the shiny strips of tape from all our mixes were spewing out from the bag’s pencil pouch—hanging there slashed and tangled, like gutted intestines in some C-rate horror film.

“Where are you?” Stek yelled down the hall. “WHERE ARE YOU?” He stomped down the hallway toward his locker, shouting it over and over and looking for Joey. I ran after him, yelling for him to stop shouting and making a scene and doing exactly what Joey wanted. When we turned the corner we both saw that the hallway, just like the classroom, was completely empty. There were no kids, no teachers, no one there to hear Stek’s yelling, except me and him. As soon as he saw

that the place was empty, Stek moved toward the hallway door to continue to look for Joey.

“Stop,” I yelled as I grabbed him by the sleeve of his corduroy jacket. He held up for a minute, flashing his red, heavy eyes back at me.

“What?” he yelled at me. “This has to stop, TJ. It has to stop!”

“It will—with time. But if you keep screaming like a mad man and go freaking out all over school, you’re going to just make it worse and give him more reason to keep it up.” I stopped for a second to catch my breath and Stek pulled away from me. He flapped out his blazer and took a second to think about what I had said. “We have to keep laying low and biding our time. It will stop. Trust me. Remember: *Bobby fucking—*”

“Bobby fucking P!” Stek yelled “Bobby fucking P! He would have put a stop to this a long fucking time ago.” Stek stared me down for a second, going quiet so that what he said could sink down into my gut, then he walked over to his locker and began unraveling his backpack.

When all the tape was off the backpack, Stek brought the bag down to the floor and started searching through it to see if there was anything that could be salvaged. He rustled through the pile of crumpled pages and ran his fingers through the loose strands of tape, but he realized, just like I did, that there was nothing there that could be saved.

“Our walkmans are gone,” he said, reaching down into the backpack. He felt around at the bag’s bottom furiously, which caused the balls of paper to go spilling out onto the floor. “They’re gone! That prick took them! I can’t believe this!”

He picked up the bag and threw it into his locker. Then he closed the door with a hard kick. I felt the sickness rush up my spine and into my head in this big wave of heat and hate that caused my vision to blur and my hands to shake. I felt it pulse up in my temples for a good solid minute, but before it took over me I fought it back, calming myself with the thoughts of Bobby fucking P, and the songs of *Bee Thousand*, and how it took fourteen years of singing to no one just to get those songs heard.

“Let’s just get home and listen to some music, alright? We’ll listen to some tunes, get this sickness out of us, and just forget about that douche for the rest of the weekend. After this week, I’m sure all of this shit will blow over.”

“Blow over? That’s real fucking easy for you to say.”

“What’s that supposed to mean? You know, I’ve been dealing with this shit all year long, too. And my walkman got swiped, just like yours.”

“Oh, you’re walkman got swiped, TJ? You’ve had a rough week and bad couple of months? I’m so sorry for you. Things must be pretty hard. Why don’t you try having this shit happen to you for fourteen years!? Why don’t you try that and see if you still think all this will just blow over? ‘Cause then you’ll be seeing all of this the way I am right now.” Stek turned and stared at his locker, while at the same time pulling back on his hair so hard that his eyebrows lifted with the force.

“Fourteen years! For fourteen fucking years I’ve be misunderstood and shit upon by my mom, my dad, and the Joey fucking Piccoletti’s of the world! Do you know what that’s like, huh? Do you? And nothing has blown over! Ever! It just keeps going and going, like some sad, piece-of-shit song that’ll never end.”

He stopped shouting and leaned his head up against the locker. His back heaved hard through four or five breaths and he grinded his fists slowly against the lockers. He was tired; tired from all the shouting, from all Joey's bullshit, and from all the other shit that he had gone through in his short life. It was like all of it had finally ran him down there in the hallway, and there was nothing that he could do to stop it from completely overwhelming him. As I watched him, my whole body got heavy and my mind just went blank. I was helpless, completely helpless, which was a feeling that was ten times worse than the sickness. My best friend in the world was right there in front of me, feeling worse than ever, and there was nothing I could do about it. He was right. I had never experienced half the shit he had been through, and that's what left me frozen there next to him.

"Come on, man," I said after a minute or so of silence. "Let's just go home and listen to some music."

It was the only thing I could think of to say, because it was the only thing that had ever worked. He lifted himself off the locker and looked me in the eyes.

"I'm done listening, TJ. I'm ready to be heard."

He walked past me to the hallway doors and slammed on the push bar with both his hands. Then he walked down the stairs using heavy steps that seemed grow louder as he walked further and further down the stairs.

I followed after him, catching up to him as he was walking out the building. We didn't speak to each other as we walked through the parking lot or as we rode the bus to work. And when we got to Vin's and started working, we continued to stay quiet, just doing our normal shelving and sweeping and cashiering, without

ever saying a word. There wasn't even a "good-bye" said by either of us as we walked out the shop after work. Stek just showed me a cold, turning shoulder, as he headed east on South Street toward his grandma's home.

I tried not to let it get to me at first, but with nothing accompanying me on the walk home but more silence and the image of Stek turning away from me, I found it hard not to let my mind run. Something was going to go down that Monday at school—a fight most likely—and as much as I wanted to believe that Stek was going to have a shot in that fight, every bit of my brain was telling me that he wouldn't have much of a chance. Joey Piccoletti was one of the biggest kids in our class. He was freshman, who should have been a sophomore if he didn't get held back. He was a kid who had more friends in that school than Stek and I would ever have combined. Stek, on the other hand, was just a lanky kid with a lot of anger and pain on his side. It just didn't seem possible for him to win.

I kept trying to talk myself into believing that he had chance all night and into the next morning, and by the time I was supposed to be at work on Saturday, I was no longer thinking about whether or not he was going to win, but about whether or not I was going to have to get involved too. On the walk to work, I was trying to think up ways to ask that question to Stek without getting him more upset at me than he already was. And when I walked into Vin's to start my shift, I had the whole conversation planned out in my head, line for line. But Stek wasn't there. I started my shift, looking out the window every ten minutes and hoping that he would finally arrive, but he never did.

After work I went directly to his grandma's house. I walked up to the little

rowhome and knocked like crazy on the door for about a whole minute, but again Stek never showed. After I looked through every window, I took a seat on the front stoop and decided to wait him out. He had to come home at sometime and I was going to be there to meet him when he did.

As I waited for him to show up, I got caught up in the scenarios playing out in my head about how the fight was going to go down and about how my best friend was going to get pummeled. I kept imaging Joey beating up Stek in different parts of the school—in the caf, in the hallway, in a classroom. It always started out with Stek catching eyes with Joey and then just charging at him with full head of steam and hate. Joey was always ready for him though, and he would drop Stek with a quick jab and then go on pounding him until his face was all pink and blue and streaked with blood.

It was flat out shitty to think about, and the worse part of it all was that I didn't see myself in any of the daydreams. I didn't see myself fighting, or getting beat up, or even stopping the fight. I was just absent, completely absent, and though I tried to imagine myself being there to help, I never could see it happening in my head, which made me feel worse and worse.

At ten o'clock, Stek still hadn't shown up. I had waited three hours and with it being late and dark, I decided to call it a quits and go home for the night. Sunday was a mirror image of Saturday. I got up, went to work, and waited outside of Stek's house, but there still wasn't any sign of him. That's when I completely stopped thinking about the fight and Joey Piccoletti and seriously began worrying about my best friend. We had been best friends since the third grade, and though

we had spent time away from each other before, we had always known where we were and when we were going to see each other again. This was the first time in a long time that I had no idea where he was. I was seriously starting to get nervous.

I didn't sleep at all that night. Walking to the bus stop on Monday morning, I was fully expecting not to see Stek there. I wanted to think that I would see him leaning up against the telephone poll, with his hands shoved deep down into the side pockets of his blazer like he usually was, but with what had gone down that weekend, I just didn't see that happening.

Just as I had thought, when I got to the stop he wasn't there, but the bus was, so I jumped on and grabbed a seat in the back. Everything from the last couple of days suddenly hit me on that ride over to school. I started to hate everything: Joey, school, Stek, myself. I felt my emotions heating up inside me and surging up and down my body. I reached over to my backpack to try and get some medicine, but I remembered as I picked up my bag how Joey had taken my walkman and how there was nothing in that bag but stupid books. I threw my bag down into the seat in quick rush of rage, and then feeling a bit embarrassed by the act, looked around to see if I had shocked anyone. But nobody was even looking in my direction, they were just rocking with the motion of the bus and looking around droopy eyed—they hadn't heard a thing.

It was pointless for me to show up to my morning classes, because mentally I was completely checked out. I was thinking a hundred and one thoughts about Stek and where he was and about what I was going to do if Joey came for me and I was all by myself. By lunch I had gotten myself so worked up and scared that I had

completely sweated through my undershirt. As I slid down into my normal seat by the trashcans, I felt the shirt clinging to my body and weighing me down. I sat there alone, chewing down my chicken fingers faster than a crazed dog, and just letting my anger stew inside of me.

About ten minutes into lunch, Stek came coasting into the caf with his blazer collar popped and his greasy curls flowing, like it was any other day at school. As soon as I saw him, my first thought was to walk right up to him and pop him one. I didn't do it though, obviously, I just sat there staring and chewing and get more angry at the sight of him.

He grabbed his lunch and then came over to our table, walking right past Joey and the 'burb bitches on his way over. I was surprised by how calm he looked when he sat down. There was no anger boiling over like there had been in the past couple of days. He was just sitting quietly in front of me, his eyes barely blinking, his forehead perfectly dry, and his hands moving steadily and slowly as they brought his food up to his mouth. His calmness was making me more angry and after a solid minute of just sitting there with him in disbelief, I finally spoke up.

"Stek," I screamed in a whisper, "where the hell have you been? I was looking for you all weekend!"

"You angry? You feeling the sickness?"

"Yeah I'm fucking angry! I got the worst case I've ever had! You really—"

"Good. You're going to need to be angry today."

"What?" I said, not sure what he meant at first. Then my mind jumped right into a state of panic, as I remembered all the thoughts of Stek fighting that had been

rolling through my head the last couple of days. “Are you really going to fight him? You can’t, man. You just can’t.”

“Don’t give me that shit today, TJ,” he said without looking at me. “There’s nothing you can do to stop this.”

“What *are* you going to do?”

“You’ll see.”

“Am I going to have to get involved in this?”

“You tell me.”

As if on cue, I saw Joey rise up out of his seat with set a headphones on that I recognized almost immediately as mine, and when I followed the chord from the headphones down, I saw that he had my walkman in one hand and Stek’s in another. He walked over to us slowly with a couple of his ‘burb bitch friends on his heels, making a scene as he went, scrunching his face into these disgusted looks that were supposed be his reaction to the music he was listening to.

“Yuck,” he shouted loud enough to get everyone’s attention. “This is terrible! This is some of the worst shit I’ve ever heard.”

By the time he and his friends made it over to us, everyone in the caf had their heads swiveled in Joey’s direction—that is, everyone except for Stek. Stek was just staring past me at the wall, eyes fixed and blank as he imagined Joey’s every move in his head so he didn’t have to turn around. Joey stopped right at Stek’s back and threw the walkmans onto our table.

“You can have this shit back! But I got to say, you fuckers really got to get some better taste in music.” He turned around and smiled back toward the caf,

playing to the crowd, just to make sure everyone was watching. I felt an instant rush of anger burn all along my arms, which caused my fingers to clench down hard upon the plastic edge of my seat. I looked over to Stek expecting to see him as heated as I was right then. I was expecting for him to be on the verge of jumping at Joey and throwing punch and giving Joey the scene that he had been wanting. But Stek was just about as calm as I had seen him in weeks. His body was relaxed and he brought the final bit of his sandwich up to his lips and chewed it down in a couple slow bites.

Confused as all hell, I watched him rise slowly out his seat, his wide, white eyes staying focused on the walkmans the whole time. Then he turned calmly toward Joey and stepped up into his face without even a flinch or a shake or a blink. Joey was getting a kick out of the whole thing. His stupid douchebag grin reaching a new level of smugness as he stood there nodding and smiling in Stek's face, waiting for the blow up he had been pushing for.

"Joey," Stek said in a soft, calm voice, like suddenly he was in confession, "why don't we take this to the hill?"

Joey's grin shrunk almost immediately. He had been waiting for a reaction, but it was pretty clear that he hadn't expected one like that.

Lemon Hill, or "the hill", as it was known in our school, was this place down in Fairmount Park about a half a mile away from our school where Prep kids had been holding fights for years. I had never been there and neither had Stek, but what had trickled down to us in the whispered stories we heard about the place, was that the hill was where the upper classmen held their fights, so that fights could go

down without teachers and administrators being there to break things up and hand out suspensions. Other than that we didn't know much else, except that the fights were supposed to be good old-fashioned Irish-catholic slugfests, where two guys went at each other one on one until someone tapped out or was too fucked up to go on.

I don't know how much Joey knew about the hill, but from the way his grin had disappeared quicker than the mice in Stek's basement, I guessed that he knew just as much as we did.

"Do you even know what you're staying Stecker?" Joey asked, the hairs on his neck rising a bit.

"Yeah, I do," Stek responded firmly, like he'd already lost three teeth at the hill and was ready to go back. He shot his stare right into Joey's eyes, and with the two of them standing there face to face, eye to eye, somehow through all the panic and anger that was pulsing through my body at that time, I noticed for the first time that Stek was slightly taller than Joey.

Joey let out a long breath through his nose, and his shoulders started to shrink as the air left his body. He blinked and turned to look back at a couple of his 'burb bitch friends, who were whispering in his ear and encouraging him to take the challenge.

"After school then," Joey said stepping away from Stek, "at three-thirty. That'll give you the rest of the day to change your mind, pussy." Then he sunk back into his crowd of friends and they all moved back toward their lunch table.

I heard the bell ring, and I finally unlocked my fingers from the plastic edge

of my chair. Stek broke out of his stare, and began cleaning up his lunch. He tossed his trash lightly into the can, and then picked up the walkmans and put them into his backpack.

“I’m going to be at the bus stop on Girad at three fifteen,” he said as he started to walk away. “If you’re there, you’re there. If you’re not, then...”

He didn’t say anything after that, he just turned his head and walked down the hall, before I even had a chance to say anything back.

Three o’clock came quick that day. So quick that it felt like I had no time to really think about what I was going to do or what Stek was going to do if I didn’t show up. I knew I was going to be there at the bus stop at the very least, but after that, what would happen at the hill, that was something that I still couldn’t figure out.

When I got to the bus stop, Stek was there waiting. He had taken off his blazer and dress shirt, so that there was nothing up top but his worn in undershirt. His hair was snapped back into a greasy bun and every second or two the long, thin muscles of his shoulders and arms would flare and tense. He was ready to go, that I could tell right away.

We boarded the bus in silence and waited to hear the driver call our stop. It was something that we did everyday of our lives, except this time we were heading north, not south, and toward a fight, not our homes. My heart raced with the speed of the bus—fifteen miles per hour, twenty miles per hour, thirty miles per hour. I

took off my blazer and my dress shirt and tried to slow the moment down and get ready like Stek. I still wasn't sure if I was going to get involved or not, but I needed to be ready just in case I did.

We got off at the park, and began following the little, blue signs toward Lemon Hill. After winding along the park's path for a little while, we saw the hill rise up out of the distance, and we could see the herd of catholic school boys standing in a circle at its top waiting for Stek to arrive. I knew that people had been talking about the fight since lunch, but I didn't believe just how quickly one rumor could spread. There must have been close to two hundred kids there, almost a third of the entire school. There were seniors there mostly, as well as a ton of freshman kids who heard about the fight first hand at lunch.

Walking up into that scene kicked my heart rate up to a whole other level. All the kids at the top of the hill started going wild as soon as they saw Stek, yelling as loud as they could and raising their hands in the air just like they did at school football games. Some kids were pushing to the front edge of the circle or jumping up on people's shoulders to get a view of the fight, while others smoked, talked, and threw back beers while they waited for things to begin. As we pushed through the crowd, I started looking at the circle of faces huddled all around me. I looked into every set of eyes I could, searching for a face that was like mine or that was like Stek's, but I didn't see a single one. Then I started looking for people there that somehow knew me, people that had taken the time to actually talk to me and get to know me, past all the surface shit that everyone knew about. Again I didn't see anyone that I could put into that category. Everyone there was older kids that I

never talked to or kids in my grade that sat back and laughed as Joey gave Stek and me shit over the last couple of days.

Those cheers and yells that were coming down on Stek and me in that moment, weren't cheers for us, they were cheers for the fight, for blood, and for Joey Piccoletti, who almost everyone there was hoping would tear Stek, and then maybe me, into two pieces. I understood why Stek had chosen to fight there, in front of all those kids who either didn't know us or didn't like us. If you're going to make a statement, if you want to be heard, do it in front of as many people as you can, so you don't have to make it twice.

At the center of the circle, Joey was jumping around and shaking out his arms like he was fucking Rocky or something. When Stek laid eyes on him and the circle started tightening all around us, I knew that the fight was on. Joey and Stek began spinning around in the circle, dancing a bit to warm up, while me and two of Joey's 'burb bitch friends stood across from each other on the edge of the circle, getting our guy's back and making sure, at the start, that the fight stayed one on one.

"Fuck that white trash pussy up, Joey," one of Joey's friends yelled from the edge of the circle. The kid's name was Paul Maldoon, and he was this kid in my English class that I had always kind of thought of as a cool guy. He was always cracking jokes in English and making fun of our teacher, and though I always tried to hold myself back from laughing at his antics, I constantly found myself smiling at everything he did, and thinking to myself about how I could join in a cause a laugh, too.

“This cocksucker doesn’t have a chance, Joey,” Paul Maldoon yelled.
“Show him, Joey. Show him.”

That’s when Joey took the first shot of the fight, sneaking in a little quick snap jab that struck Stek above the right eye and brought out some blood. Stek stumbled a bit after the hit, and Joey went at him, driving down to the ground and pounding him in the ribs. On the ground, Stek pushed Joey off him with hard kick that sent Joey flying backwards four or five feet, and when Stek rose of the grass he had a large gash, maybe six inches long, sliced deep into the skin of his left bicep. Joey stared the big cut as he stood up, and when he saw the blood running down Stek’s arm in long streaks of red, he smiled and nodded, and taunted Stek toward him with a wave.

I felt my heart go flat as I watched Stek cringe with pain. The first thought that entered my head was telling me that the gash was the beginning of the end, a sign that things were only going to get worse for Stek in that fight, not better. I hated that thought. I hated myself for thinking it and somewhat believing it, too. I wanted Stek to win, to get his story book ending, to be heard and understood, so the two of us could start living our lives without being nervous and angry all the time. We deserved that after all, and he deserved it even more than me after going through a lifetime worth of shit. I wanted to help make that happen for him, for us. I didn’t feel that when I stepped onto that hill minutes earlier, but at that moment I finally understood what I wanted. All I needed then was an opportunity to get involved, to make something happen, to make myself heard.

And that’s when it happened. Stek gathered himself and stepped toward

Joey, raising his fists and looking for an area to strike. But before he could make his next move, Paul Maldoon, hocked back loud and hard and then spat in Stek's direction, hitting him directly in the ear with the biggest, most disgusting wad of spit I had ever seen.

“Take that you fucking white trash punk,” Maldoon yelled, and then smiled at his action.

At the moment, it felt like I had been injected with the biggest case of the sickness I had ever experienced. And this time I wasn't trying to fight off. I wasn't looking for music, or thinking about Bobby P—I just let the sickness come with all its heat and hate. I let it all burn throughout my body and tighten every muscle it touched, until I was no longer thinking about what was right or wrong, or thinking about anything at all, I was just feeling that anger, feeling it spring my body into motion, as I charged at Paul Maldoon—a kid I once liked, a kid I once thought I could be like—with all the anger in the world behind me.

Everyone there at the fight heard my footsteps pounding against the grass I charged across the circle, and everyone heard the screams I let out as I drove Paul Maldoon down into the ground. Everyone heard the loud “umph” Paul's body made as when it hit the hill, as well as the shrieks of pain he cried out as I punched him in the face over and over and over.

Everyone also heard Stek follow my lead, charging at Joey with screams louder than mine and dropping him to the ground with a thud. Everyone heard Joey's shoulder pop as Stek pounced on him and everyone heard the “*whack, whack, whack*” of Stek's fists as he unloaded his hatred for Joey in powerful, quick

punches.

They all heard us—the upperclassmen, the ‘burb bitches, the stupid kids in our class who did nothing to stop Joey from giving us shit day in and day out. They all heard Stek and I as we made our statement, as we pounded it out in bruises and blood all over Joey’s and Paul’s faces. In my mind, there was nothing about that statement that wasn’t going to get through to them clearly.

Or so we thought.

After pummeling Paul Maldoon for almost a full thirty seconds, some of the kids around me must have thought he had enough, because I felt hands pulling me away from Paul’s crumpled body. Stek was also being pulled off Joey, and the two of us shook loose of all those hands once we accepted the fact that it was over. We stood next to each other in circle, waiting for our storybook ending, for someone to clap or say “nice fight” or give us any sign of understanding at all. But that didn’t happen. Some kids turned away, other stood around looking indifferent, while others, like the rest of Joey’s ‘burb bitch friends, stared back at us steaming, looking as if they were going to jump us at any minute.

“Get the fuck out of here you assholes,” one of them yelled.

“Yeah, go back to the fucking ghetto,” another screamed.

Stek and I stood in front of them stunned, our lungs burning, our knuckles throbbing, neither of us understanding what was going on. It was supposed to be different. They were supposed to see us different, but they were still looking at us like we the outcasts and the city punks. The only thing that was clear was that none of them had heard a thing.

Stek and I started running as fast as we could down the hill. We just needed to be away from that place as quick as possible at that moment, because nothing good could have come from hanging around. A couple of Joey's friends tried to chase after us, but after we got out of the park and running through the city, they gave up and went back to help out their bloodied friends.

We hopped on the first bus that came our way. The people on the bus didn't even acknowledge us as we walked to the back of the bus all bloody and bruised. They just turned their heads and looked out the windows, not even bothering at all to check if we were ok.

In the back of the bus, I inspected my damage, looking down at my knuckles to see them completely covered in blood. I got nervous because I thought at first that I had been cut, and that Paul's blood and my blood had mixed together during all the punches. But when I wiped my knuckles clean with my shirt, there was no cut there at all, although my knuckles were badly bruised. Stek was in much worse shape than I was. The gash on his bicep was still gushing and the cut over his eye was beginning to swell. He needed medical attention right away.

"Stek, I think we got to get you to a hospital," I said, looking at the gash. "You're probably going to need stitches."

"No," he responded, taking off his undershirt and wrapping up his arm. "Just get me home, man. Just get me home."

We rode the bus down to South Street and then walked all the way back to Stek's grandma's house as quick as we could. Stek's grandma wasn't home when we got there, so I went over to the cabinet where she kept all her first aid stuff and

got out some gauze and ointment for Stek's cut. When I turned back to give the stuff to Stek, he wasn't there. All I saw was an empty kitchen and the open door of the basement.

I walked down stairs with the ointment and gauze in my hands, and when I got to the bottom, I saw right away what Stek had been doing all weekend. The walls of the basement were completely covered with metal signs. They were signs you could find all over the city—stop signs, yield signs, speed limit signs—but instead of being up somewhere out on the street, they were hanging there on the crooked walls of Stek's basement. I saw Stek over by the couch, fiddling with some machine I had never seen before. I moved over to see what it was, and as I got close, I saw Stek pull out a cheap plastic microphone and plug it into the machine.

“What's that I asked?” watching him as he flicked on the machine.

“It's as TASCAM four-track ministudio,” he said. “Just like the one G.B.V. uses. I bought this weekend.”

I stared down at the machine and all its knobs and buttons, then looked up at the basement and the signs on the walls, and finally put two and two together.

“The final frontier?”

“That's right. Right here in my grandma's basement.”

“*Bobby Fucking P.*”

Stek walked over to his amplifier and placed the microphone a couple feet in front of it. Then he picked up his guitar and slung it over his bare shoulder, wincing a bit in pain as ready himself to play.

“Hit that record button over there would you?” he asked. I looked down at

the machine and found the red record button underneath the tape deck. I pressed it and the tape inside of the machine start spinning with hum. The Stek started playing his guitar, going into some song I had never heard before but sound like it was right out of the G.B.V. catalogue.

“What was that,” I said when he was done playing.

“Something I wrote this weekend,” he said, pulling off his guitar. He walked over to my bass guitar and pulled it off its stand. “Here, play something for me would you.”

He gave me the bass guitar and showed me what he wanted me to play. Then he repositioned the mike by my amp and recorded me while I played. When we were done laying my track, we moved on to drums and then vocals, mixing everything together at the end so we had one full song that was entirely our own.

For the rest of that week we were down there in Stek’s basement, repeating that process until we had five original songs completed on one tape. It was like we had our own album, and Stek even drew up a cover, just like he usually did for all our other mixes. He named the album Pollardone, and handed me my very own copy on Friday before school.

“What’s our band name?” I asked as we boarded the bus.

“Haven’t figured that out yet. But it will come.”

I listened to that tape all day on Friday. At school not much had changed, except for the fact that I think more people looked at us funny as we walked through the hallways. Joey had stopped picking on us of course, but that didn’t mean that there wasn’t somebody else cracking jokes still behind our back or

thinking up ways to pay us back for what we did. When I ever I found myself thinking too much about all that, I just took a second to flip on my headphones and listen to what Stek and I created.

At work that afternoon, Stek and I managed to sneak our album on while Vin was in the back of the shop taking his late afternoon nap. We played it as loud as we could and walked around the shop singing with the tracks word-for-word.

When the third track of the album kicked in, a guy with long hair walked into the shop and started looking around at the albums in the “G” section. He shifted through the albums slowly, taking the time to study each cover like each one was important. I noticed after a while that his leg was bouncing along to the beat of the song, and little bit after that, I heard him humming the rhythm, too. He stopped flipping through albums when the song ended, and looked up at the ceiling of the shop like he was trying to remember something.

“Hey,” he said to Stek and me, “I haven’t heard this before—is it new?”

Stek and I looked back at each other, the two of us too shocked to respond.

“Yeah, it’s new,” Stek said, completely bullshitting.

“Yeah, it’s a local band,” I chimed in, following his lead.

The guy pulled out an album and walked over to us at the counter.

“What’s their name?” he asked.

Again Stek and I looked at each other clueless. Then Stek dropped his eyes to the tape case that he created for our album, and stared at it for a second, thinking.

“The Vials,” Stek said, looking up to speak to the guy. “Their name is The Vials.”

Sighting #2

By: Alyse Gagner

They call Philadelphia the city of living walls.

It is because of the many murals in the city that they have named it so. There are over three thousand murals there. “Living” through color and shape and detail on the brick and concrete sidings of the city’s buildings. I cannot think of that place without imagining those murals. In my mind, I see the wide, hopeful eyes of the “All Join Hands” mural outside of Benjamin Franklin High School. I see the outstretched arms of the characters in the “Healing Walls” mural in North Philadelphia. And I see the playing children from the “Imagination is Power” mural on Fourth and Somerset.

I see them, the children, playing there in the “Imagination is Power” mural; the shades of yellow and green giving life to the warm spring day they are enjoying. I see their faces—joy in their spread smiles, amazement in their bright eyes—as they play in an open field filled with tall grass and sunflowers and wild daisies. And most vividly, I see the face of the mother character standing off in one of the corners. Her face is given age by the long lines on her cheeks, the wrinkles on her forehead, but her smile and eyes, they match the children’s. They are bright and wide as she stands there, watching and protecting—playing along in her mind.

I think of the “Imagination is Power” mural most often, not only because I partook in its creation, but also because it was at the site of that mural where I first saw Stek Mainard.

I did not know who Stek Mainard was before I saw him. My friend who worked on the “Imagination is Power” mural with me would be the one to point Mainard out and to tell me about who he was. This is the story that I wish to write here, but it is only one part of my story.

During the time when that mural was being created, I had lost my ability to paint. To hear that an artist had lost the ability to use her craft is something that I am sure is unbelievable to most of you. But it is possible. Very possible. I am living proof of this.

I had always painted in my youth. It was an unexplainable gift that had been given to me by God. I used that gift to acquire an education, a circle of friends, a place to live, and a way to support myself. It seemed at one point that this gift would be my whole life, and that not a day would pass without me painting or creating in some fashion. But at the time I’m referring to now, the spring of 2009, I could not paint, and had not painted in almost ten years.

To support myself during this time, I took employment at the Philadelphia Mural Arts Program as a project manager. Murals had been my passion for the entirety of my painting life, and since I could no longer create them myself, I thought it best to at least help others create their own. The job was not as important as the title makes it seem. My primary responsibility was to act as a liaison between the Mural Arts Program and the owners of the building where the mural was to be painted. Beyond that, my role was essentially to be the head assistant of the artist creating the mural. If the artist needed supplies of any kind, I got them. If he

needed the help of other assistants, I arranged for them. If he needed criticism or an opinion, I provided it.

The “Imagination is Power” mural was a project put together by the Mural Arts Program to celebrate the opening of a new playground and recreation center for kids in Philadelphia’s Kensington neighborhood. A local organization had funded the building of the center and the playground, as well as the mural, which was to be the final touch to the entire project. The mural was to be painted upon the side of a long rowhome which sat next to the playground. It was meant to remind the child who played in its shadow of just how powerful her mind could be if she allowed it to run wild.

The first step to creating the mural was to prepare the concrete wall of the rowhome for painting. The wall, itself, was very old. Before the artist could create upon it, the concrete with its weather beaten shades of brown, green, and red needed to be washed and primed, so that it could transform into one, massive white canvas.

I arranged for a company to come and power-wash the wall, and as for the priming, that was a task that I always undertook myself. It was not a job that I was required to do. It would have been easy for me to hire another company to come and handle it, of course. But I must admit, that the act of creating that blank canvas was something I enjoyed doing very much. In a time in my life when the thought of painting creatively brought with it so much fear and stress, the act of painting nothing was rather therapeutic. There was a certain sense of freedom in it that is hard to describe. There was no pressure behind the brush stroke to find beauty or

detail. There was nothing but movement, force, and the goal of resurfacing, the desire to renew that old wall and to give it new beginning.

