Like a splinter, like a thorn

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Like a splinter, like a thorn

by luna65

Summary

In a band of Heartbreakers one might find their own heart broken too.

Notes

This is an ongoing exploration of various things, but primarily the dissonance which seemed to exist between Tom and Stan, capable of great affection and equally great dysfunction. As always I hope you enjoy reading this and I thank you for your patronage.
Epigraph and Prologue

“But Stan...he had the power to get under my skin.”
-Tom Petty

“I always thought that Tom and Stanley were really close. Sometimes those are the people that fall out.”
-Benmont Tench

“What do you think about when you’re playing the drums, Stan?”
“You want an honest answer?”
“I want an honest answer.”
“I think about, like, pussy and money.”
- Heartbreakers Beach Party (1983)

Prologue

Most days working with Don were long days, the man was relentless in the pursuit of whatever was in his head to be rendered forth as sound. Stan never begrudged the use of his time, not now. Thirty years ago he might always have thought of better things to do but, oh, the foolishness of youth. They would engage in what Don liked to call the “deep” conversations in the late hours - or the early ones, depending on one’s perspective. Times when they could each speak of regret and loss and pain and hide their reactions to such admissions because it was dark, everywhere, at that hour.

“There’s something that still haunts me, man, and it’s been years. I mean, things I can’t let go of from further away but every goddamn day I have to talk to myself about it. And it’s one thing, but it’s also everything.”

“That’s always the issue, isn’t it?” Don mused, his twang scraping against his much-used voice, sipping tea with liberal amounts of honey and bourbon added. “People think we don’t mourn things properly but they don’t know the voices we hear in our heads, the ghosts riding our backs.”

“How did I let this happen? I knew it was all crazy. How could I have thought crazy was normal?!?”

“You didn’t know any better then. But do you think you do now?”

“Aw hell,” Stan exclaimed, hand on his chin fingerling the day’s stubble. “I’d do it all again. Especially the things I shouldn’t have done.”
Some guys just got to go and put their rockets everywhere

"So what you got to say 'bout ol'Stan the Man there," Tom asked. He had leaned back into the couch, smoke and daylight creating a filter for the lens of their shared observance. "He's kind of a punk, which is okay until it ain't, you know? I mean, I can't remember too well from when he played with us, but he was just a baby then."

Benmont leaned forward and clasped his hands. "You mean you guys don't remember Road Turkey?"

Tom took a thoughtful drag. "Not enough that I took notice, really."

Mike shrugged. "Maybe? All those bands were kinda a blur that summer."

"Stanley is tall," Benmont continued, "and all which that implies." A smirk followed this observation.

"I'm tall," Mike said.

"Yeah but you're not tall like Stanley is tall. There's a difference, trust me."

"See that's just what I mean," Tom interjected. "He's a punk because he knows he can be, he's not afraid. And that's kinda dangerous." He allowed the statement to hang there in the smoky air. Mike lowered his eyes, thinking his stare intrusive although the anger and pain which had briefly flickered in those other eyes was there for anyone to view.


"He can play some drums, I give 'im that."

"Yeah I don't remember him sounding that good," Mike said, ruffling his hair.

"Minute I heard he came to town I figured I should keep an eye on him. You can't just let a good drummer sit around, man."

"If you guys think he's worth it then I'm in. But he's got to know he can't be punching anybody, that ain't cool."

"Stanley is more attitude than egotism, honestly."

"Ben don't get philosophical, just tell me."

Benmont and Mike grinned.

"He's tall, like I said, but he's a drummer, so, you know, he can't afford to take himself too seriously."

This earned him a laugh from the man he was always struggling to understand.
“I gotta steal this band.”

“Huh?” The engineer had turned to him, eyebrows raised, even as his hands were simultaneously manipulating the faders on the console.

“They’re good, right?”

“Oh sure.” The guy’s tone was not particularly enthusiastic but that was to be expected. Tom recognized the L.A. blase attitude. He didn’t like it, but he was already more familiar with it than he cared to be. But he could recognize cohesion when he heard it. This was the sound of Home, in a sense which stretched beyond mere geography.

“The Drunks, man, why you want to call it that?”

Benmont gave a sigh in lieu of a snicker. “‘Cause we are. Uh, I dunno, why not, you know? What does it matter? It will turn into something else I’m sure.”

“Yeah but, who’s gonna sign a band called The Drunks?”

“Who the fuck was gonna sign a band called Mudcrutch? But it happened. So are you coming to the session?”

“Yeah man, I’ll be there. I know I owe you that much.”

Another sigh, this one weighty. “Man, don’t come because you think you owe me. I don’t want your consolation prize. Just come because you’re my friend and I need some help.”

“Yeah, sure, of course.”

Tom hung up the phone and sighed as well. He was starting to feel lonely and imagined he could hear the same quality in Ben’s voice. At least whatever Benmont was going to do it would be based in what they all knew. Who knew what he would end up with, besides Mike. Thank God for Mike, he thought, his anchor in this strange land.

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“Man, it’s gotta be moody, you know?”

Stan nodded. He wasn’t entirely sure what Tom meant by moody - everyone seemed to have a different notion of such things - but he tried to put his mind in a place he imagined of shadows and longing. Tom played him the song, just him and the acoustic guitar, and it did have an eerie feel to it, bare and forlorn like a winter sky.

They spent hours in Church Studio toying around with the idea of atmosphere, and it was helpful that Tulsa seemed like such a desolate place. They were each reminded of home in the faded shopfronts and neighborhoods which looked as though they had been frozen in time somewhere around 1952. They drove around beneath a wide washed-out sky, clouds traveling continuously blown by a steady wind.

Tom was pleased that Stan could fill in the spaces, could follow him instinctively, did not insist on putting the one in front of everything. No one followed him, he was not driving the beat, he played the drums like everyone else played their instruments, seeking to mesh and meld and fill the room with a glorious noise.
But later Tom lay in the dark of their shared motel room listening to wind and whispers and giggles and sighs and he ached. This was destiny: cheap motel rooms where people were fucking and none of them were him. It wasn’t a specific loneliness or longing...was it? No, just his usual too-sensitive nature reacting to the weirdness. Lyrics ran through his head. Tom got up and took himself and his notebook into the bathroom to write them down. Door locked, light on, stronger laughter from the other side, then a rhythmic squeaking which made him roll his eyes, letting out a breathy exclamation of ridicule at the situation.

*Just a wild child,* he wrote, then dismissed it as cliche but there was something in it, something essential. He crossed it out and wrote *well it’s too bad but I want you* as the squeaking turned into a thumping when the beleaguered headboard hit the thin wall which was then hammered upon from the other side.

“Knock it off!”

Stan and his girlfriend laughed between low moans, their louder sounds of pleasure having been drown out by the protest.

“Go fuck yourself!” Stan shouted back.

Tom smirked and continued to write. After a few minutes the squeaking began anew.

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Stan could make everyone laugh because he wasn’t afraid to be goofy, fast with the quip or the dirty joke or just a comical expression. Tom began to think that was his job in every band he’d ever been in, to defuse with laughter but also potentially wound others with sarcasm. His mockery was a weapon and he wasn’t afraid to deploy it. Benmont could be equally sarcastic but he tended to keep quiet unless he was drunk, then the humor he had learned in college bubbled up, that prep school scorn and intellectual high-toned ridicule. But Stan was also the instigator, the boy could not rest unless something was being fiddled with - you could never say that Stan was only a drummer. He wouldn’t let anyone dismiss him, whether he was standing over you, shit-talking you from across the room, or displaying a quicksilver empathy as he backed you up onstage.

There was frustration and annoyance but also a distant fascination. Tom likened it to those scenes in *American Graffiti* when Falfa would spot the blonde in the white T-bird. It was the mystery, the potential for anything at all, which kept him tethered to this strange dynamic.

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He never realized when he was too close. Stan was just there, sometimes, and it was like he had always been there. It was comforting, in its’ way. In photos he might lean back slightly, still the center, but also the foil. There was something of a sameness when one viewed Mike and Benmont and Ron - if not tall, certainly dark and handsome collectively and individually. But in Stan Tom recognized a fellow changeling - a being straddling both worlds. And it wouldn’t be until he happened to see the evidence that he would then ask: *did you think about how it would look from the outside?*

But hell, who really cared? No one else seemed to see it.

“I can’t believe they made us all sit on that tiny-ass sofa, like they don’t have a studio we could have used?!!”

Entirely unconscious, there he was, practically in Stan’s lap, like any one of the army of girlfriends
under his drummer’s command. Resting against him in a near-embrace, positioned happenstance. Folded into himself but also folded into that presence. The most natural thing in the world. And he recalled he was close enough to smell that Stan had showered that morning, the shampoo he used made him think of apples, but the warm musk of his heated skin was stronger. Summer had been reluctant to leave when they arrived and they were surprised to be greeted by swelter in March. He thought of Stan’s favorite pick-up line: Wow, what is that perfume you’re wearing? He was possessed of a notion to sniff him and whisper in his ear, just to witness the reaction to Stan’s tactics being used on him.

Jet-lagged and hung-over and distracted by Stan’s second-skin jeans, the knees shiny with wear. Aware that every time he moved his head his hair was brushing against Stan’s inner arm. The feel of Stan’s rib cage against his shoulder, something he only knew in that moment, that proximity.

_Cock of the walk, big dog, lead asshole._

So many would ask him _what’s it like to be the coolest guy in the room?_ But he would smile and chuckle and briefly look elsewhere.

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They all loved to talk about music, about growing up with music, listening to the radio, honing in on the things they loved. How important that music was and you had to honor it in what you did. Even if you played nothing like it, it required your respect. And this is where they began, the same as he had begun with any friend, any bandmate, in their mutual religion. Playing rock n’roll was a calling - as people were called to work in the name of the Lord, so were they called to labor for that which _would_ save them, _had_ saved them, from ignominy and obscurity and the overwhelming blandness of conformity.

“First time I met Stanley he was wearing a dress,” Benmont would begin, and each time Stan had to come up with a different excuse for this occurrence. “He was standing on the street, sweet sixteen, out of his fucking mind on acid, totally glammed out.”

“It was the style, man, I keep telling you! We wanted to be the next Faces.”

“Stanley, you’re lucky you didn’t get turned out that day, lordy mercy!” Tom scolded. “Some hustler come along and add you to his stable.”

Stan stretched his rangy frame, grinning.

“Oh you know I was a fine piece of chicken!” His brag brought on shocked laughter and a bit of blushing, and he readily played with that scandal every time he said something obscene…

“I ain’t fucked in three days and I think I might die!”

“If my balls don’t ache after a few hours, then I didn’t do it right.”

“I have come to conquer and you can lock up your daughters but I will fuck them anyway!”

And each time they found him hilarious and ridiculous but Stan did manage to go through girls the way he and Mike and Ron went through strings. Everywhere they went, Stan was not paying attention to any scenery which did not involve the female form. At every studio, station and venue they visited, within ten minutes Stan had phone numbers, room keys, panties, was being pulled into bathrooms, closets, back rooms to be quickly satiated. They had taken to whistling for him if he wandered away.
“Stanley, ya goddamn mutt, put your dick in your pants, it’s time to go!”

Invariably they would find him with someone in his lap, or someone trapped by the overhang of his arms, becoming pliant in the heat of his gaze, the warmth of his words. In their international travels he asked the girls to teach him new slang and they would comply - perhaps scandalized, but who could resist such a friendly dog?

They learned to riff off each other with jokes and Stan would gamely play the straight man, turning up his accent when doing so. Tom might reciprocate but he usually sabotaged these attempts by setting the other up for the punchline of a different joke, grinning at his confusion.

“Can’t even tell a fucking joke, Tommy, and we’re supposed to let you be in charge?”

“You just go bang on things with sticks, honey, and let me do the thinkin.’”
“All them candles and you don’t even have a cake?” Tom teased. Stan smirked and flipped him off.

“You know it’s a menorah, so just hush now.”

Stan had that sensation again, like he was behind the glass in a zoo. Five other guys - if you counted Bugs - staring while trying to make it seem like they weren’t staring.

“Blessed are You, O Lord Our God, Ruler of the Universe…”

He knew their unified guarded scrutiny was partly out of fear. Religious fervor was something suspect given where they all came from. God did not approve of their labors or their lifestyle, so it was said. But he didn’t see it as anything separate from the rest of himself. He wished they wanted to understand this part of him, but he also understood why they didn’t care to. None of them were particularly open about any other aspect of their lives and perceived his observances as embarrassingly showy.

_You gregarious motherfucker, nobody needs to see that!_

He couldn’t even remember who said that or when or why, though it was likely Benmont. Pulling out those five-dollar words was his specialty.

But the joke of it was he wasn’t particularly observant except for Hanukkah.

_How can you feel completely alone in a bus full of people? Join the Heartbreakers._

Bugs was in his normal stance, pleading for Tom to allow him to take one of the guitars into Manny’s for repair when they got to New York - with Tom insisting that Bugs could fix it himself - when a loud rhythmic noise began in the next room.

“Ladies and gentlemen please welcome The Michael Stanley Band!” Tom announced with a grin.

“What are they even playing?” Bugs asked, looking over at the wall.

“Nobody knows,” Ron replied, “not even them.”

“Yeah Mike’s just trying to keep Stanley from bringing three girls in the room, you know. His delicate sensibilities can’t handle another orgy.”

They all cracked up at this, continuing to wonder how those two had ended up as roomies in the first place - but knowing it was more of a case of _Who does?_ rather than _Who doesn’t?!_

“I think it’s just to get him to shut up,” Ron said, “fuck knows that’s difficult enough.”

“We had hoped Mike would kinda calm him down, but it doesn’t seem like it’s working.”

Bugs let out a raucous guffaw. “Are you fuckin’ kiddin’ me? You can’t hope to control Stanley, you can only hope to contain the damage to a mile or so.”
“Well thank God you’re here, Bugs,” Tom proclaimed, “because otherwise we wouldn’t have this valuable information.”

Bugs cheerfully flipped his boss the bird. “I’m going back to the bar, it’s positively peaceful in there.”

“Hell, we might as well join ya,” Tom said, getting up from his bed. “Ain’t like nobody gonna be sleepin’ here.”

“I’m gonna watch Tom Snyder and smoke this joint,” Ron said, producing one from his shirt pocket.

“Who’s on tonight?”

“I dunno, but it always puts me to sleep.”

As the others left he got up to switch on the TV and chuckled at Tom banging on their neighbor’s door.

“Y’all know any Blind Willie Johnson?”

Ron smirked as Mike, ever eager to please, began playing “Dark Was The Night, Cold Was The Ground.”

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“So what’s good here, darlin’?” Stan asked the waitress with a wink and a smile. “Besides you, I mean.”

She giggled and suggested the meatloaf as the others groaned and swatted him with their menus.

“Why don’t you have the Bullshit Special, man, it’s fresh,” Benmont cracked.

But damn if the boy didn’t order the meatloaf and later proclaim that was the best way to know what to eat - because a waitress always wants a good tip.

“Yeah but your dick ain’t legal tender, son,” Tom shot back and Stan just laughed.

“Well it should be!”

And it was said with such a shit-eating grin and expansive gesture that they knew he was trying to entertain them, to give them something else to think about other than mediocre diner food and bad weather and indifferent audiences and the grind of constant travel.

Tom felt that distant fascination move a little closer, a feral cat who has decided it just might want to sniff his hand, responding to a sweet-voiced plea to come in out of the dark.

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“So how long you think you can play that beat for?”

“Honey, I can go allllll niiiiiiight,” Stan replied, his tone thick with hormonal assurance.

“I think you might have answered some other question there, buddy,” Benmont cut in.

“Oh no, that’s the correct answer,” Tom said. “I want to make the beginning longer and fade out the end.”
“How are we gonna fade it out?” Mike asked, looking suspicious.

“Just play softer and softer until there’s nothing left to play. And I wanna trick ‘em at first, so play a - whatcha call that fill that’s like a drumroll -”

“Paradiddle?”

“Yeah okay. Whatever’s gonna make ‘em think we’re not playing that song, and then you just drop in and listen to ‘em lose their fucking minds.”

They all laughed, pleased at the thought of a crowd going wild.

“I dunno, sounds like too much responsibility for Mr. Excitable over there,” Mike teased.

“Now you know I don’t trust Stanley, I wouldn’t send him out for ammo, but -”

“Aw man now that is cold!” Stan protested.

“- but when he’s sitting eight fucking feet in the air on that stool, he will do his job. Or I will wring his motherfucking neck.”

“Have to catch me first, Tommy.”

“Ain’t nobody gonna let you get away, kid.”

“It’s true, I’ll bring you down myself,” Benmont said, deadpan. But within a moment he smirked, setting off more laughter.

“Well let’s try it, huh? Whatcha think, boys?” Stan enthused.

“Let’s go!” Tom commanded and gave just the slightest nod to his band.

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“He stood alone on his balcony,” Stan sang out from the doorway.

“Fuck you!”

Zagaris liked what he was getting, that James Dean-like icy hauteur in Petty’s staredown, even harried as he was by his bandmates. A series of poses but in all of them was the same quality of cool. Click-click-click and then his expression changed into one of professional inquiry - is that what you wanted? The other nodded and checked his readings, swapped out his roll and they inched by each other to change positions.

“This ain’t even a real balcony, I mean, what the fuck would you do out here anyway?” Tom gibed.

When he called the others out for group shots Mike looked skeptical.

“Is this gonna hold with all of us out here?”

Zagaris smirked. “I doubt you actually weigh 500 pounds between all of you! Now If I was tryin’ to shoot the 49ers backline they couldn’t even all fit!”

This led to a short discourse on the Niners’ chances for the upcoming season and then all it took was a nod from Petty to get everyone in place. He was amused to notice how they positioned themselves, he tried suggesting different groupings but Mike and Benmont were reluctant to leave their spots in
And he knew everyone’s eye - as it always was - would be drawn to Tom. You couldn’t not look at him. He had shot so many famous musicians, it wasn’t something he took for granted but he wasn’t apt to be starstruck now. Yet Zagaris knew, as he imagined every other photographer who had shot Petty also knew, that the man was going to be huge. He just looked like he had been born to front a rock band. And what a rock band he had, it almost looked as though he had hired people based on how they looked when standing next to him. But through his viewfinder he could always observe the nuances of interaction. And damn if their drummer thought he was also a star. That was very unusual - generally the guitar player was the one always fighting for space in the spotlight, but Mike looked as though he’d rather be doing anything else at the moment. They all had tough-guy pensive expressions, but only Tom and Stan were radiating something other than attempted cool. It was desire, of a kind, aimed at the world around them. When he asked them to move closer together, he watched Stan pull Tom to him and continue to hang onto him, which might shift the focus but the overall effect was the same: the jewel in the setting, each facet equally interesting, but only one meant to embody a special shine.

He noticed that Tom and Stan had nearly the same expression and tilt of the head as they pinned the lens. He noticed that Tom remained in his pose and yet now was a part of this new grouping, the one in which he was claimed by the man standing next to him.

You learn from the best how to draw them in.

At the radio show the previous night he had discerned some potential clashes - these guys were all willful in their own ways. And bands always were, even those who knew exactly who was in charge. But there was something about Tom which seemed to both encourage and discourage such attempts at dominance. He wanted to fight, and he wanted to win.

There was something about the way the gesture had been enacted - protective, possessive and passionate - which struck him. He didn’t give them time or space to do anything but instinctively display their camaraderie and attitude - in those instances the truth of things would surface in the images. From one second to the next an entire history could be gleaned.

Still, his portraits tended to be better, and with that image Tom was announcing his ascendancy. Even if no one knew it yet, they would, Zagaris reasoned. They certainly would because every bit of obsession and determination was evident in his face and on his body. You didn’t pose like that unless you knew you could rule the world someday. And so he wondered what would happen to all of them when that eventuality occurred.

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There was the gig, then there was the gig after the gig, which was being nice to the radio guys and the promotion guys, and the record company guys. It wasn’t always work, but sometimes it felt like it all the same. And then there was playtime. Around 2:30 am or so Stan would dangle someone’s car keys in their faces and say his farewells.

“Alright now kids, don’t do anything I wouldn’t do - and do everything I would!”

Tony and Richard didn’t approve of him going off with local girls because it was an inherent risk, but neither did Mike want to kill time in someone else’s room while Stan enacted his plan of total conquest, so this was the solution…just as long as he made it back in time to get on the bus.

“Stanley I swear to God you’d better be back on time,” Tom groused.

“I have never been late, so what is your problem?”
“It’s always at the very last minute!”

Stan rolled his eyes and looked over at their right-hand man. “Bugs, what time does the bus leave?”

“Ten o’clock as usual.”

“And do I get on the bus at ten o’clock?”

“That’s not the point -”

“Answer the question, Tommy. Do I get on the bus at ten o’clock?”

“Yeah but -”

“Then what,” Stan said, stepping forward and looking down into Tom’s face, “is your problem?”

Tom’s upward stare was of an equal intensity. “One of these days you’re gonna be late, and I’m gonna fire your ass.”

“Well you do what you gotta do, man, and until that day I’m gonna do what I wanna do.”

Stan departed with his nightly retinue and Tom stood watching him. The room grew quiet as everyone else looked everywhere but at the angry weary face of their leader.

“He won’t be late,” Ron said quietly, “he likes this too much.”

“Yeah you know he’s never gonna go too far because then he wouldn’t get to annoy you anymore,” Benmont added.

Tom laughed at that. Just a sharp bark, but enough to avert whatever might have been thrown or kicked or pushed in lieu of the true target.
“Well goddamn if this ain’t Old Home Week!” Jeff exclaimed, entering the live room.

“Yeah it’s weird, right?” Benmont replied. “I just called everyone I knew.”

“Naw, it’s good!” Stan enthused. “Crazy enough to be brilliant!”

“You know I’m here for that!”

Stan grinned, but it was just one in a slideshow of expressions. “Where’s Marty?”

“I dunno, I guess he’s comin.’”

“Is he any good now?”

This was met with a hail of razzing and small projectiles from the assemblage.

“I mean because he’s going to music school!”

Jeff rolled his eyes. “Someone tells me: ‘Man, you’re gonna go all over the world - you’re gonna live in England for a whole year, you’re gonna go everywhere - and guess what? You’re gonna go to Hollywood and who are you gonna see? Stan Lynch talkin’ the same goddamn shit he did back in G-ville when he was just a punk kid!’”

They all laughed, including the target of the jibe.

“Hey, Hollywood hasn’t changed me! Of course, I can’t speak for the rest of these assholes.”

“And we were kinda hoping it would, but if wishes were horses -” Benmont said.

“This is just like a night at the Keg,” Mike proclaimed.

“But it smells better,” Stan replied.

“Oh give it some time,” Benmont cracked, his infamous smirk surfacing.

Stan rolled over and grabbed the phone. “Yeah?” He had no idea how his voice actually sounded but he hoped it was intelligible. His mouth tasted like what he thought you might get if you mixed together all the leftover drinks from a party and let it sit in the sun for a few hours.

“Stanley? Are you alive?” Bugs asked him.

“If I’m not then this is bullshit,” he replied. “Although if Hell is living in this shithole for eternity then I guess that’s fitting.”

The other chuckled. “Well get it together kid because Tommy wants you at the house at five, alright?”

“For what?”
“Working on Ms. Nicks’ songs, so I’ve been told.”

“Are we even being paid to do this?”

“Eventually, I suppose. Are you saying you’ve got somethin’ better to do?”

“I refuse to answer on the grounds that it will incriminate the fuck outta me.”

“Now now, be a good dog, ya hear? Don’t worry, they’ll be lotsa goodies as usual.”

“Woof.” Stan slammed down the phone and sighed. This was Hollywood bullshit, and Tom was right on time in allowing it to interfere with their lives.

“So we’ll just listen to what she’s got and work it up - she wants me to write her a song but I think this is a better idea. She wants something that sounds like us, so if we play on something of hers it’s going to sound like us because it is us.”

“Didn’t she say she wanted to be in the band?” Stan asked, his expression varying shades of incredulity and hungover weariness.

“Yeah but don’t pay attention to that - I don’t think she knows what she wants, not really.”

“Women never do,” Benmont muttered.

“But you –” Tom said, pointing at Stan, “behave yourself.”

“What?!” Aw hell, I don’t give a fuck ‘bout her. I have a rule about chicks in bands.”

His three bandmates gave him interested stares.

“Oh do tell,” Benmont drawled.

“Being in a band is a whole other trip - we all know that. Everyone in a band is a total asshole. And women are complicated enough as it is. But a chick in a band? She’s been exposed to all that ego and weirdness like radiation, man, and I don’t even wanna get close to that!” Stan held up his hands and made a panicked face.

“You just hate the idea of a woman who thinks she’s better onstage than you are,” Mike teased, grinning.

“I do! For one, that’s bullshit, and for another, a woman with an ego is a dangerous thing.”

“A woman with an ego is a woman who respects herself too much to fuck you.” Tom intoned, and his audience laughed.

“Maybe so, but don’t say I didn’t warn y’all - this one will be trouble.”

“Women are always trouble, and God bless ‘em, every one.”

They drank to it because when a thing was true, you had to give it up to the man preachin’ the gospel of Terminal Romance.

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Security was tight and the post-gig amusements were rather on the dour side. But such considerations could not deter Stan from desiring to gaze out at the homeland and consider where he was, where he had come from, and what would he carry with him when he left. He had found a window at the end of the corridor not completely blacked-out and just stood staring at what he could see of the city. A quiet voice spoke his name, and he turned to see the new boss all alone, wearing jeans and flip-flops and a pullover sweatshirt, as he often did when he was trying to blend in.

“Hey man, what’s up?”

Dylan came to stand beside him. “Didn’t they tell us not to get close to the windows?”

“Yeah but I can’t waste this, you know?”

“I like the lights on the hill.”

It was the simplest of observations, but Stan had come to learn that Bob could sometimes say something so simple it became profound with his very utterance.

“I like to look at houses like that, all clustered together, and think about who lives there. If there’s another family like mine out there.”

A grimace masquerading as a smirk. “People are disappointingly similar.”

Stan laughed. “You are a cynical motherfucker sometimes, you know?”

Dylan smirked for real and held out his hands. *What can I say?*

“It’s okay to feel alone sometimes, you know? But where are all those lovely soldiers you were chasing?”

“Gone back to the barracks, I reckon. Those girls’ll kick my ass for sure.”

“And you’d beg for more.”

They laughed at this, their mutual understanding of each other as both sexual adventurers and men seeking the solace of romance, if only fleeting.

“Yeah I do feel alone here, for sure.”

“This is a place meant for rigor, and reflection. But -” he waved a hand at the lights, “you’re reflected in their eyes, forever. People say to enjoy these times, I say just remember them. Remember that you’re always a reflection in someone’s eyes. That’s a kind of immortality right there.”

“It’s humbling, when you know you’re in a place where it means more to people because they could -”

Stan couldn’t finish the thought.

“We all live in that world,” Dylan opined. “It’s just that here you have to think of it every day.”

“I can’t believe us, sometimes, how spoiled we are. Stupid.”

“Yea we are all brought low in the face of the implacable. Look man, I know there are wounds. I see them. I see how you’ve all suffered in that climb and the oxygen is running out. But just try to slide down - it hurts less that way.”
Stan had heard the whispered commentary of others regarding how the man talked in riddles and oblique observations, but in his immediate experience this man was a man and was constantly attempting to navigate the world with a map he had drawn. No one else could walk in his shoes but those shoes were the same shoes anyone could buy. Stan shrugged and ran a hand through his hair.

“Why is there so much pain in this life?” he said, and he wasn’t certain who he was asking.

“Everything is only a dream,” Dylan murmured.

“Who said that - you?”

“Lotsa people, actually.” And with that the man who was only a man departed as quietly as he had appeared.

“C’mon man, I know you want to come with us!” Stan insisted.

Ron sighed. When he had opened his door to his bandmate, he knew the purpose. And he was touched, he supposed, by the gesture. But he also considered that Stan couldn’t bear the thought of anyone not wanting to be all-in for the duration.

And he was just tired.

“I just - I need some time alone. Or at least time that’s not with all of you, that’s all. I’ll meet you guys at the next gig.”

“Aww c’mon! We’re actually gonna hang out, you know? Just mess around, like we used to.”

“But it can’t be like it was, not even if you pretend.”

“We have to try, man. And you don’t want to anymore, do you?”

Ron was used to that look - Stan could loom over you, look down at you, and pin you. It could be anything - a glare, a smile - but you were powerless to move when in his sight. He was doing it now, practically willing Ron to change his mind, to submit to his enthusiasm, his optimism.

“I’m just fried, that’s all, okay? You’ll have fun, I know you will. I wouldn’t want to spoil it because I’m feeling down.”

“You really think we’re being stupid, don’t you?”

“Naw man, I’m not. I know it will be a good time. It’s cool - I just don’t wanna go.”

Ron felt himself squirm, willed himself to stillness, didn’t want Stan to see how uncomfortable this scrutiny was to him.

“You’re hurting my feelings, man.”

Ron had to laugh. “Yeah, ‘cause you’re so sensitive.”

“I’m serious! Suddenly I’m not good enough to spend time with?”

“Man you know how it is - like with a chick, right? You get tired of anyone eventually, you just need to be alone.”
Stan shrugged. “It’s not the same, but alright, if you don’t wanna come none of us can make you.”

After closing the door Ron leaned on it and stopped to consider that point. Perhaps Stan was right, it wasn’t like a romance at all - this was a family, and you could walk away from family but there would be a connection you couldn’t entirely hope to escape.
...but you were such a pretty mess

-17-

When Stan opened the door of his apartment, clad only in a pair of bright yellow runner’s shorts, a thick wave of heat threaded through with various scents had followed him to the threshold. Tom flared his nostrils but otherwise showed no reaction to the smell.

“What?” Stan demanded.

“Can I come in, or are you entertaining?”

“I may be entertaining kicking your ass, how ‘bout that?”

“Stanley, we made a rule, remember? But it’s too goddamn hot to be sparring like this, so let me come in and have a drink, please.”

The inside wasn’t much better temperature-wise, but at least it wasn’t as bright. A ceiling fan whirred above their heads, stirring the swelter.

“Is your cooler not working?”

“I always fuck better with the air conditioner off.”

“I see.” Tom took a seat on a sofa against the far wall, eyeing Stan’s unmade bed in the center of the living room with amusement.

“Think them sheets are about to walk around on their own.”

“No doubt,” Stan replied cheerfully, handing his visitor a Coke. “Now why the fuck are you here?”

“I made a mistake, and I thought you’d rather hear it from me than from Mary, or Tony.”

“Oh yeah? Well that’s goddamn fascinating.”

“Look man, we need you, and that’s that. I’m sorry, okay? I shouldn’t have just snapped like that, but I was frustrated.”

“You were frustrated? You were frustrated?! What about me? What about all the bullshit I had to endure when everyone wanted to pick apart my thing?! I know how to play a set of fuckin’ drums and you know it.”

“I know you do.”

“How would you like to be scrutinized and criticized and insulted like that?!”

“Stanley, I have been. I spent every goddamn day as a kid gettin’ yelled at and beat up and generally treated like dirt. Less that dirt. So it ain’t particularly strange to me.”

“So you need me, huh? What about what I need?”

“You’re getting what you need, far as I can tell,” Tom said, lighting a cigarette. Stan placed a saucer before him with a decidedly sharp emphasis. “Everyone in this town either wants to fuck you, be your friend, work with you, or leech on to you because of who you are. You got this great view here -” at that Tom gestured toward the large window to their immediate left, “ - you got a nice car, got your eight-foot painting of Sammy or whatever the fuck that is, I mean, what is it we’re really talkin’
‘bout?”

“You fired me,” Stan said, continuing to stand with his hands on his hips.

“I’m sorry you felt humiliated, but c’mon, you know how it is. You get it right or you get the fuck out.”

“Yeah but I don’t get it right, and then nobody else does either. So who’s really wrong in that scenario?”

Tom took a long drag, considering his response. “This is me standing up for you, okay?”

“Like I give a fuck what Iovine thinks? Well here’s the headline, Tommy: I don’t. Only the band matters, not the opinion of some hired gun.”

“I know you don’t.”

“So is this about you and me, or is it about someone else feeding you bullshit?”

“You and me? You and me are fine -”

“No we’re not. You don’t know what to do with me.”

Tom went to take a drink and almost choked on it. Goddamn it, he thought.

Low tide at Anastasia Island, he had driven out alone with a box of photos he couldn’t bring himself to burn. Every image was pain, even as he could discern what was good about it underneath the spreading red haze of heartbreak.

That word would haunt him now.

Hoping no park ranger would come along and cite him for littering, Stan stepped out into the sun and wind after looking though each photo one last time then tearing it to bits, using scissors on the ones which would not submit to his angry actions.

This is gone, this does not exist.

He took those pieces of a dream and scattered them upon the waters, watching the sea recede then rush back to shore, and each time there was just a little less of those memories floating upon it.

But there was one photo he couldn’t bear to destroy. He had a perfect memory of how it had come to be taken and that it had tipped the situation over on its’ side. It was a state which was fragile enough without what he did. But he wouldn’t have taken it back for the world. And he did surrender the world - his world - for the ugly truth of how things had come to be.

But there was a moment in which he knew a kind of truth which was conditional, and it was something which could have only happened once.

I don’t think you realize, baby, what one little kiss can do.

Stan touched his shirt pocket and its’ freight. No one else could ever view it - had ever viewed it - and know what it meant. That was the particular remit of the two people in the photograph. He took it out and looked at himself, understanding it wasn’t him, not anymore.
But he still ached for who that kid was, what he wanted, and how he lived with what he got. And he still felt every second of that stolen kiss.

-19-

Adria and Brie fidgeted under the combined scrutiny of their fathers. As first-born progeny they were used to being adored and indulged but this summer was something rather strict when they each believed it should be a playground of discovery. Their dads worried all the more about bringing them on the road, as it was an unprecedented event.

“I don’t wanna see you wandering around where you shouldn’t be,” Mike warned. “Stay out of the way of the crew - they’ve got a job to do, they can’t be looking out for you. And you might get hurt.”

They each nodded, trying their best to look as if they hadn’t been thinking about such things.

“And don’t be hangin ‘round Stan,” Tom added.

“Why?” Adria asked. She considered it a fair question - Stan was cool. He was funny, he could do all the cartoon voices and while none of the guys doted on them since they had entered adolescence, they were at least nice enough to smile and ask, “What’s up?” whenever in proximity.

“Because Stanley is every father’s nightmare,” her father answered, and left it at that.

“And what did I tell you,” Mike asked, pointing at his daughter.

“Never to hang around guys in bands,” Brie answered.

But she looked confused as they were ordered from the room so their dads could talk about whatever it was that they talked about. Adria giggled once they were out of earshot.

“He means that Stan always has girls around.”

“Oh. But he was gonna teach me how to juggle!”

“Don’t worry, they’ll forget. You know they always forget things.”

Brie sighed. “Yeah, but Mom never does.”

-20-

“Man we fuckin’ killed out there tonight!” Benmont declared, cracking open a beer. “We destroyed those guys.”

Everyone raised their drinks except Ron.

“Why does it always have to be about trashing the other band?”

“Law of the jungle,” Mike replied with a mischievous smile. “They’re gunning for us too, you know.”

“And they can’t fuckin’ touch us!” Stan cried.

“Exactly,” Benmont agreed, chasing that statement with a long drink.

“I think that’s pretty cold,” Ron finally said. He had retreated to the corner of the room where his
road case was situated, using it like a shield. “Why can’t we just play our best, why can’t that be enough?”

“It’s no fun otherwise!” Stan said, pulling off his sweat-soaked stage clothes.

“We’re all human beings, you know.”

“Is that true, Stanley?” Tom asked.

“Some of us are more evolved than others.”

The others groaned and rolled their eyes. Mike made a “jerk-off” motion with his right hand.

“Fuck you, Campbell!” Stan exclaimed, throwing his shirt at the other.

Mike deftly caught it with one hand. “No thanks, I hear you’re a slut, no telling where that dick has been.”

Even Ron joined in the catcalls and yelling which followed.

“Hey man, don’t be jealous - you’re the one who wanted to get married.”

Mike fired the shirt back, aiming at Stan’s head. “Better that then constantly wondering if I’m gonna catch the clap.”

“It’s all part of the game, man.”

“You’re not evolved, you’re a savage,” Ron opined. Stan threw his shirt again and Ron batted it away.

“Quit throwing your nasty-ass clothes, Jesus fuck!”

Stan let out a howl and several grunts and the occupying army released their ongoing tensions yet again with laughter.

-21-

A song was stuck in his head and sometimes there was nothing better than a tiled bathroom to sing it in. So he sang whatever was in his head, sometimes only snatches of song - a chorus, or a bridge, or just one particular line. And in some of those songs were embedded recollections of traveling, of his wild adolescence, of long nights and even longer days, of heat and dust, rain and roads, strange towns and even stranger people.

Deep beneath the skin, piercing the midst of his memories. Like a splinter, like a thorn.

The King wandered by and he sang too, as it was a song he also knew. They then switched to another song, perhaps the other was curious as to how their voices sounded without accompaniment.

Don’t let me down, I
just can’t hang around
feeling this way forever.

On your balcony
you said you loved me
don’t say that you don’t remember.

In this moment, when their voices were closer than they could ever be, Stan felt himself smiling. He
was the only one who smiled with any regularity, but The King smiled back, before wandering out again and he returned to his journey through the miles. In a short while they would sing this song once more and he would be staring at that hallowed blond head, feeling the bounce and sway of the music, the longing and yearning it contained, and wondering which memory it would become tied to...this night, this show? Or another which the song could provoke, could accompany, instead. A memory of an afternoon slow and sleepy, suspended within the frantic pace of their ambition.

...don’t say that you don’t remember

Oh, but he would. And he probably had. For the other it would itch, it would sting, it would throb.

But only for him. The King would move along, a ghost in his own story.
power, fear, money, anger, love

“Just tell me already, c’mon, no bullshit.”

A late flight: the heavens they moved through were dark, although somewhere beyond their sight the moon was illuminating clouds and water. Some were sleeping, but the sounds of a lively poker game could also be heard. Tom had allowed Stan to pin him rather than insist on a type of near-privacy by choosing to sit with Bugs or Tony - neither of whom would talk if he didn’t feel like talking. But sitting next to Stan on a long flight meant an equally long conversation.

“No bullshit, I don’t know. I mean, it’s like trying to explain an orgasm - you don’t know how you did it.”

Stan’s expression was comical enough that Tom cracked up against his will. Stan really was one of the funniest people he had ever known, with a natural talent for getting other people to laugh. He could recall more than once some of the crew begging Stan to stop, as they were nearly paralytic with hilarity.

“I absolutely know how to bust my nut, man. And you know they have books about how to make women come, in case you were wondering.”

In between his bouts of the giggles Tom asked, “And how many of those did you read?”

“All of ‘em! You gotta be prepared for these things.”

He buried his face in his hands, full-on cackling now. He didn’t doubt Stan’s assertions but the whole thing seemed so absurd. Sex had always been a kind of mystery cult to him - he knew that everyone eventually had sex, but no one was particularly forthright about how they entered into it, or whether it made them happy. Tom thought the anticipation of it was far more powerful than actually doing it. But for Stan, ever-assured it would be the outcome of any encounter with a woman, he treated it more like just another bodily function.

And of course it was. But nothing was ever so simple for him.

“Tommy you just make everything so mysterious.”

“I guess I do. But it makes things more interesting, don’t you think?”

“I’m not like you, I just wanna know what’s happening, what I’m supposed to be doing.”

No, you’re not. But I guess that’s what I like about you.

Tom paused to light a cigarette, signalled the stewardess to bring him another drink. “Alright then, I’ll tell you something, no bullshit. You wanna write songs, you’re gonna have to write a hundred bad songs before you write a good one. That’s what it is: it’s work. I bet even Mr. Don Henley told you that.”

“He did say that you have to concentrate on your strengths.”

“Well there you go, sounds like he’s giving you a good education.”
“Look, if you don’t wanna share your process” - giving that word a sardonic emphasis - “then you won’t, I get that. I’m just trying to learn, that’s all. You don’t have to be threatened by my asking about it.”

“I’m not. I just don’t know how to explain it to you. I don’t even think anyone should explain it. It’s a personal thing. But if you wanna be creative, I support you in that, I really do.”

“Really?”

He was doing it again, Tom thought. When Stan answered any statement of his with that word, it meant he didn’t believe it at all.

“Yeah. So how are you writing? On piano or guitar?”

“Guitar.”

“Well good, then your chops will come back to you after a while.”

Stan seemed to lose interest in the topic. After the stewardess had brought them each another drink he leaned in, dropping his voice to a near-whisper.

“Are you honestly telling me you don’t know how to make a girl come?”

