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5-2021

## Sweat, Cigs and A Ball of Noise

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## 1-Rolling the Dice on a Reunion

Ever since my band, Streetwise Preacher, met its demise two years prior, I fumbled through life. Hilltop Pawn and Loan kept me from living at my parents' house. Rock n' roll kept me sane, yet picking up a guitar always made me yearn for the fuzzy-edged days playing bass and singing Southern-fried, swampy hard rock n' roll in weird venues around North Central Indiana.

I woke up in late September like most days-still wanting more sleep, not motivated to work and ready to have a day off. My alarm kept buzzing in my damaged ears. After hitting snooze multiple times, I opened my eyes and looked around the white walls accented with my crinkled posters-Jimi Hendrix, *Pulp Fiction* and Beavis and Butthead.

I drank a cup of coffee like a train plowing through a brick wall. Iron Maiden's album *Number of the Beast* played on my second-hand turntable. Bruce Dickinson's voice and the coffee's caffeine threw my sleepy mood out the window. Once I got through my first cup, I checked my emails on my phone which included Streetwise Preacher's booking email.

I came across an email that said, "Dear Streetwise Preacher, I am Bud Tolley from Firsthand Promotions. I worked with you on numerous occasions. We are putting together a four-band bill to support Doyle Von Frankenstein of The Misfits on Saturday October 31<sup>st</sup> at 7:30PM. I recall your band's energy, timeliness and ability to draw a crowd. While checking your social media, I noticed you have not been active in quite some time. With this being a reunion opportunity, I'm hoping that will add to the draw and increased financial compensation. We cannot guarantee a later time-slot. This could however lead to a further partnership on future show opportunities.

I can give you a week to respond. After that time period, I will have to rescind the offer.

If you are interested, please respond to this email. I hope to talk with you soon.

Bud.”

I read it three times, enough to finish my cup of coffee. While I showered, the last show played out in my mind.

Everything was a blur except for the last song. The epic five-minute tune penned by me never got its due in terms of consistent performance. Johnny, the guitarist, had issues playing his own tunes much less something he didn't write. Tony, the drummer, could play a variety of tempos, but they were never duplicated. Streetwise Preacher was a sonic craps shoot, and I hesitated to roll the dice on a reunion gig.

When I walked into Hilltop Pawn and Loan, I couldn't get the reunion out of my mind. There was about thirty minutes before we opened. Every day Carrie usually wore black and accented it with bright red lipstick. We would exchange hellos and go about our duties. That was our routine for the past two years. We weren't coworker friends. Just coworkers. No one else worked with us. Hilltop Pawn and Loan wasn't a big enough establishment to outfit an army of employees. We made it through each week on the misfortune of others. Pawns would often default and leave us with an abundance of goods that we stored, put online and shipped out once a week.

Carrie went about her business each day with a neutral smirk, few questions and an intense stare. I'd post up behind the register, ring up people and be their saving grace or, in some cases, the grim reaper to their last ditch of financial hope.

This day she kept her eyes fixed on the floor. She observed every step. I was a distant concern to her, yet, I neglected to express concern. I opted to keep my focus on my job and not being the brunt of any frustrations, she needed to vent.

After a few hours, Carrie didn't come out to the store. sat in silence until we took our lunch break at 3PM. Even after Christmas, when we received far too many pawned items that would never return to their owners, Carrie would make it a point to emerge from the storage area and check in with me.

I put our usual, 'Be Back in Thirty,' sign on the door. Carrie nibbled on her pre-packaged food that she brought in her insulated lunch bag. I propped my feet on the table, leaned back in the folding plastic chair and observed the four, tattered movie posters that graced the pale-yellow walls of the break room.

Carrie told me the backstory behind her aimless stare. Her mother was sick. Not just a flu. Serious illness. The ailment would require Carrie to shuttle her mother around the surrounding area to appointments and treatments. Before her tears caused her to cease her soliloquy, she told me that I needed to prepare myself for her eminent resignation.

Carrie's mother was in a near-fatal crash while we were in high school. Carrie and I had English together that year. The crash occurred in October and for almost the remainder of the semester, Carrie only came to class two to three times a week. I didn't know her well back then, but when she did come to class, she wasn't a lively participant.

Prior to English class, we were friendly acquaintances. We didn't hang out or run in the same social circles. Our lockers were near each other our freshmen year. The friendly acquaintance strained sophomore year when a close friend of mine said some disparaging words about one of her female friends following a break-up. This coincided with us sharing half of our schedule together that particular semester.

Her mood that day at work was identical to her mood in high school. Before the crash, I heard her talk about her early acceptances and scholarships to a few prestigious art schools out of

state. She always kept a sketch book handy or a piece of wood with an in-progress sketch taped to it.

I had worked at Hilltop Pawn and Loan before Streetwise Preacher broke-up. Once we broke-up, I was an employee who deserved walking papers. Carrie let my habitual tardiness slide. Perhaps our history as high school classmates gave her some hope that I could get my ass in gear.

Carrie hadn't convinced me that her resignation was necessary. In my mind, there was some relative nearby to shuttle her mother and wipe her ass, but Carrie told me otherwise. She reminded me that her father wasn't in the picture and her sister lived out of state. This jogged my memory. She went to college with me, but we never had a conversation.

"I feel guilty leaving her alone," Carrie said.

"Can't you just work here?" I asked and took my feet off the break room table.

"I'm not going to have the time," she said. "Her immune system is going to be wrecked."

Carrie and I knew basic details about each other. She would occasionally mention her weekend plans. I mentioned shows when I had them. Once the band broke-up, I blocked her from knowing about my miserable existence.

"She's got an appointment next week," she said. "I'll know if I can keep working then."

Her statement lingered in my mind when I walked into my one-bedroom apartment. I lived above a few businesses that included a law office, hair salon and a bar named Skeeter's Corner Lounge. I had a single chair, a few wrinkled posters on my white walls, a TV on a bookshelf that housed some dusty rejected movies from work a few rock biographies and beat-up, used classic rock records. I had an air mattress on the floor in my bedroom that was double

the size of a standard walk-in closet. My kitchen blended into my living area. I was fortunate to have a bathroom with a good toilet, sink and shower.

I sat down in my chair and returned to the reunion email while I waited for water to boil.

I knew that I could contact Tony. Contacting Johnny was another story. Tony was the one I needed to convince.

Prior to our last show, we convened at our local hang-out-The Rail Tie Diner. It wasn't a five-star restaurant, but damn, it did go well with a few, cheap practice beers. Tony and I sat on the same side of the booth. Johnny couldn't remember half of the songs in our set-list and not just the songs he wrote. He kept selling his guitar to pay debts to various people who we later found out were drug dealers or cash advance places. He didn't have anything left in his life except for the band. I had just started at Hilltop Pawn and Loan. Tony was between jobs, but he had just met his current girlfriend.

We got kicked out that night. Tony and Johnny stood nose-to-nose as Johnny accused Tony's girlfriend for being a catalyst to the band breaking-up. I just sat in my seat wishing that we would elect to not play the show, but we did. The last show was horrendous. I didn't speak to Johnny after it, and I didn't speak to Tony for months.

I ruminated on that thought and began to second-guess whether reuniting the band was worth the trouble. The past two years netted me nothing. I had managed to get a whole dollar raise per hour. I think the owner felt sorry for me. Each night after work, I came home to my apartment with the same neutral grin and empty hole in my heart.

When Streetwise Preacher formed, I had been fired from Essential Motor. My mouth got me in bands and got me in trouble with authority figures. Tony and Johnny became brothers to me. Failure became inspiration. I threw myself into the band while I returned to live at home

with my parents. They kept in my ear about finding a career. Streetwise Preacher's ball of noise sound quieted my parents' comments. I often slept over at the various places that Johnny and Tony lived throughout our two years as a band.

I finished eating my pasta and played a Streetwise Preacher song on my acoustic guitar. The musty, dimly lit music center basement encompassed my mind. Cheap beer settled on my tongue. Marlboro Light Special Blend cigarettes lingered in the air. The rock n' roll fantasy took shape.

I finished playing the song and looked at the reunion show email. I memorized the details. We were all Misfits fans. Playing on Halloween was something that had graced our band bucket list. I sent the show details to Tony and neglected to finesse him with personalized questions. The pleasantries would come later if we reformed. I needed a direct answer. I was approaching thirty and was sick of losing my few remaining friends to the trappings of marriage and children. I didn't anticipate an answer for hours if not days.

Before I went to bed, my phone flashed. Tony replied to my message, "I don't know man. I've got a lot going on."

Throughout the following workday, Carrie kept me on task, and I performed every possible menial, monotonous work-related task. Each glass surface didn't have a millimeter of dust or any trace of a fingerprint. Before we went our separate ways, Carrie told me that I needed to show up to work at least an hour early to open the store. In my two years at Hilltop Pawn and Loan, I had opened the store three times. Each time was spaced out a few months apart. I never adequately opened the store. Luckily each time, Carrie arrived later in the day to clean up my mess.

When I returned to my apartment, I removed the wrinkled clothes from my chair. My guitar called my name; I played it for a few minutes. Lyrics popped in my head but I couldn't figure out any chords or riffs to accompany them. I figured it was best to send a text message to Tony. This time, I figured reaching out as a friend was the best way to handle the convincing process.

An hour later, he agreed to meet me for a beer.

Tony was the number one priority. I knew no other competent drummer who could simultaneously play the parts, manage egos and tolerate Johnny's bullshit. We could find a guitarist or two to replace Johnny who could not only play the parts, but not bring any baggage to each band practice. Then, I began to wonder why we couldn't opt to find someone to replace Johnny. The promoter hadn't explicitly stated that the original line-up was a necessity. A customer came into the store yet I neglected his presence and returned to the situation about Johnny.

Johnny brought a certain edge to the band. His left of center riffs made the band rise above the other riff-raff rock n' roll bands that came and went in the small Hilltop music scene. I couldn't find someone in my mental rolodex that contained even a small fraction of the same edge or propensity to be wild.

Four years ago, Johnny invited me to jam. Tony told me that Johnny was ecstatic about me even considering joining the band. I knew him from coming into the Hilltop Music Center to buy guitar strings. Occasionally, I would test out various used guitars. He would comment on my playing. I did this for some time until I got fired from Essential Motor. Telling a boss to 'fuck-off' does not guarantee employment the following day. I needed money to pay the following



month's rent. I took my prized Epiphone Les Paul that my parents bought me while I was in my previous band, Switchblade Bob.

Johnny asked if I played in a band. I wasn't at the time and wasn't interested in small talk. I needed quick cash and he couldn't come in the same ballpark of what I needed financially. He offered the opportunity to jam with him and his friend Tony who played drums.

Tony met me at Skeeter's Corner Lounge. There were a few booths that lined the walls. Six bar stools and two pool tables in the bar's square area. We had played a few shows there over the duration of the band to mixed results. I, like usual, was earlier than Tony. Despite always being late, I always held out hope that he would grasp the concept of time. The bartender that night, Buzz, played in a local band called Clean Sweep. We had shared the stage together a few times. He was a tall guy with shoulder-length blonde hair and a few tattoos that covered his arms.

I was half-way through my first beer when Tony showed up. He came straight from work. He wore a gray Short's A/C hooded sweatshirt. He had recently put his community college certificate to use after a few years of menial under-the-table odd jobs that Tony called, 'Good Old Boy Gigs.'

I hadn't seen him in a few months. We had grown apart since he became a father six months prior. Tony kept a mature sensibility but that didn't keep him from putting down booze and smoking weed and cigarettes like they were on the verge of extinction.

"How are you doing?" Tony asked me after Buzz got his drink order.

"Getting by," I said. "How's the kid?"

"She's getting bigger by the minute," he said.

Buzz came back with Tony's beer.

“Y’all getting the band back together?” Buzz asked.

My eyes grew wide. I couldn’t hide my expression from Tony. He took a long sip of his beer and turned to me. He placed his beer on the bar. As I told Tony the details, he shook his head with the subtlety of a metronome.

“It’s fucking Doyle on Halloween Night,” I said and took a long sip of my beer. “Dude, it’s our big break.”

Buzz placed my second beer in front of me. He lingered with an ear to our conversation.

“I can’t do this shit,” Tony said.

“Come on, man.”

“Are you getting Johnny?”

“Who else would we get?”

“I can’t,” he said. “I’ve got too much to lose.”

“Just one gig,” I said.

“Bull shit,” he said.

“It will be great.”

“Are we talking about the same band?” he asked.

Tony always seemed to be there in spirit. The band wasn’t his life. Johnny needed a loud guitar like an IV drip. A well-crafted song and subsequent loud interpretation were my rush. Tony enjoyed the quiet moments. I got to know his true self before or after practice while navigating the Indiana backroads listening to cassette tapes in his 90s Chevrolet truck.

Buzz quit lingering and went about his duties. Tony gave me a brief life update. He was coming up on two years at his job. Buying a house was on the horizon. His daughter was almost

six months old. He was living with his girlfriend in her deceased great-aunt's house. The house needed work and the plot of land was a burden to maintain.

There were few changes in his vocal tone. He relayed the information like a broken man admitting his faults. He hurried his drinking when the details of the house left his mouth.

“Are you happy?” I asked.

Tony finished his beer. He held up the empty glass. Buzz nodded his head and poured another. Tony turned to me.

“Happiness isn't something I seek, Corduroy,” he said. “I just get through the day and try not to ruin anyone's pursuit of it.”

Buzz returned and placed the beer down in front of Tony.

“Did you even like being in the band?” I asked.

“There were times,” he said and took a long sip of the fresh beer. “That I couldn't believe I was actually doing it. After T.L.R, I gave up on being in a band. Too much drama, not enough action. All talk, no bite. Just bull shit. Then the incident in Nebraska changed my mind about life.”

Tony and Johnny went out to Nebraska. They worked construction and lived with Johnny's brother who was in the military. They joined a successful cover band. Tony on vocals. Johnny on guitar. Johnny out drank the rest of the band and developed a reputation as a barroom brawler and not a competent guitarist.

“But you didn't say anything the whole time we were a band,” I said.

“We sounded pretty good,” he said. “I kept improving on the drums. Johnny seemed to have his life in check.”

“Well.”

“His friend group changed. He went back to his old ways.”

“But man, those tunes were killer.”

“Yeah, when he wasn’t all fucked up, huffing shit and popping a low-grade pharmacy. Man, he was always like that. I just don’t know what made him dive off into the deep end.”

“The music center closing,” I said.

“That wasn’t everything. He was staring down the barrel long before that, kid. You were just blinded by the rock n’ roll bliss and I don’t blame you. We kicked ass. Bands couldn’t follow us, but there’s more to life than two free drinks and handful of scratch.”

“Why can’t there be?”

“Do you want to be playing at places like Skeeter’s when you’re fifty-five and gray?” he asked. “Those guys in Nebraska were almost twenty years older than Johnny and I. They had that same sparkle in their eye like you, and they were getting three times the money we got for playing other people’s music.”

“But this is just one show.”

“Is it?” he asked and took a sip of his beer. “Or are you going to use it as a showcase?”

After we finished our beers, Tony left and I returned to my apartment. I had four days left to convince Tony and find Johnny. And I damn-well didn’t want to work at Hilltop Pawn and Loan without Carrie running the show.

Carrie’s tardiness went over my head when I showed up at my usual 10:45 arrival time. It donned on me as I opened the door to a dark store. Anxiety sprinted through my veins.

I turned on all the lights first. The alarm's high pitch buzz distracted me as I tried to recall the pass code. When the dire third attempt stared at me, the numbers appeared in my mind. The beep dissipated. Relief settled on my skin with the comfort of a blanket on a cool evening.

At 11:30 AM, I unlocked the door and turned on the neon 'OPEN' sign. Luckily, there were no customers. I didn't anticipate a line or anyone coming through the doors for a good hour. I sat down, gathered myself and let out a deep breath. In the down time, I formulated a course of action regarding the reunion.

When Carrie arrived, I had come back to reality. She had a better attitude than the previous day. She held her head up high and managed to greet me with an upbeat pitch in her voice.

"Are you coming in at the normal time tomorrow? I asked.

"Why?" she asked.

"Um," I said. "Just double checking."

She paused and leaned on the counter, "How was opening?"

"Well, the lights are on," I said and chuckled.

"Did you forget?" she asked and stood up straight.

"Oh, no," I said. "I just a little rusty at doing it."

"Okay," Carrie said and went to the break room.

Sweat coated places that I didn't know had glands. I exhaled and looked around the store for something to do while I concocted some story if Carrie asked any further questions about opening the store.

Two days later, Tony and I met at the Rail Tie Diner. The Rail Tie was one of the few non-bar restaurants in Hilltop. It had six tables in the middle of the room and four booths on the

opposite wall of the entrance. In addition to the tables and booths, there was a counter with five stools and the cash registers in front of the door to the kitchen. Each entrée was standard artery-clogging breakfast and dinner fare with an aversion to nutritional value.

Tony showed up late and walked to the booth with his head down. He mumbled an order to the waitress. I asked him some basic questions, and he replied with one-word answers. He avoided eye contact and only looked up to take a sip from his glass of water.

Once the waitress left, Tony divulged the highlights of the past forty-eight hours. He assured me that his daughter was in good health. I was relieved. What followed was a blur of domestic despair.

His girlfriend's aunt had passed away. This prompted her to leave town. She thought it was best to take their daughter. Tony figured that her little excursion would last, at most, a week. His girlfriend thought their relationship needed a break. She would come back in a few weeks. Not only did she say that, but she felt it was best for Tony to leave the house where they were staying.

Unlike Johnny, Tony had stable friends. Johnny and Tony had mutual friends, but Tony's close friends were ones with families and Johnny's close friends well lived on the frayed edges of sanity and society. Tony's few single friends had left town and he didn't know where to stay.

Once the food came, he inhaled it. He didn't look up. I took my time savoring the greasy cuisine and wondering whether Tony's recent tragedy was an opportunity or death notice for the band reunion.

When we finished our respective meals, Tony leaned back in the booth seat. He put his head back and looked up at the ceiling. He let out a loud exhale.

"Hey man are you going to be alright?" I asked.

He kept his gaze fixated on the ceiling.

“I need a beer,” he said and brought his head back to a normal upright position.

“They don’t have any here,” I said.

“Well, shit is Buzz tending bar at Skeeter’s?”

“I don’t know.”

We got the check and ended up at Skeeter’s. Buzz wasn’t at Skeeter’s. The girl at the bar asked us if Buzz was in the band.

“No, he isn’t,” I said.

“He kept talking about y’all’s reunion like he was involved.”

“He’d be better than Johnny,” Tony said.

Each round, Tony warmed up to reuniting the band. He vocalized his frustrations about Johnny with an obscenity-laden tirade that nearly got us thrown out of Skeeter’s.

“He’ll never be clean enough to fucking play again,” Tony said.

“He doesn’t need to be clean to play.”

“Are you going to look for him when he dips out?”

I took a long sip of my beer.

“Maybe, we should get Buzz,” Tony said and polished off his third beer.

He flagged down the bartender. I wondered if he planned on driving. Tony had a high tolerance, but somehow, that didn’t ease my worries about him getting pulled over.

“Let’s get the original line-up together,” I said. “No Buzz.”

“He’s better than Johnny.”

“I’ve got to commit in two days, Tony,” I said. “We’ve got chemistry. We won’t have to teach him the songs.”

“Bullshit,” Tony said. “He hasn’t touched a guitar in months.”

“That doesn’t matter. The garage still has some magic.”

“It has broken tools and dead grass,” Tony said. “I don’t consider that magic.”

“It helps the sound.”

“Sure, whatever you say, kid.”

Tony killed his fourth beer in half the time he took to drink each of the previous three beers individually.

“Care if I crash at your place?” he asked.

“All I’ve got is a chair besides my bed.”

“Damn, better than my cold truck.”

He sat down in the chair. In the middle of discussing Johnny’s whereabouts, Tony closed his eyes and began snoring. I put a blanket on him and retreated to my room. Before he passed out, Tony mentioned that Johnny had been doing some remodeling work with a friend who had been to a few of our band practices. I knew the guy well enough to contact him without it being a weird transactional conversation.



## 2-Finding Gold in a Bin of Trash

Even from a distance, I recognized the long hair and tattooed arms. Johnny squinted in my direction and yelled at me. He finished bringing materials into the unfinished worksite structure, and I spoke with Doug who greeted me after I exited my car.

Doug ran through some minor details about Johnny's job and his weekly work expectations. From my understanding, Johnny wasn't a fucking employee. He was a back-up guy that they called a few times a month.

Johnny emerged from the house and when he approached me, he slapped me on the shoulder and called me 'Cordy boy,' which I never hated. I wasn't too thrilled either. The rock n' roll mystique that hovered around Johnny held on by a thread. The tattoos that always popped in my peripheral vision on stage were fading, and the new ones weren't any indicator of high-quality artwork. His once flowing hair had a greasy sheen that gave me serious concerns about his personal hygiene.

After a few pleasantries, I cut to the chase and broached the reunion topic. He couldn't contain himself. His eyes lit up like a fireworks display. Every elated cliché spewed out of his mouth.

Johnny didn't have a car. On the ride to his place, he kept repeating the show details out loud like a mantra. He was an elated puppy. He would look at me then look out the window.

I drove him to a double-wide trailer. The trailer park, Sunny Morning Trailer Court, had a reputation for being a hot bed of addicts and single mothers. Throughout high school, police raided the park once to twice a week resulting in multiple high-profile drug busts of not just home-grown narcotics but some imported from Mexican drug cartels.

We drove by the wooden sign with a faded yellow sun. The trailer had knee-high weeds growing around the base of the trailer. An array of lawn chairs, children's toys and rusty tools cluttered the wooden porch. Johnny opened the door and a cat piss aroma assaulted my nose. I held my breath every few seconds and gave up breathing out of my nose once I sat down on the yellow and orange couch. Dirty laundry was scattered around the living room and kitchen area. There was a bedroom and a door to a bathroom. Dirty dishes piled up in the sink. An occasional fly buzzed around me.

Johnny washed his face and emerged from the bathroom with a pep in his step and a joint in his hand. The smell alleviated the cat piss aroma. He offered me a beer. I declined. He sat down on a wooden chair that seemed to belong to a dining room set, yet there wasn't a table in sight.

Johnny told me that he had been working steady for a few months which I doubted. His friend and boss, Doug, was shocked that I wanted him to rejoin the band. Johnny's erratic attendance had tested the limits of his friendship and employment with Doug. Doug's company was in transition and wanted to work on more corporate jobs and not the small time shit that Johnny was accustomed to.

"Been playing?" I asked.

"Well, I would if I had my guitar," he said.

I could hear Tony's voice telling me to cut my loses and leave.

"Oh, where's it at?" I asked.

Johnny got up and stubbed out his joint in a dish.

"Some storage unit, but I know where it's at."

"Do you know the unit number?"

“Yeah, I know some people who can open it for me.”

He stored his prized possession-an American-made Fender Stratocaster- in a friend’s storage unit and hadn’t see it in months. Tony’s voice rang in my head once again.

I divulged the show details; he lit up.

“It’s our big shot,” he said. “I better get on the phone now.”

“Well,” I said. “Tony hasn’t completely agreed yet.”

“Fucking pussy,” Johnny said and sat down in his chair.

“He’s been pretty busy,” I said.

“Yeah, sniffing his girl’s ass.”

“What?”

“Nothing,” he said and took a long sip of his beer. “When are we going to get in the garage?”

I wanted to lean back in the couch, but I was leery of what the cloth material had ingrained in its fibers. I sat up and propped my arm on my leg to hold up my head.

“Well, what’s your schedule?”

Johnny shrugged his shoulders.

“Are you actually working?”

“Well,” he said. “It really depends on the week.”

“Do you have a rough estimate?”

“I make my own schedule.”

I rolled my eyes.

“Can you practice in a few days?” I asked.

“That’s too far away.”

Tony's voice rang in my head, '*The danger and chemistry aren't worth the price of admission.*'

"Will you be able to play on Halloween?" I asked.

"Fuck yeah, man. I'm not whipped."

The following day after work, Johnny and I arrived at the alleged storage unit that housed his guitar. He had failed to acquire the key prior to my arrival. We sat in the gravel drive outside of the blue, tin building for over half an hour. Multiple storage units were in the running for Johnny's guitar sweepstakes.

The three units housed cardboard boxes, deck furniture and exercise equipment. The dust killed my throat. The musty stench hung in the air. Johnny and I were more like movers than explorers in search of a prized possession. The first two units yielded no results. The third one had a guitar case that wasn't Johnny's.

"Are you sure it's here?" I asked as I sat on a cardboard box.

"Sure as shit," he said.

"When was the last time you held it in your hands?"

"Four maybe, five months ago," he said. "Pulled it out to plug it in one last time to my amp."

"Where's your amp?"

"Pawned it."

"Fuck," I said. "Where at?"

"In Ohio," he said.

Throughout the two-year hiatus, I contacted Johnny twice, both times on his birthday. Occasionally, I saw him at the grocery store. He would be in an aisle, and I would go two aisles over to avoid small talk with him. At the time, I didn't know why this came to be an inherent reflex to seeing him. I came to realize that he was a reminder of the good times, but also the pit falls of Streetwise Preacher. He gave me the opportunity to jam with Tony and him, but also allowed his addiction to blind him from the train wreck that we had become as a band.

Jobs changed with the seasons. He spent a few months in Ohio living with a close relative taking care of some livestock. His financial nest egg burned a hole in his pocket, so he got a different truck. This coincided with a bender. That resulted in him wrecking this new truck. Every penny went to his lawyer to avoid major jail time.

His wild man facade went away like smoke in the breeze. I saw the pain behind his eyes. He needed a small light to guide him through the tunnel of darkness.

He joined me in sitting on the musty cardboard boxes.

“Are you sure you can still play?” I asked.

“It's like riding a bike, Corduroy,” Johnny said.

He got up and stood on top of the cardboard box and played air guitar. He ripped his best imaginary solo and jumped off the box, landed on his feet and writhed on the floor like Angus Young of AC/DC.

“I still got it,” he said and panted until he caught his breath.

More than Tony, Johnny protected me like an older brother in the early days of the band. I was in my mid-twenties, and he was closing in on thirty quicker than he realized. Countless gigs, I was the guy who dealt with promoters or, in our case, random guys who allowed us to come play the show. Even our first show, we ran into an annoying headlining band that Johnny

wanted to fight because the lead singer shoulder-checked me as we left the stage to load out our gear. There were other incidents where Johnny had to stand nose to nose with other dipshits just to ensure we got gas money. The real test was our third gig-our ill-fated attempt to win a battle of the bands.

The band after us rushed us off the stage. They touched my bass amp. I bit my tongue. Tony cleared his throat. Johnny didn't think twice about grabbing the guy's shoulder, spinning him around and telling the young punk to, "Wait one fucking minute, shithead. Get some better fitting pants. Choking your nuts don't make you shred solos like Eddie Van Halen." The kid told Johnny to piss off and grabbed Johnny's wrist. Tony and I held him back from hauling off and letting his fists fly. We didn't get one of the prized top three spots that came with financial compensation, recording hours or an opening slot for a regionally-touring act. After the incident, we leaned into that fighting spirit. Johnny's scrappy spirit fueled each practice that followed.

That same guy didn't sit across from me. Johnny was a shell. The spirit was there. The motivation had no direction.

Before he exited my car, Johnny looked at me.

"Fucking Doyle, man," he said. "Ain't that fucking cool?"

"The fucking coolest."

"Get Tony's head out of his ass. We can't pass this up."

"You gotta get an amp."

"I'll find one."

"Do you need some help?"

"Shit, man, I know some guys."

He left my car and entered the dark trailer. I pulled out of the gravel drive. I wanted to believe Johnny, but damn, he was living in the Hilltop embodiment of rock bottom. Somehow, that didn't dissuade me from telling Tony that Johnny would get his act together and cause no problems.

I emailed the promoter to tell him that we were committing to the show. Tony wasn't fully committed. He was on the fence. After work, he came to my apartment. I cracked open some beers.

"Don't lie to me," Tony said. "When was the last time he touched a guitar?"

"Honestly, I don't know."

"Why in the fuck do you want a guy who hasn't touched a guitar in months to play a huge show?" he asked.

"The dude needs something to get him out of his funk. He'll fucking die without it."

"Shit, he will die with it," Tony said. "I love him like a brother, but he needs to dry out not playing fucking guitar."

"You sound like Buzz."

"He's got a point."

"Do you want Buzz to join the band?"

"It's not a bad idea," he said.

"Let's give Johnny one shot," I said.

I leaned back in my chair and took a long sip of my beer. Tony finished his beer and placed the bottle on the floor.

"Buzz is a better player."

“This isn’t about forming some supergroup,” I said. “Let’s give Streetwise Preacher its proper burial.”