Because the wall was so big, I had to bring on an assistant to help me with the priming. This was usually the case. For that project, I hired a friend of mine named Eric, who I often hired to do priming and other things for me on the mural projects I was overseeing. Eric was an artist himself. A young painter, who seemed to take any job that had to do with art. I liked him because he was not like my normal friends, who were in their late thirties and consumed by careers and responsibilities. He was young, only twenty-four years old, and had just graduated from art school. The world had not become serious for him yet, at least not in the way it did for me at his age.

We began priming on a Monday. Eric had met me at the recreation center at six in the morning. Despite the time, he was already well awake.

“Hey lady, you have a pretty crazy idea of when prime time is,” he said as I stepped out of the work van.

I laughed and said hello, then we began unloading the van. We set up our scaffolding first by the wall, then we prepared our materials to paint. With Eric there working with me, the job moved quickly. He was always playing around to make me smile, whether it be by splashing paint playfully onto my work clothes or by singing like a fool into the end of his roller. He was always pretending, too, thinking up crazy ideas to paint on the walls we were priming or creating weird names and jobs for the people that walked past us. We had fun together, and with

all the difficulties in my life at that time, a little fun was something that I truly needed

What I'd like most about working with him was the way he looked when an idea for a painting took hold of him. It was perhaps the way the thought consumed him so deeply that compelled me the most, and that throughout the day made me look forward to seeing him lost in thought. When it happened his body would go still, his face and eyes would tilt slightly toward the sky, and they would hang there as the piece formed on the canvas of his mind. I could always see the colors flashing behind his eyes. I could sense his mind creating patterns, textures, and paths of movement.

In those moments he was like a child seeing something for the first time. He was struck by the weight of the unknown, overwhelmed by the power of possibilities. It was an experience that was second nature to me when I could paint, but in truth, I had not experienced it personally for some time.

I had been waiting for a moment like that to take over Eric while we painted, and in the late part of the day, it finally happened. We were working on the upper left-hand corner of the wall, which was the only segment of the concrete that remained uncovered. With the end of the long workday in sight, we painted quickly and in silence. I pushed my roller up and down the wall with great force. I wanted the job to be complete, not because I was tired, but because I wanted to stand there in the shadow of the great wall of white and stare at its new face to see if I, too, felt new.

I covered up the last bit of dark concrete in front of me with a stripe of white, and then stepped back on the scaffolding platform to look at my work. The wall appeared longer almost. Its whiteness seemed to stretch out like the wings of an airplane. I waited for feeling to come. I waited to experience thoughts, colors, possibilities—change—but nothing happened. I felt as empty as the long, white wall in front of me.

I turned back to congratulate Eric on completing the job. That is when I saw his face composed into one of those powerful stares. They were widened by that sense of excitement and wonder that I had hoped would come to me when looking at our work. His stare went over my shoulder and down the wall. He was already taking his idea to the white, letting it unravel onto the concrete freely and in brilliant color. Seeing it was not exciting as it normally was. I found myself wanting him to close his eyes and to lose whatever idea he had playing in his head. That's when I noticed his eyes moving away from the wall and tracking something moving quickly on the street behind me.

“Is that...?” Eric yelled. The excitement in his eyes had been matched by the tone of his voice. I felt nervous for a moment, then turned to look for whatever Eric had been watching.

The sidewalk in front of the playground was empty at first glance, but out of the corner of my eye I saw a man walking toward the front of the recreation center. For a moment I saw his backside. I saw his long, heavy tangles of hair, the cracked, brown edges of his guitar case, and the worn, leather sole of his right boot. Then, in

the matter of a moment, he disappeared off beyond the front wall of the recreation center.

“Oh my god it is him,” Eric yelled again. I did not know who the man was, but Eric’s excitement brought nerves into my stomach. Eric scrambled down the scaffolding without warning. He moved down the metal beams so quickly and violently that I had to drop down on to the scaffolding’s platform to make sure I did not fall. I yelled at Eric for acting so recklessly, but he did not hear me. He got to the ground and went scrambling across the playground to look for the man, the same way a child might chase after a butterfly.

After I calmed myself, I climbed down the scaffolding to the safety of solid ground. By that time, Eric had come back from his search panting and empty handed.

“You could have killed me!” I screamed. “Think, before you act!” My body was a filled with a mess of fear, excitement, and anger. I could not believe how rash he had been.

“Alyse, Alyse!” he grabbed a hold of my shoulders and squeezed tight. His eyes were still alight with excitement. “It was him! Can you believe it?”

“Stop this foolishness,” I yelled at him like I was his mother. “Who? Who was it?”

Eric smiled at my cluelessness, shocked by the fact that I did not know who the man was.

“Stek Mainard, Alyse,” he said. “It was Stek Mainard. I’m positive of it.”

The look was back in his eyes, and I stared into them as his mind stretched them wide. There I saw the man's backside again, his long hair drifting down over his guitar case, his up-kicked heel showing its beaten sole. I remembered Eric scattering down the scaffolding. I remembered the excitement in his movement and in the look he had on his face as he stood before me. For a moment I pushed aside my anger, and I let that excitement enter into me. I let my mind stir in the thought of who the man was. And the more I thought about it, the clearer the image of his backside became in my head.

“Who is Stek Mainard?” I asked Eric. “Please tell me.”

It was my father who provoked my interest in art and painting. Early in my life, when my family lived outside of Montreal, my father would take me on Saturday trips to the Montreal Museum of Fine Art. Our first trip there is a memory of mine that I will always cherish. I remember the museum that day was showing an exhibit on Expressionist Art. Being only seven years old at the time, I did not know what expressionist art was, although my father tried his hardest to explain it by reading the museum placards out to me. My father did not understand what it was either. He was only interested in the art because it provided him with an escape.

“Do not worry about what it is, my girl,” I remembering him saying. “Just explore the painting with your mind. Let it take you away from here with its colors. Let your heart and mind fall into it.”

I liked this idea of letting my heart and mind fall into the art. As we walked from piece to piece, I would stare deeply into the painting and wish to fall into it as my father told me to do. I would even get up on my tippy-toes and lean forward as if that could help me to really fall into the painting's scene. My father would always push me back down onto my feet when he saw me doing this, then he would go back to falling into the painting his way, which was to simply stare at it while smoothing out the bristles of his moustache.

I loved the paintings for their beautiful, bright colors and extravagant images, but, as you can imagine, I had a difficult time understanding them, too. I could tell what the painting was of—a landscape, a person, an animal—but I did not understand why those things were always drawn in such weird ways, with those powerful colors and distorted lines. I wanted them to be as real as photographs, but they were more like things out of dreams.

I asked my father about them, about why they were painted this way.

“My girl, it is because the artists are painting things they do not understand.”

“Why would they do that, *père*?”

“Because they hope to understand them by painting them. You see, my girl, this is what all artists do. They find things in this world that are beautiful, yet mysterious, and they attempt to understand them through the colors and shapes of their mind.”

“But why do the things they paint have to be mysterious?”

“Because those are the things that inspire them the most in the world. They make them think. They make them wonder, just like they did when they were kids.”

“I am kid.”

My father laughed.

“I know, my girl,” he said picking me up. “And that is the best time to be a painter! There are so many things in this world that are mysterious to you. You could fill up this whole museum with your paintings!” He raised me up over his head and spun me around, until my laughing became so loud that the people around us began to get angry. At that point he brought me to the ground and whispered in my ear: “Cherish it, my girl. It will not always be so.”

We left the museum and went home. On the car ride back to our house, I thought about what my father had said. He was right. There was so much in the world that was still so mysterious to me, and now that he had pointed that fact out, I could not look anywhere without seeing something that made me wonder.

I remember pulling into our driveway when we got back to our home. It was mid-spring and outside our home in the flowerbeds, my mother’s chrysanthemum’s were coming to life with wonderful shades of red and yellow. They were so beautiful to me, and yet mysterious as well. I did not understand how they came to be, how their colors got so bright and their petals so soft. As I walked by them and into our house, I felt my heart and mind being overpowered by their beauty and mystery. I felt my heart and mind falling into their bold colors and delicate curves. I decided right then that I needed to paint.

We did not have paint supplies available in our house beyond a small water coloring kit that I had received for my birthday. That small amount of paint was not going to suffice for the painting I had glowing in my mind. I wanted the colors and

paint to be real and vivid, like they had been in the paintings in the museum. Also, I wanted my painting to be big, again because that was how they were in the museum, but also because that was how it was in my mind. The colors were vibrant and the petals massive. I needed a large surface to capture them, something wide and tall. I needed a canvas.

I went into our back shed to look for some paint. In one corner there were many old paint cans stacked together under a sheet. I remember my mother had said that they belonged to the people who lived there before us and that I was never to go near them because the paint was old and possibly toxic. I forgot what she had told me and looked under the sheet. There were several large cans of paint stacked up on the bottom of the pile, and on the top there were a few smaller cans that were long and tall. I picked one up and the insides of it rattled like a baby's toy. I pulled off its cap to find a little nozzle, covered in green paint, sticking out of the can's top like a turtle's head. I pressed the nozzle down and a cloud of green shot out and landed on the wood wall of the shed. It held there, glistening and bright green, just like many of the paintings I had seen in the museum. I looked up at the wall in front of me. It must have been almost eight feet wide of bare, unfinished wood.

I hit the nozzle again. Then again. Then again. I changed colors of paint and continued. My heart and mind were still controlled by the beauty and the mystery of the flowers. I saw their image in my head and I moved the can's spray to recreate that image on the wood of the shed. The act of painting itself, like the flowers, was both beautiful and mysterious to me as well. I did not understand how my brain

was able to bring about the shapes of the flowers, but it somehow did, bringing them out onto the wall as big and as beautiful as they appeared in my mind.

When I was almost complete, I heard the voice of my father scream out from behind me: “Alyse! Alyse! My little girl, what have you done?” He came up behind me and shook the paint can out of my hand. “You must think, before you act, young lady!”

“I wanted to understand the flowers, *père*,” my heart and mind were no longer controlled by the mystery of the flowers. Now they were both sad and heavy. I knew I had done wrong. “I am sorry.”

My father did not hear my apology. He was too busy studying the flowers on the wall before him. He followed the smooth lines of their stems up to their giant, bursting petals. Their colors blossomed in his mind—red, yellow, blue. His mouth hung open as he stared and slowly he brought his hand up to cover his open lips. His fingers did not stroke the bristles of his moustache, but I could tell that he was falling into my painting with his heart and his mind, just as I had done as I painted it.

“Understand them you have,” he said slowly, patting me on the head. “Yes, my girl, you most certainly have understood them.”

As we cleaned up our job site, Eric told me about Stek Mainard. He told me about his music, his peculiar behavior, and the way people responded to him.

“But I don’t understand, why do people care so much about this one musician?”

“You got to understand, he’s like a cult hero,” Eric said as we were driving back to the Mural Arts Program building to return the van. “People love him because his music is great, first and foremost, but also because he’s different.”

“Weird, you mean.”

“Well, it’s hard to deny that. But it’s not so much that he’s weird, as it’s that he’s...eccentric. He doesn’t do anything the easy way, or like your normal rockstar would. And that’s from everything from the way he records his music to the way he connects to his fans. And there’s something about that, that I think people appreciate for one, and there’s also something about it that kind of mystifies people as well.”

“How so?”

“Well if you do things the hard way, like record your music in a lo-fi format and bypass interviews and only speak to your fans through your music and weird internet art, people are going to start asking: *why?* And if you don’t answer those questions outright, with direct answers, speculation takes over. And it starts to build and build into this unsolved mystery, that is very captivating in a way. Especially, for Stek Mainard fans.”

“And he’s never really answered any of these questions?”

“Him? Not directly. Like I said, you can learn things here or there through analyzing his music and artwork. The closest thing to getting a straight story about Stek Mainard came in this big article that was published right before he vanished, which detailed a bunch of information about who Stek was. It was proclaimed as

the article that finally ‘demystified’ Stek Mainard, but it didn’t really tell you much besides some facts about his background and his early music career.”

After we dropped off the van, Eric invited me to come along with him to a bar where he was meeting some friends from art school. With nothing better to do that evening, I took him up on his offer. I also went because this man, Stek Mainard, was still fascinating me. I still could not completely understand why he was so intriguing to all these people, but the image of him I had in my head, of him walking away from me, it was haunting my every thought. I saw it so clearly in my mind, the curls, the guitar case. They were so vivid and real. My mind could not let them go.

“You’ve got to listen to his music,” Eric said as we were walking into the bar. “They’ve got some of his stuff in the jukebox here. I’ll put some of it on after I tell everyone about seeing him. They’re all going to flip out!”

We walked through the front of the bar, which was crowded with little groups of people drinking and talking around high-top tables and the bar. I could not stop myself from searching for the back of Stek Mainard amongst the people all around me. I wanted to see those curls again desperately. I wanted to feel that burst of excitement again, as well.

We found Eric’s friends sitting in a booth in the back of the bar. There were four of them. Two girls and two boys. They were all young like Eric. Twenty-three or maybe twenty-four years-old. Right out of art school and dreaming of a life committed to their craft. After he introduced me, Eric pulled up two chairs for us to sit in at the end of the booth, and then he told his friends about Mainard.

They all listened to Eric's story intently, their eyes and smiles growing wider with his telling. I watched as the excitement took over them completely when Eric told them about how he raced after Mainard.

"Oh my God, did you stop him!" the one girl named Sheila shouted, loud enough for the whole bar to hear. Her friends did not mind the shouting. Their eyes were frozen on Eric and heavy with the thought of actually seeing Stek Mainard. They all wore the same look Eric had when he first saw Mainard.

"No," Eric said. "When I got down off the scaffolding and made it to the corner, he was gone. He must've gotten into a car or something."

"What if he lives right there?" Eric's friend Marco asked. His excitement caused him to whirl his hands around in front of him as he talked. "Or hides out in a house near there or whatever? Could you imagine that! You may have found him, Eric!"

"It's possible I guess," Eric said.

"You know we ought to stake this place out," responded Meredith, the other girl at the table. "Seriously, we should park our cars right around there and stake the place out. If he lives around there, we'll definitely see him."

I thought this response a joke first, a fantasy or the like that was fun to think about but not actually a real possibility. However, the others at the table nodded at the thought and began discussing when they might complete the 'stake out.'

"You're not seriously thinking about doing this, are you?" I asked the whole table. They all looked back at me like I was the odd apple.

“Alyse, here,” Eric chimed in, “doesn’t know much about Stek Mainard. In fact our little encounter with him today, was the first time she’s ever seen or heard of him. Which reminds me, she hasn’t even heard any of his music.” Eric got up from his chair and headed toward the jukebox near the bathrooms. “You guys try to make a fan out of her.”

They were all still looking at me like I was mad.

“I’m sorry. I’m not a big music fan. Although, I do find all of this discussion about Stek Mainard quite fascinating.”

“That’s Stek Mainard for ya,” the other boy at the table said. His name was Allen, and he had been the only one at the table who didn’t seem impressed by Eric’s story. “Mr. Fascinating.”

“C’mon, Allen,” Sheila said sharply in his direction.

“What? What?” he got defensive. “You guys are sitting around and talking about this whole thing like a couple of kids trying to see a ghost. It’s just a little ridiculous that’s all.”

Meredith and Sheila both rolled their eyes at Allen. Marco gave him a soft elbow to the side. This was not the first time Allen had made such a comment. That I understood.

“Alright, alright,” Allen said. He stood up out of the booth. “I’ll stop being Debby Downer. I’m going to catch a smoke. Let me know if you guys see Stek Mainard while I’m gone.”

He put his jacket on and walked out of the bar.

“He never took Stek’s walking off well,” Marco said to me and pointed back to where Allen had been standing. “But I guess that’s the risk Stek Mainard took.”

“He’s such a jerk about sometimes, though,” Sheila said. “He makes Stek out to be some kind of asshole, but he’s not. He knew what he was doing when he retired. He had reasons.”

“What were those reasons?” I asked.

Everyone at the table went quiet.

“Listen up,” Eric said. He was back from the jukebox and pointing his finger in the sky. He smiled and nodded his head along with the beating of the song’s drums. Everyone at the table suddenly became happier, although they remained quiet so that we could listen to the song. Everyone was looking at me oddly, and I suddenly felt like I was under a lot of pressure. They wanted me to like the song. They wanted me to become a fan. I did not know what to do.

I listened with my eyes closed for a moment. I listened as the guitar rose quickly in speed and power. I listened as the drums followed, sounding heavy and loud and tribal. The melody dug its way into my mind, and quickly I felt it looping through my body. Stek’s voice was wildly beautiful. In parts it would be rough and erratic, but in others, like the chorus, it would be so powerful that it would find ways to your heart that most music could not.

In the chorus Eric sang along with the words: *Look up/Look around/Look in/It’s permanent/It’s permanent/If you want it...to be.*

I looked around at the others at the table and then out at the other people in the bar. If people weren’t singing out loud like Eric, they were mouthing the words

or tapping their feet. I even found myself singing in out the words in my head. The song was the type you could not only listen to you. You had to respond it. The guitars, the rhythm, the words. They forced you to respond. It was not just an ordinary song. It was an anthem.

“What are those reasons,” Sheila said at the song’s end. “That’s the big question. I guess nobody really knows, but I’m sure he had good reasons. He wasn’t just a jerk. He wouldn’t do it because he just could and didn’t care about his fans, like Allen makes it seem.”

Eric and Marco began to speculate about reasons why he left. Fear of failure, alcoholism, mental disorders, all of these things were discussed by Eric and his friends. All of them were interesting to think about, but no one knew if any of them were the right answer.

“I don’t know,” Eric said. “What do you think, Alyse?”

I hesitated because I really had no opinion on the matter, but then I finally spoke: “I can not imagine any reason why a person would willingly give up the thing they love.”

I lost my ability to paint shortly after I graduated from art school. However, I had been slowly losing my ability to paint long before then.

For most of my youth, I was home-schooled by my mother and father. The reason for this was that my father, who was a chemical engineer, was required to relocate several times for his company. My mother, a former school teacher,

decided to educate me herself for the majority of my early life, rather than shift me to and from schools whenever we were required to move.

Ultimately, being home-schooled allowed me a great deal of time to paint. My mother would instruct me in Language Arts, Arithmetic, History, and Science in the mornings, which left me the entire afternoon and evening to paint. My mother was a good teacher and strict one at that. She required me to complete all of my work for my morning classes before I was even allowed to pick up a paintbrush. I always did this, although I found very little satisfaction in studying those subjects. I could do the work because I was smart enough naturally where the subjects came very easy to me. I did not have to work very hard on them, and I did not want to. I wanted to devote all of my energy toward my painting.

Painting throughout those early years remained something of a mystery for me. I never fully understood how I was able to replicate the images in my mind so vividly. All I did was follow my father's advice. I let myself become consumed by the mystery of my paintings' subject matter. I tried to understand the things I painted more deeply with every brush stroke, with every shade of color, with every detail, until they were no longer God's creations, but my own. I put my heart and my mind fully into every piece, and this never lead me wrong.

By age nine I was regularly winning prizes and awards for my artwork. By age eleven my artwork was displayed in a touring exhibition by the National Center for Children's Art. And by age twelve I had my first solo art exhibit, at which I sold my first painting for over \$5,000. My parents never forced this life of painting onto me. The mystery of my gift and the world drove me to paint every day to the best

of my abilities, and in the eyes of people who appreciated art, my abilities were considered to be of a high quality. I never second-guessed their opinion. I simply continued to do what I loved.

The one thing my parents forced upon me eventually was a formal education. When I came into my teen years, the time at which I should have entered high school, my mother decided that it would be best for me to start attending school regularly. Her belief was that if I wanted to make painting my life, than I would eventually need to attend art school. There I could develop my abilities and associate with other young artists like myself. In order to get into art school, in her opinion, I needed to experience formal education first and to achieve a proper high school diploma from a reputable school.

“It will allow you to understand the world more fully than I can,” I remember my mother saying. “After all, it is time for you to grow up.”

I did not like the idea. The life I was already living had provided me with everything I needed. I was educated, I had the support of my family and an artistic community, and most essentially, I had plenty of time to paint. I did not want anything in my life to change.

I fought my parents on this decision for several months, but eventually they got their way. After looking for a school for some time, I was awarded a full scholarship to a boarding school in Massachusetts called the Briar Academy for the Arts, and the day before my fifteenth birthday, I attended my first day of school.

My first two years at Briar Academy were very difficult for me. This was primarily due to the transition from home schooling to formal schooling.

Academically, I did not match up with the other students in the school. Although I was smart, the discipline and structure that the other students had acquired in the previous schooling allowed them to be stronger students overall. They read faster than me, wrote faster than me, comprehended faster than me. For the first time in my life, I began to feel ordinary. My reaction to this was to not care. I did not care about the education my teachers at Briar Academy were trying to give me. I only cared about painting. Through art and art alone, I would understand the world. In my mind, I did not need to be educated any further than that.

Eventually, my advisors at Briar Academy made sure that my academics improved. They put me into a special class after school, which ultimately limited the amount of time I had to paint and create. The class was meant to help me develop certain academic skills that I was lacking, and until those skills were more fully developed, I would have to keep attending the class. If I wanted to have more time to paint, I needed to get out of the class as quickly as possible.

I studied hard. Often I would go three or four days without even thinking about painting, and I would commit myself fully to completing the work for that after school class. In time, my skills developed. I began to do better in my regular classes. I learned more easily. I understood things more easily. I completed science projects, I wrote research papers, I read novels. It was not long before I was not only placed out of the after school class, but also achieving A's in my other subjects. I became the well-rounded student my mother had hoped I would. This academic success would ultimately come at the cost of my art.

Due to my commitment to my studies, I created less frequently than I ever had before. The whole point of removing myself from the after school class was to allow more time for my painting. However, after I was excused from that course, there still always seemed to be work to complete for school—papers, presentations, exams. Painting often got pushed off in favor of all these. In addition to this, the things in my world that I normally looked to for inspiration became less obvious to me. There was a time when the littlest things in my world would make me wonder in powerful ways, but at Briar Academy, those type of things seemed harder to find. But I did find them, and the process of painting itself still remained a powerful practice for me. I could still amaze myself with my ability to recreate the world so delicately, so easily. It gave me hope. It kept me focused.

I got into art school at The Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science and the Arts. It was widely considered to be one of the best art schools in the country. That did not matter to me all that much. I only wanted to find a place where my entire world would be focused on the thing I love. At the Cooper Union, I got that and much more. Before entering my first classes, I went out and bought my textbooks. They were large, beautiful books with glossy pages and stunning photographs. They were heavy with information about the thing I loved. They explained every movement, every brush stroke, every element of designed. They indexed every notable artist, every term, every great work of art. I read them, almost page for page. I wanted to find inspiration in those glossy pages, in the understanding of the world of art; what I found was information.

In my sophomore I took a class called The Psychology of the Artist. It was course meant to explain how the artist's mind worked. One of our readings was an article on the child prodigy. I saw it on the syllabus and read it right away. I wanted to understand myself for some reason. I was intrigued by the idea of seeing if I truly could be classified as a "prodigy." It was an impulse that I wish I ignored.

I saw myself on every page of that essay. It explained to me the workings of my mind. It told me how I created, how I "worked from the unfiltered imagination," which was the result of "functioning primarily from the right-side of the brain." The essay called me a visual learner, with "the exceptional ability to transfer the details of brain down onto the canvas almost seamlessly." In the matter of twenty-five pages, the mystery behind my gift and my life had been revealed. It was that simple. Twenty-five pages. I was that simple.

The weight of this knowledge found it's way into my paintbrush. I could no longer find things to paint, and even worse, the enjoyment I received from painting, the ability to amaze myself through power of my mind, was no longer there. I went from creating bold re-imaginings of the world and all it's parts on oversized canvases, to simply painting lines and shapes on canvases no larger than a piece of paper. I called it Minimalism to make my through school. It worked, although it was not the art my advisors expected me to paint.

A year after I completed art school, I could no longer paint completely. I was twenty-four years old.

I left Eric and his friends back in that bar that evening and walked home alone. They had “more drinking to do” according to Eric. After a long day of work, the thought of staying out any longer made me tired in itself. Eric said I was showing my age. I did not disagree with him.

On the short walk back to my studio apartment, the image of Stek Mainard again came into my mind. This time music came along with it—the song which Eric had played for me at the bar. “Permanent in the Chaos.”

Look up/Look around/Look in/It's permanent/It's permanent/If you want it...to be.

I heard those words in my head as my mind once again found the details of Mainard's backside. As I walked, I could not stop myself from looking once again for that hair and his back amongst the people the passed me. I wanted to see it again. I wanted to see him again, and this time I desired to see all of him, his frontside, his face, the color of his eyes. In some way I suppose, I was becoming a fan. But I did not want an explanation of his music or an understanding of why he retired. What I wanted was to only stand there in front of a man who amazed so many people, who with a simple song or a piece of art, could cause so many to people to wonder. I want to stand in front of that man. I want to breathe that experience in.

My desire for this grew wildly throughout the days after I first saw Mainard at the mural site. The painting of the mural had commenced that week. Each day I was required to be there and to assist the artist on the creation of the mural. I showed up every day for work, but I was not very much help at all. My body was

present, but my mind was not. I was always too busy looking over to the sidewalk, hoping to see Mainard once again walking there. He did not show up again.

Each night I would return home from work, tired and disappointed. I needed to make that experience happen in some way. It was all I thought about. I could not remove the thought from my head. This led me to attempt to discover more about Mainard through the internet. I downloaded his albums, I read every article about him, every bit of speculation about him. I studied his lyrics, his short films, his collages. I don't know what exactly I was looking for. I wanted a better understanding of him. I wanted to try to recreate the experience of standing before him through some other means.

Certain things would bring hope, but nothing would suffice. For example in his collage series called "I Was There" there were many photographs of important places in music like the Cavern Club, the Fillmore Auditorium, CBGB's, and the Hollywood Bowl. Each photo displayed some moment important in music history and always, somewhere lurking in the picture, was Stek Mainard, collaged into the picture almost perfectly and proportionally, with the exception of small rip line bordering his body. I flipped through gallery over and over again. In each scene when I discovered him I would feel a pull closer to him, a connection of some kind that brought a burst of feeling into my chest. But it would be short lived. I discovered him in every photo. I studied his body there, his placement in the world of the photo. But by the end of the series, when the final photo is not a collage but simply a picture of him playing guitar, alone, in a basement, for some reason the feeling stopped and I felt no closer to him than when I started.

The same went for the lithograph he composed of all the pictures people had posted online in which they had attempted to get a picture of his face. Each shot you'd see Mainard, usually playing guitar or singing at one of his live concerts, and there would be a part of his face exposed slightly each time—a bit of an eye, part of his chin, the majority of one cheek. There was never a clear shot of his face straight on, which is what I desired to see. When he composed them all into the lithograph it displayed an image of his head tilted down, so there was only his falling hair to see, not his face. Again, I felt no closer to him than I had before.

Even the article that Eric had mentioned, the one that attempted to “demystify” Stek Mainard, it did not bring me any sense of finality. It told me his real name, it told me about where he grew up, it told me about how both his parents had abandoned him at an early age, it told me about what other names he had played under in the early part of his career, but these were just facts. What I was looking for was something different. Something that I could not explain, but would know when the feeling came upon me.

This longing stayed with me for weeks after that sighting of him. It built and it built. It was just as Eric had said. One night almost a month later, after I spent yet another set of hours trying to find this connection and never finding it, I awoke suddenly in the middle of the night. My body was cold all over. I felt that coldness in my ears and down all the way through my toes. But my body was covered in sweat. It had settled into the sheets. I could smell it in the air around me.

In my mind I could see the image of Mainard's back again in my head, this time more vivid than ever. I saw the twirling curls of brown hair strand for strand. I

saw the green stitching on his guitar case, the fraying leather on its edges. Last I saw the foot once again, kicked back and holding in the air. I could see its sole, the deep scuff marks that had been worn into the leather, I could almost feel their grooves.

The image was all so real, yet I thought I was still dreaming.

I closed my eyes and held the image there in my mind. I stepped out of bed, stood tall, and raised myself onto the tips of my toes. Then I leaned forward.

Look up

Look around

Look in

It's permanent

It's permanent

If you want it...to be.

I needed a canvas.

I went into the closet I had in my studio space. It was a door that I had not dared to open in some time. Down at the bottom of the closet I searched through some old materials that I had stashed away a long time ago just in case something like that were to happen. From an old, paper shopping bag I pulled out a can of spray paint. I shook it hard and it rattled like a baby's toy. I removed the cap and hit the nozzle. The paint sprayed onto the outside of the bag and held there bright and brilliant. It hit again. Then again.

I gathered the spray paint into another bag and went outside. I already had a canvas in mind. It was the side of a building around the corner of my apartment, which faced a lot where the foundation for a new rowhome was being laid. I began working on the side of the wall closest to the sidewalk, starting my mural at the wall's edge and painting Stek's backside to make it appear as if he were walking off the wall and disappearing around its corner. The area was poorly lit, but I did not need much light to work. The painting glowed bright and my mind. That was all I needed.

When I was finishing the foot, the last part of the mural, I heard footsteps coming from behind me. I had not realized how long I had been painting or whether or not other people had come by until then, but I heard those footsteps growing louder in the dark. I pulled back into the darkness next to the wall and waited for the person to show their face.

Out of the darkness I saw a body emerge, head down, long brown hair hanging forward. I felt my heart lift as the person moved closer. I felt my mind go heavy with the wonder and disbelief.

Then the person was right on top of me, and the head lifted, exposing the face of a woman. Her skin was soft and young, her eyes wide despite it being so early in the morning. She must have been walking to her car to go to work. It must have been near 5:00AM.

She walked my past mural, not even noticing it, while I stayed hidden in the shadows. As she walked further down the sidewalk and past me, I stepped out and

watched her walk to the end of the street and turn at the corner. I looked up at my mural and stared at what I created. That feeling of wonder was still present.