Tom pulled back, affronted. “Stanley that’s none of your business!”

“But I can help you, man. I mean, you’ve got this far without it but think of the possibilities!”

Tom laughed again, shaking his head. “You are such a dawg, my boy.”

“You are the oldest 27-year-old I ever met!” Stan proclaimed.

Jane and Adria had come to rehearsal bearing a cake and they all took a break to have a piece, after being assured she hadn’t been the one to bake it.

“Why do you say that?” Tom asked. He poked the cake with a fork but didn’t look as though he cared to eat any.

“I dunno, you make me think of a guy we knew back in this one town outside of Atlanta. We used to play there every so often because they had a good club, it was fun. And the cat who ran it was this black dude who was pretty hip, you know, he was into rock n’roll and liked us because we brought in a crowd. But he worried ‘bout every damn thing you can think of. I used to tell him he musta been a hundred years old for all the worrying he did.”

“Well if I don’t worry, who will?”

“Yeah okay, it’s just that - I don’t think you’ve ever not been old. That’s what I mean.”

“That’s a helluva thing to tell me on my birthday, Stanley.”

His drummer shrugged. “It’s just what I think.”

And he had to ponder later, on the drive home, if what he was wanting was the desire of someone hardened by experience, rather than the wild dream of anyone his age. How could Stan see that - he was barely in his twenties. Was it entirely obvious that his ambition had somehow aged him, turned
him into an old man crouching inside the shell of the cool guy he was attempting to embody?

*What does it matter? He’s just fucking with your head.*

Still, he was left to wonder. If Stan saw it, and was the only one who would actually tell him such a thing, did that mean everyone could see it?

As Tom turned onto his street he pushed it down into that same space where every other doubt had been assigned to - those dark waters he wanted to drown such things in, though they only settled to the bottom, waiting their turn to ascend once more.

-24-

“So how’d you do with that girl from last night?” Benmont asked.

Tom and Mike made it appear as if they weren’t paying attention to what was going on in the live room between takes, but leaving the talkback on was something they always did because they knew the more interesting conversations were apt to occur when the others thought they weren’t listening.

“She was kinda - I dunno - like, normal? I mean, she’s going on and on about her weird childhood and her boho parents and all that and then we get to my place and she just wants to talk - I mean, fuck me, I’ve already done all the talking!”

They cracked up in a conspiratorial sort of way.

“But then this morning she’s in the shower and she’s singing ‘La Vie en rose’ like she’s goddamn Edith Piaf and man, she can blow, I tell ya.”

“Wow, is she a singer for real?”

“Nah, she’s a waitress at the Country Club.”

“In Reseda?”

“Yeah, what other country club is gonna admit my white trash ass in there?”

“Oh you *wish* you were white trash, you’d be more interesting.”

“And what does that make you, College Boy?”

“Boring as shit, I admit it.”

“So I ask her: ‘Hey, do you speak French?’ And she’s, like, ‘Nah, I just learned that off the record ’cause my mom loves it.’”

“Yikes, way to kill the mystery.”

“I know! I was thinking: damn, you coulda just said that line from ‘Lady Marmalade’ and I woulda been happy thinkin’ you were all continental and shit.”

“Gonna see her again?”

“I doubt it. For one thing, it’s too goddamn far to drive just for pussy!”

Tom had been standing behind the console, caught up in their conversation without realizing it until Mike leaned in and said “Earth to Major Tom, come in Major Tom.”
“Huh? Wait a minute, I gotta write something down.”

Mike furrowed his brow but continued to grill Shelly on some of his more arcane audio techniques.

As he stood by the stairs to the stage listening to the burgeoning crowd, sounds swelling as more people entered the venue, he felt a pair of large hands take hold of his shoulders, giving him the impression he was more frail than he believed he was.

“You’re shaking like a leaf.”

“There’s a draft somewhere.”

Stan gave a breathy laugh, stirring his hair. “Uh-huh. Look, you know you’re with us, right? You don’t have to worry, we’re always gonna back you up.”

“I’m not worried.”

Another soft chuckle. “Yeah you’re only shivering like a dog in the rain because it’s cold in here. That’s the problem.”

“Stanley, stop trying to pry, okay?”

The hands lifted and he found himself missing their weight, like he might suddenly blow away.

“Hey if it comes to that we’re all pushing you out on that stage, Tommy. But I don’t think we’ll have to, because you know what? Those people don’t give a shit ‘bout us, so you better go out there and make them care.”

He was about to dismiss the notion but his anger, fathoms-deep, made a slow hot climb up his spine. He was chagrined because it was true. This world needed to hear him, and he would accept no other perspective on the matter.

“I don’t need a pep talk, thanks.”

Stan put his elbows on Tom’s shoulders and leaned in. “Oh I know what you need, not that you’ll ever ask for it. But that’s okay, you still might get it anyway.”

He let go and walked away, whistling the lead from “Breakdown” as he went. Tom gritted his teeth because the feeling he had at that moment was equal parts fascination and annoyance and he had never in his life been pulled in opposite directions at the same time. It was strange and yet also interesting. He shivered again, but his stage fright was gone.

“So I’ve been thinking about things and -”

“Look man, you wanna go on the road with Sebastian, I understand. He’s payin’ more, how could I possibly compete with that?”

Stan looked at Tom for nearly a minute, looked into him. He found himself blinking, wondering what the fuck is this about until the kid finally spoke.

“Now why would you think I’d wanna be anywhere else? Just for money, like I’m a - whaddya call it - hired gun or somethin?’ This is our band, right? And it’s gonna be cool.”
“Yeah it is, I know it will be.”

“That’s not what I was gonna say at all.”

“Well alright then, what were you gonna say?”

Another long stare. Tom couldn’t help wondering what it was Stan was looking for.

“When we go back to Florida, we should all live in a house together, don’t you think?”

Tom nodded, relieved at such a prosaic line of inquiry. “Yeah that’d be okay, I reckon.”

Stan felt restless, wandering the halls backstage rather than hanging out in the hospitality room with everyone else...the band, the promo guys, whatever girls had managed to get backstage, the schmoozers...

Everyone but Tom.

He found Bugs in the band’s dressing room, raiding the assortment of leftover drinks and snacks.

“So where’s Mr. TCFP?”

Bugs didn’t bother to look up from his task. “Who wants to know?”

“I know he’s back on the bus, why don’t you just fucking say it?”

“If you know then why are you asking me?”

“I just don’t get it.”

“You know how he is, same as I do.”

Stan leaned against the wall, watching as Bugs rifled through bags of potato chips.

“No, none of us know him as well as you do now. Which is goddamn ironic considering I’m the one who got you this job.”

Bugs turned around at that, narrowing his eyes. “You may have got me this job but I’m the one who kept it.”

“I just have to wonder - you know - whether you’re a shield or a wall.”

“I do what I’m asked to do, and nothin’ more. Stanley, go in there and pick your trim for the night, please. You’re acting like a goddamn nuisance right now.”

“And that’s another thing - you actually think you can talk to me like that.”

“I can because I’ve known you long enough. Too long, probably. And I know when you’re just trying to stir the shit and turn up the heat. What’s wrong, man, are you bored? Have you finally realized that fucking a different woman every night isn’t actually as much fun as you thought it would be? You fell ass-backwards into a genuine dream world and what are you doing? You’re pouting, trying to find a reason to be upset. Now that is fuckin’ ludicrous.”

“Oh I earned this spot, don’t you fucking try to claim otherwise.”
They were so engrossed in their exchange it seemed as though Tony had appeared out of nowhere and was now standing between them.

“Guys, what is this? Bugs, Tom wanted to know what’s taking you so long.”

Bugs grabbed his foraged items and left the room.

“Stan, why don’t you come in here, the girls have been asking for you.”

“So you were on the bus too, huh? Must be some party.”

Tony shook his head and gently steered his charge across the hall to the usual festivities.
The party after the party - which had also been a performance - was nearly as raucous and crowded. Stan was bored with the prospects after an hour and looked around for his guys. Tom and Mike and Bugs were huddled with some guy talking guitars, Tony and Richard and Bill Graham were catching up on industry gossip, Ron and Jim were talking to girls, laughing every so often, but where was Ben? He grabbed another beer and set off down the hallway, asking various people if they’d seen his bandmate. One of the venue security guys pointed towards an exit door which was propped open slightly.

“You should tell ‘im to come inside, the fog is killer this time of night.”

Stan walked out and the temperature dropped so quickly all the sweat on his body felt as though it had frozen. Benmont was leaning against the wall just beyond the door, smoking and watching the smoke mix with the oncoming fog.

“Damn it’s cold out here, what are you doing?”

The other shrugged. “It was too much in there.” He held his joint out to Stan.

“Is it any good?”

“Yeah, it’s from Humboldt.”

“Where’s that?”

“It’s North of here.” Stan gave him a blank look and he smirked. “It’s where they grow the good pot.”

“Oh!”

Stan opened the beer and they enacted a trade. After a couple tokes, Stan traded it back and downed the rest of the beer. Benmont chuckled.

“What?”

“I was just thinking of something my dad said when I told him we were going on tour again. He said, ‘An entertainer never gets any holidays.’”

Stan blew out another lungful and laughed. “Every damn day is a holiday for us!”

“And we’re not playing today, so we do get New Year’s Day off, kinda.”

“I guess even your dad is wrong sometimes.”

Benmont grinned. “Just don’t tell him that. But I did send him my gold record to thank him for letting Tommy talk him into not kicking me out of the house when I quit college.”

“Yeah that sounds fair.”

“What did you do with yours?” Benmont took the last hit and pinched out the roach, flicking it into the dark alley behind the venue.
“I hung it over my toilet.”

The other cracked up. “I don’t know whether to think that’s classy or ridiculous.”

“I figure it’s the one place where everybody will see it. When we get a platinum record I’m gonna hang it over my bed.”

“And you know what’s gonna happen?” Benmont asked as they re-entered the building. “It’s gonna fall off the wall during the next big earthquake and kill you.”

“Shit, I didn’t even think of that!”

“I know you didn’t, but if you can’t get a girl wet with your own rap you are sorely lacking, kid.”

“You must be high, motherfucker, because I know you did not just insult my game.”

“Christ, I hope I am!” Benmont said, and they came into the gathering with renewed vigor.

-Denny had brought Tom to Pasadena and he now stood in front of a painting, not knowing what to say.

“I don’t know anything about art, you know.”

“I know you don’t,” Denny said, but kindly, as he generally tended to do. “You don’t need to know who painted it or how. All that matters is how it makes you feel, what it tells you.”

“It’s a guy shoveling snow. I don’t know what that’s like.”

“Are you curious about it? Does it look cold?”

Tom squinted. “Yeah sure, I mean, every time I saw snow in the movies I always thought about what it must be like to be cold.”

They moved on to the next one. “Think of your songs like paintings. When people hear them, they’re going to feel something. So you have to make them colorful in different ways. You have to draw people into them. Someone can hear a song on the radio and forget it five minutes later. But you’re an artist, you don’t want that. You want to make art.”

Denny waved a hand across the length of the gallery they were standing in.

“People think old paintings like these don’t mean anything, the past is dead. But art is something that can live on longer than any person does.”

Tom nodded. “Like the Pyramids.”

“Yes. And some of these paintings are hundreds of years old. But they still have the capacity to excite the mind. Think about it - do you believe you can write songs people will want to listen to a hundred years from now?”

Tom felt himself grasping for the means to even imagine such a thing. He remembered visiting his grandparents, looking through their small collection of 78 rpm discs and thinking they were the oldest things he had ever seen. He was not allowed to play the records, though he was curious about what they were. His grandmother had dismissed them as “hillbilly stuff” but as he had reached the age where his obsession with music had taken hold, he would have welcomed anything.
“I’d sure like to think they would - but hell, even rock n’roll ain’t that old yet.”

“I know all you’ve ever wanted was a rock band, but even a rock band is capable of making people feel deeply.”

Eventually they ended up at Russell’s - a hamburger joint on Fair Oaks Boulevard - and they talked more about music, but Denny kept veering off into other subjects, things Tom had no knowledge of.

“I’m trying to understand what you’re saying, man, but you gotta remember I came from nothing.”

“It’s the common thread, Tommy - so many musicians have come from poverty, they wanted better lives. You’re no different. But you can be different by how you do it. Don’t merely think about getting out, think about getting up.”

“Up above the crowd,” Tom said, grinning.

“Exactly. Think about all those guys Leon goes about with - those guys aren’t ever going to amount to anything because they’re not thinking beyond the night, or even the next five minutes. But you’re different because you want it more.”

Tom ate his cheeseburger and looked out the window on a world he knew little about - affluent, tidy, sedate. And no matter the amount of success he desired, he didn’t want what those people had. He wanted to want and never stop wanting.

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Stan emerged from the shower, vigorously rubbing his hair. The TV was on but Mike had the sound turned down, was sitting on his bed playing that beat-up acoustic some hippy back in Gainesville had given him.

Who just gives away a guitar?

But Stan was learning Mike had that kind of luck. Maybe it was something in that strange face of his. Stan had always thought, even before he really knew him, that Mike looked like one of those guys who becomes a monk or a shaman, a sort of childlike beatific serenity in his face, his curly hair a ready-made halo. He certainly lived like a monk, which was totally cramping his roommate’s style.

Mike looked up then grimaced. “Fuck’s sake Stanley, would you put a towel on or somethin?! I’m tired of lookin’ at your pecker all the damn time.”

“Then don’t stare, Campbell. I know it’s difficult to resist.”

“Fuck off.”

Stan obliged the other by pulling on a pair of jeans, then looked through a stack of three blank cassettes on the nightstand between their beds. “What’re these?”

“Demos.”

“Whose demos?”

“Mine.”

“Demos for what?”

Mike shrugged. “Just songs. I give ‘em to Tom, he uses whatever he likes.”
“Did he use any of these?”

“Nah. When we get back home I’m gonna give ‘em to the publishing office, maybe someone else might use ‘em.”

“So how many songs do you give him?”

“I dunno, a lot. I think that’s about ten songs right there.”

“Goddamn, you mean to tell me you wrote an entire album’s worth of songs?!”

“It’s just music, but yeah, I guess so.”

“This is what I keep talking about - Tommy can’t even accept your help in the form of songs.”

“It’s not about that, man, he doesn’t need my help.”

“Yeah he does - he needs all of us.”

“You’re twistin’ my words again, you always do that. I don’t know why I let you do that all the time.”

“Hey, I’m just trying to show you that he doesn’t treat you fair, that’s all. If he was fair, then you would write the whole album with him. But he just throws you a bone now and then so you can feel needed.”

“It’s not like that!” Mike shouted. He looked chagrined and Stan held up his hands.

“Look, he’s your guy and I know you don’t wanna believe it -”

“Stanley shut the hell up already. You don’t know a goddamn thing about it.”

“Then tell me about it.”

“I don’t feel like talkin’ anymore. Leave me alone.”

Stan shrugged and turned up the sound on the TV, changing the channel until he settled on a rerun of *Starsky and Hutch*. Mike continued to play and after a few minutes he seemed to be playing along to whatever was happening on the screen, even the commercials.

“I’m just gonna say this one thing -”

“Shut up.”

“No you need to hear this. Did you ever really think about why Tommy asked you not to leave him? He needs you most of all, but he’ll never tell you that.”

“He doesn’t need to.”

“Oh so you already know? Then you’re just being a sucker, and there’s no help for that.”

“I swear to God if you don’t shut up already -”

“Fine!”

“I know you think I’m just a dumb hick but I’m not.”
“I don’t think that! I just think you believe what you want to, and that might not be such a great idea.”

“And I think I know him better than you do.”

“Sometimes you don’t have to know someone to know what they’re all about.”

A pillow sailed into Stan’s face.

“Now you’re just full of shit, and you’re always full of shit.”

Stan put the pillow behind his head. “I thought you weren’t talkin’ to me.”

Mike snorted and picked up his guitar. “I’m not.”

Stan smirked. “Uh-huh.”

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It would have been fine if all they’d done was played, concentrated on working out the ideas they were presented with, shaping them into actual songs.

But goddamn if she wouldn’t stop talking.

“I was telling Jane earlier,” Stevie said, spreading her exquisitely manicured and bejewelled hands to encompass the mostly-empty room which the band used at Tom’s house as a casual rehearsal space, “all you really need is one good piece and then you can create the rest of the decor around that.” She took a sip of brandy (with some tea added) and continued. “Don Henley taught me that, he has such great taste.”

“Piece of what, exactly?” Tom asked.

“A piece, you know, like, a piece of furniture or something decorative. I wrote a song about a lamp that my mom gave me after we joined Fleetwood Mac. She was, like, telling me I did this great thing and I deserved a reward. It’s a Tiffany lamp and it’s very mystical. I carried it on the plane from Phoenix to LA, you know, I couldn’t let it go. And they didn’t want to let me on the plane with it but I insisted!” She laughed and took another sip. “And I wrote that, you know.” She then paused to sing: And the light that shines through the shining night is the lamp that I carried from my mother’s home. “And it commands the whole room, it’s so beautiful and it’s real Tiffany. I created my whole decor from that one lamp.”

Smiles and nods and indulgent chuckles all around but Stan believed from their expressions that everyone was thinking the exact same thing.

Did she actually just admit she wrote a song about a lamp?
A performance where Tom felt they had finally broken through a barrier - they were listening to each other, they were playing as though no one else mattered but them.

It didn’t matter that the audience was only about 20 people - what mattered is that they were good. Finally, unassailably, good.

Elation in the shithole room behind the stage allotted to the band, giddy laughter, and Stan waylaid him in the hallway when he went to take a piss. The other was waiting for him outside the door, backed him up against the wall next to the payphone. Their bodies still steaming from their labors. And he knew, because their specific telepathy had been finally realized. Stan had followed every nuance of his movements, punctuating his gestures and poses and anticipating his changes before he’d even thought of them.

At one point they were egging each other on, the music taking them somewhere they couldn’t get to alone. And he knew Stan could see it in his face, how good it felt. It was an intimacy Tom was shocked to discover, but he saw it in Stan’s gaze too, a new knowledge between them.

“It was good, right?”

“Yeah it was great.”

Stan leaned down, his voice pitched low and seductive. “It can be like that every time. You just have to trust me.”

“I do.”

“Naw man, not to play the songs. You have to trust me to let me take you there. You know what I mean.”

Tom thought what he heard was: you know what I want.

He didn’t respond to the assertion but he did know. Because it had felt like euphoria, like desire, and he had liked it, wanted to succumb to it. Even now he wondered if it would happen again and they stared at one another for moments untold, until Benmont came down the hallway asking what was wrong with the shitter.

“Nothin,’” Tom informed him, “it’s all yours, brother.”

Stan smirked and winked at him and Tom stood there for a few minutes in wonder at whatever it was which had risen up in him, like that time he took acid and thought there was a miniature sun inside him and if he opened his mouth he’d be able to see its’ rays shining forth. Languid warmth mixed with the chill of sweat soaking his clothes and drying on his body.

What had they done? Nothing he’d ever done before.

And he wanted to do it again. Immediately.
Denny received a call from Tom and he sounded desperate, which was a quality Denny wouldn’t have normally ascribed to his tow-headed charge.

“I don’t know what to say to him, man. I don’t understand why he can’t just play the fuckin’ song. But you’re the producer, right? So maybe you can get him to listen.”

Denny was intrigued that Tom had asked him to mediate the situation but felt compelled to continue to offer his ongoing advice.

“Yes, I am the producer, aren’t I? But this is the sort of thing you’re going to have learn to deal with - it’s your band and if someone isn’t performing to your standards then you need to say so. Look what happened with Randall.”

“But Stan’s not a bad drummer, not at all. He just can’t play this song for some reason.”

“Look, don’t come in tomorrow, not until I call you. Let me talk to him, but without the rest of you around, right?”

Tom agreed, and the talk moved on to other subjects. Denny was continuing to attempt to draw him out, make the rounds of the local clubs, but Tom was not interested in socializing, being seen, or even checking out other bands most of the time. Denny thought this tendency was both good and bad. Good because Tom’s focus was nigh unwavering. Bad because a musician shouldn’t live in a bubble, especially one who had such a potentially broad populist appeal as Tom.

The next day Denny came into the studio. He found Max and Noah in the control room spinning around in their chairs, accompanied by the sound of Stan blowing take after take.

“How long?” Denny asked.

Noah looked at his watch. “Time is all relative, but I’d say about 20 minutes.”

“Turn off the talkback, please.” His request obeyed, Denny opened the door to the live room and Stan looked up with a start, pushing the headphones from his ears.

“Hey man -”

He shut the door behind him. “Stan, let me ask you something: do you fuck like you play drums?”

Stan had become notorious for stretching his long face into comical expressions but this time his look of confusion was not a joke. “Huh?”

“I wager you do. You hammer into all those girls like a rabid dog - you get hard, then you get stiff, and they can barely walk afterwards. But who’s really having a good time?”

“Denny what the hell are you talking about?”

“I’m talking about groove, my boy. You and Ron have the most important job in the band - a rock band is nothing without bass and drums. If you can’t groove, if you can’t swing, then you sound totally dead. You’re just hammering on and you’re not building a house, are you? You’re laying down the beat, and that can be a tricky thing even under the best of circumstances. You can’t think about it - you don’t think about fucking, do you? It just happens.”

“I’m trying, I really am. I mean, I’ve only been in a recording studio two other times in my whole life, man, so I’m still trying to get the hang of this! I don’t have the same chops like those other cats you brought in, but I’m doing my thing.”
“I know. But I really want to you stop thinking so much, it’s not going to do you any good in the long run.”

Stan had to laugh. “Man, if my dad heard you say that he would pitch a fit!”

“Look, there’s a show tonight - Bob Marley is playing at The Roxy. Meet me there ‘round 8 o’clock, right? Mike is coming too. I think there’s something you could learn from Carly and Seeco about the groove.”

“Okay sure - but let me tell you something, I don’t fuck like a rabid dog.”

Denny smirked and turned to leave. “People are never honest about their own abilities, Stan,” he called over his shoulder. “That’s why there are producers.” He came through the door, shut it behind him once more, and regarded his engineers staring into space at whatever their acid-addled brains were displaying for them.

“Bad news, chaps, I’m taking Mike and Stan to the show tonight instead, they need to hear the Wailers more than you do.”

Max shrugged and tapped his forehead. “I’m hearing them right now, boss - it’s better than what’s going on in there.” He jerked a thumb at the live room.

Denny chuckled. “Yes, I imagine it is.”

The entertainment industry elite had turned out for this show, and Denny knew some of them had never heard a real reggae song in their lives. But they would learn tonight, and how.

He found Mike and Stan waiting for him over at the Rainbow, trying not to gawk at some of the heavy-hitters they were observing from the bar. But Denny was pleased to see they had at least dressed as though they imagined they were rock stars - each in skin-tight jeans, Stan in a silky black button-down he had undone nearly to his navel, decked out in various pieces of jewelry he had been given by various of his girlfriends. Mike wore one of his gaudy flowered shirts which Denny could swear he’d seen before, but no matter.

“Well if it isn’t the Cranleigh Dandy!” Stan called out, hand raised in welcome.

“That’s quite a suit, man,” Mike said admiringly.

“One must keep up appearances, dear boys,” Denny replied, herding them towards the club. He installed them at a table up in the VIP area, then made the rounds to inspect the crowd, greet the band, and procure the all-important herb to enjoy during the set. He chuckled to himself, these boys were going to be stoned out of their ever-loving gourds tonight.

Time was a plaything in Bob Marley’s capable hands. Stan felt like he could listen to this music for days without end. The ganja which Denny had passed to them hit him like a bag of wet sand and unlocked something in his brain, made it easier to soak up the atmosphere. He marveled at this new discovery, the sound definitely grooved, it had good vibes but also meaning. These were protest songs but Marley sang his sentiments in a reasonable, calm fashion, secure in his righteous knowledge. There was none of the anger Stan associated with protest music, only a firm insistence in acknowledging the truth. That message resonated deep within him, bound up in the way the band chugged along, one song becoming two becoming three and then circling back to the beginning, it
was a tide of music which they all swam within, artists and audience alike. The band was fucking tight, and he knew that the Heartbreakers had to strive for this kind of unity.

The bass and drums were a pulse and they rode just behind the beat, an anchor but also a spur. He was amazed that they could keep the same tempo for over twenty minutes without ceasing, even as the songs flowed one into another. A groove could stretch like taffy, it could ooze thick and sticky, it could sound like the best sex felt: gliding with just the slightest bit of grit, that friction which eventually pushed you over the edge and made you blow your load until your balls ached. Having spent every year since the age of 15 performing in bands, Stan knew the power of moving a crowd, getting them on your trip and then keeping them there. This crowd was Marley’s crowd, held within his long-fingered talented hands.

“This shit is deep!” Stan yelled to Denny, who grinned and nodded and had another toke.

“D’ya think you can do that?” Denny asked.

Stan favored him with a beautiful blissed-out sort of smile. “I think I could fuck like that, but I dunno if I could play like that.”

Denny laughed so hard he ended up coughing. “Well it’s a start.”

“Look man, I admit I let Iovine talk me into something I shouldn’t have done. I kept telling him we couldn’t just fire you.”

“But then you did!” Stan shouted.

Tom could tell that his attempts to explain the situation were having the opposite effect on Stan. His drummer was angry now, his body rigid, and he was honestly afraid the other might just haul off and deck him. Stan had a foot on him so he figured he could lay him out with one punch if he wanted to. But since when had he ever been afraid? It had happened with enough regularity that he just faced into it like it was a gale-force wind.

“I’m trying to apologize, trying to admit I was wrong.”

Stan dropped into the space on the couch right next to Tom, nudging him with his long limbs. He pitched his voice low like when he told dirty jokes or sarcastic comments which were meant for Tom’s ears only.

“An apology isn’t enough.”

Tom suppressed the urge to get up from his seat. Part of him wanted to flee just as part of him wanted to be pinned, in the way only Stan could do it. That strange fluttering rose within, the same feeling he got when they were onstage flirting - something the crowd never got to see. But Tom couldn’t help it, Stan could make him feel so good sometimes, and he would be rewarded for his smiles and winks and other expressions. No one else seemed equipped to respond to such attentions when he wanted to give them.

“C’mon,” Tom said, more breath than speech. “You know I need you.”

And he looked deep into the other, willing his surrender.
Margo appreciated that the guys in the band all had easy names to remember: Tom, Mike, Ron, Stan. All except the keyboard player, saddled with one of those weird portmanteaus which the obscenely wealthy invented to differentiate between every eldest male who bore the same name. And Tom, wow, he was a *stunner* for sure. But all the guys had a vibe to them, they were cool - even if half of them didn’t want to pose for photos because they somehow believed it a frivolous activity. They could certainly live up to their band name, potentially.

It was suggested that they be photographed *in situ* - playing along to the pre-recorded tracks of their new album, because they hadn’t yet learned how to pose for the sake of posing. This was counter-intuitive to most bands because either you knew how to look like you belonged together, or you didn’t. Margo could tell these guys *did* belong together, even if they couldn’t.

The theatre they had rented for the purpose was purportedly once a porno house. It certainly *smelled* like it could have been, and then that assertion was proven with a particular discovery. Leave it to the drummer to have found such a weird artifact, but who else would it have been?

“I don’t wanna pose behind the drums!” he protested when it was time for his shots. “If I’m gonna be identified as the cat in this thing, I want people to see me, *not* my drums.”

*Who talked like that?* she thought. Margo heard a line from Joni in her head: *Those cannibals of shuck-and-jive, they’ll eat a working girl like her alive.*

Andee had taken some group shots of the guys on a row of seats which might have been of questionable cleanliness, and Stan was peeved that she made him crouch down in the back so he could fit in the frame. His expression in those shots made him look like a moody mascot.

“Hey Andee,” Tom called out. “You didn’t finish your story about being in Gram’s movie.”

“I’m surprised I can even recall half of it!” she replied, grinning. “You gotta remember we were on acid for, like, most of the time.”

“I’d go see Gram in a movie,” Mike said.

“Oh hell yes,” Tom enthused. “I am crushed that this happened but never got finished. That would be the coolest Western ever!”

Margo smiled. Andee was in, Andee was cool, she knew rock n’roll royalty and ran in the same circles as Denny Cordell and therefore the guys didn’t give her any shit, mostly. But Stan seemed hell-bent on giving *everyone* a hard time. And to prove he was *literal* about such a pursuit he produced an enormous dildo, waving it around while standing behind Andee as she shot the bass player. Ron immediately cracked up, destroying the pensive brooding persona he was attempting to channel. But as soon as it happened, Stan stepped back and put his hands behind his back, smoothing his expression to one which was completely innocent of such scheming.

Margo took his arm, pulling him away from the setup before Andee could see what he was doing. “Where did you get that thing?!”

“I found it!” Stan was grinning and he was damn *cute*, she had to admit. The kind of cute where a girl might find him in bed with some other girl and he would smile that smile and be forgiven. “It’s wild, right?” The thing had a crank and Stan demonstrated how it could achieve several states of rigidity.

“Did you wash it off first, at least?”
“Oh yeah, but it didn’t smell funky so I figured it was okay. Just abandoned. Sad, you know?”

Margo chuckled and shook her head. It was always the drummer.
Three days after they headlined the Whisky A Go-Go for two nights - accompanied by all the relatively minor glory which had rained down upon them from on high - Tom was driving to the local liquor store for cigarettes and the news on the radio stopped him cold.

He ended up buying a bottle of tequila and driving to Mike’s house. The face of his partner told him they shared the sorrow.

“‘We gotta drink to Elvis, man.’”

“But you don’t even like to drink.”

“This is bigger than what I like or don’t like to do. This is a loss.”

Mike opened the door a bit wider but Tom shook his head.

“Nah, c’mon, let’s go for a drive.”

“Have you been drinkin’ already?”

Tom shook his head again.

“Not yet - I got a bottle of Cuervo. But c’mon, we gotta do somethin.’”

He went back to the car and waited for Mike to make his excuses. After a few minutes Mike came out again, pausing to lace up his sneakers and promising Marcie something in reply to her harangue from inside the house. He got in the car without a word. Making his way to the freeway, Tom punched through stations and everyone was playing Elvis. He kept on until he came upon a station playing “Hard-Headed Woman” and Mike gave him a smirk.

“What was the first song, do you remember?” Tom asked him. “When I got that box of 45s, I don’t remember which one I played first, I think it might have been ‘Blue Suede Shoes.’ That’s why I bought G.I. Blues, you know, ‘cause it had that song on it.”

“I don’t remember either, my dad had those records but I don’t really remember the songs so much as just listening to Scotty’s guitar.”

They lapsed into silence again as Tom drove up the onramp of the northbound 101.

“Where’re we goin?’” Mike asked.

Tom made a noncommittal kind of sound. “I wasn’t even thinkin’, really. Could we sneak onto the Paramount Ranch?”

“Don’t we know somebody out there? I thought we met some guy?”

Tom started laughing, shaking out a cigarette and pushing in the dashboard lighter. “I think you might could be a little more vague there, Campbell.”

“Hell, open that tequila already and I might manage it.”

“It’s in the trunk. Guy at the liquor store told me I’d get busted otherwise, they’d impound the car. This is my baby, goddamn it!” He stroked the steering wheel fondly then retrieved the lighter.
“I can’t tell you how many times I’ve driven around with a beer and no one’s clocked me yet.”

Tom sputtered smoke and amused pique. “Yeah but you’re the one who gets away with every damn thing, I swear.”

Mike shrugged. “I have that kind of face.”

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At night - and only at night - the Chateau Marmont lived up to its’ name, looking almost like a fairy tale castle on the hill above Sunset Boulevard. One might imagine a movie-star princess in the tower, patiently combing her long blonde locks while waiting for a prince to rescue her...admittedly, one likely on the nod or fucking some other girl somewhere down the hill, but he still might quest for her cloistered virtue...eventually.

At night - and only at night - the Strip was a wild ride.

As Tom drove by the famed edifice, singing along with “She’s So Tough” on the 8-track, he thought there might be a song in it somewhere, but perhaps beyond his capabilities to capture.

He was also thinking: *we could play this song* - but who would know it? Covers couldn’t be too obscure a choice.

Tom pulled into the parking lot of The Roxy - where the real business was being conducted - hoping no one would clock him too close. The trick was you had to look like you weren’t who they thought you were.

When the call came he had been thinking of sleeping, but thinking about sleeping and actually doing it were distinct processes which might not have a relationship. Tom usually had to think about sleeping for several hours before finally accepting that he probably should. So he began entertaining the possibility early in the evening even though he might not accomplish it till the sky began to turn from black to blue.

“Hey T.P., I’m real sorry to have to call you at home and all, but I couldn’t get ahold of Tony D. Benmont, man, he’s totally plastered and I’m kinda afraid to just let him out of here - even *with* someone, y’know? Like some chick could totally roll him in the state he’s in.”

“Did you call Stan?” Tom asked.

“Yeah man, but he didn’t pick up either.”

Tom sighed, looking around for his shoes. “Yeah I coulda figured Stanley’s up to no good his own self, so -”

“I’m real sorry, man -”

“Yeah it’s alright, I’ll come get ‘im.”

“If you wanna just send a car for him -”

Tom gave that idea a moment of serious thought but then decided he didn’t want to wake Mary. She deserved a good night’s sleep. He sighed again.

“Don’t sweat it, man, I’m comin.’ Just try to contain him.”

“Oh don’t worry, I doubt he can even stand up at this point.”
As he parked, Tom smirked to himself - of course these guys cared about Ben, he was a regular, likely a decent tipper. And he was an entertaining drunk. But his boss wasn’t feeling particularly charitable. Tom didn’t like the Rainbow - he’d spent too many nights there while running with Leon and pros or no pros, all these guys would do was hang out, bullshit, get drunk, and try their luck with the groupies. He didn’t like to think of Benmont desiring to spend his time that way, even as he considered it none of his business.

But mostly he was worried about what might happen to his upholstery.

The night was warm, the air smelled like exhaust and hot asphalt with just a hint of booze. The bouncer nodded as Tom entered the dim interior, all the better for the vampires to commune.

“Dude’s in the back.”

Tom found the booth where Benmont was nearly horizontal, and alone. He assumed his bandmate’s guardian angel had shooed the barflies away.

“Benmont, don’t make me regret having to face down your daddy.”

The other looked up, his slack face stretching into a smile. “Tommy! Wha tha fuck you doin’ here?”

Tom sat down, lit a cigarette, and considered whatever was in Benmont’s glass. He sniffed it then made a face.

“What the fuck you drinkin,’ boy?”

Benmont gestured drunkenly. “Dunno, Petey was excavating, exsanguinating -”

“- experimenting -”

“- experimenting on us!”

“Fuck’s sake, boy, can’t take my eye off you for nothin’!”

Benmont struggled to sit up, then leaned in close, whispering with intoxicated gravitas.

“I’m not the baby anymore, Tommy.”

“And you still use them twenty-dollar words on me, but Petey called me. Thinks someone might leave you for dead in a ditch if I don’t come claim you. So here I am and you’d better not puke in my goddamn car!”

Benmont shook his head slowly, as if he thought he might fall over again.

“I didn’t call you.”

Tom rolled his eyes, then willed himself to be patient. “Why doncha come home with me, alright? You can sleep it off on the sofa.”

“Huh?”

He clapped Benmont’s shoulder. “Just sit tight.”

Tom asked the bouncer for help with getting Benmont in the car, and pulled up to the entrance. He had opened the window beforehand, just in case, and drove reasonably slow as the other mumbled to himself and tried to light a cigarette. Tom didn’t expect he could manage it and sure enough he
seemed to drift off in the middle of the process. He considered that he might have to let Benmont sleep it off in the car. He pulled over at a gas station and dialed Bugs from the pay phone, asking for further assistance.

“Why don’t you just take him to his place and I’ll meet you there.”

“Nah man, it’s too late for this nonsense.”

When he got back in the car, Benmont was upright again and looking around.

“How did we get here?”

“That’s a good question, Benjamin. How ‘bout you tell me how it came to this, hmm?”

The sound of his given name brought on a panic. “Oh fuck, what did I do?!”

Tom looked him over. “Well, you didn’t puke, so nothin’ too terrible. But you better not puke.”

“This is a nice car, man, did I ever tell you what a nice car this is? I’m gonna get a nice car like this someday.”

“Sure you will. We’re gonna be movin’ again, so just hang your head out the window there.”

“Nah, I’m not gonna puke. I’m okay now, I think.”

Tom pulled out into traffic again, which was fairly light. Los Angeles was a company town and it was difficult to find much action after midnight.

“So what were you doin’ - was this just a typical night?”

“Yeah I mean, I got out of the session and just stopped in for a drink, and Stanley was there -”

“He was?”

“Yeah, so we were drinking, and we had a pizza, and Stan had a sundae, and he asked the waitress if she could make it extra sinful and serve it on her tits -”

“Of course he did.”

“- and she said she never fucked drummers. Man he was bummed ‘cause she said it like a dirty word - and not the good kind of dirty word - and then he said, ‘Fuckin’ Tommy, I can’t even get laid without having to think about him!’”

“Wait - what?!”

“He says his name isn’t Stan anymore.”

“What the fuck do I have to do with that?”

“He’s frustrated - he loves you, but he hates you too.”

“What does that even mean?”

“Look man, that’s what he said. How the fuck do I know what it means? But I guess he thinks you do.”

“You are drunk and I don’t know what the fuck you’re talkin’ ‘bout. So we’re just gonna let it lie,
Alright? Hopefully you won’t even remember this tomorrow.”

Benmont let his head hang out the window for a while. Tom punched through his presets on the radio just to hear who was playing them. After a couple go-rounds he found a station playing “Listen To Her Heart.” They came off the freeway into the relative silence of suburbia. Benmont sat up and ineffectually pawed at his hair.

“He really does, you know.”

“Hate me? Yeah I wouldn’t doubt it.”

“No, the other thing. He really does love you. It’s like the rest of his life didn’t matter except that it led him to you. You used to be this guy, the guy that all the other guys kinda looked up to. But now he’d do just about anything to be what you need.”

“Damn you are drunk!”

Benmont leaned his head back on the seat and took a deep breath. “Yeah I am.”

Bugs was waiting in the driveway and supporting Benmont between themselves they brought their charge inside, helping him onto the couch. Tom turned on the TV and asked Bugs if he wanted some coffee.

“Not gonna sleep again?”

Tom shrugged. “After all that excitement?”

“Why didn’t you just call me to go get him?”

“Y’all keep saying I don’t get out much.”

Bugs snickered and shook his head.

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True to Mike’s prediction, everybody got rich once Torpedoes cracked the Top Ten. Or at least in a relative sense. It didn’t matter that Pink Floyd squatted at the number one spot on Billboard like the monolithic monster it was, because this album was shit-hot and the checks were hefty. Enough that everyone could buy a new car, anyway.

“I mean, I knew you were gonna sell out, but a Nazi tank? C’mon!”

Tom crossed his arms and waited for Stan to lose interest in giving him shit for his brand-new luxury car.

“You bought a fuckin’ Jag, Stanley, I’d say that’s selling out too.”

“A Jag is cool, though! Always will be.”

“And besides, it’s a convertible. A convertible is always going to be cool.”

“The Camaro was at least badass but now you’re just broadcasting ‘Rich Asshole’ everywhere you go. You know who drives those cars? The lawyers you fucking hate, man.”

“Man, don’t let Tony hear you say that - you’ll hurt his feelings,” Benmont said.
“Tony has moved up in the world - he’s a better class of parasite if you ask me.”

“Who the fuck really cares what I drive?”

“You do, obviously.”

“And it’s my own goddamn business. And another thing - leave Tony out of this. You wanna give me shit 'bout my car, that’s fine, but that man has fought long and hard for us and I'm not listenin' to any bullshit 'bout him bein' a parasite.”

Stan shrugged. “So what are you gonna do with the Camaro?”

Tom took a drag and looked up at the ceiling. “I’ll give it to Adria when she’s old enough.”

His entire band took exception to the notion.

“You are not gonna give a girl that car!” Mike protested. “You might as well hang a sign 'round her neck readin' Open for Business!”

“Yeah don’t waste a car like that on a girl!” Stan chimed in.

“I reckon girls should drive whatever they wanna drive,” Tom rejoined.

“I think you shouldn’t give a kid that kind of car. Probably have it wrecked within a week,” Benmont opined.

“You got an opinion too, Ron?” Tom asked. His bass player was nearly prostrate and had appeared for rehearsal with shades donned which he had not bothered to remove.

“I was actually hoping y’all would keep going so I could take a nap,” Ron replied quietly.

“I do miss driving the Camaro. I can’t punch it in the Merc like I used to do. Blowing right by all those semis on the interstate.”

“All those years you didn’t drive at all, and now you’re a maniac,” Mike teased with a grin.