“Proper burial?” Tony asked. “We broke up once, Corduroy. There’s no need to rewrite it.”

“I’m not happy with it.”

“And you want to drag some deadbeat guitarist out of a meth lab, double-wide to pen an obituary?”

Tony shook his head and got up from sitting on the floor. He grabbed a beer and handed me one. I finished the last bits of mine and cracked the second one. The beer didn’t do anything but reminded me of the bright spots in the Streetwise Preacher story.

I didn’t want to admit that Tony had a point. Standing firm meant more than accepting the obvious.

“What’s going on with your living situation?” I asked.

Tony exhaled and looked at the ceiling.

“Depends on the night,” he said.

“Please tell me that you aren’t living in your truck.”

“Just last night,” he said. “I’m working on something. Don’t worry about me.”

“Dude, you can stay with me.”

Tony took a sip of his beer and shook his head.

“I’ll figure it out,” he said.

I took a deep breath.

“Are you going to back out?” I asked.

“If he fucks me over, I’m hitting the road.”



“Johnny?”

“Yeah, I’m too old to deal with immature people.”

Tony’s brashness wasn’t something that he had expressed. He kept his head down and made sure to focus on solid rhythms. He didn’t have any mental capacity to always comment on Johnny and I’s delusions of rock n’ roll grandeur. If something major occurred like the prospect of buying a used van to haul our gear to gigs, he told us that it was a terrible idea. That was his role in the band. I was the brains. Johnny brought the wild edge and flare to the music and live show.

Tony cracked the last beer in the refrigerator, I wasn’t going to let him leave despite his adamant proclamation about being able to drive under the influence without a hitch. By this time, Tony had dropped part of his tough guy persona.

“Heard from your girl?” I asked.

Tony took a big gulp of the beer in his hand. He swallowed and slammed the bottle onto the carpet.

“Fucking bitch,” he said. “I’m never going to see my daughter.”

“That seems extreme,” I said.

Tony stood up and polished off his beer. I lost count of which numbered beer he had finished. There was a significant number on the floor. I felt a little buzz.

“She doesn’t get it,” he said.

“What?”

“I tried explaining the band thing to her,” he said and swayed back and forth like a sapling in the wind. “She’s got the shittiest taste in music.”

“Like what?”

“Oh, that pop-country bullshit-Florida Georgia Line, Luke Fuckhead, Carrie Underwear, Luke Diddy Combs,” he said. “I mention any rock shit and the fucking broad looks at me like I’m a fucking alien.”

Tony sat back down on the ground. He put his head in his hands.

“Should I tell the promoter we can’t play?” I asked.

He lifted his head and shook it no.

“Fuck no,” he said. “Somebody’s gotta keep you in line.”

“I can handle myself, Tony.”

“Come on, bro.”

I got up from my chair and finished my beer.

“I kept the band from imploding before it started,” I said.

“You gave us some motivation, don’t let that shit go to your head,” Tony said and got up to look at me at eye-level. “I managed you and Johnny’s stadium-sized egos. You two wanted to play stadiums before we headlined one show.”

Tony made sense more than I cared to admit. After our fifth show, I thought it was best to record a few songs to post on the internet to get some shows in cities like Fort Wayne and Indianapolis. Johnny, in typical Johnny fashion, wanted to record a fucking ten song full-length album. Tony was quiet the whole practice. When I said we needed to pool some money for studio time, Tony stood up from his drum stool and sat on the front of his bass drum.

“We’ve played five shows and no one gives a fuck about us except for friends and family. T.L.R waited until our last few months as a band to record. Even then, we were still figuring out our sound. Hell, I can barely keep fucking time. Each sound guy complains about

me not hitting the drums hard enough. No one's paying us to play. Yeah sure, we get a few free beers. That ain't shit, boys. Let's grind it out and earn our right to record."

Johnny and I sat there and looked at each other.

"Let's get back to playing. We've got a gig in two days."

We waited three months to record. The songs matured. The ones we thought about recording were scrapped from the set-list. Tony turned a corner in his drumming ability. That night, I went home and wrote a song that we used as a set closer for the latter half of the band.

"What do you think about Johnny joining us?" I asked.

Tony squinted at me and rocked a little while sitting down. I knew I only had a few minutes until he passed out.

"You make the fucking call. I've got nothing else," he said. "I don't want to tell my daughter later in life that I backed out when a few friends needed help."

"You don't have to worry about anything. I'll wrangle Johnny."

Tony passed out on my floor. I picked up the beer bottles. Tony slept through the racket I made while placing them in the trash can. Streetwise Preacher was back and that was all that mattered. That damn band was going to restart my life or put me in an early grave.

### 3-Obscentities, Blood & Flying Fists

We were surrounded by lawn care equipment in a garage located on graveyard grounds. I sat on my bass amp with a thin layer of sweat on my brow. Gasoline hung in the air like fog. Dead grass covered the concrete like carpet. Johnny had a big shit-eating grin on his face. Even Tony looked happy. Seventeen days stood between us and the coveted Halloween stage opening for Doyle.

I didn't know how Johnny acquired an amplifier on short notice. He played like he hadn't taken a break. I wanted to rub it in to Tony, but he kept his head down during practice while we played our songs. His tempos were tight and didn't waver like they tended to do so on our initial run.

Once we ran through our song list, we took a break. Tony brought a case of beer and handed us each one. The down time was what I missed. The five-minute breaks that turned into thirty-minute discussion on life, love and music. But this break turned into a discussion regarding our practice schedule. I wasn't opposed to practicing the following seventeen days. Johnny had the same mindset. Tony, even with his freed-up situation, didn't want to fall into the trappings that led us to burn out two years prior.

Before our first show, we practiced five days a week for three weeks prior to the show. The repetition tightened our sound. The set list became second-nature. We clicked musically, but the week after the show, we showed up to practice and didn't bullshit before or after practice. We didn't do so until after our third show. We tried to bring back the bootcamp-style practice schedule prior to our last month as a band, but practice became an excuse to drink and fuck around instead of breed musical chemistry. By our last show, a corner of the garage was dedicated to a pile of beer cases, cans and bottles.

“I’ll do three times, maybe four the last week,” Tony said.

“You can bump it up to four, the next two weeks,” Johnny said and walked over to Tony’s drum set.

Tony’s calm demeanor began to sour. They looked at each other. I didn’t know the last time that they had a deep conversation between them. They fought like brothers, and I figured it was best for me to stay a casual observer, but Johnny didn’t appreciate that.

“What do you think, Corduroy?” Johnny asked and turned his head.

Johnny’s glance pierced through my soul. I shrugged my shoulders and couldn’t think of anything to get myself out of this innocuous argument.

“I’m fine with whatever,” I said.

Johnny shook his head and returned his focus back to Tony.

“The last thing we should do is live in this garage,” Tony said.

“What the fuck does that mean?” Johnny asked.

“I’ve got shit to do,” Tony said.

“Then why did you agree to it?”

“To keep you two from fucking it up.”

“I don’t need a fucking baby sitter.”

“Sure,” Tony said. “How’s that job with Doug?”

“I’m gainfully employed. Thank-you very much,” Johnny said. “Hell, I could cover two rounds at Sleepy John’s.”

Sleepy John’s was a recent addition to the lean bar scene. Sleepy John’s was the only place that offered quality, craft cocktails and beer that you couldn’t get at the grocery store.

Johnny dug into Tony about going to Sleepy John's. He thought it would restore our chemistry and renew the friendship that we lost over the two-year hiatus. Tony didn't want to go, but Johnny insisted that he would cover the first two rounds. From his living arrangement, I doubted Johnny's financial ability to cover one round.

We drove separately to a small brick building near a decommissioned railroad track. Our vehicles doubled the number in the gravel parking lot across the street from the building.

We walked into Sleepy John's. I wore neon green shoes, skinny tan chinos and a black hooded sweatshirt. Tony wore dirty jeans, his Short's sweatshirt and a dirty trucker hat. Johnny wore his wide-brim dark brown leather hat, jeans, a thick flannel shirt and black steel-toe boots. When Johnny opened the door, a waitress, wearing Prohibition-era clothing, stopped with a dirty glass in hand and told us to seat ourselves.

The bar top was a finely crafted piece of stained wood. The walls had black and white photos of famous mobsters. We sat down at the bar. The bar stools were the same quality as the bar top with black leather seats and backs. The bartender wore a leather apron, bow tie and had a waxed curly-cue mustache with a pound of grease in his hair. There were two other groups in the place when we sat down.

While the bartender stood there awaiting our drink order, Johnny ran through a list of domestic beers. Each one the bartender patiently told Johnny that their specialty was craft beer. The whole affair lasted a few minutes. We settled on some high-class lager that cost as much as a six pack of domestic bottles at a grocery store.

Johnny and Tony had let the steam subside regarding the practice discussion and began catching up. Johnny described his role in Doug's construction company. He was just a fill-in member, but Johnny spun it to show that his position had more value than being a temporary

replacement or as I deduced a charity case. Doug and Johnny's friendship went back to elementary school.

Tony kept his conversational topics to work and nothing else. Johnny wanted to pry. Tony kept that shit locked up. This led Johnny to shift his focus towards a weekend trip down not memory lane but memory highway.

"This is like the good old days," Johnny said and held up his beer.

He looked at Tony and I. We were seated to his left and right respectively. I held up my glass.

Tony shook his head and reluctantly held up his glass, "there you go, man."

"What are we drinking to?" I asked.

"Booze, broads, and rock n' roll," Johnny said.

He touched my glass and paused before touching Tony's glass.

"What's your problem?" Johnny asked and placed his beer on the bar.

"Nothing," Tony said and took a drink.

"We're opening for Doyle in like two weeks," Johnny said. "It's our big fucking break."

"Yeah, that's what you think," Tony said.

"It's like we never stopped playing," Johnny said.

Tony turned to Johnny, looked at him and chuckled.

"Are you that stupid?" Tony asked. "This ain't the same band."

"Fuck yeah it is."

"What do you mean, Tony?" I asked.

"Just forget it," Tony said.

The bartender came by.

“Let’s get three shots,” Johnny said to the bartender.

“What would you like?” the bartender asked.

“We don’t need shots,” Tony said.

“We’re celebrating,” Johnny said. “Let’s get some whiskey.”

“I hate whiskey,” I said.

Johnny turned to me, “don’t be a pussy, Corduroy.”

“Hey, calm the fuck down,” Tony said.

Johnny turned to Tony.

“What the fuck did you say?”

“He doesn’t want a fucking shot. Let’s just enjoy our beers.”

“Sir, would you like the shots?” the bartender asked.

Johnny nodded his head yes. I put my head in my hands.

“You two need to chill the fuck out,” Johnny said while looking at the display of liquor bottles in front of us. “We’re a band now. It’s time to celebrate.”

“I guess,” I said.

“You’re the one that fucking invited me,” Johnny said.

“And I’m glad that you’ve joined us.”

“Well, you don’t sound too thrilled.”

“Just lay off of him,” Tony said.

“Oh, look at Mr. Funbags saying his piece,” Johnny said. “So what, your old lady left. Enjoy the new breath of new life into Streetwise Preacher.”



I turned to look at Johnny and Tony. Tony killed the last half of his beer. He signaled for another to the bartender. The bartender came back with three shot glasses. He placed them in front of Johnny.

“Y’all can join or bitch out,” Johnny said. “I’ve missed this shit. Damn, we should do this after every practice.”

Johnny slid a shot glass in front of Tony and I.

“We did that shit two years ago and look what that got us,” Tony said.

“It got us a slot opening for Doyle,” Johnny said. “Now are we going to drink or what?”

“I’ve been drinking. I don’t know what you’ve been doing.”

“What the fuck is your problem?”

“I’ll take a shot with you,” I said hoping to ease the tension.

“Hey, at least I’ve got one loyal bandmate,” Johnny said.

“Oh, so taking shots proves your loyalty?” Tony turned to Johnny. “You had a band and you drank it all away.”

“Bullshit,” Johnny said. “Corduroy, what are we drinking to?”

Johnny held up his shot glass and turned to me. I picked mine up.

“I don’t know,” I said. “To have a great show.”

“That’s fucking lame.”

“Just take your shot for fuck’s sake,” Tony said.

Johnny and I touched shot glasses. The liquor burned my throat and caused me to cough. I slugged down my beer. I feel nauseous. Johnny slammed down his shot glass. I thought he broke it.

“So, are you going to walk out on the band like your old lady did to you?” Johnny said.

Tony was in the midst of taking a drink. He slammed down his glass with the same force as Johnny did with his shot glass. Tony's slam was louder and caught the attention of the bartender. He walked over. I put my head down, and felt my face heat up; sweat coated my skin.

Tony got up from his bar stool, kicked it back and turned to Johnny.

"What the fuck did you just say?" he asked.

Johnny picked up his beer and finished it, "I bet you'll walk out on us like your girl did to you."

"Come on, guys," I said.

"Stay the fuck out of this, Corduroy," Johnny said while looking at Tony. Johnny got up from his stool, "You never did like me being in the band."

"Where the fuck did you get that?" Tony asked. "You act like a fucking child."

While going to many bars with Johnny, I noticed when Johnny was on the verge of confrontation. He would wiggle the fingers of his left hand, ball up his right hand into a fist and straighten his posture.

He wiggled his fingers and my heart beat faster.

"Sir," the bartender said.

Johnny turned his head while keeping his torso straight and said, "fuck you."

"You need to leave," the bartender said.

Tony reached for his wallet and pulled out some money and placed it on the bar.

"We're not leaving," Johnny said.

I placed my hand on Johnny's shoulder, "Come on, man. Let's get out of here."

"I'm a paying customer."

Another bartender approached us.

“You didn’t pay shit,” Tony said and put his wallet away.

“Where the fuck are you going?” Johnny asked.

Tony turned his back to Johnny and took a few steps.

The other bartender lingered by Johnny and I.

“I don’t want some pussy-whipped bitch in my band,” Johnny said.

Tony stopped walking and turned around. I placed my hand on Johnny’s other shoulder.

Before I noticed his balled-up right fist, he turned around and shoved me. The bartender approached Johnny, and Johnny squared up to the bartender.

“What the fuck, dude,” I said.

The next few minutes were a blur of obscenities, blood and flying fists. Tony and Johnny got into a full-blown fist fight but that was after Johnny landed a few punches on the bartender who ended up on the ground holding his nose while it bled all down the front of his leather apron and light blue dress shirt.

The other workers yelled at Johnny and Tony. I wanted them to hash it out and settle down, but each punch escalated the hatred. I tried breaking up the fight, but caught a punch square in the cheek bone. I went to the ground. The room spun like I was on a carnival ride. The room’s volume went to zero as I gathered myself. The only words that pierced through my pain-induced haze were, “the police are on their way.” I crawled around the floor trying to prop myself up on something, but I was unsuccessful. I laid on the ground until an EMT woke me up and the police questioned me.

Before my parents picked me up, I saw Johnny and Tony escorted into the backseat of separate police cruisers. The night went black as I wondered if Streetwise Preacher would withstand the inevitable legal troubles, hate-charged punches and blood-stained shirts.

The following morning, I sat at the dining room table at my parents' house and made a conscious effort to not puke while my father drank his morning coffee. I hadn't woken up before 8 AM in a few years. His rumblings in the kitchen combined with the multitude of bright lights told my body that sleep wasn't necessary.

My mouth tasted like beer and stomach bile. Minutes before sitting down, I gripped the toilet like a lifesaver in the middle of the ocean. The living room couch fucked up my body. My father's morning coffee aroma jabbed my stomach. I had four hours to get ready for work.

While he ate, he glanced at my face which jabbed me with pain. After he finished his meal, he leaned back in his chair, took a sip of coffee and placed his mug back on the table.

"Damn," he said. "You need to put a steak on that."

"Ugh," I said while putting my hand on my face to shield my eyes from the dining room lights.

My father's incessant questioning regarding the bar incident made the pain worse.

"Geez, you need to quit that band," he said. "They're a bunch of knuckleheads."

I groaned. It was too early to discuss the band future. My physical well-being didn't help either.

"Get yourself some water and Advil," he said. "Do you work today?"

I nodded my head.

"Maybe, you should rethink your week night trips to the bars."

"Yeah," I said.

"You've got to be responsible."

"I was," I said. "I didn't plan on..."

I got up from the table and threw up in the bathroom. Once I finished, I leaned against the bathroom wall. There were too many factors relating to my state of mind to contemplate my current situation.

There was a knock on the door as I splashed water on my face and rinsed out my mouth.

“Mixing beer and liquor will do that to you,” my dad said.

I looked in the mirror and assessed my face. Around my eyes, my skin was more akin to a topological map than its normal pasty white complexion. Even the slightest touch sent chills throughout my body. Places I didn’t think could be sore were the epicenters of my pain.

“You’re going to have to face the world eventually,” my dad said. “I bet your mother has some foundation to cover your face.”

I washed my hands and slumped against the wall for a few minutes. I took note of every little defect in the wooden cabinet under the sink. Once my nausea subsided, I left the bathroom and returned to the kitchen table hoping that my father had gotten all of his ball-busting out of his system.

“Geez, you must really love that band,” he said as he picked up his coffee mug and took a long sip.

“I guess,” I said and slumped back in my chair.

“Maybe, music isn’t your calling.”

I sat up and tried my best to straighten my posture despite the rush of pain.

“It’s the only thing I like,” I said.

“Son, you’re almost thirty,” he said and placed his mug down with an audible point. “I was raising a family at your age. Not getting into bar scuffles with deadbeat musicians.”

I shook my head and made it a point to exhale loud enough to express my frustration. Before I could fire back a match to burn down the bridge between my father and I, my mother entered the dining room and offered to drive me to pick up my car.

My mother drove me to my car that was still in the Sleepy John's parking lot. Before I got out of her car, she lectured me on a multitude of subjects. She never endorsed my decision to work at Hilltop Pawn and Loan. The job was a regression from my previous position at the local factory Essential Motor where my father had worked his way up the ladder and made a successful career. She mentioned a few places that didn't pay as much as Essential Motor that offered entry-level positions with benefits and other shit that I didn't want to discuss while I was battling a hangover and a mild, undiagnosed concussion. She spoke to me like we were across from each other having lunch. I looked out the windshield, never once acknowledging my mother's monologue regarding my poor employment choices. She didn't mention my dismissal from Essential Motor which always crossed her mind while discussing my piss-poor efforts to pursue a 'good job.'

"Are you okay to drive?" my mother asked as I opened the passenger-side door.

"I've got two hours to get ready for work."

"Can't you call in?" she asked. "It's not like that place is ever busy enough to afford you and what's her name."

"I'll talk to you later," I said and stepped out of the car.

"Love you," she said.

I held up a hand and shut the door.

There wasn't much else for me to do in Hilltop. I had dropped out of community college because I joined a local band, Switchblade Bob. We lasted a few months. It was long enough to

play a few shows and convince my parents that an eight-hundred-dollar guitar was a sufficient birthday and Christmas present vital for my future career endeavor as a touring rock musician. I used that guitar for one show and then our lead singer got into some legal trouble, and well, we imploded.

My parents got on my ass about finding a steady, good-paying job when they caught wind of the break-up. My dad pulled some strings at Essential Motor. I got an interview, secured a job and pissed it all away four months later right before my ninety-day probationary period was set to expire, and I would get a three dollar per hour pay increase.

Before I retreated to the break room to gather a few peaceful minutes of silence, Carrie stopped me. She addressed my bruised face which I hadn't accessed and when her face grimaced in ways I hadn't seen before, I figured that I needed to inspect the grotesque deformity that caused seething pain. Her following questions addressed the band reunion which I couldn't stop discussing the previous day. That joyous tone seemed like a distant after thought as my face throbbed.

Through my squinted eyes, I could tell that Carrie wasn't able to breathe through her nose. I realized that my own smell wasn't savory and showering was the last thing on my mind when I prepared for the work day.

My face was a fucking mess as I put it a few inches from the bathroom mirror. Each touch sent pain throughout my body. Scabs formed on my face similar to a topological map. I didn't think that Johnny had hit me hard enough to draw blood, but as I studied my face, I realized that I had caught multiple punches from Johnny, Tony and maybe a bartender or two.

Carrie knocked on the bathroom door and asked if I was okay. She was going to open the store and I needed to fill out my time card.

When I emerged from the back area, per usual, there weren't any customers. Carrie sat behind the register. Her bright red lipstick caught my eye. She wore her usual all-black uniform that she attributed to her love of the cult movie *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* and her childhood obsession with *Beetlejuice*.

"Do I even want to know what happened?" she asked as I sat down in my chair behind the rare collectibles glass display case.

"It's a long story," I said and shielded my eyes from the overhead lights.

"If you aren't able to work, I can manage," she said.

"I'll stay," I said. "I need the cash."

She got up from her seat and stood across the display case from me. She leaned on her elbows, and I looked up at her.

"I know you look like shit, but if you're going to be here, you can't sit down the whole-time groaning," she said. "I've got too much shit to deal with outside of this place to babysit you, Corduroy. We're not teenagers or even young adults. Shit, we're almost thirty. There's a good chance that next month you could take over this store. Which means you can't be getting into barroom brawls or whatever and saunter in like an extra in *Resident Evil*."

She paused and straightened her posture. I followed her with my eyes while keeping my head at a forty-five-degree angle. She shook her head, and a customer entered the store. Carrie left to greet him and returned to her usual post.

When six PM approached, Carrie told me that she wanted to speak to me. She locked the front door, shut off the OPEN sign and returned to the breakroom. I sat at the table with a little more energy than the start of our shift a few hours prior. Her earlier ass-chewing distracted me



from my facial pain, yet it didn't ignite my motivation. Every few minutes, I walked around the store without a purpose.

While I sat down observing the posters on the wall, I tensed up with anticipation. Carrie kept her conversations to a minimum the whole work day. The silent treatment worked. My palms were sweaty. I couldn't stop my left leg from bouncing up and down. When she sat down, I held my breath and exhaled through my nose. She took a few seconds to gather herself. I looked at her with sharp anticipation.

"Are you going to the bars tonight?" she asked and placed her hands on the table.

"I didn't plan on doing so," I said and leaned back in my chair.

"When's your big show?"

"The thirty-first."

"I'm done the first of November," she said. "My mother has an operation on the third, and her recovery time is going to be a few months minimum."

Carrie was the only boss who tolerated my lazy attitude and brief sparks of hard work. She told me to take a few days off the second month I worked at Hilltop Pawn and Loan. She was the only boss who gave me a second chance. When I came back, I quit showing up late. She told me that I needed a wake-up call.

"Am I supposed to take over the store?" I asked.

Carrie looked at me and shook her head. I felt like a total idiot.

"Do you think you can handle it?" she asked. "You would probably work by yourself."

I sat up in my chair, leaned my head on my hand, "Really?"

"The store can't afford to pay two workers."

"Well, how are they paying us?"

“Bill’s paying you out of his own pocket,” Carrie said and leaned back in her chair.

Billy Kelley was the Hilltop Land Baron. That nickname was bestowed upon him by the Hilltop Tribune. He owned real estate around the Hilltop area and operated a number of fast-food franchises.

“Am I going to be training the next few weeks?” I asked.

Carrie chuckled.

“Well, what if I don’t want the promotion?”

“Then you should probably look for another job,” she said. “But I hate to say it, Corduroy, this is the best non-factory job opening in Hilltop.”

We got up from the break room table and walked through the dark store. I had walked through it every shift, yet I didn’t know how many more times I could do so before I pulled a match from my jacket, poured some gasoline on the movies and let the place burn to the ground.

## 4-Tap Dancing on the Edge of Sanity

Tony and I met at Skeeter's two days after the fight. Despite it being Friday there wasn't a joyful mood in the bar. Patrons huddled over their respective drinks highlighted by the neon beer signs.

Tony hung his head and only looked up to notice me take a drink of my beer. His hood covered his face. When he sat down next to me, he put down his hood. The neon and bar lights didn't extenuate his facial bruises. The bruises gave me brief flashes to the punches that Johnny landed on me amid the crossfire between him and Tony.

I didn't greet him with a grandiose gesture. He nodded his head at me. I threw up two fingers to say hi and took another drink of my beer. Buzz appeared in front of us Tony ordered a beer. Buzz lingered a few seconds as he looked at both of us then walked away.

When Buzz returned with Tony's beer, he repeated his earlier routine. Only this time, he placed his hands on the bar top and leaned forward. I looked at him for a few seconds then looked over at Tony.

"How's the reunion?" Buzz asked.

I took a long sip of my beer.

"Why do you care?" Tony asked.

I looked over at him. He took a long sip of his beer and loosened up his free hand. Once he finished his sip, he let out a big exhale. I glanced over at Buzz who walked away.

"What a prick," Tony said.

"I wouldn't go that far," I said.

Tony picked up his beer, looked at it then placed it back on the bar.

"He doesn't need to know all of our business," Tony said.

“Last week, you wanted him in the band,” I said.

Tony shook his head and looked away from me as he drank his beer.

Tony got up to use the restroom, and I looked down the bar. The face, I vaguely remembered. He nodded his head. The dark bar and low lights didn't help this guy. I sat there and drank my beer. The guy approached me. A blast from the past stood next to me. He was a few pounds heavier and his hairline had eroded. That's what I thought about my former bandmate in Switchblade Bob, Carl Buggs.

I met him in a science class. We were lab partners because every other person in the class knew each other. The second week of class I wore a Black Flag shirt. We talked music before and after class. Just before the semester ended, he asked if I wanted to jam with his band which became Switchblade Bob.

“Carl,” I said. “It's been a while.”

“Five years, next week,” Carl said and sat down on the stool next to me. “Did you hear about Kenny?”

The name Kenny didn't ring a bell. The longer I took to answer the question, the less I saw Carl engaged in talking to me. After a few seconds, Carl told me about Kenny passing away from a drug overdose. It jogged my memory, but I didn't give a flying fuck about Switchblade Bob's junkie, former singer.

“Still playing?” Carl asked.

Buzz butted into the conversation and tried to ask about the reunion. I filled in Carl in on the reunion and left out the part that involved Johnny and Tony going to jail.

“Man, that's awesome,” he said. “I bet we could reunite sometime.”

“Who would we get to sing?” I asked.

“You know that you were better than Kenny,” he paused. “I don’t know about your songs. You can leave that to me.”

Carl slapped me on the shoulder and chuckled.

Tony returned from the restroom, and I introduced him to Carl.

“This kid was wild,” Carl said after he finished shaking Tony’s hand.

“Oh, really?” Tony said and looked at me. “When were you a hell raiser?”

“I wouldn’t say I was a hell raiser.”

“Dude, you were always buying shots,” Carl paused to drink his beer. “Oh, and you couldn’t keep him out of the strip clubs.”

“That was only two times,” I said and could feel sweat building up on my back.

“Two times,” he said. “Fuck, I remember going like four or five times with just you and a bunch of times with the whole band. Didn’t you like date one?”

“Okay, now that’s not something I want to talk about now,” I said.

“Well boys, I got to get out of here,” Tony said, but a gleam of light caught my eye.

Tony got up and left. Carl said something, and I felt someone sit next to me and before I could turn to see who it was, they asked me, “are you in Streetwise Preacher?”

The girl sat there patiently awaiting an answer she knew to be true. I had seen her face somewhere. I couldn’t pin point where exactly.

I took a long sip of my beer. Carl got up and went to the bathroom or somewhere else.

I sat there a few seconds before I contemplated what to say to her. No one ever asked me if I was a member of Streetwise Preacher. After a few sips of my beer, I turned to her. She turned to me. I couldn’t see her eye color, but her gaze pierced through me. Her necklaces popped out to my eyes against her dark blouse.

“So, you like Streetwise Preacher?” I asked.

“I’ve seen them a few times. Don’t you play bass?”

I froze. This girl knew her shit. I wondered if she knew other personal details about me.

I couldn’t think of anything to say, so I just nodded my head in agreement. I slugged down the rest of my beer and motioned to Buzz to get another beer.

“Got any shows coming up?” she asked.

“Um,” I said and Buzz came over.

“Another one?” he asked.

“Yeah,” I said and turned to the girl. “Do you need another?”

She held up her glass and assessed the remaining beer in her glass.

“It’s on me,” I said.

“I’ll take another.”

Buzz walked away.

“Have we met before?” I asked.

There was a pause. Buzz returned with the drinks and placed them in front of us.

“Probably at my job,” she said.

Before I said anything, I studied her face, she worked at Homestead Grocery in some department. And then I connected the dots, she had been at a few shows. The memories were fuzzy. She had probably told me good show or some other shit. Hell, I wrote her off as a groupie. My mind went deep into the dirty back alley of my mind. I figured that another round or two would find out if she was a grade-A stalker or a musical admirer hell-bent on finding out that superficial side of the Streetwise Preacher bassist and co-lead singer.