I went back home and managed to get a couple of hours of sleep. When I awoke, I got ready for work and went outside. My mural was already attracting a great deal of attention. A news crew had set up in front of it, and there was a small crowd of people there as well. Some were snapping photos, while others were merely looking at the mural. As I walked by them, I studied their faces. Some were outraged, while others were studying the mural in disbelief; everyone, I'm sure, was wondering where the mural came from and what was the reason behind its creation. I put my head down to hide my face behind the falling strands of my hair and continued walking to work. Down the street I could hear the news reporter saying: "Is Philadelphia's mystery man Stek Mainard speaking to his fans again? For now we do not know the answer to that question."

I have painted that mural again and again. In Philadelphia and in other cities. Perhaps you have seen one in the town you live in. Perhaps you have stood in its shadow and wondered why it is there or who created it.

Every time I complete one of those murals, I know I stand there and look up at my painting and feel that sense of wonder each time. I look up, I look around, I look in.

It is permanent. *It is permanent.* I understand that now. I will never forget it.

Stek Mania

By: Kent Marshall

Stek Mania. It's a thing of wonder.

In the span of five years we, Stek Mainard's fans, have watched an obscure and aloof singer/songwriter turn himself into a rockstar, a cultural icon, and unsolved mystery. Five years. That's all it took. And over the course of the next five years we don't know what else could happen: maybe a comeback or another album or another art series. Maybe more silence.

Nobody knows. That's the best—and worst—part.

What brought you into Stek Mania? Was it the music? That lo-fi rock that was raw and unapologetic, but poppy enough to keep you listening to every note. Was it the image? A 6'6", guitar slinging rockstar with all those brown locks that seemed to cover up the whole man along with his face? Was it the story? A musician who in 21st century somehow managed to hide away from the limelight and only speak to the world through his music and his art? Or maybe, just maybe, it was the mystery of it all, the excitement of not knowing what would come next, of not knowing what new way Stek Mainard would find to speak to us.

Whatever it was you're here now, reading this book, in the thick of the mania and still waiting. For now, what comes next is this story. The story about how I got involved in the Mania and how it changed my life in more ways than one.

It started when I felt “the Pull.”

“*What’s the Pull?*” I can already hear you asking. Well, it’s something that I’ll get to explaining shortly, but basically it’s that thing, that feeling, that makes a fan, *a fan*. But beyond that, it’s that feeling that keeps us connected to the things we love. It’s what drives our passion. *It’s what fuels the Mania*.

I first felt it when I listened to *Radio Ruins* for the first time. This was in early January of 2008. I was working for *RockRag Magazine* at the time in Baltimore, as the head blogger on *RockRag’s* website. A friend of mine at *RockRag* managed to shake loose an extra pre-release copy of *Radio Ruins* for me about a week before the album’s official release date. The minute the album showed up on my desk one Friday morning at work, I opened it up and listened to it immediately. When I was done with my first listen, I listened to again, and again, and again.

The album was the real deal. I felt that after the first listen and knew it after the second. It was the kind of rare record that we, as music journalists and fans, die to listen to and talk about. It was an authentic rock album, one that managed to meld the nuances of indie rock—unpredictable song structures, unique vocals, distinct instrumentals—with the nuances of popular rock—uninhibited guitar solos, accessible and catchy songs, powerful choruses. Beyond that it found a way to be raw but filled with heart. It managed to be original without sounding pretentious. It succeeded in being poppy without being conventional. And, most importantly, it was that special kind of music that couldn’t be turned off, even after the record needle screeched to a stop and the speakers went silent. It stayed with you. Buzzing

in your head and heart, and singing out to you to come closer, to get deeper, to know everything there is to know about it. In short, it made you wonder.

This is the Pull. That feeling you get when you're so in to something, so attracted to it and compelled by it, that you need to know everything about it. That's the Pull. Like I said it's a feeling that makes a fan, *a fan*, that keeps us connected to the things we love, that drives our passions, that fuels the Mania.

I know it's a feeling you've felt before.

So as I was saying, after listening to *Radio Ruins* a couple of times there at my desk I was feeling the Pull. I wanted to know everything about Stek Mainard and his partners in rock the Viles. I wanted to know their background info—how they formed, how they got started, how long it took from them to make it. I wanted to know about their music—how they wrote it, who their influences were, how they produced it. And above all, I wanted to know who Stek Mainard was—where he came from and how he was able to write such fantastic songs.

Of course, I knew a little about them from having listened to their debut EP *Vilelation*, but those were only basics—that they were from Philly, that they were a lo-fi band, that they had one EP out on Total 9 Records. It was a start, but I wanted more.

I grabbed a hold of my computer's mouse and got to work.

As the one and only blogger for *RockRag Magazine* my main responsibility was to get information out to our readers and to get it out quickly. You see *RockRag* had hired me in the fall of 2007 in order to help them make the switch from being a print magazine to a full blown webzine. The powers that be at

RockRag had decided to completely bend to the desires of modern readers: people didn't want to wait two weeks for their music news to arrive in their mailbox anymore; instead, they wanted it fast, boiled down, and all in one place.

That's where I came in.

As their blogger, *RockRag* didn't want me to go out into the music world to follow bands around and to write some long, detailed and engaging piece about musicians and their lives. No, they wanted me to scour the Internet and round up the day-to-day happenings in the wide world of music. We're talking about tour info, album release dates, online single releases, artist collaborations, new band bio's, etc. Whatever were the latest and greatest headlines in music that day, *RockRag* wanted me to bring them to our website, so when music fans like you came looking for them you could find it conveniently on our webpage with *our* name and *our* advertisements surrounding it.

As you can probably tell, I wasn't thrilled about the job. Besides the boring routine of it—search, *click*, type, *click*, post, *click*—on the whole it just wasn't the type of job in music journalism that I had always imagined. I grew up a long-haired, t-shirt and jean wearing rockhead, whose weekly rock rituals required him to worship in front of the glossy pages of music magazines like *Rolling Stone*, *Spin*, and *NME*. On top of that, I idolized iconic rock critics like Lester Bangs and Nick Kent. Like them I wanted to walk right into the madness of the Rock n' Roll scene with its wild, drug filled nights and outrageous characters, and come back with great stories to tell. I wanted to write as fearlessly as them, with brutal honesty and uncompromised details; I wanted to humanize rockstars like they did, exposing the

damage, the desires, and the delusions behind the biggest names in music; but above all else, I wanted to be able to pull back the curtain for music fans like they did, exposing the backstage world just long enough to give fans an idea of what it was about, and then closing the curtain again, to leave enough secrets and mystery behind it to keep fans interested and reading in the future.

But at *RockRag*, that type of writing was being worked out with the new formatting, and what I did, blog writing, was the antithesis of it in almost every way. In blog writing, there was no need for vivid descriptions or compelling story lines or even good writing anymore. All I needed to do was get to the bottom of the story fast and simply with a picture, a link, and a little wit and leave nothing left to wonder or speculate about. That was it. I wasn't a journalist or a reporter; if anything I was a re-reporter or a leach. But it was a job in the business. It was a way in. And fortunately or unfortunately, depending upon how you look at it, I was pretty good at it.

With my search on Stek Mainard and the Viles I wanted to find enough info to create two bio posts, which I called "Quick Hits" posts on the website, one post on Stek Mainard and another on the band itself. If I found anything about tour dates or music videos or upcoming appearances, that was all gravy and I'd have some other postings that I could start trickling out during the next week leading up to the *Radio Ruins* release.

Relatively quickly, I was able to find a bunch of reviews for *Vilelation*, some live show reviews, as well as some run-of-the-mill bio blurbs that offered basics about the band as a whole. I compiled all of that info under the band's

“Quick Hits” post and kept searching, because what I was really looking for was stuff that was more intimate and personal. I wanted interviews and feature articles, stuff that would bring me closer to not only the band but to Stek, so that I could see who he was behind the scenes.

But there was nothing really like that out there. I must have searched for over an hour. I hit up all my usual info outlets, starting with databases that let me search your basic independent city papers, then I went to search your dime-a-dozen indie blogs and webzines, and finally I ended with the big boys: print sources like *Spin*, *NME*, and *Rolling Stone*. But I came up with nothing at all really. There were a handful of small articles that touted the band as the next big thing, but they didn’t take you behind the scenes with the band really and they all had the same generic up-and-coming band quotes from every member of the band but Stek. I moved on to the obvious stuff after that—the band’s website, which was under construction, their MySpace page, which didn’t offer anything new but info about the new album release, and their Facebook page, which had essentially the same stuff as the MySpace page.

I was a little stunned by the lack of info out there on Mainard and the band. Sure they were a band that only had one EP out and a LP on the way, but I had seen cover bands with more press on the web than them. I clicked over to Total 9 Records website, thinking that maybe there’d be some web content up there about Stek and the band or at least some links that could point me in the right direction. That’s where I found the following passage linked under “Stek Mainard’s biography”:

Robert Stekreich, aka Stek Mainard, was born in Seattle, Washington to Peter and Amy Stekreich. His father and mother were both teachers by trade, but had always been musicians at heart. During their summers off they would go out on self-directed tours with their two-piece art-punk band called These Times Again, often bringing young Robert along with them to play cowbell and tambourine during their live performances. Through these experiences Robert would become an instant lover of music, picking up any instrument his parents had around—guitar, bass, piano, drums—and playing it until he had the instrument mastered.

After he graduated from high school, he decided to follow his dream of becoming a full time musician, which was a decision that caused some turmoil within his family's household. Despite his own love for music, Peter, Robert's father, had wanted Robert to go to college first and to think about music second, but Robert had no desire to take his schooling any further than he already had. The two argued about Robert's decision constantly, and after one argument that was bigger and more serious than any other, Robert stole one of his father's guitars, moved all the way across the country to Philadelphia, and changed his name permanently to Stek Mainard.

In Philadelphia, Robert now Stek, would live with his grandmother and work small, odd jobs that gave him enough time to devote to his music. After a playing with several bands over the course of two years and never breaking through, Stek began writing and composing his own songs on a four-track recording system that he stole from local electronics store. The grainy sound of the four-track gave Stek his signature style and he hasn't recorded his work any other way since.

Now Stek is known around Philly for his electrifying live performances and ability to write guitar riffs so catchy that they're bound to hook your ear—regardless of whether they're soft or fast or heavy. He signed with Total 9 Records in 2006 and has one EP out with his backing band the Viles called "Vilelation." It's interesting to note that immediately after he signed his contract, he went back to the electronics store he stole the four-track from and paid the storeowner for the system.

After reading the bio, I sat there at my desk for a moment just scratching my head. There was something about it that didn't sit right, that just didn't seem to add up for me. I didn't know much about Stek Mainard, but the one thing I thought I did know was that he was from Philadelphia. Everything that I read that day and the few discussions I had had about him in the past with friends and coworkers, all

of that had made me believe that he was actually from Philly, born and bred, not just some transplant like the bio claimed.

The one conversation I had had about him that I could remember was with my co-worker Rod, the guy who snuck me a copy of *Radio Ruins*. The conversation was just the week prior, when I was feeling him out to see if he could get me a copy of the record. He had called Mainard “Philly’s Constant Hitmaker” and Rod, being from Philly originally, had talked about the guy like he was proud of him, like Mainard was some hometown boy who made good.

I still couldn’t put it all together, so I walked across our office to see Rod and to show him the bio. When I got to his cube, Rod was rocked back in his chair with his feet up on his desk. He had his headphones plugged in his ears and he was playing a mean air guitar to whatever track he was listening to. All the people in the cubes around him, late twenty somethings just like me, were working quietly and diligently at their desks, typing, or talking on the phone, or writing, but Rod, a forty year old man wearing slim tight jeans and shirt so tiny his gut was sticking out the bottom of it, was rocking away at his desk at 10:30 in the morning.

I’ll treat talking about people in this like I used to do on the *RockRag* Blog, with a “Quick Hits” breakdown that gets you everything you need to know about a person in only a matter sentences. Here are the Quick Hits for Rod.

Rod Gildroy: Worthless vat of musical knowledge. Music journalist for over fifteen years. Has worked at magazines such as *The Attic*, *Record Trend*, *Spin-Cycle* primarily as a feature writer. Took on the same position at *RockRag*, but with the format transition, the amount of feature articles he writes was cut back and he

was primarily writing albums reviews at the time. Don't bother arguing with him about music, because you're going to be wrong and will always be wrong, mainly because Rod's old enough to have "forgotten more music knowledge than you'll *evvvveerrrr* be able to remember." Despite his age, he's exuberant and relentless, and will out talk you, out fact you, and even out drink you any day of the week.

The Final Hit: As you could guess, he hated everything about *RockRag's* format transition. Everything that is except for me.

"Rod," I yelled, loud enough to make it over the music. Rod snapped out his air guitar performance and spread his lips into a grin.

"Oh, no. What do you want you guerilla journo scum?" Rod said, keeping his smile as he hit the pause button on his computer. "You gonna snap a picture of me on your little doohickey, and post it up on your *blog* for all your 'readers' to poke fun at? Is that it?"

"It's *Blog*, dickrod," I said knocking his feet off his desk so I could sit down.

Becoming friends with Rod was no easy task. Being the old timer that he is, befriending someone like me, a blogger, a guy who was taking some of the stories he'd usually spend hours researching and writing about and reducing them down to hard facts for a blog, wasn't usually in the cards. You can bet that early on, a lot of those comments and looks that he sent my way weren't done in joking. But I knew Rod's writing for a while before I joined *RockRag*. His feature articles were in everyway the type of writing I wanted to produce myself, and when I got to *RockRag*, I did everything I could to get on his good side. It took a lot of flattery and self-mockery and music knowledge dropping, but after a while I broke him

down to the point where the comments and looks were still there, but there was a lot less anger and hate behind them. I don't know what he saw in me. Maybe a friend, maybe a protégé. Whatever it was I was fine with it.

“What are you listening to?” I asked Rod.

His smile got even bigger after I asked the question, then in ridiculous Rod fashion he began faking as if he was a DJ, holding one hand up to his ear and using the other to pull an imaginary microphone close to his lips.

“And that ladies and gents was the latest scintillating record from the newest sensation from underground nation, the indie rock superstar with a burning-hot *gee-taar*, I'm talking about the lord of Lo-fi who's songs will take you *soo* high. Ladies and gentleman, it's Mr. *Stek Mainard*. Philly's Constant Hitmaker.” Rod deepened his voice during his performance, doing his best to sound like some old-time DJ speaking off into the far corners of Radioland. When he was done, he looked over in my direction with a shit-eating grin and said: “and now for some half-informed opinions from the *bogosphere* here's W-D-I-C's Kent Marshall.”

He pushed his imaginary microphone in my direction and stared at me.

“I'm assuming you got my package. What did you think, kid?”

I told Rod about how I loved the album, and how I thought it was the most authentic rock album I had heard in years. Then I got to the point, and pulled up the bio on Total 9's website so that he could read it.

“It's bullshit,” Rod said after reading it. “It's one-hundred percent, ‘Paul is Dead’ bullshit.”

“How do you know?”

“Cause I’ve spoken to the guy,” Rod said, confident as ever. “And *Robert Stekreich*, that isn’t even his real name. It’s Adam. Adam Stecker.”

Rod went on to tell me that he had seen this Adam Stecker guy play a few years prior, at a small club in Philadelphia called The Fire. “He was playing solo and he didn’t have his crazy, long hair, but it was him. Stek Mainard. I’d remember that voice anywhere.”

After the show, Rod had approached him as the guy was packing up his gear to tell him how much he liked the show. He talked to Stecker/Stek for a minute or two about the show, and his music and somewhere during the conversation Stecker/Stek said that he had grown up in Philadelphia, right off of South Street.

“He definitely mentioned it. I know for sure, because he didn’t say much else during our conversation. I did most of the talking to his back as he was gathering up his gear.”

“What was he like? Because I can’t find anything out there on the web about him at all.”

“I’m not surprised by that. He seemed pretty...standoffish. Cold. He was trying to split as fast as he could. And as soon as I told him I was journalist he started packing his shit up quicker.”

“Can I quote you on this?”

“Oh, no. All of this is for your shitty clog?” Rod said.

I raised my eyebrows at him to let him know I really needed the quote.

“Alright, whatever,” he brought his hands to his face and started rubbing. “But quote me as anonymous, I’m already feeling dirty as is just from the thought of me contributing to that slop.”

I thanked Rod and went right back to my desk. I immediately typed “Adam Stecker music” into my search engine and began digging. It took me a while, but I was able to click my way to an old article review from a small outdoor concert series in Philadelphia called Summer Sounds. The article re-capped the summer long series, where a number of small, local indie bands and artists had played shows outdoors at number of parks in the city. Adam Stecker had performed August 21, 2003 at Gorgas Park in the Roxborough section of Philadelphia. The article made a note that it had been one of the best shows in the series that summer and even had a small picture of Stecker performing.

The picture was from a good distance away from the stage and Stecker, so I couldn’t make out his face too well. But what I could see was that long, lanky frame of Stek Mainard and those stringbean like arms that seemed to make his guitar look tiny in his hands.

It was him. I was almost certain. So certain that I linked up the concert series article and the bio from Total 9’s website to a new blog post. Then I wrote up a little blurb about Rod’s story to go along with the links and posted it to the RockRag website under the title: “What the Steck?”

It was maybe about three hours later and right before I was about to check out of work for the weekend that Calen Goodson, the Editor-in-Chief of *RockRag* called me into his office.

Here are the Quick Hits for Calen:

Calen Goodson: Editor-in-Chief of RockRag Magazine. Like me, he was brought on six months earlier to help transition the magazine over to a webzine. He's an Internet junkie and if anybody out there has ever seen everything there is to see on the web, it would be him. At thirty-five years old he has a sterling background in web journalism and has won several awards for the work he did at the webzines he worked at before joining *RockRag*. He likes music, but not as much as most of the people who work at *RockRag*.

The Final Hit: Despite his rather young age, he means all business. I know this because when he first got to *RockRag* he made a speech in which he stated, "I'm all business" and because he always wears a shirt and tie to work. It's an outfit choice that makes everyone at *RockRag* nervous.

When I walked into Calen's office he was sitting at his desk, wearing his normal business-hipster attire, which consisted of a pair of tight grey slacks, with matching waistcoat vest, a collared shirt, and a black slim tie. He was on the phone, talking to someone about advertisements for the website, and he motioned for me to take a seat in the chair across from him.

I tucked in the tail of my button down shirt and sat down.

Up on the walls, Calen had all the award placards he had won hung up in a row that stretched around the office. I scanned them while I waited, reading the

different categories he had won in: *Outstanding Use of Digital Technologies on the Web, Online Video Journalism, Online Commentary and Blogging, Outstanding Use of Emerging Digital Platforms*. In looking at those awards alone you could probably tell who Calen was as a journalist.

Sitting in that chair reminded me of the first time I met the guy, which happened to be in that very office on my interview for my job. I came into that meeting ready to sell myself as a journalist. I had my resume printed out and polished. I had the story about how this was my dream job practiced. I had my goals all thought out and prepared. But I didn't get to say much at all. I handed Calen my resume and he took things from there. He talked mostly about his ideas for the webzine. In his eyes it would be the ultimate interactive website for music fans. He wanted to veer away from *RockRag's* traditional reliance upon feature articles and album reviews, which didn't attract "modern readers" anymore and put *RockRag* "an inch away from bankruptcy." The magazine, the glossy images, the long articles, all that was to be left behind "in the recycling bin" and in its place would be the webzine, an interactive online forum that incorporated more formats that appealed to young, tech-savvy music fans, who made up the majority of our target audience. He talked about artist podcasts, artist vlogs, live online concerts, video interviews, video feature stories, social media networking, and the blog of course. "We're living in the all access-age here, Kent. Fans want to be brought behind the scenes now more than ever. With these new platforms at our disposal, we can take them there. We can allow them to experience their favorite musicians and bands in ways never thought possible. They can learn everything there is to

know about them in only a few simple clicks. It's an amazing world we're living in, and it's an amazing time to be in this business. My only question is: do you want to be a part of it?"

You all already know what my answer was to that question.

"I'm sorry about that," Calen said hanging up the phone. He grabbed his computer's mouse and started clicking his way to something. "Now, what I wanted to see you about. Have you checked the comments on your post about Stek Mainard from earlier today?"

"No," I said. I never usually checked in on the comments section, mainly because it usually was just fans bickering with one another about this and that.

"Well, I think you should. You'd be amazed by what people are saying."

Calen swung his monitor around so I could see the screen. My "What the Stek?" blogpost was up and Calen had scrolled down to the end of the post so I could see the beginning of the comments section. *192*. It was the number of comments that had been made on the post. For the biggest bands we usually covered like Arcade Fire, Radiohead, The Flaming Lips, I'd maybe get sixty comments, seventy-five max, about the biggest types of news—new albums, tour dates, etc. And that would be over the course of an entire day or two. Stek Mainard pulled in 192 comments, in only about five hours. I felt a tingle at the back of my throat. I pulled myself closer to the screen so I could read the comments.

There was story after story from different fans claiming that they had seen Stek Mainard play live under different names in the past: Adam Stecker, Robert Stekreich, Adam Stekel, Robert Steck.

Posted by: RockOutzzz21 at 12:23PM

“Saw Robert Steck in 2004. Different name, different hair, no band. Same chops, same vocals, same style. It was him allllllright. Stek Fucking Mainard.”

Posted by: LoFiGirllll at 12:29PM

“I saw Adam Stecker play too!!!! He opened for my friend’s band in Denver like four years ago. OMG! I guess it was Stek Mainard. I’m freaking out!!!!!!!!”

Posted by: Dudeinski at 1:07PM

“How do you people not know this? My friends and I called this back in September. We saw Robert Stekreich play in Brooklyn in ’05, then when we saw Stek and the Viles play this fall at Irving Plaza, we made the connection. We were close to the stage at the IP show and even called out “Robert Stekreich” to Stek, to see if he’d respond. Definitely did a double-take! LOLZ!”

I kept reading the comments. Some were short, maybe two or three sentences, while others went on for paragraphs. All of them, though, had a story similar to Rod’s, where the poster had seen Adam Stecker, or Robert Stekreich, or Adam Stekel, or Robert Steck performing live long before anyone knew the name Stek

Mainard. Every reader who posted seemed certain that their story was the truth and that they really knew who Stek Mainard was. But after reading all those posts, the only thing I was certain of was that no one knew who the man was for sure.

“This is crazy,” I said to Calen. “Who does this guy think he is? Bob Dylan or something? Why do this?”

“There it is, Kent. There. It. *Is.*”

“There what is?”

“The question I want you to answer for me?”

I squinted at Calen. I wasn’t following exactly.

“*Why do this?*” Calen continued. “That’s the question I want you to answer for me,” he leaned forward in his chair and pointed at me. “You, Kent Marshall. In one little post, *you’ve* got almost two hundred readers wondering about the same thing: Why did Stek Mainard do this?”

“With all due respect, Calen, I think Stek Mainard has these people wondering, not me. I just gave them a forum to discuss it in.”

“You’re right, Kent, but in drawing attention to him by creating this forum you’ve put the wheels into motion for something. You’ve got people focused. You’ve got them thinking. You’ve got them feeling...,” Calen paused and tried to get the right word. “You’ve got them feeling...”

“The Pull?”

“The what?”

“The Pull,” I said to Calen, “Like an attraction or connection. The Pull.” I demonstrated by literally pushing my body toward the monitor, like I was being sucked in by the screen.

“Right,” Calen said, with a strong smile and a nod. “And this *pull*, this connection, it’s something that we need to capitalize upon. I’ve listened to *Radio Ruins*. I know how good it is. When this thing hits stores next Friday and people hear how powerful this record is, there’s going to be a lot more readers out there wanting to know who this guy is and why he does the things he does. *We need to capitalize on that urge.*”

“So you want me to figure out who Stek Mainard really is?” I understood where Calen was going finally, and I let myself get excited at the thought of the assignment. Not only would it be a break from the normal boredom of my job, but I was just like those people who commented on the post. I wanted to know who Stek Mainard was, and now Calen was telling me that it was my job to figure that out. It was just what I needed.

“Well, yes, and more specifically I want you to figure out what all this name changing is about,” Calen stood up from his desk and crossed his arms. “What’s he hiding? That’s what we got to be thinking about this, right? Only somebody with something to hide would be doing this nonsense. So find out what’s he keeping tucked away behind all that hair.”

“I can do that,” I said quickly. I was already thinking out the story in my head. I was seeing the angles I needed to take in the research. I was planning out questions that I wanted to ask Stek Mainard if I got the chance. I was writing the

opening lines of what I could already feel was going to be my best piece of writing yet.

“Good, then,” Calen said, uncrossing his arms and reaching for his monitor. “Then get the ball moving over the weekend as best you can, and try to get another blog post up on Monday if possible. I want this little mystery solved ASAP. Get to the bottom of this story like you normally do—fast and simple. Let’s give the people the answers they want and leave them nothing else to wonder about.”

“Wait. You want this for the blog?” I asked shocked. I stopped writing my article in my head immediately.

“What did you expect? We don’t have much time on this, Kent. We have to get this story out fast, before our competitors beat us to it.”

“Well,” I said, swallowing back my frustration. “I thought this might be a story best suited for the magazine. For a feature?”

“No,” Calen said quick, like a swift punch in the gut. “Maybe if we had more time, but that’s not the case. This thing was started on the blog, so I’d like to end it there as well. You okay with that?”

I took me a second, but I eventually nodded to let Calen know I was okay with it. Then I pushed myself out his chair and started walking back to my desk.

“Kent,” Calen called out before I could leave his office, “this a big story. It’s the type of story that can help you to start making your mark in this industry, and, more importantly, it’s the type of story that can help re-establish *RockRag* as one of the premiere new sources in all of music. Do this right, and I know you can get

yourself your own plaque on the wall.” He pointed to the placards to his left and gave me a smile.

I nodded back and then went home.

On Monday, I got into work earlier than usual. I wanted to get a head start on my whole Stek Mainard assignment, because the searching over the weekend hadn't gone well at all. I had put in some preliminary calls to some people I knew around town, show promoters, musicians, club owners, anyone I thought may have had contact with Mainard or knew something about him. I even called Total 9 records, Mainard's label, to see if they knew the best way of contacting their rising star. But my inquiries brought back very little. From my friends I got only more stories about Mainard's elusive nature, and from Total 9, I was dealt some major heartbreak when the receptionist said that Mainard almost never came into their offices and, to the best of her knowledge, didn't do interviews.

The only glimmer of hope I came away from it all with was a single name: Moses Halverd.

One show promoter I knew in town had described him as Mainard's booking agent; my bartender friend, who worked at a club Stek and the Viles had played at, said he looked like Mainard's body guard; the receptionist at Total 9 had called him: “The band's everything—booking agent, publicist, manager, all rolled into one.” Whatever he was, he dealt directly with Mainard and the band, and that was enough to make contacting him my main goal that Monday.

The only problem, the receptionist at Total 9 warned me when I called Total 9 again on Monday morning, was that reaching the man was a difficult task. Total 9 only had one contact number for him, and he rarely picked up any calls on it, which meant that you had to leave him a message that he may or may not choose to respond to.

“I’ve learned one thing about Stek Mainard in the handful of years he’s been signed with us,” the receptionist said after she gave me Moses Halverd’s number, “everything with him has to be a mystery. He doesn’t make anything easy.”

“I’m learning that myself,” I responded and hung up the phone.

“Well, at least you’re learning something,” I heard a voice say from behind me. I swiveled my chair around and saw Rod standing there. He had his classic, black Sony Walkman clipped to his belt, and a pair of old, boxy headphones wrapped around his neck. The Walkman was just one the many tools he used to mess with me on a weekly basis. Usually, I’d have my headphones on at my desk and then all of sudden Rod would be there, bebopping by my work station with his walkman blasting or trying to jam an old cassette tape into my iPod or computer and telling me how desperately I needed to listen to this one song. This day, though, he was only standing there smiling at me, the Walkman and headset quiet, his hands tucked into his pocket. It was altogether weird.

“Just came to say congrats,” he said.

I braced myself to be messed with, and then responded: “Congrats for what?”

“On the Stek Mainard story from last week. Your post. I saw it pulled a lot of people into the website.”

““You *saw*,”” I said, jumping on the fact that Rod had just admitted to reading my blog. I let silence between us grow and stared at him to make things awkward in typical Rod Gildroy fashion.

“Jesus,” Rod said, breaking down. “Well you bug me enough, I was bound to check out your work sooner or later. Plus, I had to make sure you quoted me right.”

“Don’t worry,” I said, “your secret’s safe with me.”

“So anything new going on with it?” Rod asked.

I gave him the rundown on Calen’s assignment, and immediately he went back to being good, old, bitter Rod. I didn’t even get to tell him about Moses Halverd.

“Goddamn bloodsucker,” he said through his grinding teeth.

I flinched a bit. I hadn’t see that type of response coming.

“Not you,” he said, noticing my reaction. “Goodson. That no good, Yoko Ono-ing sonofabitch. Does he have to suck the heart out of every good story? Let me guess, he wants you strip this story down. He wants you to explain it. Simplify it. He wants you to write the thing like it was the fucking essay portion of some middle school history test?”

“With the album coming out this week,” I said, avoiding Rod’s stare, “he wants the story out ‘fast and simple.’ That’s what he wants, and it’s my job to do it for him.”

“Goddamn bloodsucker!” Rod said again, this time in a whispered scream. He snatched his headphones off his neck and went as if to spike them into the ground. “Quite possibly the best damn story of the year comes across his desk, and he sends it out to the *blog*? Is there nothing worth *actually* writing about anymore? *Fast and fucking simple!* Where did this come from? Who are these people that want everything so cut and dry and boring? It’s a Goddamn epidemic. And Goodson’s the mad scientist going around claiming he’s got the antidote, when he’s really just shooting more people up with the disease.”

“I know, man,” I said. I was starting to feel in that worst of ways, where your heart’s telling you that something’s right and true, but your brain won’t let you give into it. Call it fear, call it cowardice, call it what you will, but it was there, inside me, telling me that what was burning down in my chest, was only going to end up bringing me down in flames. “I know, man.” I said again. There was nothing else I could say.

“Do you, Kent?” Rod asked. I could feel his stare on my face, even though I wasn’t looking at him. I knew it wasn’t me he was mad at really, but in that moment with the heat from his eyes hitting me hard, it sure felt like it.