“Yeah don’t teach Adria to drive, for fuck’s sake!” Stan exclaimed. “That would be so bad!”

“So what, I should let you teach her?”

“Hell, I’ve been drivin’ before I even had a license! I’d say that makes me more than qualified!”

“No look, I’ll teach Adria and Brie at the same time,” Mike cut in.

“Well if anyone has the patience to teach teenage girls it would be Campbell,” Benmont commented.

Tom grinned. “Naw - by the time she’s ready to drive I’ll have it all figured out.”

They all found this notion hilarious - even Ron wasn’t too hungover to crack up for several minutes.
"What's the difference?"

"Do you remember what happened that night I subbed for Randy in Tampa?"

"Nuh-uh."

"You don't remember the guy in the wheelchair?"

Tom grinned, but there was confusion in his gaze. "No, man - all them gigs run together in my mind now."

"Great events are wasted on the unattentive!"

"If you say so, Stanley."

"Campbell are you drunk?!" Stan exclaimed.

"What?"

"You were late! I coulda fucked two girls in the time it took you to come back in!"

"Well if it was only two -" Tom cracked but gave Mike a Look.

"I forgot where I was, that's all. I'm not drunk - fuck you, Stanley!"

"Ben what the fuck is that noodling? This ain't the Boom Boom Room, son."

They all could hear the reason for offense, but Stan's delivery left them howling.

"You're drifting again, Stanley," Tom warned him.

"Drifting? What the fuck are you talkin’ about? If I'm drifting then Blair is full-on stumbling like a wino goin’ down Sunset!"

“Stanley, pick it up for fuck’s sake!” Tom said.

“Look man, I was about to get some action and instead I get to come back in here to try and play this fuckin’ thing again, so don’t yell at me!”

“If we have to play ten more takes of this, I swear -” Mike grumbled.

“Look, we played this fuckin’ song for hours already today -” Tom began.

“It’s actually tomorrow,” Benmont cut in.

“Wait, how can it be tomorrow when it’s tonight?” Mike asked.
“It’s not night anymore, it’s just really dark morning,” Ron commented.

A pause as everyone else considered that explanation.

“Can we just play this fuckin’ song again already, please?!” Stan demanded.

The band knew better than to get in the way of Jim and the lighting crew as they set up for the camera angles, but Tom and Mike had to hold their drummer back when he saw who was sitting behind his drums, attempting to twirl his sticks. Stan was rendered incapable of coherent speech at that moment but managed to let out an angered huff.

“Hush Stanley, she’s not hurting anything,” Tom whispered.

“The fuck you say -” he hissed.

Mike laced his long fingers in Stan’s hair as an additional caution. “Stop it now, before you make a bigger fool of yourself than you are already.”

“Oh fuck off, Campbell.” Stan shrugged off their restraining holds. “Bugs!” he shouted, pointing at the problem.

With his innate gift for anticipating the needs of his employers, Bugs attempted to dislodge Stevie by telling her he needed to tune Stan’s drums.

“But why? We’re not playing for real, are we? Or are we?”

“I swear, if she’s fucked up anything on my kit -”

“Shut up!” Tom and Mike said in unison, causing everyone in the room to stop and stare.

“Look Tom,” Stevie joked, “I’m a Heartbreaker!” She twirled one of Stan’s sticks like it was a baton and managed not to drop it. Her entourage applauded.

“Aww Stevie, we’re pretty hard on drummers so I don’t think you want that seat.”

“Now that is the first honest thing you’ve said all day,” Stan retorted, and the room settled down as preparation for the video shoot went on.

Mike knew the real reason for Stan’s ire had nothing to do with Stevie’s antics. The soundstage was full of girls and none of them were even looking at Stan. Even he was amazed at all the friends and assistants Stevie seemed to have, that must be what happened when you became as famous as she was. He found himself wishing they would never be famous enough that they had to have fifteen other people around them at all times.

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An argument, as all arguments with Stan tended to be, about nothing in particular. But it spun out of control the more time they had to talk, the more oxygen they used up. Tom thought of some movie or TV show he had seen where the characters had to think about that. Not to talk so much, not to fight, because the oxygen was running out.

“Do you remember the first time we were alone? There was a tornado. We should have taken that as a sign.”
Stan’s mind tended to operate in terms of humor. He would always make a joke if he could, even if he had to exaggerate to make it work.

“That tornado was ahead of us, though. It’s not like we caused it. And we weren’t really alone, were we?”

**Why do you always have to pick a fight with him?**

“We were essentially alone, man. We were the only two people in that room who mattered.”

Tom realized that was how Stan honestly assessed the situation most of the time. *Who really matters right now?* And probably thought regardless of who else was around, only a small number of people actually did, totaling five or less.

“It reminds me of that day, that was a good day.”

“Really?”

Tom frowned, but in the moment he was suddenly tired of fighting.

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Tom wasn’t used to hearing his own words in someone else’s song, but there they were.

*He says, ‘You could be my prisoner’ - well, you’re not living in the real world.*

It was typical of the way Stevie composed a song - a sparse idea, lyrics and vocal melody anchored to just the slightest of rhythms belying her rudimentary instrumental abilities - but there was potential. Tom surmised that Stevie’s songs were definite examples of the power of raw potential.

“It makes me think of John Lee Hooker,” Mike said, “it’s swampy.”

Stevie’s look was equal parts surprise and sharp-eyed scrutiny. “Really? Because you know I’m gonna take that as a sign that I’m totally singing the blues. And that’s intense.”

Tom wasn’t sure he could hear whatever Mike was hearing, but he decided to go along with it.

“Sure, it’s your version of the blues.”

“Can you help me finish it?”

Tom had to stop himself from rolling his eyes. *Not this again.* “I bet Campbell could, he needs an outlet for all that slide playing he always says I won’t let him do.”

Mike grinned. “Sure, I can already think of a real good slide part that can go on top of it.”

“You do? It’s really okay then?”

Tom had it in him to be kind in that moment. “Yeah it’s a real rock n’roll thing, girl, and Mike can make it even better.”

“It’s a Heartbreakers thing, kinda, don’t you think?”

...of course, she had to ruin it all in an instant. Yet Tom couldn’t help but like Stevie because there was something between them, something intangible they were each aware of.
“Let’s not get carried away there, huh? Why don’t you go play it for Bob and see what he thinks?”

That was enough to bring her back from Fantasyland. Stevie blushed. “I couldn’t do that, not until it’s finished. You don’t just play Bob Dylan a rough demo!”

“Well I guess you’d better go work on it then, lady.”

She retreated to a corner with her notebook and guitar. Mike finished his beer and buttoned up his shirt as the band assembled for the walk to the stage.

“You were nice, I’m kinda surprised.”

“Yeah I’m kinda surprised myself, I think it’s the jetlag talkin.’”

Mike nudged him, smirking. “Don’t worry, I won’t tell anybody. But I think it’s interesting, I mean, I’ve never heard her write anything like that before. You could be rubbin’ off on her.”

“I think you’re crazy, but at least you’ll have somethin’ to do.”

“Who’s crazy?” Stan asked as he came up on them.

“You, generally,” Tom replied and Stan pulled an appropriately crazed face in response. He then spied Stevie in the corner, who was setting aside her accoutrements, fluffing her hair and smoothing the wrinkles out of her outfit, getting ready to make the walk with them. He set himself as a barrier between them, with his back to Stevie.

“Is she really going to be here every night?”

Tom shrugged. “I can’t rightly say - she worked it out with Jane. But Bob’s cool with it, so settle down.”

Stan frowned. “Like I give a fuck - we’ve got more important things to worry about.”

That spotlight stage fright of old laid cold tendrils on the back of Tom’s neck. He took comfort in knowing that the crowd wasn’t necessarily going to be paying attention to him at all. And he was glad of that. Ever his empathetic shadow, Stan placed his hands on Tom’s shoulders and leaned in to whisper.

“We’ve got this, Tommy. All of us - even you.”

“Fuck off,” he murmured. But he was smiling.

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“Bonnie was the only one worth a damn in the whole thing,” Tom declared.

Bruce nodded but there was a trace of Did you actually just say that? in his expression. “She played a good set, man.”

Tom leaned back and swigged his Coke. “What I mean is that she was really herself, you know? And she’s funny as hell. People play these kinda things and they’re always posin.’ But Dylan doesn’t do that, he was the first one who never did.”

“So I’m posin’ too?” Bruce ran a hand through his curly hair and gave the other a lopsided grin.

Tom chuckled. “You’re doin’ your thing, and only you know what that is. I can’t tell you. It’s fun, it
reminds me of the Beatles, kinda. When they were all still smilin.’ Like when I went to see *Hard Day’s Night* and I thought, ‘Man, that must be the coolest thing in the world, to be in a band like that.’”

“And that’s what I think when I see you play.”

“I just - I can’t pretend I’m in with them. Maybe that’s what really threw me off, maybe it wasn’t *us* after all, it was just *me*. You should be there, because people expect you to be a hero. They wanna look up to you. But I don’t join no clubs, is what I mean.”

“I heard Browne was trying to let you down easy,” Bruce said, chuckling.

Tom’s laughter was sarcastic. “Yeah he thought we’d be freaked out or somethin’ and I was thinkin’ ‘Fuck that!’ but, you know, it just flew outta my mouth and I think it kinda upset him. I wasn’t *tryin’* to be an asshole, though sometimes it’s just natural.”

Bruce let out a genuine belly laugh and toasted his luncheon date with his cup of coffee. “Amen, brother.”

“If I can’t win because of who I am then I might as well quit and go back to diggin’ graves.”

“You did that?!”

“Well, not exactly. I did work in a graveyard.”

“I am so glad I never had to do that shit!”

“Well you certainly got everybody fooled then, don’t you?”

Bruce sat back in the booth, looking thoughtful. That was the thing about Tom: you just never quite knew if one of his sarcastic comments had an actual hook in it. But he chose to believe he was hanging out with the *smartass* rather than the *asshole*.

“I just write those songs to remind myself that it could have been *worse*, you know?”

Tom nodded, reaching for a cigarette. “Now *that* is where I’m with you, brother.”
Interlude: take a picture of this

I gave it everything I had
though the good times and the bad.
But now I’m down here on the floor
‘cause I don’t know you anymore.

“I appreciate that was difficult for you to write,” Don said.

Stan had been almost afraid to play the demo for Don. It was a good song, that could not be denied, and he was fond of the percussive hook in it as well. But it was also blatantly honest and he knew Don would know immediately who and what it was about.

“You should change some of the lyrics, I think, but of course that’s up to you.”

Don looked at his partner, who was always the picture of ease - even now in his late fifties he was as lean and long-legged as ever, feet up on the console, in baggy shorts and a faded button-down. He appreciated the quality of calm which Stan had learned over the years, and he ascribed it primarily to the personal diaspora he undertook in the ’90s. If Stan had stayed in Los Angeles he might have never matured. Hollywood had a way of keeping a person in a perpetual state of arrested adolescence.

“Everything can be about anything, you know,” Don intoned, deadpan. He waited for a count of ten and then grinned. Stan laughed.

“Yeah it’s goddamn obvious, but so what.”

“I almost want to leave it the way it is, I like your playing.”

“Oh god no, Don, I did that one at home so it sounds kinda low-fi. We definitely have to re-track it.”

“Can you play it just like that again?”

“I will do my best, friend.”

“You’d better, Stanley.”

The joke was a sly one, as Stan had told his collaborator a novel’s worth of stories about his ex-bandmates and their sardonic insistence on using his given name rather than the diminutive he had gone by for most of his life. But he never minded because he had his ways of making them pay for it. The jibe gave him pause for a few seconds nonetheless.

“Goodness gracious, for a second I thought I was back in 1975!”

Don laughed. “Gotta shake you up sometimes, you know.”

“So what you been workin’ on?”

“Speaking of going back, that idea you gave me about the guy in the grocery.”

“Oh lord, what did you do?”

“I just thought about it - if someone asked me if I would have gone back, and I would have said the same thing you did.”
Stan shrugged. “It’s not like they would have taken me back anyway.”

“Yeah but you can’t go back. People like to think they could, but it’s never the same.”

“Tell that to Blair!”

“You’re not envious, are you?”

“Aw hell no, but I did have dreams for a while that I would wake up and there I’d be, like I tried to escape but I couldn’t. I don’t blame him a bit because after that, what other band is there? There was nowhere for him to go but back to them. Those assholes are our assholes.”

Don took a sip of coffee, then grinned wryly. “Oh friend, don’t I know it!”
"A good casting director..."

The sign for the tuning room read DAUGHTERS OF THE CONFEDERACY QUILTING BEE and people wandered in and out as the familiar rhythms of pre-show activities established themselves. Mike was letting the Red Dog wail in a way he’d never do onstage, it was unseemly and not tasteful. But sometimes it was fun. Stan played paradiddles on his practice kit and eventually they fell into a Muddy Waters type of blues riffing. Tom shuffled into the room clapping his hands to the beat.

“Yeah baby, I’m feelin’ it!”

Howie had followed him in and pretended to be alarmed. “Whatever it is, don’t give to us!” he joked.

“That Boogie-Woogie flu is goin’ ‘round!” Stan cried.

Howie cracked up. “Stanley, you fuckin’ cheeseball!”

“I’m dairy-free. man! Gotta keep my uvula clean.”

Mike rolled his eyes, but he was smiling. He lifted the guitar off his body. “You wanna play, Tommy?”

Tom took the Red Dog and seated himself in a nearby chair, carrying on in the same kind of riff. Howie picked up his bass and fell in likewise. Just a dirty feel-good groove, nothing too demanding. Various members of the crew drifted in to listen. Jim came up behind Mike and leaned on him.

“Damn they don’t sound too bad for a pickup band.”

Mike grinned. “Yeah they might have a future after all.”

Tom always knew when he got through to Mike at the house because the first seconds of every call featured a cacophony of barking dogs and giggling girls.

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“Damn they don’t sound too bad for a pickup band.”

Mike grinned. “Yeah they might have a future after all.”
“Yeah they do. Hang on a minute -”

Tom heard Mike put the receiver down but the proceedings were still audible.

“Kelsey, honey, don’t feed that to Buddy, okay? He’ll just barf it up again later.”

“He likes it, Daddy!”

“I know he does, sweetheart, but it’s not for doggies.”

“Daddy I thought we were gonna have pizza!” Brie said. “Where’s the pizza guy?”

Mike picked up the phone again. “Sorry, man.”

“It’s alright. So did Marcie finally leave you?”

“She’s at a slumber party, if you can believe it. Some kind of high school reunion thing.”

“You want me to bring the girls over? Hell, we’ll get pizza and chicken!”

Mike’s relief was palpable. “You’d do that? I thought about callin’ Mary but Marcie like to kill me if I did.”

“Sure, I wrote a song today, so everythin’ else is gravy.”

“Rub it in, why doncha?!”

“Hey now, these are the precious times, man. I know it’s a challenge, but someday we’re both gonna be wonderin’ what happened to our little girls.”

Mike sighed. “Yeah I know, I know - it’s just that I’m not used to doing this all day.”

“Tell ‘em we’re on the way. Maybe we’ll play Candy Land with real candy.”

“Are you tryin’ to get me murdered in my sleep, Tommy?!”

Tom chuckled. “Hey, you’re in charge -”

“Now you oughta know that I’m never in charge even when I am in charge!”

-44-

The light at eight o’clock in the morning was particularly unforgiving. Benmont couldn’t quite understand why he was awake, or partially awake. But awake enough that he was fully dressed and drinking a screwdriver, smoking, staring out the wall-length windows in the lobby of some hotel in some city he didn’t recall. There was nothing of the landmarks outside to make it any clearer, except he knew they were somewhere in that semi-anonymous stretch between a city and its’ airport.

He was trying to remember how he got there, on that sofa, as people streamed in and out of the building, gathering and dispersing. Why he was in the lobby and not the bar.

Oh yeah...it was eight in the goddamn morning.

No one recognized him and he didn’t expect they would, he was wearing sunglasses and a hat. Both were a mercy, as the sunlight would feel like daggers and the hat contained the hair he never quite knew what to do with. The epic discourse he had with Michael regarding their collective unruly hair,
it would fill volumes.

He was beginning to suspect he was being ignored by everyone else because he looked dangerous, somehow.

Benmont laughed to himself. It made his head hurt. But he didn’t feel hungover, nor drunk. It was some liminal state between the two poles of agony. Because intoxication was beginning to feel like a need he could never quite satisfy. And its’ aftermath was the same as it ever was, ever since he had learned how to drink.

The entrance doors slid open to admit the person he must have been waiting to see, as he could recall no other motivation to be here, now, in this nondescript lobby of a place he didn’t know, would never truly know except as a place to pass through. But here was his friend.

Stan had been out for a run and now stood before him, panting and sweating, but with the endorphin-rich glow of meaningful exertion - much like when he came offstage at the end of a gig, and Benmont realized he knew the scent of Stan’s sweat as well as he knew anything or anyone. *Put us in the dark and I’d know you.*

Stan pulled off his tattered t-shirt and collapsed into the space next to his bandmate, stretching to fill all available space as he tended to do.

“Have you been to bed yet?”

“I’m not really sure,” Benmont replied. He took another drag although it felt like a Herculean effort to lift the cigarette to his lips.

“You don’t look like you have. I’d swear that’s the same suit you had on last night.”

“You’re so virtuous now, Stanley, it’s like I don’t even know you.”

“Well you can’t be that fucked-up, Ben, if you came down here to talk shit. Or have you been here all along?”

“I doubt they’d allow it, you know. Would have sent someone to clear me off.”

“Likely so. But you smell worse than I do, so my vote is that you’ve been fucked-up for quite a while now.”

Benmont started laughing, even though it hurt. Stan reached over and helped himself to the drink, then coughed after a swig.

“Fuck, this ain’t the hair of the dog, it’s the whole goddamn mutt!”

“Eye-opener.”

“And are they?”

“Not all the way. What’s there to see?”

“It’s actually a nice day out there. Saw a couple cute girls in the park. They gotta lotta squirrels around here too, they were playin’ chicken on the road.”

“Squirrels do that, have you ever noticed? Crows too. They just squat there in the road, like, ‘I dare you to hit me, motherfucker,’ and then they fly off at the very last second.”
“Every species has its’ assholes.”

“And then you’ve got me.”

“Okay, you must still be drunk. Didn’t you get the memo, son? I’m the asshole ‘round these here parts.”

That last was delivered in a perfect mimicry of Tom’s diction, which wasn’t quite an accent, but it was also entirely derivative of his origins. Mike also had a sort of, but sort of not, way of speaking.

Benmont laughed again, then leaned in close. “I swear on my dad’s gavel I will hurt you if you tell anybody, but I don’t remember how I got here.”

“Well you couldn’t gone far, you know? We’re only on the tenth floor. It coulda been way worse than wakin’ up in the lobby.”

“You’ve never blacked out, have you?”

Stan shrugged. “If I have, I don’t remember. Isn’t that the point?”

The last hour or so came back to Benmont like a jump cut in a film. Walking very slowly through the lobby and finding that if the bar off the lobby was not exactly open, there was a bartender racking glasses and setting up for the new day. This man seemed to know who he was and had served him but told him he couldn’t sit in the bar or else his boss would complain. The drink gave him something to hold on to, a cooling moment of clarity, a bright flavor of consciousness. But then he had grayed out again.

Benmont took back the drink and downed it. The warmth of the vodka was only a feeble fire.

“Will you sit with me for a little while?”

“Yeah man, though I’m pretty ripe right now.”

“You can’t smell any worse than our dressing room last night.”

Stan laughed. “Goddarn - and you know that was the reek of defeat!”

The pun was a cheap one, but Benmont was happy to award it a chuckle. He felt as though Stan had reached down and grabbed him before he was about to slide into a place he was afraid to contemplate.

-45-

Looking down the aisle of the bus as the miles rolled by. Fifty miles could feel like five when everyone was having a good time. Other moments every mile was dragged out of you bit by bit, stewing in the collective miasma of bad vibes, bad moods, bad juju.

Sometimes that closed door felt like a slap in the face.

Sometimes The King might allow a courtier to approach, they might play dominoes, or they might just talk.

There were times when no one talked. It had taken many years to learn when he shouldn’t talk. He had to grow up, he was so raw and green and unaware of the nuances of relationships.

Some days he thought: How the hell do you put up with me? Some days he thought: You’re
goddamn lucky to have me.

Most days he thought: Why can’t you look at me like you did? When you smiled last night, and you meant it. You were smiling at me.

But Stan had to wonder, as always, about the why of the smile. Feeling good in that moment was only for that moment, like the guy in “Magnolia” who realizes that he was only a momentary distraction for the mysterious femme fatale. That’s how he felt sometimes: I’m only your guy when you feel like being generous. Admitting he had fallen into that orbit, and everyone else was in the same state: circling around that cold sun, some closer than others.

He knew it was crazy, and he was crazy for being frustrated with it. But he wanted to crack that facade and pull out the person he thought he knew.

But maybe he didn’t know. And he didn’t like the silence. But he learned to respect it.
"...and a benevolent dictator."

For any upcoming tour, Linda reserved the first fitting/wardrobe selection session for Tom and Mike and they always did their best to entertain her over the several hours it would take for them to decide on their pieces. Of the entire band they were the most demanding, but in the nicest possible way. And even if she managed to find or create several things they liked, they still might go out onstage in their street clothes or pull something from their estimable personal wardrobes. Mike had a collection of suits the equal of any British dandy and Tom a cache of what he liked to refer to as “gritty Americana” outfits.

What it came down to, in her mind, is they were each hippies at heart, although when she first met them they were more interested in what was modern, but still seemingly classic. Tom had crafted his image and his aesthetic - although it wouldn’t be referred to as such until many years later - very carefully. He had an instinctive sense of what was cool.

Black was always a safe bet, of course. For years that was the mainstay of their collective fashion. When they used to shop for themselves, or allow wives and girlfriends to contribute, that was the default objective. Find something cool, in black, then buy two of it.

Tom had been the one, for example, to insist that Benmont wear suits onstage. Benmont had always worn blazers - it was the prep school kid in him - but Tom decided that the casual look was not what he needed to embody onstage, and the habit had just stuck. She couldn’t remember the last time she saw Benmont when he was not in a suit. Though he was always the first to refer to himself as “that nerd in the turtleneck” even if he hadn’t worn such a garment in at least 20 years. So he was easy to dress, and he insisted on picking his own hats. Benmont was the one most likely to be mistaken for someone in management, and - given his perverse sense of humor - he liked it that way.

Mike had taken his cues from his heroes, who were usually a bit more formally dressed when they performed. He had always preferred wild colorful prints and was now at the age where he didn’t have to give a damn what he wore, so he might as well wear what he liked. But a suit felt natural to his perception of himself.

Many times Tom and Mike didn’t know what they wanted until they saw it. They could each go through a dozen racks of clothes and find nothing in particular they wanted to wear. She had learned what not to choose, such as couture (even though she could afford it with the budget they gave her) or even niche boutiques. Tom had told her stories of wandering the stalls on Kings Road in London in the early part of their career, how most of the “really cool stuff” had come from there. So she had learned to scavenge for things, knowing that what they would deem acceptable would be found in the most unlikely of places.

Or as Tom was telling her now, in the face of Mike’s rejections, “Queenie, honey, we need just a little more Leon Russell on a three-day bender wakin’ up in a Salvation Army hotel in Nashville at 3:47am wonderin’ where the hell he left his Continental.”

Mike added, with a smirk: “Now you know a woman drove off in it, and with his heart too.”

Tom smirked as well and all she could do was nod solemnly, until they both laughed and then she could too. But he was always completely serious even if using such a whimsical metaphor. There had to be a timeless yet down-at-the-heels elegance; hippies who had refused to succumb to trends, old men who refused to yield their tastes, Southern gentlemen who might still raise a little hell, even
if it was only in the form of playing rock n’roll.

But when she did find something they liked she was rewarded with smiles and hugs and compliments.

“Aw girl, now this - this is a goddamn jacket!” Tom might exclaim. Or Mike might murmur, “Oh this hurts my heart, it’s so danged pretty.”

The soul of everything the band embodied resided within those two, she could see it. Though she had served proudly for so many years, her best memories were of then, when five very distinct personalities treated her like a little sister - to be teased and counselled and protected. She could crack jokes and critique hairstyles and gossip about the crew. She knew when to keep quiet, stay out of the way, or provide a kind distraction. They knew they could bitch about the catering, bitch about the grind, ask her what the weather was like outside.

So now she didn’t see clothing, she saw who might be wearing it. Memories of how hard it was to find things for Stan because of his height, whereas Howie was so attached to one particular Western-style shirt, and Tom just shook his head and said: “Let the boy do his thing, he knows who he is.”

Sometimes it was a ghost. She had to stop herself from buying certain things because they triggered a rush of long-past memories before she could remind herself that the past was beyond her capabilities to clothe.

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From his seat at the back of this enterprise, Stan often thought that the audience had no idea how meticulously rehearsed they were, because it all sounded as if it fell out of them. They were, in the words of Jimmy Page, loosely tight. And the audience didn’t know how much thought Tom put into entertaining them, they thought it just happened, because they were all together and why shouldn’t it be a good time?

He tried, sometimes, to forget what he knew, even as in some moments it did feel as if it was happening just because they were who they were, they were where they were, and everything had aligned to support their deep communion.

The accumulated effort of muscle memory carried him through those songs, and he knew they all did that - even as they exchanged glances as any good band would to communicate - and this was the biggest part of the illusion of effortlessness. It only looked and sounded easy because getting to that place had been anything but. It had been torture and it had been pain and it had also been the best thing they’d ever done or felt.

He thought about how the beat for “Breakdown” had been a mistake, Tom had meant something else entirely but once Stan translated his intention he liked it better, that bump-and-grind swinging shuffle. The one he could play as long as Tom wanted him to. Sometimes the song was a slow burn, sometimes it shimmied and slithered around them, sometimes it crackled, sometimes it seethed, sometimes it teased. Some nights sounded better than others.

They weren’t often terrible, but every time they were less than amazing it hurt him. He put himself in the front row, those kids hanging onto the stage for dear life, gazing up into the lights, into their faces, with dazed delirious wonder. He never wanted to be any less than his best for them even when his connection with the others was frayed. For whatever stupid shit they were all slingig at each other before they walked up those stairs and onto that sacred space.

Tom wanted every night to sound the same because that meant every night could be great, but with
such fragile volatile chemistry how could you know? How could you hope for such a state of grace to occur all the time? They knew each other as well as they could know anyone but there were some nights when they could not mesh and had to rely on knowing the songs but unable to penetrate their own mystery.

Stan thought about how he loved it when Tom called him “Heartbreaker Number One,” and he saw everything from his privileged position, he opened his heart and his soul to this glorious noise and he drove it and it rode him and it was spiritual and sexual and these were his brothers and they were badass and goddamn if they didn’t get the job done. A bad show was better than most bands’ best performance. They were a band and Tom would be nothing without them.

Every night held the risk of having his heart broken. But the ecstasy of a great show was his whole world. He found himself coming offstage and having to lean against a wall, breathing heavily not because he pushed himself too hard but because he was overwhelmed by love.

He wanted to live, and this was life, but it was the love which always surprised him, made him feel as if he could never be fully prepared for what Life demanded from him.

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Of the various thoughts Tom tended to have about Stan, such as: you kinda remind me of my dad sometimes and what kinda bullshit did they teach you in that experimental school, the one most often in his mind was - how do you just act like you’re bulletproof?

Ever the rebels they might have thought they were, there was still a wide-eyed reaction at how Stan’s obstreperous nature had gotten him kicked out of three different schools, and he shrugged as if this was only a slight concern.

“My mom said she knew I wanted to learn, but I was just too ornery to suffer fools.”

“Sounds like the only fool you were really sufferin’ was your own damn self,” Tom noted wryly.

“Yeah you’re gonna say that shit now that I can’t hit nobody,” Stan replied with a smile and it was hilarious to all of them, the notion that they could be brutal with words and it was an accepted form of interaction. But it was necessary, sometimes, to spill a little metaphorical blood.

Tom had suffered for his own convictions but had always done so in a bitter fashion, knowing it would cost him in some way, but Stan never seemed to be afraid of the consequences and he had to admire that, in a way. There was something to be said for sailing into the hurricane with arms spread wide, laughing all the way.

Something crazy, certainly. And one is often fascinated with the seemingly exotic nature of a distinctly opposite personality.

The way Stan threw himself into playing, for example, it made him want to do the same - to treat the stage like it was a contest of combatants and he had to win. Even when the audience was receptive, he was possessed with the need to provoke that crucial reaction. And he was often sullen when he couldn’t. Things might get broken.

A gig in Ohio where the crowd was distinctly chilly much like the night outside the club, and Tom was determined to break every glass and bottle he could lay hands on - his long-time compadres too stunned to attempt to restrain him - then Stan actually picked up his flailing form and removed him from the room.
“Fuck them!” the other told him, as they leaned against the side of the rental truck consigned to their gear. “Fuck their ignorance and their attitude! They don’t matter, I’m tellin’ you.”

“Of course they do! If they don’t dig us -”

“Then we keep doin’ it till they do. Why I am tellin’ you this - you’re a stubborn son of a bitch, Tommy, this is what you know.”

He still attempted to struggle, but Stan had pinned him and he relaxed into that firm grip, if only for a moment.

“Ain’t got to hold me down like I’m crazy, y’know.”

“Naw, but it’s fun.”

They smiled at each other, and Stan’s smile eased the ache of failure, promising it was only a temporary state and victory was eminent because they wouldn’t - and couldn’t - stop until they conquered.

“Why do you always act like you’re gonna win?”

“My question to you is: why wouldn’t I?”

It was a seductive consideration and Tom wanted to know what it was like from both sides. He didn’t think he would ever allow anyone to subjugate him but his curiosity swelled and he bit his lip against a question he had no business asking. But he took the other in, as much as he could allow himself to do. Breathed in his proximity and his desire. Closer than close.
“Let me know when you’re finished with me, what you want me to be.”
- Tom Petty, 1979

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A night that was probably morning by now, he could hear the birds singing. But there were birds
who sang at night, as Stevie liked to remind him. Like they did. She came over for a visit, in the
tradition of those long afternoons and evenings of kin coming to interact, when you didn’t see people
for months on end a long visit was the chance to reconnect and dwell within a feeling of family.
Stevie’s visits always seemed that way, sometimes he might feel transported back to the Farm,
hootenannys which went on till the daylight revealed their mundane conditions.

She played him a song in bits and pieces, stopping to explain each verse, and at one particular point
she said, “I wrote this for you too, because I knew I’d be here one day to sing it to you and you
would need to hear it.”

Tom was still rather skeptical of Stevie’s claims of precognition but perhaps it was only that
righteous sense of destiny which guided each of them - one of their enduring bonds.

To survive, do it right
you believe in the five.
To survive the distance - everyone fights.

He had that goose walking on his grave feeling to hear such a basic tenet stated with the conviction
of someone who has lived it. Even as he knew every band was different, every band had their own
dynamic and vibe, but some things were the same for everyone.

“You love those boys, I know you do,” she said. “And they love you too, so much.”

He nodded but he meant to shrug. What kind of love did he want from them anyway? What kind of
love did he need?

“This isn’t about love, Stevie,” he said. “It’s about trying to function.”

“Everything is about love, Tom. Maybe you don’t know that yet, but it’s true.”

He had to look down, fearful of what he might be revealing in his expression. Besides being stuck in
a place where no one could keep time the way he heard it in his head, he felt untethered from his
sense of identity. Realizing how much of his identity was bound up in those four other people and
that was the trade-off. Become as meaningful as you want to be, but they’ll own you because they
gave themselves over to you.

She knew how it was in the world of Men. She let him be quiet, she sipped her wine and tried to
pretend like she didn’t know he was crying.

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“I just don’t know why you wanna saddle yourself with dead weight, that’s all I’m sayin.’”

One might surmise it was quite a cultural shock for Tom to befriend someone who was such a
product of an opposite coast. That hoarse Brooklyn honk of Jimmy’s had come to haunt his dreams
sometimes. Their hours-long nightly discussions leaked into his subconscious when he finally did sleep.

“The thing you have to understand about Stanley is he’s a feel-type drummer, not a technical drummer. He knows how to groove.”

“Which is fine onstage but we’re makin’ a record here, c’mon!”

“We’re makin’ a record with a band, Jimmy, and he’s in the band.”

“It shouldn’t have to be so hard.”

Tom laughed. “You wanna change every damn thing about the way we make records and then you say it shouldn’t be hard. Yeah, tell me another one, brother!”

“You know what I mean, T.P. - everyone can do the job but him. I don’t care who he is, how he plays, if he can’t play what I want - “

“Excuse me?”

“- what we want, then he’s gotta go. The drummer needs to play the fuckin’ song and that’s his job.”

“C’mon man, you totally changed his setup, what do you expect? He’s gotta adjust to all that. Even if Stan’s not playin’ exactly the way he should, he can play the songs.”

“Tom, I can’t tell you how many times I’ve seen this happen in a band - not everyone makes it to the next level. And it’s usually the drummer. Drummers are the worst when it comes to consistency in playin’ - they drive me fuckin’ nuts!”

“Iovine, I trust you to help me make this record. But you are not gonna tell me how to run my band.”

Jimmy sighed. “I’m not, man, I swear I’m not, I just want you to be the best. You’re the artist, you’re the one who really matters.”

“But that’s what I’m tryin’ to tell you - it’s not just me. It’s never been that way.”

“I think you might change your mind about that someday. You haven’t seen what I’ve seen. I know you get tired of me talkin’ about Bruce but I’m tellin’ you - you have that same genius in you. In you. You could play with some bum off the street and you would make it great. You are that amazing.”

Tom laughed. “Well if that’s your argument then what does it matter if you think Stanley is a terrible drummer, right? It could be Gomer down to the VFW, for fuck’s sake, if it’s all on me.”

“Wait, wait, what the fuck is that? I’m tryin’ to give you some wisdom and you’re talkin’ about some hillbilly shit.”

Tom put on his best drawl. “Boy, doncha be sassin’ me now lest I take a hic’ory switch t’yer bee-hind!”

Jimmy laughed. “Okay, I get it, I gotta get used to that.”

“Damn right you do!”

Tom understood implicitly that no matter how Jimmy might push for his vision of how the record
should be, he was ultimately in control of everything, and that was exactly how he liked it.

But something like doubt had been wedged into his heart.

When Mike walked out of a session, you knew things had to be bad.

The cracks were widening, and Tom admitted he had begun to succumb to the audio mania driving his production team, but for his patient partner to throw up a warning flag in the form of absence was a sign of disaster, meant to express something deeper.

Ten takes that day - and that was nothing. That was a walk in the goddamn park, whistling all the way.

But then, after the playback, Mike shook his head and quietly said, “I gotta go, I can’t stay here and listen to this soulless grinding for one more minute.”

Tom shot him a wary look. “You gotta go where?”

“Anywhere but here right now. I hear this and I wanna kill myself, it sounds so mechanical.”

Jimmy put up his hands in a placating gesture. “Hey, it’s okay, we can take a break, it all starts to sound the same after a while, I get it.”

“Shit, of course it’s gonna sound like robots when you play the same fuckin’ song for weeks!” Stan declared.

“And you, what is wrong with you?” Mike asked, turning to Stan. “Why do you sound like you’re playin’ a fuckin’ wake?”

“Me?! What the fuck are you talkin’ ‘bout? My ass is not draggin’ on this one. You’re so quick to point that finger, but that grinding sound you’re hearin’ is you!”

“Fuck you!”

“Hold up!” Tom exclaimed. “Okay then, get outta here. We’re not gonna record a decent take if you can’t even hear the song anymore.”

As if this was an inclusive dismissal, Ron was actually the first to leave the control room. They heard the back door slam a moment later.

“Fuck it - y’all just get out then,” Tom said, waving his hands. “I can’t deal with this bullshit right now.”

He looked up at Mike, who looked like he was about to cry. And he couldn’t remember the last time he’d ever seen the other so upset about anything.

“Tommy -”

“It’s okay, man, just go home and mow the lawn or somethin.’”

Jimmy and Shelly laughed, but Tom smirked at them.

“Oh you think I’m kiddin’ but this man knows more about gardening -”
He looked over to see if his teasing had eased the agony, but Mike was already gone.

The call came the next evening, as Tom was taking solace in a late-night airing of *Stagecoach*, wishing he lived in a simpler time, but understanding that no era was ever simple.

“Tommy,” the caller began, and then lapsed into silence.

“Campbell, you been drinkin’?”

“Mighta.”

“Uh-huh. What’s on your mind, partner?”

A breath that might have been a strangled sob, then another. A pause. “I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have done that.”

“No man, you were right. We were goin’ exactly fuckin’ nowhere.”

“I took Marcie and the girls to Santa Barbara, I needed to just -” An especially breathy sigh. “- get rid of those bad vibes, I guess.”

“What’s in Santa Barbara?”

“The beach. And I never take her anywhere, really, so -”

“Yeah okay.”

“The beach is nice here. We built a sandcastle today.”

“Is it still there?”

Mike cracked up. “High tide, man, everything goes under.”

“You ain’t kiddin.’”

“Yeah so -”

“Just tell me this: you don’t really wanna kill yourself, do you?”

A moment of silence. “I did kinda feel that way listenin’ to that. But I’m okay now.”

“I never want you to feel like that, man. I depend on you.”

“I depend on you too, and I’ve got your back, you know that. I didn’t mean to scare you.”

Tom chuckled. “If you ever actually scare me, I will tell you.”

“I’ve been thinkin’, though - what if he’s right, about what it takes to do this. What if we’re not really good enough?”

“Michael, do you think I’d be doin’ this if I didn’t believe that we could?”

“But it’s not gettin’ any easier, is it? That’s what I’m afraid of.”

“It’s a dark time. But what else are we gonna do, right? We just gotta get through it, no matter what.”
He heard Mike take a drink of something. “They say the same thing ‘bout a war, y’know.”

“I’m not disputin’ that notion, necessarily.”

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They reached an impasse as they stared into one another. They each knew what the other wanted, but neither wanted to relinquish their autonomy to acknowledge those needs. Someone had to blink, and Tom understood that it had to be him.

Stan put his forehead against Tom’s. “You need me for what?”

“I need you to make it right.”

“It can’t be right without me?”

“No.”

“Say it, then.”

“It’s not right without you.”

Nose-to-nose now, breath upon skin. Tom thought of a time of going hunting with his dad and they’d sought shelter in a grove of cypress trees when a thunderstorm hit while they were deep in the woods. Lightning struck another tree nearby and he felt the reverberation in his chest, the air seeming to sizzle in the aftermath. He had that same feeling when Stan got too close. Because it wasn’t too close, just enough that he could feel the heavy weather between them.

The distance, waiting to be erased in an instant. The possibility of anything occurring.

“You were wrong.”

“I was wrong.”

Stan was toying with him, pinning him down and employing that hypnotic rhythm he used on others. Tom couldn’t spoil this with his natural tendency towards resistance.

“You’re gonna have to let me in sometime,” Stan whispered, “again.”

The sudden rush of a memory and it was the same as the flash blinding him, his vision replaced with a moment in a van, on the way to somewhere and the radio blaring, the Stones came on and they all demanded it be turned up, they all sang along - Stan was the loudest, of course.

_Help me baby, I ain’t no stranger._

Stan’s expression had seared him, looking directly at Tom as he sang the line, and there was no clowning in it, only a sense of longing.

“You’re making me beg, isn’t that enough?”

This was also spoken in a whisper, an admission which was truly what he knew the other hungered to hear.

Stan leaned to the side and put his lips to Tom’s ear.

“Not quite.”
Tom had closed his eyes, but he felt Stan rise from the sofa, maybe bored, maybe resigned. He didn’t think about how relieved he felt, only that he wished it might have gone just a bit further.

Just enough.

I know you want me, why don’t you give in?
Surrender!

Don’t let me down, I
just can’t hang around
feeling this way forever.
On your balcony
you made love to me
don’t say you don’t remember.

Sometimes Tom couldn’t see Stan when he was in the booth, so he wasn’t sure if the other would remember the change in the lyrics. But he followed along as he always did, laying his voice on top of Tom’s in a skin-tight blood harmony.

He had written that song in tribute to the heartsick longing for girls who didn’t want him, a romantic desperation he knew so well, even as he also told himself it was a character feeling this way. But there was something missing every time they tried to record it. And he couldn’t let it go, it was a song which meant so much to him, even if he couldn’t fully express the heat of that hopeless desire within its’ jangly boundaries.

Hearing Stan’s voice in his headphones made him close his eyes, remembering why he had changed the lyrics.

Stevie set aside her guitar, fixing him with a direct gaze.