But my initial thoughts were only partially true. Okay, yeah, she liked the band. That was true, yet the groupie stereotype went out the window slowly.

The one detail that stood out was how she came to know about Streetwise Preacher. Our first night playing at Skeeter's was two months after our first show. We were first on the bill. The girl's boyfriend was the drummer in the headlining band. He went to high school with her. If not for him wanting to check out every band on the show, she wouldn't have thought twice about coming early to see us play. That night I not only climbed on Tony's drums, but I didn't hesitate to climb on my amp and even on Johnny's and jump off of them during songs to really make an impact.

I'd forgotten the one detail that the girl said made her a fan- the song, "Tap Dancing on the Edge of Sanity." She quoted it and was the only lyrics I uttered that night that cut through the shitty mix. It wasn't a memorable performance of that song. Hell, I think we cut it from the set-list a few shows after. The only take away from that show was the amount of sweat that soaked my shirt and the cigarette stench that still lingered in my bass case.

She got up from the bar stool and went to the bathroom.

Buzz came over to check on me.

"Y'all still playing on Halloween?" he asked.

I went to lean on my face and pain shot through my body.

"It's not likely," I said and sat up.

"Oh, really?" he asked and leaned on the bar top.

"Some shit went down the other day," I said and pointed to my face.

"Saw that earlier," he said. "Did you have an accident?"

"Long story," I said.

Buzz looked down at the empty stools.

“I’ve got time,” he said and chuckled.

For a split second, I debated whether to tell Buzz about Johnny’s incident. He was too enthralled with the band situation. Our only interactions to that point had been at shows or at Skeeter’s. I had no other context to judge his character or intentions. I had seen Buzz play shirtless, writhe around on the floor and jump from the tops of amps and bass drums without breaking a bone. To me, Buzz was Johnny without the liability.

“So, what are you guys going to do?” Buzz asked.

“I’m going to let my face heal before I step into a room with Johnny again and even then, I might wear a helmet,” I said.

Buzz chuckled.

“Are you doing anything tomorrow night?” he asked.

“Probably going to keep a low profile,” I said.

The girl returned from the bathroom and introduced herself as Trish. The conversation drifted away from the band. She worked at Homestead Grocery in the pharmacy as a pharmacy tech. We graduated high school the same year even though she was a year younger than me in age.

Buzz came by after we finished our respective drinks. I wondered if Trish had drove herself. I had no clue how many drinks she had consumed. The last thing I needed to do that week was contribute to someone’s legal record.

I ordered another beer, and Buzz asked Trish if she had drove herself or had someone to take her home. He seemed to know more than me. Trish hesitated to answer him. Buzz stood there for a few seconds. Trish opted for a water.



“Got any plans?” she asked.

I told her about work.

“How come you are drinking another beer?”

“It’s not like I’m doing brain surgery or saving a life,” I said.

Buzz returned with my beer. It went down like ice cold water. I began to wonder if I was going to function in the morning. I enjoyed the moment too much. Hell, my drunk mind wasn’t too keen on leaving the bar as long as Trish sat next to me indulging my questions and other bullshit ramblings.

Buzz returned to the conversation. He brought up that there was a big house show.

“I’ll be there,” Trish said.

I perked up.

“We’re playing like an hour or so set,” Buzz said.

“You should come,” Trish said.

“Maybe,” I said. “Depends on how the work day goes.”

“You said it yourself, you aren’t going into surgery.”

I held up my beer, “I won’t argue that.”

She held up her glass of water, and we touched our glasses. As the beer went down my throat, the night got fuzzy. I didn’t black out. Being at work early the following morning circled my thoughts as Trish went on diatribes about her life. She mentioned her parents, maybe a sibling or two. There was talk of roommates. I couldn’t remember if they were current or recent ones. Her voice made sounds, yet my mind didn’t process any words. The sounds rattled in my brain like a car driving down the road outside of a window. Every few words, I nodded my head and chuckled regardless of whether I thought she said a funny statement. Her face stayed neutral.

She kept her eyes locked on me. Any other time, the piercing stare would have been an instant turn-off. I'd been without any romantic attention for such an extended period of time that any flattery I welcomed with open arms.

Buzz came back as I slugged down the last bit of my beer. Last call was still a few hours away. I knew better than to indulge another one. Trish lingered, and I knew that another beer would fuck up any chance I had with her.

Somehow, we agreed to come back to my apartment which I didn't realize was a Hail Mary because in my intoxicated state, I was the rock star Corduroy Jones that could swoon ladies with his heartfelt lyrics.

The only distinct image of our rendezvous in my apartment was one of Trish's tattoos featuring some words that I thought were vaguely familiar. These words had to do with something she'd mentioned earlier in the night. I couldn't get it out of my head as we fumbled through our intoxicated hook-up.

The following morning my alarm jolted me from my drunken slumber. I hit my hand against something and realized that Trish was sleeping beside me. When I pulled away the blanket, I saw the words tattooed on her side that ran through my mind as we fumbled through tearing off each other's clothes.

I had thirty minutes to get to Hilltop Pawn and Loan, and once I burst through the bathroom door still damp, Trish had just sat up shirtless only wearing her underwear.

"Hey," I said. "We need to go."

She grunted and rubbed her eyes.

"Did you drive last night?"

“Um...” she said.

I picked some clothes off of the ground and put them on. Trish followed suit with a snail-like pace.

Each stop sign, I yielded long enough to act like I knew American traffic laws. Trish was the worst navigator. She was more hungover than me or perhaps, it was the previous night's intoxicated sexual symphony that clouded her judgement and ability to greet the day with bright eyes.

I arrived early for my usual arrival time, but when I walked in the store, Carrie didn't hesitate to stop me before I went to filled out my time card.

“Do I even want to know what you did last night?” she asked and got up from her chair.

“I need to fill out my time card,” I said and began walking towards the door to the break room.

“Hold on, one second,” she said.

I stopped and felt a lecture on the horizon.

“I'm sticking my neck out for you,” she said. “And you're stepping on it without any hesitation.”

She paused and shook her head.

I stopped and felt a lecture on the horizon. Carrie looked down at the floor and brought her head back up. She kept a neutral grin as her eyes looked around and behind me.

Carrie never repeated a process when dealing with my behavior. There were passive aggressive comments, verbose lectures and simple lectures that let me know exactly where I stood with her.

The anticipation didn't kill me, but I was rather intrigued.

“What are you doing?” she asked not with an inquisitive tone but a distinct rhetorical one.

“Getting through the day,” I said and leaned against the door frame.

“If you don’t want to work,” she paused and shook her head. “It’s pointless.”

“Just say your piece,” I said. “I’m a big boy.”

“Oh... are you?” she asked.

“Yeah, I am.”

“I don’t believe a single word.”

“That’s just not true.”

Carrie straightened her posture and her lip began to quiver.

“I’m sticking my neck out for you,” she said. “I’m already taking care of my mother, and I’m sure not going to take care of you.”

“Who said you needed to take care of me?”

“Corduroy, you have multiple bruises on your face, obviously you’re not putting yourself in the best situations.”

She wasn’t wrong. I sure as hell wasn’t going to tell her that.

“At least I didn’t break any bones,” I said. “And, I still showed up to work.”

Carrie took a deep breath and crossed her arms.

“I don’t even know why I am doing this,” she said.

“Well, tell me what to do better,” I said.

She looked down at the floor, shook her head and her gaze pierced into soul. I looked away and felt the same tingling sensation as when they fired me at Essential Motor.

Tony’s voice popped into my head for a heartfelt monologue:

*“What the fuck are you doing? They should’ve fired you long ago. You’re pouring gasoline on this bridge to stability with every dumb fucking word you say. Cut your losses and come back the next day with a new outlook.”*

But even Tony’s voice couldn’t stop me from prodding into Carrie’s soft emotional shell.

“I don’t get paid enough to deal with this shit,” Carrie said. “My mom might die within a year. Does that even register with you? I’m not leaving for some early retirement to take a vacation of self-discovery. I’m just hoping I don’t have to call my sister to bury our mother.”

Carrie cried as I leaned against the door frame. Every word left my mind. Any decision she made regarding my employment I was willing to accept. She kept her distance as I did my normal job duties without even broaching the subject of manager training. Any downtime was filled with relentless cleaning that made the place spotless and ready to perform surgery. Carrie didn’t tell me to have a good night or even to come in early on Monday. It was as if a long-term relationship had come to an end.

After work, I slumped in my chair and wondered if going to the house show would be a good idea. Tony had messaged me before I left work and he wanted to grab a drink. I brought up the house show and surprisingly he was down to go to it.

Tony stopped at my place, and I figured it was best to make a game plan before trekking out to the rural parts of Miami County. Tony had some color in his face. He didn’t wear his gray Short’s A/C hoodie that he had worn the past week. I grabbed him a beer from my refrigerator as he sat down on my chair. I sat on the floor with my beer on the floor as I strummed a few chords that had been stuck in my mind the past few days. We drank a beer apiece before we went down to Tony’s truck.

When I opened the passenger door of Tony’s truck, shirts and pants covered the seat. Each article of clothing I picked up had at least a few visible stains. I thought that they were

Tony's work clothes. He often threw the dirty clothes in the seat and would change at practice. But as I picked up these clothes, I noticed that these weren't the work pants and faded t-shirts that I had noticed to be Tony's work clothes. They were clothes that he had worn to shows or band practice.

Tony sat in the driver seat with his left hand on the steering wheel and his right hand on the gear shift.

"Just throw those on the floor board," he said and started the truck.

"That's a lot of clothes," I said and sat down.

"You never know when you need to change," Tony said and put the truck in drive.

"They didn't seem dirty," I said.

"Well, you have to keep a few clean outfits."

"Dude, that's like a few days' worth," I said.

He looked over at me. I saw his face outlined by the street lamp.

"It's not what you think," he said and turned away.

"What are you saying?"

There was a pause.

"I have room in my place," I said.

Tony pulled out of the parking space. Further down the road, he told me about staying with Matt Deacon, a high school friend, and his family that upcoming weekend.

Tony told me to put a tape in the player. For the next twenty minutes, we listened to the tape as we drove by the 'closed,' signs of the downtown Hilltop businesses and the sparsely occupied parking lots of the few open businesses just inside the city limits.

Cars and trucks, new and old, lined the long gravel drive up to the two-story house that had a wooded area to the left and a vast corn field to the right. Tony parked his truck by the road. As we made our way up the inclined drive to the house, we could see a crowd of people behind the house. Music rattled the windows and leaked outside. There was a huge bonfire behind the house and two kegs were near the side entrance door that people entered and exited like a pet door.

Tony saw someone at the bonfire. I went over to the keg. There weren't any cups and a girl behind me told me that the cups were inside.

When I went into the house, I walked into a room that had a multitude of mud-caked shoes by the doors as well as a washer and dryer to the left with clothes piled up on both machines. It wasn't a wide area and as I got halfway through the room, someone was on their way out of the house. When I exited the laundry area, I was in the kitchen and saw multiple packages that had plastic cups of various colors. I heard a voice when I turned to the counter to get a cup from a package. Before I went through my mental rolodex of vocal clips, I heard the voice again. When I turned around, I saw the necklaces and rings. She was speaking to someone, and I saw her face in my peripheral vision. She left her conversation with a simple, "I'll talk to you later," then beelined for me. She hugged me. Her perfume reignited the fuzzy memories of the previous night.

She had the worst time saying Corduroy in the heat of passion. I'm pretty damn sure that she called me 'Cord,' 'Cordy' and 'Cor,' but she never said Corduroy without stumbling over the multiple syllables.

She rambled on about me showing up to the show. Her questions faded into the evening air. I had one objective-grab a beer. Trish kept me pinned in the kitchen that grew crowded each

second. Each point that Trish thought warranted emphasis was projected by her punching the air with open hands like she wanted me to give her a double high-five. Her necklaces swayed back and forth each time she emphasized a point and after the fourth time she did so, I noticed that the necklaces would get caught in her cleavage. My mind drifted to the previous night where I had debated whether I should be the one in charge of removing her necklaces, but Trish intervened before I made an unprompted move.

“Hey, I’m thirsty,” I said.

Trish had her hands in the air.

“Do you need a cup?” I asked.

She looked at her hands which were empty. I turned and realized that my once easy access to the counter was now hindered. I held up one finger and pushed my way by two guys wearing ratty flannel shirts and trucker hats like they worked for some logging company. I grabbed a cup and returned to Trish. I handed her the cup and ran into traffic in the laundry area where five people were carrying on a conversation about which of the Halloween movie sequels was the best.

Of course, when we pushed through the room, there was a six-person line for the keg. Tony joined Trish and I when we filled our cups and stood by the roaring bonfire. He spoke to us for about a minute before he left to grab himself a beverage. When he left, I saw a girl in the distance. The walk was familiar. The fire highlighted her bright red lipstick. Nothing was reflective. Our eyes met and there she was-Carrie. My heart dropped. A lump formed in my throat. I thought I was going to choke on my beer. Trish had her back to Carrie. I focused on Carrie’s every movement. Trish peppered me with innocuous questions as I mentally prepared for the ensuing conversation with Carrie.



I waved to Carrie. Trish had a puzzled look on her face. She stopped talking and turned around to see Carrie.

“What are you doing here?” I asked.

“I should ask you the same thing,” Carrie said.

“Um,” Trish said. “How do you know him?”

“We work together,” I said.

Carrie walked toward me and lightly punched me on the shoulder and smiled.

“Worked with him for what two years?”

I froze and shook my head.

“Yeah, something like that.”

“I’m Trish,” Trish said and extended her hand to Carrie. “I’ll be back.”

Trish walked away.

“What was that?” I asked.

“What?”

“You fucking touched me,” I said. “You were on my ass like three hours ago.”

“That was work,” she said. “How do you know her?”

“Um...is that really your business?”

“I’m not trying to intrude on your personal life.”

“Shouldn’t you be with your mom or something?”

I asked and finally took a big gulp of my beer that had cooled off.

“Is that really any of your business?” she asked.

“Well, I guess not,” I said.

The fire felt hotter or maybe I was just nervous. The awkward silence froze me and I forgot that I had half a beer to drink.

While in the midst of continuing to sip my beer, someone hit me on the back, and I nearly choked on my beer and spit a little of it out. Tony put an arm around me. Carrie stared at him. I grinned and coughed. Tony took a sip of his beer.

“Carrie, this is Tony,” I said. “He’s the drummer in my band.”

“Nice to meet you,” Tony said and extended his hand.

He shook her hand. Trish returned to the group. I went through another round of introductions.

“I’m a big fan of your band,” Trish said as she shook Tony’s hand.

“Thank-you,” Tony said.

“Check, check,” a voice said over a loud speaker.

There was a snare drum hit. A loud guitar rang out a chord. There were a few low notes plucked on a bass.

We moved from the bonfire area inside where everyone else took the audio cues to follow our instincts. The side door was clogged like turtles being herded into a confined space. Trish led the way with Tony bringing up the rear.

We made our way through the kitchen into the dining room that didn’t have a table, but had two glass cabinets full of antique dishes and a low hanging lamp that looked old and expensive. Trish pushed her way to the fourth line of people just outside of the living room where the band was finishing their set up.

The first note shook loose all the negative feelings of the past week. Clean Sweep’s loose garage rock reinvigorated my love for live music. I forgot the sonic stranglehold that a house

shows commanded. By the three second chorus that repeated the phrase, 'no sleep needed,' the crowd swayed left and right jockeying for position. This jockeying evolved into slam dancing and became a pit. Plastic cups hit the floor.

Our group was a row from the outer edge of the pit. I caught reactions of Trish, Carrie and Tony through my peripheral vision. Trish moved to the drum beat. Carrie bobbed her head. Tony focused on drinking his beer and not getting engulfed in the pit.

Once Clean Sweep found their footing, the other guitarist, Fairley who I knew because he worked at a gas station where I occasionally went to for my morning coffee, thrashed around and came close to hitting the front row of people with his guitar's headstock. Each song we moved closer to the band. The pit died down, but what energy the crowd lost, Clean Sweep gained. Each player besides the drummer, moved around and not just in a normal rock vibe sense. This was a show; an appreciation of knowing that live music wasn't just an auditory experience but also a visual experience.

When Buzz announced that they had one song left to play, I wanted to grab Tony and a guitarist to capture only half of the energy that I saw Clean Sweep produce. After they finished playing, I turned to Tony who was in the midst of finishing his beer.

"Dude, that was great," I said.

"I gotta grab a beer," he said.

"Hey, you have to drive."

"Trust me, I can pull it off," he said and turned to leave.

I told Carrie and Trish that I would be back.

"I'll see you Monday," Carrie said.

"Hold up, Tony," I said. "Oh, same time?"

“Just before we open,” Carrie said.

“Okay,” I said.

Trish followed Tony and I outside where we all waited in line to fill our cups. She yelled into my ear. Every detail about the show blew her mind. It was like she had never seen a live band. I was just thrilled to see live music and even more thrilled that an attractive woman like Trish was at least interested me romantically or at least physically.

While she yelled her diatribe into ringing ear, I hypothetically detailed a scenario where Buzz replaced Johnny. Buzz was musically more competent. His riffs and playing had a through-line in which Tony and I could link up to produce a tune where you could tap your foot along to it. For all I knew, Buzz wasn't going to get pissed and use me as a punching bag. He had just as much of a stage presence as Johnny. But there was one thing I doubted about him-could he be a guy that had your back?

“They're a pretty good band,” Trish said.

“Who?” I asked as we moved up in line.

“Clean Sweep,” she said and looked at me with a slight look of disgust.

I guess I wasn't a huge fan of underachieving garage rock. I was always partial to good songwriting and great guitar tones.

“Did you not like them?” she asked.

“It was good to hear live music again,” I said.

She paused and put a hand on her hip.

I shrugged my shoulders hoping to deflect her line of questioning.

“Shouldn't you support other local bands?” she asked.

“I showed up,” I said and we approached the keg.

This back and forth went on while I filled her cup and mine. I'd only known her for twenty-four hours and it felt like we'd been slogging through a ten-year marriage, or maybe, that was the beer talking.

We returned to the living room where the guys were packing up the microphones and speaker cables.

"Great show," I said and approached Buzz.

"Hey, thanks man," he said.

"That first song is awesome," Trish said.

"Thanks," Buzz said.

We stood there watching the band deep in packing mode. Buzz put a few cables away and returned to us.

"So, how's the band situation?" Buzz asked.

"What?" Tony asked.

"You know the thing with Johnny," Buzz said. "Um, am I not supposed to know that?"

I wanted to find a room and escape the awkward moment, preferably with Trish, but I didn't want to face Tony's wrath. He turned to me. His eyes lasered into my soul. My father never raised his voice when I made the many missteps of my adolescence and early twenties. He shot a glance like Tony only without a red plastic cup full of cheap keg beer.

Tony put his hand on my shoulder and told me to walk with him.

"We'll be back," he said to Buzz and Trish.

Once we were out of shouting distance, Tony took a long slug of his beer. He looked around the room trying to find the words to express his shock and disappointment.

"I fucked up," I blurted out.

Tony shook his head and took another gulp of his beer.

“You...don’t have to let everyone know our dirt,” he said. “Hell, we could probably turn this into a positive.”

“What? Like ask Buzz to jam?” I asked and sensed my brain lighting on fire with ideas.

“Well, it’s not like we’ve got a guitarist,” he said. “You’re the one that wants to play the show so bad.”

“But you’re the one who wanted Buzz to join instead of Johnny,” I said.

Tony shook his head and held up his cup.

“Well, the worst thing he could say is no,” Tony said.

After a few minutes of discussion, I asked Buzz to jam with us the following day, Sunday. Fairley, the other guitarist, caught wind of the conversation and nearly dropped his guitar case with enthusiasm. He was more ecstatic at the prospect than Buzz. I looked at Tony with confusion.

## 5-Sunday Shenanigans

I was the first one to show up at the garage. There was still fifteen or so minutes until our meeting time. I forgot the last time we had played in the garage during the day time. While I leaned back in my seat, I rolled down my windows, turned up the radio and closed my eyes. The classic rock riffs coming from the radio calmed my nervous heart. Previously, I always waited with an adrenaline shot of anticipation, yet this particular afternoon I didn't care when we began playing the tunes would work themselves out. Bringing in Buzz and Fairley intrigued me. There was one other instance where I jammed with them. The session seemed to go on forever. For the multiple hours, we didn't play songs but rather traded chord progressions and let the music go down less traveled roads with sonic ease. But as I ruminated on an endless, boundaryless jam session, Tony's voice brought me back to reality.

"You okay, man?" he asked as he leaned on my car.

I opened my eyes and the bright sun cut into my vision like a steak knife, and I subsequently closed my eyes.

"What time is it?" I asked and hit the lever to raise up my seat.

"Time to jam," a voice said.

When I put my hand to shield my vision from the bright sun, Buzz was a few feet from Tony. His almost white blonde hair radiated and damn-near blinded me.

We took half the usual amount of time to set up our respective rigs and the P.A. set-up complete with microphones and speaker cables.

Once we set-up, I pulled out a notebook from my music bag that I used to house show notes and lyric ideas. Everyone waited while I wrote them down, it dawned on me that there were still a few variables in the song choice. So, I decided to put away the notebook and called out a

song title. Buzz played the riff. ‘No fucking way,’ I thought as I looked down at the dead grass-covered concrete floor. Tony nodded his head when I looked at him. He put his sticks in the air and counted the tempo. Each note and chord change seamlessly emanated from the amplifiers and speakers. The swagger, the bite, the edge, whatever the fuck you wanted to call it, wasn’t even close to what Johnny brought to the band. This was a different level.

This post-song high enveloped me. I leaned on my amp and flashed back to the first practice back with Johnny. Only, there was something different. The sound was fuller. Tony’s playing was better than I could ever fathom, but I felt like we had just cheated the system. I didn’t know if Johnny deserved a second chance at this reunion, but Buzz and, to a lesser extent, Fairley made it harder for me to feel guilty.

After a few hours, we decided to grab some food at the Rail Tie Diner. The Sunday afternoon crowd was sparse. One person was at the register counter. Two booths were occupied. One table had a party of three. The four of us sat at a table. Once the waitress left with our drink orders, Buzz inquired about the Halloween show. I was taken aback. He was ahead of himself in assuming that we were closing the door on Johnny’s return. When Buzz inquired about the show, Fairley couldn’t quit singing his appreciation for the opportunity to jam that day. His playing added a flavor, but the garage felt claustrophobic, and the PA couldn’t compete with the amplifiers that Buzz and Fairley used. This crossroads kept me out of the moment.

While I stared into space and sipped my coffee, I scanned the restaurant and noticed a guy at the register counter. He had shaggy brown hair and wore a jean jacket that had phrases written on it in permanent marker. That was the signifier that made me pause. I waited to see him turn around. When I saw his face, I looked away and everything came into perspective. He was



Johnny's friend who had come to multiple band practices. He also lived with Johnny toward the end of the band when Johnny showed up to practice more fucked up than usual.

After the waitress took our food order, I knew that the longer that I sat there, the longer that Johnny's friend, Kevin Preece, would wonder why Johnny wasn't eating with Tony and I.

Each step after I returned from the bathroom gave me time to cover this affair-like scene. As I ruminated on it, the more absurd my thought process dissected the narrative in my head. We were cheating on Johnny. I would go so far as saying that Buzz or Fairley were the equivalent of the hotter other woman.

When I sat down next to Kevin, I treated the situation with no importance. He was startled by my presence, but once he recognized who I was, he didn't hesitate to ask Johnny's whereabouts.

"Well," I said. "He's, uh, not in a good situation."

"Yeah, I know he's in jail but what's with y'all having lunch with those guys from Clean Sweep?"

"Just a casual hang," I said. "You know, right?"

"Um," he said. "I thought y'all had a gig like next week?"

"Halloween night."

"Oh, that's dope."

"It's going to be awesome."

"So, is Johnny going to be out in time?" he asked.

Every fucking gland perspired despite the comfortable temperature in the Rail Tie Diner. I took a few deep breaths. Kevin returned to his food, took a few bites and drank his water.

"So, have you spoke with Johnny?" he asked.

“Um, oh yeah, he’s got some shit to clear up,” I said.

“How’s it going, Kevin?” Tony asked as he patted me on the back.

“Tony, been a long time,” Kevin said.

“Shit, high school?”

“Probably, had a few beers between then and now,” Kevin said.

Tony closed out the conversation soon after that and when we walked away, I felt worse than when I attempted to prepare some fake story to cover my ass.

We returned to the table where we finished our meal. Fairley doodled on the paper place mate on the table. Buzz shoveled the last bit of his meal into his mouth. I took a few more bites which still left half of my plate with uneaten food. Tony ate with same intensity as Buzz.

“Who were you talking to?” Fairley asked as he finished up a sketch.

“Oh, just a guy that used to come to band practices,” I said and placed my napkin on my plate of food.

“I’ve seen that guy at Skeeter’s,” Buzz said between bites of food.

“Oh,” I said.

“I’ve kicked him out a few times for dealing in the bathroom,” Buzz said. “Come to think of it, I’ve seen him there with Johnny. He’s mentioned your name.”

Buzz looked at Tony. Tony mentioned his history with Kevin.

“I think Johnny and him live together,” Buzz said.

The trailer popped into my mind. Johnny snorting shit in the bathroom. But then I wondered why Kevin didn’t know about Johnny being or not being in jail. Johnny did couch surf like Kelly Slater. The real question was who was Johnny staying with now.

“When was the last time you saw them together?” I asked.

Buzz paused as he chewed his food. He looked around the room, wiped his mouth and took a drink.

“It’s probably been a few months,” he said.

“Okay,” I said.

“So, when do y’all want to jam next?” Buzz asked.

I looked at Tony and shrugged my shoulders. He leaned back in his chair and wiped his face with his hand. Before he gave a definitive answer, the waitress came by and asked if it was all one check or separate.

“One check,” Tony said and pulled out his wallet.

“I can pay,” Fairley said.

“Me too,” Buzz said.

The waitress handed the check to Tony. He handed her a few bills and told her to keep the change.

Tony always sat back while Johnny and I made the big decisions in the band. Unless there was a huge decision, like recording or our ill-fated idea of possibly buying a van, he would tell his piece with a paternal tone that wasn’t passive aggressive but rather enforced the adage, ‘If you don’t follow my advice, you’ll come running back to me to express your dissatisfaction, and I’ll say I told you so.’

But once the waitress was out of earshot, Tony placed his hands on the table like a judge hitting the gavel to warrant attention. Buzz and Fairley snapped to attention. I was stunned.

“We’ll get back with you,” Tony said. “Anything you want to add, Corduroy?”

Three pairs of eyes bore into my soul while I comprehended Tony’s new Mafioso, calm demeanor.

“I’ll let you know, Buzz,” I said.

Tony and I leaned against his tailgate as we saw Buzz and Fairley leave the parking lot.

“Are we closing the door on Johnny coming back?” I asked.

“Have you spoke with him?”

“No,” I said. “Have you?”

“Not yet,” Tony said. “He’ll call someone. He always does.”

“What the hell does that mean?”

“You’ll figure it out, kid,” he said. “So, what’s the deal with that girl?”

Sparing the explicit details, I gave an abbreviated version of meeting Trish. But then I paused before revealing a detail that I couldn’t tell if it was real or fake. She had lyrics to a Streetwise Preacher song tattooed on her ribs that in my drunken haze had stopped me but kept me from asking her further questions while in the heat of passion.

“Just be careful, kid,” Tony said and closed the door to his truck.

## 6-No Blues on this Monday

Carrie didn't chew me out. She kept to herself as she took inventory. I cleaned some display cases, straightened shelves and made sure our items displayed behind the counter looked pristine. When I took lunch break there was a voicemail from an unidentified number.

"Hey Corduroy, it's Johnny..." I put my phone down, took a breath and put it back up to my ear. "Let's get back in the garage..." I rolled my eyes. "I'll talk to Tony..." 'sure,' I thought. "We just need to grab some beers and get back that early magic..." This guy has no clue. "Hey, what's the deal with Clean Sweep?"

He rambled on about nonsense to make it sound like Tony had provoked him at Sleepy John's. Carrie entered the break room as I sat back in my chair and assessed Johnny's voicemail. I kept my eyes on the ceiling expect to see Carrie enter the break room and sit down across the table from me.

After listening to the voicemail three times, I didn't know whether to feel sorry for Johnny or give up on him. This wasn't just a drunk Johnny voicemail. I'd received my share of those. This had some hidden pain. He was oblivious to the pain he'd inflicted on not just me but Tony. Those guys were brothers when I first met them. They'd always tell stories during our breaks at band practice. Some were funny. Others were illegal. But damn, they sounded like what I'd missed out on by letting high school friendships slip through the cracks despite never leaving Hilltop. That was the appeal of Streetwise Preacher. And maybe why I stayed with it longer than I probably should've.