After a about minute, I pulled my head up and looked at Rod. He wasn’t looking at me anymore; instead, he was just leaning up against the wall of my cubicle, raking through his graying, long brown hair with his fingers and grinding his teeth in frustration. The gray in his hair, the anger in his face, the silence between us—all of it, at least for that moment, made the man seem older than I ever remembered him.

“What do you want me to do, Rod?” I whispered back to him with a shrug.
“Quit? You know I can’t do that.”

“No, Kent. I don’t want you to quit,” Rod said to me over his shoulder. “I just want you to realize that all this type of writing, this simple, fast bullshit, is putting you further away from what you want out this writing career. You think this job is going to take you places in music journalism? You think it’s going to help you become a feature writer?” Rod pushed himself off my desk and got right up into my face. “Look at me, Kent. Guys like me are getting kicked out of this business each and every day. As more of this web writing goes up, the easier it becomes to access, and that means there will be less and less of a reason for people to go beyond it, to find my writing, to find a real story that they can get lost in and explore. Why read a twenty or thirty page article when you could read a Wikipedia page or RockRag blogpost or watch a two minute video clip?”

“Come on, Rod. You’re going over the top,” I said, trying to save myself. “People will always want more than just the surface stuff. If they’re interested in something they’ll always want to explore beyond what blogs and stuff can offer them.”

“Maybe. For now. But will that be the case after the Calen Goodson’s of the world spoon-feed a whole generation of readers this type of writing from birth? Huh? Will there be enough of those readers out there then? Will there be a job for you and me?”

I closed my eyes and shook my head. I didn’t know the answers to all Rod’s questions. I wanted to say “yes” to all of them. I wanted to push aside his

pessimistic perspective and believe that there would be more people like me out there in the future, modern readers who would want more, who wouldn't settle for just the basics when it came to things they loved. But I couldn't do that right then. I just couldn't say that for sure.

"I don't know," I whispered to Rod. "I don't know, okay."

"Well neither do I, and it drives me crazy to think about it, especially when all signs point to the worst of outcomes." Rod stepped away from me and started back-peddling toward his desk. "All I do know is that somebody has to do something about it, Kent. Somebody has to make a stand!"

He was damn near yelling at that point, and several of our fellow coworkers had snapped their heads in his direction. He shouted at some of them, growling in their direction: "Who's it gonna be? *Who's it gonna be?*" I swiveled around in my chair with my hands over my eyes, afraid to be the next person Rod was going to ask his question to.

All the commotion passed after a couple of seconds. I pulled my hand away from my face and looked at my computer monitor. There, typed out in bold lettering on the white canvas of word document, was Moses Halverd's number. It was staring me down just as Rod had done minutes before, and the document's cursor pulsated along side it, reminding me of what I had to do to keep the story and my career alive. I raised myself slightly out of my seat so I could look in the direction of Calen's office. The door, with its frosted glass front, was closed and emitted a soft, yellow light, which signaled to me that Calen was inside fast at work. With all of Rod's commotion, it seemed that he hadn't even so much as

poked his head out of his door to see what the fuss was about. He probably hadn't even buzzed to his secretary to ask her what all the racket was.

My body all of sudden felt as if it weighed about a thousand pounds, and I fell back down into my chair with a thud. I looked at the computer screen again for a moment, then I picked up my phone and dialed Halverd's number.

By twelve o'clock that afternoon I had called Moses Halverd over ten times and left him three different messages, but still I hadn't heard back from him. I felt temporarily paralyzed for the moment. I couldn't see the next move in the story, I didn't know who to call, or email, or research. All I thought I could do was wait, wait for Halverd to call so I could start getting some of the answers I needed to make my next post.

So that's exactly what I did. I waited. And with each minute that went by with my phone remaining silent, my stress level seemed to get higher. If the wait wasn't bad enough, Calen had stopped by my desk earlier to see how the search was going. I told him about the calls I made over the weekend, I told him about Moses Halverd and the calls I had in to him, and for the time being that seemed to be fine work to Calen. He said he'd check in with me later in the day, to see what else turned up, and he reminded me that he still wanted another post up by the end of the day. I promised him I would have something for him for sure, and heaped some more pressure onto my already stress-filled mind.

So by noon that Monday I was in the midst of a staring contest with my phone, and I was losing. Badly. So badly, in fact, that my mind was starting to scramble, and race, and tighten. I was afraid and frustrated because I didn't know what was going to happen next.

I went to put my head down on my desk, so I could steal a minute or two of sleep to help rest my aching head. That's when, out of the corner of my eye, I saw my computer screen flash a little pulse of light in my direction. I looked up at my monitor and saw that my Facebook page for the blog was still up. Between Halverd phone calls, I had made a Facebook post to alert the blog's followers about some other run-of-the-mill music news that I had posted up to the blog. The page was still up and live, and in my news feed a new status update had come in.

It was from Stek Mainard and the Viles' fanpage. In the post there was a link to the band's website, www.stekmainardandtheviles.com, and two simple words above the link: "Find Me."

I had been connected to the band via Facebook for six or seven months, and there had been no updates or posts at all. Nothing about shows, or videos, or articles, or even album release dates. There was nothing. But now there was this: a single Facebook post.

Stek Mainard—the silent, humble musician, the man who didn't do interviews or show his face or tell his story—had finally spoken.

Two words: "Find Me."

I clicked on the link to the website immediately. It had been under construction just the other day when I was looking for Stek's bio info. Clicking to it

this time, I expected to see a functioning website with text and links and photos. All I got, however, was a webpage that showed nothing but a black background. I refreshed the page. I refreshed it again. I went back to the Facebook post and clicked the link there again. But the result each time was the same: an all black webpage.

I was stunned with excitement for a minute. Not knowing what to make of the black webpage, I felt my mind quickly fill up with questions: *What was the point of this? Was there something wrong with the webpage? What was I missing?*

I clicked into action, floating my mouse's cursor around on the webpage and clicking anywhere I could. I was thinking that if I clicked in the right place I could uncover some hidden link or button that would take me beyond the black surface. I did that for about fifteen minutes, literally clicking everywhere on the black I could, but nothing came up. I was frustrated again, but I wasn't ready to give up. I clicked and held on the top left corner of the webpage and pulled down, thinking this time I could maybe find something hidden in the black, like a message or text, by highlighting it with my cursor and bringing to the surface.

I kept pulling my cursor down across the page, the black rushing upward and the tab of the scrollbar plunging further and further down.

My cursor finally hit the bottom, having uncovered nothing at all, but when I pulled it over to the far, right corner of the page, suddenly out of the black flashed a blue highlighted rectangle that was about an inch long. I clicked on the highlighted space, and a cursor appeared, blinking, pulsating, signaling. It was a search window. I had found it. There *was* something beyond the surface.

The cursor blinked fast and steady as I thought of what to type first into the window. I tried “Stek,” I tried “Viles,” I tried “Stek Mainard and the Viles.”

Nothing came back.

I tried “Vilelation,” I tried “Radio Ruins,” I tried song titles, I tried lyrics.

I still got nothing.

I kept telling myself the window was there for a reason. There had to be a word or term that worked, that did something, even though I didn’t know what it was. The longer I went without getting a hit, I began to wonder about whether Stek Mainard had made this happen on purpose. *Was it his idea to create this site? Was it his idea to make this window? Why did he do it? What was his purpose? Was there really something there to discover? What did he want to say?*

The last question I thought about over and over. That was what this whole thing had to be about, I convinced myself. Stek Mainard had reached out to his fans, which was something he never did. There had to have been a reason why or something he wanted to say.

The only thing he had said was two words: “find me.” With nothing else running through my head, I slid my keyboard slightly closer to me and typed in the two words.

I hit enter and then, out of nowhere, a window popped up in the middle of the web page and began playing a video clip. What was shown was a close up shot of a cassette tape in a tape player. You saw the front of the tape with its beat-up blank label, its spools, its control buttons. You heard the sound of guitars being

plugged in, of drumsticks tapping, and of some voice off in the background screaming: “You ready? You Ready!”

Then a finger poked its way into the shot, scanned across the control buttons, and stopped over the one marked “record.” It lifted then—

The clip stopped.

I did a full body flinch when it cut off, then I watched as the clip’s window shrank into a little photo of the tape player and floated off to the top, left corner of the page. It settled there in the corner, standing out against the black background with a dazzling, silver border. “‘Find me’ - 1 of 60,” it read underneath the photo in a font as dazzling and silver as the border. Then the page scrolled quickly back down to its bottom and settled again on the search window.

The cursor was waiting there in the window for me; blinking and pulsating, taunting me to try again. My fingers hovered above my keyboard and pulsated along with it.

I quickly pulled up the blog to create a post about the website and the videos. The name Moses Halverd didn’t even cross my mind. I had the website and the videos to write about, and that would get me my one post for the day. I began writing my post. I explained to my readers about how to find the search window. I explained to them what would happen if they typed “find me” into the window. I started to explain about the video, and tape player and the finger. But as I was typing in that sentence and the tips of my fingers went to tap out the word “tape” on my keyboard, the only thing in the world I could think of for some reason was

Rod's Walkman, and his headphones, and the way he had looked just hours before when he was leaning up there against my desk.

I looked over what I had written, and immediately felt like the biggest asshole in the world. There it was in front of me. The *fast and simple* stuff Rod had barked at me about. The Facebook post had come in not twenty minutes before and there I was sitting at my desk typing away, explaining everything to the whole world, to make their day and their lives just a little bit easier.

I started hearing Rod's voice sounding off in my head: *Somebody has to do something about it. Who's it gonna be?* I knew it was just a bunch of hopeless, blaze-of-glory bullshit, but that didn't mean that it was completely wrong. It didn't mean that I could just easily ignore it.

I read back over my writing again. I read back over a third time and fourth. I needed the post, but putting that piece of writing up would have been a huge slap in the face to Rod, and I just couldn't bring myself to do that to the man. I thought quickly and deleted my post. Instead of explaining everything for my readers in clearly stated sentences, I typed in a bunch of questions about the website that would point them in the right direction: *Is Stek Mainard trying to say something here? Is there something hidden here behind the black?*

It wasn't a full-blown stand like Rod was looking for, but at least it was something. At least it was making people think. I posted it and went back to searching.

I started entering any word that I could think of—band, music, drums, guitar. “Guitar” was the second word that opened a clip, and again the window popped up

in the middle of the screen. This time it showed Stek standing alone with a guitar case out on an empty bridge. As always, his hair fell over his face, and he was standing at the center of the bridge, facing out toward the water. The shot panned out and then Stek took a couple steps back, before he began sprinting toward the ledge of the bridge. As he neared the ledge, he swung back his guitar case and then began to heave it forward to throw it off into the water.

But right as the guitar case was about to leave his hand and go sailing over the ledge, the clip stopped and the window shrank down again. This time it went down to the bottom of the page and froze there. “‘Guitar’ -58 of 60.”

I kept going. I found “Record,” clip 8, which showed a kid with long hair purchasing an album and bringing it home to play it. You saw the kid shifting through a stack of albums at a record shop, you saw him purchasing the album from a cashier, you saw him walking home, album in hand, staring at it with big, wild eyes, you saw him getting home and running to his record player and placing the record on the turntable. But before he dropped the needle and the music started playing—the clip stopped.

I found “Dive,” clip 20, which showed a kid with long hair up on stage during the middle of a random concert about to do a stagedive. You saw him run toward the crowd. You saw him jump into the air. But before he fell down into the waiting hands of the audience—the clip stopped.

I found “Fight,” clip 14, which showed two boys, one with short hair and one with long hair, in the middle of a circle of kids about to get into a fight. You saw the two boys in the circle spinning around. You saw the kids around them

shouting and cursing. You saw one of the boys, the one with short hair, charge toward the other and pull back his fist. But before the punch was thrown—the clip stopped.

I kept searching. After a while, I was finding clips quicker and quicker. I found “Voices,” I found “Basement,” I found “Father,” I found “Music.” I found “Band” and “Crowd” and “Drums” and “Friend” and a slew of others. The more clips I got, the easier it became to find new ones. You had to work off the discovered clips and get an idea for a word from what was happening in the scene you were watching. There were also things always lurking in the background of clips—signs, lettering, images, posters—things that would lead you in the right direction if you were paying close enough attention.

The blog was once again pulling in a lot of readers. I tried to avoid reading too many of their comments at first, because I wanted to find all the clips for myself. However, the minute I told Calen about the website and the clips and about how I was switching my focus to that for the day, he told me to stay on top of the comments and to compile all the readers’ findings every half an hour and post them to the blog. So that’s what I did, and by the time it was four o’clock, the readers and I had found 59 of the 60 clips, and there was a post up on our blog detailing all fifty-nine discovered words and the clips that accompanied them.

All that was left to discover was one, final clip. Number 60 out of 60.

Some of my coworkers who followed the blog had been stopping by throughout the afternoon to check in on my progress, and with only one clip left to go, a few of them huddled around my desk cube and tried to help me figure out the

last word. Even Calen had joined the crowd to see what would happen when the last clip was found. I had done such a good job of talking up the clips to him, stressing to him about how I thought there were answers about Mainard to be found in them, that I think I had made him a little nervous. He paced around to the different crowd members as he waited, staying as composed as he could while he talked to his employees about different assignments for the website, but he always had one eye in my direction, he was always focused on my computer's screen.

The blog had gone quiet. No new comments were coming in at all. Other sites similar to ours had been covering the clips too, but to the best of my knowledge, no one had cracked the sixtieth clip yet. For the moment, we were all at a standstill. All of us, all of Stek Mainard's fans, were waiting and searching. I don't know exactly what we all expected to find or uncover. I had been telling Calen that there was something to be found in these clips, but I didn't really know if that was true at all. I had just been pulled in by the strangeness of it all. It was the mystery of the whole thing. The clips, the words, I didn't know what it all meant, but I wanted to stay inside of it for as long as I could. I kept watching clip 59 over and over again to dig for clues. The clip's name was "Unplugged" and it showed the closing moments from a Stek Mainard and the Viles concert. The camera was placed at the back of the stage, on top of an amp, and from its view we looked out toward the crowd, and toward Mainard, who stood centered in the shot with his back toward the camera. We saw the closing moments of the show, we saw the crowd going wild, we saw Mainard turn to face the camera with his hair hanging over his face. He walked right toward the camera and reached for the cable that was

running from his guitar to his amp. He held there in the shot for a couple of seconds, his covered face staying centered in the frame, then his arm and body jerked as if to pull the cable out from its plug, but before the cable snapped out of the amp—the clip stopped.

I scrolled back the clip a couple seconds from the end, pausing it on the shot of Mainard's covered face. I had never seen it so up close before. The strands were so thick and wavy, and in a few spots you could see through to the pale skin of his face, although the face itself was indistinguishable. *Why did he always have his face covered?* I couldn't help but wondering as I stared at all that hair. *Why didn't he want us to see it? What didn't he want us to see?*

I was feeling the Pull in that moment, moreso than I had all day. It wasn't just that I wanted to know the answers to those questions. I needed to know their answers. But without anyone to actually answer them, my head went heavy with the weight of all the possibilities. There were no right answers and no wrong answers. And when you give your mind that much freedom, when you take away those borders, it's really hard to shut it down.

I clicked my mouse into the search window and typed in the word "face." When I hit the "enter" key, the other fifty-nine clips that were displayed on the web page all began merging together into one single window. Once all the clips had come together, they began to play in succession as one single video.

Originally the clips had only incorporated the ambient sounds of the action from the scene, but now that all of them had been discovered, a song underscored the footage. It was clearly a "Stek Mainard" song, although it wasn't off *Radio*

Ruins or *Vileation*, and it started off as a slow piano number and then grew into one of those typical Mainard tracks with swelling, heartwrenching guitar riffs and soul-pounding drums. There were no words to it; it was purely an instrumental track. And as its rhythm mounted in the background, the scenes, too, seemed to mount and grow. Seeing them all playing together made their meaning clearer to me. In them we were seeing the life of one kid, of one man, who would eventually become Stek Mainard. There was no name attached to this long-haired character, there were no hard-cut facts about where the scenes were taking place or what exactly they were about, but their story line seemed clear: this was a life being shown, from childhood to the present.

This life, in my opinion, was Stek Mainard's.

The Pull was again affecting me stronger than ever as the video made it to the "Unplugged" scene, and Stek was standing there in the center of the frame with his hair covering his face. After that clip ended, the video moved into the final scene, clip 60 of 60, which no one in our group, in all of Stek's fanbase, had yet seen. In the clip we saw Mainard walking off a stage alone, we saw him step into the shadows of a backstage hallway, we saw his silhouette hovering in the darkness of the background while a single beam of light glowed in the foreground. Then we saw Mainard step forward into the light, we saw his hair still hanging over his face, and we watched, enthralled, as Mainard's head began to lift, and the curtain of his hair began to part, slowly making his forehead visible, then his eyebrows, then the top of his eyes, then—

The clip stopped.

Our little group let out a collective sigh when the clip went out, me again doing a full body flinch that was so strong this time that my chair rolled backwards a couple of inches. I scooted back toward my computer and put together another post that informed our readers about the “Face” clip and what happened when all sixty clips were unlocked. I closed out the post by asking my readers one question: *Is this the story of Stek Mainard’s life being told in this video?*

When I was done I turned back to the group in search of Calen. My fellow coworkers were wide-eyed and glowing. They were talking amongst each other about the clips, sharing with one another for a few brief seconds their collective amazement. Calen, however, was talking to no one. He had his iPhone out and was reading something with his head down and his eyes narrowed and focused.

“Can you believe this?” I said as I walked up to him.

“Believe what?” he responded as he tapped out a text message or something on his phone.

“The clips, of course,” I said, “The video. Don’t you realize what this is? This is Stek Mainard’s life we’re seeing in those clips. He’s trying to tell us who he is. This is what we’re looking for.”

Calen finished up typing his message and then slipped his phone back into the breast pocket of his waistcoat. He glanced over to the computer and then back at me with a set of squinting eyes.

“Is it?” he asked me, tilting his head with the question. “Doesn’t seem like it. I think all we have here is an extravagantly released music video and nothing

more. It's good for building hype, but all in all I don't think it contains the answers I'm asking you to find."

"Just a music video?" I stared back at him shocked, taking offense in how dismissive he was being. "*Just a music video?* You got to see past the surface here, Calen. The guy doesn't speak at all to anyone in the press, doesn't let anything about who he is get out into the public, and then all of sudden there's this video released, directly through his Facebook fanpage? He's reaching out to his fans now, Calen. He wants to let them in somehow. He wants to let us understand who he is. That's what we're seeing here. The story of how he became Stek Mainard."

"Come on, Kent," Calen said with a smirk that rubbed me like sandpaper, "don't be so naïve. You're reading into this way too much. All I see is another dime-a-dozen indie music video with interesting idiosyncrasies and plot lines. To think, however, that there's some truth in it is a reach. It's about as futile as trying to apply the meaning of every song a songwriter writes to his or her life. It's never that cut and dry."

"But don't we have to read into these things? Isn't that the position Stek Mainard's put us all in? With the exception of maybe his songs, we don't have any explicit statements from this man about who he is or what he stands for. And all my research has pointed to the fact that he consciously doesn't let this information out. Then he puts this video out through *Facebook* of all places? He wants us to read into this, Calen. He's telling us something and if we don't read into this video, we're going to miss it."

“Okay,” Calen said, entertaining my idea for second, “if this is the case, the question that still seems the most compelling to me here isn’t about what there’s to find in these clips, it’s still the question I asked *you* to answer for me on Friday: *why* does he do this? *What’s his reason?*”

I went quiet for a second, looking back at my computer’s screen to think over Calen’s question. My last blog post was still up, and from a far I could see that a bunch of people had already commented on the post.

“Maybe he just wants us to think,” I said, staring at my writing up on the screen, my explanation about how to solve the mystery of the clips and what there was to find in them. “These clips, they’re not complete, right? We never see the whole scene, we just get the majority of it and then get cut off right at the end. They’re cliffhangers, essentially, where we’re left to wonder about what exactly happens next or in the case of that last clip, we’re left wondering what Stek Mainard’s face looks like. Maybe that’s why he does things this way. Maybe he wants us to wonder. Maybe he wants us to feel the Pull for as long as possible.” I paused again and focused back upon my writing in the post. “Because it’s a feeling that, in this world, is entirely too fleeting. It’s a feeling that we don’t get to feel enough.”

“That’s speculation, Kent,” Calen said. His pocket buzzed and he reached for his iPhone. Without taking his eyes off of me, he took the phone out of his pocket and unlocked the screen with the simple flip of his thumb. “Speculation doesn’t make a story—facts do, answers do. Now I’ve asked you to find those answers for me. So let’s put aside all this self-promotional nonsense we got caught

up in today, we gave it a shot and come back tomorrow ready to find those facts and answers for me, okay? We only have a couple more days until this album is released and the demand to know this information about Mainard is higher than ever.” He was pointing at me now, but with his phone, not his finger. “We got to strike why the iron is hot. When people Google ‘Stek Mainard’ I want our blog to be the top link in the search results, and I want your name to be along side it. Got it?”

Calen didn’t give me the chance to answer his question or even provide a slight nod, he just spun back toward his office and started walking away with his eyes fixated on his phone. There was no need for an answer. I had already committed myself to the assignment. In his eyes, all I needed was refocusing.

I stood in the same spot there next to my desk for a second, staring at the ground and still trying to find a way to make Calen see my point, even though he was no longer there in front of me. I looked up to where he used to be standing and with him no longer there I noticed for the first time that I was looking right in the direction of Rod’s desk. His chair was empty and his desktop was clear. I looked around the office for him, but he was nowhere to be found.

During the next two days, Stek Mania would escalate into full-on hysteria. On Tuesday, the craziness that had been ignited by the clips, was sparked again by another “contact” from Mainard. Again the initial “contact” came through

Facebook in the form of an unusual status update; this time the word “Underneath” accompanied the link to the band’s website. When I clicked over to it, the all black page and the clips from the day before had completely disappeared. In its place was only that standard photo shot of Mainard, with his hair hanging down over his face. The photo was the background of the webpage, and on my computer’s wide screen the picture seemed to loom there for a moment in front of me. This was Stek’s way of staring down his fans. This was how he connected. And just like the day before I felt the questions come rolling into my head, I felt the need to understand.

I put my hand on my mouse and got to work.

The search on this message came rather easy. After trying the same progression of clicking and highlighting, I found a link embedded into the photo, hidden right in the center of the frame, where Stek’s face would have been if not for his hanging hair. I clicked on it and the photo at once became animated. The strands of his hair parted and revealed the outline of a face. There were no eyes, or eyebrows, or nose, or mouth, only blackness and the borderlines of what would have been his jaw. In the black of the face another video began playing, this time what was seen was Mainard standing in front of a brick wall, again with his hair hanging down over his face. After a second or two of the camera just moving closer and closer toward him, his head lifted and through the curtain of hair came the face of a man.

My heart raced with excitement as I studied the man’s face. He had bold, brown eyebrows and a long, skinny face. These traits, given Mainard’s hair color

and lanky stature, seemed to fit perfectly and for a second I was convinced that this was Stek Mainard, that this was the face of the man I had been tracking.

But just as I allowed that thought to enter my head, the video continued, switching to another shot with Mainard standing with his hair down just like the shot before it. Again the camera moved in toward his face and the head lifted again, revealing another face that was altogether different than the first. This pattern continued throughout the video, each scene showing Mainard standing somewhere, like in front of church, or out in a field, or in front of a store, and whenever his head lifted there was a different face each time.

I went running to Calen immediately to show him the clip. I barged into his office, telling him about how this video worked and about how there were all the different faces. He didn't want to hear about any of it. He didn't even let me pull the video up on his computer. He just reminded me about our conversation from the day before, and sent me back off to my desk to complete the assignment that he had given me.

I walked out of his office feeling as frustrated as I did the day before, and headed right for Rod's desk. I was again feeling the Pull, but at that point it was beyond just wanting know which face was Mainard's—I had to know. If anyone could help me figure that out it was Rod, after all he had talked to the man before.

When I got to his desk, he was typing something up on his computer and looking as miserable as ever. He had dark bags under his eyes and his hair was all messy. When I asked him what the hell had happened to him, he looked up at me

with his tired eyes and said: “I was up all night planning the revolution. What’s it to you, traitor?”

“I think the revolution has already begun,” I responded. I snatched his keyboard away from him and pulled up the video. Rod watched it intently, studying each face as carefully as I had. I kept asking him which one was Mainard’s as he watched, but he kept yelling at me to be quiet so he could focus.

“So,” I said after the clip finished. “Which one is he?”

Rod stared at me and then shot me a slick, little smile. “I don’t know, Kent. I don’t think I can help you on this one. I just can’t seem to remember.”

“Rod!” I shouted at him. “Don’t mess with me now, man. I need answers.”

“Well,” he said smirking at me. “I guess you’ll just have to figure it out for yourself.”

I didn’t bother arguing with him any further. I went back to my desk and got back to work. I made a post about the new video, which consisted of nothing more than a link to the webpage and the question: *Which face belongs to Stek Mainard?* Then I started making some calls.

I called Halverd again for the hell of it, even though I knew he wouldn’t pick up. I left him one final message and then started thinking of how else I could get in contact with him. My first thought was to try and track down one of the members of the band—Tom Wood, Colin Donahue, or Denny Fisk. If I could get to them and ask them about Halverd or Stek, then that could be the break I needed to get some real answers.

I started tracking them the same way I did Halverd, by making a bunch of calls to people I knew in the industry, musicians, promoters, club managers etc, anyone who might have an idea as to how I could contact one of them. The information I got there led me back to the web, where I was able to track down an email address for Colin Donahue through an old employer, as well as phone number for Tom Wood through his high school's alumni association. I sent out an email for Donahue and left a message for Wood, and waited anxiously for the rest of the day to hear back from them.

As I waited, I couldn't stop myself from clicking back over to the blog and reading all the comments I was receiving up on my latest post about was now being called "The Faces Video" by everybody up on the web. There were over two hundred posts up already, all from people feeling the Pull just like me and trying to figure out which face belonged to Mainard. The frustrating thing was that there wasn't one unanimous choice that the people were claiming was his face. There were five or six of them that the readers seemed to be gravitating toward, and each face had users testifying that they had seen Mainard up close at shows and knew for sure that they could identify him. I read over all the posts a handful of times, but in the end I still couldn't be certain which of the faces belonged to Mainard.

I left the office that day in no better situation than when I entered it that morning. Yeah, I had leads, but what I didn't have were callbacks or messages in return. I had hit a wall that I never saw coming, and with Rod refusing to talk or help me, I walked out of the office feeling more alone than ever.

On Wednesday, it was more of the same. Another message from Mainard came in through Facebook. “I Was There,” the status update read this time atop the link back to www.stekmainardandtheviles.com. I clicked on it and went over to the website. The all black web page was up again, but this time there was a long list of links running down the center of the page. The title “I Was There” was at the top of the list, and looking a little more closely at the links, I noticed that each of them was titled after either famous concert venues—The Cavern Club, CBGB’s, The Fillmore Auditorium—or famous music events—Woodstock, the Newport Folk Festival, the Altamont Free Concert. I clicked on the link for the Cavern Club to see where that would take me.

The webpage that loaded was a completed Google Images search for the Cavern Club. Filling out the page were tons of little images of the venue, the majority of them showing the Beatles up on stage and performing there live. Thinking there was something wrong, I refreshed the page and awaited something else to come up, but nothing changed. I scrolled around a bit and looked at all the pictures of the Cavern Club, because I knew there was something I needed to find. Just like with the last two messages, I knew I needed to move past the surface and find what Stek Mainard wanted me to discover. I was studying every picture that came up pretty hard, looking for some connection that would lead me back to Stek Mainard.

It wasn’t until about the tenth or eleventh picture that I discovered what I was looking for. It was a picture of the Beatles playing up on stage at the club. The photo had been taken from behind the band, so that in the background you could

see the crowded hall of the club and all the fans watching the show. In the front row of the crowd, standing in between two starry-eyed teenage girls was Stek Mainard.

I felt like I was seeing a ghost when I first noticed him. His hair was down in front of his face, and in the black and white of the photo he seemed eerie and strange. I looked a little closer and you could easily tell that the image of Stek Mainard had been collaged into the photo, but that didn't make it any less creepy.

I copied the photo and wrote up a post about it, asking my readers if they could locate Stek Mainard in any of the other links.

I couldn't spend time that day searching for all those photos. I had the album release date quickly approaching, and if I didn't get Calen what he wanted there was a pretty good chance I could lose my job. I sold myself on the idea that I wasn't looking for his answers anymore, I wasn't looking for those facts that he wanted me to churn out to the public by the end of the week. I was trying to find a way to prove to myself that I was right about why Stek Mainard felt the need to do all this with the websites, and the name changing, and the hiding of his face. I needed to prove this wasn't just hype, and that he wasn't just hiding something. There was a more genuine reason underneath it all. He wanted to tell us who he was in his own way, through his own words, images and ideas. I knew that was the case deep down, but I just needed a way to prove it, if not to Calen, then to myself.

With nobody picking up my calls or returning my messages, I really only had one place else to turn to: the comments. The comments section of the blog had been brimming over the last couple days with posts from people claiming to have

had personal contact with Stek Mainard at some point in time. There were plenty of leads to follow right there underneath my nose. Many of them, I was sure, would turn out to be nothing, but if I could find just one that led me somewhere, that helped me learn something about Stek that I didn't know, then it would all be worth it.

So I started sifting through those back comments, post by post, emailing any reader whose story about meeting or seeing Stek Mainard seemed significant. In the email I told them about who I was and why I was contacting them, and then I bolded my office phone number and asked them to call me if they had details that could help me. By around three o'clock, I had received about a dozen calls from my readers. In talking to them, I could tell that they were all people just like me, who were trying to figure out what Stek's games were all about.

For the most part, though, these calls led me nowhere. It was interesting to hear about all of the callers' experiences talking to Mainard or seeing him play live, but as for real leads on how to go about contacting him or anyone in connection with him, I came away with very little. Just after five o'clock I was thinking about calling it quits again for the day, when I received one last phone call from one of my readers.

The man on the other end of the line sounded older than me, maybe in his forties, I thought, as he explained to me in this deep voice who he was and which comment he had made on the blog. His story to tell me wasn't about meeting Stek Mainard or anything like that; instead, in his comment he had actually claimed that

he had identified where one of the clips from the “Find Me” videos had been taken place.