“Tom, I’m being totally serious here - there’s something I don’t think you’ve thought about. I’m in a band, and I’m only one voice. Most of the time I get outvoted, or they act like I’m crazy. But I put up with it because it’s a very special thing. I’m never going to walk away. But you’re in charge. They have to give in to you and it’s hard for them sometimes. Everyone has pride, but I understand that I can’t always afford to be proud. So you have to let them have their little moments, you know? You have to let them be men.”

Tom ruffled his hair. He wanted to laugh, but he knew she was trying to help.

“I wish we were grown, we were men, but we’re not. We may be livin’ like it, but we’re still just kids. Hell, I’m not even the dad - just the older brother everyone resents.”

“Not all the time. I’ve been on that stage with you and I know they love you.”

He shrugged. “Yeah I guess so - we just got a weird way of showin’ it.”

Tom listened to the ticking of the Camaro’s engine, staring at the multipaned back door of the studio, waiting for someone to come out. Not that anyone would, they were all waiting on him. Though he didn’t believe in telepathy except in the context of performatively creative situations, he broadcast his
thoughts to Mike’s brain, willing him to come outside and check for his arrival.

After ten minutes and two cigarettes he had resigned himself to actually going inside. What he wanted to do was vomit until there was nothing left to come out, but he knew that the sick feeling churning in his gut would not be alleviated by anything less than the confrontation he knew was coming. It wasn’t enough to admit to what he’d done because - give the kid enough time to think it over - Stan was ready to let them all know what he thought, and it was going to be rough for everyone. His own guilt and regret and ambivalence was weighing him down as if the atmosphere was suddenly too dense.

The car was hot, the late afternoon sun was close, but it would feel like a tomb inside. He climbed out with a sigh. He opened the door and there was Mike, looking upset. They stared at one another for a few seconds, their expressive shorthand taking over. Finally Mike spoke.

“I dunno man, it’s pretty ugly in there right now. Stanley’s been drinkin.’”

“Did he show up like that?”

“Yeah.”

“Well that figures. He’s gonna let it all hang out, I reckon.”

Mike looked at his shoes. “Oh he already is. It’s almost like he’s gonna piss us off and then we’re supposed to take him back?”

“So what’d he tell ya?”

“That I’d protect you no matter what you did, and now there’s blood on my hands.”

“Sweet Christ in a go-kart that boy gets all manner of melodramatic, don’t he?”

Mike looked nauseous - he hated conflict.

They heard an angry voice and then the door to the lounge banged open and Stan entered the hallway, red-faced and frowning.

“Oh so you finally decided to show up, huh? Like I’m supposed to sit around all fuckin’ day until you decide to talk to me?!”

“We did talk, or are you too drunk to remember that?”

“I’m not drunk enough to be dealin’ with the way you treated me!”

“Look, you wanna blame me for everythin’ then go ‘head, but you come in here too wasted to play - that’s not showin’ any respect for your band, man, what kinda bullshit is that?”

“These assholes don’t give a damn about me because if they did, they would have mutinied on your ass! I know for a fact that this motherfucker -” Stan pointed at Mike “- was probably so fuckin’ relieved -”

“Everyone said they didn’t want you to be fired.”

“You don’t know what’s in my mind, Stanley -” Mike protested.

“That’s right I don’t, but it’s not for lack of tryin!’ I have tried to be your friend, but you won’t let me! None of you will, you just sit around and grunt at each other and I’m sick of it!”
“Did you come here to play, or what?”

“I came here because if I’m gonna be in this band, then we’ve gotta talk. Nobody ever wants to talk to me and I can’t go on like that.”

Tom took ahold of Stan’s t-shirt and pulled.

“You wanna talk, let’s go outside and talk, alright?”

“Tommy you don’t have to -”

“Let it be, Michael. We’ll settle this.”

They went outside, and Tom made a point of closing the door firmly, a clear signal to the others not to follow. Mike went back to looking at his shoes and wishing he could start the day over again with some other outcome. Benmont and Ron looked out from the lounge like they might be dodging gunfire.

“What happened?” Benmont asked.

Mike nodded his head towards the exit. “They’re talkin.’”

“Is that a euphemism for Stanley beating the shit out of him?”

“He doesn’t want me comin’ out there, so I hope not.”

Raised voices drifted towards them like a song from a passing car.

“They’re yellin,’ so that at least means they’re not swingin.’” Ron commented.

“Not yet,” Mike said, as the other two joined him in his vigil.
I'm the one you couldn't love

At a radio station stop in Houston they were doing the usual glad-handing and signing of various items, the chatter of the promo guys almost but not quite drowning out the actual airplay but Tom smirked to hear his self-proclaimed number one fan coming out of the speakers.

“Can’t get away from that fuckin’ song,” Stan muttered.

“Have you ever really listened to it, though? Buckingham worked some serious mojo with all those layers.” Mike replied, and his smile appeared slightly envious. He was curious about the way Lindsey worked in the studio but not quite enough to broker an introduction through Stevie.

“No, and I don’t plan to.”

Tom leaned in close to Mike. “We should knock him out and bring him to their show. Wouldn’t that be somethin’ to see?”

The thought of Stan finding himself at a Fleetwood Mac concert - something not entirely out of the realm of possibility because Stevie had ensured Tom could have tickets whenever he wanted them - had them cracking up and their bandmate rolled his eyes.

“Whatever y’all are sayin’, fuck off!”

“Are you sure she’s singin’ ‘Sara?’ Don’t you think it could be ‘Staaaaaan,’” Tom joked, and the sound of him attempting to replicate Stevie’s phrasing made them laugh so hard they had to stop what they were doing and wait for it to subside, only to look at each other and start giggling anew.

Stan pointed a finger at his leader and scowled even as he had been laughing a moment earlier. “You won’t know the time or the place, but I will get you for that.”

“I’m gonna rewrite the entire song with your name in it,” Mike said, grinning.

“I swear to fuck y’all are asking for it!”

Benmont had put his head down on the table, his laughter so overwhelming it had reached the point of silence. He had to take a deep breath before he could speak again.

“Michael, I will pay you to do that. All my per diem for the month!”

Mike reached over and they shook on it. Stan surrendered his ire and Ron waved his hands to interrupt.

“Oh man, you gotta change it all, make it about him!”

“The day I actually write a song about Stanley is a day that’s never gonna come.”

“Campbell! I thought we had somethin’ special!”

This brought on further laughter and they could see people hovering beyond the doorway, confused as to whether they could intrude, and Tom mused this was part of what it meant to be a band - you brought that bubble with you, no matter where you might be.
It was the kind of weather people came here to experience and Mike considered, as they hung out by
the pool, that he had never spent a day like this in his life when he actually lived in Florida. Nor had
his bandmates. He was enjoying Howie’s reaction to the parade of flesh before their collective gaze.

“Is it always like this?” he asked in an awed whisper.

“At a beach resort? Sure. But this isn’t really Florida,” Benmont replied. “Which is why we like to
stay here.”

Mike smirked and wiggled his bare toes. “Yeah buddy. Place like this woulda never let us set foot
inside back in the old days.”

They were trying their best to embody low-key tourists, in shorts and t-shirts and flip-flops,
sunglasses donned against that brighter than bright sub-equatorial sunshine.

Benmont nudged Mike, tilted his head towards a group of girls directly across the pool. “So
whaddya think - the blonde or the redhead?”

Mike stretched on his lounge chair as he considered the flock. “I like the brunette.”

“Really?”

“Yeah man - you take that redhead, who knows what’s underneath all that. The brunette, she’s just
real. I like that.”

“And the blonde?”

“I’m not really into blondes, you know that.”

They snickered at the memory of Mike’s rejoinder to Stan after the video shoot when he was
enthusing over Wish and how he was going to ask her out - “She’s a nice girl and all, but you work
for a blond, so why would you wanna fuck one?” - primarily because it was uncharacteristically
 crude.

“But what about Gretchen?”

Mike pushed down his shades and fixed the other with a glare. His infatuation with the girl who
handled the ticketing during their recent tours was something Benmont would never let him live
down.

“She’s not a blonde. She’s got that sandy kinda hair. And what about her?”

“Just making an observation, is all. You don’t have to get touchy, but you do like her.”

Mike ruffled his hair - frizzed out from humidity - and frowned. “She’s a nice girl, she’s real sweet.”

“Man, I know what you’re doin’ down here, and it’s okay. You’re not dead, you know.”

“No, but I’m gonna be if we keep up this line of conversation.”

Benmont snorted and shook his head. “Nobody’s gonna tell her!”

“Man, I told you that just between us and what did you do? You told Stanley!”
“I wasn’t trying to rat you out, I just mentioned it in passing ‘cause Stanley made a comment about her too.”

Meanwhile Howie had wandered over to the bar and was talking to two healthy-looking girls who towered over him, not that he seemed to mind.

“Oooh look,” Benmont said, pointing. “Models?”

“Volleyball players. So I can’t trust you now - but what did he say about her?”

“I don’t remember, the usual thing he says about girls.”

“He better watch his mouth.”

Benmont smirked. “Take the gentleman out of the swamp but you can’t make a gator learn new tricks.”

Mike cracked up. “What the fuck is that?!”

“You like that? I’m gonna patent it.”

Mike whistled low. “Two o’clock,” he said, pointing with his chin.

A buxom girl with lush curves barely contained by her bikini had entered the pool area, her long dark hair glinting in the sun. She was like a relic of a golden age, the hallowed era of their youth.

“Bestill my heart,” Benmont murmured.

“Lemme just look at her for a minute before you move in for the kill.”

“Thank fuck Stanley went waterskiing or I’d never have a chance.”

“You probably still don’t. Goddamn, she’s gorgeous.”

“Absofuckinlutely.”

“You best step up your game if that’s all you gotta say.”

“I am a erudite motherfucker, and don’t you forget it.”

Mike polished off his beer and waved the empty bottle above his head, signalling the bar staff.

“Keep drinkin,’ you always get so damn wordy when you’ve been drinkin.’”

“Man, don’t get jealous just ‘cause I’m gonna fuck her. I’m lettin’ you enjoy the view first.”

“And I bet you won’t.”

“Yeah well, we’ll see who’s wrong about that.”

Howie had left the bar area and was making his way over to their mutual interest.

“Goddamn it! Why did I let you hold me up?”

“Cause you weren’t doin’ shit. You just wanna sit here with me and take in the scenery.”

Benmont sighed, looking into his equally empty glass. “Yeah. But you can trust me, I didn’t do that
to try and hurt you.”

“Loose talk never means to hurt nobody, but that’s what happens.”

“I’m sorry, okay? But that’s all I got to say about it. I know, I know - you’re a gentleman.”

“Maybe the last one there is. And what’s a gentleman gotta do to get a goddamn beer ‘round here?”

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“I wanna get outta here. I thought about just drivin’ somewhere with Bugs, but...well...remember Tulsa?”

Stan chuckled. “Sure. You wanna a replay?”

“Let’s go somewhere and hang out.”

“You mean: ‘Let’s go somewhere that people aren’t watchin’ our every move.’”

“Maybe. If you don’t want to -”

“Did I say that? Hell yes let’s go somewhere!”

“Where?”

“Fuck, anywhere! Let’s go to London.”

“Why?”

“Because every time we’ve gone there we’ve never really done anything cool.”

“Goin’ to Kings Road was cool.”

“Yeah we can do that, but I mean just checkin’ it out. But hey, listen - I don’t wanna go with you if you’re not prepared for me, okay? The 24-hour me.”

Tom laughed. “Goddamn, Stanley - the last eight years has been nothin’ but dealin' with you!”

“What is this about? What is this really about?”

“I wanna get outta here, and I want you to come with me. That’s all I’m gonna say ‘bout it while I’m sittin’ here in the house. Are you with me?”

“Aren’t I always?”

“No, but we won’t discuss that right now.”

London was strange as they proceeded from the perspective of not being feted, or even known. But after a few days they found it too cold, so Tom had Mary change their itinerary and they flew into Las Vegas because Stan had tickets to see Sammy and Frank at The Sands - and it was like dropping down into a pool of light within the midst of dark stretches of natural austerity.

“I remember when we came out to California I was upset ‘cause we couldn’t drive through Las Vegas,” Tom recounted to Stan as the landing gear descended with a jolt.
“Why not?”

“I don’t remember, but I think it had somethin’ to do with goin’ to Tulsa first.”

“I did. I just drove through ‘cause I didn’t have enough money to stop here and the Bus was gettin’ persnickety on me, but I came through at night with my mouth hangin’ open.”

“All by your lonesome?”

“Yeah - Marty was still in G-ville and Jeff hadn’t come back from Boston, I don’t think.”

“Now that’s a brave and foolish thing to do, get a notion to just drive ‘cross the damn country.”

“Young and dumb, that was me.”

The first night they sat by the windows of their suite at The Flamingo Hilton and sang, accompanied by Tom’s trusty Dove.

“Hell why shouldn’t we, everyone else is out drinkin’ and whorin’ and gamblin’ so they won’t complain.”

“And we shouldn’t do any of those things, right?”

“Stanley, I know that’s the 24-hour you, but I think you can give it up for one night.”

“We haven’t done anything like that all week!”

“Are you bored?”

Stan stretched himself out on the floor, hands behind his head, grinning.

“We’re just two cats on the loose, what could be boring about that? And tomorrow night, you are gonna swing, brother!”

Tom chuckled. “You’re never gonna win me over to all that stuff, kid. But it’s not like you’re ‘bout to seriously dig Hank Williams, so -”

“I mighta changed my mind ‘bout that. Let’s see, how does it go -”

Stan sat up and motioned for the guitar. Tom handed it to him and he began playing and singing a passable version of “Why Don’t You Love Me.” Tom sat gaping and then clapped his hands in delight.

“Goddamn, boy - you still surprise me sometimes, you know?”

Stan handed back the guitar and sat beside him, their shoulders and knees touching.

“I always will, if you give me a chance.”

They stared out at the lights for a while within a moment which belonged only to them.

It was a journey of atmospheres and of climates and of moods. It was amusing, but it was the secret thrill of considering that no one but Mary - sworn to secrecy even to her own boss - knew where
they were, or what they were doing.

By the time they had flown on home which was no longer Home - discreetly - the cracks were beginning to show. And yet, it was too good a time to end. Tom discovered that he could be someone with Stan he wasn’t with anyone else. He could get lost in Stan’s outsize personality, drape it around him like a blanket.

He wondered if anyone was going to clock them as they drove through familiar streets, then went on to the shore and he sat on the beach staring at clouds and waiting for some image or idea to come to him. Stan returned from the boardwalk vendors with bottles of Coke and mixto sandwiches.

“Do you ever miss the humidity?” Stan asked after they’d spent several nearly-silent minutes eating and drinking.

“Not enough, since we seem to find ourselves here every year.”

“I think about that afternoon, when it was too hot in the apartment -”

“And you don’t think I do.”

“I know you do, but you don’t really remember, do you?”

“I never said I didn’t.”

“Tommy, I just -”

“You don’t know what you want, but neither do I. So can’t we just leave it at that?”

Stan answered by doing what he had done that afternoon in 1976, putting his tongue to a drop of sweat making its’ way down Tom’s face and the contract was torturous to Tom because he was ready to turn into what he thought was the inevitable collision. But Stan stopped just short of the other thing he’d done.

They didn’t talk after that, not until hours later.

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“I told you, man, it’s the five of us or nothin.’ Now you’re either gonna believe me or you won’t.”

“How can I believe you - how can I trust you? With the way you treat me? Tell me - what do you want from me?!”

“What I want is for you to stop shit-talkin’ me behind my back and act like you wanna be in this fuckin’ band!”

“I wouldn’t have to shit-talk you if you actually acted like you wanted me in this band! You manage it for two hours a day and the rest of the time I might as well not even exist!”

“I can’t worry about what you want every minute of the day.”

Stan laughed in Tom’s face, but it was a mean-spirited laugh, fully mocking. “Oh, oh that’s just fuckin’ hilarious, Tommy - because WE DO! We have to worry about what you want all the motherfuckin’ time! If we’re not worried about what you think of us, then we’re not doin’ our jobs, that’s what Elliot said before he gave us that ass-reaming that you were too much of a coward to do yourself! So what you’re tellin’ me is that you have the right to treat me like shit and I can either like it or get the fuck out.”
“That’s not what it’s about and you know it! You’re in the best fuckin’ band there is and you’ve got it made! But there’s only so much of your nonsense I’m gonna endure.”

Tom was frail - they all knew it - but sometimes he acted like he was bigger than all of them. Stan put a firm hand on his chest and pushed him against the wall.

“You need me. I know you told me so but from one minute to the next it’s like you forget. But don’t worry, I’m gonna remind you.”

It was waning daylight and anyone could have seen. But they were each too angry to care. It looked like a fight either way.
Oh ‘cause it can feel like perfection, but never all the time

"But listen, I'm impressed that I still have friends in this group, that means a lot to me. I mean, after twenty years, what ridiculous crap haven't we seen each other go through? What awful thing could we not say to each other?"
- Stan Lynch, 1991

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Bill was up against another deadline for the *Sun* - typing furiously on the Selectric in his office (he distrusted computers and would only use one when his editor insisted) on a draft he hoped would become the actual article with only a handful of edits - when his wife poked her head in and announced: “There’s a guy on the phone who says he’s Tom Petty.”

“Does he sound like Tom Petty?”

She scowled at him. “Now how the heck would I know? He wasn’t singin’!”

Bill plugged in his desk extension and picked up the receiver. “Bill DeYoung here.”

“Billy, this is yer ole pal T.P. here - how ya doin.’”

From long experience with that drawl he knew it was the genuine article, and thus he was afraid.

“Tom, please don’t take this the wrong way, but this is totally unexpected and so therefore it’s got to be bad news.”

“Well, I wouldn’t call it bad necessarily, I’m just curious about somethin’ and wanted to have a confab.”

And what was he going to say? *Sorry Tom, but I’ve got a deadline.* One didn’t say such things to Tom Fucking Petty, the golden-haired king of Floridian rock stars. If he wanted to have continued access to the organization, he had to play nice.

“Uh, sure T.P., what’s on your mind?”

A pause on the line. Bill could hear Tom lighting a cigarette. “I read your review of the show there, in the paper. My bro sent me all that stuff.”

“By carrier pigeon? It was published two days ago!”

“They fax us things, down to the hotel.”

“Oh. Well, it was a great show, I think everyone really enjoyed it. It meant a lot to everyone here.”

“Yeah but right in the middle of the thing you’ve got to make a comment ‘bout how Stan’s not smilin.’”

“I believe what I wrote was that the only time Stan smiled was during ‘Ben’s Boogie.’”

“And what the fuck does it matter if he’s smilin’ or not?!”

His voice had come up just the slightest in volume and intensity, and Bill felt it, his heart rate increasing.
“It’s a hometown crowd, Tom, of course it matters. But it was just an observation, it seemed like the only moment they were having fun.”

“But why did you have to write that?”

Bill sighed. “Look Tom, I know you guys, okay? I’ve been writing about you for near a decade now and I know you can count on one hand the people who really know you, but I know you and I know this band. And what I saw was a great show, it was very entertaining. The stage set is crazy, Lenahan really came through on that one. But it had to be entertaining because it wasn’t entertaining for any of you.”

“So you’re tellin’ me no one cared ‘bout that but you.”

“I probably wasn’t the only one, but like I said - hometown show. The rest of the world definitely doesn’t care.”

Tom sighed. “Yeah, you know what you know. But you ain’t got to be tellin’ people, is what I mean.”

“I was watching the soundcheck, sitting next to Bender, and I was shocked at what he said to me because I had no idea.”

“‘Bout what?”

“That Mike hasn’t said more than two words to Stan on any given day in several years.”

Another sigh. “Goddamn it.”

“I’m not a gossip, you know that. I know some things are never acknowledged with you guys. But I guess it was on my mind while I was watching the show. How things have changed. And I’ve always liked Stan, he never fails to give me a great interview. I might be the only journalist who likes your band as much as I like you.”

“Everybody likes Stanley until you have to live with him a while.”

“You must still like him, you’re letting him sing now.”

“I did feel like Stanley doesn’t always get his due. And he can sing - he used to sing lead in Road Turkey. So why not?”

“I’ve seen you guys on every tour, just about. And I know what makes not only a good show, but a great one. I’ve never seen you play a bad show, but I have seen a few great ones. And it’s the little things, like how you and Stan set each other on fire when you’re really connecting, the way you give Campbell a nudge and his smile just lights up the whole place, the way Benmont never stops bouncing behind his rig when he’s in the groove, the way Howie looks when he feels like he’s really fitting in. The way you smile when you’re happy with your own band.”

“And you weren’t seeing any of that, huh?”

“No, not really. It was very entertaining, like I said. But it didn’t feel like the Heartbreakers I know. Stan really clinched it for me because it used to be that he was the only one smiling, sometimes. He was loving life behind that kit. But now he’s accepted that this is just a job. It makes me sad, I guess, because I know you guys.”

“We’ve had some interesting conversations, haven’t we?”
“That we have. Remember that night in New York when Campbell came in and said that you stuck around because he was so good-looking?”

Tom laughed, and Bill felt somewhat relieved to hear it. “Aw he was kinda drunk, wasn’t he? That was an interesting night - there were so many people backstage after that show, all kinda famous people, I had to get the hell outta there but quick!”

“Tom, I hope you don’t feel I’ve betrayed you in any way. That was not my intention. You’re so important to the scene here, a hero -”

“I never wanted to be a hero, y’know. I just wanted people to hear what I had to say.”

“And they have. That’s something to be proud of.”

“I’ve always been careful not to have the wrong dreams, y’know.”

It seemed like a strange thing to say, but Bill knew Tom was attempting to express his version of wisdom, acquired the hard way.

“I’m sorry if my review upset you. You’re one of the few bands I still love.”

“I had to push to play Gainesville - the promoters always fusssed at that.”

Bill looked at the clock and winced. *Goodbye deadline.*

“We appreciate it. It’s hard to book a college town, I know.”

“Look man, I shouldn’t yelled at you, I’m sorry. But it just seemed so strange to me, is all.”

*Yeah I bet it did,* Bill thought. He wondered if maybe he had seen this band for the last time. And that would be a damn shame. Then again, maybe wheels were turning in Tom’s mind and he might find a way to save what was truly one of the best rock n’roll bands Bill had ever seen, and he had seen plenty in his career.

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The side of their tour jet was emblazoned with a mission statement for the year:  
...let that sucker blast!

When the band emerged out into the light rain of mid-morning at GNV’s private jet terminal, they heard a chorus of cheers and saw a group of girls at the fenceline.

Tom waved, but kept moving towards the bus pulled up just beyond the hanger.

“What? It’s just a little group of kids, you don’t wanna say hey?” Stan asked.

“Exactly - they’re kids,” Tom replied over his shoulder.

“I’m not gonna be the asshole in this,” Stan said, setting off towards the fence. “Don’t leave without me!”

“I’m not an asshole,” Tom said, coming to a halt, nearly colliding with his bandmates.

“You can’t take two minutes to say hi to some kids who are skippin’ school just so they can catch a glimpse of you - that’s Beatles shit, man. Why do you think you’re too good for that?”
“I’m tired, okay? Just hurry up.”

Benmont looked at Mike, who shrugged and kept following the leader. Howie came to stand beside the other as they watched Stan run over to the fence.

“Now is this some naughty girls ditchin’ school that I see?” he teased, holding his arms out as if he might embrace them all. “Oh hey little dude!” he added, realizing that the smallest of them was actually a young boy.

“I get nervous talking to anyone under the age of eighteen,” Howie joked.

“So which high school y’all go to?” they could hear him ask. The girls were beaming and giggling to have a chance to speak with one of their idols.

“Stanley will talk to anybody. He’d probably talk to the corpse at a wake,” Benmont cracked.

They heard the bus’ engine start up. “Stanley, we gotta go!” Howie yelled.

Stan put his cheek to the fence and received three kisses, then gave the little boy a high five. “Y’all behave yourselves now, okay? We love you!” He waved and they all screamed at him as he walked away.

“Guess you don’t have to be short and blond to get some love in this town,” Stan said with a broad grin as he put his arms around the other two. “Time to get on the bus!”

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“Let’s do somethin’ crazy tonight,” Tom said.

“Like what?” Stan replied. They were standing out on the deck of Stan’s new house, which overlooked Keystone Beach. They watched boats returning to dock for the night, the day’s amusements coming to an end as the sun went down. He wouldn’t admit it to anyone, but he had bought the house thinking Tom might like it, might even consider it as a band retreat when they needed to get out of the smog once in a while. Tom had some crazy notion about relocating the band to London for six months but Stan talked him out of it, citing the expense involved given that Tom and Mike had to think about their families.

“I dunno, somethin’ - there’s only so much sittin’ around a man can do.”

“Tommy, this is Home - that’s what you do at home, you kick back and take a breath!”

“You’ve had me to yourself for a while now, but you never take me anywhere!”

Stan laughed and put his hands on Tom’s shoulders, gently shaking him. “You wanna go out on the town, honey? Is that it?”

“Let’s go see somebody play - anyone you know playin’ tonight?”

“Like, local, you mean? I dunno. I can make some calls, I reckon.”

“Wait - let’s sit in with somebody. Wouldn’t that be a gas?”

Stan grinned. “Yeah buddy, that would be fun! Okay, let’s see what I can scare up.”

“Don’t tell ’em I’m with you, just say you wanna come sit in tonight. I don’t want it to get weird.”
“Don’t worry, if they ask I’ll say ‘Tom who?’”

Tom chuckled. “I bet you always do. Hey -”

Stan turned around, receiver in hand. “What?”

“What did you think I meant?”

Stan hung up the phone and rejoined Tom at the railing. “Naked waterskiing, peyote ceremony, gator wrasslin,’ who knows?”

“You’ve taken peyote?”

“Yeah. Henley said I should try it once, and I did.”

“What happened?”

I saw you.

“It wasn’t that much different from the first time I had magic mushrooms, just more intense. You know, all that weird shit they try to show in the movies: the crazy colors and the prisms of light, suddenly your hand is the most fascinating thing you’ve ever seen, and sounds are really loud or really soft and you feel like you’re turnin’ into jello.”

“Weren’t you scared you might freak out?”

“I was scared I was gonna puke. Don said they all almost puked their guts out when they did it in Joshua Tree. Peyote tea and trail mix at sunrise, boy howdy!”

“Oh yeah, Felder told me ‘bout that, back when. So what great wisdom did you learn, Stanley?”

“That you can’t take everything too seriously, man. When I started trippin’ for real, I thought everyone was laughin’ at me. But I realized that we were all supposed to be laughin,’ ‘cause it’s one big cosmic joke. But the best joke ever, y’know?”

“Well I’m not takin’ you seriously, so I’ve got a head start on that.”

Stan pulled Tom to him and held him against his body from behind. “Yeah you keep talkin’, Tommy, and we’ll see who’s really serious, huh?”

He was amazed that Tom didn’t attempt to break his hold, but he could still feel those ever-restless vibrations deep inside.

The lights had gone down, the band was coming up, and Mike had passed Ron who was standing off to the side in the area by the stairs looking like he was asleep with his eyes open. This was not a new occurrence, and it peeved him. Mike went up and snapped his fingers in Ron’s face. He started, looking annoyed.

“Where are you, man? ‘Cause right here, right now, we’ve got a show to do.”

Ron mock-saluted. “Sir yes sir, Lieutenant.”

As a Navy brat, Ron fell into those kinds of jibes easily, but Mike decided he had no patience for it anymore. Ever since Tom had publicly referred to Mike as his “lieutenant” the band was making him
pay for the compliment.

“Stop with your bullshit already. You sleepwalk through this gig and I’ll tell Tommy to fire you myself.”

“Are you fucking kidding me? Don’t come at me with empty threats, Campbell.”

“Hey!”

They looked up to see Stan leaning on the handrails.

“There’s an arena full of people out there who, for some reason, have paid to see us play. So I think we should do that.”

Mike took Ron by the shoulder and shoved him towards the stairs. Ron knocked his hand away.

“You touch me again, and I will drop your ass. I don’t care what the rule is.”

“Guys, get the fuck onstage already before Tommy loses his shit on all of us!” Stan yelled.

Ron pushed by each of them, and Stan stopped Mike at the head of the stairs.

“What was that about?”

“Blair is done and dusted,” Mike said, watching as Ron picked up his bass and got ready to play the first song.

“Not tonight he’s not!”

“Yeah well, we’ll see about that.”

“I’m not playin’ this goddamn show by myself!” they heard Tom exclaim, and they each ran to their places.

Benmont wondered which was worse: to be not wanted, or not needed. And there was no reason why he should feel either way in his own band but it had certainly come to that. Because here he was, showing up to a session for which he had not been requested, perhaps merely to remind his bandmates that he did, in fact, still exist.

He had plenty of work, he’d had to turn down work because - as he told several bookers who had recently requested him for session work - “The Heartbreakers always comes first, and there’s a new album happening.” - but it was turning out to be more of the same bullshit. It was Full Moon Fever all over again, only this time under the guise of band business, which it wasn’t at all, no matter the reassurances which had been proffered, as if they were dogs looking for a treat and a pat on the head, so grateful for the slightest attention.

They had their own lives, their own money, their own reputations, but there was nothing like being a Heartbreaker. And Tom was well aware of that. It was a short leash, or perhaps just enough rope to swing from.

Seated outside near the ebony elephant statues which guarded the rear entrance of the studio, Benmont smoked and stewed. There was no point in going inside given his mood, but he expected someone to come outside eventually and decide what to do with him.
“Goddamn that drive was brutal!”

He looked up to see Stan loping across the parking lot, Benmont had been so lost in his own thoughts he hadn’t recognized the throaty roar of Stan’s Jaguar XKE pulling in.

“Who picked this fuckin’ place? Did you know it belongs to the Captain & Tennille?”

Benmont laughed. “No shit! But it was Campbell, that’s what Bugs said. They tried to get Sound City but it was already booked. Campbell’s worked here before, I guess.”

“This is just too fuckin’ far for me, I swear I hate the Valley.”

“Won’t get much argument from me, but it’s not our decision.”

“So what are we doing today?”

“I don’t know, what did Bugs tell you?”

“He doesn’t call me anymore, Mary does. She told me to be here, but that was it.”

“I called Bugs and he said he didn’t know if they needed me or not.”

“Bugs didn’t know?” Stan looked incredulous.

“Bugs didn’t know.”

“That’s fucked up, man.”

“Tell me about it. But why doesn’t Bugs call you anymore?”

“I’ve mouthed off to him one too many times, I guess. And he’s still mad about that other thing.”

Benmont leaned forward in his patio chair, Stan turned to regard the statuary.

“What the fuck are those things, elephants?”

“Yeah.

So are you ever going to apologize to Michael?”

“I did!”

“Seriously apologize, I mean.”

“I did! I swear upon the god of my ancestors that I seriously apologized to him. When we started this album, I got to the studio early one day and waited for him, since I know he always tries to be the first one there for a session. When he came in I said I wanted to talk to him and I figured enough time had passed that he would be willing to listen but he just stood there, giving me the death glare, and said, ‘So talk.’ I said, ‘Look man, I screwed up, I know I did, I should have never said that to you, it was so awful and I wish I could take it back.’ He said, ‘But that’s what you actually think, isn’t it?’ And I said, ‘It doesn’t matter what I think, it was just screwed up that I actually said it to you and I’m sorry.’ And then he gave me the death glare again and I waited for him to say something, and it went on, and on, and on. Finally he says, ‘Since that’s what you think about my wife, I don’t accept your apology.’ He tried to get past me and I said, ‘C’mon Campbell, it doesn’t matter, I’m not married to her, you are!’ And he said, ‘Of course it matters!’ and then he shoved me out of his way and that was it. So I guess he’s never gonna talk to me again.”

“Do you want me to talk to him?”
“He’s not gonna listen to you! I figure Tommy would be the only one to fix this, but he probably doesn’t give a shit.”

“Why did you have to say it?!”

“Benmont, how long have you known me? All kinda shit comes outta my mouth that I shouldn’t be sayin’, but you can’t act like it’s carved in stone.”

“Yeah speaking of that, I’ve got my own problem with you.”

“Which is what?”

“Why did you do it? You know what I’m talking about.”

Stan huffed, wiped his hand across his face and gave Benmont a I can’t believe you’re still mad about that shit look.

“I told you - you were fallin’ for this girl so hard, I was worried. I didn’t want you to get hurt again. I can’t believe you let yourself have feelings for Maria after I warned you about what happens with chicks in bands.”

“Courtney is going to be my wife, so are we gonna have a problem too?”

“What?! Are you sayin’ you proposed?”

“We haven’t set a date, but she said yes.”

“I’m happy for you, man, I told you - she checks out, you can trust her.”

“I’m a grown man, Stanley, I think I can manage my own relationships.”

“Are you sure? Because you were a mess, you can’t deny that. Maria seriously fucked with your head, man.”

“Yeah well you didn’t have to try to manhandle her, that shit was out of line.”

“I didn’t touch Courtney! I told you, all I did was ask her out to see what she’d say - and she passed the test, she said she wasn’t interested because she was with you.”

“How can I trust you after that?”

“She’s going to marry you, isn’t she? That’s your proof right there.”

Benmont stood up. “For the sake of my own sanity I’m going to forgive you but if you try anything like that again, I’ll be joining Mike in that Not Talking To You club. Matter of fact, you might not be talking to anyone.”

Stan held his gaze for a few seconds. “Wish left me.”

Benmont tried not to smirk. The Master of Deflection is at it again. “When?”

“When we came off the road. We had this long talk and she was sayin’ she wanted to get married right now, she didn’t want to be dependent on me anymore unless we were married and I said my head wasn’t in a place where I was ready to think about that, and she said she couldn’t go on like this, she had wasted too much time on me already, and that was it. She went back to her mom.”
“Well can you blame her? You keep talking about settling down and having a family, and then you meet this sweet girl, who is gorgeous and adores you, would follow you anywhere, but no - the minute you’re on the road without her you start acting like a whore again! What did she have to do to get you to take her seriously?”

“These are uncertain times, and you know it. Hell, tomorrow Tom could say, ‘So long, assholes!’ and leave us in the dust. He could take Campbell and start some other band and they’d be fine, but we’d be scratchin’ our asses wonderin’ what the fuck just happened.”

“You know I don’t want that to happen. It would kill me. But we wouldn’t starve. That’s just an excuse, Stanley. Do I feel bad for you? Of course. But you didn’t treat her right, and you’re going to have to face that.”

“Sure, now that you’ve bagged your prize you couldn’t give a damn ‘bout anyone else.”

“I do. I care about you. And if you don’t know that then I don’t know what band you’ve been in for the last fifteen years. I want you to be happy. But I think you had a chance to be happy and you were either too stupid or self-involved to realize it.”

“Oh that’s nice!”

“Stanley, please tell me you did not drive all the way out to the middle of No and Where just to pick a fight with me.”

“No, I came to play a session. Should I ask if they need you? They probably don’t.”

“Fuck off.” Benmont’s tone was an equal mix of affection and exasperation.

“I’m not stupid, y’know,” Stan said as they went inside. “I’m just particular.”

“I think you mean peculiar.”

“Eat shit, College Boy.”
Michelle was genuinely perplexed, and that was with the benefit of having known and loved the man standing before her for the past 12 years.

"Stanley, I don't want to say you're being ridiculous, but you're being ridiculous."

Stan laughed, he could always count on Michelle to give it to him straight.

"Yeah, it's true. But there are complicated feelings just waitin’ to boil over at any possible moment. I'm drivin’ along, 'American Girl' comes on the radio, and BAM! I'm relivin’ somethin’ terrible for three minutes and 35 seconds."

"But you've seen them play, we've seen them play, and you never freaked out."

"This is different, my dear," Don said from across the kitchen where he was checking the progress of his famous chili. "This is about as big a thing for a band as you can get these days. Hell, they're not even a band now so much as an institution."

"I need Don to talk me off the ledge," Stan confessed, "and that's not an easy thing to admit."

Sharon walked into the room and regarded her friends with a smile, "Sometimes we just have to let them be the insecure creatures they are, you know?"

Michelle enfolded Stan in a hug. "Don't make yourself crazy, please. You're exactly who and where you need to be."

Stan kissed the top of her head. "Gonna try my best, darlin'. Don will make sure I don't get stupid."

After their mutual better halves had vacated the area, Don held out a spoonful of chili for his collaborator’s approval. "Here, I think it's ready."

Stan gave it a taste. "I've been sayin’ it’s ready for the last two hours!"

"You can't rush these things, friend."

"Have I thanked you lately for bringin’ that beautiful, sensible, intelligent woman into my life who I clearly don't entirely deserve?"

Don grinned. "Gratuities are always welcome."

"The truly crazy thing is I know exactly how it's gonna go down, I can predict it. Is that sad or not a big deal?"

"It's the Super Bowl - these things are always populist choreography."

Stan laughed. "I think that's the title of your next album."

"It does have a ring to it. Grab the beer, I think the second quarter is almost over."
“Did you watch the press conference?” Don asked. They were seated in his media room in front of the obligatory big-screen monitor and top-of-the-line audio system, all the better to enjoy (and in their case, critique) this most American of new year rituals. The door was shut, everyone in the house knew that they needed to be alone for this.

“I got as far as that one woman flirting with Tom and then I had to leave the room. Besides, what was there to really report? I’m tellin’ ya, it’s not gonna be about the Heartbreakers at all.”

“Okay lay it out, brother.”

“They’ll play ‘American Girl’ and a bunch of the solo shit. Since Full Moon Fever the band lost its’ core identity. So I mean even before I got canned.”

“And you’re not bitter about that at all,” Don teased, patting Stan’s leg in an affectionate gesture.

“I’m really not, you know, it’s more just sad. But that’s part of why I was so unhappy, sure. Who wants to be in a band that’s not really a band anymore?”

“I still don’t get why you didn’t want to give an interview.”

“For the movie? That wasn’t really an honest portrayal. I hope if y’all ever decide to do somethin’ like that you make it true, y’know? Just put it all out there. And what did it matter, they had plenty of footage of me jawin’ about everythin’ so they could fit me into their official narrative. But they wouldn’t have wanted me to be honest, we know that. The real crime is what they did to Howie - he’s barely in the damn thing. But sure, that’s why I’m riled, I suppose. I try not to think about it because when I do, I’m right back at the funeral and I don’t know which I’m feelin’ more: grief or anger. Like a perfect storm of the two, I guess.”

A voice on the television announced: “Next, the Super Bowl XLII Bridgestone Halftime Show starring Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers!”

“Oh - I did hear the part where he said that whenever we - they - were on TV we tried to be sweet boys, and that galled me too. What the fuck is he talkin’ ‘bout?!”

“Stan, we don’t have to do this.”

“Naw, look - I’m sputterin’ right now, I know. But I can do this. I need to do this, I need to watch it while it’s happenin.’ With someone who understands why.”

The stadium went dark, and a heartbeat could be heard, then flashes of a giant heart outlined in red pulsed along with the sound. As the lights went up and the band broke into “American Girl” followed by shots of people rushing the stage, the two fist-bumped.

“Right on the fuckin’ money,” Stan said, and chased his declaration with a swallow of beer.

“The intro wasn’t too gimmicky, I don’t think,” Don said, turning his attention to his chili. The basis of their friendship had nothing to do with past employment and everything to do with a mutual appreciation of their personalities. Don’s role in this moment was to make certain, whatever emotions his friend was experiencing, that Stan kept it all in perspective.

A minute into the performance Stan exclaimed, “Where the fuck is Ben? They put the camera on Ferrone before they put it on Ben or Mike?”

“Drummers are fascinating,” Don quipped, and Stan laughed.
“Oh there he is, but just for a second.”

“What is it about a man who gets people to suppress their own egos?” Don mused.

“I sincerely believe those two have no idea how to *live* without him now.”

“But they each have lives, surely.”

“Yeah, but with Campbell - Tommy makes sure to keep him close. Just close enough.”

“He loves that role, I do know that about him. Even as he is capable of so much more.”

“Blair is lookin’ damn good, just as good as when I last saw him - see, that’s what being out of the music business for 20 years will do for ya. Those three are gettin’ dried up, but Ron looks *fresh.*”

“So far it seems pretty bullshit-free.”

“Yeah, I mean, Benmont wouldn’t let them get away with any major bullshit. Ha! Tommy must have told Campbell he had to smile. And actin’ like a guitar hero, even, that’s - wow!”

“I always respected Mike for not falling into that stereotype. He lets his playing speak for itself.”

“Yeah this is the most animated I think I’ve ever seen him!”

The next song caused Stan to laugh again.

“See? Now it’s gonna be all *Full Moon Fever* - just wait.”

“They wouldn’t do something, like - well what would be good?”