"Kelley's coming in tomorrow," Carrie said and I returned my gaze to her and straightened my posture. She put an apple slice in her mouth and chewed. Each bite took a minute in my mind. The anticipation sent my mind into a tailspin.

“He wants to meet with you,” she said. “So, you’re going to need to come in early this week.”

“Manager training?” I asked.

Carrie nodded her head.

“Better stay out of the bars,” she said and chuckled.

“I’m not a drunk,” I said. “I can keep my nose clean.”

“Just show up early, please,” Carrie said and threw away a food package.

“You still quitting after Halloween?” I asked.

She paused and zipped up her lunch bag. She frowned. The silence grew.

“Why do you care so much?” she asked and got up from her chair.

“Um, well, I…” I said before she interrupted me.

“Is it going to ruin your slacker tendencies?”

“Hey, now I’ve been better, Carrie.”

“Well, that’s not what I heard about last week…” she said.

And the ass-chewing began. Let’s just say that I felt like this was the day I would walk out and never fill out a time card at Hilltop Pawn and Loan again.

A patron, who did not leave a name, told the owner that they had showed up last week at 11:03 AM, and the shop was closed with no indication of being open anytime in the near future. That statement was pure hyperbole, and it felt like some prank aimed at getting me fired.

When I left for the night, I couldn’t think clear enough to decide whether to contact Johnny.

While I paced around my apartment, the sweet riffs of Black Sabbath’s album *Masters of Reality* blasted through my turntable. I could always turn to music for a release. No matter my

mood-happy, sad or somewhere in between-there wasn't anything a loud guitar couldn't solve, yet when both Switchblade Bob and especially Streetwise Preacher broke-up, music was an auditory albatross that reminded me of the beer-soaked, cigarette-tinted nights, in the basements and garages where I left after practice with ringing ears and an increased confidence that straightened my posture and inflated my ego.

Once "Children of the Grave," on side one of Black Sabbath's *Masters of Reality* ended, I figured it was a sign to sit down and reflect on whether even bringing Johnny back into the fold was worth it. There were still some yellowish bruises on my face, but the lingering pain had all but subsided. Buzz seemed a little too eager to ingratiate himself in the reunion. I didn't want to add Fairley into the mix. We didn't need a fourth member. I could barely hear myself without his loud amplifier increasing my hearing loss with every power chord digging into my ear drum like a tooth pick.

Playing back Johnny's voicemail didn't help me decide anything either. It only complicated matters. I couldn't really tell his mental state. The latter half of the voicemail was all over the place. I figured the only way to get to the bottom of my investigation was to contact the source.

Each ring erased any prepared talking points except for the obvious-I didn't know if I can get you back in the band. And when rings stopped, a voice came on the line that I didn't recognize.

"Is Johnny there?" I asked.

There was a pause.

"Who?"

"Johnny Blade," I said.

“Johnny, there’s someone on the line that wants to talk with you,” the person said.

“Hello.”

“Johnny,” I said.

“Yeah.”

“It’s Corduroy,” I said. “I got your voicemail.”

And for the next five or so minutes, our conversation was me asking questions, and Johnny giving one-word neutral answers that didn’t drive the conversation anywhere, but a dead end.

I wanted to throw my phone against the wall, smash my records, punch a hole in the wall-anything to relieve my frustrations. While fumbling through my phone, I had forgotten that I had Trish’s number. The dark skies opened. Bright lights appeared.

We sent messages back and forth for hours until I realized that it was almost 2 AM and I needed to be at work early.

When I woke up, I once again had a voicemail from another unidentified phone number. From the first word, I knew that Johnny was on the other line, but he shared the same info as he did his previous voicemail. It didn’t alarm me at first until I took the phone away from my ear sat back in my chair. While I sipped my morning coffee, Tony’s voice yelled into my ear, *‘See, I fucking told you, man. This guy needs fucking rehab!’*

As I went through my morning routine, I couldn’t get Tony’s wisdom out of my head. It carried over into work. Carrie showed me a variety of tasks, but I found myself staring into space contemplating Johnny’s well-being and ability to adequately function as a human being. Every few minutes, Carrie would say my name not once but multiple times, never once asking my condition. When I snapped back into the moment. She rolled her eyes. This routine continued



until our lunch break when I received a voicemail from Tony. He never did this sort of thing without a damn-good reason.

Johnny called Tony, and tried to justify hitting both Tony and I, or at least that's what Tony's said in his voicemail. Tony stated that he had a hard time deciphering Johnny's intent because he couldn't form coherent sentences. I knew that Johnny partook in many controlled substances. His main vices-beer and weed-kept his head on his shoulders, but I could always tell when he traveled down the dark, dirty paths of drug consumption. He would say bursts of coherent thoughts, not tie them together and then look at you like he had just discovered the cure to cancer. He would never, well, I shouldn't say that, go back-to-back days of hard narcotics, but he broke that personal contract as we rounded the backstretch of our time as Streetwise Preacher.

When I got to my car, I called Tony. We spoke for a few minutes. He was staying at a his friend Matt Deacon's house and invited me over which I obliged.

Matt Deacon played guitar in Tony's high school band, T.L.R short for Tippecanoe Lake Road, and worked as a supervisor at Essential Motor. He came to practices occasionally. I saw him around Essential Motor before I got fired. He looked like he should be in a band over Tony. He had more tattoos than Johnny, but he wasn't the wild card. Once he settled own with his now wife and had a kid, he didn't come to our practices as much. When he did come, he would sometimes bring an amp and jam long, and man, he could light the fret board on fire. But he didn't have that sparkle in his eye when he played. The music wasn't the drug he needed each day. He could shut it off and readapt to the real world. His supervisor money allowed him to have a two-story house on a few acres of land with a pole barn out back.

"Hell, if I didn't have a family and a full-time job, I'd come out of retirement," Matt said.

“We’re think about bringing in Buzz from Clean Sweep,” Tony said as he drank his beer then threw a dart at a dart board.

“Huh,” Matt said and leaned back in his chair. “That’s an interesting choice.”

I sat up and leaned forward in my chair. Before I said anything, conversational flashes popped in my head. Sound clips lingered and replayed in my head. He seemed a little too eager about the whole thing, especially before we ever invited him to jam, but at least he showed up to the garage in a coherent state of mind.

But my intuition didn’t fail me. Matt told Tony and I a story about being in a band with Buzz. He didn’t need to spill any detail for me to think that Johnny was somehow a lesser of two evils.

Buzz weaseled his way into some band that Matt joined after high school. He knew the drummer and kept asking if they needed a second guitarist which was something the other members had considered, but he wasn’t on the list. Matt wasn’t opposed until Buzz began critiquing Matt’s playing and writing which wasn’t met open arms by Matt who came close to knocking off Buzz’s block.

“Goddammit,” Tony said.

“That was almost ten years ago,” Matt said.

“He plays better than Johnny,” Tony said.

“Thank god, I hung up my rock n’ roll boots,” Matt said.

“I had until he dragged my ass out of retirement,” Tony said and smiled at me and chuckled.

“Hey, you love it,” I said. “It’s like a fucking drug.”

“Not this drama,” Tony said.

“Those two bands were crazier than my worst ex-girlfriend,” Matt said and finished off his beer.

I sat back in my chair and paused before I took another sip of my beer. No one ever compared a band to a relationship in person. Sure, I’d heard musician interviews where they’d compared their band dynamic to a relationship, but no local band peers had done so. Its not like I really had too many conversations with fellow local bands and their members. We never played in Hilltop consistently enough to really put a foothold in the small Hilltop music scene that hadn’t seen a surge in bands in almost ten years and didn’t expect to see one anytime soon.

Tony stopped me outside of the barn, before I left. He was a little buzzed. He took his time saying each word like a car driving through molasses.

“I’ve got your back no matter who joins us on that stage,” he said. “Don’t make a quick decision.”

“Matt seems to know what he’s talking about,” I said.

“That shit was ten years ago.”

“Maybe, we should give Johnny another chance,” I said. “I know you hate the charity case bullshit, but he needs some fucking hope, man. You said it yourself, you consider him a brother.”

While Tony took his sweet-ass time to reply, I flipped through the band’s mental photo album. Each memory was accompanied by Johnny’s shit-eating grin and utter devotion to entertainment in the live show. Yeah, he fucked up musical moments. There were wasted minutes bullshitting about nonsense while drinking watered-down piss quality beer, but damn, there was an honest poetry in each moment. And I was ready to fucking fight Tony if he still opted to go with Buzz.

“I’m still not going to tolerate any of his bullshit antics,” Tony said and patted me on the shoulder. I returned the favor. Hell, I even wanted to tell Carrie that I could even see myself as the manager at Hilltop Pawn and Loan. For the first time in years, I went to bed with a smile on my face.

## 7-Sacrificing Sanity

I found myself back in that cat-piss stained double-wide trailer, but this time I was accompanied by Tony. Johnny didn't make it easy to convince Tony that deserved another chance in the band. Kevin was Johnny's personal hype man. He compared Johnny to every legendary guitarist that he could come up within his drug-addled mind-Hendrix, Clapton, Berry, Angus Young, Iommi, Blackmore, Zakk Wylde, Eddie Van Halen, Stevie Ray Vaughn, Steve Vai, Joe Satriani-after that I quit listening to his coke-fueled rant.

My tolerance for bullshit was at the razor's edge. Carrie ran my ass through a battery of tests. I arrived almost two hours early. Getting to Hilltop Pawn and Loan that early was easy, but getting out of bed was just a notch in the old belt of struggle road. My mind was still foggy from the beers consumed with Tony and Matt the previous night. I felt worse than I anticipated, but I forgot that we drank some quality, high-alcohol content beers, and smoke some nice cigars. My energy reserve was used up by the time I got into my cold car and sat there as it warmed up. I closed my eyes and let the heat fill the car to an almost sauna-level temperature. Sweat formed on my brow. That was when I knew that I could start my day.

Tony had a rare day off which I didn't believe. He wanted to meet me after work which I was fine with, but then he suggested talking to Johnny which shocked me.

Tony shared the same sentiment while we stood by the cars putting together a game plan. That was a disaster. Tony wanted to sit down, outline some strict-ass rules, and give no time for Johnny to think it over. I knew that strict rules would be necessary, so I wouldn't end up with another bruised face. Before I told my two cents, my phone buzzed. Tony leaned up against his truck and smoked a cigarettes. The silence grew. I couldn't see his face except for the small burning end of his cigarettes. I couldn't tell if he hung on the anticipation or didn't mind if I

checked my phone, so I pulled up phone illuminating my face. Trish texted me. I figured Johnny could wait another minute or two.

Normally, small-talk based text messages took me out of the game and were often annoying but the impending toss-up that lied inside the cat-piss double-wide let all my preconceptions of it drift off into the ether. Trish wanted to know where I was. I gave her some phony place. She didn't need to know every fucking foot print that I placed into the Hilltop soil

After a few messages back and forth, Tony cleared his throat a few times. He lit up two more cigarettes. He surprised me by not busting out a flask or a beer. I took the hint and placed my phone in my pocket where it buzzed a few times.

“What are we going to say?” I asked Tony.

He took a drag of his cigarette and exhaled some smoke.

“If he hits one of us, he's fucking done,” Tony said.

I had no words to express my deflated feeling. His calm demeanor seemed to drift into the ether along with his cigarette smoke.

“Well,” I said. “I guess we better not waste any time. Should I lead the questioning?”

I looked back at Tony as he followed me up the wooden steps onto the porch that had acquired more dirty, rusted shit than the previous time I visited. Before I made my way to knock on the door, the porch light came on and the front door opened. Johnny stood in the door with some faded bruises on his face. He wore a sleeveless shirt that showcased the new tattoos that I hadn't see previously.

Tony and I sat on the cat-piss aroma couch. The odor was more pungent, and it was thick enough to eat. I refrained from breathing through my nose which barely helped. Tony followed suite. Kevin leaned against the counter in the kitchen area with a beer in one hand and an unlit

cigarette in the other. Johnny offered us beer, weed and some other assorted substances that I cared not to remember. Tony took up his beer offer. Johnny's eyes were bloodshot. A dirty skunk odor hung on him.

I wanted to get out of that fucking place quick. Hell, Johnny could've said he murdered a suburban family and as long as Tony said it was okay, I would've been fine with leaving to breathe clean, odorless air. But Tony just had to drink some cheap-ass beer.

Johnny pulled up on one of the stray dining room-style chairs and sat in the middle of the living area. He lit a joint and took his sweet-ass time exhaling the hit. He got up from the chair and handed it to Kevin. Each second, I felt like barfing on the carpet and shoving Johnny's face in it to pay for the emotional distress his violent tendencies had caused me.

"Where's the Clean Sweep guys?" Kevin asked before letting out a big pull from the joint.

I looked at the floor and took some deep breaths. They were more to calm my nausea than ease my anger from Kevin's asinine question.

"Does it matter?" Tony asked.

I lifted my head. Kevin walked toward the couch. My heart rate sped up. I didn't know if Kevin had the same capacity to snap into a violent rage as Johnny. Kevin stopped by Johnny's chair and handed the joint back to Johnny. He paused and took a sip of his beer.

The silence grew. I didn't know if not speaking or saying something funny would ease the tension, but I didn't fool like rolling the dice on walking into work again with a bruised face.

Johnny took a hit, leaned back in the chair and exhaled.

"Kinda fucked-up, don't you think?" he asked and looked at Tony and I.

He handed the joint back to Kevin, then he folded his arms and slumped into the wooden chair.

“It wasn’t anything serious,” I said.

Each eye bore a single, laser-sharp stare into me. Sweat trickled down my back. My face warmed up. I felt a fight or flight response getting ready to act if any slight move was a cause for concern.

“That’s bullshit,” Johnny said.

“What do you even know?” Tony asked and sat up. “You were in fucking jail.”

“What happened to loyalty?” Johnny asked.

I wanted to interject, but I saw Tony begin to prepare himself for another showdown. I didn’t know if I was prepared to fight Kevin or at least be able to pull him off of Tony if Kevin attacked him while Tony went after Johnny.

“This isn’t about loyalty, Johnny,” I said and the sweat built up quicker than before. “We needed to play some tunes. Hell, I was drunk when I invited them, and I felt it would be disrespectful to rescind the offer.”

I felt like a whiney, ass-kissing bitch. Kevin and Johnny stared at me with aimless wonder. Tony shook his head. I couldn’t tell if he was disappointed or embarrassed.

Kevin left Johnny’s side. Johnny leaned forward. He rested his head on his hand.

“Ten days, right?” he asked.

Tony and I looked at each other then I returned my glance to Johnny.

“Um, until the show?” I asked.

Johnny nodded his head.

“That sounds about right,” Tony said.



“Y’all got a rig I could use?” Johnny asked and sat back in his chair.

“What?” Tony asked and finished his beer.

“Do you need a guitar and an amp?” I asked.

“Yep,” Johnny said and got up from his chair.

He returned with three beers and handed Tony and I one apiece.

“Had to sell them,” he said. “Actually, Kevin was the one who had to. Needed some cash for bail.”

When I first met Johnny, he had professional level equipment. His guitar had come into the music store from a guy who had went away to prison and his wife needed quick cash, so Johnny acquired it without much hesitation. He got a hell of a deal on his amplifier just by working at the music center and getting it at manufacturer cost. Every gig, there would be one guy who would approach Johnny and gush about his tone or equipment. I was pretty jealous at first, but when he said that Kevin had pawned it, I became suspicious of whether Kevin pawned it or actually sold it. I then began to question whether Johnny had been earning a substantial income with Doug or whether that was a sham as well. To me, Tony was up to bat in the quest to help Johnny acquire musical instruments, but I got a sense that Tony wasn’t in the right headspace to do so.

“Corduroy, do you still have that Les Paul?” Johnny asked.

Tony glanced at me, through telekinesis, I hear him say, *‘You brought this upon yourself. Is it really worth it? I’m sacrificing my sanity. The least you could do is let him play that fucking guitar.’*

“I don’t have a good amp,” I said.

“Well, looks like we will have to search for one,” Johnny said.

Before we left in our respective cars, Tony stopped me.

“I’ll help you get an amp,” he said.

“This guy’s going to burn us,” I said.

“Yeah, probably but that’s brotherhood, I guess.”

“Fuck, why do you have to be right?”

He patted me on the shoulder, “I ain’t right, man. I know that you can’t say no.”

He got in his truck. I leaned against my car. I felt the weight of the band jab into my shoulders. My phone buzzed. That was the last thing I wanted to address.

## 8-Door to Delinquency

I was going to meet Trish at a bar, but I had to help Johnny get an amplifier. That was the first thing. I also had to go to my parent's house to retrieve my prized Les Paul. Plans went through my head as Carrie handed me inventory sheets and followed that up with how to enter that data into our system to avoid legal prosecution in an event of stolen merchandise. I knew what she was doing, but the procedure evaporated like steam on a mirror.

Multiple times, Carrie turned to me, paused and asked me if I had any questions. My blank stare replies built up a mound of disgust and before we opened the store, Carrie confronted me.

"I'm not doing this to hear myself talk, Corduroy," she said. "Kelley's coming in tomorrow, but it's not like you care anyways." She paused. "I'm fucking done."

Carrie walked away and opened the store. Before I left for the evening, she told me to only come in an hour early to meet with Bill.

While on my way to my parent's house, Carrie's voice swirled around my head like piss draining into a toilet's plumbing.

I pulled into the driveway as my father exited his car wearing a Colts pull-over. He had probably returned from the golf course. His hair had an extra silver tinge to it. And it made me access my own impending aging process that I had neglected for the duration of my employment at Hilltop Pawn and Loan.

I parked behind his car and he noticed me as he opened the trunk and retrieved his golf bag. He waved and I nodded my head to acknowledge his gesture.

As I exited my car, he asked me what I was doing at the house. I neglected to text him, but I figured letting my mother know would be a smart decision, and in turn, she offered a warm, home-cooked meal.

“Just getting a guitar,” I said.

“Staying for dinner?” he asked.

“I need to get going,” I said. “Busy night.”

“Band stuff?” he asked.

I paused.

“You’re still playing with them knuckle heads?”

“Well...”

“You’re a big boy,” he said. “Just keep out of the bars past midnight. Nothing good happens after midnight.”

I followed him through the front door. Dinner aromas hung in the air. The couch reminded me of the previous week, but I shook it out of my thoughts and walked through the living room toward the kitchen where my mother was preparing food.

The stove was near the garage entry door where my guitar was located and before I took another step, my mother reiterated my father’s questions about dinner.

“I’m on a time crunch,” I said and took a few steps toward the door.

“It’ll be done in like five minutes,” she said. “Come on, you can’t be that busy.”

I stopped. She never quite understood the time commitment. Every time I tried to explain the countless hours required for rock n’ roll glory, she would look at me like I was an alien and ask if I would be able to one day afford a comfortable place of my own. I would often default to, “That’s not the point of life, mom. Art isn’t about an end-goal.” I said that statement or a

variation of it many times while in Switchblade Bob and after my ill-fated venture at community college.

There was a side-door to the outside world in the garage. I'd often sneak out of that door to smoke various tobacco products while in high school. While I moved cardboard boxes away from the guitar case, I kept glancing at the door. Two boxes were in front of the door. I looked back at the entry door to the house. My father would take the brunt of my mother's frustrations. That pointed my feet back towards going inside. Then there would be questions about the guitar. Even referencing Johnny or the band was going to reignite my father's distain for the band's reunion. A text from Trish and a missed call from Tony tugged me back towards the door to delinquency.

The two boxes propped against the door were labeled 'Corduroy's Music Books' and 'Corduroy's baby items.' An invisible arm grabbed me and redirected me to the door. Not living with them anymore helped my cause for escaping. And dammit, Trish sure was something I didn't want to fuck up. It was only fitting that the same guitar that I almost sold to Johnny and got me in the band was the same one he would be using for our big reunion.

While I traversed the back roads to Matt's house, I messaged Trish to let her know that I had an hour-long stop before I would be free. But when I showed up to Matt's house, I noticed an extra car that I hadn't see there the previous visit.

Matt greeted me when I opened the side door to his garage. Tony sat in a folding chair with a beer in-hand. Kevin and Johnny were there smoking. Tony didn't tell me that they were showing up as well. The plan was to pick up Matt's amp and take it to my place, because Tony wanted to come straight from work the following evening to band practice. I wanted Matt to lend Johnny one of his four guitars. Tony didn't mention Johnny's arrival when I spoke to him before

I left my parent's house. I didn't know why I was there. Hell, I didn't know why Kevin and Johnny were there and how they were to go. The whole situation had a strange vibe.

I followed Matt to where everyone sat and smoked. There were a few guitar cables on the ground. Matt had more amps than he mentioned the other day. Johnny picked up a guitar before I sat down. Matt handed me a beer.

Before I could say anything, Johnny played a chord that rattled my brain. He looked around the room with a huge smile and couldn't quit laughing even after the sound stopped and the feedback lingered in the amplifier's speaker.

Matt picked up a guitar and played some chords and riffs. Johnny fumbled through some lead parts to compliment. I was enthralled until my phone buzzed. I knew it was Trish before I pulled out my phone out of my pocket. Matt and Johnny had their respective amps at practice-level volumes. I couldn't concentrate to read Trish's text messages.

The impromptu jam session didn't let up. I checked my phone and saw the clock countdown until I needed to leave. I needed to know whether I had to take the amp, but there wasn't a moment for me to express my concern. This finally came when Matt's wife appeared in the doorway and yelled loud enough to compete with both guitars. Before they resumed playing at a slightly decreased volume, I stood in my chair.

"Do I need to take this amp home with me?" I asked.

Everyone gave me a blank stare.

"What's the rush, man?" Johnny asked. "Can't have a good time?"

Jail didn't change Johnny. I didn't know why I thought he would come out a different person. He was always going to run on instinct. And instinct meant only caring about getting fucked up and rocking out.

Tony sat there with a beer in hand. His little speech about having my back seemed to go out the window.

“I need to at work early,” I said.

“And?” Johnny said.

I sat down and shook my head.

“Got a hot date?” Tony asked.

“No,” I said as I looked at the concrete floor.

Tony never asked anything like that while he was stone-cold sober, and I didn’t know why he was doing so in front of Johnny.

“The chick with the tattoo?” Johnny asked.

I hit the arm of the chair with the palm of my hand

“Can’t go wrong with those tattooed broads,” Kevin said. “They’re freaks in the sack.”

“That’s for damn sure,” Johnny said and chuckled.

I kept my head and looked at the floor. I knew that if I looked at Johnny or even Tony, I was bound to see red and there would be no chance of seeing that stage on Halloween night.

I stood up and looked at everyone. Matt rolled his guitar’s volume knob forward and feedback came from the amplifier.

“She’s a nice fucking girl,” I said. “She’s not some tatted-up whore.”

“Hey man, take it easy,” Matt said. “I’ve got another guitar, and I think a bass around here some...”

“I don’t want to jam, Matt,” I said and my heart rate increased.

“Dude, stay and hang,” Johnny said.

My phone buzzed. It was getting close to the hour time limit. Johnny rolled his volume knob forward as well.

“I don’t fucking want to play tonight,” I said. “You get your own fucking amp, Johnny.”

“I’ll see you tomorrow,” Johnny said.

I couldn’t tell if he was being sarcastic or genuine. My inner rage clouded my judgement as I opened and slammed the door.

My phone buzzed as I sat down in the driver’s seat. Each little thing built up an internal rage-filled bonfire: the cold car, Tony’s betrayal, the incessant stream of text messages. All I wanted was a break from the drama, the alcohol-soaked conversation and the cigarette-stained small talk. Trish offered that break at least that’s what I thought until I met her at Skeeter’s where I reluctantly agreed to meet her because I didn’t feel like playing an away game in the romance season.

She was halfway through a beer when I sat down at the bar. There was a small group at the pool table and Trish. Of course, I saw Buzz’s blonde hair that radiated beneath the neon beer company signs. When he turned around to take my order, he paused. The awkward pause didn’t improve my night. The only saving grace was the music coming from the speakers that I assumed Buzz chose. “Piece of Your Action,” by Motley Crue filled the sonic gaps in our non-existent conversation. I asked Trish what she was drinking and ordered that. Buzz nodded his head and walked away. I kept my head forward and admired the liquor bottle display behind the counter.

While Trish auditorily vomited her work day into my ear, I drank my beer faster than usual. The early work day didn’t even come into my conscience. My brain needed to numb itself from the monotonous bullshit.



Trish asked me questions, and I responded with audible grunts. With each beer, they sounded more animalistic. I couldn't believe that she hadn't left. Before my fourth beer, I went to the restroom and the pool table crew packed up. When I returned to my seat, Buzz, Trish and I were the only ones in Skeeter's. Leaving through the back door became a very real option for me.

Buzz had changed the music to 70s Southern California artists like The Eagles, Jackson Browne and Fleetwood Mac. "Go Your Own Way," by Fleetwood Mac blasted through the speakers as I sat down and ordered my fourth beer. Trish asked Buzz a few questions about Clean Sweep. In my intoxicated intellect, Trish wanted to tour Buzz's tattoos and find the ones that didn't see the light of day. I knew that I had seen them first, but I was still jealous. And then I wondered if Trish had hooked up with Buzz. While I looked at her smiling while listening to Buzz tell band stories, I realized that I needed to get out of this bar and never take her there again if I wanted to have any sort of serious future. Meeting at Skeeter's played into the groupie narrative that I had written in my mind after the previous week.

I kept my head down and only lifted it to drink my beer. Buzz told some stupid immature story about playing a garage in another town after taking too much acid or LSD or some hippie shit. My buzz was approaching the end of the happy peak and ready to slide into the depressive, fight anyone stage. I touched Trish's thigh to get her attention. While doing so, Buzz asked me if I had got in touch with Johnny.

"Still hashing that shit out," I said.

"He left as I was coming in today," Buzz said.

"No shit," I said. "Could I get the check?"

"Sure," Buzz said and left to go to the register.

“Let’s get out of here,” I said.

“What’s the hurry?” Trish asked and placed her hand on my thigh.

“Don’t you work tomorrow?”

“I have the day off,” she said.

“Want to come to my place?” I asked.

Buzz placed the bill in front of me, and I handed him my card.

Before we left, Buzz said to let him know if I needed him.

While Trish told me various stories, I kept wondering why Buzz wanted me to let him know if I needed him. I couldn’t focus on the moment it was like seeing the world through a dirty window. There had to be a better place than my shit hole apartment.

What I thought would be a sexual bow to the evening resulted in a drunken slumber where I got up super early, puked, then wrote down my thoughts about the evening. When my alarm went off, I had some scribbled words with the title, “One for the Road.”

## 9-Denting the Bonds That Bind Brotherhood

Bill Kelley's words lingered in my mind as Johnny tried unsuccessfully three times to play our opening song. 'I know the allure of rock n' roll, Corduroy. The danger, the anarchy. It's better than getting fucked up. The money isn't there, and when it does come around the shelf life is short and pressurized.'

When he gave me this partial lecture, I was barely awake. Due to the action-packed previous day, I didn't have an adequate time-frame to enjoy a solid cup of coffee. I had to worry about Trish who wanted to eat breakfast and meet up later to have a casual hang. Even as I exited the shower, she sat on my bed without a bra on or any indication of getting dress soon.

I entered Hilltop Pawn and Loan with a frazzled mind. The future wasn't on my mind. With the Johnny drama, there wasn't any time to consider my future or perhaps I used it as an excuse. Everything competed for attention, and I had no mental capacity to dedicate any substantial time to an individual task. I ran on auto pilot and got pulled into each situation like a rag doll.

Bill and I sat at the breakroom table. He wore a collared shirt and dress pants. My hooded sweatshirt had a lingering sweat smell. Even my jeans felt like they had lived through a war. Carrie wasn't there when I arrived, I began to wonder whether she had detailed my recent mishaps to Bill or let them slide, I didn't want to volunteer that information until at least after the gig when I figured I had nothing left to lose, and nihilism was bound to encompass my belief system.

Bill went through a litany of small talk questions that were pretty much work-related. But I knew that the surface level questions were ending when he asked if I envisioned myself as a leader once I would turn thirty. He sat there with his legs crossed. He said it like he said that the

Colts had just won the previous day. That question hit me like hammer to a nail. Initially, I wanted to get up from the table, flip him the bird and say, ‘fuck you, I’ve got a band to piece together.’ That was the old Corduroy, and not that long ago I believed that those actions were not only acceptable but reenforced through my self-imposed lack of a healthy support system. A wave of maturity brushed my mental coast and alerted me to the opportunity that Bill presented—a steady income stream and a resume booster. Yes, I wouldn’t have a coworker. There were bound to be more mental headaches. The Hilltop Pawn and Loan expiration date was on the horizon. But he told me that there were plenty of opportunities with in his vast network of businesses that he owned.