“It’s the eighth clip. ‘Record.’ It takes place in a little record shop on South Street here in Philly,” he said. “It’s called Vin’s Vinyl. I used to go in and out of there all the time buying records. You only see the inside of the shop for a couple of seconds in the video, but there’s this Nirvana sticker on the cash register that you can see. I’ve stood next to that cash register enough times to know that the sticker in the video is the same one in the store.”

“What good does this do me exactly,” I asked, cutting to the point.

“Well here’s the kicker,” he responded. “I used to talk to the owner of the place, Vin, all the time when I went in there. And he’d always be telling me to look out for a record by one of his former workers named Adam Stecker. The guy talked about this Stecker kid like he was his son, too”

I damn near dropped the phone when I heard the man say the name Adam Stecker. For the first time since I had started my search, I actually felt closer to finding Stek Mainard. I asked the man some questions about the shop, specifically about the owner, Vin.

“That’s the thing,” he said in this sad way that made me nervous. “He recently died and the store changed hands. But whoever now owns it allowed Mainard to make that video in the shop. They’ll know something for sure.”

I thanked the man, took down his contact information just in case, and then hung up the phone.

I had the number for Vin's Vinyl pulled up on google in a matter of seconds, and I called it right away. It only took two rings for somebody to pick up.

"Hi," I said into the phone. "I'm looking for some information on one of your former employee's, a guy by the name of Adam Stecker."

The man on the other end of the line didn't say anything in response at first. All I could hear was his breathing, which grew heavier in the silence.

"We can't share any personal information about our former employees with customers or inquirers," the man said nervously into the phone. "I'm sorry, pal."

"Well can you at least tell me if you've seen him recently? Or if he's come into the store to film something?"

Again the man paused and breathed.

"I'm sorry. I can't help you," he said in a rush and then hung up the phone.

I tried calling back several times that night, but nobody picked up. The man's pauses were enough reason for me to keep pursuing the lead, but I knew calling him over and over again wasn't going to get me far.

So I walked into Calen's office and told him that I needed to go to Philadelphia in the morning.

At 10AM the next morning I was standing across the street from Vin's Vinyl, staring at the metal shutters over the store's windows and waiting for someone to come and open them. Despite the fact that I had gotten up at 6AM and

driven two hours from Baltimore, I was wide awake and ready for what was ahead of me.

It was a little past ten when a guy finally approached the store's shutters with a key in hand and opened up the store for business. I waited for a couple minutes before I made my entrance. I didn't want to startle the guy. I needed to talk to him, and if I scared him off too quickly, I would have essentially come along way for nothing. So I sat outside for about a half an hour, fighting the cold January air and thinking about how I was going to ask him about Stecker.

When I entered the shop, I played as if I had been there before, and I knew exactly what I was looking for. I gave the guy behind the counter a little nod and walked right back to the M section of the rock stacks and started looking through albums. I took my time, stealing a glance every now and again toward the counter to look at the guy. On my third glance over I noticed the Nirvana sticker on the side of the register. I had studied it the night before in the clip and looking at it then in the store, I knew that my reader had called it right.

Adam Stecker—Stek Mainard—had been in the store I was standing in right then, and the man only a couple of feet away from me had been there and maybe seen his face. At least, that was what I was hoping.

I picked up a copy of *Vilelation* and brought it up to the counter.

“Good choice,” the guy said, pulling out a bag.

I played it as cool as I could, not saying anything at first, but when I saw the *Radio Ruins* poster hanging behind him, I made my move.

“You know anything about the new album?” I asked as I paid for the record.

“I do,” he said smiling. He handed me my bag and my change. “It’s his best yet. May be the best record of the year, if you ask me.”

“I look forward to listening to it,” I said, and went as if to walk out of the store. I stopped myself after two steps and turned back in his direction. “You know, I heard somewhere that he used to work here. Is that true?”

“Where did you hear that?” the man said, staring back at me.

“I actually read it. Online. On a blog. Someone said they used to come in here all the time and talk to Vin, the old owner. He said Vin was always talking about one his former employees. A guy by the name of Adam Stecker.”

“Adam Stecker and Stek Mainard sound like two different people to me.”

“Yeah, that’s what I used to think.”

“Who are you, pal?” the man asked, shuffling out from behind the counter.

I broke down and told him that I was from *RockRag*. “I’m a music journalist,” I said. “I need to know if Adam Stecker worked here. I’m working on a story about him and I’m trying to learn about his past. Now, did he work here?”

“He did,” the guy said, getting a little angry about it. “You happy? Like ten or fifteen years ago with my uncle Vin. But that was before I took over this place and I don’t know anything else about him.”

“You sure?” I said pushing the subject. “Because I have reason to believe he was in here recently doing some filming for a music video.”

“No,” he said. “He wasn’t here for that. Some big guy with a beard did that on his behalf. Came in with some kid and shot for ten minutes then left.”

“Was this big guy’s name Moses?” I asked quickly.

“Yeah. Mo. That’s right.”

I started asking him a bunch of questions about Moses Halverd, about where to find him. But the guy didn’t know anything. He had only met for that handful of minutes and then he hadn’t heard from him again.

“What do you want with him anyway? If you want find anything out about Adam Stecker, you probably want to find the friend.”

“The friend I asked?”

The man squatted down below the counter and out of sight for a second. Then he shot back up a second later with a picture in his hand.

“Tim,” he said, pointing to the photo. “Tim Jerome. He and Stecker used to work here together with my uncle.” He held up the photo and all three of them we’re there in the shop, smiling for the photo behind the counter. I studied Adam Stecker’s face for a moment. I couldn’t believe that what I was looking at in the photo was what just days before I was dying to see.

The man at the counter had told me that he had talked to Jerome a couple months earlier at his uncle’s funeral. Jerome had said he was working as a teacher, somewhere outside of Baltimore, but that’s all the man could remember. It was enough for me.

I was able to track him down relatively easily on the Internet with that information. I figured out that he worked at Owings Mills High School, right outside Baltimore, and by 3PM that afternoon I was outside that school in the

faculty parking lot and waiting for Jerome to leave for the day. I remembered his face from the photo pretty well, but there was a faculty picture up online that I had pulled up on my iPhone just in case.

The man at the record shop had let me buy a copy of *Radio Ruins* a day early. I had to give back the copy Rod had leant me, so I needed one anyway. I listened to the album on the CD player in my car as I waited for Jerome. In my head, I couldn't stop thinking about all the questions I wanted to ask the man. I had come a long way to get to that point, and I was ready for it all to end.

I picked up and studied the cover of *Radio Ruins*. It was a collage, depicting a valley filled with towering walls of broken clock radios and stereos. In the top left corner there was a cutout of a boy with long hair, standing on a ledge, and reaching out toward the valley. *Radio Ruins*, the lettering on the cover read. *Stek Mainard and the Viles*.

I looked up and there was Jerome striding out of the building, but for some reason I brought my eyes back down to the cover of the album, to the boy out on the ledge, who was trying his hardest to reach all those radios down in the valley. For a second, I pictured myself out on that ledge, reaching back toward all those radios, all that history that so many people had just left behind in the dirt.

I looked back up at Jerome and saw that he was at his car. He opened up his trunk and threw his workbag inside. All I needed to do was step out of the car and approach him. Then I would have my story, I'd have all of those facts and answers that Calen wanted.

I looked back down at the boy with long hair, feeling the strain of his arm in my own.

I watched Jerome drive off. I didn't go after him.

Alana Masterson and The Gum Tree

We had an hour until Vin's viewing. So coming out of dinner, I suggested to Stek that we should grab a drink somewhere to kill time and because these things always went "smoother with the help of a little liquid courage."

He agreed, flipping on his dark denim jacket and nodding his big head of hair yes.

At Stek's suggestion, we had met at the South Street Diner, one of our old hang outs from when we were kids, and since he had arrived first and gotten the table, I wasn't able to get a full look at his get-up until just then.

He was wearing a pair of slim black jeans that had frayed edges at the heel, and under his jacket I could see the fastened buttons of his vest, which kept the garment tight over his slim, white dress shirt.

"What? No suit," I said eyeing him up.

"I don't own one."

He reached down and zipped up his jacket with a quick pull.

"Well you could've at least put on a tie or something, man," I told him as I straightened mine.

"Don't own one of those either," he said. He pushed his hands deep into his jacket pockets and shrugged.

"Well that's the reason you become a musician right there, huh? No ties, no suits, no nine to five job, no responsibilities." I started to laugh, thinking about the

towering stack of essays I needed to grade for my students by Monday. “You lucky jerk. You never have to grow up.”

He nodded slightly and dropped his eyes for a moment. He focused for a second on the sidewalk, then looked back at me with a smile. “Yeah, it’s *one* of the reasons.”

I stared at him there for a couple of seconds. My oldest friend in the world, the kid who I spent hours with down in his grandmother’s basement listening to music, playing music, and talking about how we were going to do those two things forever. He had done it. He had become a musician. He, unlike me, had actually achieved the dream.

He didn’t look any different. To me he was the same Adam, the same old Stek with his lanky frame and his never-ending hair. He got embarrassed by me looking at him, so he dropped his head, bringing his hair downward with it to cover his narrow face.

In this pose he was different. The hair down, the sharp shoulders raised. It was the way he performed. The way he had always performed. At the start, though, the pose came out of fear. Stepping out of the basement and onto a stage wasn’t the easiest of transitions, especially for fifteen-year-old kids. We had to find a way to make it work so we could play. With our hair being as long as it was then, the solution seemed pretty clear: we dropped our heads, kept our eyes on our fretboards, and prayed not to screw up.

Now, though, the pose seemed professional—calculated and mysterious.
Different.

“I hate your guts,” I joked.

Stek came up out of his bow laughing.

“Hey,” he said through his laughter, “it could have been you, too.”

“Do we always need to have this conversation whenever we get together?” I snapped back.

Stek rolled his eyes and lost his smile. He knew where I was going.

“You need talent to get where you’re at. Real eye-catching, ear-snagging talent. You got it. I don’t. And as good as you are, I still don’t think you’re good enough to drag my talentless ass to the top.”

“The top?” Stek said, his face now losing all sense of humor. “I’ve got one EP about to come out on a local indie label. That’s not the top where I come from. And since we’re both from the same place you should know that, too.” He paused, which let the fear grow in his head. “Hell, I could be back doing open mike nights in six months if nobody wants to listen to my record.”

He burrowed his hands back down again into his pockets and pulled his chin down into his jacket.

“There you go again. Always bracing for the worst,” I scoffed. “Could you actually just enjoy the ride for once, instead of always worrying about how it might go off the tracks?”

He rolled his eyes again and went silent.

The wind picked up, hitting me and Stek right on our cheeks and causing us to turn our backs into the wind. It was late March, and that day had brought one of those sun-filled afternoons that was warm enough to trick you into thinking it was

spring. But of course it wasn't. It was still winter. Still cold. And when that sun went down and the wind picked up, you quickly remembered what month your calendar displayed.

I scrunched my neck down into my pea coat like a turtle and waited for the gust to stop. In the street a couple of leaves floated up in the wind, sailing off down South Street in unison like the tail of a kite. In the night the street glowed; the store signs, the TLA marquee, the lampposts, the headlights, they all lifted into the night's sky in neon shades of red, yellow, blue, and white.

I peeked back at Stek and his cheeks had been colored red by the wind. In feeling the cold burn on my cheeks, I was sure that I was glowing red, too.

"About that drink," I said. The cold air and the wind had reminded me why we were there: Vin's viewing that evening and his funeral the next day. Vin was our former boss. For a good part of our childhood and teenage years we worked at his record shop, Vin's Vinyl, right there on South Street in Philadelphia. He had brought us in when we were twelve, and we both worked there into our early twenties. But to say Vin was just our boss wouldn't be telling the whole story. He was the guy that first made us really listen to music, that taught us everything we knew about music, that gave us attention when no one else would, that gave Stek his first guitar. He was more than just a boss or friend. There wasn't a term for what he was for us, but there was feeling inside that told me and Stek that he was important. And with him dying of a heart attack just a couple of days earlier, that feeling was now more present than ever.

“Where did you want go?” We were standing on the corner of Second and South now, looking out over to Second Street and Headhouse Square. “There’s Downey’s, there’s Dark Horse, there’s—”

“Forget these places,” Stek said, putting aside his frustration. “I got a better idea.”

He told me to head over to my car, which was parked right near us there on Second, and to give him a couple of minutes.

“Just get it running and get it warm,” he said as he back-peddled away from me down Second. “I’ll be back in five.”

I watched him turn and hop off down the street, then I walked over to my car and got inside. Exactly five minutes later he was back, falling down into the passenger seat beside me with two brown bags in his hands.

“One for you,” he said handing me a bag, “and one for me.”

I felt the weight of the bottle through the bag’s paper. I gripped it, hooking my fingers around the bottle’s wide, rounded shoulders.

I knew right then what we would be drinking.

“Homestyle sauce?” I asked Stek.

“Homestyle sauce,” he said back with a smile, dropping his “o” in home just like Vin always did. Stek pulled out his bottle and snapped it open with a quick turn of the wrist. Then he knocked down a big swig and followed it with a forced, “Ahhhhhh.”

“Shut up,” I said, laughing at his fake refreshment. I pulled out my bottle and looked at its label. *Philadelphia Whiskey*, it read in amber, constitutional script,

The Heritage Whiskey. “I should have known what you were scheming. I can’t even believe they still make this poison.”

I snapped my bottle’s top off and took a swig. The liquid burned on my tongue and tasted like what I always imagined rubbing alcohol mixed with honey would taste like. It was terrible, but as I swallowed it back and felt the burn heat my throat, I immediately remembered so many teenage nights that had gone down just like that, with me and Stek hanging out in a car somewhere, sipping on bad, cheap booze and just talking about music and the future.

“Ahhhhhh,” I said after I got down my first swig, “just as fucking horrible as I remember.”

In the car we held our own private wake for Vin. We talked about the memories we had of him, the memories of him taking us out to buy records, of him giving Stek that first guitar, of him flipping out on us in the store whenever we did something stupid.

“What’s going to happen to the shop, you think?” I asked Stek, finally getting around to the question that the two of us had been avoiding.

I hadn’t been to the place in a while, not since that past summer when I had come back into town to visit my parents and to see Stek play a show. Baltimore had become my home, ever since I went to college there in the city at Loyola College. When I graduated, I got a job teaching high school English at a school in the Baltimore suburbs, so I stayed down there.

Stek on the other hand had never gone to college, opting instead to pursue his music career in Philly, so I knew he was in or out of the shop all the time. He had

even worked there as recently as a year before, when he was struggling to get his career going and needed some steady income.

“I guess we’ll find that out either today or tomorrow,” he said. His face all of sudden froze and his eyes locked onto the dash. “It’s crazy, man. I was just in there a week ago today, dropping off a copy of my EP to Vin. We were supposed to meet this afternoon so he could tell me what he thought.”

He snapped out his stare with a blink and then took a long swig. I didn’t know for sure, but I felt that he was coming to the understanding, just like I was, that he would never know what Vin thought of his record.

“What name did you settle with?” I asked him, changing the subject. Stek had made a habit of changing his stage name almost every year. His real name was Adam Stecker and he had performed under it for a while, but he had also performed under a bunch of another names: Robert Stekreich, Adam Stekel, Robert Steck.

“Stek Mainard,” he said. He took a long drink and then looked out over the dash. “Stek Mainard. That’s the one.”

“Stek Mainard. It’s got cachet, I’ll tell you that.” I knocked back a swig and thought about the name. I never actually asked why he needed a stage name, but I always guessed that when both your mom and your dad run out on you when you’re just a little kid, it’s real easy not to get attached to your birth name.

“Why is it that you do all this name changing and stuff anyway?” I said, my curiosity getting the best of me.

Stek was staring at his bottle, rolling it around with his hands so that the whiskey flickered with the light from the streetlamp.

“It keeps people guessing,” he said still playing with the bottle. “It gets them thinking. It’s a game.”

I thought about his answer as I downed another mouthful. I didn’t really understand it, but I guessed it seemed like an interesting thing to do. I looked back over at Stek and I could see his eyes getting heavy with that fear again.

“You know this record is going to be great, man. I’ve seen you play all of those songs on it live and they’re solid. They’re the best songs you’ve every written, and I’ve heard all of your stuff. People are going to love it.”

Stek kept rolling the bottle in his hands the whole time. Then he pulled his head up and looked out his window.

“I really need this, Tim,” he said. “And I’m just afraid that I didn’t—”

“Don’t do that,” I yelled at him. “Don’t doubt yourself! Have some goddamn faith for once in your life!”

“Well, it’s hard to have any faith when my whole life has been marked by disappointment. Fucking every time I get something good going, every time there is hope, something comes along and fucks it up. And with Vin dying right before the record comes out...it just doesn’t feel right. It feels like another disappointment is on its way.”

I bit my lip and ran my hand through my hair. I knew what he was talking about with all the disappointment. I had been there when his mom left him, when his dad kept coming in out of his life and only making things worse, and when his grandmother died right before our senior year of high school, leaving him homeless and familyless at one of the most important times of his life.

“And it’s not just the whole Vin dying thing that’s got me shook up either,” he said, looking back out his window.

“What else is it then?” I said back. I shook my head again and sucked down my biggest gulp of whiskey yet.

“They cut it down last week.”

“Who cut what down?” I responded.

He turned to face me finally. I could see that fear that had been in his eyes was developing into tears.

“The gum tree,” he said staring right at me. “The city cut it down.”

He kept staring at me, the tears welling up in his eyes but not falling yet. I looked away from him. I couldn’t face his eyes, especially now knowing that he was thinking about me, too, when he was talking about all that disappointment. He was thinking about how I too had hurt him, about how I too had left him, all those years ago.

I turned my head and looked across the dash, wishing at that very moment that I still had my long hair to hide behind.

My Ma and dad told me the “good news” through tears: we were moving—out of the city and into the ‘burbs in Jersey. My dad’s dedication to “The Firm” had finally paid off: he was off the road, he had “moved up the ladder.” For all his hard

work he received a new job in the big office over on 21st and Arch Street and the right to finally stay put. Somehow, though, that meant we were moving out to Jersey, to a place called Haddon-something, into a house that my father had already bought as a surprise for the family.

“Some surprise!” I yelled. I felt the blood rushing to my head.

I went into the facts: I was seventeen. I went to school in the city. I had a job in the city. My best friend lived in the city. My home was *in the city*. There was no reason for any of that to change.

“None of it would change,” my dad pleaded.

“Yeah, except for the home part.”

They went into some family sitcom monologue about how this would be good for me, about how the suburbs were the proper place for kids to grow up. It was going to be like starting a new life for them and me and my sister.

“Sister?” I asked. I looked around our living room, suddenly expecting a little adopted kid to pop out from under a couch pillow or from behind my dad’s leather recliner.

My Ma pointed to her stomach: “Surprise number two!”

“Come on, Tim,” my dad started up. “We’re going to live in a real house, with a real yard, set in a real community and environment that’s meant for families and their children.”

“That’s all great for her,” I said flinging my hand in the direction of my Ma’s stomach. “But I’m going to be in the house for what another year, then I’m

off to college. I'm still not seeing what this does for me. Other than make my life harder."

My dad went into explaining our family's "new way," where things were going to be "easier" on everyone. There was going to be more time for each other, more time for going on vacations, more time for going to sporting events and dinners and movies.

His explanation was supposed to make me feel better about the situation, but every bit of it only made me feel worse. I couldn't imagine this great, new life I would be living, because I could only think of the one I had already lived. In that life I had two parents that worked so much they never were around. And because of that, ever since I was about ten or eleven I had been taking care of myself: making my own meals, doing my own laundry, shopping for my own clothes. In that life if I wanted records or a new bass guitar, I had to work for it. If I wanted a car or to go to college, I had to save up for it. There was nothing easy about that life, nothing that came free, and now all of sudden I was supposed to just pretend like it never happened because I was going to get to live in Jersey for a year and wake up to the smell of grass clippings and fresh air, instead of exhaust fumes and burnt rubber.

"You mean there'll be more money?" I said. I was staring down my Ma's stomach with red-hot eyes.

"Don't think of it that way." My dad went into full-on lawyer mode. "Think of it as one year to be a normal, care-free kid for once. I know we couldn't give that to you for your whole life, but isn't this better than not having it at all?"

“*Normal? Care-free?* What’s is this bullshit?” I started yelling again. “Do you really think it’s that easy for me? Do you? I can’t just move across the bridge and become a completely different person!”

“Isn’t this what you’ve always wanted? For us to be a family?” my Ma asked, the tears coming into her eyes again.

“Maybe ten years ago. Now it’s too late. Enjoy your *new* life in *New Jersey!*” I yelled. “I’m staying here.” I thudded up the stairs and into my room, slamming the door behind me as hard as I could.

The conversation was over.

The next day in school was hard. For one, I had to look at all the preppy suburb jerks that surrounded me every day from 8AM-2:15PM at school and imagine what it would be like to see them all the time on my block, at my grocery store, at my 7-11. And two, I also had to find a way to break the news to Stek and to tell him that my parents were screwing me over and, by extension, him as well. That talk was going to be hard as hell and I wasn’t looking forward to it. Throughout the day I kept having it in my mind. I saw me standing in front of Stek with my head and hair down, telling him the bad news. Stek would always flip out, sometimes yelling at me, sometimes punching me. I always let him just go with his anger. I never tried to calm him down or stop him from hitting me. I just let him go, because deep down I knew I deserved it.

Like I said, I wasn’t looking forward to that talk. Not one bit. And what made it worse was that the shitstorm had already swooped into Stek’s life. Just a couple of weeks earlier his grandmother had died in her sleep at the age of 89. “It

was nature's way of taking her." That's what the doctor had said about her passing to Stek. It was a nice way of thinking about it, but what Stek would have to deal with as a result couldn't be described any other way than as a surefire shitstorm. Her passing meant you-know-who would be coming into town—his dad. A scumbag, washed up, never-was drummer, who walked out on Stek his mom when he was six. Stek's mom went chasing after him not too long after that and despite the fact that he *knew* Stek was living all alone with his mom, Stek's grandmother, in Philly, the only times he came back into town were if he needed money or a place to shack up for a while. And as soon as he got what he wanted, he was up and gone, leaving pain and empty promises behind in his every footstep.

So all that was already going on and now there was this: his best friend moving to New Jersey.

I avoided Stek all day long at school. I told him I had a ton of homework to do in my other classes and stuff, and every time I saw him I was either on the move or had my nose buried into a book. After school we made our way to work at Vin's on South Street. I was thinking there, in the safety of the record shop, would probably be the best place to tell him. It would be just me and him and we could talk it out as best we could there. With customers coming in and Vin there in the back, it would never get too out of hand or loud. It seemed right.

After taking the bus from school, we walked down South Street toward Vin's. Stek didn't say much on the walk, which was fine by me because I didn't trust myself not slip up and say something before we got into the shop. We crossed over 3rd Street and walked past J.C. Dobbs and Lorenzo and Sons pizza. Up ahead

of us we could see the marquee sign for the TLA and right across the street from it, casting a shadow over the storefront of Ishkabibble's Eatery, was the gum tree.

Stek had started it, the gum tree that is, a couple months earlier and right around the time when his grandmother became more shaky and deaf than usual. We had just come back from a fight with some suburb jerks from our school. All the punching and kicking had turned our faces into a broken rainbow of colors: blood red, shiner pink, bruise black and blue. The fight had also left us starving, so our first order of business upon returning to South Street was to get some grub in us and to get in us fast. We had picked Ishkabibble's Eatery because we both were dying for chicken cheesesteaks, and when we had made it to the shop, Stek had paused for a second outside of the place to stare down the nearest tree.

He always got that way after fights and stuff. He never could just let his anger go, even if he'd beaten the shit out of the guy he was fighting. So he'd usually spend some time stewing and staring and beating himself up on the inside.

The tree was this old looking oak that must have sprouted out of the sidewalk decades earlier. Its brown bark was old and craggy. It made me think of the deep wrinkles on Stek's grandmother's face and what she might look like if she could actually become petrified. I didn't know what Stek was thinking, maybe about how he wished he could have gotten in one last punch, but whatever it was it had caused him to take the gum he had been chewing out of his mouth and push it deep down into bark of the tree. Stek had gone inside the shop after that, but I had stayed there outside, looking at the gum and thinking about how it was as pink and slimy as newborn baby's skin.

From then on sticking our gum on the tree became a thing for us, especially after something bad or frustrating happened. Like if I got into a fight with my mom about her and my dad working all the time, I'd stick a piece onto it. If Stek's got into a fight with his grandmother about his dad, he'd stick a piece onto it. Or if we heard about kids at our school drinking and having fun on the weekends while we had to work, we'd each stick a piece onto it. We always had some negative shit going on in lives, so after about a month's time almost half of the tree's trunk had become speckled with gum. And once other people caught on, sticking their own gum up alongside ours on the tree, it wasn't long before there was more gum to look at on the trunk than old, wrinkly bark.

It sounds disgusting when you first think about it, but when you spotted it out on the street, like we did then, the thing was pretty cool to look at. Its bark had become a technicolored collage of Chiclet white, Winterfresh blue, Double Bubble pink, Juicy Fruit yellow, Big Red...well, red. It was like something straight out of a kindergarten art class, but it wasn't just some crayon colored piece of fridge art, it was real. Real enough to make whoever walked by it stop for a second, look up, and wonder as clueless as a kid how in the heck the thing came to be.

Stek went right for the tree as soon as it was in sight, pulling out his blue wad of Bazooka Joe and getting himself ready to stick it. The usual gumming protocol was to "gum and run," also referred to as "stick it and ditch it"; you'd walk by the tree, plug your piece in the nearest gap, and keep walking on by like nothing had happened. That was the safest way of going about it. This time, though, Stek didn't seem to care about getting caught. He stomped up to the trunk, pushed his piece

into it hard, and kept pressing, smushing, and grinding the gum down into the bark until he was Bazooka Joe blue in the face.

“My dad’s selling my grandmom’s house,” he said when he stepped away from the tree, “he told me I have to be out by the end of the month.”

I stopped chewing my gum, my jaw going numb from the shock. I quickly forgot all about having my talk with him.

“He can’t be serious?”

“You’ve met my dad,” Stek said. He turned and started walking again. “The only thing he is serious about is screwing me over.”

“But can he do that? You’re a minor. Can’t social services do something for you?”

“TJ, I’m seventeen. In a couple of weeks I’ll be eighteen. I’m an adult in everyway but age. Social Services won’t do anything for me. I’ve faced it: I’m on my own from here on out.”

We crossed over the street at Sixth and closed in on Vin’s. I was thinking that what Stek was saying couldn’t be true. I knew he was older than me because his parents had started him in school late, but he was still a junior in high-school just like me, and with a year left until he graduated he couldn’t just become homeless.

“Could you talk to people at school? Maybe—”

“TJ,” he said. “I’m on my own. I said I’ve faced it. I don’t want anybody’s help.”

We stopped out front when we got to Vin's, the two of us standing there quiet in front of the store's two big front windows that had been covered from top to bottom with music posters.

“So what's your plan now?” I asked Stek.

“Same plan we've always had,” he said. He reached for the handle of the door and opened it with a pull. “Chase the dream.”

That dream was the one he and I had shared since we were about ten years old. We wanted to become musicians, and not just any old musicians, we wanted to be like the guys we idolized—people like Kurt Cobain and Robert Pollard, Steve Marriott and Mick Jagger—musicians who could write and sing songs so powerful that you weren't the same after listening to them. For us it wasn't about money or chicks or any of that played out rock n' roll bullshit. It was about reaching people. It was about changing people's lives in the playtime of record. We talked about that dream every now and then when we were down in Stek's basement and either playing and recording our own music or just listening to the records of bands we loved.

But we talked about it the most on nights when I slept over his place. The two of us would be crashing on the couches in the basement and right before we'd drift off to sleep there would be nothing to do but stare up into the basement's blank, white ceiling and listen to how silent and empty the house above us was. That's when we'd really get into it, Stek in particular, talking about specifics about what type of music we wanted to play and how we were going to go about building our career.

That's how Stek was talking now, in Vin's shop, with the reality bearing down on him that in a couple of days he'd be homeless.

"First things first: I need to get a place," he said. We walked into the store and started our normal workday, checking in with Vin in the back and going to work on the stack of albums he needed us to reshelve. "It's got to be something that's cheap, of course. I don't need anything that's nice as hell. As long as it's got a shower and place for me to sleep, that'll be cool. I'd love to find a place with a basement, though."

Stek went on as we worked, talking about how he was going to go about getting a band together and playing gigs. He wasn't going to bother playing the open mike and battle of the bands stuff like he and I had done over the last couple of years. "I'm done with that. It's time to get serious. That means a real band, real rigs, and a real sound." To get all that he wanted to put ads out in papers for band members and to start going to more local bands' shows to meet people who were in the scene and knew how to get gigs.

He talked throughout all of our opening tasks—the re-shelving, the sweeping, the dusting, the inventory check—and he was still going when we finally settled behind the counter.

"Are you okay, man," I asked after I got a look at the clock and realized that my normally quiet best friend had been talking for almost an hour.

"Aren't you listening to my plan?"

"I hear the plan, but I'm asking you if you're okay. Like okay, okay."

I pressed him with a stare—locking my eyes on his and not letting go. He went to respond, but stopped himself, closing his mouth and taking another second to think about my question.

For the first time in an hour he was finally quiet.

“I doesn’t hurt anymore,” he said after a minute. “I’ve gone through this stuff too many times and at this point it’s just expected. I told him this time, though, that it wasn’t him walking out on me, but me walking out on him. I told him he could take the fucking house. I didn’t care. ‘I’m the one leaving now,’ I said to him. ‘I’m going out and making my own life, without you, and I’m going to give myself the kind of life that your worthless ass never could.’”

His eyes were fixed on the counter and he was breathing hard. I could tell that he had been lying. I knew it still hurt, probably now more than ever. But I didn’t say anything. For the moment we lived that lie, because I understood, just by looking at his face, that Stek really needed it.