“‘The Waiting’ - that’s what I think they should play, but they won’t. You know our biggest hit on the radio, other than ‘Draggin,’” was ‘Don’t Do Me Like That’ and after the tour in ’80 Tommy never wanted to play it again. And it was a good song, it’s certainly not less deep than any of this other shit.”

“Lots of cuts to Campbell, looks like.”

“Yeah I could see that as a directive - ‘Make sure my Lieutenant is represented.’ Oh look, Ferrone is singin’ - good on ya, buddy. A drummer should always sing along, even if he’s not on the mic.”

“He’s solid.”

“He’s exactly what Tommy wants and I’m glad that whole thing wasn’t too painful, honestly, because that’s the hardest piece to swap out in a situation like that.” Just before the next song began Stan shouted, “FUCKIN’ BUGS!,” pointing at the television. “I’m sure Tommy wanted him to have his moment too.”

Don chuckled. “All the right-hand men are rewarded, apparently.”

“I fuckin’ hate this song.”

“Why?”

“It’s not the song, it’s not a bad song really, it’s just that every time I happen to hear it, like, just last week Michelle and I were somewhere - probably the grocery - and it came on and all I could think about was how angry I was when I realized he wasn’t gonna call me to help. Phil had to call me and
say, ‘Look man, Tom asked me to play drums on these sessions and it’s not a band thing, so don’t be mad at me,’ and I was, like, ‘Of course I’m not mad at you, man, you’re not the asshole in this.’”

“One would think he was trying to tell you something.”

“That’s the thing, nobody really knows how to talk in that band. I bet even now they’re all still gruntin’ at each other, and making sarcastic comments that nobody on the outside knows how to respond to. Oh, I just thought of it - they should play ‘Mary Jane’s Last Dance,’ but I bet Tommy thinks it’s too salacious for the Super Bowl.”

“It does strike me that they hadn’t had a hit since you were fired.”

“No, I mean that whole thing is over for them, you know? Wow, it never really occurred to me how these songs are all fuckin’ durges, man. But it’s over for everyone else too - that’s just what happened.”

“He could go Country.”

“That’s what Mudcrutch is about, I’m tellin’ ya - it’s not just, ‘Hey, let’s get the old band back together,’ it’s him thinkin’ - ‘Hey what about this whole Country thing?’ But I heard that record and I’m still not into them. I wasn’t into them in 1972 and I’m not into them now.”

As “Runnin' Down A Dream” began, Don clapped Stan on the shoulder.

“You called it, friend, you surely did.”

Stan nodded. He hadn’t touched his chili and his beer rested undrunk in his hand save for the first swallow. “So fuckin’ sad - this band is a great band, one of the greatest ever, but they’ll never really be remembered for what they did, only what they helped Tom to do. As usual, it’s all about him.”

“Was it ever not?”

“I really do think it wasn’t for about two years. But then, yeah, that started to crumble right before our eyes. Well, Campbell probably saw it comin’ and that’s why he made sure he was on the inside. But damn, look at Thurston, he’s solid too, like he’s always been - and that’s another thing they can thank me for, but he’d say the same thing Bugs did: ‘You got me this job, but I kept it.’”

“Hold tight, it’s almost over.”

“It’s that fuckin’ movie, man, it stirred up all the bad shit.”

Don squeezed Stan’s shoulder. They sat silently for a moment, watching the performance.

“Oh now that’s just showboatin’ - who is that guy and where the fuck is Mike Campbell?!”

The screen showed the two men shoulder-to-shoulder and Don made a mmm sound.

“It really is the two of them, isn’t it?”

“Yeah. I mean, Ben gets what - maybe three, four shots - and that man made sure we were on our game all the time. The best musician in the Heartbreakers and they can’t even really show him?!”

“I think perhaps Tom is paying a debt here. We know how he’s held Mike back, for selfish reasons.”

“Yeah, I mean think about the fact that Campbell made more money and had more exposure thanks
to you, **not** the Heartbreakers. He’s still livin’ in the house ‘The Boys of Summer’ built, you know what I mean? And he’d be the first to admit it.”

“And I’m happy he has it. I appreciate everything you and Mike and Benmont have contributed to my work.”

“Aww fuck, it’s just Hollywood, and now it’s over.”

“And we don’t live there anymore,” Don concluded.

-Humdingler
*she likes to lick my finger...*

"But Mike, I listened to the CD and he's playing it faster than that," Howie insisted.

Every night the band boarded the bus to set off for the next city - if they were lucky there was Chinese food waiting for them - and Mike would sit in the back lounge, playing a particular song from J.J. Cale's new CD which had somehow sunk its' hooks into his brain. After a couple nights Howie came to join him and they jammed on it.

"And I'm not gonna tell J.J. Cale his business but it sounds better slower," Mike replied.

"Well it should," Stan opined, leaning against the doorway. Mike looked up at him and his expression said *don't test me.*

"Yeah?" Howie asked. "Why?"

"If it's a song about gettin' a blow job then it needs to sound dirty. Campbell knows that."

Howie cracked up and Mike smirked.

"I dunno what it's about exactly."

"Uh-huh, okay. But you got the right groove, definitely."

Howie raised his eyebrows, then they started in on it again. Stan sang along, and it was Mike's turn to look surprised when he discovered Stan knew all the words - although there weren't many. Stan once again demonstrated his talents of mimicry by phrasing exactly as his bandmate did, just a half-step above the other's voice, creating a perfect harmony. Mike smiled despite himself and Stan winked at Howie.

About half an hour later Benmont came back and begged them to play something else, stating there was an eggroll in it for all of them if they complied. A couple hours after that everyone had settled down for the night, opting either for sleep or reading until they were ready to sleep.

Howie changed into sweats and a t-shirt in the aisle by the bunks then joined Stan in the back lounge. Stan was stretched out on the largest of the couches reading *The Silence of the Lambs.*

"Hey Howie I finished *Jurassic Park* if you wanted to read it," Stan said, pointing to the book on the console table in the center of the space.

"Thanks man. Hey, so what did you mean," he asked, his voice near a whisper, "when you said he knows that?"
"Huh? Oh that. See, everyone likes to talk about me havin' a dirty mind, but Campbell? It's always the quiet ones, you know what I'm sayin'?"

Howie put a hand over his mouth and fell over sideways trying not to burst into laughter.

"Shhh!" Stan cautioned, whispering loudly. "Some people are tryin' to jerk off in there!"

Despite not knowing what it truly meant to be a “musical director,” Benmont was taking his new responsibility very seriously. His motivation was multi-tiered - he genuinely liked Stevie, and was perhaps the first of the Heartbreakers to do so. He enjoyed her sense of humor, which was often self-deprecating, and the way in which life had shaped her. She came from privilege, as did he, but was determined to succeed on the strength of what she could do. And the day he would not appreciate a beautiful woman was a day in which he was probably already dead.

Stevie struck him as being entirely serious about her artistry, she loved to write - she played him hours of demos, and even as the songs tended to run together after a while, he had to respect the effort.

But it was the songs which Tom, and now Jimmy in his turn, were concerned with.

“I’ll admit it to ya, Ben,” Jimmy had told Benmont over pasta and wine one night while they were deep within the process of recording their own album, “I have no fuckin’ idea what to do with Stevie. I mean, I know how she got those guys at Atlantic - she sat down and played them her songs and they were hooked - how could you not be fascinated, you know?” He laughed and Benmont chuckled as well.

The band had tried hard not to be, but to a man they had all - save Stan - slid down a-ways from the precipice of insular distrust. And it was simply because Stevie wouldn’t quit trying to win them over. You had to admire someone who knew what they wanted.

“But I’m listening to these demos and I don’t know what’s going on, are these even songs, or what? There’s no structure to them.”

Benmont cleared his throat and leaned in. “I think you just have to listen really hard to hear the song inside of it. She played me some of her stuff and sure, it’s pretty basic, but I think I could see how to arrange it. It just needs to be worked out. We managed it with that one song.”

“Oh my god, you’re the answer to my prayers! I can arrange a song when I know it’s a song, but this stuff -” He trailed off and ate another forkful of linguini. “So can you work with her, please, to - I guess like Buckingham does - make these demos into actual songs.”

“I can try, sure, if you think she’ll let me.”

“And so night after night he visited Stevie’s beach house and they had gathered in the living room around Stevie’s baby grand piano to work on arrangements. The ladies had teased him about being their musical slave and they had bonded, all of them, even as sometimes it was difficult to achieve focus. Benmont had three sisters, so he considered himself well-acquainted with feminine energy - his only true experience of brotherly interaction had come with the bands he had joined. The hours passed in laughter and with the help of wine, coffee and the occasional line of blow, they achieved actual progress in terms of the vocal melodies and harmonies for the songs, as Benmont did his best to take Stevie’s two-chord approach and make it breathe beyond the limits of what she could express.
musically. He was loving the blend of their voices: Sharon, who possessed obvious musical talent but not so much in the way of charisma; Lori, who knew how to twine her voice around Sharon’s although her true value seemed to be in how she could make Stevie laugh and had gained her trust; and Stevie, who sang from a place of sheer determination and was fortunate that her voice was distinctive enough to appeal to everyone, potentially. Being beautiful did not hurt, of course.

They all flirted with him and he understood it was just the currency of women, not evidence of his specific charms. Not to mention that when Tom got wind of his activities there was a specific edict not to become involved with, as Tom put it, “that whole scene, man.”

“Strictly professional,” Benmont assured his boss, and Tom had laughed and replied, “It might be strictly somethin,’ that’s for sure.”

Benmont had attempted to enlist Mike for assistance, to add some guitar to the new demos they were recording at Stevie’s house and Mike had given him a long stare before replying.

“Are you tryin’ to get me murdered in my sleep?”

“But this is work, man.”

“Work with girls, you mean. Marcie would put me out in the yard and let the dogs take my place.”

“Don’t they already? I mean, I thought you were a dedicated couch dweller because by the time you get home the dogs have already got to your side of the bed.”

Mike laughed. “Yeah mostly. Sometimes I get lucky. Look, if Iovine needs me on the record that’s one thing, as long as Tom says it’s okay. But I can’t be goin’ over to her house, y’know? That shit’s not gonna fly.”

“I didn’t hear Jane complaining about Stevie’s entrance into our lives.”

“Jane wants to be in that whole thing, you know that. And if Tommy’s cool with it, then that’s his lookout. But Marcie wouldn’t want to be a part of that, and I wouldn’t want her to either. Those girls are a little too wild for my taste.”

“You’re like my dad, Campbell, I swear.” Benmont laughed, and then remembered an important detail. “What about Stevie’s dogs - you like her dogs, don’t you?”

“I like everybody’s dogs, but it’s not like I don’t have my own.”

If there was any song which Benmont felt he believed in, it was “Sleeping Angel,” a delicate Country-tinged ballad which Stevie had written for her ex-boyfriend Paul Fishkin.

“Poor Paul,” she murmured after she had played him the song. “He’s so good, you know? One of a very few people who always believed in me no matter what, never questioned what I wanted to do, that I’m an artist and nothing is more important than my art.”

Benmont heard the echo of Stan’s admonishment regarding chicks in bands, and chided himself for believing it, because he knew women didn’t have it easy in this business. “It’s a beautiful song - does he know you wrote it for him?”

She nodded. “We have to get it just right, it’s so special.”
“I’ll get the band to come in, okay? We can play this stuff, we used to play this kind of stuff in Mudcrutch. We can do it, easy.”

“You’d do that for me? I wasn’t really sure ‘cause it seemed like the first time Tom wasn’t really feeling that great about what we played at his house.”

“Yeah but that was just kind of a jam session - this time we’ll be totally serious about it. We’ll make it work. And we won’t ask Tom.”

Stevie gave Benmont a wide-eyed look and giggled.

“You mean, this can be my band for a night?”

Benmont put a finger to his lips, then winked.

The guys had to admit it - Stevie was trying. She showed up to the demo session at Village Recorders in blue jeans (even if she paired them with a silk top and scads of jewelry) and cursed like a sailor when she screwed up a run-through. She was focused and intense and listened to them when they gave suggestions. And in turn they gave her their best effort, which made Benmont proud. His band brothers had their own pride in doing it right, no matter the circumstance.

*This fucking band, goddamn.*

He wouldn’t tell them, but he thought it might be even better than whatever could be directly identified as themselves. Because it was good, no matter who it might be.

Stevie had a new piece to play for him, something she called “my harpsichord song” and he found himself seduced once more. He wasn’t sure what the song was about but there was something incredibly compelling about the way the melody sat against the chords.

“Doesn’t it sound like it should be played on a harpsichord?” she asked him.

“Yeah I could see that,” he told her.

“It’s about this, about tonight.”

“But tonight just happened,” Benmont said, looking skeptical. “How can you already have a song about something that just happened?”

“I must have known you guys would be my band,” she said, “however momentary,” she sang, just as she had in the song.

Benmont was confused, thinking it had been a love song of some kind, then it hit him. *Of course* it was.

“Can I tell you something, like, totally honest?”

“Of course,” Stevie said, turning on the piano bench to face him.

“I know sometimes it’s easier to have a fantasy than to face reality. And right now, you’re doing what you want to do and it feels liberating. But someday you’re going to go back to that reality, so don’t let the fantasy poison the well, you know what I mean?”

“But this is just so much fun, I love it.”
“I know - it’s fun for us too, but, it’s dangerous to think that way, that’s all I’m saying.”

“Do you know, do you really know how much I love this band?” she whispered to him.

“I think I might because I love it too. More than it loves me sometimes.”

“Wow, that actually makes so much sense. I’m gonna have to think about it like that, maybe.”

“Your album is going to be great, and we’re happy to be a part of it.”

He knew the others would likely kill him if they knew he was telling her this, but what the hell.

“Benmont, you have saved me, truly. I will never forget this.”

He knew Stevie had a tendency towards the melodramatic, but he embraced the fantasy of being her musical knight in shining armor and told himself it was okay to feel like that however momentarily.

“It had to be a hometown show, right?” Tom mused, smirking to recall certain memories. “Always somethin’ ‘bout the hometown shows.”

Tom and Mike were at the Clubhouse by themselves - they wanted to review various tracks for the live project without Ryan so they could speak candidly about themselves, so Mike was running the board.

Mike nodded. He didn’t have a specific memory regarding that show - not like he did in ’90 or ‘91 - but when he listened to the recording he was amazed at how good they sounded, in that last gasp before everything changed. But visiting Gainesville was so political, they had to be good. He recalled Tom bitching them all out over an ambivalent review they had received for a hometown performance - I don’t care what you’re thinkin’ or feelin’ but when we’re home we have to be perfect - and so they likely doubled-down at this show to ensure it didn’t happen again.

“That song, though, I can’t even remember when it sounded so good. I don’t think we played it much, did we?”

“Naw I don’t think so. It’s a good’un, but it’s rather dark. I think that’s why we didn’t play it much.”

“That’s exactly why it’s so good,” Mike insisted. The entire show had been informed by loss - he did remember that, the bad news which had come to them that day - and thus entirely fitting to play a song about someone who had lost their way out in the darkness of emotional abandonment and bad choices. He didn’t care to dwell in the darkness but there were some moments when it meant that much more to walk through it.

“Yeah I’m wonderin’ who that guy was. A character, but where did I find him, where did he come from?”

“We should put it together with ‘Drivin,’ doncha think? The dark and the light.”

“Sure, why not. That was a good gig, that one was on the radio, wasn’t it?”

“Yeah I think it was.”

Tom was thinking on the ending of the song - that litany of desperate hope for a future which might not come - and then the cathartic coda where the band exploded behind his repetition of the word
lost. And it ended so abruptly, upon yet another empty promise. He wondered if maybe thinking of River had pushed his hand, triggered that choice.

“Goddamn, sometimes - even then - we could nail it, right?”

“We could indeed. The bad times weren’t onstage, or at least not many.”

Tom sighed. “If only that boy could have been that boy -” he pointed at the console - “all the time.”

“Stanley could only be who he was but I have to admit, I miss that fire of his.”

“Don’t worry, I won’t let it get ‘round.”

Mike grinned. “Naw, it’s all good - hell, fifteen years in the rearview, I can afford to set it down.”

“And why shouldn’t we be proud of it, fuck, we were amazin.’ More often than I would have thought possible.”

“In spite of ourselves, some of the time.”

They laughed for a while to recall the madness, and then nodded to each other because there was no need to recount it.

-69-

Was it love that took you under
or did you know too much?
Was it something you could picture
but never could quite touch?

Within the long hours of paralysis, lying in his bed and looking at the ceiling, looking at the beams of light coming in the cracks, inside his rustic hideaway, Tom wrestled with his guilt the way one might attempt to dislodge something weighty while underwater, struggling, needing to break the surface before it all went black.

And it wasn’t all Jane and the girls. He told his therapist it was, the feeling that he had destroyed something he shouldn’t have created in the first place, but that creation was already out of his hands long before he set out on the road to becoming who he was. Part of what made him not want to get out of bed, to lay there within the long afternoons of birdsong and distant surf, hearing voices that weren’t there, was a feeling of failure which squatted on his chest and spread wings, sunk in claws, hissed in his face, whispered terrible things.

It was absence, it was guilt.

They had all agreed, they had all backed him up - and he knew Mike had been ready for it to happen years before, but his only response was: “If this is what you want, then it’s what’s best.” But even so, out on the road and attempting to be kind to the New Guy, there were moments where he could see everyone - even Mike - feeling the absence, like a hole in the midst of their now threadbare unity. He thought Howie might have only agreed because he didn’t believe he was in a position to disagree. Because the other had become so quiet and withdrawn, accompanied everywhere by his beloved dog and other, darker, things.

It felt like a rebuke, the relative silence of the dressing room and the tuning room and the hallways. There was relief but there was also mourning. Even the crew was quiet, and that was downright eerie.
He hadn’t stopped to consider that as he was jettisoning the combative relationships in his life - one of which he couldn’t, just merely ignore - that when he no longer had that resistance to face, or to hide from, that he would fall. Fall and fall and fall through space.

Nothing to stop him now, and everything to regret.

The primary regret was the old: you couldn’t make this work, and you could make anything work if you tried hard enough. If you wanted it bad enough.

Determination was a drug, of sorts, and without it Tom didn’t feel himself any longer. He was just another guy who was giving up.

The weight of all which had never been said but felt within the space of a touch or a look, experienced in a series of moments which flickered like film stock and were equally as flammable when subjected to the heat of intense scrutiny, warped by the world’s demands, the cold facts of business and the passion of glorious performance - what was it that made him hate the boy so much, but love him just as hard?

These feelings, rising up out of the swamp again, he wanted to murder them. He wanted to stop feeling like he’d made the most terrible of mistakes.
"That song is just a bitch all the way around."
- Mike Campbell, 2009

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“I think I finally figured it out,” Tom announced, entering the control room, waving around some coffee-stained notebook pages.

“What’s that?” Mike asked.

“How I can make this damn song work. Why’d you have to write somethin’ so good, Campbell? It’s been drivin’ me fuckin’ crazy!”

“Shoulda told me to write shitty songs instead, I might coulda managed it.”

Shelly began snickering and the room broke up.

“So how’d ya do it?”

“I was drivin’ home last night and I had Plastic Letters on the tape deck. ‘Cautious Lip’ - remember that song?”

“Oh yeah, that was the slow song, wasn’t it?”

“Yeah but it speeds up at the end. She talks in it, she only kinda sings, like the girl groups or somethin’ and I thought, ‘Hey, I could do that!’”

“Oh that’s right - that’s the one they go fuckin’ nuts on. I remember Debbie freaked out some guy in the front row one night who musta been on acid when she screamed in his face.”

“Huh, I musta missed that.”

“What the fuck are you two talkin’ about?” Jimmy demanded.

“We toured with Blondie, they have this weird song where Debbie kinda talk-sings it, and that’s what I can do for the verses of the jangle song.”

“Is that what we’re callin’ it?”

“Nope, now we’re callin’ it ‘Here Comes My Girl.’ Well, we will when I finish the damn thing.”

“So how’s it goin’?”

“It’s alright, but the guy who’s in it, I think he’s kinda an asshole.”

More laughter. Jimmy snapped his fingers.

“Bruce does that on his new record! It’s a great bit, sure.”

“Well fuck, I ain’t doin’ it now then!”
“Oh c’mom, you’re not gonna pass up a good idea, besides, like you said, you all stole it from The Shirelles!”

A disembodied voice interrupted their collective bullshitting.

“Get it right, assholes, it was The Shangri-Las!”

“Finally this boy turned out to be useful for somethin’!” Tom said, and Benmont stood up from behind his piano in the live room and took a bow.

“Naw man, it’s just a ditty, you know? That’s why I thought it would be good for J. Geils. It sounds like them.”

“And they turned it down - so you’re both stupid! It sounds like a hit to me.”

“Aw c’mom, that’s not fair!”

“That song is a hit, I’m tellin’ you - and it’s been just sittin’ there, for how many years?”

Tom shrugged. “A few.”

“Man, sometimes you just don’t know what you got, thank god I’m here!”

Tom stood up and gave Jimmy a glance somewhere between a smile and a grimace.

“Okay, we’ll do it if you get the hell out right now, Miracle Man.”

“Fuckin’ A it’s a miracle! Just like when you played me ‘Refugee.’”

“Well don’t strain yourself there, Iovine, otherwise you might run out of luck.”

Jimmy continued to babble about how they needed all the good songs they could get as Tom pushed him out the door.

It came to Tom while they were attempting to put a different drum track on "Here Comes My Girl" and they had left Stan’s original harmony on - there was some leakage in the channel from the snare - but the sound of his voice made Tom pause, as the work carried on around him: Mike and Shelly working the knobs and faders with Jimmy occasionally calling out directions and Thom making careful notes of all the settings.

The song itself filled him with a sense of joy; it had been easier to assemble than some of the others, and it would be meaningful and meet his standards - but their voices together, it took his breath away.

That voice was a ghost, now.

“Yeah we’ll take that off,” Jimmy noted.

“The fuck you will,” Tom snarled.

No other comment. They continued with their pass, the nuances of the mix working their specific aural magic to bring forth the glory of the music. Tom looked over at Mike and the other gave him
what might have seemed to the others to be a neutral stare but Tom could read in his blinking and the shape of Mike’s mouth a series of questions.

*Did we do the right thing? For the record? For us?*

He sighed. When the chorus came back, he gasped to hear Stan’s voice so tightly wound around his own, their true intimacy which no one else could understand. That half-step harmony he could sing so easily, it felt like they were one voice. He closed his eyes against a momentary ache.

Tom knew they were creating greatness - but it never occurred to him it would be such a painful process.

“Why isn’t it working?” Tom asked. It wasn’t meant to be a rhetorical question, but it might as well have been.

“I think maybe we’re rushing it a bit,” Mike said. It was two AM and everyone else had left the studio, although the night crew was there to clean up and Tom told them to collect the trash and then to *please get the fuck out.* “It still sounds too fast to me.”

“This fuckin’ song, man, it’s not supposed to be this hard.”

“Yeah she’s a bitch all right, but you know what? When we do get it right it might be the best thing we’ve ever done.”

“If she’s a bitch, you birthed her - I want you to remember that.”

Mike laughed and rubbed his eyes, the circles beneath them darker than they had been the day before.

“Tommy, what are you still doin’ up - don’t you have to go meet the lawyers later?”

“Yeah, speakin’ of *bitches.*”

“It will come, it has to, even if I have to spill some blood to get it.”

“You talkin’ some hoodoo there, partner? Well you can’t have my blood, the lawyers are already suing me for it.”

Mike didn’t want to say *better you than me,* but Tom knew that’s what he was thinking.

-One of Tom’s sacrosanct rules of the road was: if it sounds like a fight, just give it a few minutes, it might burn itself out.*

Siblings - by blood or by avocation - always knew how to get on each other’s nerves. Tom mused that his band brothers were more like what everyone expected siblings to be. His own brother was a gentle soul and they’d never fought a day in their lives. They all had actual brothers and sisters they were protective of or at least lovingly tolerant. Whereas the people they had to live and work with in close quarters for months at a time were forever on the cusp of being walloped for the slightest of offenses, like breathing loudly or eating noisily or simply existing long after the other had tired of their presence.
When it was time to leave for the venue Bugs made certain to account for everyone - not merely the one who was his personal responsibility - and get them herded and moving in the proper direction. No one would admit to pre-show jitters but they often manifested as scatterbrained behavior once the call came to get in the van or the car, or on the bus and thus they required that kind of attention, if only to ensure they got where they were going on time.

Benmont was attempting to explain something in the news which Mike had heard on the radio, and Tom was attempting to ignore his vague stomach cramps as they stood in the hallway waiting on the others, and they were all startled by a loud crash.

“What the fuck is goin’ on?” Tom yelled down the corridor to Bugs, who was standing in front of Stan’s room.

“Look man,” they heard Stan say - rather loudly - “she came back with me, so calm the fuck down already!”

Ron’s response was angry, but unintelligible.

“Oh not this again,” Mike whined. “Seems like every goddamn week they’re fightin’ over some girl.”

“Have you seen some o’them girls, Michael? They’re worth scrappin’ over,” Tom asserted.

“Yeah, like that blonde in Dayton, goddamn,” Benmont agreed.

“It’s bullshit! It’s stupid to fight over girls.”

“So if some dog-lovin’ mofo had gone after your girl at that party you woulda let it go?”

“That’s different! Marcie wasn’t there lookin’ for guys, she only talked to me in the first place ‘cause I called her dog wrong. It was just a normal conversation.”

“Yeah we’re all craven degenerates, don’t you know,” Benmont teased. “Campbell won’t allow us to sully him with our search for romance.”

“Romance? Y’all do the fuck-and-run so much I’m surprised you even remember that word.”

“Oh now that is cold, Campbell. Don’t do a brother like that,” Tom scolded.

“It’s the truth! I was never that bad even when I wasn’t married.”

“Cause you wouldn’t talk to nobody!” Tom exclaimed, grinning. “Wouldn’t say boo to a goose, much less a girl.”

“The paragon of propriety!” Benmont mockingly declared. He then gave Tom a nudge even as they heard hostilities escalate down the hall. “Whatcha wanna bet some girl shows up backstage with a dog and then we’ll see how fast Saint Michael gets interested.”

Tom laughed. Mike smirked and flipped his bandmate the bird.

Several doors opened up behind them in the corridor, with various inquiries voiced to those they saw standing there, along with such assertions as calling the hotel manager, or even the police.

“Goddamn it,” Tom muttered. Just then, the two combatants spilled out of the room, with Bugs between them attempting to stop them from punching each other. “If either of you break the rule I’m
gonna suspend your per diem!” he yelled.

The voice of economic reason penetrated their conflict as Stan pulled away from the other two with a disgusted huff. Once they collected their carry-on bags, they walked up the hallway towards their bandmates, keeping distance between themselves. Bugs followed behind and rolled his eyes at the others.

“Fuck per diem, Tony D. needs to be givin’ me hazard pay!” he cracked.

“So what was it this time?” Tom asked.

“Forget it,” Stan replied.

“Naw, since y’all raised such a goddamn stink and held us up, I’m downright curious now.”

“Stanley thinks he needs to fuck every girl in the world, and he doesn’t. Especially not a girl he knew was interested in me,” Ron explained.

Stan rolled his eyes but remained uncharacteristically silent, a sure admission of guilt.

“I think you’re taking this too personally, man,” Benmont counselled. “I figure if Stanley talks some girl into going with him instead, she’s got terrible taste in men and who wants to fuck someone like that?”

In the time it took them to get to the elevators they were all laughing, even Stan.

“It’s poor judgment to say the least,” Tom added.

“All right, that’s enough,” Stan cautioned.

“Boy don’t you even start with me now, ya goddamn mutt.”

“That’s an insult to dogs,” Mike said, and they all groaned.

Tom had occasion to recall - on some incident of localized bacchanalia - the conversation he’d had with Terry Melcher when the other had shown up at Leon’s one night to discuss work on the album project, but had ended up regaling Tom with his tales of excess and also of genius and madness. And Terry had imparted something which stuck with Tom, even if he didn’t always actually heed it in a specific sense.

“The leeches, man, they’re very tricky. You just wake up one day and realize you’ve got ten too many people in your space, let alone your life. You gotta watch out for that. I think about how I’m lucky to be alive, you know?”

Tom had nodded, his mind floating in that hinterland brought on by sleep deprivation and intoxication, and it echoed, as all true things did.

But a party needed people, even if just a couple girls and the promo guy. You couldn’t fault Jon, he had an actual job and had proven to the band he knew how to do it very well. And he managed to find them whatever they might want, within limits. Jon wasn’t a leech, but Tom wasn’t entirely trustful of his ilk. Promo guys had their own agendas, they wanted to party as much, if not more, as the band did. And the party was the reward for that effort they gave, the sweat and intensity of performance, of working so hard to get the crowd off. Once they had risen through the ranks to play
arenas, it became harder to know what kind of impact they were having. There was a roar greeting them and sending them off, the mass of bodies providing a specific humidity, the firefly flicker of all those lighters held aloft, but Tom had seen too many glazed and dazed faces in the front rows and realized that everyone was there for the party, and their presence was incidental to the ritual.

Jon’s energy was always a welcome addition to a nightly gathering as they sought to come back down to the mundane level, he was a babyfaced curly-haired chubby ball of enthusiasm who genuinely loved the band as a band and as individuals, despite the hazing they had first given him. With all the gladhanding bullshit Tom had already endured, it was nice to have someone in the machine on his side.

And now it was Jon speaking to him in hushed tones, looking serious. Definitely not his usual outgoing easy demeanor. They were on the bus headed to another town in the Rust Belt, business as usual, traveling carnival and conquerors on the move.

“T.P. I know you usually duck outta these things, but since we’re all here I want you to watch Ben.”

“Watch ‘im do what?”

“Just watch, please.”

It was typical, Tom considered, of what happened after a gig, only this time they were on the bus and not at the venue. Not everyone got to go on the bus and besides Jon and a couple girls, the only other people there who weren’t in the band were executive crew. Stan was talking to one of the girls - again, this was altogether typical - and Mike and Jim were talking to the other one. They each flirted in the way which long-time married men tended to do, strictly for the attention of a pretty girl but ultimately devoid of incentive. Benmont and Howie were huddled in a corner and they both looked sloppy, but if they were going to be sloppy they might as well do it on the bus.

“Yeah, he looks drunk, sure, but -”

“Just watch,” Jon said again.

Tom realized that he was usually an observer at social gatherings. He had been doing it for years but never quite grasped the significance of it. He tended to keep people at arm’s length but didn’t realize this effort extended to situations. Even if talking to someone he was eying the periphery, watching for signs of significance and of danger. He sat there between Jon and Bugs - who was half-listening to their conversation while he changed out the strings on one of the Telecasters - and understood that he wasn’t truly needed even as everyone was unconsciously acknowledging his presence.

The two were doing shots of Jack, chasing it with beer, smoking, all very normal for them. Their laughter was raucous and Tom knew Benmont needed this kind of distraction. He had boarded the bus at the start of the tour with a fragile heart, and they had all rallied to remind him there was always the road, there was always the show, the grind, all the components of their organized structured existence in this floating bubble. Beneath his laughter, beneath his drunkenness, Benmont looked haunted. Tom couldn’t recall the other having his heart broken in this way in all the time he’d known him. He flashed on a moment of Ben at 13, hamming it up at Lipham’s on one of the upright pianos. When did it happen - that intense but slightly silly kid turning into someone with deep pain radiating out of the cracks in a world-weary facade?

“Yeah okay, he’s in trouble,” Tom said quietly.

Jon nodded. “Don’t leave him out there to drown.”
“I can’t be meddlin’ in other people’s lives, c’mon now.”

“T.P. it’s not just some guy, it’s your guy. Your best guy, if you wanna know the truth. You told me that day at your house, remember? You said: ‘As long as I got those guys we can go on forever.’ Are you telling me you don’t believe that anymore?”

Tom was thinking about how he had solved his own problems with heartbreak, with having his feelings hurt, and wasn’t sure he wanted to tell Benmont to just build more walls so that no one could ever do it to him again. He looked at Stan, who practically had the other girl in his lap - so very typical - and stared long enough that Stan cut his eyes to him in acknowledgment and they silently exchanged a moment of ambivalent longing, something they had learned to do over the course of several contentious years, the weight of whatever they felt rendered in a glance. His strategy was bullshit, but he was choosing to believe it was too late to learn something new.

“Fuck, I’m no expert on any of this shit!”

Jon shrugged. “Who is? Not anybody in this business. But I can’t just sit by and not say anything. You’re too good to let this kind of stuff trip you up.”

Tom lit another cigarette and called out to Mike. “Campbell, haul out that git-box and let’s have some real music instead of whatever the fuck this shit is.” He looked up and waved a hand at the speakers set into the ceiling of the bus.

Mike drained his beer and saluted. “Roger dodger.”

Tom made a beckoning gesture to Benmont. “C’mon Ben, you too - don’t tell me you’re too drunk.”

“Not entirely drunk, not yet.” Benmont stood up to look for his Casio and swayed slightly but then seemed to impose some kind of effort towards sobriety in his movements.

“Are we havin’ a hootenanny?” Stan asked, grinning. The girl looked confused and asked what that was.

“Well darlin’, we’re about to demonstrate for ya,” Tom replied with his best charming smile.

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When Jim had given Tom a copy of the initial treatment for the "Runnin' Down A Dream" video to review, Tom read it over and had fixed him with a skeptical look which lasted nearly a minute.

“What?!” Jim asked, spreading his hands out.

“I get why this has to be a cartoon -”

“Don’t think of it like that, it’s animation.”

“All right there, Cecil, settle down. Every time I see one of these kinda videos it always seems too gimmicky. That fuckin’ Dire Straits video, man.”

“It won’t be anything like that, I swear. Think more like the one for ‘Accidents Will Happen,’ remember that one? ”

“Kinda? Didn’t we see it in London?"

“Yeah, on Top of the Pops. But this one will have nothing to do with rock n’roll - it’s about what happens when you dream.”
Tom touched his nose and pointed at Jim. “Oh I get what you’re trying to do there!”

“Can’t get nothin’ by you, boss.”

Tom trusted Jim in the way in which one trusts someone they have known since the era of their emerging destiny, but he felt it was important to provide just a bit of resistance to Jim’s ideas lest the man start believing he was some kind of visionary. There was only room for one of those in this outfit. But he could be damn convincing sometimes.

Performance-based videos - those in which bands mimed to songs - were fairly quick, dirty and cheap to create and rather than make the rounds of music-related shows Tom had long-preferred such substitutions, and so he expected more of the same based on the relative success of the clips for “Refugee” and “Here Comes My Girl.” And he was in the position to insist that his guy would be the one to create them, now that they were all living in a world where videos were not only desirable but expected. What he hadn’t expected was that Jim would have such ambitious aims for them. When it was decided by Backstreet A&R that the first singles would be “The Waiting” and “A Woman In Love” Jim had decided they had to adhere to a unified concept.

“Once I sat down and really listened to the songs, it hit me - one of them should be in color and one in black-and-white.”

A raised eyebrow, then a sip of coffee. “Okay, I’m listenin.’”

“Each of them starts out with a black-and-white slow-motion shot of playing, like you playing a big chord on the Rick, and then goes into a band shot, but 'Waiting' will be very colorful, like how you feel when you open the big box of Crayolas. 'Woman' will be in black-and-white - actual black and white, not just shades of gray.”

“And how’re you gonna do that, Cecil?”

Jim rolled his eyes. “I’m gonna light it like a goddamn Fritz Lang movie, smartass. It’s all about the lighting.”

“Fritz Lang?”

“Now I know you know who he is, man, we’ve spent many a night smokin’ dope and watchin’ movies and we saw Fury on KTTV a few months ago.”

“Oh that guy.”

“Yeah. It’s a moody song, it needs a stark palette. It will look amazing.”

“And what about 'Waiting'?”

“We’ll make it look like a big canvas, a white stage with lots of color around you, primary colors, and you guys will be in dark clothes so you stand out against it.”

“Hmmmm. Okay, I can get behind that. But you can do it for the budget they’re willing to give us?”

“I may end up spendin’ more on ‘Woman’ but yeah, I will make it work.”

The reaction was decidedly mixed. When Jim gave the band a preview of the finished product, they
all sort of squirmed and made vague noises of protest while they watched “The Waiting” - except for the ending.

“Ah man, that was a great idea!” Stan exclaimed, laughing.

“I don’t like my solo, I look so weird,” Mike said, looking down at his shoes.

“I told you that you shouldna cut your hair so short!” Stan said.

“Shut up, Stanley. It’s that big red thing, it’s just weird.”

“Michael, I believe they call that a triangle,” Tom cracked.

They had a very different reaction to "Woman," no one said anything as it played, and their stunned silence once it had concluded left Jim wondering if he had done something so bad they couldn’t bear to tell him.

“Goddamn,” Tom finally said. “You actually did it just like you said you would.”

“You actually made us look good, sorta,” Benmont commented.

“Yeah I look okay in that one,” Mike murmured.

“What’s with the slo-mo though?” Stan asked.

“I believe they call that art, Stanley,” Jim said, and Tom gave him a nod as the others cracked up.

Jim would always say it was the little things which made a video great - and he could remember those details with pride: the way Mike looked bemused at Tom’s business with the streamers in “The Waiting,” or how Ben had kicked the camera in “Letting You Go” and how they had ad-libbed the bridge of that song with Tom up on the boom and Benmont and Stan playing their shared vocal for laughs. He wanted them to do something funny in every video, though he wasn’t sure if Tom would approve. The camera loved Stan - Jim knew that even before Tom had informed him he was now going to direct the videos. He had to remind himself that the ratio of shots had to favor Tom, because his affection for the band entire meant he wanted to present them equally.

And in tribute to this affection, he instructed the animators to insert a two-second sequence into the scene where Tom is wandering through a city, having grown to King Kong-like proportions. It was a joke, but a joke which could be interpreted on several different levels. And he knew exactly what Tom would say to see it, or at least he was hoping Tom would get the joke too.

He had brought in some photos as reference, stopping at one in particular.

“Make sure you get a good likeness of him, okay? With the others it doesn’t have to be exact.”

“So this guy is breaking the fourth wall for real?” one of the artists asked him.

“Oh yeah, that’s exactly what he would do if he found himself in a cartoon. He’s like the Bugs Bunny of this production: Ain’t I a stinker?”

Jim found himself disheartened that none of the animators laughed at his impersonation. Fucking kids.
Jim sat behind Tom when he played him the rough edit - still missing a couple sequences - and Tom snorted when it came to that one shot. When the run-through finished he was still grinning.

“You think maybe he’ll quit fussin’ finally? Think that will get him to forgive me?”

“That’s not why I did it, but I thought he wasn’t mad anymore.”

“Oh he’s just sayin’ he’s not in the interests of bein’ a team player, or whatever. But I like it, you got ‘im - that Stanley Smirk we oughta call it.”

Jim laughed. “Yeah that’s him alright. Think the guys will care it’s him and not them?”

“Naw.” Tom snapped his fingers. “It’s too bad it’s already done - he shoulda pulled out a slingshot. I mean, doesn’t that look like what he’s thinkin’ of doin’?”

The two laughed that much harder for their shared history, to say nothing of their shared humor.
Benmont checked his camera what seemed like a dozen times, waiting for Bugs’ summons. But he had fallen into a sort of sleepy lull, dialing around on the radio, enthralled by the juxtaposition of foreign and familiar voices, and feeling himself sweat. When the rap sounded, that familiar five-beat, he was startled back into the moment.

“We’re leavin’ in fifteen,” Bugs informed him. “You got all your stuff?”

“Yeah, and I’ve got my passport, just in case.”

“Well the film crew says we won’t be hassled, but who the fuck knows.”

“I’ll get Mike.”

“I don’t think he’s comin.’”

“Not coming? He’s got to come!”

“Well tell ‘im he’s got fourteen minutes to make up his mind.”

Benmont went out and put an ear to his neighbor’s door, hearing guitar noodling, and knew it was safe to knock.

“What?”

“It’s me.”

“It’s open.”

Mike was barefoot, wearing jeans and a t-shirt which looked like he’d landed in a tug of war with his dogs and lost. He sat on his unmade bed and played his trusty Gibson, looking weary.

“Did you get any sleep?” Benmont asked.

“Not really. Sounded like Apocalypse Now out there all fuckin’ night.”

“I told you to get some of those earplugs -”

Mike waved a hand, annoyed.

“C’mon, we’re getting ready to go.”

“With Tommy and McGuinn?”

“Yeah - Howie and Stanley left hours ago, I guess Howie knows some guy who’s showing them around.”

“Which means you’re gonna have a camera in your face all day long. No thanks.”

“Not me, brother. I can assure you no one gives a fuck about me, or you.”