Before I gave a genuine answer, I sat back and reevaluated my life to that point. There wasn’t much if anything that really gave me purpose outside of the band’s reunion. That was what drove me nuts and motivated me to see some iteration of the band approach the microphone with the same energy that we put forth at our first gig.

“I can lead, at times, but I don’t see myself as a loudmouth, field general-type leader,” I said.

“Could you run the shop, for say, a year or so?” Bill asked.

I took a few seconds to think. I just wanted to be there a few months and wait until the place closed to figure out my next move.

“I think I could fulfill that duty,” I said.

“Is the band going to interfere?”

“We’ll be done after Halloween.”

“Just one show?”

“I don’t think we could last more than one show,” I said. “It’ll be a nice end to that chapter.”

“It’s a hard chapter to close,” he said. “There are some days that I wish I could just plug in one more time.”

Bill uncrossed his arms and loomed off at the wall behind me.

“I don’t know if I’ve had enough time to appreciate the moment.”

“Just take it day by day,” he said. “Carrie was telling that you haven’t committed yet to taking over for her in November.”

I knew that he wouldn’t leave the break room without asking about that, but damn, it still stung. I went through a rolodex of excuses-ailing grandparents, financial woes putting a burden on my decision-making process, laziness (that always came with some grade-A reactions), the band. Somehow, I concluded that giving Bill a straight answer would be best, but well, what I planned to say didn’t leave my mouth.

“Well, you see, I’m not big on thinking about long-term without fielding other offers,” (What the fuck was I saying?) “When do you need a firm answer?”

Bill sat there with his mouth open like I said some vile, disgusting comments about his family. The silence grew, and I felt my resignation being written with each second that passed.

“Are you being serious?” Bill asked.

I was shocked and now I didn’t know how to answer. Bill refolded his arms and scrunched his face from his shocked state to the look of a concerned father. Tony’s voice came into my head, “*Kid, get your head out of your ass. No Money. No band. No Life.*”

Before Bill walked through the break room, he turned around and leaned on the door. He looked at the floor and shook his head. His half-frown sunk me in my seat.

“You better have some pretty good offers or start paying attention to Carrie’s routine,” he said and wiped his face with his hand. “I want an answer Monday.”

Bill left, and I put my head in my hands. All I wanted was a beer and a black out, but even a beer couldn’t simmer my frustration bonfire. Luckily, Matt let Johnny borrow one of his guitars. I didn’t know that until I entered the garage. Johnny broke a string before we played a song. He complained about my guitar’s tone not being optimal for that Southern-fried aspect of the undeclared Streetwise Preacher sound.

I didn’t hear Johnny’s guitar after his second attempt to lay the first song. The rest of Bill’s speech played out in my mind, “The constant grind can be intoxicating. At the end of the day, there’s a time when having a passion-filled safety net isn’t selling out, but rather a wise investment. You can always play music. Hell, you can play it until the day you die, but sometimes you can’t make a living out of it.” My frustrations were torn between Bill’s speech and Johnny’s incompetency.

Before he tried the opening riff a fourth time, I suggested playing another song.

“Well, which song?” Johnny asked.

I blurted out a song title and it happened to be the one I wrote.

“Of course, you chose one of yours,” Johnny said.

“Well, what do you want to play?” I asked and sat on my amp.

Tony lit up a cigarette and didn’t look to be in a hurry to play another song.

“Um,” Johnny said.

“What do you think, Tony?” I asked.

He took a long drag on his cigarette and leaned up against the wall behind his drums. He exhaled and looked at the ceiling.

“Does it matter?” he asked.

“It would if we had a set-list,” I said. “Do you guys want to put one together?”

“What’s your rush?” Johnny asked.

Tony sat there and glared at Johnny. Leaving seemed like a better option than hashing out some half-assed set-list. There wasn’t any light at the end of this rock n’ roll tunnel.

“It’s none of your fucking business,” Tony said. “If we’re going to sit here and talk, I’m heading out.”

Johnny’s hand formed a fist and he began to take off the guitar. I suggested playing one of Johnny’s songs. This particular tune, “Hangover Blues,” was so on the nose it was a crowd favorite for its sophomoric lyrics and simple chorus. Tony stubbed out his cigarette. Johnny unclenched his fist and put the guitar back on.

We hacked through the song like a 19<sup>th</sup> century explorer looking for resources in a jungle. For its simplicity, the song presented more challenges than the first song fiasco. Once we reached the chorus, the latter half came together. Memories of the early days came into view. The musty basement. A lingering cloud of cigarette smoke. Faded beer cans. Dust-coated guitar cables. Faded guitar brand posters taped to the cement foundation blocks. Unbearable ear-ringing that lasted until the following morning.

This brief moment of ecstasy faded as each attempted song became a rain-soaked winding road. The mistakes popped up out of nowhere. Missed lyrics. Forgotten solos. Inconsistent drum tempos.

The sweat on my brow and my sore fingers didn't feel earned, but rather results of failure.

When we went through a handful of songs, I gauged the mood of the room. Tony lit up cigarette and stared into space. Johnny cracked a beer and sat on his amp. My initial expectations were off in the distant horizon. I thought we would have a solid batch of ten songs ready to cut down into a tight six song set hell bent on inciting a riot. Our mood was more in line with a band on Behind the Music who broke-up too soon.

When I brought up our next practice, we hit the same crossroads as the Sleepy John's incident. Tony mentioned there was a possibility of seeing his daughter or even leaving town to go see her. Johnny searched the room for some immature response to Tony's answer, but he opted to drink a beer. I was relieved. It opened up my intended Saturday night date with Trish. But Tony didn't mention if he would be back on Sunday.

I asked him and he responded, "I'll be back for a last run of practices."

"What is that supposed to mean?" I asked.

"I've got some business to handle," he said. "You'll understand when you have your own."

Tony left the garage. Johnny began packing up his stuff.

"Are you doing anything Sunday?" I asked.

"Nah, man," he said.

"Maybe, we can work on some of these songs?"

"Got cold beer?" Johnny asked.

I nodded my head begrudgingly. As Tony and Johnny left the gravel driveway, I remembered that I had to be at my parent's house for dinner on Sunday.



Trish thought it was a good idea to go to Sleepy John's. I forgot if I mentioned the band incident there. I was just happy to have a proper date with her. My groupie suspicions subsided as I walked from my car to the front door. She intercepted me and filled me in on her busy half-day at work where she didn't stop moving the five hours she was there. I brushed off her questions about my work day. The awkward tension that went unspoken between Carrie and I grew over the shift. She didn't tell me anything before we went our separate ways at the end of the day.

Once we were seated and the waiter left, Trish emphasized every minute point with her hands. I wondered if this was some nervous tick, but she didn't stop it. With each sip of her drink, the hand gestures became more animated like manifestations of punctuation and not just periods but commas, dashes, colons and semi-colons.

The small talk calmed me down, but I felt like a car spinning its tires in a muddy field after a substantial rain storm. I knew there was a sexual connection between Trish and I, but I knew very little about her outside of her occupation and undying appreciation for Streetwise Preacher especially my songwriting prowess.

I usually gauged my friendships and relationships through musical tastes, but I knew that if I did so with Trish, I wouldn't really break through her fangirl exterior that kept her true personality at a longer distance than I thought was manageable. While she kept the silence to brief half-second increments, I drank my beer and hoped that the alcohol would loosen up my insecurities to ask Trish some deep questions to chip away at her obvious emotional shell.

But our food came before I could unload a question, and the silence grew. It pained Trish to hear the adjacent conversations and innocuous restaurant sounds. I saw a brief window when she cut up her chicken.

“What got you into music?” I asked. “Was it a song, a person or a movie?”

Time stood still. Her fork fell from her grip. She kept her gaze on her plate. I thought it was a valid question until I saw the once bright, jovial expression turn into a dark storm cloud ready to dump a life-changing amount of rain.

“My dad,” she said. “Excuse me.”

Trish took her napkin dabbed it to the corners of her eyes. Everything came into view, but I didn’t want to assume that this was some sort of psychological response to why she was sitting across me at Sleepy John’s. Each second, she stayed silent and fought back a rush of tears, the more I felt like a shithead.

With reddish eyes, Trish held a napkin in her hand while she detailed her earliest memories of her father and how he introduced her to his vast knowledge of mid to late twentieth century popular music. Her energetic arm motions were replaced with two napkin dabs to her eyes. I felt bad for bringing up her father, but I cracked that shell. Her connection wasn’t just some obsession. It was how she and her late father connected. She had his tape, eight-track and vinyl record collection. There were times when she knew that the money from it would be more beneficial than the sentimental value, but she kept it even at the urging of her mother who had been estranged from Trish’s father at the time of his sudden passing.

“He had no boundaries to his taste,” Trish said after she put down the napkin. “Every ten-minute car ride was a music appreciation class. Even when I visited him at the hospital, he asked me what I had been listening to and what new artists were keeping real music alive.”

“I guess I had a similar experience, but I took it a lot farther than my parents anticipated,” I said.

“I wish that I could do something in music.”

“Well, what’s stopping you?” I asked and finished my beer.

“Seventh grade choir,” she said and took a long sip of her drink.

I thought this was going to be some sob story, and at first, it was. Her choir teacher was a fucking bitch. Well, that was making some assumptions and not everyone has an opera-quality voice, but it can be developed. Hell, I had no voice lessons or formal vocal training and I was a local fucking legend, at least in my mind.

After her lengthy story about the crushing of her musical dreams, I got up and went to the restroom. Like the speakeasy motif, the bathroom had a door with an eye-level slit that stopped me, and I wondered if I needed a password to take a piss. The urinal was carved into the wall and went to the floor.

Before I washed my hands, my phone buzzed. Tony texted me. I figured it was serious, so I washed my hands and dried them. He told me that he leaving town. I paused and didn’t know whether to ask him for how long or ask if he wanted to play the show. But after just one beer, I flooded his phone with each message pertaining to my concerns. And he called me right away.

“Hey,” I said. “What’s going on?”

“I need to straighten some shit out,” Tony said.

“Like what?” I asked.

There was a pause. A guy entered the restroom. I leaned up against the wall opposite the sink.

“She thinks I’m a bad dad,” he said. “I kept that girl in nice diapers and good clothes while that fuckin bitch sat there and complained whether she wanted to be mother.”

“I thought you liked her,” I said.

“She’s been doing some shady shit,” Tony said. “Fucking calling my brother and telling him about me not coming home until late. I bust my ass and get a slap in the face.

“Why is she calling your brother?” I asked.

Tony had a strained relationship with him. I met his brother twice and each time he seemed to be out of the moment and in his own world.

“She’s probably fucking him,” he said.

Tony never accused her of infidelity. He never disclosed much about his past relationships and his thoughts on women. When he did say so, it was usually after a few drinks. And from his speech patterns, I could tell that his words coming out in a cursive, or to the common man, a slurred, pattern. He paused in the middle of phrases. I could hear audible sips which I knew only occurred while he hit the hard shit. I knew that I wouldn’t be able to focus on Trish while I wondered if Tony would hit the road for a road trip drunker than George Jones on a lawn mower hellbent on getting a case of beer.

“Dude, where are you?” I asked and exited the bathroom and leaned against the wall beside the door.

“In my fucking truck, she’s not going to take my daughter from me,” he said slurring his words like a cursive sentence.

“Tony, listen to me,” I said. “Don’t turn the keys in your truck. Are you at Matt’s? We should talk this out before you do something that hurt someone.”

“This isn’t Johnny and the band,” he said.

“That has nothing to do with that,” I said.

“I know what needs to be done,” Tony said. “I can keep it between the lines.”

“Just fucking wait ten minutes,” I said and paused.

Damn, I felt like my dad when he had to stay on my ass to get a job when I got fired from Essential Motor.

I returned to the table in a frantic headspace. The check was on the table. I pulled out my wallet. It dropped on the floor. I yelled out a few ‘fucks,’ and ‘shits.’ Patrons at adjacent tables stared at me while Trish badgered me with questions.

“I need to leave like three minutes ago,” I said and threw my debit card on the table.

I looked round the bar for our waiter.

“What’s wrong?” Trish asked and put a hand on my shoulder.

“Band shit,” I said.

“Like what?”

“Where’s our fucking waiter?”

“He’ll be here soon enough,” Trish said. “What’s the rush?”

“Tony,” I said and took the leather check folder with me to the bar.

Tony told stories about him driving the back roads while drunk. This wasn’t just after two or three beers at dinner. He was near the brink of black out. This seemed to be a common occurrence before Streetwise Preacher. He told me about one confirmed DUI that resulted in his arrest. There was another wild story about out running the cops and hiding out in the backwoods of northern Indiana for a few weeks less than a year after the first arrest. I worried that the Sleepy John’s incident would hurt his inevitable custody battle. I doubted my ability to stop his drunk-ass from driving eight sheets to the wind across hell’s half-acre.

Trish approached the bar where I signed the receipt. She kept peppering my ear with questions as I tried to devise an on-the-fly plan to keep Tony from harming himself or worse getting in a wreck, arrested or killing someone, God forbid.

Once the cold wind brushed my skin, I hurried to my car. Before I unlocked the driver door, I stopped to catch my breath which allowed Trish to follow my frantic movements. She wedged herself between the door handle and me. She demanded a direct answer to my uncharacteristic frenetic energy.

As I detailed Tony's situation, I realized that there was a good chance that his paternal instinct would over power his drunk common sense and my words would be as useless as non-alcoholic beer to an alcoholic. But Trish knew how to handle this situation with ease, she was going to stage an intervention.

"He's not sucking dick for crack, Trish," I said. "He's drunk and pissed at his girlfriend."

"If you show him, that his present actions gratefully affect his life then he will either fold or go deeper into his dark path," she said with quite a few hand gestures that didn't seem necessary.

"Just get in the car," I said.

The speedometer reached its limits on that trip. Every second, I kept an eye in my rearview mirror, front windshield and on the speedometer itself. I gripped the wheel like I was holding on the edge of a cliff. Sweat soaked every fucking inch of my clothes. Trish kept in my ear about slowing down, but each word dissipated into the ether as I fulfilled my lifelong fantasy of driving way too fast at night with no legal repercussions.

I pulled into Matt's driveway and Tony's truck was in the driveway. Exhaust came out of the tail pipe. Matt and another person were on the passenger-side of Tony's truck. As I got closer, I saw that the other person was Matt's wife with a baby in her arms. I parked my car behind Tony's truck. Their voices were loud enough to be heard inside my car. I couldn't make out distinct phrases, but it didn't seem like the three of them were making small talk. I put the car

in park and turned it off. Trish placed her hand on my hand that was on the gear shift. I looked over at her.

“Let me handle this,” I said.

“I can help,” she said.

“This shouldn’t take too long,” I said and stepped out onto the driveway.

“Think about your daughter,” Matt yelled at Tony’s truck.

The white lights lit up on his truck. I yelled at Tony to stop and ran up to the driver-side door. Tony had a beer in his hand and the other was on the steering wheel. A cigarette hung from his lip. His window was cracked and I hit it with an open palm. He looked over at me.

“You’re going to hit my fucking car,” I said.

“I’ve got to get my daughter,” he said and turned his head away from me.

The truck rolled backward. I yelled out and hit his window repeatedly. His truck hit my car and jerked Tony forward. Matt joined me on the driver-side. We looked at each other then back at Tony who leaned forward and rested his head against the steering wheel.

“What the fuck happened?” I asked Matt.

“We were drinking in the barn. He got a call and started yelling. Then he stared slugging the beers down like they were shots then he asked for the hard shit. I haven’t seen him like that in a few years.”

“I thought he was supposed to leave yesterday,” I said.

“By the time, he got back here from work, he said that plan was a no-go.”

Despite Tony hitting my truck, I wasn’t mad at him. Thankfully, he wasn’t going fast. Trish couldn’t stop shaking when she joined Matt and I outside of Tony’s truck. I looked at her and didn’t know what to do. We didn’t really know each other. Tony and I were practically

brother. Once I hugged Trish, I felt tears hit my shoulders and I forgot about Tony for a minute. Maybe this was a sign. Grab my keys, leave Hilltop in the dust and break my car's rearview mirror. This place wasn't going to take me live. But that attitude subsided as Matt's wife approached the three of us and couldn't hold back her pent up rage regarding Tony's childish behavior, in her words.

"I don't know if he can stay at my place in this condition," Matt said. "I've got kids, man."

"Fuck," I said and walked with Trish to assess Tony's damage to my car.

Getting Tony into my car wasn't the worst part of Saturday night. He seemed to weigh a thousand pounds. Matt's wife couldn't thank me enough, but I got a sense that she hadn't been too keen on Tony staying at their place for the past few days. Once I got Tony settled into my backseat, dealing with Trish became another hurdle with a barbed edge.

Before we left Matt's, I sensed that Trish wanted to clean her hands of dealing with Tony. She insisted on driving her car from the Sleepy John's parking lot to my apartment.

While driving, I thought about Sunday dinner with my parents. They were going to grill me and, dammit, I didn't want to hear it. And fuck, Trish seemed to be on the ropes in a romantic way.

The car was silent. Even the radio wasn't loud enough to distinguish a song. Tony mumbled to himself. I kept checking my rearview mirror and worried that Tony would throw-up in my backseat. That just seemed to be some twisted sense of karma that was ready to pounce on me while my guard was down.

Before she exited the car, Trish turned to me. She paused.



“Do you really need my help?” she asked.

Anger rose up in me. I gripped the steering wheel tighter, took my hand off the gear shift, clenched my fist and took a deep breath. She put me in a tight spot, and I wanted to burn down our romantic bridge.

“It would be nice to have little back-up,” I said and felt a little tension relieved.

“I can’t stay long,” she said and walked to her car.

Even when she followed me and helped walk Tony up to my apartment, I was surprised that she followed through. This wasn’t some glamorous part of the Streetwise Preacher story. Hell, this was the reason to not be attracted to me. My dumb fucking bandmates were walking over me, and yet, Trish put one of Tony’s arms around her shoulders and literally carried her weights. Then I got suspicious that she was trying to impress me. Perhaps, she wanted to show me that she was, ‘one of the boys.’ Maybe, she wasn’t high maintenance. The last thing that came to mind was her solid Midwestern upbringing where you help people, friends or family.

We plopped Tony in my chair and before I could mention it, Trish got him a glass of water. Tony drank it with half-opened eyes and groaned. I glanced at my open door and had flashes back to the last time Trish had been to my apartment, but the erotic fantasy subsided when Tony finished his water and tried to stumble to his feet and walked away from the chair only to fall on the ground and aggravate a shoulder injury that he announced to Trish and I.

This drunken Three Stooges one-man routine show lasted until Tony showed signs of emptying his stomach onto my floor. We drug Tony to my bathroom and he painted the bowl with beer, liquor and bile. Once the initial nausea wave wore off, we left him to sober up and suffer the consequences.

Trish sat on my air mattress. I sat next to her. There wasn't any inkling of eroticism in the air. It was quite the opposite. Her arms were to her side. Her head was down like something emotionally scaring had happened and she was processing it. I leaned back on my hands and couldn't figure out what the fuck to do.

"You don't have to stay," I said. "He'll probably just sleep in the bathroom."

"That sounds kinda mean," she said and looked back at me.

"He slept in his truck last week," I said. "That floor's probably more comfortable."

I chuckled a little, but Trish's face didn't welcome the joke. A pit of guilt formed in my stomach like when you tell a 'your momma,' joke and the joke recipient has a dead momma.

"Do you consider Tony a friend?" she asked.

"Um, yeah I guess," I said.

"Why didn't you help him out?"

"It was after the fact. He's thirty, Trish. He can sleep in his fucking car if he damn-well pleases."

She turned her head away from me.

"He's not some sob case," I said. "He's got a big boy job."

I sat up even with her and placed my hand on her thigh. She put her hand on mine then picked it up, placed my hand on my thigh and returned her hand to her thigh. Her face didn't have an ounce of joy left to express. I wanted to give her some lecture on brotherhood or male friendship or band dynamics, but nothing popped in my head that didn't have a gym's worth of vitriol ready to launch into the universe.

She got up from the bed. I asked her where she was going. She paused and took a deep breath.

“Home,” she said and stood in the doorway.

“Hey, when are you free again?” I asked.

She looked at me and I didn’t get a warm fuzzy feeling. I didn’t think I was out of line in my questioning.

She put her hand on her hip and looked around the room before saying in a neutral tone, “you should work on yourself.”

I sat there on the bed. My mind went blank. I guess I was shocked but there had been more profound shocking moments in the past month, but this moment left me speechless.

The brief moment of reflection didn’t net an eloquent response. I felt attacked, and dammit, it was in my fucking room. The venom overtook reason.

“What the fuck does that mean?”

She shook her head in disappointment.

“You have to be kidding me,” she said.

“I want to fucking know why you’re so pissed,” I said. “I’ve done nothing wrong.”

I got up from sitting. My hands were shaking. I began to see red. This wasn’t anything that had happened previously.

Trish took a step back from the door frame.

“Don’t move any closer,” she said and grabbed inside her purse.

My heart dropped. I looked at the floor and tried to gather myself. The adrenaline put my heart into overdrive. And apology wasn’t on the table. I wanted fucking answers.

“Just fucking tell me,” I said with an army-load of piss and vinegar.

“Maybe, you should work on yourself,” she said.

“What the fuck does that mean?”

“You use people, Corduroy.”

“Hey now, you’re the one with my lyrics tattooed on your body.”

“Does that give you a right to use me?” she asked and turned with her whole body to face me. “Do you think I’m just some groupie?”

“Don’t put words in my mouth,” I said and got up from the air mattress.

Tony’s voice popped in my head, ‘*She’ll burn you with a passion and leave you with a charred heart on your doorstep.*’ I didn’t know that Tony’s voice was a fucking poet.

“I’ve got to work in the morning,” Trish said and walked away.

“So, you’re just going to leave when the fire gets too hot?” I said and followed her to the door.

She paused before she opened the door and turned to me while I sat in my chair awaiting a verbal title fight.

“Call me when you act like an adult,” she said and left my apartment.

“Fucking bitch,” I mumbled.

Tony gripped the toilet like he was on an incline ready to slide into a lake. I closed the door and went to my bed. Every little thought inhibited my ability to sleep.

When I finally stumbled out of bed, Tony was sitting in my chair with his head in his hands. There was a full pot of coffee in the kitchen. I yelled to thank Tony. There was no response. For a moment, I thought he was dead or in some hungover, catatonic state. Before I could follow through on that unlikely possibility, he joined me in the kitchen. He asked for a mug and poured a cup of coffee. We sat on the living room floor. Each detail that I revealed of the previous night made Tony keep his head down and shake it in disbelief.

He paused awhile before he detailed the call that opened the flood gates. The anticipation didn't kill me. There were a few hours before Johnny was set to come over and work on songs. That took precedent over Tony's inevitable sob story about his girlfriend's delusional feelings regarding Tony's inability to parent.

"I don't even know why I got so mad," Tony said and placed his cup on the ground. "I guess, I just didn't want to be some dead-beat dad."

"She can kick rocks," I said.

"It's not some high school girl cheating on you with your best friend, Corduroy. There's another layer that's hard to explain. I knew I should've married her."

"Well, I wouldn't suggest that now," I said.

Tony shook his head, "You won't be saying that when you're my age."

"Come on, man," I said. "You act like I'm twelve or something."

Tony sat up and grinned, "how much do you get paid?"

"What does that have to do with anything?" I asked and felt defensive.

"I assume it's above minimum wage."

"Well, yeah it is. I wouldn't be able to live here."

"So, like ten dollars per hour?"

I shook my head yes.

"Dude, you're knocking on thirty's door and you're barely making ten dollars an hour. Maybe, it's time to think about the future and not after next week. That'll be too late. You should think about now or you're going to end up like Johnny."

"That's bullshit," I said and stood up.

My face was hot. I opened and closed my fist.

Tony shook his head side to side with a half-smile. His advice was like a drunk telling me not to drink while he had four beer bottles on the bar in front of him.

I paced between the kitchen and living room area. Tony didn't know what he was talking about.

Johnny showed up a few hours later without a guitar. I didn't have a chance to prep some song notes or put together a song list. When Johnny walked through the door, he paused in the doorway. Of course, he suggested we just trot up to the garage and conduct band practice, but I was adamant about staying at my apartment. I needed a break even though we had only practiced in the garage twice to mixed results.

Tony was surprised that Johnny wasn't in some drug haze. He asked Tony about his domestic situation. When we got around to playing, Johnny showed his true colors. We went back and forth on how to conduct it. I had an acoustic and electric guitar. I thought it would be best to refresh Johnny on my songs with the acoustic, but well, it was pretty counterintuitive to play on an unplugged electric guitar. When we played together, Johnny's lead parts were practically silent compared to the chords that I played on my acoustic guitar. Tony chuckled at this rookie move. I didn't decide to switch guitars with Johnny until after we had played four songs to very little progress. So, we switched guitars, and I took out my acoustic bass and we played one of Johnny's songs without one fucking mistake. Tony stuck the knife in a little with a mock standing ovation. Each clap was a hammer hit to my ego. I wanted to prove that Johnny could learn my songs and that our set-list could be a 50-50 split. But there seemed to be a fucking conspiracy, Johnny nailed each of his songs on the first or the occasional second try. When we played one of my songs, he acted like he had never picked up a fucking guitar in his life.

Smashing every guitar in my apartment was a better idea than practicing with Johnny. I already knew that he could play his fucking songs. Tony looked at me with an, 'I told you,' look after each failed attempt at teaching Johnny one of my songs. I wanted to quit. Regret swirled in my mind. I needed a beer.

Eventually, we took a break and I saw there was a few missed called from my parents. They were the last people I wanted to see. If I never saw them again, I thought I could die happy. Johnny asked who was blowing up my phone. I sensed that he was going to prod me about Trish.

"I need to leave soon," I said.

"Is it that girl?" Johnny asked.

I shook my head side-to-side. Even the act of asking the question upset me. I needed him out of my place and really just out of my life. Tony tipped his head forward with another 'I told you so,' expression.

I pulled into the driveway of the piss-stained trailer. Before Johnny opened the door, he barged between the front two seats and looked back and forth between Tony and I. He asked when our next practice would be.

"I'll call you," I said.

"Don't have a phone," he said like this was nineteen ninety-five or more like eighteen ninety-five.

"Are you fucking kidding me?" I asked.

There was a pause, and I looked at Johnny. He looked at me like I was an asshole with one eye half open and his head cocked at an angle.

"Let's just go with seven," I said. "I'll stop by after work."

"No hot date?" Johnny asked.

“I’ll see you tomorrow,” I said.

Johnny got out of the car and disappeared into the trailer.

“Jesus Christ,” Tony said. “How much more shit are you going to put up with him?”

I looked out my window at the neighbors’ trailers. Each one seemed to be dirty or have rust spots on them. I was a bad decision away from being a resident.

I put the car reverse and backed out of the driveway. We drove in silence. I didn’t answer Tony’s question. He didn’t seem to anticipate an answer. Admitting my fault wasn’t close to making my list of priorities.

When we pulled into the driveway, I looked over at Tony who kept his head forward. I kept the engine running and began to doubt if I should exit the car and go through the motions at dinner.

“Should I even go inside?” I asked Tony.

“After eighteen, you don’t owe your parents shit, but they do come in handy when the bottom falls out,” he said and turned to look at me.

“But I told them about my show,” I said. “They’re going to show up and...”

“Who fucking cares?” Tony said. “They’ll show up if they want and then you can run or man up and answer for your sins or whatever shit you believe in. Make a decision either way. I’m fucking hungry and need a nice cold beer.”

I looked at the front door and wondered if my parents heard me pull up. I put my car in drive and words popped into my head, “I haven’t been much outside of this country/but there’s got to be more than this.”

I scribbled it on a napkin before Tony and I left the sports bar we went to for dinner.



Before he left my car, he looked at me and said, “driving away ain’t going to solve anything. You can leave memories behind, but they’ll bit you in the ass eventually.”

I couldn’t sleep that night. A chord progression from the Switchblade Bob days popped in my mind. I couldn’t write a fucking, but a solid first verse sure did ear its place on that piece of paper. Hell, I thought that it could make it into the set list if I hammered through it. But I knew that I would have to take that journey alone.

## 10-One Last Scar

When I arrived at the trailer, Johnny sat on the porch smoking something. His body odor indicated a healthy supply of marijuana. He didn't have any equipment with him, so we had to stop at my place to pick up my guitar which Johnny hated with a passion. And that wasn't even the tip of the iceberg.