It was hard for me to say anything, too, because with him reliving the argument with his dad for me, I couldn’t stop reliving the one I had with my parents just the night before. I was thinking about the shouting and my mom crying and the picture my dad had shown me of the house—of our house—right during the middle of it all.

As soon as I thought of that picture it got stuck in mind and wouldn’t leave. I kept imagining it with its white siding and black shutters and those two tall columns it had right outside of the door. Then I kept thinking about walking through those columns and opening the house’s heavy, red door to find my dad and

mom sitting inside with smiles on their faces and a baby's crib between them. In my mind they waved me inside, my mom standing up to greet me, while my dad reached down to pick up the baby. But in that thought I didn't move forward toward my parents, I didn't turn back away from them either. I only stood there in the doorway, knowing I was home, but feeling guilty as all hell about it.

"I'm in," I said to Stek.

He snapped out his stare and looked over at me funny.

"Yeah. I've been figuring that all along," he said. "Why wouldn't you?"

I panicked for a second, choking on my tongue.

"I just thought telling you would make you feel better," I finally spit out. "I'm just letting you know you don't have to do this alone."

Just then Vin stomped out of the back with a roll of posters in his hands. He was wearing one of his typical baggie, black t-shirts that blanketed the rolls of his stomach and chest. With his ripped jeans, forearm tattoos, and long, hair back in a ponytail, Vin always reminded me of some the teenage kids we were always seeing around the shop and shows, street tough kids like Stek and me who looked and acted older than their age let on. Except with Vin and him being up in his fifties, with a look like that it was as if it was the other way around, like he was desperately still trying to be like us.

"New promo posters," Vin said. He tossed the roll of posters onto the counter, then pushed past Stek and shuffled his way out to the racks to check our work. "Switch out the old ones in the windows with those. I got doubles in the back if you guys want any of 'em."

Vin always let us take any extra promo posters home that we wanted. The basement at Stek's grandmother's house was covered with them wall to wall, as well as with all the road signs Stek had nailed up to the walls to make the recordings we made down there sound like the ones on old records.

"What are you two goofs talking about?" Vin said, peeking back at us from the rack. "You're both a little flushed in the face. You been fighting again or something?"

Stek opened his eyes wide, stared at me, and shook his head "no." *Don't tell him*, the look said. I read it loud and clear. I reached for the posters and changed the topic.

"It's just stupid school stuff. Don't worry about it." I rolled the rubber band off the posters and let their ends unravel. I looked over to the store's front windows, sizing up the new posters with the old ones to find a new pattern. The afternoon sun was heating them from the outside, causing the posters to turn the windows into two shadowy, brick walls. I thought about the secret forts Stek and I used to make in my playroom out of stacked pillows, boxes, and bins. The insides of them were always dark, even though the light in the playroom would be on. We'd always feel safe in them, safe to dream and wonder and pretend. We wouldn't come out until my Ma came for us, her legs flashing in the cracks of our walls.

"What do you say about maybe actually letting some light in the joint every once and while?" I said to Vin.

He was flipping through some records in the blues section with his back to us. He didn't seem to be paying attention. I raised my voice and asked him again.

“What? Why would I do that? Those posters are part of my marketing strategy. You know that.”

I searched my brain for the memory of him explaining that to me. I found nothing.

“What marketing strategy?”

“Make people think about us,” Stek said, “the posters make us stand out.”

Stek was counting out the money in his cash register. I couldn't figure out how he knew about it and I didn't.

“He knows it,” Vin said. “TJ, there's three types of people outside that door: the people who always come in here, the people that never would come in here, and the people that might come in here. The first group we already got, the second group can go screw, but that third group, that's the people we got to find a way to get in the store.” Vin looked over to the windows. A silhouette appeared behind the posters, floated from one window to the next, and then disappeared. “Take for instance that guy who just walked by. Say he's in group three. On the South Street strip here there's five other record stores, and that's including that shitbox Tower Records. What separates them is selection and service, but the guy from group three doesn't usually know one store's selection and service quality from the next. All he sees is the surface, the storefronts, and he's usually going to choose who he's buying from based on that. So he walks by these stores a bunch of times,

checks ‘em out from the street, and then one day he thinks: ‘Oh geez, I really want...whatever album.’ Which store is gonna jump first into his mind, outside that friggin’ Tower Records?”

“The one with the posters,” I said, finally starting to get it.

“Bingo,” Vin said. He pulled out a record from the stack he’d been sorting through and walked toward the counter. “Then after he remembers us, more often than not his mind starts wondering: Would they have the record I want? Why do they got all those posters up in the window? What’s that store look like on the inside? And then we got him from there. He’s at the very least coming in next time he walks by, you guys will wow him with your customer service, and then *ching*: we make a sale.”

He had waddled behind the counter at that point and shoed me out of his way. He slid the record he’d pulled out of its plain, green jacket that had a wolf howling on the front of it. The album was Howlin’ Wolf’s *Moanin’ in the Moonlight*. One of Vin’s favorites. I may not have known about Vin’s marketing strategy, but what I did know was that he only played that album whenever sales were down.

He dropped the needle onto the record, and after a couple seconds of piano, Howlin’ Wolf’s big, husky voice was moaning out: *how many more years, have I got to let you dog me around*.

“Now if you guys didn’t friggin’ come in here every other week with your faces looking like something out *Night of the Living Dead*, maybe that guy would come back a couple more times.”

I apologized to Vin, although I knew I didn't need to. He knew why we fought all the time. He knew what we were up against. Stek didn't say anything. He was too busy listening to the song.

"No need for apologies," Vin said. "Best way to rid yourself of the blues is to..."

"Listen to the blues," I said, finishing his favorite saying for him.

Vin cupped his hands over his mouth, and when Howlin' Wolf started blowing out that harmonica, Vin began pretending to play his. His hands trembled with the vibrato of the harmonica, his eyebrows arching up as he did it, even though his eyes were pinched tight and closed. I had seen Vin play just about every air instrument you could think of, with him being a former musician he always needed to try and feel his way through a song. Out of all the air instruments he played, though, I always loved his harmonica the best. I loved the way he stomped and danced while he pretended to play and the way his hands slid across his mouth like he was gnawing at a piece of corn; but what I loved the most was how he never opened his eyes during the song, not even in the parts when there was no harmonica playing at all. He always kept his eyes sealed tight, his body moving, like he never wanted to leave the place that song took him to in his mind.

"If anybody ask about me," Vin and Howlin' Wolf sang together. *"just tell'em I walked out on."*

Stek was watching Vin do his thing, and for the first time all day I saw him crack a smile. I grabbed the posters and the scotch tape from under the counter, then Stek and I went to work. We each took our on window and began rebuilding

the wall. The trick was to find an old poster that was the same size as a new one, and then just swap them, trying to leave no cracks between posters' edges. We both worked on our wall's pattern, not saying very much at all; the two of us just letting Mr. Howlin' Wolf do all the talking for a little while.

As I worked, I was thinking about how I was going to tell my parents about staying with Stek and finding our own place in the city. I let the anger I had felt during our talk boil back up inside me, and all I could think about then was making my talk with my Ma and dad hurt as much as theirs had hurt me. I peeled down the poster in the top, right corner of my window, and the last ray of afternoon sunlight that hit the storefront shot down through the glass and smacked me in the face.

Just then the door opened, and in came walking a girl about my age in a plaid black and gold jumper and knee-high socks. Since I was up on the stepladder right there by the window, from my perspective she was all flowing blonde hair. She felt me right there on top of her and flinched a bit, turning quickly to flash me a surprised smile. I smiled back and then asked if she needed help finding anything.

“No,” she said. “I know exactly what I need.”

She floated off toward the vinyl in the way most customers do, walking slowly and scanning the section labels for the one she needed. I don't know if it was the way her hair seemed to tip-toe on her shoulders or the fact that Howlin' Wolf was crying out *who-hoo, who-ooo* in the chorus of “Smokestack Lighting,” but my heart was moving at a pace so fast that I could feel it beating in my throat. Stek had barely noticed the girl, glancing over his shoulder for a second, and then opting to go back to work rather than stare. But me, I was off task completely. I

hopped off the ladder without replacing the corner poster, and then made my way over to the counter to wait for her.

Behind the register, I kept watching her move around the store as I pretended to read a copy of *Rolling Stone*. She drifted over to the “C” section and skipped her fingers down the tops of the albums. She wasn’t conventionally pretty, like all the girls that crowded our school’s parking lots on Fridays. Stupid catholic school bimbos with round make up covered faces and ponytails that bobbed off their heads.

This girl was different.

She was thin from head to toe, with these hollow cheeks and dark eyes that made her standout. Her blonde hair kind of balanced the darkness of her eyes, though, and the hair glimmered slightly as it caught the light from the fluorescent bulb directly above her head.

I remembered how I had just changed that lightbulb earlier that week, and suddenly I felt closer to her in someway.

She pulled out an album and walked over to the counter.

“Cat Power” I said, recognizing the flowers on the cover of *Myra Lee*. “You know she just signed with Matador Records. She’s apparently already recording another album with them.”

“Oh cool,” she said with another one of those surprised smiles.

“So you’ll have to come back and buy that one from us when it comes out.”

I immediately regretted saying the comment as soon as it left my mouth. All I wanted to do then was just drop below the counter and hide away.

“Do I *have* to?” she asked back, following it with a laugh.

“No. Of course not” I said, fumbling my words. I ran my fingers through my long hair and then slipped the album into a bag. “I hope you like album. It’s a good one.”

“So’s this,” she said pointing to the ceiling.

Like some kind of idiot I looked up at the ceiling tiles.

“Oh, you mean the Howlin’ Wolf,” I said bringing my eyes back down to her. I couldn’t have been doing any worse.

“Yeah,” she said laughing. She handed me a credit card across the counter. “My dad loves him. Says every time he hears him it makes him feel ‘young again,’ because all he hears in it is early rock n’ roll stuff. He’s a bit off a music junkie.”

I looked down at her credit card and read the name on it: *Alana Masterson*. I read it out loud in my head three times.

After she signed her receipt, she smiled one more time and said good-bye. Then she went for the door, walking through that lone beam of sunlight that was still falling through the uncovered glass. In the light, the plaid pattern of her school jumper seemed to match the pattern of the posters, its rows of boxes lining up one on top of another.

I wanted to know more about her then. I wanted to know who she was, what school she went to, what town she lived in. And as she walked out the door and her silhouette moved across our storefront, what I wanted to know that instant more than anything was how and when I could see her again.

People always look older at viewings and funerals—even kids and teenagers. It’s the sadness that does it. There’s something about all the crying and frowning that just wears a person’s face down and makes it sag and wrinkle. It doesn’t stop at the face, though; people act older, too. It’s like that sadness moves to every part of the body and just weighs it down with age. People talk slower, walk slower, think slower, shake hands slower. It’s like for the moment that dead body at the front of the room just forces everyone to move ahead on their own timelines and no one can find a way to stop it.

I started thinking all of this the minute Stek and I walked into the basement of St. Peter’s church on Pine Street, which was where the viewing was being held. At a snail’s pace, we went around the half empty room, talking to friends and family members of Vin’s that we barely knew or had never met, but who seemed to know us well.

“He loved you like a son,” someone woman named Evelyn said to Stek. She was apparently Vin’s sister-in-law. “And you Tim, he loved you, too.”

Stek and I thanked the woman and kissed her on the cheek. Then we moved on.

“Weren’t we both like his sons?” I said to Stek. “What was that about?”

“That’s what she said,” Stek said, his eyes wandering around the beige walls of the room.

“No she said he loved *you* like a son and that he loved *me* ‘too.’”

“He loved both us. That’s all she meant.” His eyes kept wandering, never settling on one spot for longer than a second.

“Well, that was a weird way of putting it if that’s what she meant.” I had this feeling sneaking up my throat that somehow I had been disrespected. I didn’t know how or why to explain it, but the feeling was there.

“Stop, would you. She was trying to be nice.”

I stopped complaining and tried to forget about the comment.

In the front row of the seating area by the casket I noticed a man sitting by himself. He was quietly staring down the casket with his big arms crossed. His eyes moved up and down the casket’s stained, dark wood, and never closed, not even to blink. For a second I thought it was Vin. The man had those same round walrus cheeks as Vin did, and he was heavy set, too, with big, solid shoulders that always looked flexed. But the similarities stopped there. The man’s hair was brown and short, with a manicured, thick mustache that was as brown as the hair on his head. And on top of that he wore a dark, green suite that shined slightly in the dim light of the room as if it were brand new.

He finally took his eyes off the casket, turning his head in our direction so I could see his whole face. I recognized the man. It was Max, Vin’s brother, Evelyn’s husband.

He saw me staring at him from a couple feet away and quickly rose to his feet. I tapped Stek on the shoulder and we went over to greet him.

We knew Max mainly from the handful of times he had to watch over the store when Vin was gone off at record conventions or other business. That rarely happened, though, because Vin's whole life was that store. He had no real friends, no wife, no other real interests either; music and work were his life, and he had to find reasons to get away from them. But he rarely did that.

Max was also a silent partner at the shop. He was a businessman of some kind. He owned a couple mattress/furniture stores or something like that out in the suburbs. After Vin's music career was over, Max had given him the start up money for the shop so that Vin could stay attached to the thing he loved. And when things at the store got particularly rough, Max was always willing to help Vin out financially, to make sure he got through even the worst of storms.

Max shook our hands slowly, and his big walrus cheeks drooped a bit as Stek and I told him how sorry we were.

"Thanks for coming guys," he said. He said "guys" just like his brother, where the S sound seems to trail on forever. "I don't know if you two understand how much you meant to my brother here." He laid his hand on the top of the coffin and gave it a soft tap.

Stek moved to the other side of Max, so that he was closer to the seating area than the casket.

"Well, we know how much you meant to him, too," I said, still shaking his hand. "Without your support with the shop, we may not have even gotten the chance to meet him. So, thank you."

“Ah, come on,” he downplayed my statement with a slow, swat of the hand. “That was just one brother helping out another. What you guys gave him was much more significant. I’m not kidding here. Those years with you guys in the shop were the best of his life. He always said so. The way he taught you two up, and the way you guys embraced it—it meant everything to my brother. You didn’t just make a lonely man less lonely in those years, you gave a man a reason to keep living his dream.”

Stek dropped behind his hair for a moment. His sadness was rocking his body from side to side. I don’t know why, but I started to think about Evelyn’s comment again.

“What’s happening with the shop?” Stek asked, lifting up his head.

“There’s some good news there at least,” Max said. He pointed toward another big man standing over by his wife. “My son, Ricky, there. He’s going to take the place over.”

“Oh, good,” I said, relieved. “We thought there was a chance you were going to sell.”

“No. Vin’s is a household name on South Street, and we’re going to keep it that way. Ricky just got out of school and wants to get into the family business. Mattresses and furniture really don’t interest him much, but music and movies do. So, I thought here’s an opportunity to keep Vin’s name alive.”

“Movies?” Stek asked.

“Yes,” Max said, “This may be hard to hear, but there will be some revamping of the store and its product. Ricky’s got some great ideas about how to

expand some. He wants to bring in more DVDs and t-shirts and books. You know, to really fill out the store more. Then he wants to start stressing the buy and trade angle more, too. By having both CD's and DVD's in the shop, it will entice more people to trade with us."

"So you're getting rid of the vinyl?" I asked, putting two and two together.

"Well, we're not going to get rid of it. We're going to scale it back. Keep the essential stuff upstairs and then create a new area of the store in the basement where we can put the rest of it. We don't want to completely ostracize the clientele that's stuck with Vin's all these years, but we do want to bring in more of the casual South Street shopper."

"The basement?" Stek raised his voice slightly. His face tightened up with anger. "You're going to stuff all your brother's hard work in a basement so you can bring in casual shoppers? Come on, Max."

"I told you this was going to be hard to hear, and I'm sorry that you have to hear it here of all places. You guys put in a lot of time to help him build and rebuild his collection, I understand that, but if you could see his books from the last couple of years you'd know why this needs to be done. The man was barely getting by. It actually cost him money to bring you on last year, Adam."

The anger Stek was feeling suddenly washed away from his face. He had wanted to argue more about the store with Max, that I could tell, but hearing about how Vin had lost money to give him a job, that truth had shocked him silent.

He said good-bye to Max and then walked toward the exit. I stood there with Max and watched him walk out. Like Stek, I too was stunned by what Vin had

done for him, and for the first time, I was starting to get a sense of why Evelyn had made her remark.

“It’s business, Tim,” Max said. “I don’t won’t hurt anybody. We’re just trying to find a balance between his way and what really works. You can understand that, can’t you?”

Max’s mustache began to twitch a bit. I could tell he was fighting back tears. He pulled his eyes away from me and glanced over to the casket.

“I understand, and Stek will, too. All this is just hitting him really hard,” I reached out my hand and put it on Max’s shoulder. “It’s hitting all of us hard, you know. You’re doing what’s right for you and your family. That’s what’s most important. No one’s going to hold that against you.”

Max stared at the coffin for another second or two, then he sniffed back his emotions and looked up at me again.

“Thanks, Tim. Vin always said you were the more level-headed of the two.” He dug down into his pocket and pulled out a set of keys. “We are trying to get the remodeling going next week. Since you and Adam helped Vin compile a good amount of those records, I thought it was only right to allow the two of you to go through them one more time. Take whatever you like. Don’t worry about the amount or value. I think this is what Vin would have wanted. We’ll make do with whatever you leave behind.”

He worked a worn key off his key ring and then handed it to me. It was Vin’s old key. I had memorized its round head and amber colored metal back when

I was younger. Stek and I had watched him open and close that front door so many times it was pretty easy to do so.

“Just get it back to me tomorrow at the funeral,” Max said. “I hope the two of you will be staying for the viewing reception after this. But if not, I understand.”

I looked over to the exit and remembered Stek.

“I’m going to go see if I can get him back in here. Thanks for this,” I said, holding up the key.

Outside the wind was still cleaning the city streets with heavy gusts. I looked up and down the street for Stek, running my eyes along the empty sidewalks and parked cars, only to find nothing. I walked down Pine toward where I had parked the car, and when I got close enough to be able to see inside, I saw Stek sitting in the backseat, with his head resting against the glass of the window.

“You left it open,” he said to me as I popped open the backdoor and fell into the car next to him.

I glanced over at him as I settled myself. His cheeks had been wiped clean of tears. I could tell by the glaze of liquid that was shining at me off his temple. I averted my eyes from his face and looked out across the dash. His body had been in motion ever since I entered the car, and as I stared at the rusty bumper of the car in front of us, I listened to him move, to the sound of him scratching his fingers through his hair, of his back sliding against the seat, of his foot bouncing up and down off the floor.

“The fucking basement!” he exploded. He punched the back of the driver’s seat with his fist, rocking the whole car. “I can’t believe that guy.”

“Well,” I said, “all of this started in a basement. Maybe it’s right that it lives on there, you know?”

Stek turned his head to look at me. Through the darkness of the car I could see that his eyes were scrunched. He was staring at me like I was crazy.

“Are you fucking serious?”

“Jesus, man,” I said. “I’m just trying to make the best of a bad situation. I know it’s not ideal, but there’s nothing we can do about it.”

“Not ideal? You’re fucking right it’s not ideal,” he said. He shook his head and began rubbing the tops of his knees. “This is the shit I’m talking about. They only let you come up so far, before they kick you right down again. It’s just one thing after another they keep taking away from me. One thing after a-fucking-nother. I just want something in my life to be permanent for once.”

“You can’t look at it that way,” I said, trying to talk some sense into him. “Max isn’t purposely trying to hurt you. He’s just doing what’s right for his family. He’s just trying to find his own way to cope with all of this, just like we are.”

“God,” Stek said, shaking his head up at the ceiling. “You would be able to see it that way.”

“What hell is that supposed to mean?” I shouted at him. “Really, what is that supposed to mean?”

“Why are you still chewing gum?” Stek asked.

I snapped out of my daydream and tasted the cinnamon flavoring burning on my tongue. I focused and realized that we were standing on the corner of Fourth and South. We had already passed the gum tree.

“Oh, must’ve spaced out,” I said, taking the red clump of gum out of my mouth. I ran back to the gum tree and plugged my piece into the first gap I saw in its technicolored bark.

“Where the hell’s your head?” he asked, as soon as I made it back to him. “I need you with me here.”

“Sorry,” I said. “I’m with you, I’m with you.”

I lied. I wasn’t. At least not in that moment I wasn’t. He had been talking about finding an apartment, which was the first order of business in our plan for the future, but I hadn’t listened to him much at all. Instead, I had been thinking about Alana Masterson.

Since she had come into the store a week earlier I couldn’t stop myself from scanning the sidewalks of South Street for her every time I walked them. After she left that day, I had put aside the shop’s other copy of *Myra Lee* by Cat Power while Stek wasn’t looking, and I brought it home with me later that night when I left work. I had been listening it to all week long at home. As soon as I’d get back to my house from work, I’d stomp up stairs to my bedroom, passing my parents and all the boxes they had started filling, and lock myself away and listen to Cat Power’s breathy voice and mellow songs while thinking about Alana.

There was this one song in particular on the album, a Hank Williams cover she did called “Still in Love,” that I listened to over and over again. I loved its opening lines:

Today I passed you on the street

And my heart fell at your feet

I can't help it if I'm still in love with you

I couldn't stop myself from thinking about them when I was walking down South Street going to and from work. At every corner I'd imagine Alana turning to find me there on the same part of the street as her. In my mind she'd always stop me by singing out those lines. Only it wouldn't be her voice doing the singing, it was Cat Power's. It was her soft, fluttery words floating off of Alana's lips and into my ears and down into my heart.

We'd always kiss after she told me she still loved me.

“So this other place,” Stek said. “It's kind of a wild card, but I think it might be the one.”

All that week we had been hitting the classifieds hard, trying to find a place where he and I could live. We had gone to see about half a dozen places. Stek would pretend each time that he was going to be a freshman in the fall at St. Joe's University and that he needed a cheap place to stay near his work. I'd always be his younger brother along for the tour, making sure for mom and dad, who happened to be out town, that their college man found a safe and sufficient place to stay. The

lies worked on most of the landlords, with the exception of one jerk, but all in all the places hadn't been great. They were either too small or too expensive, and all of them didn't have any place where we could play our instruments without driving our would be neighbors nuts.

“Why is this place a wild card?” I asked him as we walked into Vin's.

“You'll see,” he responded. “I don't want to say anything else, because I don't want to ruin it. But I've got a feeling though it's the one.”

We both zipped it about the apartment when Vin came walking out of the back with our daily load of albums to shelve. We had decided it would be better not to tell him until after everything was finalized with the place. He was always looking out for us and probably would have helped us if anything, but deep down the two of us were afraid, giving his failed career as a musician, that he would try to talk us out of it. And that was something that we both didn't want.

“So it's tomorrow at three,” he said to me as soon as Vin went into the back again. “I worked it out with the guy so that we'll meet him at the place. I checked the Saturday bus schedule and for where we're going we'll probably need to meet at the stop on Ninth and South at around one thirty.”

“Jesus,” I said. “We have to get on the bus at one thirty to get to this place. Where the hell are you taking me to, Jersey?” I said, joking, though the second after I said it I realized just how unfunny it was.

“You'll see,” he said again. His face lit up with excitement. “It's off the beaten path. I kind of like that about it.”

After that, he wouldn't tell me anything else about the place. I must have asked him about twenty some questions as we went about the shop helping customers and doing our normal tasks, but every time he'd just act like some little kid with a secret, smiling and staying quiet, driving me crazy with his silence.

Every silent second that passed between us gave my mind time to wonder about the future and Alana and about my parents' new house in Jersey. My little wisecrack from earlier in our conversation had me thinking about that last one the most, unfortunately.

I had already had my second talk with my parents, the one in which I had told them how I was forgoing their wonderful new life in Jersey and keeping my old one in Philly with Stek. I hadn't told them about how Stek had been kicked out of his grandmom's or about how we were looking for our own place. That would have just complicated things more. All I had said was that I was staying behind and I was serious about it and that there was nothing they could do to stop me.

That of course brought on a big screamfest between my dad and me. He got livid at my response, calling me selfish and ungrateful and a bunch of other things that didn't bother me one bit, especially when they were coming from him.

There was one thing though that he had said that got to me. Near the end of all our screaming and crying, he had attempted to put his foot down, shouting:

"You're just a child, my child, and as long as you're a child you'll do as I tell you."

"Child," I had yelled back, channeling Stek. "A child doesn't make it in a house with no parents. There's no time to be child when you have to look after

yourself all the time. Only a grown up can make it through that. Only a man. And that's what I am now because of you.”

My Ma had been sitting at the dinner table during our argument. The whole time she had been rubbing her stomach and crying, pleading to us through her tears to stop fighting and act like family. I had tried not to look at her when I grabbed my coat and stormed out of the house.

I had gone straight to the gum tree after that fight, and thinking about it again there in the shop was only making me want to go back to that tree and cover up another piece of it's wrinkly, old bark with a bright wad of gum.

I caught Stek smiling to himself as he reorganized the magazine racks over by the counter. He could have been smiling at some joke or something or the song that was playing in the shop, but that smile was the one he had been making all afternoon whenever I asked him about this other place, so I kind of figured he was thinking about that.

I still hadn't told him about my parents moving, although I tried a bunch of times throughout that week. It was just that every time I went to tell him about it, I had to think about that life my parents wanted me to live over in Jersey. I had to think about what it would be like to live in that big white house, with its columns and black shutters. And what's worse was that I knew I was going to have to tell Stek about all that, too, maybe not in that initial conversation, but definitely in ones down the line. I would have to tell him about my new house and my new sister and my new family, and when I thought about all of that at once, I just could

never bring myself to do it. I could never bring myself to get those words out of my mouth.

So I didn't tell him, and I wasn't going to, especially now that we were going to be living together in the city. With that, the problem had been solved.

The door opened in the shop, pulling my head out of the clouds, though when I looked over to the front and saw Alana's bright, golden hair, I could have sworn I was still dreaming. She walked right for me in the back, where I had been checking inventory in the country section. I already had Cat Power's "Still in Love" playing in my mind, and when she stopped in front of me and looked me in the eyes, I waited for those opening lines to come floating off her lips.

"So my dad wants that Howlin' Wolf record," she said instead, crushing the moment.

I gave my head a little shake to get back into worker mode. "The one that was on the other day?"

"Yeah. What's it called? The one with 'Smokestack Lightning' on it."

"Moanin' in the Moonlight."

"That's the one!" she screamed a bit and rose up on her toes. "Apparently, a bunch of his records got damaged when we moved, and that was one of them." She rolled her eyes and shook her head. Her golden hair danced in the shake. "A box of books or something fell on them."

"Aw, that sucks," I said cringing. I thought about how tragic it would be to have some of my own records destroyed. I yelled over to Stek, who was still

organizing the mags, and told him we had better get some good boxes and bins to make sure nothing like that happened to us.

“You guys are moving into together?” Alana asked.

“Yeah,” I responded. It was the first time I had said that to someone other than Stek and my parents. Hearing it out loud in that casual kind of way made it sound official, real.

I walked her over to the blues section and started flipping through the H albums. I reminded myself over and over again not call her Alana. Technically, she still hadn’t told me her name.

“Cool, where you moving to?”

“Well,” I hesitated, my tongue tripping up a bit. I stopped flipping through the albums and glanced over at Stek. “We haven’t really figured that part out yet, but we want to live around here.”

“Are you guys in college or something?”

“No,” I said, pulling out *Moanin’ in the Moonlight*. I told her about how we were juniors at St. Joe’s Prep and about how Stek was turning eighteen.

“I go to Saint Maria Goretti in South Philly,” she told me, pointing southward to the back of the store. “I’m a senior there.”

I looked at the little shield emblem on her jumper and realized what it stood for. I smiled at the fact that I knew something else about her, but I still wanted to know more. In the pressure of the moment, though, it was almost like I forgot how to ask. I stared down at the record in my hands, hoping to escape those dark eyes of hers for a second so that I could think of a question for her.

“You’re dad must be a pretty cool guy, huh?” I said, not knowing why.

“Yeah,” she said. “He’s a writer and he’s always listening to music while he writes. He says it inspires him. I can’t step into my house without hearing some kind of music blasting.”

“He works from home then?”

“Yeah,” she said, “it’s one of the benefits of being a writer.”

I pictured Alana walking into her house and being struck by the sound of Howlin’ Wolf’s voice booming throughout the place. It must have been pretty cool to get to have that experience, to be able to not only walk in to hear that music, but to know that someone was there playing it, someone who cared for you and loved you and wanted to hear about your day. It was like when I was little and how my Ma used to pick me and Stek up from up school. We used to sing home the whole way, pretending we were rockstars, and loving every minute of it. Those days weren’t that long ago, but thinking about them then, it felt like they almost never had happened.

I pushed the copy of *Moanin’ in the Moonlight* into Alana’s hands and tried to walk off that thought as I made my way to the cash register. I punched the price of the record into the register, then looked up and found myself staring directly into Alan’s dark eyes.

“What about your parents?” she said, reaching into her pocket for money.

“They’re cool with you guys moving out?”

I hesitated again, fighting off the memory of my Ma crying at the table.

“They’re kinda not in the picture anymore,” I said, trying to believe it as I said it.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” she said. “That must be tough. I can’t even imagine what’s it’s like not having parents.”

“You learn to live with it,” I said.

Stek dropped a stack of magazines down into the rack, and both Alana and I looked over at him. He didn’t catch us staring at him. He was too busy smiling at the thoughts in his head to even notice that we were there.

“I’m Alana, by the way,” she said with a little wave.

“Hi, I’m Tim,” I said back. “People here call me TJ. That’s Stek over there.”

She turned to Stek, and introduced herself again with a wave. Stek waved back, keeping that same smile on his face.

“Well let me know if you guys need any boxes or bins,” she said as she walked to the door. “I work over at the thrift store at Ninth and South and people are always leaving them behind after they sell us stuff.

“Ok,” I said. “We’ll definitely do that.”

“I’m there on Fridays, Saturdays, and Sundays. Just drop by.” She waved one last time and then pulled open the door.

Stek called out to thank her just before the door closed.

After work, I had to go straight home. My talk with my parents had put me on the shitlist big time, so if I wasn’t at work or at school, I was supposed to be at home, grounded, which meant I’d be locked up in my room and forced to listen to the sound of my parents packing up my life into big brown boxes.