“Yeah but they’ll still be there, and I don’t wanna be around that. Everybody’s gonna be starin.’
Forget it.”

Benmont knocked his knee against the mattress. “So what are you going to do - sit here all day?”

“No, I’ll grab somebody and go out, maybe see if I can find an oud or somethin’ that’s not too expensive.”

“I thought you already had one.”

“No I’ve played one, at Norm’s, but I don’t have one.”

“Ben!” they heard Bugs calling in the hallway. “Y’all best come if you’re comin’!”

“Look man, don’t waste this. Who knows when we’ll get to come here again - they didn’t even sell our records here before now!”

Mike scratched his head, then frowned. “I don’t travel as well as you do, okay?”

Benmont knew he was on the edge of annoying the other, who had his limits when it came to social interactions. “Okay, man - at least I can say I tried. It’s just that we’re so lucky, you know?”

Mike rolled his eyes. “You think I don’t know that? Just ‘cause I don’t wanna be around cameras doesn’t mean I’m not grateful. But I’m not a celebrity, hell, I’m barely a entertainer!”

“Yeah you’d better not let that get out,” Benmont teased as he headed for the door.

“Shoulda left the gator in the swamp,” Mike muttered, and Benmont chuckled as he closed the door behind him. That was something his bandmate liked to say when someone had managed to rile him, which didn’t happen too often.

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Stan had insisted they lay upon the beach which ringed the lake, the lack of ambient light in the area meant one could see the stars fairly well if the night was clear. A citronella candle in a mason jar burned steady between their respective towels, their own personal firefly. Tom had agreed to this activity with the condition that Stan not speak for at least ten minutes. And the boy could certainly muster discipline when he felt like it. Tom wondered if they were thinking about the same thing.

“Wow,” Stan whispered, pointing up to the sky, “did you see that?”

And he had. A streak of light which had gone from white to yellow as whatever it was travelled through the atmosphere above them.

“Some big hunk o’rock is gonna crash down somewhere.”

“Did you make a wish?”

“I don’t wish for things - I want something, I get it. Or I don’t get it and I just find something else.”

“And what if you don’t know whether you want it or not?”

Tom turned his head, waiting. After a few seconds Stan did the same. They stared at each other long enough that if an entire planet had fallen out of the sky, they would have missed it.

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Mike sighed. He was torturing the coil cord of the wall-mounted extension in their kitchen, which had already been chewed on by dogs, stretched out by children, and now he was contemplating winding it around his neck and pulling hard. He loved his bandmate in a particular way - loved the way Stan made them all laugh, loved the way he told a story, loved how exciting his playing was during a show, loved that he had attitude to burn even when it could be annoying. But he wasn’t loving the way Stan went on a campaign to complain - Mike had coined that phrase in the early days to describe the way their drummer acted when he was in a bad mood.

“Look out,” he’d tell the others, “Stanley’s on a campaign to complain.”

“And what am I gonna do ‘bout that?” Mike asked. “It applies to all of us, it’s not like Tommy’s gonna change his mind just ‘cause I got somethin’ to say ‘bout it.”

“But we all know it’s bullshit!”

“Look, think ‘bout the bigger picture here. We know things are gonna get better. When this lawsuit business is done, and we can release the album, we’re all gonna be rich. Sure, there’s levels to it, but we’re all gonna have some. Tommy will just have more and why shouldn’t he?”

“But he’ll keep us from havin’ more later on! For one thing, what if we all wanna write songs?”

“For fuck’s sake, nobody’s stoppin’ you from doin’ that!”

“But he barely uses any of your songs as it is! And Ben’s given him songs and they always get rejected. You’ve got a whole room full of songs, don’t you? And you’re just gonna sit on them? And is Ben just supposed to put his in a vault or somethin’?”

“No, of course not. But this is his band, now didn’t you say you were with him? Remember when Tommy asked us that? And we all said yes we are. So why do you keep fussin’? Why can’t you just know your role?”

“I do, but I also know that we were put into an impossible situation by that asshole, who has one of the worst reputations - I have heard stories about that man. Nobody wants to walk away, and Tommy knows that. And so he listened to those fuckheads -”

“He has to do what’s best for him. He’s takin’ all the heat right now, I don’t see you showin’ up to court.”

“I would if someone asked me!”

“Oh lord, I can only imagine what would happen if they did. Stanley, listen to me: we have a good thing. A really good thing. There’s gonna be rich, richer, and richest. But we’re all gonna be rich, I promise you. We’ve got great management, we’re gonna have a better royalty rate, and points, we’re gonna tour the hell out of this album, it’s gonna be the best. The record is that good, you know it is. You know you wanna be a Heartbreaker - is there honestly any other band better than us?”

“Fuck no!”

“Then you’re stuck with us. So just accept it and get ready for what’s comin.’”

“I don’t know if I completely trust you, Lieutenant -”

“Quit fuckin’ callin’ me that! Fine, don’t trust me. Go ahead and quit and then watch us get big.
'Cause we’re gonna.”

“Fuck you, I ain’t quittin’ this band! You assholes wouldn’t know what to do without me!”

“Well you do what you want and I’m gonna do what I know is right. Tommy is fightin’ not just for himself, but us too. He wins, we all win.”

“Yeah but he still wins more.”

“What the fuck does that even mean?!”

Stan continued to babble and Daisy came up to her master, whining softly, tail wagging. Mike got up and opened the kitchen door so she could go about her doggie business in the backyard. Waiting for her return, he looked up at the night sky.

_Hell, I might not survive this bullshit to finally get rich._ But he knew he really didn’t care about that. He had a few desires: he wanted a bigger house, to be able to buy Marcie a better car. And to not have to worry about providing for his family. He _always_ wanted more guitars. To be able to build a decent-quality home studio. He wanted to do something nice for his mom, like buy her a house. But otherwise, he still couldn’t quite believe he was actually making a living doing the thing he loved more than anything. He knew Stan felt the same way, but it was in his nature to complain. And Mike had the capacity for patience and for loyalty, and _that_ was why Tom had brought him along for the ride.

“Are you even listenin’ to me, Campbell?” he heard Stan ask.

“Have you said anything you haven’t already said in the last half hour?”

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“That’s it! You guys are gonna sound like The Motels on this record.”

Jimmy’s pronouncement brought on laughter, and a dramatic piano flourish from Benmont in lieu of a rimshot, but not necessarily the shaming he meant to deliver. After the reaction had died away a bit, and he was still standing there even though Stan had basically told him to get out of the live room - albeit in a humorous sort of way - Stan decided to push back.

“That’s _not_ an insult, man. That band has two of our good friends in it. Cats from G-ville don’t suck. Cats from G-ville make great rock n’ roll bands.”

“What the fuck is G-ville?”

“That’d be our hometown, genius,” Stan shot back. He gave the other an alpha dog _I dare you to start some shit with me_ kind of look.

“Now how the fuck would I know that?”

They all groaned. “Jimmy, I’m pretty sure I told you we’re from Gainesville,” Tom said.

“All I know is you’re from Florida, why would I need to know anymore than that?”

“We _all_ know you’re from Brooklyn, you never let us forget it!” Stan said.

“There’s a difference!”
Everyone in the room protested mockingly.

“Yeah, just try and tell someone back home there’s no difference between Gainesville and Jacksonville and you’ll get your ass beat but good,” Mike assured him.

Jimmy rolled his eyes and put up his hands.

“Okay look, I got nothin’ more to say about fuckin’ geography, can we please just get this done?”

“Stanley’s not wrong, and that’s all I gotta say ‘bout that,” Tom declared. “Now just let him play the goddamn song already.”

“Yeah can I do my job? Is that okay with you?”

“All right, settle down!” Tom barked.

As the door closed behind Jimmy, Stan muttered *who the fuck do you think you are* and his bandmates turned on him as one with annoyed stares. He became wide-eyed with exaggerated exasperation.

“I’m ready - y’all ain’t ready so why are ya gawkin’ at me?!”

“We’re making a record? Really? I honestly thought we just came down here to hang out,” Benmont cracked, and their unity kicked in once more, laughing as they readied themselves for another take.
Within the lowest of the emotional valleys, those places where he was visited by demons and he could only lay there and listen to them, he would consider the notion of angels - of how he had been given angels, or he had been given to them - the notion of redemption, and it always wore a placid female face.

Power had to be wrested, and claimed, and fought over - but in his life, women had a power which no man could ever understand. The capacity of mercy.

Murmurs, like the wind he was hearing now, coming ashore from some distant clime and soothing him, blurring into the voice of his mother.

Her power could only extend so far. But he had failed her.

Everyone in his life could tell him he had done all he could - certainly more than most progeny were capable of - but he had no motivation to believe them.

Look at yourself, what would she think of what you’ve done.

And he knew it didn’t matter because whatever he had done, she was accepting and indulgent. Not that she spoiled him, she simply didn’t have the means to do so. But she viewed him as someone capable of delight, and of value. He knew that when she looked at him she saw who he was, even at those times he wasn’t entirely sure himself.

And how had he repaid her? With distance.

Sometimes her words stung, even as they were delivered without venom.

“Tommy, can’t you see that actin’ this way isn’t how a good man conducts himself? “

“But I don’t love her, Momma.”

“You will, in time. Don’t be the kind of man you know there is. Be a good man and do right by that girl. She’s only ever wanted to be there for you. And you’re gonna go out there and do whatever it is you mean to do, so start out with a clear conscience.”

“But I haven’t done anything bad to her.”

She gave him a weary half-smile. “Oh you might yet, when you get out there to Hollywood where all them high-livin’ people are. Not that you’d mean to, particularly, but you’d be tempted. Just like any other man.”

And he had wanted to shout at her I’m not him! but he knew she had a point. He’d thought about how the guys might tell funny stories about their fathers and he and Mike would look at each other and remain silent. How neither of them had any particular affection for the men who had failed them. Or at the very least it was a rather ambivalent variety.

Here he was about to join their ranks. He could not stand in the face of that accusation.

He didn’t leave you, but he should have. Biggest favor he could have done. You could have found
you a good man.

But she was sick, and she was tired, and he was leaving her. There was nothing else to do but to do as she asked. He owed her everything, and could pay this particular debt. In time, he could save her.

But you never did. You were too busy.

And when she came to him in dreams she was kind. She did not speak, but her mercy was a force, a presence he could sense and be embraced within. A moment of absolute peace and contentment. No more anger, or grief, or weariness at the world and its’ demands.

He sought that same grace in chemicals and at first the bliss was nearly the equal of that solace but it quickly made him numb and nothing else.

Down, down so far underground he might as well be dead and he wondered why he wasn’t already. Maybe he was and he just didn’t know it? He had seen such an explanation for ghosts in a movie once - those souls who were so caught up in their own misery that they could not let go of the physical realm. And now he had found salvation - another angel to watch over him - but it was that same distant ideal: he could not quite reach it, couldn’t fully claim it as his own.

Every day, an attempt to tunnel out of the earth, his mouth filled with dirt, his brain filled with loathing, his heart filled with sorrow and guilt.

Stay in Hell, it’s where you belong.

But he was his mother’s son, and he knew that wasn’t true.

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Everyone had a path, everyone had a destiny, but only some came to comprehend the shape of it, the beginning and the end.

In those moments when the sorrow had not fully consumed him, black and cold, waiting to be disgorged upon some far shore which was devoid of his destiny, he could see the sense in it. But he had awaited such a time much farther from now, a day in which they might simply be friends. Nothing so complicated as their actual relationship, but deeper in its’ inherent affection.

And he would forever hold those points in his mind, he was convinced. The two days - forty-six years apart - in which his life changed forever. There were several events which had changed, and solidified, the meaning of his existence, but there was only one man who had offered him his hand, and then finally let go of it.

It was not the man’s choosing - but no one could choose, not really. This was a philosophy he knew better than to share, as some saw it differently. But that man had held him in his hands, tucked in his pocket - whatever metaphor was applicable - and in that absence he was nowhere.

(This was a fallacy, of course he was somewhere, but he existed in a dark place now which felt very much like a void.)

He had gotten the call, he had moved forward, he had a place to get to, and the next thing he knew he was down on the floor, not fully aware of how the collapse had occurred. Coming back to himself as his dogs herded him, nudging him and making whining sounds of concern and encouragement.

Am I breathing? How could I be?
"Boy, I will break every one of your fingers if you don’t get with us - and then the Army wouldn’t take ya no how!"

He laughed at the voice in his head, then clapped a hand over his mouth. He got up from the floor and he went to gather support and love and bring them to the place they needed to be shared.

In the hours which passed, of low whispers and tears and holding onto those who needed it, he thought of so many moments, some of which he had not considered for decades. He didn’t want to cry, other people needed to cry and he needed to hold them and say reassuring things, he embodied the character he had always downplayed: the Lieutenant, the steadfast presence and the partner who never fussed, who might sometimes doubt and question, but who always believed.

He had come to consider, in later years, that he and Tom had found in each other the fathers they had been denied.

He didn’t want to cry, not until he was alone and could keen like a wounded animal.

His thoughts turned upon a song of his own, which he had written when he had been told, calmly but in complete confidence, that his partner had been enacting a slow suicide for over a year, but then decided to live. Mike knew that when Tom decided something, it was done.

But the shock came to realize the source of the poison.

He walked around in circles, pulling at his hair, wanted to jump in the car and drive over there, march up that driveway, take that son of a bitch and pin him to the wall, scream in his face _How could you fucking do that? When you know what it’s doing to Howie? How could you be so goddamn stupid?!_ He walked until the anger had passed and his face was wet. Tears, because he blamed himself, and he channeled those doubts and that sorrow into a work he knew would be appreciated if never fully understood because he chose not to provide context, not even to the one it was meant for. It was just another song on a demo, a blistering blues piece, composed on a night in which he was more than a little drunk, expressing the things he would never say directly, the emotions which had overwhelmed him on various occasions, wondering if things might have been better if he had said them.

_Don’t say it’s too late_  
_don’t say it’s over now._  
_It doesn’t matter_  
_away, anyhow._  
_I tried so hard_  
to work it out.

Though the absolute depth of the meaning of those words could not be rendered by a simple recitation. It seemed ridiculous to even try.

_I’m sorry_  
_I didn’t mean it._  
_I shoulda known_  
_I shoulda seen it._  
_I didn’t mean_  
to drag you down.

_Don’t say it’s over now_  
because_  
_I still love you_
I still need you
I still want you by my side.

How could someone feel so hopeless when they knew that others would give anything to make them feel hopeful? But they had all been guilty of stupid shit - and he had his own load to carry in that regard. He had honestly tried never to complain, but it was bound to happen.

I didn’t realize
what you were going through.
Know I shoulda been there
for you.
What can I do now?

That song, among others, became the subject of another debate entirely, but Mike had no indication from Tom that he had ever heard it as anything more than a lover’s lament.

(Why couldn’t you turn to me? Why wouldn’t you let me help you?)

But he knew why. When you serve someone, it means they serve you in turn with their strength. Take that away and the chemistry changes, the power shifts, the edifice cracks and crumbles.

So he couldn’t scream, he couldn’t plead, he couldn’t cry. He could only squeeze the shoulder of his destiny within the form of a man, and offer a smile. A look which lasted a second, or a minute, which tried to express that fathoms-deep loyalty and reassure the man it had never faltered.

This was absurd, so absurd. He was the big brother, that was their private joke - how everyone saw Tom as the patriarch but Mike was older, if only by months. But Mike had granted him sovereignty, had trusted he knew the path of their shared destiny, and had been rewarded more than he could have dreamed would be possible.

You gave me everything, and then you left me.

Not deliberately, but it wasn’t simply a case of being taken too soon. The situation far more complex, as always.

It brought him back to that dark time he had never wanted to dwell within, and he swam through it, feeling the same helpless abandon. He had compassion for the struggle, empathy for the desire to turn off the pain. But hatred for the way in which the machine seemed to always encourage such sacrifices, in ways which sometimes merely wounded, but often enough annihilated.

This night, humid and humming and expectant. He looked up at the sky, at the stars, and imagined that Tom was now one of them, far from the concerns of this rock and all its’ creatures. He sat in a paradise of his own creation and ached. He would always ache now, he thought, and that was the deepest expression of love.

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“C’mon, you moody bastard. Come out with me, let’s shoot some pool, somethin.’”

Of all the things he would miss about Howie, Benmont considered that the saddest of them all was how the other just wanted to be a friend. And when the chemicals came between them, dividing and conquering, it was the first thing which had changed. The distance was one of secrets and shame.
By the time of that late-winter farewell, a day as gray as any he’d ever known anywhere in the world, he had filled the ocean with tears, even as he had stopped himself from angry confrontation - which he knew would never work anyway. He had mourned for years before the event which existed for such oblations.

He started seeing Howie after a year of numb resignation, marked by other losses, other regrets. Benmont was fully convinced he was hallucinating, some potent combination of grief and stress and depression. He would hear Howie waking him up, just like he did on the bus all those years.

*Ben, c’mon - you’re not gonna believe what Stanley is doin’ now!*

And for most of that time he was barely coherent, crouching within the fog of whatever he was using to combat the demons, but his boys were there to pull him along, never allowing him to sink too deep into his own darkness, if not the band entire.

Chemicals were themselves demons, but one never knew that in the beginning. When they had nothing, when they huddled in a squallor-ridden apartment in Gainesville and played Dub’s for change and chops and all the beer they could drink, there was never a reason to hide behind anything. And now it was all edifice and artifice and precisely the type of thing Benmont despised. The anathema of the life-long passion project he had undertaken.

“The Machine, man,” Stan had opined as they sat in Craig’s living room after the funeral and looked at painfully young photos of Howie - Howie in bands and Howie boxing, Howie in the snow and Howie at the lake - “has eaten the heart of yet another precious soul. How many souls does it need, you think? Is it only surviving, or getting stronger, the more lives it takes.”

And Benmont had wanted to tell him to *fuck off* or *shut up*, but that was then and this was the incredibly shitty now, and Stan was no longer his band brother, no longer a Heartbreaker. And neither was Howie. And it had tried to eat him, and Tom, as well.

When would this ever end?

They were there to offer solace, to reminisce, to assure Howie’s kid brother that even as his death had been such an ugly end, the man was a sweetheart and they were devastated.

But he didn’t know what to say which didn’t sound incredibly trite. So they started telling stories.

“Dingo, man - I loved that dog, but he could take a shit bigger than a grown man!” Benmont began, laughing within the moment of his recollection, “- and damn if the kid didn’t clean it up himself. I’d say, ‘Howie, man, have you ever taken a shit that big?’ And he’d just laugh and give Dingo a scratch and say, ‘Who’s my good boy?’”

“Howie and I would spend hours tryin’ to think of complicated rhymes,” Stan recalled. “It turned into a contest, kinda, tryin’ to find things that would go with *light bulb*, and *beige sweater*, and *porno film.*”

“What kind of goddamn song were you writing?” Benmont asked with a broad grin.

“A really stupid one.”

Craig became a mere background presence to their wider retrospection, but Benmont hoped it offered a kind of comfort, as it was for them, to laugh at themselves and their wasted glorious youth. And to honor the sacrifice of that sweet man, whom the other could only hope had reunited with his best friend and perhaps had found the place where all the cool people were hanging out, waiting for him to finally show up and make it a party.
Jody had driven to her brother’s property in response to a message he had left on her answering machine stating that her presence was required for “a Viking funeral,” whatever that meant. But as well-acquainted as she was with her brother’s tendencies toward melodrama she wasn’t prepared for the sight of Stan squirting lighter fluid over one of his drumkits within a circle of stones on a portion of land which had been cleared - far enough away from the trees which comprised its’ utilitarian origins.

“Don’t you think it’s kind of, well, _extreme_, to be burning an entire drumkit?” Jody asked him.

“It’s like a exorcism, I have to let those things go, burn them, appease the fickle gods of Fate, all that shit.”

“So what are these gods going to do to you if you _don’t_ give them an offering?”

“Who knows? I’m not inclined to believe things will get any worse, but you can’t fuck with the ineffable.”

Whereas someone else might laugh or scoff or otherwise refute such a claim, Jody knew the language of Stan-speak and merely nodded. They stood and watched as the wood burned, flaring brightly at times, but the hardware merely melted and gave off a terrible stink.

“Wouldn’t be surprised if the Sheriff comes to call,” she warned him. “I bet they can smell this mess two counties over.”

“The fine would be worth it. I don’t live in a museum.”

That last phrase he had said numerous times already, when he had asked her to divest him of awards, photographs, a press clippings archive, tour merchandise, fan mail - boxes and boxes of items chronicling his career as a Heartbreaker. Then he had taken some of it back.

“It’s gotta burn!” he declared, and she was ready to slap him.

“Let Mom keep it,” she argued, “if you don’t want it. It means something to _us_.”

“It means something to me too, but it’s over now. I have to let go of it and I can’t do that if I’m livin’ in a museum.”

Jody then understood that Stan was grieving, and she stopped trying to talk him out of his series of rituals. Not that she would have been able to anyway, and that was as much of a virtue as it was a liability with her big brother.

“Do you want to talk about it?”

“I have to leave you some illusions, hon.”

“No you don’t - I’m grown-up now.”

Stan put an arm around her. “You’ll thank me later, I promise.”

“I think this could be toxic, bub, we should put it out.”

Stan laughed. “Yeah, that’s about the size of it.”
Long after dark and his sister’s departure, he sat staring at the pile of blackened metal and the ashes of the exotic woods before him, twirling a pair of drumsticks and thinking about good days. Whether a day was good or bad didn’t always have to do with his mindset - sometimes it just shoved him and he knew to follow along. He laughed at a specific memory of a good day from a lifetime away.

*Those assholes - damn they were funny.*

“Phil, my action is loose!” Stan called out to his tech at the soundcheck. This was a typical complaint of his.

The band and the crew turned to him in unison and shouted back “NO SHIT, STANLEY.”

Stan laughed loudly for a moment, amazed at their timing. “You assholes think you’re funny, but don’t quit your dayjobs.”

“I ain’t never worked a day in my life,” Mike said, “but plenty of nights, though.”

In a show of approval Stan granted him a rimshot, and Mike took a bow.
“You’re going to talk to Stanley, aren’t you?” Benmont asked.

Warren had enjoyed speaking with all of his current subjects; even as they were at times brutally honest regarding the course of their shared career, there was a deep heartfelt affection for the band as both an idea and an actuality, as well as its’ leader. He found it a refreshing change compared to other experiences with more bitter and jaded individuals - including himself, if he was equally honest.

“I’ve put in a more-or-less official request through his management, and was given the standard ‘thanks but no thanks.’”

Benmont sighed before taking a sip of coffee. “You have to understand that it’s not really about what happened back then. It’s about loving someone but not always loving what they do.”

Warren nodded. “I do plan to try again, really convince him that this story can’t be told without his perspective. Everyone has something important to contribute to the overall tapestry.”

“Tapestry, I like that. It’s a good word for a communal history - it’s not just dates and places and events. It’s the sensation of it all. And Stanley, he was a big part of that. He’s such a huge presence, I can’t even begin to describe it, you have to experience it. Once you do, you’ll understand. When we talk about how important he was, you’ll see, if he lets you.”

“I hope so. I can’t see how I could hope to write a complete account without him.”

“Oh you can’t, there’s no way. It’s bad enough that -”

Benmont looked away for a moment and Warren considered how sad it must be for the other, to have lost his two closest friends in the band - both casualties of the rigor which such a profession applied to its’ participants. Manifested in different ways, but the same malaise.

“I agree.” He thought that was the best thing to say in answer to a sorrow which could not be fully expressed, even now.

“I’d say I could plead your case, but even I wouldn’t underestimate the stubbornness of that man. He is generous beyond words but he is also irascible.”

“I promise I’ll keep trying.”

“And that’s all anyone can do about anything,” Benmont said with a smile. The production assistant stuck her head in the doorway, politely informing Benmont the stage call was in 15 and he gave Warren a wry look.

“Time for the old softshoe again.” He donned his hat and took his leave.

“I know what you said, but tell me what kind of book you’re writing,” Stan demanded.

“Unvarnished, but not unseemly,” Warren replied.

The other laughed loudly, which he took to be a good sign. “So you’re not gonna waste my time
making me relive all of this shit and then just whitewashing it like Tom and Huck on a hot afternoon.”

“No - I value your time, your perspective and your honesty. I will say that I fully expect there are going to be sections where everyone else will disagree with you, but both sides will be presented.”

“And I’m not gonna be the asshole in all of this?”

“You will be an asshole, absolutely. But not the asshole. If you’re being honest, that is.”

Stan laughed again. “I see you’ve done your homework. I am coming around to the idea, man. But I don’t wanna do this over the phone, and I don’t do that whole video doodad - what do they call that thing?”

“Skype is what you mean, I believe.”

“Yeah that’s it. If I can’t look you in the eye then I might not always be honest.”

“I would also prefer we meet face-to-face. I can come to you, wherever you might prefer.”

“You’d do that? Fly down here to G-ville?”

“Certainly, I’ve already been out there to speak to a few people. As I stated in my email, it’s of the utmost importance to me to interview you, this story requires it. And your bandmates all say the same thing.”

“All but one of them, yeah.”

Warren paused. “I have to tell you, Tom praised you as much as he criticized you in our discussions.”

“That’s not who I meant.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah exactly: oh. Still find it hard to believe I was in a band which had that kind of awfulness in it. I mean, I’ve been talkin’ ‘bout gettin’ together with my Road Turkey brothers, and we’re all still alive, we’re all relatively sane, and I think about how thankful I am for that. Not to be a walking cliche, but I was sure part of one, in some ways. Are you ready to hear that?”

“I’m ready for everything,” Warren assured him.

“Stevie Nicks? Don’t even get me started.”

“Not even a little?” Warren asked, his eyes crinkled, betraying the mischief he was attempting to make.

Stan rolled his eyes, but then decided to humor his guest.

“Lemme break it down for ya as far as Stevie goes. Sure, I didn’t trust her, I didn’t really like her, but I could see where the association with her would be helpful. And I think Tom did too. And she turned out to be a good friend to him, I guess, but then again she brought some of that bad behavior with her. Every time she turned up she had blow and she was willing to share. But she also brought along a bunch of people we didn’t know who the fuck they were, and we didn’t like that. So Tom
had to kinda ban her from our sessions. We’d go to her sessions and she could do whatever the fuck she wanted. Iovine couldn’t control her, that’s for damn sure.”

“Did he even try?”

“Oh sure, they fought as much as they fucked, or whatever they were doing. It was kinda hard to tell because Stevie would flirt with everybody. And I’m thinkin’, ‘Wait, isn’t that your boyfriend in there? Starin’ through the glass at us? Ben and Mike really liked her, after a while. Well, Campbell liked her because she always wanted his demos, and she would actually use some of them. So, again, he was smart about that as far as a relationship with her was concerned. She could make you feel very special if she wanted to. If you were willing to let her do that. I never wanted to, but if Tom was in the room that’s who she really cared about anyway.”

“And you’re also sort of connected to her even now,” Warren noted.

Stan snorted with derision, then stretched and looked around. “Hey, you want another beer? Somethin’ else to drink? I lose track of time when I’m engaged in epic discourse.”

The two laughed, and Warren accepted a glass of sweet tea.

“Okay so here’s a perfect example: Stevie knows that Don gives her more cred. So when they stopped fucking each other, she didn’t burn that bridge. Henley, for his part, always tried to be friends with his exes. It don’t always work out that way, but he’s a gentleman. He taught me a lot ‘bout how to be gracious. Probably too late to actually improve me, but...anyway, years ago, Stevie had this idea for them to do a Summer tour together, and so Don was okay with it, he’s not stupid - and then she wants them to sing together, and not just ‘Leather and Lace.’ So he agrees to that too - a whole section of the show where they duet on stuff, and she wants to do ‘So You Want to Be a Rock n’ Roll Star’ and I was there at the rehearsals - she said to me, ‘Hey Stan, this is a Heartbreakers moment!’ and I’m thinkin’ Lady, you wish you were as cool as those assholes! And that’s with or without me, you know? That’s the whole thing: Stevie wanted to be a Heartbreaker, she wanted that so bad. Because we were fucking cool. And you can’t just walk into that situation and expect that the cool is going to stick to you. Like it will show up on you just because you’re there. You gotta work for that shit, you gotta own that shit, and she never understood that. But she had her own thing, she was rich and famous and people fucking loved her. And they still do. But she wanted what we had.”

“I don’t think I’ve ever heard their version of that song.”

“It was okay, but c’mon - Tommy doin' his best McGuinn, Campbell playin' that solo where he stuck some ‘Eight Miles High’ in there, and we’re all groovin.’ That is the goddamn definition of cool and nobody could touch us, especially not Stevie Nicks.”

“So I take it you and Don don’t discuss her.”

“I choose not to, which is the best thing for our friendship. Our friendship is that important to me that I’m not gonna ruin it with my bitchin’ - I have a reputation, you know.”

Warren chuckled and raised his glass. “Here’s to reputations, however they might turn out.”
Stan held out his index finger, which was covered in a thick brown substance.

“Here, taste this.”

Tom looked uncertain, and even a touch nauseated. “I ain’t lickin’ yer finger, boy!”

“It’s clean! C’mon, tell me what you think.”

Tom flicked the edge of his tongue upon it, then puckered. “That’s too spicy for me!”

“A little heat never hurt nobody!”

“You call that a little? Put some more ketchup in the damn thing.”

“Ketchup?! What kinda slop you think I’m makin’ here? This is culinary genius, bubba.”

“It’s sauce, man, it’s ain’t too technical.”

“And you claim to be from the South! Besides, mine is sause,” Stan proclaimed, putting a particularly Southern spin on his neologism. “S-a-u-s-e.”

Tom laughed. “And what’s the difference?”

“The difference is: when it’s just right, ain’t nobody gonna need no other. Kinda like me.”

Stan - as usual clad only in a pair of shorts which bordered on obscenely short, his hair pulled back and covered by a bandana - considered the array of ingredients upon the counter before him and picked up the containers of brown sugar and molasses, frowning with consideration at each of them.

Tom was momentarily lost in musing that Stan had tanned nicely in the three days they’d been at his new house, his skin was brown with just the slightest hint of red.

“Put some co-cola in it,” he finally suggested. “That’s how my momma made it.”

“Hmm, I might at that. Did your momma make a ham like that too?”

“A ham? Hell, that was too fancy for us - like my daddy coulda bought a whole ham!”

“Well we only had it a couple times a year, but damn it was good.”

“No other what? What are you, exactly?”

Stan grinned. “I been waitin’ on ya to find out, Tommy.”

Tom smirked, feeling that shiver again even as the kitchen was hotter than the Floridian afternoon outside with all of Stan’s ongoing activity.

“Okay then, just like that ‘sause’ - be sweeter and I might change my mind.”
“Hell, I’m cookin’ for ya - what more do you want?!”

They laughed, and Tom did consider that this temporary domesticity was a thing he would never be able to explain to anyone else, and he wasn’t so certain that he understood it himself. Except that he was perfectly content to watch Stan cook and be entertained by his comedic narration - like watching a cooking show hosted by a guy who was funny and foul-mouthed and liked to compare sex to everything else in the world, including food.

And good-looking, don’t forget that.

Like I ever could, Tom replied to himself.

Mike stared into a Tupperware container by the light of the refrigerator and pondered how many of the leftover enchiladas within he could eat without invoking the ire of his wife when the phone rang. He leaned left and grabbed the kitchen extension without thinking, answering: “Campbell’s House of Cuts and Abrasions.”

“What the fuck is goin’ on over there?” Stan asked.

Mike chuckled. “Just a typical day at the zoo. What’re you doin?’”

“I’m plannin’ a cook-out!”

“Cook-out? You ain’t got room to have a cook-out.”

“Well that’s why I’m callin’ - ‘cause you do.”

“Aw fuck!” Mike exclaimed, his leftover foraging forgotten. He closed the refrigerator door. “I am not hostin’ a party for you and your asshole friends, and you outta know why that would never happen.”

“Not my asshole friends, our asshole friends. Strictly band business, I gotta new batch of the sause to test, and y’all will be honest ‘bout it, I know.”

“How is your obsession with barbecue sauce band business?”

“Because this is a creative endeavor! It might be the very thing that ends up holding us together - the universal antidote for every damn problem.”

Mike laughed. “A good sauce will do a lot, I reckon, but is it gonna stop you fussin’ all the damn time? Nope!”

“You never know, Lieutenant.”

“This is not winnin’ me over, try harder.”

“I will bring everything and do all the cookin’.”

“Clean-up too, and then Marcie might allow it.”

“Jesus Christ, it’s not like I’m askin’ to move in!”

“You are kinda movin’ in for the day, so that sounds fair to me.”
“Okay fine! But we gotta make sure Tommy and Jane are there too.”

“Well I dunno why they wouldn’t be, Tommy does enjoy a cook-out. But -” Mike slumped against the counter and idly pulled at a stray curl. “- what are you schemin,’ exactly?”

“Nothin’ much, just wanna put him in a good mood.”

“He’s not the one you got to be worryin’ ‘bout.”

“I am a perfect angel when the situation calls for it!”

Mike cracked up. “Oh lord, has that lightning hit you yet? You are surely callin’ it down!”

“Look, you get to throw a party and you don’t have to do anything - but you get the glory.”

“Well if you finally managed to make some good sauce then that’s all anyone will remember. But you better not bring any of them groupies, you know who I mean. Those girls are not comin’ in this house.”

Stan laughed, nasty and low. “Yeah ‘cause you wouldn’t want the little woman to hear what they like to call you!”

“Shut up!” Mike hissed into the receiver. “I swear to fuck I will thrash you if you say anything -”

“Don’t worry, I’ll bring a virgin, a homecoming queen, a right upstanding Christian girl -”

“Oh fuck off!” Mike cracked up at the thought of Stan dating a nice normal girl. “Okay you can have a cook-out here, but you’d better do all the work or I’ll be movin’ in with you!”

“Fuck me, I’ll do anything not to live through that again!”

“I was a good roomie, unlike you.”

“You are boring as shit, Campbell, but that’s why I like ya.”

“Yeah well, this boring motherfucker has a backyard and you don’t!”

Stan laughed at that, then hung up. Mike opened the fridge again and in a moment Buddy was investigating its’ contents alongside him.

“Naw dude, Momma’s gonna kill me if I give you more people food,” he said, gently moving the dog’s face away from the container in his hand.

“Cooking is fascinating because it’s both a skill and an art. It’s all contextual: it’s a job, it’s creative expression, it’s a source of pleasure for both the person who does it and the person who receives it. Hopefully, if you did it right.”

Stan snickered. “Like sex, you mean.”

Don smirked. “As always, yes, you can equate it to your favorite pastime.”

“I try to do that with everything!”

Don had been in the midst of cutting up tomatoes, he put both hands on the cutting board and
cracked up.

“You are a rascal, my boy. But be careful, lest you become a source of continual gossip.”

“Are you kiddin’? Without me the crew would have nothin’ to talk about!”

“So it’s a public service, you’re saying.”

“Sure - you know the kind of girls the crew ends up with. I have to give them somethin’ to aspire to.”

His host chuckled again, then switched into instructional mode. “Are you ready to pay attention? Because I’m only going to show you this once. And you have to memorize it, no taking notes.”

Stan got up from his chair and came to stand beside Don at the stove. “Ready.”

“If you’re using actual tomatoes rather than tomato sauce, as I am here, then you have to cook them down carefully. Don’t allow them to get mushy, you’ve got to regulate your heat and keep ‘em moving in the pan. See how I’m moving them?”

“Right, you keep ‘em moving so they’ll cook evenly, right?”

“Exactly. But only enough that they release their flavor, not get too soft. The tomato is a delicate fruit, mostly water and seeds within skin.”

“Hold up, are you shittin’ me?”

“Mr. Lynch, are you telling me that your parents, who are educators, much less the school system you attended, failed to inform you that a tomato is, in fact, a fruit?”

Stan’s face took on a look of comical confusion. “Huh. Maybe?”

Don stirred vigorously. “In the meantime I’m about to burn these durn things, don’t distract me, boy!”

“My apologies, sir.”

“What do I keep telling you?”

Stan sighed good-naturedly. “Yes I am a drummer, but I don’t always need to act like one.”

“Do you want to create the greatest sauce in the known universe?”

“Yes sir!”

“Then stop acting like a drummer and focus!”

Stan bit his lip and once again was thankful no one was there to witness the scolding - they’d never let him live it down.

-Man, I’m tellin’ ya, we need to hit up Speed Queen - they got great ribs there!”

Stan gave Howie a skeptical glare. “You can’t fuckin’ tell me that a place which is cold for three-quarters of the year knows anything about barbecue. And what the fuck kinda name is that
anyway?"

“It’s a cool name and I would put their food up against anything I’ve ever eaten in Texas.”

The crew - which as a good crew should was always there in the midst of everything but never obtrusive - found much to disagree with when considering this declaration.

“Whoa!” came the collective exclamation.

“Howie, my man, you know I’m apt to agree with you on any number of things, but you’re in deep waters, my friend,” Jim told him. “Especially in a band of Southerners.”

“You know I keep hearing that, but none of you act like you’re actually from the South.”

More loud protesting followed.

“I’m serious! Hell, I wouldn’t have even known Ben was if he hadn’t told me.”

“Well Ben was brainwashed in New Hampshire or wherever the fuck that school is, but even he knows what real barbecue is. If he didn’t we’d leave his ass on the side of the road.”

“Oh c’mon!”

“True fuckin’ story, kid. Believe it.”

Howie smirked and shook his head at Stan. “You pull some shit like that on me, and we’ll be swingin,’ believe that.”

“Uh-huh.”

“I wouldn’t give ‘im a reason, Stanley,” Bugs said, taking a moment to count the beverages provided on the catering table and comparing the total to the copy of the rider in his tour bible. “Howie would kick your ass ten ways to Sunday, it’s only that he’s nice enough not to have done it already.”

“Stanley’s always givin’ somebody a reason to do somethin’ to ‘im, ain’t nothin’ new ‘bout that,” Tom declared, entering the room.

Everyone laughed with the boss. But Stan, as was his wont, had to push the issue.

“Yeah but we got New Guy here tryin’ to give me some bullshit ‘bout how you can get good barbecue in Milwaukee.”

Tom gave Howie a sideways glance. “I love ya, kid, but don’t be comin’ in here tryin’ to tell Stanley ‘bout no barbecue. He’s been tryin’ to invent the sauce to end all sauce for years and I don’t wanna hear about it for the five hundredth goddamn time.”

“It’s sause, goddamn it! How many times do I have to tell ya?! S-A-U-S-E.”

“What the fuck is that?” Howie asked.

Everyone yelled “No!” as Stan began lecturing his uninformed bandmate.

“This stuff is so powerful, it even makes my Jag run better, which, like every British automobile ever made, is temperamental in the extreme.”

“Just like its’ owner,” Tom cracked.
“Now that is some bullshit right there -” Jim interjected.

“Lenahan - you keep that up and you won’t get any of the new batch come Christmas.”

The other promptly shut his mouth, knowing which side his chicken was basted on, and sat back to hear the saga of Stan’s quest to create the one true barbecue sauce yet again.
"We all get paid and," he adds with a chuckle, "we all get laid."
- Mike Campbell, 1978

-86-

"Honestly, Jimmy," Mike said, sighing, "I don’t know that I can save her."

It was late coming on early and the two sat in the control room of Can-Am, consoling each other regarding various debacles. Too many songs which were glorified fragments, too much ego, too much indecision...too much cocaine. Too much power and not enough reality. Their reality had become the hermetically-sealed permanent twilight of recording studios.

Jimmy grimaced, but nodded knowingly. “Yeah I get it, I just thought that maybe you understand her better than I do right now. But I still don’t get her songs, just to listen to the demos. I guess I never have. That’s why I wanted to bring in other songwriters - but I didn’t count on just because she has a track to write to that she’s gonna make any goddamn sense.”

“I think one of them is better than the others, but she’s convinced that she wants to use all of them, because she says this is going to be a rock album, but what does that even mean? Although I did get one away from her.”

“Which one?”

“The riff-y one, ‘You Like Me.’”

“Oh thank God!” Jimmy threw his hands up in the air. “For fuck’s sake I couldn’t figure out what she was even tryin’ to do there. It’s such a fuckin’ mess. That track is hot, though, you should do something with it.”

“I made a deal with David and Andy - they gave her a song in exchange for that one. It needs work but it’s such a good track, I don’t wanna waste it.”

“Those kids? You really gonna produce ‘em?”

“Yeah they’re great. They sound like the Everlys, amazing harmonies.”

“Yeah you should do something you believe in, for sure. But let me tell ya - you’ve never completely run a session before, have you?”

Mike shrugged. “Just for us.”

“Well, the clock is runnin’ and A&R is on the other side of the door - if you’re lucky. Keep it manageable. ‘Cause you guys didn’t do so great on your own.”