While sitting the gravel driveway for almost an hour, Johnny and I went back and forth on which song to even consider for our set-list. He kept pushing for tunes that we hadn't played since our first handful of gigs. These immature, riff-drenched rock tunes never really caught any heat with the audience or in practice, but despite our inconsistent performances, Johnny pushed for them to be included in the set.

When Tony's truck finally arrived, he didn't say anything while he unlocked the entrance door to the garage. He kept his vow of silence while Johnny and I discussed which song we should play first. The discussion slowed down our pre-practice set-up. Tony didn't help us set anything up. He went straight from unlocking the door to his corner, sat behind his drums and lit up a cigarette. He savored his drag and didn't think twice about lighting up a second one with the end of his first.

"Let's just play a fucking song," Tony said and cracked open a beer.

"I mean, we have a show in five days," I said. "Johnny, got any ideas?"

"Cold Brews and Best Buds," he said and smirked.

I sighed and rolled my eyes. Despite its signature sophomoric party boy lyrics, it was one of Johnny's best, coherent tunes that always got the crowd on our side, but I didn't want to play it. We had better songs.

"Come one, dude," I said.

“What the fuck do you have against that song?” Johnny asked and walked towards me.

I looked down at his fist which wasn't even close to being clenched.

“You've written better songs,” I said and sat on my amp anticipating a lengthy discussion.

“Well smart-ass, tell me what song I should choose that I wrote.”

“Pick a fucking song,” Tony said.

His voice reverberated throughout the garage. Johnny and I turned our focus to him. Tony stood up and threw his cigarette on the ground like a player scoring a touchdown and spiking the ball to celebrate. He hit the wall behind him with an open palm. The smack made me flinch.

“This shit's fucking ridiculous,” Tony said. “Either pick a song or I'm fucking leaving. You better do it before I finish my beer.”

“We'll take as much time as we need,” Johnny said and turned to walk towards Tony.

He walked with a purpose. His left hand opened and closed like he was working out a cramp.

“Let's just play, 'Cold Brews,’” I said and sweat built up on my brow.

Johnny ignored me, and Tony stood up.

“What's your fucking problem?” Johnny asked Tony with his back to me.

“It's none of your fucking business,” Tony said and took a step towards the small opening between his drum set and the work bench up against the garage wall.

Even though they were a few feet apart, I still got a bad feeling about them getting into a fight that I wouldn't be able to stop. The tension that I felt wasn't even close to being actualized. They stared at each other waiting for the wrong words to be said. That was my cue to walk over and try to steer them back to practice.

“Hey, let’s play your song, Johnny,” I said while he kept his focus on Tony.

“I don’t think he wants to play any of my songs,” Johnny said.

“Jesus Christ, you’re such a fucking bitch,” Tony said and sat back down behind his drums. “Let’s play whatever the fuck gets him to shut up.”

“Well, maybe I want to play one of Corduroy’s songs now,” he said and turned around to look at me.

Tony shook his head and pulled out a cigarette. He paused before lighting it.

“Let’s play ‘Tap Dancing on the Edge of Sanity,’” I said.

Johnny grinned, nodded in agreement and returned to his amp.

The little momentum we gained from choosing a song didn’t last as I saw my song, my self-proclaimed masterpiece, hit a sonic brick wall. Like our previous practice, Johnny couldn’t even make the same mistake twice. I didn’t know how to fix it.

He always had trouble learning my songs. They took twice as long to learn compared to the effort I had to put forth in order to make his left of center collection of riffs into coherent rock songs. He wrote songs with commercial-appeal intentions, but when he played them for me, the songs were like free jazz that only a small percentage of the listening public could stomach. Maybe, that was harsh, but geez, we spent more time on his songs than mine, and it wasn’t to improve them.

I doubted that Johnny could even play my songs. We were better off scraping all of my songs and playing a six-song set of Johnny’s greatest hits, which didn’t sit well with my musical ego.

Of course, when we played one of Johnny’s songs, we plowed through it like a snow truck through fresh powder. I couldn’t fucking stand it. That shit-eating grin wasn’t earned. He

hit big on some musical scratch-off ticket, and when we played the next song, I fucked it up on purpose and Johnny didn't even care. He picked another song which hit a brick wall, and we limped across the practice finish line.

Tony bolted out of the garage and straight to his truck. He wanted a day off and he closed his door before Johnny could reignite the confrontational flame from earlier. Johnny wanted to paint the town red. I needed to get a good night's sleep.

Johnny hounded me to stop at a liquor store while I returned to the city limits of Hilltop. I knew there was one liquor store open a few blocks from my apartment. I knew better than to volunteer that information. He wasn't in a mood to get in and out of a store in a timely fashion. At each red light, he kept on my ass. As we neared the center of town, he shifted his wants from alcohol to hard narcotics. First, he wanted to stop at his weed dealer, which I shot down.

"Come on, man," he said. "I'll be in and out."

I kept my focus on the empty road in front of me. He kept pleading his case with an incessant story of how he would show up and get out. I ignored him.

At the next red light, he changed his tone. He wanted to stop at some trailer just outside of town. This particular trailer, Sycamore Court, wasn't just worse than where he lived. Sycamore Court was always a stake-out for sting operations, not just for drugs, but also human trafficking and prostitution. Even hearing the name made my skin crawl. A few fellow high school classmates lived there and their parents weren't model citizens and neither were their children. I didn't want to go within a few miles of that place.

"Dude, it's calmed down a lot," Johnny said.

"Bullshit," I said and kept my head forward.

"You're a fucking buzz kill."

“I’ve got to work in the morning,” I said. “Shouldn’t you be worried about your job?”

“You don’t know shit.”

When I hit the next stop light, I turned to Johnny. He had a switchblade in his right hand. My eyes grew wide. He hit the button and the blade popped out. He thrust it forward, stopping an inch from my ribs. It happened so quick that shock set in. The light turned green. I checked my rearview mirror. There weren’t any cars in sight.

“Drive,” Johnny said.

The blade poked me. My hands started to shake. I didn’t know what was a right or wrong move in Johnny’s eyes. He told me to drive faster. My sweaty hands made it harder for me to grip the steering wheel. Once we left the city limits, I felt the full weight of Johnny’s actions.

We were on a dark road with empty corn fields on both sides of the road. There were a few houses. Not a row of seven or more houses on a typical suburban block. A wreck or at worse a knife wound was bound to put me at the edge of my mortality. Johnny was capable of anything. I began to wonder if he had killed anyone and gotten away with it. Sick scenarios went through my mind, but a deer ran across the road. An adrenaline dump went through my body as well as a sharp, hot pain in my ribs.

“Fuck,” I yelled out.

I hit the brakes. My hands shook as I took them off of the steering wheel. I looked over at Johnny. He left the knife in my side. Without thinking, I pulled it out. Blood ran down my side and dripped on my seat. I pressed my left hand to my side. It was as useless as a band-aid on a dam leak. I kept my head down and focused on the cut. Johnny didn’t say a fucking word. He was dead to me. The band was over in my mind. I wanted to slam his head into the passenger

side window. There was no way that I was going to allow him to drive my fucking car, but I was losing too much blood to drive and stop the blood from drenching my seat.

I sat in the driver's seat longer than I should have. Johnny sat there in shock. I could barely see his face from the small bit of moonlight coming through the car's windshield.

"You need to drive," I said while increasing the pressure on my cut.

"Um..."

"What?" I asked.

"Nothing."

"Fuck it, I don't have time to waste," I said and unbuckled my seat belt.

"I still need to make a stop," he said.

"You fucking stabbed me," I said. "And you want to score?"

"Technically, I didn't stab you," he said.

"Just drive me to the hospital," I said and unlocked the driver-side door.

There was a pause. I didn't hear Johnny unbuckle his seat belt.

"Let's go, man," I said. "This shit's fucking hurting and my hand's sticky as shit."

"I'm not allowed at the hospital," he said.

For the first time since I knew Johnny, I actually felt some sort of authenticity in his voice. Fear coated his words. The cock-sure drug abuser hell bent on a fix met his match, and I sat in a seat with fresh blood painting it.

With one hand covered in blood. I navigated the country roads while Johnny sat in silence. Maybe, humanity actually smacked him in the face for once in his life. It got me to thinking about my meeting with Bill.

Before he got out of the car, Johnny asked when was our next practice.

“Don’t worry about it,” I said.

“What crawled up your ass?” he asked.

I let out a big sigh and took a deep breath, “I’ll come by and tell you.”

“Whatever, man,” Johnny said and exited the car.

I sat in the gravel driveway and sent a text to Tony, ‘Johnny’s out of the band. I’ll tell you about it tomorrow.’



## 11-An Obituary to the Past

I sat there with my legs crossed wincing from every little movement to get comfortable in my chair. Bill sat with perfect posture. He didn't need to say a single fucking word. Even when I entered the store, Bill kept a poker face. I couldn't hold back from letting the pain paint my facial expression. He shook his head as I walked past him into the break room.

Bill kept a neutral expression as I looked around at the pale-yellow walls avoiding eye contact with him.

"Anything new to tell me?" he asked and reclined back in his chair.

I clinched my teeth as I tried to get comfortable in the shitty break room chair. I looked into my lap. Tony's voice popped into my head, '*Don't fucking lie to him, but don't snitch, man.*' I already had some fresh stitches. Despite my lack of long-term interest in working at Hilltop Pawn and Loan, I didn't have many other options. Those fucking medical bills were going to royally fuck me whether I stayed or hit the road in search of my purpose.

Once I got comfortable, I formulated my story. Johnny and I got into an accident that resulted in a minor injury caused me to focus my attention towards my health. This all occurred in the early evening, but resolved after midnight and disturbed my usual eight hours sleep routine. Not a single prepared word left my mouth, and I said with a straight face, "Bill, this whole band thing has really clouded my judgement."

He wiped his face with his hand and exhaled audibly. I hung my head and didn't hesitate to grip my side with both hands. The tactile sensation sent chills throughout my body. The nervous sweats subsided as flashes from the drive with Johnny took me out of the moment. I heard Bill's voice, but not a single sound made a distinct word in my mind. He should've just

fired me. I needed that kick in the teeth to jolt my mind from the adolescent mindset that I felt would never leave my body unless a tragedy shocked my body into adulthood.

Carrie's hand touched my shoulder as she asked me if I was okay. For a moment, the pain subsided. This was short lived, and I winced which warranted another string of questions that I didn't want to answer.

Before Bill sent me home, well before our lunch break, Tony called me and when I was greeted by the angry wind, I listened to Tony's sadness-fueled voicemail.

"Hey, kid. Sorry for calling you at work. I'm just...well...I don't think I can sit behind those drums anymore. This ain't Streetwise Preacher. It's a Jerry Springer episode each time we step into that garage, and I'm more of Maury fan," he said and chuckled. "Just give me a call sometime. I need to grab a beer."

I couldn't tell if he had been drinking. Neither would have surprised me. His words didn't slur together. His tone was not his typical wise, old man who'd been through a war type of thing, but I could tell this was a blindside hit.

We went to Skeeter's. Buzz lined-up some beers and got us some cheeseburgers before we mentioned needing some food. Tony was content with a liquid dinner especially after I detailed the knife incident.

"Are you fucking serious?" he asked and turned to me.

I showed him the stitches.

"That fucker's dead," he said.

Buzz saw my side before I put my shirt back down. He didn't hesitate to ask what happened. I paused and looked at Tony. He shook his head. I didn't know if he was telling me

not to inform Buzz or was disappointed in Johnny's actions. I debated whether to inform Buzz. He was one of the only options we had if we went through with kicking out Johnny. I didn't want to be in the same room as Johnny ever again, but I knew that we would have to march into that cat piss trailer to inform him because he was a fucking caveman without a fucking cell phone.

"It was a dumb fucking accident," I said.

It felt like a solid compromise aimed to get Buzz off of my ass, but he had to fucking prod.

"What the hell were you doing?" he asked.

I was surprised that he hadn't overheard me telling Tony the gory details. I took a long sip of my beer. I was fucking tired of skirting around the issue. The beer wasn't some watered-down domestic shit. This was some higher alcohol content shit. I worried that he was going to chares us extra or whatever.

"I got fucking stabbed, Buzz," I said and placed my beer glass down with enough authority to make a loud sound when the glass touched the bar top.

He stood there and placed his hands on the bar top, and his eyes grew wide.

"Could I get another beer?" I asked and held up the glass.

He took the glass and walked over to fill it up.

"That's one way to handle it," Tony said.

I hung my head and looked into my lap.

Skeeter's, for a long time, was a source of distraction for me, but Buzz ruined that. His incessant questions kept me on edge. The casual acquaintance that we had developed through playing shows was on the ropes. I wasn't interested in some friendship where we got beers and

talked shit. But I really wanted to play that Halloween show, I feared that he would drag his weirdo buddy, Fairley, into it.

Buzz returned with my beer and lingered for a second. He couldn't help but make eye contact. He knew that the window was cracked open, and he wasn't going to just open it and waltz in. He wanted to smash the glass and alert the world of his presence. I anticipated a question, so I didn't drink my beer.

"So...um...are you guys going to play on Saturday?" Buzz asked while he went through the motions of cleaning beer and cocktail glasses.

I looked at my beer glass and glanced up at Buzz. He looked off into the distance like he was talking to himself. While I drank my beer, Tony decided to spill his two cents.

"I don't know man...you know anyone who wants to learn six songs in what...three days?"

I chocked on my beer and hit my chest a few times before I felt even slightly normal enough to formulate a thought on the matter.

"So...you guys are kicking out Johnny?" Buzz asked.

Tony looked at me. There wasn't a way to avoid involving Buzz in the plan.

"Can you practice tomorrow night?" I asked.

"I'll figure something out," he said. "What about Fairley? Do you mind if he tags along?"

"Bring him if you want," Tony said.

I felt like we were on two different pages. As Tony took point on making the plan, I kept my head down, sipped on my beer and felt the little power I had slip away.

Buzz gave me a weird feeling in my gut. His eagerness put me off. His obsession and knowledge of Streetwise Preacher shit was on Trish's level. I was surprised that he hadn't told

me that he had a Streetwise Preacher tattoo. Even his playing seemed a little too clean. I doubted our decision to kick out Johnny, but there we sat in the driveway. The only noise was the radio playing, “Black in Black,” by AC/DC.

The porch light wasn’t on. I felt like we were serving an arrest warrant. Like a few weeks prior, the unknown scared me. Kevin was the wild card that was bound to rip my stitches or put me to sleep. Violence seemed to be the only answer to cut this branch of the Streetwise Preacher family tree.

“This isn’t going to end well,” I said.

“How do you think this was going to end?” Tony asked.

“On an arena stage with thousands of people chanting my name,” I said and turned off the car.

“Welcome to the real world, kid,” Tony said.

Tony knocked on the door. A few seconds later, the porch light came on. My breath formed a cloud. Tony lit a cigarette. The door unlocked and Kevin opened it. We followed him inside and sat on that couch. The odor hit me, and I coughed a few seconds. Kevin offered us every substance under the sun. Tony asked for Johnny.

Johnny emerged from the bathroom wearing jeans and no shirt.

“Are we having practice now?” he asked and walked over to the refrigerator.

“Not tonight,” Tony said.

“Well, why the hell are you here?”

Johnny sat down in a chair. I was glad to relinquish the speaking role to Tony. Tony looked at me, and I nodded my head, ‘go ahead.’ He sat up and took a long drag from his cigarette. The smoke drifted into the air. He used it to distract Johnny from his statement.

“We have to go in another direction,” Tony said and put his cigarette back in his mouth.

“Like play metal or some shit?” Johnny asked.

Tony repeated his exaggerated cigarette routine.

“Not quite,” he said. “You’re...out of the band.”

Sweat couldn’t escape my body fast enough. Johnny sat there with a grin that didn’t take long to turn from neutral to a mix of sadness and anger. My phone buzzed which I didn’t anticipate. Keeping my head on a swivel was the only thing on my mind. I tensed up. Any physical manifestation of anger wasn’t out of the question. Each second didn’t quell any ounce of fear that pumped adrenaline through my body.

Kevin walked over to us. He took a hit of a fresh joint and held it for a good while and exhaled a cloud of smoke bound to put anyone asleep.

“This guy right here is the best fucking guitarist in Hilltop,” Kevin said and placed his hand on Johnny’s shoulder. “You should be kissing his ass.”

“Shut the fuck up, Kevin,” Johnny said and brushed off Kevin’s hand from his shoulder.

Johnny got up from the chair. I looked over at Tony. He sat up in the couch. I returned my focus to Johnny and noticed his hand clenching to make a fist.

“Stand up and say that to my fucking face,” Johnny said.

I assumed that he was talking to Tony. Tony snorted in a dismissive way. Johnny repeated himself. I stood up.

“What the fuck are you doing?” he asked me.

I couldn’t think of anything and shrugged my shoulders. Tony stood up. They stood a foot from each other. I looked over at Kevin. He didn’t have any visible weapons on him, but I

didn't think Johnny owned a fucking switchblade. Flashes popped in my mind, only there weren't any bartenders to break up the scuffle.

"You're a fucking bitch," Johnny said to Tony.

Tony shook his head.

"Whose fucking idea was it?" Johnny asked and was now nose to nose with Tony.

"Corduroy?"

"Keep him out of this," Tony said. "It was my idea. Grow the fuck up and get out of my way. I've got a band to form."

"There's no Streetwise Preacher without me."

"Watch me," Tony said and took a step back to walk away.

I glanced towards the door to turn and leave. There was a loud smack. Skin to skin contact. I snapped my head back to see Tony hit Johnny with a right cross. Johnny fell back and stumbled into Kevin.

"Get out of here, Corduroy," Tony said.

I stood there frozen as Johnny bounced up and sucker-punched Tony. The night faded to black.

## 12-Busted Stitches

I woke up with a stain on my shirt where my stitches were. My shirt stuck to my side.

“Damn, you’re alive,” Tony said as I opened my eyes.

Panic went through my body. I didn’t know where I was. When I tried to sit up, my whole body flooded with pain.

I moaned, laid my head back down and stared at the ceiling. I couldn’t keep my eyes open for more than a few seconds at a time.

“Want some coffee?” Tony asked.

I touched my face. The slightest touch was tender and flashes from the previous night appeared in my brain.

Kevin pulled me back from hitting Johnny while he was wailing on Tony. I broke free and turned towards Kevin who didn’t hesitate to load up a punch and deliver it to my face.

“Ugh,” I groaned.

“Your phone won’t stop buzzing,” Tony said.

“Just...ah...I,”

I couldn’t formulate any plan. Words drifted from my mind. This pain was worse than the morning after the Sleepy John’s incident.

“Do you have any frozen vegetables or ice?”

I made a guttural noise that made sense to me.

“What was that?” Tony asked.

I closed my eyes and let the pain run its course.



Sometime later, someone shook my shoulder. I assumed it was Tony. I managed to form an eloquent sentence in my mind, “Fucking quit. I feel like I’ve been fucked by the devil himself.”

“Excuse me,” the voice said.

I realized that it wasn’t Tony. I opened my eyes and Carrie stood there. She didn’t look too happy. Her arms were crossed. She furrowed her brows and I felt like a complete fucking idiot.

Our eyes met and I quickly looked away. There wasn’t anything I could do. When I tried to sit up, every part of my body gave up.

“Would you like some help?” Carrie asked with her arms crossed.

I nodded my head yes and tried to reach out my right arm, but it hurt too bad. I didn’t think about my inability to play bass at the time. My left arm wasn’t much better. Carrie nearly pulled it out of my socket. Tony propped me up with pillows.

I moved my fingers on my right hand. Relief calmed me down, but I realized that there wasn’t a chance in hell of me playing on Saturday. Carrie and Tony discussed the previous night in front of me like I wasn’t in the room.

“This one, sure didn’t help me out,” Tony said and patted me on my hand. “You need some fighting lessons.”

I found it funny, but I knew that any unnecessary movement was bound to hurt.

“Um...should he be in a hospital?” Carrie asked.

“Didn’t really think about that,” Tony said.

“Real nice, man,” I said.

“Can’t really move him now,” Tony said.

Carrie told Tony about my employment situation. She left out the ultimatum that Bill gave me the two previous days.

“Why are you here?” I asked Carrie.

“I picked up the phone and told her,” Tony said.

“Geez,” I said and closed my eyes.

There was no way that I could return to Hilltop Pawn and Loan now. The medical bill from my now ruined stitches was bound to arrive any day.

“I can fix you up with a job,” Tony said.

“I don’t now if Bill will let you have your job, but I bet you can talk to him,” Carrie said.

“Oh, come on, Carrie. I can’t show my face in there again,” I said. “You said it yourself that I need to grow up.”

“Um...I didn’t say that,” Carrie said.

“Fuck,” I said. “That was Trish.”

“Damn,” Tony said. “She called too.”

Every flame, romantic or otherwise, needed tended to, and I was bruised up like a prize fighter. Having Tony as my pseudo-secretary surprised me. He never pried into anyone’s business. He was just there to give little quips that you found on wooden signs or bumper stickers. Only his quips weren’t cheesy, but rather road-worn with no tread left like a race car tire.

Tony left the room to do something. I looked at Carrie and couldn’t believe that she was in my room.

“You’ve really shed some blood for this band,” Carrie said.

I chuckled.

“And we probably won’t even play the show,” I said.

“That’s a shame,” she said.

“I’ve wasted too many hours on this shit,” I said.

“At least, you had something.”

“I’ve got nothing to show for it.”

“What about that girl from the party?”

“I fucked that up the other night,” I said and detailed the situation.

“You need to look at what you have,” she said. “That’s one thing I’ve learned from my mom. She smiles when I greet her in the morning. How can someone with the grim reaper looking over their shoulder get up each morning and not feel like shit each day?”

Tony entered my room and broke the awkward silence. Carrie dabbed her eyes with her fingers. I felt small and shitty. Her mother’s illness had escaped my thoughts. The stupid fucking band numbed every part of my life. I was a damn animal running on instinct.

All of us looked at each other waiting for a word to brighten up the room. Tony stood in the doorway looking around the room. I wanted to disappear beneath the covers, yet I felt like this incapacitated state forced me to confront my shortcomings as a functional member of society. Carrie sat there on the edge of my bed encapsulated in a fragile emotional case and I wanted to run like all those other fucking times. She had been nothing but good to me. Hell, she stood up for me more than anyone in my life. It was a fucking travesty that I hadn’t built a better working relationship over the past two years.

“I’m sorry,” I blurted out.

“Huh?” Tony and moved from the doorway to leaning against the wall.

Carrie held her head up. Her make-up was a tad messy. She looked at me with a scrunched brow.

“I don’t deserve this,” I said and felt hot.

I sounded like a stuck-up asshole. The pain seemed like a crutch to use for blame, but my new accountable self denied that from entering my mind.

“Um...what are you trying to say?” Carrie asked with a concerned look on her face.

“You two shouldn’t be here,” I paused. “I’m a fucking shit head.”

“Come on, man,” Tony said and pushed off from leaning on the wall. “At times, I’ve wanted to wring your neck, but shit, at least you aren’t Johnny.”

“Is that supposed to be a compliment?” I asked and tried to adjust myself with no progress.

“It’s whatever you want it to be,” Tony said.

Carrie sat there looking around the room, not trying to keep her focus on me for more than a second or two at a time. She sighed and placed her hand in her lap. The same action sequence occurred when she gave me an ultimatum two years prior as the band broke up and my work ethic found itself at the bottom of a filthy fucking toilet.

“I don’t know whether to tell you now or later,” she said and sat up straighter. “I’m here because I care. This isn’t some courtesy call. Bill gave me the option. He doesn’t side either way on whether you should stay or find another job. He might close the shop next week, who knows.”

“You can be a good worker. That’s not to say that your self-motivation needs work. And don’t feel sorry for yourself. Especially when your girl shows up. It’s not attractive,” Carrie got up from the bed. “Make sure to update Bill.”

She turned to leave the room.

“Hey, thanks, Carrie,” I said.

“Get better,” she said and turned away.

“Are you going to come on Saturday?”

“Do you think you’ll be able to play?”

“You can’t stop rock n’ roll, Carrie,” I said and chuckled.

Tony left for an hour or two and didn’t tell me where he was going. I laid in my bed like a turtle laying on its shell, legs in the air. The pain subsided, but not fast enough. It felt like some sort of karmic retribution.

I needed the silence for reflection which I only did for a brief five-minute span and then fell asleep until Tony woke me up. In my last few moments of conscious thought, each person who I had encountered the past few weeks popped into my mind. They appeared like a baseball card. There weren’t any life statistics. However, there were outlines of my relationship with each person. It was some pain-induced fever dream where I entered this sick game show where I chose which person to cut from life and how to mend each relationship. Sleep took precedent over participation in this mind-fuck scenario.

Tony didn’t shake me awake. He told me that Trish was on her way to my apartment. I smelled like a cigarette ball drenched in beer and coated with bad blood. It sounded good when I told Tony, but he cocked his head to the side like a dog when you call its name.

I sat in my bruised, stinky ball of filth as Trish looked over me. She gasped. I hadn’t seen myself. Carrie didn’t bring any audible attention to my temporary, I hoped, disfigurement. For a brief moment, I thought her astonishment and audible disgust were red flags. It seemed that her immature comments about me went out the window when she asked if I had sought out medical attention.

I didn't say a word, and she lost her shit. Instead of chastising me, she handed Tony a plate of ass-chewing phrases that I never heard and didn't care to remember.

"Why didn't you go to the ER?" she yelled at Tony and thrust her arms into the air.

"Let's take this someplace else," he said.

"He could die," she said.

"Okay, now that's a little extreme," he said. "Don't you think?"

Her hands gripped her face. I thought that she would calm down and perhaps we would have a calm conversation where I could apologize about my past actions and kiss her ass until I got a seal of approval signed with a realistic kiss, but she flailed her arms around in the air. Each limb seared for some imaginary chunk of words to grab and set Tony straight for his ass-backward logic.

"Did he sleep at all today or last night?" she asked and closed and opened her hands to make fists and stretch her fingers.

"He fucking passed out last night," Tony said. "What, are you a doctor?"

"What," she yelled loud enough to be heard in the surrounding counties. Her arms settle to her sides as Tony leaned up against my bedroom wall.

"Hey, I'm right here, Trish," I said.

She ignored me.

"What happened exactly?" she asked and took a few deep breaths and settled on the end of my bed.

Tony described the fight. I ignored his story. I didn't feel like filling in the missing or the inaccurate details that were attributed to physical violence and alcoholic consumption.

Trish wore those tight-fitting tan pants and that helped to numb the sharp edge of my pain. The top of her lacy underwear peaked out from the top of her pants. Her shirt was cut low enough to accentuate her boobs and damn, I thought them heathens that came to the grocery store sure got a lot more than some legal dope.

Once Tony finished his story, I banged my way into the conversation, “we need to get a plan together for Saturday.”

“You can’t play like this,” Trish said and turned towards me with a concerned look.

“I got it covered,” Tony said. “Don’t worry.”

“What?”

“I got some guys lined up,” Tony said. “He doesn’t even have to move.”

“He needs to get proper medical attention,” Trish said.

“How do you know what he needs?” Tony asked.

I was shocked by his combative line of questioning.

“I work in the medical field,” Trish said.

“Um...aren’t you a pharmacy tech?” I asked.

“Do you need a degree for that?” Tony asked.

I knew that he didn’t mean any malice. Trish began to wiggle her fingers to unload her frustrations.

“What kind of question is that?” she snapped back.

“A serious one...” Tony said. “I don’t know and if you have actual medical expertise, I would listen to you, but we have a show in three days. I thought you would be more understanding to our predicament.”

Trish stood there frozen. I sat in my bed and couldn't comprehend Tony's attitude toward the reunion. There was an awkward silence for a few seconds before Trish left room without saying a single word.

"So... who is joining the band?" I asked.

"Don't worry about it," Tony said and turned to leave the room.

"Wait," I said and Tony turned to me. "What's gotten into you?"

"Huh?"

"This is your out, dude," I said. "I'm a mess."

"Anyone who takes a few punches for something deserves some sort of closure," he said.

"Are you getting Buzz and...Fairley?" I asked.

He paused.

"You'll just have to wait and see," he said and left the room.



## 13-Steering Towards a New Path

I wasn't surprised when Buzz and Fairley walked into the garage. They looked like kids on Christmas morning as they unloaded their gear and squeezed it into the confined space in the garage. I suggested that they used my guitar and bass set-ups but they didn't think a guy with a bruised face, slumped over on a zero-turn radius mower was a reliable source of information.

For once, my injuries were an excuse that I was happy to use. Lugging gear was always the worst part, and of course I played bass. My amp weighed twice as much as Johnny's. He would often bust my balls about working out, so I could take less time unloading and setting up my shit.

Tony handed me a microphone after Buzz and Fairley tested the limits of their respective rigs. Each note and chord hit harder than anything Johnny or I ever played. I wondered how either of them could still hear. The house show didn't seem as loud, but I guess I was just a few feet from the mouth of the sonic beasts that wailed distorted, rock n' roll screams.