I walked into my house and the first thing I was hit with wasn't the sound of music, it was the sound of metal striking metal, like the type I'd normally hear coming from shop class or a construction site. I kept listening to the sound as I closed the front door, then I let it lead me to the back of our townhome's first floor, which was where our garage was. I could see through the open door at the end of hall that the light was on in the garage. When I got to the door, I poked my head through the doorway and saw my father there on the other side of the garage.

He was leaning over of the exposed engine of my Ma's old Jeep Cherokee, looking like a TV doctor hopelessly trying to bring some patient back to life. The Cherokee hadn't been used in years. It's engine must've died at least six or seven years earlier during one winter in which the snow wouldn't seem to stop falling in the city. With my dad being out of town all the time, my parents had been able to make due with just one car, which meant the Cherokee was left behind to collect dust in the garage along with everything else that was stuffed in there: my father's tools, the Christmas lights for the outside of the house, the basketball hoop I got for my birthday one year that never even got set up, and God knows what else. They always meant to get it fixed, but work always got in the way.

My father was so focused on whatever tinkering he was doing down on the engine, that he didn't even notice me standing there in the doorway. He brought his hand up to wipe the sweat from his face, but completely forgot about the grease on his fingers and ended up smearing his cheek with war paint like streaks of black. He realized how stupid he been after it was too late and pulled the collar of his white undershirt up to wipe away his mistake.

If I had been raised a normal kid, I'd probably have memories of similar moments like these stored up in my head by the dozens. What I was seeing there in the garage would have brought me back to Saturday morning grease-head sessions with dad, where he accidentally smudged his face all the time to point where it became our own inside joke. But I wasn't a normal kid and never would be, and the only thing remarkable or memorable about that moment was the fact that I was seeing my dad without his suit on.

He reached down into the metal heart of the engine, working a screw or a sparkplug or something down there with all his energy.

"I got you," he mumbled to himself. "Now I remember...come on...come on...I can do this...I can make this work."

After a good while of huffing and puffing and working that engine's inside, he pulled himself off of the thing with a smile and slammed down the hood.

I turned and walked away at that point, not caring to see what happened next, but he must have heard me move or something because I quickly heard the sound of him calling out my name from inside the garage.

I walked back to the doorway and poked my head back into the garage.

"You're just in time," he said, scurrying around to the driver side door. He was looking as happy as when he and my Ma had approached me to tell me about their big surprise. It was almost as if he'd forgotten everything that had happened between him and me in that last week.

"What are you going through the effort for," I said. "That thing's dead."

He ignored my pessimism and turned the key. The engine stuttered at first, doing its own imitation of my dad's huffs and puffs, but then it turned over, sending out a growl that shot me back ten years in time and made me remember what it was like to sit in that car's back seat.

"Yes!" my dad shouted. He killed the engine and slid out the car with the keys in his hand.

"Great. That'll make the move for you and Ma easier," I said.

"Actually, I was thinking it would help you with the move," he responded with a grin. He flipped the keys right at me and I had no option other than to catch them.

"You're giving this to me?"

"That's right," he said, turning to stare at the car. "I've been busting my hump all week trying to get it fixed. Me and your mom figured it would make things easier for you, so you could drive from home to school and work and to see Adam."

"You do know I've been working my ass off at the shop to buy *myself* my *own* first car?"

My dad paused for a second and wiped his face again with his shirt. He looked back at the car, then at me.

"Well, keep that money stashed away for a rainy day," he said. "It's never a bad idea to have some extra funds deposited for future investments."

"Save the business talk for your god damn clients," I said to him, grinding the keys in my hand.

“Tim, all I was—”

“Why do you think this is so easy, huh? Why do you think this is something that can just be fixed with a new house or a car?”

My dad dropped his head, staring down at the floor for a moment. When he brought his head back up his eyes were watery and his lips were shaking. He was about to cry, I could tell, which was something I had never seen him do. As I stood there staring at him, waiting for his tears to fall, I found myself thinking about what Stek’s dad’s face had looked like when they had their argument. I wondered if that man had ever shown himself to his son like my dad was doing then, and I wonder even further if he ever even cried over Stek at all.

That thought made me feel worse, and I slammed the keys down into the ground. I should have stormed out then, up to the safety of my room, but I didn’t. I stood there frozen, too afraid to do anything at all.

My dad bent down and picked up the keys, fighting back his tears with a hard sniff. He walked up to me and grabbed my hand, forcing my fingers open with the greasy tips of his.

“I don’t think it’s easy,” he said pushing the greasy keys back into my hand. “I don’t think this is something that can just be fixed. It’s going to take time. I know that. It’s going to a lot of hard work, especially on my part. But if you stay angry like this, if you go move in with your friend to try and forget about me, then you’re going to miss me try, and I think I deserve the chance to at least try to make this better.”

A tear was rolling down his grease covered cheek, but his eyes were so focused and glazed over that it wasn't even like he was crying.

“We all need to find a better balance. That's the only thing that'll make this work.” He let go of my hand and stepped past me. “I think you need to consider that, and I also think you need to remember who all of this is really for.”

I stared at the Cherokee and listened to him walk up the stairs. I didn't move from that spot in the garage until I heard the door to my parents' bedroom close and the muffled rumble of the shower. Then I walked upstairs, hurrying past my parents' bedroom door and trying not to notice how the crack of light at the bottom of it flashed as I went by. I locked myself away in my room after that, only coming out of it to go to the bathroom or to get a drink of water.

Inside my room I tried to flood my head with Cat Power's music and thoughts of Alana, but it didn't work. I went to sleep instead thinking of my father's tears and the grease on his cheeks and wondering about what he meant when he said that word balance.

I slept in the next morning until about eleven just so I wouldn't have to be awake in the house that long with my parents there. After I showered and got dressed, I went down stairs to find them packaging up all the dishes and glasses from the china cabinet in newspaper and bubble wrap. I told them that Vin needed me to work the early shift and the night shift that day, an obvious lie, but since I think everyone was too tired from fighting, they just let me go.

It was right around 12:30PM when I got to South Street, and with about an hour's worth of time to play with until I met Stek, I had to figure out what I wanted

to do. I had the usual options in front me, get something to eat or check in at the shop, but I opted instead to walk down to Ninth and South to see if Alana was working at the thrift shop.

The thrift store she worked at was called Second Chances. Stek and I had been in there years before to sort through the place's mediocre collection of records, but other than that I had almost forgotten that the place existed. Ninth and South was pretty far removed from the main stretch of South Street where Vin's and all the other main places were, so if you weren't going down to Ninth and South to take the bus or to go to a specific store, you rarely set foot down there. Or at least we didn't.

I walked up to the door not knowing if Alana would even be there. She said she worked Saturdays, but she didn't say a time or anything, so really I was just guessing. When I walked into the store, though, and heard the sound of Howlin' Wolf booming throughout the place, I knew right away that she was working.

Second Chances was a pretty big store, maybe about twice the size of Vin's, but you couldn't really tell that underneath all the racks of used clothing that covered up every inch of the store's walls. The racks didn't stop there. They filled up the floor of the shop as well, so when you walked in the place you felt as if you were a lab mouse entering a maze. The cash register up at the front was left unmanned, so I walked a little further into the store and found Alana in the back, hanging up a bunch of old dresses.

"I thought this was for your dad?" I asked when she saw me walking to her.

She stopped what she was doing and said hello. “It is,” she smiled. “Like a dodo I forgot to bring it home with me on the train last night. Since it was here I thought I’d play it. It makes the work go by quicker, as you probably know.”

I nodded and then went quiet for a second. She pulled a couple strands of her hair behind her ear and waited for me to say something. I felt myself getting hot in the face with nerves.

“So are you here for those boxes?” she finally asked.

“No,” I said after a second or two. My mind went blank with panic. I needed a reason for coming, something other than the truth, which was that I just wanted to see her. I had a perfectly good reason in the fact that I was meeting Stek to get the bus, but my mind couldn’t find it for some reason. I looked down at my beat-up jean jacket that I had worn for years. “You know, I was thinking about maybe buying a new jacket. Just wanted to see what you had.”

She cocked her head and squinted at me with her dark eyes. I could tell she was thinking about if was lying.

“Well, TJ,” she said. “You came to the right place.”

She grabbed me by my jacket and led me through the maze of racks to the men’s jacket section. There we stopped, and she looked me up and down, studying my outfit for the day: a pair worn in jeans, a plain black t-shirt, and my jean jacket.

“What are you doing,” I asked as she sized me up.

“Thinking.” She pulled her hand up to her chin to help herself think. “Is this what you normally wear?”

“Yeah,” I said. I scanned over my outfit for a second, thinking like I was doing something wrong.

“So this is your look? The slacker, tough guy image?”

“Hey,” I said, getting a little offended.

She tilted her head and raised her eyebrows at me.

“Ok, I guess that’s pretty fitting.”

“So this is you? This is who TJ is? A worn-in denim and t-shirt kind of guy?”

“Well, I guess.”

“You guess? Come on, TJ. Clothes say a lot about a person. They tell us who you are.”

“Well, I like to listen to music and play music. Stek and I are in a band.” I looked down at my clothes again. “I guess that’s the type of look I’ve always been going after.”

“So that’s it? You’re just a guy who likes music? There’s nothing else to you but that?”

I racked my head trying to find something.

“Well, what about you. You’re telling me everything I need to know about you I can learn through your clothes.”

“Well not everything,” she said as she rolled her eyes. “But you can learn a lot. Observe.”

She stepped back a bit so I could see her whole outfit. She was wearing a thin, little yellow dress that looked as if it had been made out of an old dress shirt.

Even though she was wearing the dress, she had jeans on underneath it with rolled up pant legs, and up in her hair she had a yellow paisley headband that went with the dress.

“I’m creative,” she said, telling me about how she made the dress herself from an old shirt she found in the store. “I’m stylish...and, dare I say, cool.” She pointed to her jeans, another find from the store. They gave her “instant coolness” from their tightness and shabbiness, as well as a touch of style from their rolled pant legs, which separated her from your “average jean wearing joe.”

“Then, of course, there’s cuteness,” she said. She framed her paisley headband with her hands and a smile, then kicked up a heel to kick up the cuteness. “And that, TJ, is Alana one-o-one.”

“So that’s it. Creative, stylish, cool, and cute. That’s all I need to know about you?”

“Well, of course there’s more, but those are the essentials.”

As she sorted through the jackets for me, she told me about how she was an artist at heart. She did a lot of things with fashion, which is why she worked at the thrift shop, but she liked to paint and write and even play songs. When she graduated from Saint Maria Goretti, a school she despised in the same way I hated mine, she wanted to go to art school in New York or Baltimore. She had applied earlier in the year, but was still waiting to hear back from schools. Her dad, the writer, and her mother, the middle school art teacher, had encouraged her to pursue it, but it was her dad mostly that wanted her to follow her passion, even if it meant taking her away from home.

I kept asking her about herself, rarely stopping to let her get a question in about me. I just wanted to learn about her for a while. I wanted know her in the ways I never got to know most girls I met, girls like the ones Stek and I would meet at shows and hook up with and whatever and then never hear from again. She seemed more interesting than most of those girls anyway. And in terms of the artistic people I knew from South Street and working in the shop, she seemed more interesting than them, too. She was so smart and passionate, and young, on top of all that; I had just never met anyone like her in my whole life, and that only made me want to know more about her, about how she got that way and about how someone only my age could be as experienced and interesting as her.

“You love talking about your dad,” I said, noticing a theme after a while.

“Yeah. I’m a daddy’s girl. My mom hates it, but it’s true.”

“He seems like a pretty cool guy.” I imagined this man who I had never met before. In my head I saw him interacting with his daughter, teaching her to paint and write by the window in his home office and encouraging her to follow her dreams at the dinner table and as he tucked her in at night.

“He’s great. You actually may have met him once or twice without knowing. He’s always coming over the bridge to do his record shopping, and when I was talking to him about this Howlin’ Wolf record, he mentioned that he had been to your store dozens of times.”

“He comes over the bridge,” I said, getting caught up with that idea.

“Yeah,” she said looking lost. “I thought I told you, we live in New Jersey. We moved from the city a couple years ago when I was little. That’s when the record got broken, remember.”

I remembered the story about the broken record. I didn’t remember anything about her being from New Jersey. I thought back to all those moments I had pictured in my head of her and her father at home. Suddenly, they were all set in a home in New Jersey, in house exactly like the one my father had bought for our family.

“You okay?” she asked, staring at me as if were crazy. “You look like you never met anyone from New Jersey before.”

“No, I have. There’re kids at my school from there. It’s not that, it’s just...you don’t seem like anyone I’ve met from New Jersey,” I said, trailing off. I got caught up thinking about her again, about those experiences with her dad that I had imagined in my head. Then suddenly I was thinking about my house, imagining myself walking up to it again and opening up the door to find my parents there waiting for me. This time I didn’t stop at the doorway, though. There’s wasn’t anything holding me back. I went inside. I imagined what it would be like to live there with them, to do similar things to what Alana and her dad did together.

“What’s it like?” I asked.

“What? What’s what like?”

“What’s it like to live in New Jersey?”

“That’s a weird question.”

“I guess what I mean is, what’s it like to live there and go to school here and stuff.”

“I don’t know. It’s okay. It’s a bit of a balancing act sometimes, but I like it.” She folded the jackets she had pulled off the rack over her arm. “You know sometimes it’s nice to have two places to go. If I’m having a rough time at school or something, I can always go home to get away from it, and vice versa.”

We both stood there quiet for second. I thought more about the balancing act that was her life.

“I like to write,” I said suddenly. “Like you and your dad. I like to write. I write all the lyrics for the songs Stek and I play.”

Alana took a second to get on track with me. “Well, there we go. Now we’re getting down to the real you.” She shoved some of the jackets that she had draped on her arm back onto the rack. “Let’s see, we’ve got say musician slash writer slash cool guy.”

She yanked a corduroy jacket off the rack and held it up against my chest. I looked down at the jacket and studied its brown color. I liked the way it had two buttonable breast pockets, as well as a soft, wool lining on the collar and the inside.

“I think we found our match,” she said.

I slid off my old jacket and put on the new one, loving how the wool on the inside warmed my body the moment I put it on.

“What do you think?” I asked, holding out my arms to display the jacket.

“I like it,” she said smiling. “You look cool because of the pockets and the big collar, but the corduroy suggests something more sophisticated and smart. I like

the balance. My dad wears a lot of corduroy. You look like him with that jacket on.”

“Do I?” I asked. I turned and looked at myself in the nearest mirror. I liked what I saw, too.

“Yeah, you do.”

I noticed the time was getting close to 1:30, so I thanked Alana for all her help, paid for my new jacket, and then hurried out to the bus stop just in time to see Stek walking up to the stop, as well.

“New threads?” Stek asked with a nod.

“Yeah. You think it looks like me?” I asked back.

“What the hell does that mean?” He walked up to me and stood there squinting his eyes. His hair got caught in the wind.

“Nothing,” I said, shrugging off his question.

When the number 47 bus wheezed to a stop at the corner, we both jumped on and grabbed seats near the back. Stek still wasn’t ready to spill and details about the place yet.

“I don’t know much about it I’m telling you,” he said. “All I know is that it’s got everything we need to start the dream, and it’s the right price.”

I settled for that for the moment, willing to go along on his mystery ride a little while longer. The bus shot us up to Spring Garden, where we got off and hopped onto another bus that took us up north toward Girard Ave, the street our school was on. But the part of Girard we were going to wasn’t the area where our

school was, it was east toward the river, to a part of the city that I had never really seen before.

When I got off the bus at Front and Girard, the flashing screen above the bus driver's head read "Fishtown" in red letters.

"You sure about this place?" I asked Stek as we stepped off the bus. I was looking at the buzzing corner of Girard Ave we were standing on, noticing the different people around us that didn't remind me of the types of people we usually saw on South Street.

"The old man I talked to says the area's pretty safe," he held out a piece of crumpled paper that had writing on it. "All we have to do is stay on these streets and we'll be fine."

From there we walked up Front a couple blocks, weaving our way through little neighborhoods with shabby looking rowhomes until we got to an area where there was nothing but run down warehouses and trash cluttered open lots. We had maybe been walking for ten minutes when I saw the church's steeple rise up from behind the metal rooftop of a warehouse.

The church sat alone in its own lot, set apart from a string of rowhomes that lined up off to its right. Most churches I had seen in the city were big stone monstrosities that took up huge segments of city blocks, but this church was much smaller, maybe about the size of two or three rowhomes pushed together. Unlike those traditional city churches, there was nothing striking about this one's exterior. Outside its gold steeple, the church itself was just a plain, boxy building with rows of long, narrow windows along its sides. Those windows had been boarded up a

long time ago, though, to keep them safe from any rocks that happened to be thrown their way, and with those long slabs of weathered wood running along the outside, the church looked abandoned and lost, very much like the section of the city that was all around us.

“We’re here,” Stek said, staring up at the church’s steeple.

“A church?” I said to him. “You want us to live in a church?”

“Don’t doubt me just yet,” he responded, smiling.

He pulled out the piece of paper from his pocket and read something off of it, then we walked over to the closest rowhome in the grouping of homes next to the church. Stek knocked on the door, and an old man with a cane and wrap-around sunglasses answered the door.

“You must be Adam,” he said, grinning at us with a mouthful of grey teeth. We both introduced ourselves, and shook his hand. “My name’s Marty. Marty Akers. Nice to meet you young gentlemen. Alright, enough with the introductions for the lord’s sake. Let’s see this place already.”

Marty walked us to the back of the church, telling us as we went about the church and its history. He told us about how it used to be the place of worship for all the factory workers in the area during the first half of the century. Since the factories had shut down in the late seventies, most of the families had moved out of the area, leaving the church and the neighborhood behind.

“Once the work leaves, so do the people. It’s what happens,” Marty said as we approached a little stairway that led underneath the church. “And faith, that got

left behind long before the departure. People were losing faith the moment things at the factories started turning for the worse.”

We walked to the bottom of the stairs and found a door. Marty pulled out a big ring of keys and started flipping through them.

“Alright fellas, what you’re about to see is the old reception room here at the church. They used to have reception parties for weddings and other ceremonies down here, but mostly it was used as a daycare spot for the factory workers kids during the weekdays and then on the weekends it was used for Sunday School for the children.” Marty jiggled loose a key from his big ring and slipped it into the lock. “I reno-ed the place about ten years back when it became clear the church wasn’t going to sell. Made it into a nice little living space for young people like yourselves, so I could at least make a buck or two on the place while it sat.”

He snapped open the lock with a quick turn of his veiny hand and the door squeaked open. Marty shuffled out into the half lit room, his cane’s rubber bottom bumping along floor with each step. We heard the snap of an old light switch and in a flash the room in front of us filled with light.

“Come on in fellas,” Marty said with a wave. “I’ll give you the grand tour.”

Stek walked out into the room first, and I stayed behind in the doorway, frozen there for a second by the doubt racing through my head. I watched his eyes as they rolled along the room’s high, paneled ceilings and down across its white, plastered walls. His face beamed as he discovered the space piece by piece, his eyes going as bright as the fluorescent light that fell all around him. He waved me in

with his hand, although his eyes stayed focused on the room. He was working too hard to uncover every inch of the place to focus on me for a slight glance.

I stepped out to where Stek was standing, and found myself in the middle of one large open room that reminded me of our grade school's cafeteria. There wasn't much to the place at all, just the open space, a small kitchen along one wall with an old stove and fridge, and then two door ways at either end of the room. There were long, rectangular windows along the tops of the walls, too, about four on each side. But their glass was caked with dirt, so that very little light made it into the space.

"Tour concluded," Marty said and then started cracking up. "Oh, and the bathroom's on the other side of the kitchen wall there. There's no tub, just a shower, a toilet, and a pair of sinks. Nothing fancy, but enough to get by."

"People live here?" I said, spinning myself around the room to see if I missed something.

Stek jabbed me with an elbow to the side.

"Oh sure, sure," Marty said. He went on to tell us that it was a popular space and that it wasn't on the market to rent too often. He said the people that rented it usually were the artsy types, "like you fellas. You know painters and designers, even musicians."

"Musicians?" Stek said.

"Sure, sure," Marty responded, adding a laugh. "They're usually the tenants that stay the longest here. I've had whole groups stay here, maybe four or five people at a time. This is a great place for them to bring in their instruments and

what not and play.” Marty reached out one his veiny hands and slapped a wall. “This old place, she sucks up every sound. Can’t hear anything at all really from the street or over in my place. Hell, they used to have whole concerts here back in the late eighties, and I couldn’t hear a damn thing.”

“That’s so cool,” Stek said. He was beaming again. “Did you hear that, TJ. Whole concerts.”

I looked around the space again. I could imagine the concerts happening there. I could see receptions, taking place there too, as well as the daycare center and the Sunday school classes. But what I couldn’t imagine was a person living there. I just couldn’t find a place fit for a bed or a couch or kitchen table anywhere along the grey rubber tiles of the space.

“But how do people live here? Like how do they set it up?”

Marty described to us the layouts that his past tenants had used, dividing the open area up with carpets, furniture, and partition walls.

“You’re creative types,” Marty said to us. “This here’s an open canvas and you got to create on it. Make a home out of it whichever way your mind tells you.”

I squinted in Stek’s direction. For a second the smile on his face shrunk. He yelled out to Marty to give us a minute, and the old man obliged, shuffling out toward the steps, his cane bumping the floor along his way.

“What’s the problem?” Stek asked me.

“I don’t know, man. This place doesn’t seem weird to you at all? I mean, can you really see yourself living here?”

“TJ, we’ve been living in my grandmom’s basement for like the last ten years. If we can make that dusty room into home we can definitely make this place into one.” He back-peddled out into the open room, spreading his arms out to emphasize the space. “This is the dream, man. Here it is! Our own world, tucked away from all the other bullshit. We can do whatever we want here. We could stay up all night playing music, we could blast records as loud as possible, we could have band practices right here each and every day. This is the dream, and we would never have to stop living it. No one could tell us to stop playing. No one could ever force us to leave. Fuck, man. This is everything we’ve ever wanted. And it’ll only cost us six hundred bucks a month.”

As I listened to him preach, I let my eyes wander around the space again. I tried to think about the world he was describing, to picture the two of us living there together and doing all the things he said. But my eyes just drifted up to the windows, and I stared at one in particular, where the faint border of light around its dirt covered glass was shining like gold.

The light flickered with movement, and I began to wonder for a second what was outside that window and causing the light to flicker.

“So are you in,” Stek said walking toward me. “TJ, look at me. Are you in?”

Vin’s posters had been taken down.

That was the first thing we noticed when we rolled up the metal shutters of the shop. All that was left to prove that they had ever been there were the little ripped ends of tape that speckled the windows' glass like pockmarks.

“That would be the first thing they went for,” Stek said, referring to the posters. He leaned his head up against one of the windows and punched its glass softly. “Fucking Max. We should have stayed at the show longer.”

After we had skipped out on the viewing reception earlier, Stek had decided that he wanted to go to this show at a club up by where our old high school was. He said he had made a commitment to a friend that he'd be there, but at the show, we hadn't met any friend. I could tell that he had just wanted to avoid going to the shop. After all, it was going to be our last time being in Vin's when it was still *our* Vin's. Neither of us was ready for that experience. So I had gone along with him to the show, hoping just like him that it could distract us from thinking about that final visit for a little while.

It didn't work.

I looked into the shop through the glass and tried to remember if I had ever seen that view before. It was dark on the inside so I couldn't see much, but the view from the street felt more right than wrong. I remembered Vin's whole marketing strategy that was behind the posters, and in finally seeing the view through those windows, I was now thinking that maybe he had gotten it wrong the whole time.

Stek unlocked the front door and yanked it open.

“Pull those shutters down would you?” he ordered me from inside the store.

“Good idea,” I said. I reached back and pulled the shutters closed. “Don’t want people walking by thinking we’re robbing the joint.”

I turned around and saw Stek staring at me with a scowl on his face.

“Yeah that’s it,” he said shaking his head. He walked behind the counter toward the back room where the light switch was. For a moment he disappeared into the darkness.

“Now what?” I yelled into the darkness. “I can’t even roll the shutters down right?”

I took a deep breath and felt the tension in my shoulders. I was getting tired of all the fighting we were doing. In the darkness in front of me I heard Stek yell out “forget it,” then the light switched on and illuminated the shop.

Looking around the place, it didn’t take me too long to realize that nothing had changed other than the posters. Nothing ever changed in Vin’s; the place was like a time capsule. I hadn’t really actively thought about that until then, just a couple days before everything *would* change, but I guessed that’s how things like that worked.

“I can’t believe how he never changed a thing,” I said to Stek.

He was standing next to the cash register, slowly punching on the keys until the drawer sprung open.

“You kidding me?” Stek said. He closed the drawer and started punching the keys again. “That was the best part about this place. Every time you walked in here it was like time traveling. It was like you stepped back into some memory...into some dream that wouldn’t fade.” The drawer sprung open and made a *ching* noise.

Stek looked down at it for a second, then slammed it closed. “Yeah, let’s throw that all away for a couple extra bucks.”

“I guess you got to wake up, right?” I said. “That’s the worst part of any dream.”

I turned back to Stek, looking for a response, but he just stood there behind the counter, holding his eyes closed as he rubbed his fingers on the register’s keys.

“Where do you want start?” I took my coat and my blazer off and slung them over the counter. Then I loosened my tie and rolled up my sleeves.

“Fuck,” Stek whispered up to heavens. “Well if we have to do this, we’re at least doing it to greatest the sign off set list in history.”

Stek pulled off his jacket and slammed it to the floor. He marched over to the rock section, pulled out a record, then marched back over to the counter where the record player was kept. I heard him snap on the machine, then I heard the drop of the needle, followed by the mounting guitars on “Motor Away” by Guided by Voices.

It was the perfect choice to start with. I shouldn’t have expected anything less from my friend who used to make mix tapes religiously.

We both listened for a bit, letting the song build up courage inside us with every charging chord. What I had always loved about the track was how anthemic was. It always felt to me to be the greatest walk off song of all time, fitting for the soundtrack of any moment in life where you had to just leave something behind and move on. And the lyrics were filled with hope, written and sung by Robert

Pollard, the singer of GBV, with the idea in mind that what was ahead of you was a lot better than what you left behind.

That's what made it a great spin for that moment, all that and the fact that it was played by one of our most favorite bands of all time, a band who we had found our love for in that very store, a band that Vin had recommended for us.

"You remember when Vin gave us our first GBV record?" I asked Stek.

"Oh yeah. *Bee Thousand*," he said laughing. He pointed to the front of the counter. "It was right here, man. Grunge was dead and we needed a new sound. We came in moping like a bunch of lost puppies."

"Yeah, but he set us straight, right?"

"Of course. He always new the right move. He always new the next step when it came to tunes. I loved that about him."

Stek reached down and turned the volume up on the track. The two of us just stood there frozen, listening.

"Alright, let's officially start doing this." I said.

"Your spin," he pointed to the record player. "I'll go grab some boxes from down stairs."

I listened to him thump down the stairs to the basement as I turned back to the racks and thought about my choice. I walked over to the rock stacks and went right for the "R" section. I pulled out a copy of The Rolling Stones' 7-inch single release of "Not Fade Away" on Decca and walked back to the counter to put it on. Stek was coming up the stairs as that Bo Diddley-esque riff came galloping out of

the speakers, and he gave me a nod of approval before taking the boxes out to the floor.

Things took off from there. We each set up shop at our own section of the stacks and began riffling through the albums row by row pulling of any record that we wanted to keep.

“Max pretty much said we could take whatever we want,” I called out to Stek over the music. “So don’t hold back.”

“Oh, I won’t,” I heard Stek say, as he dropped a handful of records down into his box.

The truth was, we didn’t need any more records. Since we had been collecting them for years, our combined record collection was pretty substantial already. I remembered when we had to split them up when I went off to college. The process took almost a whole day, me and him going back and forth arguing about which records were more sentimental to who and which ones we had personally brought to the collection.

So, like I said, we didn’t need any more records. That wasn’t what this was all about. It was about compiling memories from that place. It was about building the biography of that store one memory, one record, one track at a time. That’s the way I thought about what we were doing as I sorted through the records. I was looking to pull anything off that shelf that reminded me of Stek or Vin our days together there in the shop when me and Stek were just two kids looking to learn anything and everything about music from the one man, who to us, seemed to know it all.

Each time we pulled a record off the rack Stek and I would talk about the memories attached to it. We reminisced about the times we spent with Vin out searching for records or the times right there in the shop with the three of us just hanging out and talking music. Stek had brought along the bottles of Philadelphia Whiskey, so we were drinking as we talked, the booze making our voices louder, our laughs harder, our stories greater.

“You remember how Vin used air play like every single instrument,” I said.

We had stopped picking records for a moment to focus on drinking.

“Are you kidding me,” Stek shouted. “The man was the greatest one man air band of all time.”

“I know. I know. Remember this,” I said. I reached down into my box of records and pulled out Howlin’ Wolf’s *Moanin’ in the Moonlight*. I stumbled over to the record player and put the album on, skipping to its second track, “How Many More Years.”

I waited for the harmonica to come in on the track and then I cupped my hands around my mouth and imitated the way Vin used to imitate Howlin’ Wolf whenever he listened to the song in the shop. I stomped my feet and danced around the counter laughing, working my hands back and forth across my lips.

“No, no,” Stek said through his laughter. “You’re not getting it right. Let me.”

He pushed me out of the way and waited for the harmonica to come back around so he could show me how it was done. I leaned back against the counter, drunk and cracking up.

The harmonica came back in at the end of the second verse, and Stek went into his impersonation. He brought his hands up to his mouth just like I had done. He started shuffling and stomping his feet just as I had done as well. But unlike me he closed his eyes when he did his version of it. He managed to push aside the laughter and the buzz that had come over us and just focus on the song. His eyebrows danced along with him, though his eyes stayed pinched closed even as the rest of his body moved.

When the song made it's way into its final moments, where the harmonica gave out completely and there was only the sound of the tumbling piano and the steady thump of the drums, Stek stopped his impersonation. His body still swayed slightly, although he was no longer dancing, and his eyes stayed tightly closed. Through thin skin of his eyelids I could see his eyes moving, shifting in the darkness behind the skin as he imagined a thought or a memory that was too good to leave.