“The deal isn’t signed yet, so I’ve had ‘em over to the house. We’ve been workin’ on demos, and everything will be ready when we get the say-so.”

Jimmy laughed. “Man, those kids are fuckin’ lucky. What - did you get the guys to come in too?”

“Stanley - he was bored. Ben is so busy, though, he doesn’t even have time for me if we’re not
already workin.’ Howie never calls me back, so I’m on bass too.”

“Oh you gotta get Ben in there, even if it’s just one track.”

“Yeah it’s too bad I can’t just bring them with us and we could get it done on the road, somehow.”

“Do you have any idea how much that would cost?! Campbell, I thought you were the sensible one in this outfit!”

Mike grinned. “Sometimes.”

“Stanley, huh? So how is he playin?’”

“He’s fine when you ain’t ridin’ his ass.”

“Sure he is, but how does he play?”

“It’s fine. It’s better than the drum machine at least.”

Jimmy laughed raucously. “That ain’t sayin’ much, Michael. Just remember, when the time comes, do what’s best for the songs. That’s all that matters. Because you’ll get the credit, but you will also get the blame, and you gotta deal with that.”

Mike nodded. He continued to believe that he could make a good record using what he knew, because he knew what worked. If nothing else it was a learning experience, and one which he wasn’t looking to brag about until it was an actual album he could hold in his hands. He also felt vaguely uneasy, given all the weirdness occurring in their lives of late. But as Tony D. kept reminding him: your reputation will only last as long as you do things to prove it.

And he believed, somewhere inside, that he could be just as good a producer as any he’d ever worked with. But the one thing he couldn’t do was penetrate Stevie’s mad tea party. He’d come to think of it that way because whenever he had visited her to discuss songs for her new solo album; the house was always full of people, some he already knew, some he didn’t. But everyone seemed on the edge of full-on breakdown, much like the surreal mood of the story. The story which made far more sense to him now than it had when he was a kid. For her part, Stevie couldn’t pay attention for more than a few minutes at a time, and Mike summoned every particle of patience he possessed to humor her, encourage her, and motivate her.

Then he heard the work tapes...and his heart sank. He had the same feeling he’d had some nights at Gone Gator One - like he could hear the drugs in what they were doing, even as he felt it was beyond him to actually remedy the situation.

When Tom broke his hand, Mike thought it might be a wakeup call to Stevie as well, but it hadn’t seemed to affect her, save for the sympathy and worry she displayed to her friend. Whatever he could do, he didn’t think it was enough to put together an album which would be coherent and present her in the best light.

_Hell, we couldn’t even do it for ourselves._

They had dodged a figurative bullet and unless they got their shit together, next time they might not be so lucky.

Mike thought back to a time when they were merely determined, and considered how much simpler things were when there was only one goal to focus on. But he wanted to use his power, such as it was, to help someone else. It just wouldn’t be Stevie.
“Do you think she’s gonna get mad when she realizes we’ve changed the song?”

“Lemme tell ya somethin’ – Stevie always changes songs. Her songs, other people’s songs, whatever. I guarantee you she will not even notice. Besides, she likes you right now, so whatever you do will be fine. Unlike me, who can’t do anything right.”

“We all have days like that.”

“It’s beginning to feel like this is my goddamn year, enough already!”

“What is this song about, anyway?”

Mike looked at Stan from across the garage. Stan was at the other end seated behind his kit amid a veritable forest of microphones. Mike was checking to ensure all the cables were taped down so that neither of them tripped when going back and forth between that space and the spare bedroom which served as his control room.

“What do you care?”

“I’m curious. David said you guys had to rewrite it because it was, shall we say.”

“Stop. You think she’s a flake, yeah, I get it. Very few songs come out perfect the first time.”

“I know that! But he wasn’t really sure what it was about either, and he helped rewrite it. So that’s just weird to me.”

“You act like everything is weird, so that’s nothin’ new.”

“Tell me, though - we’ve run through it, like, ten times now.”

“You don’t have to have the guide vocal in your cans, you know.”

“I like their voices, though.”

Mike smiled. “Yeah. Yesterday I isolated all the takes we kept, it was like angels had come to visit. I could listen to that shit all day.”

“And...so?” Stan arched his eyebrows and spread his hands in inquiry.

“I dunno - I mean, what do any of her songs mean? We changed it so it’s about someone tellin’ someone else that they’re onto them - You like me, don’t you, ’cause you can’t hide the feelin.’ I have no idea what it really meant before that.”

“Now was that so difficult?”

“It doesn’t matter! But I know why you wanted to know - because it sounds like something you would say.”

“Sure it does, it’s gotta fit with the music. And you are obsessed with this song, so obviously it means something to you. But everybody likes me, and if they don’t they’re just foolish.”

“Uh-huh. It’s a good song. And it’s gonna get out there, one way or the other.”

“Are you ready for me to do the shakers?”
“I was thinkin’ I’d keep the ones from the original demo.”

“Oh so you don’t like me, then?”

Mike cracked up. “I do, against my better judgment. But can you keep the same rhythm for an entire take?”

“Are you sayin’ I have no stamina? ‘Cause it sounds like you’re saying I can’t keep it up and you, of all people, should know -”

Mike almost threw the roll of duct tape at his bandmate. “Just shut up and play the maracas, goddamn!”

“You ain’t even rollin’ yet - and you call yourself a producer?!”

“Now I get why everyone said I shouldn’t have called you.”

Stan sat up and looked serious. “Are they really sayin’ that?”

Mike felt a pang of guilt. “Naw, just Iovine.”

“Fuck him!”

“Yeah I know. I didn’t mean -”

“Look, if you really don’t want me -”

“Shut up! If I didn’t want you I wouldn’t have called.”

“I am doin’ my best for you - you know that, right?”

Mike smiled again. “Yeah I know. So let’s get back to work.”

Stan donned his headphones. “Just say the word, boss.”

Mike smirked. He wondered how long that would last. Probably only the amount of time it took him to walk back into the house. But Stanley was playing his ass off, and he was thankful for the minor miracle.

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“I know you lot expect every Brit photog to be like David Bailey, but I’ll have to disillusion you.”

The band before him was stone-faced, though their leader smirked.

“Hey I saw Blow-Up, man, it looked pretty great to me. Y’all get the chicks.”

“As if I have time for women, or anyone else.”

They laughed in sympathy, all in their dark stage clothes, occupying yet another hotel corridor, seemingly out of place in daylight.

“So I want some attitude, right? I’ve seen other shots and most of them aren’t quite cool, y’know? That’s what I need to see if we’re going to get you across.”

“Across?” Ron asked.
“To all those kids readin’ the mags and such. You’ve gotta reach out from the page and grab ‘em. Make ‘em stare hard. Make the girls stare harder.”

Snickers, then. He was speaking their language.

They were a good-looking bunch, even if Tom outclassed them just by standing there. The rest were no slouches, merely used to remaining in the background. Yet they wanted to be stared at, he could see it. It’s just that Tom was so - dare he say exotic - compelling that the focus was already compromised. But then again very few bands were egalitarian, even when it came to attractiveness.

It took the first roll to warm them up, get them unconscious enough to forget that they were posing. After that the jokes began to flow and the attitude emerged. Frame by frame he was seeing who they wanted to be, their desire directed outwards, and the nuances of their specific personalities. They were in tune with each other, the cohesion was not an illusion - as he had experienced with other bands - and there was affection there, rather than an obvious jostling for dominance. They knew who was in charge, and they knew themselves well enough to know they could win over any theoretical audience if they wanted to.

Whether serious or smiling, posing or in a moment of unguarded contemplation, he absorbed the spectrum of their charisma and found it satisfying. He couldn’t make them look good, though he was pleased to see they were doing the work of getting people to believe they represented the very thing they were selling: youth, freedom, and the promise of a good time. And even...cool.

He followed them on to the venue, where they spent some time being nice to those upon whose largesse they depended - radio promo people, especially the females. Chris continued to snap them as they surrounded one woman and gave her the thrill of their attention and proximity, a bit of charm, a bit of flattery, and a whole lot of aww shucks now.

“You gonna stick around?” Stan asked. “If you’ve got the time, that is.”

Chris snickered. “I suppose I could, if there’s booze.”

“Oh there’s always booze, man, not to worry. So how’d we do?”

“I think you’ll be just fine. Especially you. The camera fancies you for certain.”

Stan smirked. “Yeah, I know. But I mean, did we look cool.”

“I think you managed it, even in such tawdry surroundings.”

“Who’s tawdry?” Benmont asked, giving his bandmate a friendly shove.

“You might be, if we get lucky tonight,” Stan replied, and his ersatz English accent was good enough that Chris was pleasantly surprised.

“It’s not luck, chaps,” Chris advised them, “it’s attitude.”

“Stanley’s got enough for everybody, trust me,” Benmont assured him.

“I’d be apt to say that’s quite wasted on the drummer, but somehow I don’t think it matters.”

“Yeah, people don’t get us at first, but then we play and it all makes sense, hopefully.”

Chris nodded solemnly. He realized that was the way in which they would truly win people over.
And it was the only way which actually counted, all told.

-88-

It all started with a well-seasoned critic - as she was apt to describe herself - crushing on the band, and Tom was at the ready with the loose talk. It was equal parts elation and mischief which caused him to say what he did - but once his declaration of sexual mores both within the band and concerning himself was published, the women came a-runnin.’

Not that they hadn’t been there all along, but this was a different game. The professionals started coming around. And Tom suddenly didn’t feel desired so much as coveted in the way a collector examines the next acquisition.

“We sometimes share each other’s girlfriends!?” Stan read. “What the fuck are you talkin’ ‘bout - I don’t take sloppy seconds and I sure as hell don’t need your leftovers!”

And he couldn’t help it, that writer was a delight - a dark-haired wise-cracking intellectual firecracker who he enjoyed talking to, and he always communicated better with women. Tom liked giving interviews to females, they weren’t so deathly serious about The State of Rock n’Roll. He cared about it enough to believe he might do his part to save it, but it wasn’t brain surgery. So his tongue was a bit more slippery than it might have been otherwise. Even as she struggled to keep up, having to write out his comments (as her tape recorder decided to die at the very moment of revelation), he felt like he could have talked to her for hours.

“I’m pretty sure everyone thought you were just weird at 17,” Benmont cracked.

And maybe he wanted to think he could be that guy who was in it for the chicks. Whatever they saw in him, maybe that was some part of him he hadn’t ever realized was there. Maybe whomever he couldn’t win over in his previous life might now see him on the album cover, or in a magazine or newspaper, and regret that they should have seen, they should have believed, in his potential.

“Very communal?” Mike asked. “What the fuck does that mean?”

“She was real cute,” Tom said to all these charges, “I would have said anything just to amuse her.”

“Yeah but we’re never gonna be able to live up to it!” Ron said.

“Speak for yourself!” Stan shot back. “I am in this business for the chicks, and they can come get me anytime.”

“Yeah maybe that’s what happened, “ Mike mused, “for a minute you thought you were Stanley. Did you get hit on the head or somethin?’”

“Wait, you’re saying got cruised by a guy? Which guy?” Benmont questioned.

“Guys,” Tom said, studying his fingernails. “Just guys, you know, around.”

Three of his bandmates wore various shades of skepticism in their expressions, while the fourth winked at him.

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There was no true privacy on the road - when a door was closed, wild speculation would bloom and spread regarding what was going on behind it, and how whatever it was would affect everyone else, or not. Especially when they were in extremely close quarters for weeks at a time in a Winnebago.
At every stop for gas, or grub, or just because the boss asked that they stop, everyone would stumble off and gratefully breathe air which didn’t contain the mingled exhalations of each other.

When Tom came out of the men’s room of the rest stop and saw Mike leaning against the side of their boxy chariot staring directly at him, he knew what it meant. Mike gestured with his chin and Tom followed him back into the vehicle. He looked down the aisle and waved to Bugs, who was on the radio to the crew, engaged in the usual jovial bullshitting.

“I’m pullin’ that curtain in the back, don’t let nobody in there till we come out again.”

“We who?”

“Me and Campbell.”

“Uh-oh, guess you knew that was comin,’ huh?”

Tom grimaced. “Yeah.”

He shut the door and moved to the back of the vehicle, pulling the privacy screen to block off the rear sleeping quarters. Mike sat on the lower bunk, and he had that look like he wanted to throw up. Tom figured there was no percentage in dancing around the issue.

“Oh, so say what you got to say.”

“You made me look like an asshole to my wife, man, and that’s not fair.”

“Michael, you knew what the rule was before you tried it.”

“But it was just that one time, I was tryin’ to do somethin’ special for her.”

“If I bend the rules for you, then that makes everybody mad, and you know it. We both end up payin’ for that.”

“I still don’t think it’s fair - groupies get to come with us, girlfriends, but you won’t let me bring Marcie along.”

“Because nobody wants wives here.”

“Not even you?”

“Nope.”

“I can’t believe I’m the only guy who loves his wife.”

Tom rolled his eyes and let out an exasperated breath. “That’s not what this is about, man, don’t be tryin’ to twist it. Home is home and the road is the road and they’re two different things, and there are rules. And you gotta set an example by followin’ the rules. If you don’t follow the rules, how can I expect anybody else will? That’s why you’re the Lieutenant - ‘cause I know you’ll do the right thing.”

“That’s a lot to be puttin’ on me - and they never let me forget it, every fuckin’ day.”

“I put it on you ‘cause I know you can handle it. You got my back. And that means for everything you don’t like just as much as what you do. That’s what it means to be a leader.”

“I’m tired of it, you know? Havin’ to sit there and watch the circus, having that shit in my face every
day.”

Tom sighed. “What I’m wonderin’ is why you didn’t get in the car with her. That was four hours you coulda been with her instead of us, which I’m assuming was the whole point of the thing.”

Mike looked up and Tom saw real anger in his eyes. “Because she was so damn mad she said if I tried to ride with her she’d push me out onto the interstate.”

“And I fully expect that you blamed me, which is fine.”

“But that’s the problem, man, she knows you gave me that responsibility. She said, ‘Oh he trusts you but he doesn’t respect your feelings.’ And I had to sit there that night and listen to a whole mess of that kinda thing. For, like, an hour. She’s still mad at me - I tried to call home just now and do you know she changed our answering machine message? It says, ‘If you’re not my husband, leave a message. If you are, don’t bother.’”

Tom tried not to laugh. And failed.

“Yeah it’s real funny, sure. Meanwhile, I might not even have a wife to come home to.”

“C’mon man, that girl loves you. And sure, she’s mad, but I’m not changing the rule. The road is the place where people might do all kinda things they can’t do at home, and that’s what it’s about. And you’ve been knowing that ever since I’ve known you.”

“I’m not made of stone, and I keep feelin’ like I’m gonna crack. I don’t wanna be that guy. I’m a good husband, a good father, I take care of my family, I provide for them and I love them and I’m not gonna let them down.”

“Nobody is sayin’ you will. Women - you never can tell what’s gonna make ‘em mad. You could be Prince Fuckin’ Charming and still be an asshole if she decides you are, though.”

“No, that’s not what I mean, but -”

“But nothin,’ man - look, I’m not gonna tell you what to do but you gotta figure it out now, because you can’t be having a breakdown while we’re in the middle of a goddamn tour! And none - none of us will care if you get a little wild. Nobody cares, nobody talks. That is the rule.”

Agony had replaced anger in Mike’s eyes. “I don’t think I should be punished for doing the right thing.”

Tom shrugged. “You wanna do that kinda thing, seems to me you’re in the wrong business. And you’re makin’ me say that, Michael. She’s gonna forgive you eventually. Life goes on, and so does the road. This is how things get tough. And it’s what you want, I know it is, just like I know you. Does anybody know you like I do?”

Mike shook his head, then got up and slid open the divider. During their conversation everyone had
reboarded and the RV pulled out, continuing on to their destination. As Mike came down the aisle towards the front he picked up an acoustic guitar which lay on one of the seats.

“Move your goddamn feet,” he snapped at Stan.

“Fuck, who pissed in your corn flakes, Campbell?”

“Mmm, salty,” Benmont murmured in response.

Mike sighed heavily and sat down away from the others, leaning his head against a window, playing scales. Everyone returned to their previous activities: Stan and Benmont were sharing a newspaper, reading headlines to each other and eating potato chips; Howie was writing a letter; and Bugs had gone up to sit with their driver, listening to the chatter on the CB. Tom leaned against the partition and lit a cigarette, watching Mike and wondering - not for the first time - if maybe he was the one who just didn’t understand what the right thing was at all.
Traveling on the East Coast in winter was a bad idea for those not used to its frigid caprices, though it was also necessary to get back on the road - especially crucial for the Heartbreakers in this instance. Tom had already started to feel ache-y and shivery the minute they got to the venue in the late afternoon, a hallowed place they had enjoyed playing at previously (but it seemed like every performance space in the city was celebrated in some way, Philly was a die-hard rock n' roll town), as well as the kind of hall they preferred to play, but the tour was just getting underway and they needed to reward the patience and loyalty of all those people who now rushed to welcome them as heroes.

Tom sequestered himself in the administrative office and swallowed repeatedly - a truly nervous tic - for over an hour. He sipped at tea and brandy and fretted, but wouldn’t allow anyone to keep him company; he was afraid to tell anyone he thought he might seriously be getting sick.

They had dealt with various types of crud one contracted on the road before: in too-close quarters, not enough rest, too much of everything else (isn’t ever enough, Stan was fond of saying) and they counted on their resilience to guide them through the landscape of ever-evolving temptation and hazards. But he suspected that whomever had infected him had likely been on the plane to New York, and it had taken hold during that crazed week of attempted rehearsals, interviews, promotional obligations, and virtually no sleep.

But oh how they treated him like a king now. He found it equal parts humorous and contemptuous. As every Western had instructed him over the course of his life, you had to get tough in order to receive respect. And now Tom feared any sign of weakness in himself. He should have known, as he thought their appearance on Saturday Night Live wasn’t necessarily their best; they sounded fine, but it was missing the spark he believed was always absent when you watched a band perform on television. And yet...how could the Beatles have captivated an entire generation as they did, given an equally sterile circumstance? He should have known he just didn’t feel well enough to be on like he needed to be.

These are the things you think about when you don’t want to think about your problems, Tom mused, and paged through an week-old copy of Variety. He realized he hadn’t been out to see a movie in over a year, all of the box office boffos and busts being advertised and reported upon might as well have been in a different language for all he knew about them. A gentle rap sounded upon the door.

“Go ‘way,” he growled.

“Did ya wanna eat before soundcheck?” Bugs asked from the other side of the door.

Tom got up and instructed his right-hand man. “Go get me some soup, man. Chicken soup.”

“You okay?”

“I just want some soup.”

“Okay then.” Bugs turned and walked down the corridor, but gave Tom a worried glance before rounding the corner.
He thought about the broadcast again - he realized he didn’t know where to look. Was he supposed to look at the crowd, at the cameras? At least when they had filmed the promo clips they told him exactly when to look at the camera, when to look at the band, it was easier when you knew what you were supposed to be doing. His band sounded tight and all they had to do was look at each other to understand where they needed to be. His mind had to be half on his own performance and half on those who witnessed it, to invite them closer. Tom was happier when he reached that point in a show where he could lose himself in what he thought of as the Heartbreakers experience - that sound which only they could make, and his emotional reaction to it. Knowing the crowd was theirs, and whatever entertained him also entertained the ones who came to see them play.

Their connecting flight from Chicago to New York had been especially rough, the weather turned nasty as they crossed the Great Lakes, a near-constant jarring jostle. Mike, as he always tended to do in perilous situations, had fallen asleep while everyone else drank heavily to steady their nerves.

“Do you think I should ask our stewardess if she wants to get it on, like, in case we die?” Stan asked him.

Tom chuckled. “Ain’t nothin’ gonna kill us now, goddamn it. That would just be dumb.”

“Besides which,” Benmont opined from across the aisle, “you couldn’t fit into one of those bathrooms to fuck anybody if you tried, you overgrown motherfucker.”

Stan stretched and looked smug. “I bet I could if I really wanted to.”

The plane bounced again, and they all grabbed their glasses.

“Fuck!” Tom exclaimed.

“Yeah I’ve had about enough of this joyride, y’all,” Ron declared.

“Fuckin’ Campbell, man, how does he sleep through everything?!” Stan wanted to know.

“Lemme tell ya a story ‘bout Michael there, I have seen that boy sleep through every damn thing,” Tom began.

“Do you remember when we got strip-searched in Germany?” Benmont asked them. “And we had to sit in that interrogation room for an hour? They shoved me in there in my goddamn skivvies, I sat down, and the next thing I know Michael had laid down on three of the chairs - he was out. Like it’s perfectly normal to take a nap while being detained by a foreign government. And one of the customs agents thought he was on the nod or something, I had to stop the guy from slapping him.”

“Oh yeah,” Stan responded. “You said, ‘No man, he’s just tired’ but he still looked for trackmarks, didn’t he?”

“And Campbell said, ‘Who the fuck told them I’m a heroin addict?!’”

They all cracked up to recall Mike’s confusion, thinking he had been pranked.

“And I said,” Tom went on, “Well you’re so goddamn skinny, man, what did you think they were gonna think?”

Their laughter provided sufficient distraction from the bumpy ride. They would have kissed the ground when they exited the plane but it was too fucking cold.
Tom wasn’t really expecting it would happen like it did. He thought it might just be that he would sound raspier than usual, but not that his voice would actually crack under the pressure of the typical demands he placed upon it. He knew his instrument was idiosyncratic and he still wasn’t entirely certain how it worked at all.

But when he saw the look pass between Mike and Ben he thought oh fuck. Because those two were downright taciturn the moment they stepped onstage, and he liked to make a game of trying to get them to smile or even laugh. So if they were worried then he must sound terrible to ears other than his own.

“What’s wrong?” Stan immediately wanted to know when they took a short break after the sixth song. “Have you got laryngitis?”

“Naw, I just talked too much with all o’those goddamn interviews,” Tom replied, glowering at their manager. “I need some water. We gotta cut ‘Refugee.’”

“Cut it? But it’s all over the radio!” Stan exclaimed.

“Stanley, if I can’t sing the fuckin’ song then I can’t sing it - they can go listen to it on the fuckin’ radio for all I care.”

The others looked worried. Watching Tom wipe his face and neck with a towel while he waited for Bugs, he looked paler than usual and tired and a bit too frail for their liking.

“What if your voice goes out completely?” Mike wanted to know.

“Then we just find a way to finish the show without makin’ everybody mad, I guess.”

“I’ll ring for a doctor,” Tony said, “he can meet us at the hotel after the show.”

“I don’t need a doctor, I just need to stop talkin’ so goddamn much,” Tom answered.

“You might be really sick, man,” Benmont interjected. “I mean, this isn’t Hairy and the Ingrowns, this is Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers. We’ve got to take care of Tom Petty.”

Everyone snickered despite their stress.

“Hell I’m ready to change the name right now,” Tom croaked with a grin, “might take some of the pressure off me.”

“Look man, I’ll sing somethin’ if it comes to that, okay? We can deal with this,” Stan assured them, and they all nodded but continued to look concerned.

Bugs brought Tom a glass of water and a bottle of Chloraseptic. “Down the hatch, boss.”

“Y’all go back out there, give me a minute.”

The band walked back to the stage and Tony began to say something but Tom cut him off.

“We’re not gonna talk now, okay? Go on, I’ll handle it.”

Bugs took back the glass and the bottle. “Need anything else?”

“Yeah but I ain’t gonna get it, so…”

“Hey, it’s what I’m here for, man.”
“Tell Genaro to turn up Stanley’s mic - just in case.”

Bugs laughed. “You let that boy sing now, you’re never gonna hear the end of it, yanno.”

Tom smirked. “Yeah well, it’s a last fuckin’ resort but I’d rather let him think he saved the show then blow out my voice completely. Sometimes you gotta pick the lesser of two evils.”

“Is that what they call it?”

“What they call this,” Tom said, moving in the direction of the stage as the sound of the expectant audience swelled once more, “is rock n’ roll.”

Tom pumped the brakes on his usual onstage enthusiasm, just wanting to get through the show, and he could feel Stan’s eyes on him the entire time. This was nothing unusual in that Stan watched him, followed his movements, during every performance. But the weight of that stare was especially palpable. Every time he glanced at the other he could see true concern in the other’s eyes, as if Stan was expecting him to fall down or move his mouth in surprise when no sound emerged.

A cynical interpretation would have been the understudy waiting for that big break, but Tom suspected that Stan merely wanted, once again, to prove his worth. Since all the fighting of those prior months they had moved closer to an understanding, or at least attempted to understand that they didn’t fully understand whatever existed between them. To acknowledge it, even if they couldn’t define it.

There were times when Stan almost acted like a bodyguard, a presence choosing to walk behind him, having his back in a literal sense. He saw it as his responsibility. Tom saw it as some expression of kindness which Stan would never claim, but it was obvious to everyone else. And those were the things which made his heart ache, that for all he felt for Stan he couldn’t trust him. If he couldn’t trust him, there was no true future in their connection. To acknowledge it, even if they couldn’t define it.

But the desire continued to burn much like whatever was in him at the moment, attempting to steal his voice.

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“Festivals, man, they’re just so fuckin’ dumb.”

Tom looked out on the mass of bodies underneath the leaden sky and thought it looked wrong, somehow.

“Even back on the Farm?” Mike asked him.

“Man, nobody really came to hear us play, it was all about hangin’ out and smokin’ dope. I think we’ve evolved to the point where we don’t need to play in daylight anymore.”

“I don’t mind that so much, just that I always worry ‘bout going out of tune when we play outside.”

And as if to remind them that this day was turning out to be disastrous, Keith arrived with the bad news that the Hammond was officially out of commission, but Benmont thought he could cover with the Vox and likely no one would notice.

“Aww shit!” Tom exclaimed, a burst of anger directed as much at himself as at whatever forces were
responsible for fucking with them - and Tom was certain they existed.

Mike shrugged. “Ben can make it work, hell, he can play better than all of us together with an out-of-tune piano, I reckon.”

“I just don’t like the idea of playing for 100,000 people without all of our stuff.”

“Yeah man, but we can, y’know? That’s the whole point. Can’t fuck us up, right? That’s what Stanley says.”

Tom didn’t reply, just continued to stare out at the crowd. Finally he said, “They don’t look like hippies, do they?”

“I don’t think hippies exist anymore. ‘Cept maybe you and me.”

Tom laughed. “Already we ain’t cool no more - that didn’t take too long, did it?”

“Hold up - 100,000 people? You’re shittin’ me!”

“Guess you’d better go take a nap, partner.”

“Jim, get them to turn those fuckin’ lights down, I’m ‘bout to pass out up here!”

Tom looked around - everyone was just about close enough to touch and the crowd could have climbed onstage and made off with all of them. Everyone was sweating but smiling. It was getting hard to breathe, and Tom expected someone was going to shut them down any minute now, surely they were violating fire codes. But he didn’t want to give in to the obvious considerations of health and safety. They were playing The Marquee, the same stage many of their idols had also stepped upon, and they deserved to be there.

Stan downed the rest of his water and pitched the empty gallon bottle at Phil, the universal gesture for “Fill it up!”

The heat was an actual presence, Tom could see it within the lights - a thick smoky shimmer - and he caught himself wobbling a few times. He sat down on the drum riser and Mike joined him, wiping down the neck of his guitar as well as his hands.

“I ain’t sweated this much since Dub’s!” he shouted to Tom.

“This is goddamn crazy!” Tom said, his tone a mixture of awe, annoyance, and exhaustion. But this crowd meant more to him than anything, they wanted to be there, they were willing to endure a less than ideal situation simply to see them. He looked over at Bugs who slashed his hand across his throat, the universal gesture for this is fuckin’ nuts, let’s just stop the show right now, but Tom shook his head. This was his Elvis moment, as Stan had put it, and he wanted people to talk about this show for years afterwards...if only they could get through it, that is.

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In retrospect, Tom berated himself for not paying attention. It had been a strange week, everyone was on the edge of getting full-on sick, band and crew, the weather was bad, and frankly, the Midwest looked thoroughly depressing when experiencing such conditions.

It was verified band lore that people...gave Mike things. Simply because they perceived something in
him which triggered their own generosity. And that night was weird - starting with the girl who walked up to him in the parking lot outside and just handed him a Grateful Dead shirt from the '74 Winterland stand because someone had told her that he was into Garcia (which was indeed true), and then one of the promo guys left a coffee mug full of joints backstage and everyone had enjoyed that bit of kindness, but not enough to hinder their playing...until they realized a bit too late that Mike hadn’t had anything to eat that day and was starting to look like he was seriously out of it.

“How does a person forget to eat?” Stan wanted to know. Such a thing was beyond his ability to comprehend.

“That’s just Campbell,” Benmont explained. “We used to threaten to take his guitar away unless he put a goddamn sandwich in him.”

“He keeps laughin’ at nothin’,” Ron noted. “Is he gonna be okay?”


Benmont snapped his fingers. “Wait a minute - is he still taking that stuff? That we all did last week when you gave us your cold?”

Stan put a hand on his chest and looked offended. “Me? It was that girl, the one from the radio station, who kept tryin’ to kiss everybody.”

“And she kissed you, and then you had to go and breathe all over us, so it was you,” Benmont replied, scowling. “But if he’s still taking that cough medicine too? Campbell must be over the moon right now.”

“And out past Mars,” Stan added. “That could be bad.”

“No shit!”

“Well let’s ask ‘im,” Tom said. However, the moment they entering the communal dressing room and viewed their bandmate’s demeanor they groaned.

“Michael, buddy, you gotta eat something,” Benmont said, looking at what was left of their pre-show meal on a nearby table.

“It still hurts to swallow,” Mike said in a near-whisper. “I’m not really hungry anyway.”

“How many tokes you had?” Tom asked, bending down to look in Mike’s eyes, which were no more or less bloodshot than usual.

“What? Oh, just a couple. I think. It made my throat hurt too much.”

“Michael, if you don’t eat somethin’ you’re gonna faint. I can’t have you faintin’ during a gig, man, that ain’t allowed.”

Benmont handed him half a sandwich which Mike frowned at, but dutifully began eating. He looked up at all of them, blinking slow and looking confused.

“Why y’all starin’?”

“You okay, Campbell?” Stan asked. He was trying to play it off but the others could detect a genuine concern in his tone. “Can’t have your skinny ass fallin’ down on us, man.”

“I’m okay, it’s just that my throat still hurts.”
“Maybe some brandy?” Ron suggested.

Tom rolled his eyes. “I think he’s fucked up enough already, don’t you?”

“What? I’m fine!”

“You ain’t drinkin’ before we go out there, so don’t let me catch you sneakin’ a beer.”

Mike suddenly looked worried. He had gotten used to having at least one beer before a gig. It took some of the edge off in terms of playing for people who expected them to be *good*. He rose to his feet, ready to protest, but sat down again just as quickly, as standing seemed to be too much of a challenge at that moment.

“Oh fuck,” Stan said, shaking his head. “Our boy is *toasted*.”

“Bugs!” Tom shouted down the hallway. “We need coffee and food, pronto.”

“I just...can I lay down for a minute?” Mike asked.

“I dunno, man - if we let him sleep now, we might not be able to wake him up for the gig,” Ron said.

“Just sit there and eat your sandwich, okay?” Tom told him. “It’s gonna be fine once we get some coffee in ya.”

“Coffee has **never** sobered me up,” Benmont observed.

“Ain’t nobody asked you, College Boy,”

“This sandwich is gross,” Mike said, grimacing at the remainder in his hand.

“Don’t think of it as *food*, man,” Stan advised, “just somethin' to keep you goin.’”

“You’ve eaten worse, man,” Benmont reminded him. “We **all** have.”

“Well he’s not trippin’ or nothin’ so I think it’s just yer general kinda intoxication,” Tom said to Bugs, who had asked what sort of food he should be buying. “Just grab some hamburgers or somethin.”

“Does he have a temperature?” Bugs wanted to know.

Benmont put the back of his hand across Mike’s forehead for a moment. “Doesn’t feel like it to me.”

“I’m fine!” Mike proclaimed once more.

“Think ’bout it this way: you fall down onstage and wreck your guitar, you’d never forgive yourself, would you?”

Mike looked at Tom with wide eyes. “Oh wow, I didn’t think of that!”

“I know, ’cause you ain’t in your right mind at the moment.”

“Three hours till we go on, is that enough time?” Ron asked.

“It’s gotta be.”

Tony rushed into the room. “Bugs said Mike is sick?”
“Just stoned,” Stan replied cheerfully.

“He might be sick, we ain’t really sure,” Tom declared.

“So…”

“We’re gonna handle it, man, but you might wanna make sure you’re around the owner if somethin’ happens.”

“Something, as in?”

“I dunno. Could be anythin.’”

“Well that’s reassuring.”

“Life is always an adventure with us!” Stan exclaimed, slapping Tony on the back. The other grimaced, but nodded.

Tom had to hand it to his partner - he made it through the gig, even if he looked like an actual zombie: pale and thin and perhaps unsure of his immediate surroundings. But muscle memory kicked in and Mike played the songs and his solos more or less the way they should be played. For better or worse he waited until after their set to fall off the stage, having handed off his guitar and then became confused regarding which direction to go. The only injury was to his pride, afterwards the crew delighted in making signs they would tape to his monitor wedge reading REMEMBER NOT TO FALL OFF THE STAGE and Mike would flip them all off every night once he spotted them.

“I’m just glad you didn’t break nothin’,” Tom told him. “That woulda been annoying.”

“I don’t think I was in my body,” Mike opined by way of explanation. “I always feel like that onstage, like I’m looking down at myself and then I think, ‘Shit, what do I play next?’ and then I’m back in my body.”

“You got some weird thing goin’ on there, man, like one o’them yogis or somethin.’”

“You gotta be open to the Universe, all that good energy.”

“I’m all for that, just as long as you don’t get any ideas that you can walk on air or nothin’.”

“Awww man, wouldn’t that be a trip?”

“I think it actually was a trip,” Tom cracked, and was happy he finally got Mike to laugh about what happened rather than be eternally mortified.
...you look restless too.

_Sometimes everything’s nothing at all._
- Tom Petty, “Home”

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“If we go back we can’t tell nobody.”

Stan shrugged. “Yeah, okay. I just need to be there for a little while. Besides, I got this house now, gotta spend some time in it.”

“And do what?”

“I dunno, let’s just fish and you can write some songs or somethin.’ Wouldn’t it be nice if you could be somewhere that nobody needs anything, isn’t askin’ you for anything -”

“What do you want?”

“I won’t ask for nothin,’ man, if that’s what’s got you so worried.”

Tom looked off into space, frowning, and Stan held his breath, a litany of _please let him say yes_ in his head.

“Nobody, I mean it.”

“Yeah man, I never pull that shit, you know that.”

When Stan was doing his best to be the good dog, Tom knew it for the effort it was. Stan’s impulses were often contradictory and at least a bit self-destructive, a bit devious. He had no filter unless he honestly tried to stop and think about whatever came out of his mouth. But those impulses were sometimes good instincts and the mind behind them agile. He recalled one instance in which they were all considering a problem - the actual issue lost to specific memory - and Tom expected Benmont would be the first to offer a solution but Stan had spoken sense almost immediately and Tom looked over at him, eyebrows raised - the response that smirk, again.

He had to stop himself from making a quip regarding how you could never be sure what was behind a pretty face.

“Man, that was _fun_!”

This was about the third or fourth time Stan had commented on their impromptu jam session of the night before, Tom had already lost count.

“It was a fuckin’ mess, but yeah, it was fun.”

Stan poured him more coffee and grinned. “The best things always are _messy_, I mean.”

Tom smirked, thinking of the rib joint they’d hit up before going to the club, with Stan providing detailed criticism of the establishment’s sauce. He realized the other had been right - when he had nothing else to think about, or worry about, then he could enjoy being with Stan. Enjoy residing in
the moment and it didn’t have to mean anything other than what it was.

“I would say I miss those days, but I don’t think I do, not really. It’s fun to play a club, though.”

“Back then it was fun - hell, what did I know about anything? Now, I dunno - sometimes it’s weird to realize how hard people are starin’ at you.”

“At me?”

“At us.”

“Well we’re fascinatin’ individuals,” Tom gibed.

“We are,” Stan replied, leaning on the counter and staring directly into Tom’s eyes.

Tom had become more adept at not looking away from that scrutiny, from its’ intimate weight. A hard stare, hungry and horny and meaning to penetrate. He didn’t know what Stan truly expected would happen, when he stared at Tom like that.

But then again, neither did he. And that was why he liked it.

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Stan opened the door and his expression changed from annoyed to interested in what seemed to Tom to be a matter of seconds. His signature smirk surfaced and it was a particularly lascivious one. The one which said: Yeah I know you’re lookin’ at me. Tom had been on the other end of it enough times not to flinch at its’ unerring ability to make him feel pinned.

“Michael fell asleep in my bed.”

The smirk grew deeper. “Why didn’t you just wake him up?”

“I don’t like to wake anybody up, that’s just cruel.”

Stan stepped aside and Tom entered, kicking off his shoes and stretching out on Mike’s bed. In a few seconds he looked down at it suspiciously.

“You didn’t -”

Stan gave Tom a Are you kidding me? look. “Naw man, that’s gross, I wouldn’t do that! But I didn’t even have a girl in here at all.”

“But that’s why he came over to our room. Did you lie?”

“It wasn’t an actual lie. I just wasn’t interested in any of them tonight.”

Tom gaped, a little more than half-incredulous. “You feelin’ alright, kid?”

Stan rolled his eyes. “I don’t fuck for the sake of fuckin,’ Tommy. I’m not walkin’ ‘round lookin’ for the first girl that comes along.”

“Uh-huh. And what is this?” Tom asked, gesturing towards the television.

“I dunno - but it’s got tits, and that’s enough for me.”

“But that’s exactly what I mean. You don’t wanna fuck just anybody, but you’ll watch other people
fuckin?’ That doesn’t make any sense.”

Stan sighed in exasperation. “It’s two different things, man. Like you never looked at a *Playboy*?”

“Of course I have, but that’s different too. I can admire a girl but not have to think about fuckin’ her *at all.* But I know that’s the first thing you think of.”

“So what if it is?!”

“Don’t be givin’ me some bullshit about how you’re not always on the make, is all.”

“I’m not!”

Tom threw a pillow at him. Stan knocked it away with a lightning-fast reflex born of many onstage mishaps.

“Man I could use some weed right now.”

Tom pretended to search himself. “I ain’t holdin.’ And I thought you were livin’ the clean life.”

“I’d rather smoke a doob than take a pill or some shit. Ben always pops a ‘lude and then he’s all fucked up when he finally *does* wake up. I don’t want that.”

“It’s only -” Tom consulted his watch “- 1:52. Too early to sleep anyway.”

Stan sighed. “Yeah what is goin’ on in this thing?”

They watched the movie in silence for some minutes. A dream sequence involving witchcraft was followed by a sex scene which was followed by a scene in a graveyard.

“Damn, why the fuck did you stop on this?” Tom inquired.

“I was just flippin’ around and I saw titties, so -”

“*Of course* you did.”

“Oh fuck off!”

They laughed, then Stan kept up a running commentary for the movie and Tom settled in, lighting a cigarette, having completely forgotten that he was in a bed other than his own, if any of the series of beds he inhabited in these anonymous respites could be said to be his own. He wondered what Ron would think when he finally made it back to the other room, then chuckled to himself to contemplate that Ron might bring a girl back to the room and then Mike would wake up to the very thing he was hoping to avoid.

“Maybe I *should* go wake him up,” he murmured.

“Naw man, we’re havin’ a good ole time, right?”

Tom gave Stan a skeptical look, then laughed. “Yeah I guess.”

“Be better if we had some weed, though.”

“Why don’t you shut up ‘bout that and let’s find somethin’ better to watch.”

“But then I’m never gonna know how it ends!”
Tom looked over at Stan’s distressed expression and frowned for just a moment, with laughter following just as quickly.

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_Please grow old with me_

_life is but a dream._

Stan turned off the recorder several times. Every time he got to certain spots, following his hand-written lyrics sheet, his voice would crack.

“Goddamn it,” he swore, but whispered it even as he was alone.

Start again, to capture the lightning, the passion.

His demos were perversely low-tech - he refused to use Pro Tools, recorded everything on four or eight-track, left it to an assistant to digitize later in order to pass it along to whomever it was meant for. Don liked to tease him regarding his “Luddite tendencies” but Stan thought nothing would ever sound as good as tape.

“You’re damn lucky people let you get away with being a cranky old man,” Benmont had told him once in one of their ongoing email exchanges. “Even I eventually succumbed to that shit.”

“You gotta stand for something, man,” Stan replied, and left it at that.