Buzz played some Streetwise riffs-a mixture of Johnny tunes and some of mine-which still baffled me on how he knew them. We played a fair amount of show with them, but I never paid enough attention to learn any of their riffs.

Fairley wasn't as confident in testing his bass. The brand of the bass wasn't anything that I recognized. Stickers covered every fucking inch except for the single pick-up the fretboard and the bridge. He even went so far as to cover the neck and head stock with stickers of brands and things I had never heard of. It was a mural of brightly colored words and graphics. He played single notes in no distinct pattern, just enough to test levels and occasionally compliment Buzz's riffs and chords that he played.

“Let’s play something,” Tony said as he sat down and grabbed the drum sticks that he always had between his rack toms. “I’m itching to play some loud shit.”

I squirmed around in the lawn mower seat and tapped the microphone which wasn’t on. Before I said anything, Buzz walked over to the soundboard and turned it on. I thanked him. Fairley looked at me like I had a plan on how to conduct a practice where the whole band line-up changed in a twenty-four-hour period and all we had to prepare was only forty or so hours. Thank God, we didn’t have to play an hour. My mind went blank and every affected area of my bodily harm inflicted by Johnny hurt like hell.

Buzz took point. He chose a song. Tony clicked his sticks. Fairley furiously looked around the room and at his bass. I still wasn’t comfortable in the lawn mower seat. Luckily, the song that Buzz chose had a lengthy instrumental opening that gave me an opportunity to figure out a way to sing.

When the time came for me to sing, every fucking muscle in my body lit up in pain. The second word of the first verse didn’t come out of my mouth. I leaned back in the lawn mower seat as Tony, Buzz and Fairley plowed through the song until the chorus and stopped. I dropped the microphone without realizing it. I smelled dead grass and gasoline as my head was a few inches from the cracked leather lawn-mower seat.

That was the first realization that perhaps I needed medical help. Before I say anything, Tony asked me how I was. Eventually, I sat up after a few minutes of collecting myself. He stood there with a cold beer in each hand and handed one to me.

“This should help,” he said and I took a sip. “Let’s take five.”

I sat there with a beer in my hand. It just didn’t have that crisp, refreshing taste. I needed it which took all the fun out of it. The pain subsided or at least didn’t cloud my thoughts as Buzz

told a story about work. I looked over at Fairley. He looked at the ground for a few seconds then pulled out a small notebook and pen. I thought he was taking notes, but then I realized he was sketching which kept me out of the moment until I heard Buzz say, “Johnny showed up.”

Part of me didn’t give a flying fuck about Johnny. Hell, he could’ve wrapped a car around a telephone pole, and I wouldn’t have shed a tear. But Hilltop isn’t a big town, so I listened to Buzz describe Johnny’s trip to Skeeter’s where he and Kevin had to be told multiple times to calm down or get escorted out by the police. This story gave me enough time to adequately position myself for optimal comfort and a better attempt to sing better.

I suggested playing the same song again. Everyone agreed on doing so. Buzz thought it was best to cut down the instrumental introduction which I thought was a perfect way to open the show and a vital part of tightening up the loose screws that weren’t even close to holding anything together. I took a few moments to evaluate whether Buzz was a beneficial member or just some guy who saw his opportunity to put himself in the limelight and take advantage of our desperate situation. As the seconds passed, the latter thought became my verdict. Starting the song a few counts before the first verse felt like a drag strip race instead of a speedway jaunt.

Tony clicked his sticks and the musical gas pedal went to the floor. The timing went out the window. Every person, including myself, didn’t form a musical unit. This pattern continued throughout practice. Each song, Buzz tried to cut parts and add some without any reason.

Clean Sweep never indulged in the long instrumental break that we sprinkled into our set-list. Their fuzz, garage rock wasn’t far off from a three-minute version of a Ramones song. There were so many options for the four-person, two-guitar line-up to add some cool sonic qualities to their sound, but they opted for the no-frills approach that, in my opinion, plagued their sound and kept them from rising up the very short ladder that was the Hilltop original music scene.

We played for a few hours. I lost count of the songs that we attempted to play. Only one song survived the practice meat grinder. Every other song was butchered. I threw out song suggestions, Buzz knew them, but Fairley was in the dark. I didn't have any strength to show him. When I told Fairley the musical notes or even the chords, he looked at me like I was speaking a foreign language.

Ending practice was easy. Buzz wanted to give another run through on each song. I was too tired to even weigh-in on the discussion. Tony lit up a cigarette and told them to come tomorrow at the same time ready to prep for the show. Before he left the garage, Fairley looked like a deer in headlights. I had never really paid attention to his playing. I didn't really think he was bad, but I soon realized that Buzz was the true brains, muscle and engine that kept the Clean Sweep train running down the track.

Tony put the microphones and cables away as I maneuvered my way down from the lawn mower seat. He offered his hand a few times, I told him that I needed to get accustomed to finding my way through the world.

"Dude, you don't have to suffer," he said. "This isn't some kind of penance."

Subconsciously, I placed some theological meaning on the events of the past week. I never went on either side of the theological debate. Riding the line didn't do much for me, and the headache with Johnny was a sign. Each painful morning brought me closer to a reckoning. The winding road was near the end. Streetwise Preacher wasn't helping to lay down any concrete much less gravel to help me find a path to drive. Buzz was a test. Fairley and him could do their jobs, but damn, they were a major compromise compared to Johnny. Tony needed something to distract from his disintegrating family, and I became some pseudo little brother for him to guide with a beer in one hand and a cigarette in the other.

After a few failed attempts, Tony grabbed my arm and pulled me down from the mower and walked me to his truck. I caught a small glimpse of the dented rear bumper in the moon light. The tides had changed since his drunken escapade. Somehow, that lapse in judgement brought us closer. He got me settled into the passenger seat, and before he buckled his seat belt, I didn't hesitate to bring up Buzz.

"That guy's fucking up our songs," I said.

Tony clicked his seat belt and started the truck.

"And?" he said.

"Come on, dude, this shit's worse than Johnny."

He put the truck in reverse and backed down the gravel drive. He stopped before driving onto the road.

"It's better than getting the shit knocked out of you," he said and pulled onto the road. "Life's a bumpy highway with some sharp turns. Just be happy we will be able to play on Saturday."

"Were you at the same practice?" I asked.

"They'll learn the songs."

"What songs are you talking about?" I asked. "Those were Buzz's version of my songs. Songs that I poured over and now, he waltzes into the garage and cuts them up like a fucking butcher."

He came to a stop sign and put the truck in park. I turned to look at him. He kept his head and eyes forward.

"This little band drama doesn't mean a fucking thing, Corduroy. So, what your dumb fucking songs get a fresh coat of paint. This ain't the same Streetwise Preacher practicing in the

music center as an excuse to get drunk and smoke a little dope. You'll heal up and get back on your feet. That girl will probably come around and you'll luck into some job. Count your blessings and grow the fuck up."

He cut into the thin flesh. Anything I said wouldn't hit that deep. As much as I didn't want to admit it, Tony was right. He wasn't going to skirt around it. He said each word like a heavyweight boxer jabbing his way to a body shot knock out. I sat in my seat without any plan or how to conduct the next forty hours that weren't just going to affect the gig, but held enough weight to steer my life down a better path than the dirty one I kept neglecting to pave.

Before he left, Tony told me that I needed to find my own way to practice on Friday. This time, he didn't use the excuse of 'taking care of some business.' He opted to say that he contacted his girlfriend's parents help in his fight to see his daughter. All I heard was, "If I make it to practice, I won't be worth a shit either way. Here's the keys. Lock up when you're done. I'll see you on Saturday."

## 14-Gut Punch Revelation

The nagging pain had let up enough for me to regain some independence. I still wasn't one hundred percent. Keeping myself stable was a main goal whenever I was in motion. My apartment felt empty without Tony greeting me with a fresh, hot pot of coffee. It took me twice as long as usual to prepare the miniscule amount I made.

By the grace of God, I limped my way into Hilltop Pawn and Loan in hopes of catching Bill. There were three customers at almost 1PM on a Friday. I didn't know how Carrie would handle the rush. She sat behind the register as I stumbled towards her.

"Um..." she said.

A customer asked if I was in line to check out. I ignored him. Carrie and I looked at each other. The customer repeated his question. He stood right next to me. I could feel his body heat. His breath told me that he needed some serious dental work done. Another customer came up beside me while the first guy checked out. I looked at her and she asked if I was in line to pay. I shook my head no and motioned for her to go ahead of me in line, and I walked over to the glass display. The glass had visible smudges. For all of my lazy tendencies, dirty glass was not on the list of my short comings. I took the sleeve of my jacket and tried to clean the smudge with little progress. Before I looked up, Carrie asked me why I was there.

"Maybe, I'm just her to get some fresh air," I said.

"There are plenty of other stores in town to do that," she said and leaned against the counter.

"But not one as cool as here," I said and propped myself up.

"Why are you even here?" she asked. "You don't even like being her when you get paid."

“Boredom,” I said, paused and made eye contact with Carrie. “Tony’s gone, and I’m not too sure about band practice.”

Carrie stood straight up and folded her arms.

“What do you want me to do about that?” she asked.

“Well...there’s nothing you can do, unless you’re free tonight to drive me to practice,” I said.

“Didn’t you just drive yourself here?”

“Well... yeah, but I need someone to help me set-up stuff for band practice.”

“What about that girl?” What’s her name?”

“Trish,” I said. “We’re...I don’t even know what we are.”

“I can’t be jet-setting around for a few hours especially with my mom...” she said and looked down.

I felt awkward. Carrie put her hand to her face. She sniffled, and I went back to slouching on the counter.

The only other time I asked her to hang outside of work was just after the band broke up. Before we broke up, I would tell her about our shows and really be in her ear about the local shows. When I asked her to hand out, she looked at me like I was joking. It was an innocuous inquiry about grabbing a beer at Skeeter’s right after I moved to my apartment. In my twisted mind, I thought I could put something together. But when I asked her, I made it a plutonic situation without any romantic underpinnings. After that failed attempt, I kept my distance from her. We would make small talk, but I never inquired about her love life and she did so likewise. Our two year as coworkers yielded very little information about each other.

Carrie went to the back. A customer approached the cash register and looked around.



“Where did she go?” he asked.

I turned away and ignored the customer’s concern. I wasn’t on the clock. He could fucking wait. There were bigger fish to fry. This guy had no fucking clue about my show tomorrow. I was opening for Doyle on Halloween night. It was the biggest show to come through Hilltop since the one-time John Mellencamp played the county fair almost forty years ago.

After a minute or so, I looked over to see the guy walking away with the merchandise in-hand. He kept his head down as he made his way towards the door.

“Hey man, I can get her to ring you up,” I said as he kept walking away from me.

He sped up his steps. ‘Dammit,’ I thought and put my head down. The pain flared up. Each step was a million little razor blades stabbing my skin with a reckless abandon. I pulled out my phone. Before I tapped the nine, the guy turned around.

“Quit following me,” he said.

“Maybe, you shouldn’t shoplift,” I said and hit the nine.

“Why do you care?”

I hit the one button.

“Well smartass, I’ve got one number before you head to jail and find out,” I said and paused.

“Fuck you,” he said and pushed open the door.

I hit the last button. The ironic thing was that the police station was less than two blocks from the store. I detailed the guy. The dispatcher was two years ahead of me in high school. We had a class together and he would often come into the store on his off days. Carrie emerged from the back right as the cops showed up and caught the guy who found out that I wasn’t bluffing.

“You’re going to miss this place,” she said as we looked out the front window where the cops apprehended the guy.

“I never said that I was leaving,” I said and turned to her. “I still haven’t made a decision.”

Carrie didn’t say anything. I turned to look at her. She rolled her eyes and walked back to the register. I didn’t feel great in the moment. I was damn close to walking out that front door.

Looking around the store, I took stock of the past two years. Every negative aspect of the job was self-inflicted. The countless ass-chewings were never unprompted. Being trading and lazy were always the case, and yet, I didn’t get fired. I had been paid to sit on my ass, clean shelves and sell used movies. Shit, that was the easiest job in my life. Every other dead-end job required a hell of a lot more effort. Bosses held me to a high standard that I didn’t even hold myself to. Coworkers wanted to grab beers and have comradery. I just wanted to show up, get paid and leave.

Carrie didn’t prod into my personal life. There were no after work hangs, and even my one failed attempt didn’t change our dynamic. Yet as I looked at the shelves, I wished that Carrie and I were friends and not just acquaintances. That very moment, I needed a friend to guide me through the dark tunnel of my late twenties, and Carrie just rolled her eyes and processed her own baggage that held more weight than whether to leave a job or stay.

“I thought you left,” she said as I trudged my way back to the register.

I leaned against the display counter like earlier.

“Where did we go wrong?” I asked.

“Um...what?” Carrie asked and sat up in her chair.

“I don’t even know you,” I said and propped myself up on the counter.

Carrie looked confused. She tilted her head own and shook it side to side. It was like we were on the different planets.

“It’s not like you ever asked,” she said.

“Well, you haven’t either.”

“I’m not going to sit here and argue like siblings, Corduroy,” she said. “Maybe you should go rest up for your big show.”

I got up from my slouched position, and, despite the pain that flooded every last fucking nerve in my body, walked over to the counter.

“Do you think if I showed up on Monday, Bill would let me work?” I asked.

Carrie looked up from her forms. I didn’t think that my question was rhetorical. I didn’t want the truth as much as some piece of mind.

“Do what you want,” she said. “Tomorrow’s my last day. He hasn’t hired anyone if that’s what you want to know.”

“So, you’re really quitting.”

“I don’t have any time. My mom goes into surgery next week.”

“How’s she doing?”

She looked at me and paused. I kept a concerned look on my face. She folded her arms and leaned back in her chair like a detective sniffing out a lie. I thought the innocuous small-talk question would spark a longer conversation. Perhaps, she would rethink her sudden departure and give me a little bit of a cushion, but she put up her gate, locked the key and held strong against my prying.

“Why do you care all of a sudden?” she asked with a lifeless tone.

“Can’t I be concerned about my coworker’s mother?” I asked and matched her lifeless, serious tone.

“You don’t make any sense,” she said.

“But you still keep talking to me,” I said.

“It’s not like anyone else is here to talk to me.”

“I’ll take that as my hint to leave,” I said and turned away from her.

The front door opened, and I stopped dead in my tracks.

“No fucking way,” I said under my breath.

Johnny walked towards me.

“Hello,” Carrie said to him.

“You back-stabbing son of a bitch,” he said.

At that point, I just wanted him to hurt me and for someone to witness it so he could return to jail.

I relaxed and prepared for another few days of pain-filled, bedridden days if it meant that he was out of my life.

“Dude, just go home,” I said.

“Don’t tell me what to do, you fucking pussy,” Jonny said.

Not just one but both hands opened and closed. I hadn’t seen this move before. He wasn’t looking to settle a dispute. This fucker was out for blood.

“Excuse me, can I help you sir?” Carrie asked.

“Stay out of this, bitch,” Johnny said.

I wanted to look back at Carrie’s reaction, but Johnny’s body language kept me on high alert.

“Sir, I’m going to have to ask you to leave,” she said.

“What the fuck did I do?” Johnny asked and took a couple of steps forward and shifted his focus to Carrie. “This doesn’t concern you.”

“You are in my place of business, and he is my coworker. That is my concern, sir.”

“The name’s Johnny, bitch. Just go in the back and let me sort this shit out.”

“Carrie, I’ve got this,” I said and walked towards Johnny. “Just calm down, dude. Don’t involve her in this shit.”

“Wow, you’re a bigger pussy than I remember,” he said and stepped towards me.

Less than a yard separated Johnny and I. He reeked. A wave of body odor, weed, booze and God only knows what made me nauseous. The shaky feeling in my body subsided. Pain still lingered. I felt a sense of duty come over me. This wasn’t just some simple disagreement. Johnny’s disrespect towards Carrie felt like a familial attack. She was my pseudo sister, and the scumbag standing in front of me needed an ass beating. I knew that whatever happened at Hilltop Pawn and Loan would stop Johnny from trying to ruin the show. He knew that this was his best shot to scare me away from his mission to claim Streetwise Preacher as his own.

Before either of us could solve this disagreement by our own personal brand of street justice, Carrie picked up the phone and dialed the police station. She detailed the situation and hesitated for a second to tell them if Johnny had become violent. Some switch went off in his brain. The violent glow that fueled his mission subsided with each detail that Carrie divulged to the operator at the police station. Johnny stormed out of the store and couldn’t slam the door because Bill didn’t cut corners on secure, non-slamming front doors like the rest of the block where Hilltop Pawn and Loan was located.

I laid in bed for a few hours awaiting a text response from Trish. Each hour, I didn't hear from her I felt our connection slip away, until she responded with a jovial, "Work was fine. I'd be glad to come to practice. What time?"

Despite leaving the house, I hadn't cleaned up and hadn't done so since the incident at Kevin's trailer. My clothes could walk. Cheap body spray covered my hygienic short comings. So, I spent enough time in the shower to prune every fucking exposed pore.

When I got out of the shower, I wanted to piece together a rough set-list. Well, that didn't happen. Trish used my romantic blinders to take me to a local health clinic which I opposed and made clear for a few minutes. And that was when I realized that Trish and I weren't just casual lovers; she had deeper feelings than back stage lust.

There were a couple of girls, more like women, who I met at local shows or at bars pre- or post-show. Often nothing happened. Two distinct women, who hadn't seen Streetwise Preacher those particular nights, became short-lived things. Nothing serious. I talked a good game after a good show. Once I left the stage after a killer show, I strutted into anywhere with a hundred dollar look and a million-dollar confidence. Those two girls, on separate occasions, picked up the cash that I threw around.

When I met Trish, I was surprised that she even talked to me. My hundred-dollar look had a ten-dollar confidence. I leaned on the post-show high more than a post-wreck person leans on a crutch. The tattoo back up my preconceived notions. Only I thought she was a stalker. No one enjoyed our music that much. Every girl who had shared company with Tony, Johnny or myself didn't wave the Streetwise Preacher flag. Hell, we barely raised it ourselves.

“I can’t wait too long,” I said as I looked out the passenger window of Trish’s car,  
“Tonight’s our last practice.”

“I got you a last-minute appointment,” she said.

“What?” I asked and turned to her.

“My sister’s a nurse practitioner at the clinic,” she said.

“You have a sister?” I asked.

We stopped at a red light, and she turned to me. I couldn’t recall any conversation about any siblings. There was a mention of her late father who showed her good music and thus, why she wanted to bang my sorry ass.

“She’s my older sister. I told you about her last week,” she said.

“My bad, it’s been a rough couple of days,” I said and felt that it wasn’t a good enough excuse.

We rode in silence for the last couple of minutes of the trip. Rain dumped down on us as I fought the pain that flared up when I exited Trish’s car. She observed from a distance. She was like a physical therapist who wasn’t going to let anything bad happen but damn sure wasn’t going to hold my hand despite my pain-fueled body language.

For what seemed like an hour, I went through a battery of tests. I tried to block out the routine that Trish’s sister put me through. The cost loomed over me. Was it going to be a financial burden? Did Trish work out some kind of deal? She was tightening an invisible grip on me, yet I didn’t know how to interpret it. To my knowledge no one ever took a person to a hospital with an ill-willed intention. That sounded like a conspiracy theory that my feeble little mind wouldn’t be able to process on a good day much less one after the growing number of recent physical altercations.

When the exam ended, Trish's sister filled out some online forms on the computer. I eagerly awaited some good intentioned advice where the medical veil fell and a real person hoping to impart a lasting impression stood before me. All she said was to be more diligent about wearing protection and avoid strenuous physical activity especially ones that involved voluminous amounts of physical contact. I took this as a green light to hit the rock n' roll gas pedal to the floor without a glimpse into the rearview mirror.

"Hey, you should come to my show," I said.

She paused and placed her hands in her pockets.

"Unless you're seated and wearing soundproof headphones, you shouldn't be playing loud music," she said.

I carried that buzzkill feeling into the lobby and let it drape over my shoulders like a coat. Trish pestered me with questions as we left the clinic. I hadn't even processed the payment concern that was bound to bite me in the ass if Bill opted to not allow me back at Hilltop Pawn and Loan. With the growing medical bills, there was no option on my employment future. The American health care system locked me in and Bill Kelley held the key in his pocket.

Trish drove me to my apartment. I didn't want to go back and sit down. Wallowing in my pain was the only that would happen if she helped through those doors. At the last light before turning onto my street, I told Trish to go straight. I looked out the passenger window. There was the beauty salon that my mom took me to get my hair cut. A high school ex-girlfriend cut hair there, and I couldn't drive by there without her face crossing my mind. When Trish objected to my suggestion, I was daydreaming about the hairdresser high school ex-girlfriend who broke up with me and dated a guy who played baseball. He pissed away his college scholarship and was working for the city. He even worked in my department at Essential Motor for a hot minute.



Trish touched my shoulder, and the Hilltop daydream evaporated like steam on a mirror. I exhaled and turned toward her. The light was green. A car honked. She ignored it and pierced my soul.

“Let’s go back to your place,” she said. “I don’t want to drive around.”

“I need some fresh air,” I said and turned away from her.

“Do you have any food at your place?”

“What do you think?”

Trish turned onto my street and parked it. She left it running. I sensed a fire brewing below the surface. I began to prepare some fighting points like we had been married for years. I realized that we hadn’t even discussed if we were exclusive. There weren’t any titles. To me, she was just about a casual hook-up. There was no communication. The band didn’t help matters and my myriad of medical concerns as the band’s punching bag didn’t bode well for me either.

“What are we even doing?” she asked and turned off the car.

If I didn’t take a deep breath, I knew that the next statement to leave my mouth would not only reflect poorly on my family name, but would also ruin any chance of a romantic, sexual or platonic future with Trish.

“Getting to know each, I guess,” I said.

She took her hands off of the wheel and unbuckled her seat belt. Her whole torso faced me. I knew that if I did so then my whole body would fire up in pain, so I opted to turn my head towards her with a slight body lean towards her.

“That’s bullshit and you know it,” she said and emphasized the point with hand motions.

“You forgot about my sister.”

“I’ve had some recent head trauma, remember?”

“Oh, what a convenient excuse,” she said and looked away.

“It’s fucking valid, Trish. What have you been doing lately? Working, hanging with your friends, not getting hurt while trying to piece together a band that will never play again?” I paused. “Oh, so you’re not the number one Streetwise Preacher fan anymore? You’re just like the other ones.”

She whipped her head around, “I’m not some band slut.”

“Don’t fucking kid yourself, Trish. Would you even like me if I wasn’t in the band?”

We looked at each other. I wanted to pull out some gut punch revelation that would get my ass thrown out of the car. The venom filled my veins. Her face fought itself between anger and tragedy.

“I don’t know if I would,” she said. “Maybe, I got caught up in the fantasy.”

“I’m a fantasy?” I asked and hesitated to react. “That’s a first.”

“It’s just a waste of time,” she said.

“What? Fucking me?”

“Geez, you need to grow up.”

“You’re not the first person to say that.”

“I told you the other day,” she said and the anger flared up. “What are you even going to do on Sunday?”

“You know, I’ll wait until that day comes and go from there,” I said. “Is that what you want to hear? Or do you want me to tell you that I’m going to take a shower, don some clean unwrinkled clothes and finally choose a career that pays more than ten dollars an hour where my parents don’t hound me about whether it will pay the rent? Because I’m not that guy, Trish. Never have been. Never will be. I’ve waited too fucking long to say that.”

Trish turned her head to look out the front window. She placed her hands on the wheel, paused and turned the key in the ignition, and the car started.

“I can’t do this,” she said.

I hit the button on the seat belt and turned to her, “I’ll drive myself to practice.”

I moped around my apartment until I gingerly trekked down the stairs to my car. Once I shut the door, everything flooded my emotions. I stared out the front window and neglected to start my car. The cold temperature matched my emotional state. Practice didn’t sound appealing. Tony hadn’t contacted me, and I didn’t have a gut feeling that a few hours would make any progress towards writing a set-list.

## Chapter 15-Taking Back my Rightful Place

I stopped by the cheap, knock-off Wal-Mart-type store on my way out to the garage. I walked the aisles aimlessly. There wasn't any purpose. I was still nursing my wound from the argument with Trish.

I grabbed a bag of chips and a bag of candy. On my way to the register, I passed by the office and art supplies section. I thought I could grab a new notebook to get back into writing songs on a semi-regular basis. As I left the aisle, the art supplies jogged my memory. I stopped and looked at them for a minute. I didn't know what things were good or shit. That didn't stop me from gathering a few items. While holding a pack of paintbrushes in my hand, I thought about my actions at work and how they put more stress on Carrie than she could probably handle. I know there wasn't much I could do for it. My skill set didn't extend much outside of music and unskilled labor. I figured that my artistic pursuit had cost her so it was only fitting that I gave her something to jumpstart her old passion that she hadn't discussed much the past two years.

The quiet moments before and after practice should have been opportunities for reflection. I wasted them and opted to listen to music before practice. After practice, I would sit in my car while my ears rang and my sweat-tinged body odor filled the car. This time I didn't want to wait and jam out to tunes in my car eagerly awaiting my bandmates' arrival. I didn't want to be there. The Halloween show lost its luster. Playing music burned with desire deep in my soul, but playing in Streetwise Preacher was a distant chapter. I'd assembled this deadbeat band in hopes of reliving the small bit of glory from a few years prior, only to gain a broken body tattooed with new scars.

Before I had the change for the self-loathing train to leave the station, Tony's truck pulled up. Buzz and Fairley piled out of the truck. I fought against turning that depressed frown into a grin, but those guys emanated joy and damn, that shit's contagious.

Tony walked over to my passenger window, and I rolled it down.

"You coming?" he asked and leaned on the car.

"Give me a minute," I said.

"Don't take too long, I'm ready to rock."

"What's gotten into you?" I asked and began to unbuckle my seat belt.

"Just letting go of some shit, man."

"Did you talk to her or something?"

"Eh, a little. Enough to say my piece I'm not going down without a fight."

"That's good to hear," I said.

"Do you need some help?"

"I'll manage."

"Well, I'm going to inside. It's too fucking cold," Tony said and moved back from the car door.

I opened my door. Instead of landing on my feet like a normal human, I fell on my side onto the gravel and yelled out. Tony asked if I was okay. I laid on the ground writhing in pain. He came around and hovered over me.

"How should I do this?" he asked and lit up a cigarette.

"I don't fucking know. Just don't burn me with your cigarette," I said and tried to move with little progress.

“Man, I’ve played shows with a lit cig and haven’t burned myself,” he said. “You’ll be fine.”

He gripped my shoulders and pulled me up like a sack of dog food. Luckily, he didn’t sling me over his shoulder. He opted to grip my torso with one arm like I was a football allowing my feet to touch the ground. If I was an alcoholic, this would’ve been my rock bottom.

This minor incident didn’t help practice. While I took up my throne on the lawn mower, Buzz ran his mouth about changing and adding shit to the set-list. He should’ve been fucking grateful to be in Streetwise Preacher, but oh no, he had to take out his insecurities on us and use this opportunity to showcase his talent. I was happy to let him showcase his ability, but we never had a proper meeting to hash that shit out. Fucking guitarists, man-they’re a dime a dozen and an asshole nine times out of ten.

“Why can’t we just play the fucking songs?” I asked.

An imaginary record skip played. Everyone looked at me. For being the least intimidating presence in the room, every syllable that came out of my mouth held a lot more weight than I expected. Tony and Fairley’s reactions didn’t matter to me. Buzz was the main target. He needed put in his place. This was my fucking band. No one, especially a two-bit hack, bartender garage-rock guitarist like Buzz, was going to take that from me.

“I’m not Johnny,” he said. “You’re not going to push me around.”

“I didn’t push him out,” I said and managed to sit up as straight as my ability allowed. “I kicked his ass out.”

Fairley stood up and walked over to Buzz, “dude, let’s just play the songs.”

I looked over at Tony. He got up from his drum seat. The silence killed me.

“Whatever,” he said and turned away from me.

Despite my improved vocal ability, we still sounded like shit. I sensed that Buzz sabotaged the first couple of songs. We didn't have time for a high school pissing contest. That shit ends after you're in your twenties. The jury was still out on Fairley as a competent bass player. He focused on hitting the right notes. He didn't bob his head to the beat or move around in a rhythmic sense. For once in his life, Tony was the musical glue that should've been the case years ago. His rhythms were tight and solid and all the other musical terms equivalent of good.