The music put a stop to my laughter, and the sight of Stek swaying there before me with his eyes closed sobered me up quicker than a strong cup of coffee.

When the song ended, Stek's walked over the record player and played the song again. As he listened a second time, he looked around the store, glancing down at the boxes of records we had put together, then over at the windows.

“This place, man,” he said closing his eyes again. “This store was one of the only places where I got to be a kid. At home, out there, I never even got the chance. All the shit in my life grew me up quicker than any kid should. And it was those times when it was you and me singing and joking with your mom, or you and me

down in the basement playing and listening to tunes, and above all you, me, and Vin here in this shop talking and learning about music, those were the only times I got to be a kid. Those were the only times where I really got to feel what it was like.”

Feeling awkward as he spoke, I tucked my hands into my pockets and turned to face the door. At the bottom of my right pocket I fingered Vin’s key to the shop, and pictured all the times I had watched Vin slide that key into the lock to open the store. I remembered Stek sliding a key into that door earlier in the night to unlock the place once last time, but just then I realized that he hadn’t used the key in my pocket. He had used one of his own, one that Vin must have given to him a long time ago.

“It’s just that with this place changing, with Vin dying, with the basement being long gone, with the gum tree being cut down...you know, if this music career doesn’t work out, I don’t know where I’d have left to go to when I need to feel that way again.”

“Why do you need to feel that way, though?”

“Doesn’t everybody?” Stek asked, opening his eyes again. “Don’t you?”

I went to respond, but stopped myself, suddenly feeling the tug of my tie around my neck. I looked down at it, thinking about how I never wore one at school when I taught.

“Yeah, I guess,” I said, pulling off my tie.

“Everybody needs that feeling once and while,” he said, pausing for a second to listen to the song. “I just need it more than others.”

“Well,” I said. “In the future if you need it, just call me and we’ll get together and—”

“It’s not that simple anymore.”

“Why not?” I said. “Why can’t it be?”

The record player’s needle slid into the next track of the album, “Smokestack Lightning,” and Howlin’ Wolf growled out:

Ah, oh, smokestack lightning

Shinin', just like gold

Why don't ya hear me cryin'?

I felt my face suddenly go hot with shame. I quickly leaned over the counter to pull up the needle.

“Just let it run, man,” Stek said, before I could get to the record player. “The damage is already done.”

I went for the needle anyway, pulling it up in anger.

Stek walked to the wall behind the counter where Vin had put up a bunch of pictures of himself. He focused on the picture of a young Vin playing drums at a live show for his band Red Edit. Then he pulled it down off the wall and brought it over to his box of records.

“Why can’t you get past this,” I yelled at him. “Every time I think we have, you go bringing it back from the dead again. I’ve said I’m sorry a million times. There’s nothing else for me to do. I can’t go back and change history.”

“I know,” Stek said, looking down at the picture of Vin. “I thought I got past it too, but it’s in times like these where I learn I’m not.”

“But why?” I shouted in frustration. “Why can’t you—”

“Why? TJ. You fucking want to know why. It’s because of this right here. After all these years, you still don’t get it! You still don’t understand why what you did was so wrong.”

“You make it seem sometimes like I’m as bad as your old man. I’m sorry your family life was shit, but you can’t hold that against me. You can’t hate me for taking the opportunity to actually have a real family and a normal life. And the Alana thing—”

“Again, this is the shit right here I’m talking about. It was never about your family or that stupid girl. Get that into your head once and for all.”

“Then what was it, huh? What was it?”

“You doubted the fucking dream,” he shouted, louder than ever. “You doubted me and Vin and what this place stood for. You embraced it all your life, and then you abandoned it. That’s what it was and still is. You lost faith in us.”

“Look at this guy,” Stek said, holding out an arm to stop me there on the street.

Up ahead on South Street we saw a man in a tan jacket staring up at the gum tree with his jaw dropped. He scrunched his eyes as he studied the tree’s rainbow bark one piece of gum at a time.

“He’s clueless,” Stek said through laughs. We stepped behind the closest tree and peeked around its trunk. “Clueless as a little kid. I love it.”

“Seriously, it’s like the guy’s never seen anything like it before,” I said, giggling along with Stek. “What do you think he’s thinking about?”

“Isn’t it obvious. He’s wondering what the hell the thing is. He’s wondering about it so hard it stopped him dead in his tracks.”

The man stared at the tree for another second or two. We both watched as he lifted his dropped jaw to make a smile. He pulled a camera out his pocket, snapped a couple of pictures, then slowly back-peddled away from the tree. A woman who was walking by him suddenly caught a glimpse of the tree, too, and slowed down to take it in. The man said something to her, and though I couldn’t hear him from where we were standing, I read his lips.

It’s wonderful. His lips read. *It’s wonderful isn’t it?*

“Can you believe that?” Stek said, after the man walked off. We popped out from behind our tree and started walking again. “We did that. You and me.”

“Wait, what?”

“That,” Stek said. He threw out his hands in the direction of the tree. “We made it happen. Our tree, our gum, they made that guy stop.”

“So?” I said back.

“So? Come on, TJ. Don’t you think it’s kind of cool that something we did could make a person stop on the street? Think about it. That guy was so amazed with what he saw that he took pictures of our tree. Who knows what he’s going to

do with them or who he's going to show them to. It could end up in some photo album of his that he keeps for years. That's pretty cool."

I thought about that for a second, picturing the man in the tan jacket thirty years from then pulling out an old photo album to remember his younger days and flipping to the picture of the gum tree.

For some strange reason a feeling of pride rose up in my stomach.

"I guess it is pretty cool."

"Finally he gets it ladies and gentlemen," Stek said. We walked toward the tree, Stek stopping me again right before we got to Ishkabibble's so that he could stare up at our work. He ran his eyes along the tree's spotted trunk and then looked over to where the man had been standing.

"That's it," he said, looking back at me with a prideful smile. "That's what it's got to be about, man."

"What are you talking about, dude?" I asked. I was getting lost again.

"Our music," he said. "Our fucking sound. It's got to make people feel like that. We're not going to make music that just makes people feel sad or angry or cool or romantic—none that typical shit. We've got to write something that makes people feel like that."

Again he threw out his hands in the direction of where the man had been standing. I remembered the look on the man's face, his dropped jaw, his scrunched eyes.

"What do you mean like awestruck or something?"

“I don’t know how to label it,” he said, stepping into the man’s the spot. He ran his hand through his wavy, long hair and looked into the gum tree for answers. I could tell he was feeling the moment. “It’s like when you were a kid and everything’s so new and exciting because you don’t understand any of it. Everything’s this little mystery that you can’t figure out. You know, before all the shit comes in and messes it up. That’s what we got to be about. Making people feel that again.”

I tried to think of any bands that had made me feel that way, that put me in a place where they were so exciting, so good I couldn’t understand how they got that way. It made me think of some of the greatest bands of all-time: the Stones, the Beatles, the Who all the way up to the great bands I had been listening to recently, like the Pixies, Sonic Youth, Nirvana, and Guided By Voices. They were bands who made you rethink who you were as a listener, who made you rip up your understanding of what you thought music was, and start building it up all over again.

“That’s a pretty tall order don’t you think, man?” I asked Stek, checking to see if he wasn’t completely living off in the clouds. “I mean that’s a lot pressure to be putting on our backs.”

Stek’s shoulders slumped after my comment, as if my words had caused that pressure to arrive all of a sudden square on his back. He rolled his head toward me and burned his eyes in my direction.

“What the fuck is your problem?” he said, stressing his question with a pause between each word.

“What?” I said, holding up my hands.

“You’ve been hitting me with that daddy-talk every time you get the chance. It started the other day when I had to *talk* you into taking the church place, you were doing it on Wednesday when we were packing my stuff up at my grandmom’s house, and here you are doing it again today, playing Mr. voice of reason.” He shook his head and spit toward the curb. “A.k.a. Johnny fucking buzzkill.”

“What? I’m not allowed to have some input? You know this is my future here we’re dealing with too.”

“Yeah,” he said, stepping toward me. “I know. It’s our future. Me and my friend’s future. So that’s who I need now, my friend, the kid who helped dream up this whole thing with me. What I don’t need is a God damn parent.”

He was practically standing on top of me then, and with him being that close I could only look up into his face for a second before I had to drop my eyes to the pavement. I got defensive all of sudden, feeling as if I was being attacked, and held up my hands again, thinking that would be enough to make him step back.

“I know. I’m here,” I said. I shook my hands to emphasize that fact. “I’m just...I’m just trying to be a little realistic that’s all.”

He held there for a moment, pressuring me with his eyes until I finally looked up into them. He backed away after that, shaking his head a little bit as he reached into his mouth for his gum. He walked over to the gum tree and grinded his piece down into the bark, mumbling a bit to himself as he did it.

“What was that for?” I asked, staring at the tree’s new yellow patch of bark.

“Same old shit,” he said, still sounding angry. “Same old shit.”

On the walk over to work it was easy to tell that Stek was still pissed at me. He gave me the silent treatment pretty hardcore, not responding to any of my apologies or explanations and pretty much pretending like I wasn't even there. When we got in the shop, he kept up with the same act, doing his reshelving and other daily tasks while keeping his distance and not saying anything to me.

Vin waddled out of the back after a little while, and started giving me the run down on a couple of display changes he had in mind. Stek was off in the back of the store doing inventory checks, but when he heard Vin talking to me he came right back over to the counter where we were standing.

“Hey, Vin. Could you tell us about when you and Red Edit opened up for George Thorogood and the Delaware Destroyers on tour?” he said, once he was right there standing next to us. “TJ and I were talking about it the other day and couldn't remember all the details.”

I racked my brain trying to think of the conversation that he was talking about, but I couldn't remember that one. I tried to get his attention by shrugging in his direction, but he again was shutting me out. He focused only on Vin and asked him question after question about the tour.

We had heard Vin's story about playing with George Thorogood about a millions times. He told us about what it was like being out on the road, about not showering for days and sleeping in the van.

“We got an allowance of twenty-one dollars a day for food and whatnot. And if you spent it quick, then you were on your own. I usually just slept through breakfast and lunch as we drove, and then I'd get a quick bite to eat before we went

on.” He pointed over his shoulder at the wall of photos he had up of himself when he was in the band. In the photos he must have been at least sixty pounds lighter.

“I’ll tell you, I’ve been making up for all those lost meals ever since.”

He went on talking about what it was like not having any other obligations other than the ones you made to the open road and the fans. He talked about how he and the guys never stopped playing music all day and night, playing songs for handfuls of people in hotel rooms and in random people’s apartments when they could. He talked about meeting almost every type of person imaginable, about making new friends in every city you stopped in.

“It was a dream world, I’m telling you. You never knew what or who you were going to find when you stepped out of those van doors, but you always came back to them with a story to tell. It was only one summer, but it was the best one of my life.”

I looked over to Stek and noticed him staring at me. I realized then why he was making Vin tell us that story again. The life Vin was describing was the one that me and Stek had always wanted. We wanted the adventures, the music, the stories, the friends, the things we never got because we were always stuck in our shitty lives. The life Vin was describing was closer than ever for us then. There was still a ton of work for us to do to get there, but looking at Stek as he listened to Vin, I could tell he was thinking about how all of that could be ours now more than ever.

I wanted to be happy in realizing that. I wanted to feel something that told me that this was the right path for me, that this life was the one I had been meant to live. But right then, all I could feel was an uneasiness growing in my stomach.

At that moment, a man walked into the store. He was tall and maybe in his forties, and he had long brown hair that was pulled back into a ponytail. As he stepped into the store, he pulled off his dark sunglasses and folded them into the inside pocket of his jacket, a brown corduroy blazer.

“Sounds like a great life,” I heard Stek say to Vin. I turned my head back around to find Stek staring at me again. “Don’t you think, TJ?”

I hesitated for a moment, trying to remember what I had been thinking before the man came into the shop.

“Yeah,” I said, feeling that uneasiness from before moving up to my heart. “Yeah it does.”

Stek and I went back to work after that, and for the rest of the evening he still kept stone walling me like he had before, only saying something to me if it was somehow related to work. Before we left for the night he reminded me about our meeting the next day with Marty to sign the lease on the basement. He would be the one doing the signing, of course, but he wanted me to go along with him for support.

“Just like last week then,” he said as we were walking out of the store. “One thirty meet-up again at the bus stop on Ninth and South.”

I nodded to him to let him know I’d be there.

“The next phase of our lives starts tomorrow,” he said, pulling up the zipper on his jacket. “It’s the dream, man. Our dream. It’s happening.”

He shot me a little half smile, the weakness of which let me know he was still angry, and then he walked off one last time toward his grandmother’s house.

I walked into my house to find the place quiet and empty. When I made it to the top of the stairs, I noticed that the living room was filled with boxes, but my Ma and dad were nowhere to be found. I relaxed a bit in my own house for the first time in what seemed like a month. There had been so many fights, so many awkward moments of silence, so many looks of anger and fear and pain shot my way recently that it was nice just to come in and not have to deal with any of that.

I went into the kitchen and grabbed myself a little cereal for dinner. I felt even more relieved when I found a note on the counter from my dad saying how he had a dinner meeting that night and wouldn't be home until 10:00. Suddenly, it was just like old times again—me alone in the house and the parents gone. There was something settling about the feeling, even though I knew the moment was to be short lived, but sitting alone there eating my cereal was actually kind of nice. In that time where there were so many changes going on in my life, it was nice to pretend just for a little while that nothing had changed at all.

I was about two spoonfuls into my second bowl of cereal when I heard movement coming from above and the faint sound of music drifting down the stairs. I wasn't alone after all.

I downed that second bowl of cereal and then headed up stairs for the safety of my room. When I got to the top of the stairs the first thing I noticed was that the door to my room was open and that the light was on inside. The music was also

coming from within my room, and I quickly recognized the unmistakable sound of Keith Richard's buzzing guitar on "Satisfaction."

I crept up to my door and eased it open to find my mom sitting on my bed with my old Winnie the Pooh tape player in her hands. The tape player had always been my secret. I never realized she knew about it.

"I thought I was alone," I said over the music.

My mom, startled by my voice, quickly snapped off the tape player.

"No, no, honey. I thought you knew. I'm sorry if I scared you." She placed the tape player off to her side and tucked her hair back behind her ears. She looked down at the tape player nervously and then back up at me.

"What are you doing with that?" I asked sharply. I felt myself getting upset. My face went hot and my skin tingled. I was trying my hardest to not cry.

"This," she said picking up the tape player. She rubbed the surface of it with one her fingers, softly skimming over the buttons and the plastic window of the tape slot. "I was just in need of some cheering up."

I could tell that she had been crying. The skin underneath her eyes sagged a bit and was coated with a thin gloss of tears. She kept studying the tape player, rubbing that finger over every bit of its green plastic.

"You know you just can't come in here and go through my things," I said. I walked over and pulled the tape player out of her hands. "I have the right to keep some things private."

Her lips started shaking a bit, and she folded her now empty hands into her lap. I couldn't stand to look at her that way so I stared down at the tape player just

as she had and thought about all those times I had played it at night before bed on the nights when I missed my dad. I looked up and caught her watching me. I don't know why, but I quickly hid the little machine behind my pack.

“You know I used to be able to hear you playing that. All those nights when it was just you and me alone. When your father was always away.” No longer holding back, she began to cry, her tears tumbling down her cheeks. “It was one of the only things that kept me happy during those days. I'd listen to you playing that song and I'd remember what it was like to be a little a girl and doing the very same thing. It made me remember that I'd never be alone as long as I had you. And that was something I needed to understand then.”

Although I tried my hardest not to, I started to cry with her. I wanted to tell her that I had always played it loud enough so that she could hear it. I wanted to tell her that having us both listen to the same song, even if we weren't in the same room, made me feel as if I was less alone, too. But I couldn't say that. Not then. I needed to be mad at her. I needed to tell her how much it hurt me that she forgot all about that.

“If I was so important to you, how come you left me alone, huh?” I said. I wiped away my tears with the sleeve of my shirt. “How come you got a job and left me here to be by myself most nights?”

She thought about my question, staring at the wall of posters across from her, while gently rolling her hands.

“Tim, you grew up so fast,” she said. “You got that job with Vin the record man, and if you weren't at school or at work you were always at Adam's playing

music. It felt as if you left me then. It felt as if you didn't need me anymore. And with this big empty house all to myself, I just couldn't stand it. I couldn't take it. I needed to get out."

She looked over at me and caught my eyes.

"I'm sorry if it felt like I left you. I never meant to hurt you." She brought a hand up to her face and pushed away some tears. "And your father never meant to hurt you either. I know it felt like that at times, but he was only working that hard to do what was best for us."

I scoffed at the comment about my dad, somehow finding a way to push out a laugh through all my tears. My mother turned her head at me, my reaction upsetting her even further. She glanced back over to wall of the posters and shook her head.

"This is something I probably should have said to you a long time ago, but here goes." She paused for a moment and looked over to me. "Your father and Adam's father are not the same type of man."

I turned and went to walk out the door, but I didn't get far because my mom sprung up and grabbed me by the shirt. She stood up and held me by the shoulders, the points of her fingertips digging into my biceps.

"You have people that you love," she said crying hysterically now. "I love you. Your father loves you. And he only worked as hard as he did so he could give you this life, so he could get to this point where he could be with us all the time." I fought hard to break her grip, but she pinned me against the wall of posters with her

body. “You can keep pretending all you want, but your life and your friend’s life are not the same.”

I broke free of her hands, but I didn’t run away from her. I just pulled my arms up over my face and cried harder than I ever had before. I slid down the wall to the floor, ripping down a poster as my body dragged against the wall. What had me crying that hard wasn’t what my mom had said about my dad or Stek’s dad or the guilt I was finally feeling for giving my parents such a hard time about the move, it was the thought of Stek, it was the thought of him being all alone down in his grandmom’s basement just a couple blocks away. He was probably thinking about the move and signing the lease and the two of us starting our second life together. In those thoughts of me and him he wasn’t alone, just as my Ma and I hadn’t been alone whenever I played that tape player late at night when my dad wasn’t home. But if I moved to Jersey with my parents, if I took that life they were offering me and didn’t go with Stek, then he would be alone. I knew that. No matter how hard I tried to make him feel otherwise, he’d always feel abandoned.

“It’s not fair,” I said through my crying. “Why do I get this new house and this new life when he’s got nothing?”

“Is that what this has been all about?” My Ma dropped down to the floor and hugged me. “Is that why you’ve been so set on moving in with him?”

I nodded my head from behind my arms. My Ma began rubbing her soft fingers through my long hair.

“Tim, you can’t hate yourself for having this opportunity,” she whispered. “And he can’t hate you either, not if he’s a true friend.”

“But his dad kicked him out of the house. In a couple days he’s not even going to have a place to live. Unless I move in with him, I don’t know where he’s going to go.”

“Don’t you worry about that anymore,” she said, whispering again. “Adam can come stay with us, too. He can come be part of our family. He’s not going to be alone, not as long as he has you as a friend.”

My Ma kept running her fingers through her hair, leaning into me every now and then to kiss my forehead and shush my tears. We stayed that way for maybe a half an hour, my Ma just holding me and doing her best to stop my crying. She told me about the basement in the new house, a big, open space with more than enough room for our instruments.

“It could be your own little room down there,” she said. “Your father and I won’t even go down there. I promise.”

I pictured me and Stek living together, driving to school and back over the bridge with the windows down and the stereo blasting. We’d be able to still go to work together, we’d still be able to play music as much as we wanted, we’d be able to hang out together as much as we wanted, too. We’d be like brothers in almost everyway imaginable, and for the first time we’d both have parents to look after us and to take care of us. It wasn’t the dream exactly as we had envisioned it, it was more: a balance between what we wanted in the past and what we wanted now. It was the chance to live our dream and be loved.

I looked up into my Ma’s eyes once I had cried out every tear I had inside of me. I finally knew what was the right thing to do.

I slept like a rock that night, and in the morning I woke up and started packing some of my stuff. I started with my clothes, and as I rummaged through my closets and drawers, I planned out how I was going to ask Stek to move in with my parents and me. I needed to explain it to him just right so he understood how that life could work. He needed to see how it would give us everything we wanted and more.

It was hard for me not to think about Alana, too, then. I couldn't look at any of my clothes anymore without thinking about what they were possibly saying about me. The more I thought about Alana, the more I saw her in those same images I imagined of my life over in Jersey. In my head I saw Stek and me picking her up from work and dropping her off at her home. I could see myself driving over to her house to pick her up for a date, and walking up to her door and shaking her father's hand. I could see us kissing on the train as it shot us across the Delaware River and toward home. It was a dream I wanted to live, a life I wanted to make. I understood that then more than ever.

While I packed I had been putting any old clothes that I never wore anymore into a garbage bag. It was mostly stuff from a couple years earlier when Stek and I were really into grunge—some jeans and t-shirts I had outgrown and a couple of flannel button downs—stuff that had made its way to the back of my closet or to the bottom of my drawers. The rest of my clothes, the pieces I wanted to keep, I started packing away into two boxes my mom gave me, leaving out any essential

clothing that I needed for the next couple of days. By the time I stuffed both of my boxes to the brim, it was almost noon. I looked around at my room and in spite of the fact that I had packed away my entire wardrobe, the place looked like it had barely been touched. I was going to need some more boxes if was ever going to get the room completely done.

I grabbed the bag of old clothes and headed over to Second Chances.

Alana was sitting behind the counter reading a book when I got there, and she peered out over the fanned pages of her book when she saw me walk through the door.

“Looks like the packing is going well,” she said, as I plopped the trash bag of clothes onto the counter top. “I hope you saved some clothes to wear.”

“Don’t worry, I did,” I said. “But this stuff I’ve outgrown. I figured some other kid might need them.”

She slipped her hand into the bag and began sorting my old clothes. She folded each item gently and precisely, and made piles of similar clothes, one for t-shirts, one for jeans, one for button downs. I studied her face as she worked through the bag, loving the way the golden blonde of her hair became slightly darker at her scalp. It balanced out the darkness of her eyes.

“So I’m assuming you and Stek found a place?” she asked.

“Yeah,” I said and then paused for a moment. It was the first time I had said out loud that I had a new home. “Yeah, we found a great place.”

“That’s awesome,” she said smiling at me. “Now you just have to get through the actual moving part.”

“Yeah, I know,” I said, remembering all the stuff back in my room. “I actually could use some of those boxes.”

“Sure,” she said and then asked me for a minute. She needed to finish up with my clothing before she could get them. So I stood there waiting, watching her prepare my old clothes to be sold.

“What town do you live in?” I asked her. “Over in Jersey?”

She looked up from her piles and squinted at me. She didn’t know where my question had come from.

“Haddon Heights.”

“Is that anywhere near Haddonfield?” I asked, referencing the town my new house was in.

“Yeah. They’re right next to each other.” She looked at me again with those squinty eyes. “Why?”

“I was just wondering,” I said. I tucked my hands into the pockets of the corduroy jacket she had picked out for me. “It looks like we’re going to be neighbors, that’s all.”

“What?” she asked. Her lips stretched into that same surprised, little smile she had worn the first day I met her.

“I’m moving to Haddonfield with my family,” I said to her.

“That’s great,” she shouted and ran around the counter to give me a hug.

“Wait, I thought you said your parents were out of the picture?”

“I thought they were for a little while,” I said, remembering how my Ma had kissed me and held me just the night before. “But things changed.”

“Well what about Stek? What’s he going to do?”

I hesitated in answering, remembering that I still had to talk to him about the move.

“He’s going to come live with me and my parents,” I said confidently.

“We’re all going to live together.”

“Well,” she said smiling. “You’ll have to invite me to the house warming party. After all, I am providing the boxes for the move.”

She held onto my neck for a moment and kept smiling at me. I looked into her eyes and then leaned into to kiss her, feeling for her thin, pink lips with my own. I pressed into her hard, pulling her body to mine and holding it there for as long as I could.

She leaned away from me slightly, saying how she was worried about her boss coming in from lunch and finding us. She grabbed my hand and led me to a back storage room where the boxes were. We went into the room and inside there were some boxes folded up against a wall and a big pile of clothes that had been heaped onto the center of the floor. She pulled me down into the pile and I fell on top of her. The clothes moved underneath us and for a couple of seconds I struggled to stay there on top of her, but then she pulled me close to her body and I found my balance.

We kissed like that for a while, breathing through our noses so that we could keep our mouths tight together. I lifted off her for a second, and looked down at her as my long hair fell all around her face.

“What?” she said, looking up at me.

“Nothing,” I whispered to her. “I’m just happy, that’s all.”

I leaned back in to kiss her again, and felt in that moment that my new life had begun, that I was living it right there in the tiny room with her.

Alana and I walked out the storage room and I checked my watch. It was just around 1:30 and I knew Stek would be waiting for me. She gave me a couple boxes and her phone number and I promised to call her later that night. Then I kissed her one more time and left, holding the boxes tightly underneath my arm.

Outside, waiting for me on the corner was Stek. I called out to him as I neared him and he turned to face me, his hair catching slightly in the wind.

“I have good news, man,” I said to him. “We don’t have to take the place.”

“You’re right,” I said to Stek. The memory of that decision came back to me in a flash. “I played it safe. I had the opportunity to do what we always wanted and I turned it down.” I felt tears come up into my eyes. There was nothing I could do to stop them. “You know I tried to make it work after that. I tried to believe in it as I much as I did at the start, but that decision to move with my parents, it really changed me. I don’t know why, but I’ve been playing it safe ever since, with everything—school, my job, my life.”

Stek had picked up the picture of Vin again and was staring at it. He pulled his fingers through his hair and held his hand there, tugging slightly at his hair as he thought about the photo.

“You know it changed me, too,” he said. “I know you didn’t mean for it to, but it did. I don’t think I’ve ever been as confident since. It’s hard doing this all by myself. When it was you and me, it was different. I believed in myself more because you were there believing in me, too.”

“But I do still believe in you,” I pleaded. “That’s what I’ve been trying to show you all night long. I’m still here. I may not be up there on the stage, but I’ll always be here for you.”

Stek started crying himself then, and he dropped his head a bit so his hair cover a good portion of his face.

“I know, but it’s not the same anymore. I told you. I want it to be, but its not.”

I couldn’t look at him crying like that anymore, so I looked away. I tried to think about what I could do to change what I had done, so that I could show him that I could still be that person he could look to for hope and support, but there was nothing I could think of in that moment. The hurt that I had caused him was too great to erase that quickly. Even ten years couldn’t erase away that pain.

I still kept looking away from him, ashamed of how badly I hurt him. I looked over to Vin’s wall of photos in search of answer or something and then I lifted my head and glanced up at Vin’s big board that was right above the photos. The big board was a staple of Vin’s Vinyl. It had been the end all and be all of

contemporary musical discussion in the shop and around South Street. It told everyone who walked into that store what was the best album at the moment. It told every customer who was really worth listening to. And it was always prepared by Vin and Vin alone. Nobody else was allowed even to voice their input, not even Stek or me.

At the top of the board, scratched out in Vin's wobbly hand writing as the number one album at the current moment was *Vilelation* by Stek Mainard and the Viles. It was Stek's one and only EP.

"Look Stek," I yelled out to him, waving him over to the counter to see the board.

He hurried over to where I was standing, and when he looked up and saw his name up there in Vin's handwriting, his tears quickly turned into tears of joy. He pulled me over for a hug and started crying into my shoulder. I hugged him as hard as I could, hoping somehow that I could one day help him to feel that happy.

"I knew he wouldn't let me down," he said through his tears. The guilt I felt in my stomach over what I had done to him all of sudden felt even worse. Vin had done what I couldn't. He had never stopped believing in Stek, not even death could stop him from showing Stek how much faith he had in him. I wanted to somehow be able to do that for my friend. I wanted to show him that I believed in everything he did still, even though my belief had wavered in the past.

"What can I do to make this up to you, man?" I asked Stek. "I need to make this right."

“I don’t know what you can do,” he said honestly. “Maybe someday there’ll be an opportunity for you to change this, but right now I just don’t know.”

I thought for a second about his answer, and though I didn’t like it, I had to settle with it for the moment. But then idea came upon my quickly that would at least start to set things straight.

“Let me start making it up to you now,” I said looking out toward the windows.

I told Stek to wait there and I quickly went for the door. I rolled up the shutters and ran straight for my car, hopping into it as quickly as possible and slamming on the gas. I shot down South Street as fast as I could to Second and then parked outside the Wawa convenience store and ran inside. I bought as many packs of gum as I could, making sure to buy as many different color varieties as possible. Then I got back into my car and headed back to Vin’s.

Stek was getting our boxes of records together when I got back, and I waved for him through the windows to come outside and meet me. In front of Vin’s there was another oak shooting out of the sidewalk, and although it wasn’t as big or as old as the original gum tree, for what I had in mind, it would certainly do.

I handed him a pack of gum and we both started chewing. It was just past 3:00AM on South Street and aside from a few homeless men and the occasional late bar-goer, the street was essentially empty. We chewed hard and fast until our jaws were sore. We stuck as many pieces as we could onto the tree, trying to rebuild our old tree the way we still pictured it in our minds. After about forty-five

minutes of chewing and sticking, Stek placed one last piece of gum on the tree and told me to stop.

“We got to let other people take it from here,” he said looking up at the tree with a big smile on his face. His cheeks had gone red from all the chewing and as he continued to look up at the tree his cheeks glowed stronger it seemed in the dim light of the street. I looked up at tree myself and smiled too, feeling my cheeks glowing red as well in the cold March wind.

We walked back inside to collect our stuff and when we turned back around to face the window there was a homeless man standing there outside staring up at the tree.

Both Stek and I ducked behind the counter for a moment, studying the man as he looked over the tree’s technicolored bark.

“Here comes the best part,” Stek said through laughter.

We both watched as the man ran his eyes over all the gum and dropped his jaw in wonder. I looked down at Stek at that point and stared at his smile, finally feeling as if I could change what I had done all those years ago.

“I mean it, Stek,” I said to him. “I’m going to make things right again between us.”

“I know you will,” he said, his eyes still fixated on the man. “I know you will.”