After playing a handful of songs, we took a break. Buzz left the garage. Fairley sat on his bass amp. Tony lit a cigarette. I laid back in the lawn mower seat. My adolescent dreams of playing in a rock band didn't include this scene. Maybe that was why my bands were always lackluster. I wanted arenas, but I didn't have a clue on how to get five new fans at a local show.

Buzz returned with four beer cans and handed us one apiece. I didn't know why he wanted to celebrate the train wreck first half of practice. I bit my tongue and thanked him for the beer. He said, 'yea,' when I thanked him and avoided any opportunity for an extended conversation. Everyone except me was content to drink beer and enjoy the quiet moment. My mind slid into the ravine of catastrophe. I worried that our set list would either start strong and fall off the rails or be a dud from the first note and hit a wall. There weren't any positive outcomes in my mind unless we practiced for five hours with one run-through that contained less than three mistakes total.

Buzz and Fairley opened up a few minutes into their respective beers. Buzz thought that despite our shitty practices there would be an opening in the rock n' roll clouds for a magical set-list sun to shine through and guide us down the highway to rock n' roll glory. Fairley didn't weigh in. He just nodded his head in agreement. I sensed that he was more insecure about his

abilities than doubtful of our ability as a band to form a coherent ball of noise. Tony just sat back in his drum chair and drank his beer. He grinned at me and shook his head.

I hadn't drunk any alcohol all day and didn't know about the other three guys. The first song hit like a sledgehammer. It wasn't flawless. Fairley took the prize for most fuck-ups. Even Tony had a struggle with tempo. Somehow, I didn't fuck up the lyrics. My voice couldn't find a note if it hit me in the head. I never was a good singer. I was just a guy who played bass, penned songs and said those words with a bunch of conviction.

We didn't stop between songs to critique our performance. Tony called out the next song, clicked his sticks, and the song started. This one took a few tries before we could get past the opening chords. That little doubtful voice in the back of my mind didn't hesitate to rear its ugly head. 'Why do you think that two fresh players in a time crunch would change anything? You're still that college drop-out who hasn't done a fucking thing with his life. Just fucking qui...' I got up from the mower seat and hobbled over to Fairley.

"Let me see that bass," I said.

He looked at me and handed it to me. I sat on top of his amp and showed him the song while I sang it. My voice sounded better. Maybe, it was the endorphin rush. All pain subsided. This was the feeling that I chased the past few weeks. There were glimpses of it. There wasn't a euphoric awakening like this. Chills went up my back like when you hear "Enter Sandman," by Metallica or "Free Bird." It was probably the worst of the six songs, but it didn't matter.

I looked down at the floor and realized that I couldn't take the stage without standing in front of the microphone without a bass guitar slung down low.

I looked up at Fairley, "I'm playing tomorrow."



“What?” he asked.

I made eye contact with him and took the bass out of my lap.

“I’m taking back my rightful place,” I said. “Thanks for filling in.”

I handed him the bass and got up from the amp.

Fairley stood there holding his bass, and I walked over to the lawn mower and paused before climbing back up to my post.

“Don’t take it personally,” I said to him. “We were always meant to be a three-piece.”

“Well, why did you wait until now to tell me?” he asked.

“I’d forgot how fun it was to play and sing,” I said. “Are we just going to stand around or what?”

“What the fuck am I supposed to do?” Fairley asked.

I didn’t expect him to stand up. He seemed more like a guy to hang his head and mope. He didn’t ever truly fit in. Buzz just wanted him to tag along.

“I’m ready to play,” Buzz said. “Fairley, why don’t you give that bass to Corduroy.”

“What the fuck man,” Fairley said and turned to Buzz.

Buzz stood there with his arms crossed and guitar about waist high. Fairley and Buzz stared each other down.

“Come on boys, let’s get this show on the road,” Tony said. “I don’t want to be here all night,”

Fairley stormed out of the garage. Buzz helped me set-up a way for me to sing and play while seated. We hacked through the set-list for a few hours. Fairley stayed outside or in Buzz’s car. When we finally finished playing, he wasn’t there.

“Don’t worry about him,” Buzz said.

“I’ll see you at one tomorrow,” I said.

Buzz threw up a hand to acknowledge my comment.

Tony patted me on the shoulder before I got into my car, “you’re a fucking trooper.”

“I think I’m fucking stupid,” I said.

“I guess you can’t stop rock n’ roll,” he said.

## 16-Supplies, Pleas and Empty Phone Calls

I sat in the grocery store parking lot for a minute before I got out and fumbled through some prepared talking points. Nothing stopped my path to the pharmacy. Through the glass, she stood there in her white coat with some stack of papers in her hands. The line was five people deep, and there wasn't much time left before they closed for the day. I didn't want to lose her, but she seemed pretty content to dump my ass the previous day. My hands shook and perspiration poured out of every fucking pore in my body.

Two people stood in line behind me as I approached the counter. The guy at the register asked me what I came to do. I froze. I rehearsed some epic monologue where I yelled out to Trish announcing my short comings and asking her to go steady or some sort of twenty-first century equivalent. The guy repeated his question and asked if I was okay. The lady behind me in the line told me to get out of the way. She needed some prescription for a condition that I didn't care to learn about.

"I need to speak to Trish," I said.

He looked at me and hesitated to say or do anything.

"Sir, what might this be about?" he asked.

"I need to get my script filled," the lady behind me said.

The guy left the register. He walked to the back, and I saw Trish for a brief second. They were back there long enough for the lady behind me to double-down on her song and dance routine about her prescription. She touched my shoulder and pestered me with questions on an array of topics that weren't pertinent to the situation.

The guy returned and told me that she couldn't and didn't want to talk to me. Before he finished his statement, Trish peaked her head around to see me. We locked eyes. I knew that I

wouldn't be able to control any of my actions. I had nothing to lose. My chips were all in, and I damn-well wanted to see if I could hit the jackpot. So, I made a plea that I'm pretty sure the whole grocery store could hear. Only I didn't say I was sorry. Actually, I did quite the opposite. I told her that my show was at 7 PM. We played first. Meet me after our set, so we could discuss things like adults. A manager approached me and asked me to leave the store. He followed me into the parking lot where I hobbled to my car.

Despite its shitty interior and overall garbage aesthetic, my car was a place of solace for years. It wasn't going to win any car shows or wow people in a street race. It was the embodiment of my playing style-dependable and solid. Often, I drove around Hilltop to reminisce and forget my current despair.

When I hobbled to my car, I didn't want to drive around and find places where great times occurred. Almost every place with a good memory had a more recent memory that I wanted to erase from my mind. Parking lots were where I'd sit and listen to music to escape my parents' house were now associated with driving through town on my way to practice. Hilltop Pawn and Loan, a place where I gained employment in my rock bottom early twenties, was the now the place that marked the end of adolescence and the real start to adulthood. The once empty music center building was now some home goods place that lost the musty character that made the building feel like home or at least a neighborhood dive bar equipped with locals who had a distain for outsiders.

I quit the self-loathing and drove to Hilltop Pawn and Loan in hopes that Bill would be there. It was Carrie's last day, and I needed to keep that bridge intact. Her word would be gold on a reference list. Bill held the key to a number of employment doors that I wasn't sure would even let me on the welcome mat.

Three customers perused the aisles as I made my way through the store. Carrie sat in my usual seat. Bill sat behind the register and got up from his seat when I stood in front of the register. I didn't feel like greeting him. This was a business move. I approached the conversation without a clue on how to set myself up without admitting a litany of elbow grease shortcomings.

We sat down across from each other at the break room table. Bill and I exchanged pleasantries. He sat up in his chair, arms crossed awaiting my decision on the coming weeks. I slumped in the chair and felt a sharp, painful sting surge through my body.

"What brings you in today?" Bill asked and leaned back in his chair.

I looked in my lap and twiddled my thumbs.

"I need a job," I said and looked up.

Bill looked at me with a puzzled look.

"What do you mean?" he asked. "I haven't fired you."

"So, I can come in on Monday?" I asked and sat up in my chair.

"Corduroy," Bill said and put his hands on the table. "I like you. It's pretty neat that you put your band back together. It shows initiative. I'm not too keen on your lack of urgency in telling me whether you see yourself filling Carrie's role. I would like for you to do so, or else I wouldn't have asked you. But I can't have that sort of behavior become a normal occurrence. I have a new plan for the store, and I would like to have your input regarding it. This would require some longer days and even Sunday shifts. There would be a significant pay raise."

He paused and placed his hands in his lap.

"What I'm asking is this, could you step up and commit to a real deal full-time position?"

Bill asked, sat back in his chair and placed his hands behind his head.

He gave me a concrete, verbal contract detailing a better financial future, and the first thing I thought was, ‘This shit isn’t going to be worth it.’

I wanted to tell him that I would like to think on it. I felt like I’d exhausted my thinking things over privileges. There was the old trusty Corduroy move-get up, and walk out with a double-barrel salute. That seemed like a real classy move with a solid job offer at the end of that white trash rainbow. I did have another trick up my sleeve to help the decision-making process. I sat up and leaned on my elbows and looked down on the table. Short of conjuring some tears, I raised my head with a distraught look on my face.

“What would you do, Bill?” I asked. “I consider you to be a pretty knowledgeable person with years of wisdom under your belt.”

“I can’t tell you what you should do, only offer some sound advice,” he said. “Do you want man-to-man or father-to-son?”

“Well, do you consider me an adult or a youngster?” I asked, leaned back in my chair and put my hand under my chin.

My plan was off and running.

“Let me tell you this,” he said. “If you like your life, stay here, earn some cash and be content, but the slightest chance that you feel stuck, get the hell out of here and come back when you feel it necessary to pop back in.”

‘Dammit,’ I thought. ‘This guy has not only been in my shoes, but he has put them through multiple battles, taped and stitched them up and polished them the night before a victory parade.’

I sat there for a few seconds. Bill sat there content to wait all fucking day for me to give him a straight answer.

“I gotta get out of here, Bill,” I said and got up from my chair. “Every day I stay in Hilltop the closer I get to working on a factory line again.”

Bill got up and extended his hand.

“Give ‘em hell tonight,” he said and shook my hand.

There weren’t any customers in the store when I emerged from the back. Carrie looked over at me and we locked eyes. Looking at her jogged my memory, and I rushed out of the store. I grabbed the bag of art supplies and beelined right to her.

I stood in front of her holding the bag. She looked puzzled. I lifted the bag and placed it next to the register. She looked at the bag, and I looked at her. She opened it and pulled out the contents individually.

“Sorry,” I said.

She kept inspecting the items.

“Maybe, you can take up painting or drawing or whatever,” I said.

“Thanks,” she said.

“We play at 7,” I said and walked away.

I made it to the garage with time to spare. I didn’t know why I was there. I couldn’t lift a fucking thing, so I sat there playing Tetris with the amps and assorted equipment that we piled into Tony’s truck. He was there before me and sat on the tailgate of his truck smoking a cigarette and wearing sunglasses which was a rare occurrence. His clothes weren’t torn, tattered or stained. He looked like a regular presentable human being. I hadn’t even thought about what I was going to wear that night. That was always a fun last-minute thing to help me get in the zone before the grueling, monotonous ritual that we called load-in and soundcheck.

Somehow it went over everyone's head that a quick run-through wouldn't be a bad idea before we left for soundcheck. This, of course, donned on all of us halfway through loading in Tony's drums. I had to expedite the unloading process which hurt like hell for a few seconds after the laborious rush in the bitter Indiana October wind.

While Buzz and Tony set-up the heavy-duty items that required full strength, I scribbled the final set-list in my music notebook.

Amateur musicians always fuck up the live set-list. Crafting a set-list is an art they don't divulge in the rock n' roll tell-all books. When I realized that lost art, we were on our last set as a band.

The first song doesn't always have to be the hit or best song. It just has to grab the audience by the throat and the subsequent songs should tighten the sonic grip on the audience's ears. There shouldn't be a drastic drop-off between songs in terms of tempo and style. You ease into those peak and valleys. We were known to jerk the wheel left and right in our early set-lists. Johnny wrote many of his songs with a mid-tempo groove which conflicted with my up-tempo rockers and slower reflective story-telling ballads.

The Halloween set didn't have any room to let off of the gas especially with the punk and metal-leaning crowd that would trickle in at various points of our set. I kept that in my mind but then again there weren't many other tunes to choose from that we had practiced with Buzz. This was the hardest set-list to craft. This wasn't a record track listing that people could skip to the next song or repeat the hit until it made them sick. People weren't there to see us. We needed to convince them not to grab a beer, take a leak, or got out to smoke a cigarette.

I handed Buzz the set-list before he took his guitar out of the case. He looked at the notebook page for almost a solid minute. There was less than fifteen words on that piece of



paper, yet he studied those few words with the eye of an art critic. I expected him to lean on his amp and prop up his head with his hand like the thinker sculpture.

He held out the piece of paper and expected me to come grab it which was a much harder task after the re-loading of gear into the garage.

I walked over to Buzz.

“This isn’t going to fill thirty minutes,” he said.

“We’ll just take our time between songs,” I said, took the paper and folded it to place in my pocket.

Buzz shook his head and looked away from me.

“Maybe, I’ll do a drum solo,” Tony said and chuckled.

Buzz kept quiet as he took his guitar out of the case. I thought he was cooler than this. In that moment, he was the band guy who wore extra-tight jeans and scoffed at other guys who didn’t listen to the same underground independent artists who would never make a dime to afford their rent.

I made a mental note of what time we started playing. When we ended, the time was a little over twenty-five minutes. Buzz didn’t hesitate to ask.

“Twenty-eight minutes,” I said.

He nodded his head, and started to pack things up.

We met up at the community center. It was an open room a small bar area to the left of the entry area. The stage wasn’t but a few feet off of the ground. The soundboard was a few feet inside the room. Skulls were everywhere on the walls. “Happy Halloween” signs and black and

orange streamers adorned the area around the stage. I wished we planned some costumes to wear together. Playing a good set was better than some matching outfits.

A guy at the soundboard came over to greet me. I gave him the vital information. He walked away and came back with another guy who introduced himself as the promoter, Bud Tolley. He wore a trucker hat, a dark flannel shirt and look to be a little older than Tony and Buzz. We shook hands. Tony called me to tell me that he and Buzz had arrived with the gear.

“It should be a good turn-out,” Bud said. “Got many people coming?”

“Yeah, I think so,” I said.

I went outside and saw Tony, and he came up to me.

“I just got a call,” he said.

“From who?” I asked.

“Johnny,” he said.

## 17-One for the Road

Buzz walked by Tony and I while carrying his amp in his hand. Tony paused before he detailed the phone call with Johnny. Once Buzz was out of earshot, Tony stood inches from my face.

“He’s going to show up and fuck up our show if we don’t let him back in the band,” Tony said.

I paused before I burst out laughing. Johnny wasn’t only higher than outer space, but he’d lost touch with reality.

“Fuck him,” I said and began to walk towards Tony’s truck.

Tony and Buzz did the heavy lifting for our load-in. I was refreshed. When I put that guitar strap around my neck, every highlight of musical career filled me with joy. The sound man’s unprofessional aimless procedure killed that joyful buzz.

He didn’t have a fucking clue on how to properly mix sound or do it with any sense of urgency. Each microphone took almost a minute a piece to level out and proceed to the following one on his board. He didn’t have us all play together. Instead, he opted for the band after us which was a five-piece band with three guitars to use the same set-up. Buzz picked up on my eye roll that I made obvious to him and Tony. He jumped off of the stage and nearly fell over. He played off the near injury-inducing, potentially hilarious incident and beelined to the soundboard. The sound guy wasn’t paying attention. When he looked up, Buzz stood there towering over the man with his arms crossed like a bar bouncer.

I ignored the situation until Tony told me to look over. Buzz stood nose to nose with the sound guy who didn’t want to hear any of Buzz’s complaints and decided to walk away.

“Get back here, asshole,” Buzz said.

I heard him loud and clear. This statement prompted the promoter to emerge from the dark recesses of the room. He wasn't as tall as Buzz, but he was a bug compared to Buzz. When this confrontation occurred, I felt a hand grab my shirt and tug on it. I looked back to see Tony tell me, "let's go take care of this shit."

Despite Buzz's intimidating presence, we didn't get a chance to do a full-band run-through. The band after us stared at us while we unloaded our gear from the stage and placed it in a back room was a mix between a coat room and a janitor's closet.

We convened around Tony's truck. Buzz suggested that we have a pre-show beer and meal at Skeeter's. Tony agreed to it. I was hesitant at first. I figured if I showed up, Buzz would lay off of his power trip, and I could reclaim a little bit of power in the band.

Tony stopped me before I got in my car.

"Everything's going to be fine," he said. "Take a chill pill and be ready to rock tonight."

I stood in front of my closet and didn't have a fucking clue on what to wear. It wasn't so much of what I wanted to wear as much as a menial task that would quell my nerves. None of my numerous black band t-shirts caught my eye. I didn't want to walk on stage with a bruised face, skinny jeans and a black t-shirt. There was bound to be a plethora of people in the crowd with that very same uniform minus the bruised face.

A pair of light-colored jeans caught my eye. Going against the themes of Halloween became my mantra. I found a turquoise short-sleeve button-down shirt that featured some beach-themed cartoons in navy blue. I figured if I was bidding farewell to music, I might as well leave a bright flash in the audience's minds.

My phone rang as I put on the button-down shirt to make sure it still fit.

“Son, what time is your show tonight?” my father asked before greeting me.

I sat down on my bed and thought about lying, so I wouldn’t have to deal with them.

“Show starts at 7,” I said. “We’re playing first.”

“Still with that knucklehead guitarist?”

I paused.

“Got another guy, pops. He’s a good dude,” I said and couldn’t believe I said that about Buzz.

“Good,” he said. “You need to talk to your mother.”

“What’s up?” I asked.

“Just call her. She would like to hear from you.”

“I’m pretty busy today with the gig and all,” I said. “I could just talk to her at the show if you guys decide to come.”

There was a long pause.

“She’s not too happy about that stunt you pulled the other week,” he said.

If there was a good time to hang up and decide not to grow up, this was the pitch right down the middle to hit a home-run. But I thought about my earlier decision to leave Hilltop Pawn and Loan, I needed my parents to get out of Hilltop and see somewhere besides small town, rural Indiana. That bone head, adolescent decision really shot me in the ass.

I asked my father when I would be able to call my mother. She was gone but would be home soon. I still had two hours until the pre-show rendezvous at Skeeter’s.

I didn’t even knock when I showed up to my parents’ house. My mother greeted me at the door and didn’t even asked to hug me. I hated hugs, but I let that slide with my mother and no one else. We sat at the dining room table where a grocery bag had multiple bags of candy. I

forgot that it was Halloween. After that realization, my mother didn't hesitate to investigate the bruises and limp that set off her mom alarm. Even my dad inquired like a private eye.

I sat back in my chair and looked up at the ceiling. There wasn't a realistic way to lie my way out of this situation. Any story I told was bound to spark a long tapestry of questions from my mom and dad. That was one of the many reasons I hadn't come to dinner. I wanted to live without someone tracking my every move.

I wiped my face with my hand and took a deep breath. Each detail jabbed my parents in their respective hearts. My mother couldn't restrain herself from asking how I had managed to avoid serious repercussions. My white lie opportunity opened up, and I hit the gas. Tony became my medically-trained rock n' roll pseudo brother who sought the advice of his relatives in the medical field to assure my speedy recovery. They bought it like a fifty percent sale at a department store.

This helped to back up my decision to leave Hilltop Pawn and Loan which I fluffed up with verbal streamers and bows.

"Bill's going to help in my pursuit of a new career when I'm full-recovered and ready to hit the ground running in the job market," I said.

"What a saint," my mother said.

My father nodded his head in agreement.

"Do you want some dinner?" she asked.

I got up from my chair.

"We're having a pre-show meal as a band," I said. "Show at seven and we play first."

"We'll make it, son," my father said and patted me on the back. "Don't half-ass it up there."

I hugged my mom, shook my dad's hand and left with an ounce of relief as I pulled out of the driveway.

Buzz sat at the bar when I walked into Skeeter's. As I approached him, I saw that Fairley sat next to him. There wasn't any time to think about walking away. Fairley got up from his barstool and approached me. I tensed up and, like too many in the previous weeks, anticipated a physical altercation.

"Buzz tells me that you sound pretty good," he said.

"It could be better," I said.

"Maybe, if you would have kept me..."

I paused and wondered if he was pissed or pulling my chain. He seemed teeter on the edge of throwing a punch or saying, 'gotcha.'

"Hey man, it's what needed to be done," I said and stood up a little straighter.

Fairley stuck out his hand, and I looked at it.

"It's your band, man," he said. "You guys better kill it tonight or I'll kick your ass."

We shook hands and sat at the bar. Tony came in a little bit later. We drank beers, ate greasy cheeseburgers and told our own rock n' roll stories.

It was bittersweet. I could still hang with either of them. No one was dead. Deep in my soul there was a small voice that told me that they were the shackles that kept me from growing into a man.

As we walked from the parking lot into the venue, Johnny out from behind a car with Kevin in-tow. I knew that Buzz and Tony would back me up, but I wanted to thwart this asshole with my own two hands and live to tell the tale.

Neither of us wanted to approach the other. We were two dogs waiting for the other to make a wrong move. Johnny's hands weren't making fists.

"Why don't we just go inside?" Buzz whispered.

Unless he had a gun or some gasoline and a match, Johnny wasn't going to stop us. There were people gathering outside to line-up for the show.

"Fuck him," I said and walked forward.

Johnny folded his arms and stood his ground. He looked puzzled. Each step stomped his insecure ego into powder.

When I got within a yard of him, Johnny decided to speak up.

"Where the fuck do you think you're going?"

"I've got a show to play, asshole," I said and clenched my fist ready to dish out my pent-up frustrations.

He looked at me then glanced over to Buzz and Tony. It was a damn shame that we even got to this place in the history of Streetwise Preacher. We always trashed those bands who got mad over the stupidest shit. The reoccurring reference was Metallica's movie *Some Kind of Monster*. They hired a shrink to work on the band dynamic amidst them having their long-time bassist leave the band. We all thought it was so pompous for three grown-ass adults to outsource their problems to some old dude who hadn't played a single distorted guitar note to an arena filled with screaming lunatics.

But I realized standing there waiting for Johnny to throw a punch, that they were mature adults. We were just adolescent late-twenties and early thirties man-children who thought a beer and a joint could solve the world's problems.



I looked down and saw Johnny's fist opening and closing. Every self-defense alarm rang throughout my body. The last two times that Johnny hit me and unleashed a world of hurt he swung wildly with his left hand first then followed it up with a quick right hand that each time knocked me to the ground.

Like clockwork, the wild hand came at me, and I took a step back. He fell forward, and I caught him in the stomach. I heard him cough, shifted my focus to Kevin who stood there frozen. Johnny laid on the concrete cursing my name as he caught his breath.

We walked into the venue and went back to the storage area and unloaded the gear onto the stage. Afterwards, we mingled with the other two opening bands in a green room which, to us, was a rare occurrence.

One of the bands decided to dress up in black and white face paint and all-black clothing. The other band, like us, decided against dressing up. Both bands were from out of town. They didn't travel more than ten minutes. Neither band was on my radar. The guys in each band were cool and talked to us until I felt my phone buzz. I didn't anticipate a message from anyone. Doors had just opened which meant we had thirty minutes until our moment in the spotlight. I looked at the message, left the room and saw her by the glare of the rings on her fingers by the entrance door.

Every word except, 'hi' left my brain as I got close enough to see the expression on her face. I didn't anticipate a look of joy. Hell, I was just glad for her to be there. Then again, she liked Streetwise Preacher first and me second. That's where I started the conversation and where I knew it was going to eventually end.

"I'm here to enjoy a nice night of rock n' roll," she said.

My heart began to descend from the heavenly place it started before she said a word.

I paused and figured that the quicker the conversation went, the less it would affect the show.

“Well, what about us?” I asked.

“I’m not some fling, Corduroy,” she said. “Despite your romanticism of our time together, I’ve been treated like a second-class citizen. You can’t even take care of yourself. I don’t want to be with some beta male pushover who only expresses his feelings in his songs.”

“Well, you’re just a hypocrite,” I said.

“I realized your flaws before you could, and yet I still held out hope that you could shake yourself of this tortured artist persona that you try to shake but you secretly can’t,” she said and each word warranted an arm gesture to emphasize her point.

“I can’t deal with this shit now,” I said. “I’ve got a show to prepare for.”

“Just go ahead and run away,” she said as I turned away.

I paused and turned to her, “about an hour ago, I punched Johnny in the stomach, quit my job a few hours before that and don’t forget I got kicked out of the grocery store. Enjoy the show.”

I walked away and felt the urge to cry. Of course, my parents showed up as I made my way back to the pre-show area. I held back my emotions and just wanted the show to start. When I finally got to the back, tears formed in the corners of my eyes. I went to the bathroom and splashed some water on my face. The water cooled me down enough to embody my front man persona.

Tony and Buzz asked me where I went. I elected to leave out the situation, but I knew when her song came up, I would be faced with the recent emotional turmoil.

The promoter gave us a five-minute warning; Buzz and I grabbed our respective instruments and tuned them. Tony picked out his least used pair of drum sticks. Before we left the room, I grabbed the guys.

“Hey, before we play let’s do a huddle on stage as the intro music plays,” I said.

Buzz and Tony nodded their heads in agreement and walked ahead of me to the stage. The promoter held us up as the lights went down. Small orange lights were scattered around the stage. Chills went up my spine. This wasn’t nerves or adrenaline. It was the feeling you get when you sit around a place waiting for someone to show up or for a store to open. Only this time, we got our only proper introduction complete with intro music and a black out stage. The crowd erupted when the music began.

The opening riff to Black Sabbath’s song, “Sabbath, Bloody Sabbath,” played. The promoter shined a flashlight onto the stage, and we walked on. When Ozzy sang, I gathered the guys in front of Tony’s drum set.

“I’m not here to say sorry. This is the biggest show we’ll probably ever play. Nobody gives a fuck about us. Hell, they want us off of that stage. Fuck ‘em! We’re motherfucking Streetwise Preacher. That stage doesn’t stand a fucking chance. Buzz, we’re going with long instrumental breaks, they get people moving. Someone’s going to bleed. Tony, push that tempo. They aren’t here to dance. They’re here to lose their minds. I’m dying on that stage. I don’t know about you two,” I said and walked to my amp.

When I approached the microphone, the stage lights came up. I saw my parents, Trish and, at the edge of the light, Carrie. I closed my eyes, took a deep breath and turned around to Tony. I nodded my head and looked over to Buzz who had a smile on his face the size of Texas.

Tony clicked the tempo with his sticks. The music stopped. Buzz and I played on the fourth hit, and the musical gas pedal hit the floor.

Our third song was the one I dreaded- “Tap Dancing on the Edge of Sanity.” Before I uttered the words to the title, I swallowed hard and felt a deep pit in my stomach. Any other show, the song would have been cut, but it was one of my crowning songwriting achievements. Trish and I locked eyes when I introduced it.

I looked back at Tony.

“You good?” he asked.

I took a deep breath.

“Set it on fire, man,” he said and clicked the tempo.

I kept my gaze away from her throughout the whole song except when the lyrics, “I’ve never burned my hand in the fire/The only time I’m burned/ Is when I’m filled with desire.” The following line didn’t get its due respect, but I said those three lines with the same conviction as the day I wrote them.

Before our fifth song I walked over to Buzz and told him, I needed his guitar for the last song. He looked at me and asked why.

“Just give me the guitar, man,” I said. “You’ll see.”

“Are you playing some cover?” he asked.

“I’m taking control of my life.”

“What?”

“Just give me the guitar and adjust the strap after this song.”

During our fifth song, I couldn't focus. I played the right notes and sang the right words. I didn't sing with any ounce of conviction. On my drive to Skeeter's from my parents' house, I realized that our last song wasn't going to be the legacy I wanted to leave. It was a three-minute song with some sophomoric lyrics about a girl who I liked before I began at Hilltop Pawn and Loan.

When the fifth song ended, I turned off my amp and leaned my bass against. Buzz met me at my amp.

"This better be worth it," he said and handed me the guitar.

The guitar hovered around my waist the way I wore it in Switchblade Bob.

I approached my microphone and thanked the crowd for coming to the show. I introduced Buzz and Tony. Buzz introduced me. I nodded my head and looked back to see Tony place his drum sticks on his bass drum like he did countless times to alert us that he was ready to leave. I turned around and introduced the song before I sang, I looked at Trish and mouthed, "sorry."

One stage light illuminated me. Every punch, bruise and lost time spent working towards this moment were worth it as I sang, "I've seen this world through a dirty window/And it ain't the cleanest place/I haven't traveled much outside of this country/But I know there is more than this."

I didn't look up. The crowd disappeared. Every punk kid expecting one last mosh pit didn't matter to me. The only person I sang to left before I got to the chorus.