He had romantic notions, an idea of a world which didn’t exist any longer but he cherished it still. And he wrote about it, elevating it to a shining ideal.

He wondered what they would think of the somewhat noisy and strident middle eight, but he liked the juxtaposition between those quieter deep chords of the verses and the other section. It was a bit discordant, like the passage of time. All bluster and fury and clangor.

There was a loyalty within him, even now. Deep like roots in the ground, and how long did trees live? Seemingly forever, sometimes. A loyalty to something which had passed from view, and yet it continued to exist, it assailed him upon the air, and in the comments of those he encountered, those compelled to tell him how they admired him, for what he had once done because it was all he knew how to do. He was gracious, the passage of time had taught him to be gracious because everything comes back around, eventually.

He thought about mortality often - all the way back to his mid-20s, contemplating his place in the Universe. He thought about time and the way it remade things and people. How it was not entirely kind. It was up to the people to be kind, to be gracious, to recall those shining ideals.

He thought of himself, he thought of the one he had written this song for - she had told him, “There’s something left in me to say,” and he nodded and smiled. They’d met for lunch after she returned to Florida and asked him why he had moved back so many years ago.

“Truth is, I never really left,” and they both laughed. “I suppose maybe I thought I had but then we came back to rehearse and do a few gigs before we went on our first tour with Al Kooper and I said to myself, ‘Man, what was I thinkin’?’” But you know how it is, you couldn’t catch the Big Dream here, not back then.”

She had nodded and her legendary beauty still affected him, even in their mutually advancing years.

“It was in me, I don’t think it was something I left behind. Now Tommy - he did leave. He was
never gonna feel the same ‘bout G-ville ever again. But me, I felt like I belonged in this state. A state
of mind too, I suppose.”

“I’m happy to be back,” she declared and he smiled again, genuinely touched that someone else had
chosen to return to a place which was often maligned or lampooned, but was also a sanctuary for
people who desired to move through life with studied purpose, with an appreciation for traditional
pleasures.

But this song, which was written for her, for her worn-velvet smoky contralto to express, was also
for him. It came out of him like a prayer, as if by someone who might find themselves praying in an
unconscious sort of way. A request, a plea, an incantation.

Time.

“I wonder who’s gonna sing me over,” she said to him, “when it’s my time to go,” speaking of the
Cherokee transition ritual. He sat back in his chair and wondered at such a thing. To let go of all
things of the world, enrobed in a song. A glorious noise, the last thing you knew.

This was the song: a plea for more time while understanding that Time was only what it was, and
someday you would have no more.

The chords did not come easy, many days of attempting various structures and sequences until the
right one came to him and whispered in his ear. And once played, everything else fell into place.

Everything he meant to say, even as he had not said it then.

“Some songs,” she told him, “help people to remember something beyond time.”

Time.

(Leave the fire ashes, what survives is gold)

His voice would crack under the weight of that love, every time. And so he prayed once more for the
strength to make it through this recitation. For hope, for loss, for love and for ever.

Your broken heart, time to mend
give our thanks, for time we spend.

Was he giving himself permission to grieve now? He wasn’t certain.

I’m doing the lonely work, he thought, and maybe that’s the thing he would appreciate.

It was all he knew how to do.

-96-

It was a surreal kind of thing, to be able to turn on the television at any hour and see yourself on the
screen, telling a very short story to an unseen audience. To yourself, possibly.

It wasn’t anything Tom wanted to do but it was a thing which existed now, and he had to come to
terms with the reflexive cringe he would experience upon seeing himself even as part of his mind
might remark, well now you don’t look so bad there, T.P., not hardly.

But what he found more...not disturbing so much as disarming...was that once he came upon the
video it was difficult to switch over from it. He wanted to watch Stan and appreciate all the details
which came to mind - some related to the filming of the promo, some related to the recording of the
“He sounds like such a fuckin’ sleazeball,” Jimmy complained.
Tom rolled his eyes. “Well that’s just Stanley, and if you can’t understand that then you don’t get us.”
“It doesn’t need to be like that, is what I mean.”
“Yeah it does. When we say ‘she is all I need tonight,’ then you need to know what we mean.”
“I don’t think there’s anything wrong with the way he sings it,” Mike said. “It’s a real nice harmony.”
“See? Even Michael approves, and he’s a good Christian kind of boy.”
His partner belied such an assertion by flipping him off.
“It’s just that this song isn’t even about a girl at all,” Jimmy continued. “It’s about what a girl means.”
“That’s what you think, but don’t mess with this. This is us, and you’re either with us or you’re not.”
“Of course I’m with you, how could you think I’m not?!”
“You don’t sound like you are. Stanley is in this fuckin’ band and you’re just gonna have to accept that and stop pickin’ at every goddamn thing he does.”
“Yeah that’s our job!” Benmont chimed in from the live room.

“Are you wearin' honest-to-God white boots?” Tom inquired.
Stan grinned. “Brand-spankin’ new, I mean to tell ya!”
Everyone laughed as Stan showed them off to the band and the film crew.
“I don’t think I ever even knew a girl who wore white boots!” Mike marveled.
“Sammy was on Dick Cavett this one time? And he had on some motherfuckin’ white boots. That cat can wear anything.”
“Yes, but can you? That’s the question,” Benmont quipped.
“Act like you can, deal with it later,” their drummer proclaimed.
Tom laughed. Such a philosophy was either audaciously profound, or supremely ridiculous. He imagined the truth was in the space between.

Big Dog, Lead Asshole, Cock of the Goddamn Walk. Once you had someone like that in your life you began to measure all people by how tall they could be. And as his brother-in-soul had informed him from the beginning, there were various ways to be tall. Tom found himself watching the clip, mouth agape, now fully cognizant of the effect his drummer could have on the world.

*Look at him.*

But he had been. Looking, that is. For such a long time now. Even the way he moved to the small platform they had put the drums on, singing along to the track, singing with Stan as if only to him, as if…

*To* him.

They had thought it hilarious at the time, there were so many moments they began laughing and had to start over again, finally just accepting that they would laugh no matter what, and there were cuts from about six or seven different takes in the finished product. But he hadn’t realized he’d done that, or the way they were looking at each other.
Tom put his hands over his face. No one had even mentioned it other than in a joking fashion, that they couldn’t be tough or serious to save their lives, not really. They were a bunch of sarcastic, silly assholes and it showed. But it was a damn good song, the song saved their somewhat awkward performance.

*Redemption,* Benmont had said. *That’s what it really means.*

And what else would he expect Stan to do? Point a camera at the boy and he would always clown around. He even bought his own camera to record certain exploits and they had all hurled various taunts at him, wondering how anyone could want to film themselves doing anything - even as all their lives contained such documentation now - and that was the essence of who he was. Big enough to eschew restraint. Tall enough to have a different view on things.

Why it was essential to have someone like that in your band, in your life.

The camera eye, over his shoulder, looking at Stan. Implying that he was looking at Stan, and of course he was - Stan’s smile just a few seconds and yet entirely genuine. Affectionate.

Tom placed a hand on the screen and closed his eyes.

“Okay so when the camera comes around the corner you guys are just talking -”
“About what?” Stan asked.
“Whatsoever. So then you acknowledge the camera and you motion to Tom to turn around.”
“Okay.”
Tom stood against the wall and Stan loomed above him, leaning as much into him as against the wall.
“Damn, stop actin’ like you’re ‘bout to pick me up!” Tom hissed and Stan cracked up.
Hearing laughter, John yelled “Cut!”
“Sorry, man,” Stan said, continuing to snicker.
For the next take, Tom pushed Stan away from him. But then Mike had a problem with not stepping away from the camera in time as it moved between himself and Benmont, so they had to start over yet again.
“If we were really talkin’, man,” Stan whispered, “I wouldn’t be standin’ this far away!”
“That’s your problem, not mine,” Tom said, trying to prevent Stan from making him laugh again.
“Now make sure you let me know when to turn around.”
The camera came around the corner and Stan motioned at it with his chin, standing up from his slouch and tapping Tom on the chest then pointing at the camera, all in a fairly fluid motion.
“Huh?” Tom said.
“Cut!”
“Okay you can’t blame me this time!” Stan exclaimed, but he was grinning.
As he sang the first line of the song along with the playback, Tom could see the others standing in the shadows beyond the immediate crew, watching him, their collective aura of please don’t fuck this up, we don’t want to be here all day obvious to him if no one else. But although he couldn’t actually see Stan beyond the lights, he could feel him. That stare. The shiver he felt even beneath those hot metallic lights.

The video concluded, the program had moved on to an in-studio performance by some other band, and Tom turned the dial aimlessly. He thought about Stan watching it too, just now, lying in bed
somewhere - maybe his bed, maybe someone else’s - watching it and thinking his own thoughts, which might be similar enough to make Tom stop once more, recalling an argument they’d had over something really stupid but it had become about something else, the only thing which mattered. Appropos of nothing else Stan had said, “Look man, I work so hard to get you off every night, so what are you gonna do for me?!"

Tom was thoroughly nonplussed, not knowing how to reply. But after a moment he said, “What am I gonna do? What do you mean?”

Stan looked away and for just a second he seemed embarrassed. But only for a second.

“Forget it,” he’d said, and walked away.

And when Stan had said that - the thing he hadn’t meant to say, perhaps - there had been no space between them, the conflict had brought them closer and closer and then -

*And then what?*

Tom imagined they were both thinking just that, right now, miles apart and yet - in this document which might outlast even them - closer than he’d allowed anyone else to be.
Interlude: danger

The cassette reached him by Indianapolis, though the mailing envelope showed signs of wear as if his friend had carried it around for a while before remembering to send it.

Stan read the accompanying note as he waited for the call to depart, contemplating the front-cover artwork, clearly not meant for the dimensions of a cassette box. But it was weird - was it supposed to be sexual? And if so, how the hell did they get away with that?

*Stanley - 2nd album as promised! Can you fucking believe I wrote songs that are on an actual major label album? Me neither! The first one is a song MD wrote for the Pointer Sisters but they didn’t like it. Their loss cuz I think it’s mighty fine, especially with her boyfriend’s power chords on it. Groove on this, or, if you don’t, feel free to run over it with the bus. Trying to enjoy this thing while it lasts, but Jeff is still pissed at me. If you see him, tell him it’s only rock n’ roll. The circus is underway, here’s hoping we all survive it. You did, right?

But try not to get fired again OK? I worry about you, boychik.

Marty

Stan grinned, murmuring, “Shut up, Marty!” which he meant with love.

“You guys wanna hear Marty’s new album?” he asked once they’d boarded the Winnebago.

“I like that Martha, she’s got a great voice,” Tom commented.

Everyone nodded with various voicings of assent. Stan went up front to put the cassette into the stereo and adjust the volume. As the first song played they all nodded their heads to the beat.

“So did you give Marty your spiel about chicks in bands?” Benmont asked.

“Of course I did, but Marty said I was crazy. But then, when he called to tell me she fired Jeff, he thought maybe I wasn’t so crazy after all.”

“Fired him? What for?” Mike asked.

“Cause her boyfriend wanted the job.”

“Hell, that’s gonna break ‘em up quicker than anythin!’”

“That’s what I said!”

“Well,” Tom said, “if he was tellin’ her to do it, I mean, what’s she gonna do? If she wants to keep her man, that is.”

They all responded with some version of yeah, I guess.

“Sounds like he can play, anyway,” Ron observed.

“This song doesn’t have a chorus,” Mike noted.

“Yeah it does,” Tom replied.

“Nuh-uh - it’s got a bridge, but that’s not the chorus. What should be the chorus is the refrain at the beginning of the verses.”
“Run it back,” Tom commanded, yelling toward their driver. They all listened with studied concentration.

“Huh,” Benmont said during the instrumental break. “I guess you’re right. It works, though.”

“Marty said she wrote it for the Pointer Sisters but they didn’t want it.”

“Ca’use it don’t have a chorus!” Mike declared.

They all laughed but continued their tapping and nodding along.

“It’s good, I like it. I don’t think it will be a big hit or nothin’ but it’s interesting.” Tom said once the song faded out.

“So Jeff got fired from two bands now, man that’s rough,” Ron commented.

“Marty said Jeff wanted him to quit so they could start their own band, but I told him fuck that, man, havin’ to start over again?”

“Yeah but who says it’s a sure thing?” Tom asked.

“Well they’re workin’ hard, just like us. Is anything really a sure thing?”

Tom frowned. “Yeah, I get ya, but they’re kinda quirky, y’know? I just wonder if they’re too weird to make it.”

“Well hell, if DEVO can make it, why not them? They’re openin’ for The Cars now.”

“That’s a good slot, then. I like The Cars.”

“Fuck, I can’t listen to them, all those fucking synths!” Benmont exclaimed.

“It’s a new decade, man, ya gotta get with the program!” Mike rejoined.

“And you -” Benmont replied, pointing his finger at Mike, “you are the worst with that shit. Keep your fucking gizmos to yourself!”

“It’s the future, I’m here to tell ya!”

“Michael’s gonna find a way to get all y’all out; it’s just gonna be him, a big ole stack of keyboards, and a drum machine.”

Mike grinned wide. “Synthesizers and drum machines don’t talk back.”

“Hell that’s an attractive prospect, now that you mention it,” Tom said, pretending to take the notion seriously.

Stan had lost the thread of the conversation, half-listening to the songs, thinking that even if The Motels could be said to be quirky, they had one hell of a singer. He went up front and asked their driver to rewind the tape to the beginning. “Danger” was a catchy song but it had a mood to it which sort of snuck up on you. You weren’t really sure what it was about. It seemed to be about wanting someone but knowing that it might not be a good idea. But why? The instrumental break was vaguely threatening compared to the gallop behind the verses. Marty wasn’t making any effort at all to be melodic on the sax, it was more in answer to those dropped-tuning power chords he’d mentioned in his note.
Stan stared out the window, not really seeing the miles of fields they were passing through.

_I said danger_
_your love is like a stranger._
_So close, so close_
_and yet so far away._

_Why?_ he wondered. _Why is she afraid?_ And this was the first time Stan had heard something he would consider to be modern and actually liked it. Most of the bands assigned to the New Wave didn’t sound all that new to him - there was always something there you could trace back to something old. But this, it was _cold_ in a way which was still appealing. He thought about songs which were about wanting someone you could never have, and splinters of music echoed in his brain - all those hits, paens to longing which ached so sweetly.

But this -

_Nightly, I dream how it might be_
_if I gave you everything_
_that I have._

There was something purposely vague in those lines which seemed disturbing, somehow. Because what did that mean - _everything?_ Everything was _everything_, not just the one thing you might give to someone to get them to like you, or want you.

Why was this song messing with his head?! _Oh I think you know._

A repeating sound: the heavy tread of footsteps, back-and-forth. Stan sat up in bed, listening, wondering what was going on. The crew wasn’t on their floor, so he couldn’t imagine what they might be doing unless there was a prank of some kind afoot. And if so, why wasn’t _he_ in on it?!

He pulled on his jeans and went to investigate.

The opened door revealed the slight figure of his boss, fully-dressed, trudging up-and-down the hallway. Apparently everyone else was either asleep or unconscious or otherwise occupied and thus were not disturbed by the _it’s too fucking early in the morning for this activity._

“How long you gonna keep this up?”

“I have an idea,” the other answered as he passed by, “but it don’t wanna come out.”

Stan was familiar with the pacing, but always in the studio. He’d seen Tom walk the circumference of the live room, muttering to himself, and then half an hour later he had an entire lyric written.

“How long you gonna keep this up?”

“Did I wake ya?”

“Sorta. I wasn’t asleep but I was tryin’ to sleep.”

“Sorry.”

“Naw it’s okay. Can I help?”
Tom stopped and turned around. “How?”

“I dunno. But you look like you need somethin.’”

Tom smirked. “What kinda somethin’ you mean?”

Stan leaned against the door, understanding that this was yet another version of their game. “Somethin’ to shake you loose, make it come out.” He stared, a directly brazen kind of expression. He could do that because they were alone, relatively-speaking.

What he thought was most interesting about this game is that they each knew never to mention its’ existence, or that they were each aware they were playing it. But sometimes it might be obvious anyway. As to how others interpreted it, that was not their concern. No one else either dared - or cared - to comment either way.

“You might break somethin,’” Tom replied, walking slowly towards him.

“I’d be careful.”

“Naw you wouldn’t. You never are. You’re -”

“What?” Stan had moved out from the doorway. He leaned against the wall, thumbs in beltloops, tilting his head, voice low and teasing.

Tom stopped. They were close enough that they could have touched, and Stan smirked at the sudden caution in those heavy-lidded eyes, those eyes which could present the illusion that he was looking at you, but more often than not the mind behind them was in some other realm, far ahead of everyone else.

“What am I?” Stan asked again.

“You can’t reel me in with your rap, y’know.”

“I’m just askin’ a question.”

“And you think I don’t know what you’re doin’. But I do.”

Stan put his hand on Tom’s shoulder, a light touch. “Hey man, you’re the one wearin’ a hole in the floor outside my door. What am I doin’? What are you doin?’”

The rules, apparently, were made to be broken.

“Boys are dangerous,” Jody had said to him. He was Home, briefly, driving around with her and making note of changes in the landscape. Not much, but in a college town there was always a certain amount of incremental change given its’ ever-rotating population. He was playing Careful for her, and she liked it.

“They’re cool, kinda different,” she said. “Who woulda thought Marty’d end up in a band like that?”

Stan chuckled. “He fell into it, lucky bastard.”

“But that’s what I think the song is about,” she continued. “Boys are dangerous and we never know if we should love them or not.”
Stan’s mind was only half on their conversation. After six months on the road his mind was generally frayed and fried and it took at least a couple weeks before he felt normal again. He came home to recover, this was the reality which mattered most. The humidity did something to bring him back to himself, the familiar smells of hot asphalt, swamp water, barbeque, and magnolias in full fleshy bloom. Then he would return to L.A. and crawl back into the womb of recording studios and clubs and various bedrooms.

“All boys are dangerous?”

“Yeah.”

“You’re sayin’ I’m dangerous?”

“Stanley!” she said, her voice taking on a teasing scolding tone. “You remember when Mom used to say she prayed every day after you turned 15 that you didn’t get some girl pregnant, so why are you actin’ like this is a total surprise?”

He hung his head, pretending to be sheepish. “Okay, so if all boys are dangerous, then why do y’all want any o’them?”

“Because it’s like lookin’ at a tiger. Tigers are beautiful and even though you know it would bite your arm off, you still wanna pet one.”

He rewound the tape, letting the music wash over him like the air itself. Their talk turned to other subjects, local gossip, but that angular and vaguely menacing song stirred and prodded other thoughts from the bottom of his brain. Martha’s voice growled with ambivalent desire and thwarted lust.

Danger
your love is like a stranger.
It’s so close, it’s so close, it’s so close, it’s so close, it’s so
It ain't easy to make it look this easy

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He was living his life out in notes, Tom mused.

Mike always knew where best to leave them, either taped to his cigarette pack or under his coffee mug. And they were each filled with the careful cursive (which was still a bit sloppy even so), much like his own, as they’d both struggled with the Palmer Method at the same age. Mike’s handwriting reminded him of those days - when he might wake up at 3 in the afternoon to an empty apartment, a note taped to the door:

*There’s no coffee but I hope we’ll come back with some.*

And it was all so solemn and earnest, exactly the character of the boy who’d changed his life, and whom he’d changed in turn. But even as he’d bent that mind to his way of looking at things Mike retained a quality of meditative remove - he was in the room, on the stage, sitting beside you, playing in front of you, but you always got the sense that part of him was somewhere else.

*Today feels green, I wonder why? But it does. Will be back at 5 from B’s school conference.*

*We needed more bananas.*

*I don’t like this mix, talk later.*

(ThiThis one affixed to a tape box containing a version of “Something Big.”)

Conversely, Stan wrote like a girl. It was not meant as an insult, but his printing was round in what Tom considered to be a feminine concern for visual appeal, and the other figured he’d learned how to do it at P.K. Yonge - it was known that all the kids who went to that school were eccentric somehow. But he enjoyed receiving notes and letters and postcards from Stan, there was always a sense of excitement in the loops and lines of his script. And when it came to the written word, Stan was funny as hell, maybe even more than he was in person. They’d all gotten used to the hectoring signs left on his kit.

*DO NOT TOUCH THESE DRUMS! I MEAN IT!!*

And they would follow behind him with signs of their own.

*WE REALLY REALLY MEAN IT MAN.*

*UPON PENALTY OF SEVERE MAIMING AND DISMEMBERMENT.*

On the road Mike had become infamous for replacing signs at the venue, usually the one for the tuning room. Tom’s favorite on the last tour had been *ALL ROTTING LEPERS WELCOME.*

Beneath its’ inclusive declaration Benmont had written *but not the smelly ones* in his tidy block printing. They then playfully argued about who among them would be the leper.

“Y’all hate me, so it’s me,” Stan asserted.

“We don’t hate you all of the time,” Benmont countered. “Just *most* of the time.”

“I feel like a leper right now,” Ron declared. “If my arm falls off don’t kick it off the stage, okay?”
“You keep yer rotting’ body parts on your side of the stage,” Tom warned with a smile.

“We’re all lepers on the inside,” Mike said with a smirk. Silence for a moment, then everyone cracked up.

“I’d like to buy a leper a Coke, and keep it company,” Stan sang, and they all began swaying in their seats, arms raised, humming along. Bugs and Phil entered the room, stopped to assess the scene before them, then turned around just as quickly.

“Y’all are fuckin’ weird,” Bugs called over his shoulder as they exited.

“We get a bus? We really really actually rate a bus this time?!” Stan exclaimed.

They stood in the back parking lot at Universal eyeing the large shiny vehicle which had just pulled up.

“That’s what the man said: ‘Y’all can travel the highways and byways of this great nation of ours in a goddamn bus,’” Tom replied.

“Cause we’re goddamn rock stars!” Stan shouted joyfully.

“Photo, gents?” Dennis asked, camera at the ready.

Mike snorted. “You’re always gonna be a rock star in your own mind, Stanley.”

Stan turned and put a finger on Mike’s chest. “Campbell I have seen you during a gig and you’ve got that look that says you’re runnin’ the goddamn world so I know you’re one in your own mind too.”

Mike’s response was to look confused, especially when his bandmates began nodding.

“What does that even mean?”

“You can’t tell me you’ve haven’t seen those photos of yourself where you are all business, man,” Benmont said. “‘Permit me to introduce myself: Mikey Campbell, six-string badass.’”

Mike gave an embarrassed laugh. “I guess that’s why I fall down sometimes, to remind everyone to be humble.”

Stan had already climbed onto the front of the bus, positioning himself like a figurehead on a ship.

“Stanley, what on God’s green earth are you doin?’”

“Y’all line up in front and it’s just gonna look dumb with five of us.”

Tom looked back at Dennis, who shrugged.

“He might have a point at that.”

“The boy is just bein’ dramatic, but what the hell.”

“Can I hang out the door like I’m getting ready to puke? That’s rock n’roll, right?” Benmont inquired.

In unison, everyone but Tom raised their fists in the air and shouted, “Boogie till ya puke!”
“Do we really have to do that again?” their photographer asked. “I was hoping there wouldn’t be any puking on this tour.”

“Then you ain’t doin’ it right!” Stan proclaimed, pointing at him.

“Stanley why don’t you look off to your right and try to be dignified, like The Spirit of Ecstasy.”

His subject, well-versed in English luxury cars, tried his best to look off into the distance with an expression of suitable wanderlust. The others were loose-limbed and laughing at each other, definitely not imbued with serious purpose. However, Dennis knew that the moment they stepped upon the stage they would be focused inward and outward, upon each other and on the crowd, ready to deliver. He got the sense that even now, so many years later, they still thought: Can you believe they let us keep doing this?!

“Stanley get down from there before they cancel our insurance rider!” Tony shouted at him.

“Hell, why can’t we just tie him to the front of the bus? Nothin’ more rock n’ roll than that!” Tom declared.

“Now that is why they say you’re the genius,” Mike teased, grinning.

“Tie me up? Hey man, I’m not Campbell - I’m not gonna fall off the bus!”

Mike flipped him off, then turned with a worried look to Jim who had also come out to view the new acquisition.

“You don’t think I’d fall off that ramp, do ya?”

“Are ya lookin’ to?” Jim replied, grinning.

“You better not shine a spot in my fuckin’ face when I’m walkin’ out!”

Jim threw his hands up. “Okay T.P. that’s it, no more spotlights for Campbell!”

“Only when he’s standin’ still,” Tom replied with a smirk.

“I’m fine, goddamn it - that’s what we got insurance for, ain’t it?!”

Tom limped into the soundstage area with Tony trailing behind, looking worried.

“Yes but it’s still going to cost you, is all I mean to say.”

Tom stopped and Tony almost ran into him. Their exchange went down several levels of volume and despite the empty echoing space, it could not be heard from the stage where the band waited on the arrival of their musical fulcrum.

“Okay what happened?” Benmont asked Mike.

“His knee is botherin’ him, he fucked it up on the trampoline.”

“When the hell did he get a trampoline?” Stan asked.

“I dunno, but I told him he should jog, like I do. Not too far, just to get loose enough to run around every night. He said he was too lazy for that, so I guess he got one of those little ones to use instead.”
“He probably got pissed thinkin’ ‘bout havin’ to jog in the first place and that’s how he got hurt, stubborn sumbitch that he is.”

“Fuck, it’s always somethin,’” Ron observed. “Blowin’ my amps out wasn’t enough, I guess, so now there’s this.”

“We are not cursed, so you best stop with that kinda talk,” Mike cautioned.

“Wait, wait - nobody said anything about a curse!” Phil exclaimed.

“’Cause there ain’t one!”

Benmont looked over at their boss and scratched his head. “You don’t think there might be, though? Not enough to destroy us, just enough to annoy us.”

“I’m annoyed just listenin’ to you right now.”

“Hey Gimpy!” Stan called out. “We gonna play somethin’ or what?”

Tom looked over at the stage, his expression decidedly grim.

“Why don’t y’all play somethin’ to remind me why I put up with you.”

The band collectively rolled their eyes at each other.

“Don’t poke the bear, man,” Ron muttered.

Stan clapped Phil on the shoulder. “Welcome to our world, dude!”

“Why don’t we just play,” Benmont said, “and remind him why we’re the best fucking band he knows.”

They all grinned and nodded at each other and knew instinctively they could definitely do just that.
in the realm of Men

“It’s a very complicated monster.”
- Mike Campbell, 1995

"Well, you know us," Petty sighs. "We manage to get into shit somehow."
- Tom Petty, 1989

More than a decade on in his tenure as New Guy, Eternal in this band which was a band but also a collective of people entrusted with the responsibility of ensuring that a particular insular, irascible man always satisfied his audiences, Steve Ferrone boarded an elevator with three of his bandmates for what they thought would be a typical jaunt, lasting less than a minute.

But that’s not what happened.

When the elevator halted with an alarming jerk between floors 35 and 36 they all eyed each other. When the door to the car did not open and they heard an alarm sounding from below, there was a bit of bemused annoyance in their collective expressions.

“Anybody claustrophobic?” Ron asked.

Steve pretended to freak out while Mike sighed heavily.

“Remember when we all had to squeeze in that closet so Steve Wilson could film us singin’? And he had us do it, what, ten times?” he asked.

“Six,” Ron and Benmont replied in unison.

Mike grinned. “And I think we were all pretty weird by that point.”

“Wot were ya singin’?” Steve asked.

“Man, I don’t even remember,” Benmont answered. “Do you?” he asked the others.

“Naw, but I bet Stanley does,” Ron said.

“Or Jim,” Mike added. “I remember he kept askin’ ‘Who farted?’”

“I remember you couldn’t actually sing ‘cause you were laughin’ too much,” Ron noted.

“I wasn’t gonna really sing no how,” Mike rejoined.

“And that’s why he had to shoot it six times!” Benmont exclaimed.

“Wait, so why were you all in a closet?” Steve asked.

“It wasn’t really a closet,” Ron replied, “I think it was a storage room?”

“Ron and this other guy on the crew were making a movie - just something to do on the road, you know - and there were all these little skits that we did, comedy-type stuff. And one of them was like a Marx Brothers thing, I think? That’s what that was, you opened the closet and there we were, singing some joke song or something.” Benmont explained.
“That clip is gonna be in the movie, I think.” Ron said.

“Of course it is,” Benmont said. “I remember when Cameron saw it and he said, ‘You guys are so goddamn adorable,’ and we all cracked up. We all said, ‘Naaaah!’”

“Yeah, and then Tony said to him, ‘They just don’t see it like we do,’” Mike added.

Steve chuckled and shook his head. He had no real knowledge of them from their salad days and thus could not comment. But there was something heartwarming about their relationship even now. Upon Ron’s return he could sense the bonds reforming with a minimum of effort, deeply instinctual.

“So it’s an actual movie, then?”

Ron nodded. “Yeah, Tommy watched it and he thought it was great, but he wanted it to be just for us.”

“We were such goofy kids,” Mike said. “Some of that stuff would have been funny only to us.”

A moment of silence then, as they all looked around the car.

“Should we pick up the red phone?” Ron asked. “Just to let them know somebody’s in here?”

“They got cameras everywhere nowadays,” Mike commented. “They know.”

“Hey, do you guys remember when we almost got stuck in the elevator with Stanley? That was New York too.” Benmont said.

Ron laughed. “Oh my God, yes, I remember that now!”

Mike frowned for a moment, then gasped. “Oh yeah, we were going to MCA’s offices, right? They were gonna tell us somethin’ or give us somethin’—”

“- and it was the four of us because Tommy was already up there, he got there before we did for some reason,” Benmont continued.

Ron turned to Steve with a grin. “Okay, so Stanley would do crazy shit just to get us to laugh, you know? He didn’t always think things through, though.”

“That was 1979, right? We flew out to start the tour for Torpedoes and we had all kinda shit to do for a week before that, and Tommy’s gettin’ sick -” Mike said.

“- which we didn’t even know yet.” Benmont interjected.

“And we were just ragged already and the tour hadn’t even started! So one day they told us to come into headquarters for somethin’ and we’ve ridin’ up to the 50th floor on the elevator and Stanley’s lookin’ up at the ceiling, and suddenly he crouches down and jumps up and the entire elevator shakes.”

“It shook so hard it knocked us all off our feet, like, we hit the walls,” Ron added.

“And we’re all screaming at him, saying ‘What the fuck?!’ and he doesn’t say anything, he just gets ready to do it again,” Benmont said.

Mike leaned back, looking up at the ceiling of the car. “So just as he’s ready to jump - and to this day I don’t know how I did it because Stanley was taller and heavier than me - I slam him up against the wall and I’m yellin’ STOP! and tryin’ to hold him there, which was a laugh ‘cause he coulda picked
me up with one hand if he’d wanted to, and these two are ready to dive in if it got ugly -”

“And Stanley finally says, ‘Look up, you assholes!’ so we all look up at the ceiling and there’s a sticker on the ceiling. A sticker of our logo,” Benmont said.

“On the ceiling,” Steve said.

“Yeah. And the first thing on Stanley’s mind is ooh I want that, while we’re all thinkin’ Who the fuck put that up there?” Mike said. “Like, none of us would have tried that, especially in a movin’ elevator.”

“And we’re all just staring at it when the elevator finally gets to the right floor and as soon as the doors open we run out. Except for Stanley.”

“Don’t tell me - he tried it again!” Steve said, laughing.

“Yes!” they all shouted back at him, also laughing.

The red phone rang. Benmont answered it. “Thank you for calling Car Four, how may we assist you?” He held the phone away from his ear so his bandmates could hear the automated message.

Please be aware that this elevator will reset itself momentarily and return to the ground floor. We apologize for the inconvenience.

The car began to descend and they all sighed.

“So...we takin’ the stairs, boys?” Ron asked.

“I solemnly swear I will never jump inside of an elevator,” Steve promised them.

“Oh sure, you say that now, but…” Benmont said, deadpan. They all chuckled as the car reached the lobby. Once the doors opened they stared out at the worried faces awaiting their arrival.

“Fuck it,” Mike declared, pushing the button again. “Who feels like livin’ dangerously tonight?”

They all shrugged, a type of response which can only be understood by those who choose the intentional brotherhood of a rock n’roll band.

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Tom put his feet on the console, stretched luxuriantly, then lit a cigarette. He smirked to see Mike fidget in the seat next to him. His partner hated it when Tom put his feet on the console, having a particular reverence for recording equipment. It was a response to the current crisis - which was also the age-old crisis - taking place in the next room.

Jimmy leaned forward and switched off the talkback. “Hell, why don’t we just get Phil to play the hit, this is fuckin’ ridiculous already.”

“I think the last one was fine,” Mike opined, examining his cuticles.

“Yeah, it’ll do,” Tom agreed.

Because the door to the live room wasn’t exactly flush to its’ frame, they could hear the developing distress of their drummer, who was standing up behind his kit yelling and waving his arms at the group of people in the control room.
“I know y’all are talkin’ shit about me again! You better cowboy up and tell me to my fuckin’ face already!”

“Like that sumbitch knows any damn thing 'bout cowboys,” Tom muttered, rising to his feet. He looked through the glass and drew his hand across his throat, glaring at the other.

“What, you’re gonna behead me? Don’t you think that’s kinda harsh?”

Silence for a moment, then everyone in the room but Jimmy cracked up.

“Man, that would be a good reason not to fuck up!” Mike exclaimed, then leaned his head back, overcome with laughter.

Iovine was nonplussed, tossing a tennis ball from hand-to-hand. He didn’t consider himself a violent man but daydreamed about launching various projectiles in the direction of said problem child - who knew, it might make him play better. Stan was not cowed by anything it seemed, not even the displeasure of his leader. And a well-timed punchline could go a long way towards repairing interpersonal relations with this crowd.

“Brad, you got tape rollin?’” Tom asked.

“Always,” their assistant replied.

Tom turned on the talkback. “Look man, you get one more chance. Make it count. It’s one hit, Stanley, just one hit and it’s not that difficult. But pretend it’s my face if that’s what it takes to get it right.”

“I told you - there shouldn’t even be any drums on this song! It’s too delicate and emotional for me to come slammin’ in like a quarterback on Prom Night.”

The assemblage began snickering again.

“Goddamn it!” Tom mock-yelled. “I don’t care what you think, I just want you to play the fuckin’ hit like I want it to be played. We’re not debatin’ this, kid.”

“Please, Stanley,” Mike said. “Just play the damn thing so we can go home already.”

Stan sat down again, holding his arms out on either side and breathing deeply in-and-out. He positioned himself, adjusting his stool, making sure the snare was in tune, then nodded.

“Let’s go!”

Shelly cued up the playback. “Snare hit, print two, take fifteen, rolling.”

Tom and Stevie’s voices warbled into life. *Yeah, you’ll become his legacy. His quiet world of white and gold.*

Stan struck the snare and it was *perfect*. Just the right weight and force to carry the song into the final bridge and chorus. Tom wished he could make Stan understand that the drums were absolutely *crucial* to the emotion of this song. It was a ballad, but not a gentle one, not a pretty one. This song had some bruises, some distress hanging over it. This song was about surviving betrayal and witnessing things one should never want to know, the price of proximity to power and privilege.

Tom still wasn’t sure why he would write something like that for someone else when it so perfectly expressed his own experiences through the obscuring efforts of metaphor. Sometimes he didn’t know
what a song meant until it was finally finished, realized by the people who understood him best.

“Tommy? Earth to Major Tom,” he heard Mike say.

Tom gave Stan a thumbs-up and sighed loudly.

“Fuck I need a drink now. I’ll catch y’all on the flip side.”

He exited the control room and moments later Stan came through as well, apparently looking to chase Tom down. Jimmy picked up the control room phone and dialed Stevie’s house, negotiating with her assistant for an audience.

Mike grinned at Shelly. “That was kinda excitin’, huh?”

Shelly gave him a lopsided smirk. “I guess you could call it that, sure.”

“Aww, you don’t know! Noah used to come in with this big camera light and flash it in our faces when we messed up. He’d say, ‘Let go of your ego and step through the door!’ and we’re all thinkin’ What the fuck does that mean?”

“Sounds like being in a cult to me.”

Mike chuckled. “Yeah I guess it is. ‘Cept we don’t have to live together and eat brown rice. *Anymore*, that is.”

“Hey I don’t wanna know about that shit!” Shelly exclaimed. When Jimmy put a hand over the receiver and asked, “What the fuck?” they both laughed in response.

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“For today you are a man, my son!” Stan exclaimed, shaking Brad by his shoulders.

“I ain’t sayin’ I don’t trust you,” Tom told him. “But I am sayin’ that Iovine can’t just be leavin’ us in the care of assistants. No offense, man.”

Brad knew that to say anything other than *none taken* would be a terrible decision. So he did.

“Naw it’s fine,” Mike assured them all. “We know what we’re doin.’ And if Brad fucks up we’ll just cut his head off.”

Everyone laughed just a little too long at that joke for Brad’s liking.

“Well, uh...if you guys are ready then we can do some level checks, okay?”

They all stared at him intently without a reply.

“I mean, everything is set up and we did the prelim mic checks and…”

Silence. Five beats. Then they all began laughing loudly.

“Aww man, your face, it was too good not to let it keep goin!” Stan said, reaching out to shake him once again.

“Y’all should let this boy get to work now,” Bugs scolded. “And think about what to do to Iovine later. I say we put Crisco in his hat.”
“Now that is a brilliant strategy!” Benmont enthused.

“Hey!”

Everyone looked through the door to see Stan behind his kit.

“Why, look at this - I’m ready to go and you assholes are just standin’ there as usual with your thumbs up yer asses!”

“Where did that expression come from anyway,” Benmont asked as they walked into the live room. “I mean, of all the possible fingers to try and put up your ass -”

“Ugh, stop!” Mike protested. “You’re givin’ me the creeps!”

“Uh, just play something, okay?” Brad requested over the talkback once they were all positioned with instruments at the ready.

“You heard the man,” Tom said, and fell into a familiar blues riff which could have been any number of songs, but turned out to be “Mannish Boy.” In honor of their engineer he changed it to “Braddish Boy.” After that rendition they played “Gloria” but changed it to “Bradley” just to fit within the phrasing of the lyrics. Brad was enjoying it too much to stop them and with tape rolling, knew Tom was giving him something to cherish for the rest of his life.

“Can we please play something after 1965?” Stan asked.

“Listen here, youngster, I’ll have you know nothin’ good ever happened after that year,” Tom joked.

“I say we play something from 1924,” Benmont cracked, playing a few bars of Rhapsody in Blue.

“I don’t know nothin’ earlier than 1927,” Tom shot back, and played the refrain of “Are You Lonesome Tonight?”

“Welcome my friends to another edition of Fossil Hour with your host Old Man Petty and his Swingin’ Sweetheartbreakers,” Stan jibed in an ersatz radio announcer’s voice.

“Uh...guys? I think we’re ready now?”

“Are ya sure I ain’t too decrepit to make this here record?” Tom asked, doing his best impersonation of an 80-year-old. “Seems like Stanley thinks I’m ‘bout fall down any minute now.”

“Man, I got a fossil I’m ‘bout to brain you with,” Mike said, deadpan. Three beats and then he smiled wide.

“Oh you wish you did!” Stan retorted amid the laughter and Brad decided he would let them figure out when it was time to actually get to work because it was far more entertaining to sit back and let it happen.

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Yeah she was an American girl
raised on promises.
She couldn’t help thinkin’ that there was a little more to life somewhere else.
After all it was a great big world
with lots of places to run to.
And if she had to die tryin’
that one little promise she was gonna keep.

“That’s not about a girl,” Denny commented, sitting behind his desk as smoke writhed and coiled in the air between them.

“What?” Tom said, confused, wondering if the other was just fucking with him.

“It’s you, isn’t it? I think it describes you perfectly.”

“It ain’t done yet; I need another verse, I think.”

“Yes, you’ve got to finish the story - what happens to her?”

“I dunno, she’s just havin’ a moment, y’know? Where she doesn’t know what she’s doin.’”

“What made you think of it?”

Tom shifted in his chair on the other side of Denny’s desk, his trusty Gibson sliding on his lap.

“I had watched all these commercials - I couldn’t sleep so I turned on the TV and there were all these commercials about the Bicentennial, everythin’ Stars and Stripes. And it just kinda popped in my head. I had the window open and you can hear the cars on the freeway - the freeway is right there - and it made me think of the ocean. Like, the first time you had me come over, I remember standin’ on your deck lookin’ at the ocean and thinkin’ ‘bout how there’s parts of the world I don’t even know exist. That’s heavy, y’know?”

Denny nodded. “That’s the best type of inspiration, when one thing makes you think of something else entirely.”

“Bein’ American, it means a certain thing, but maybe not what people think it’s supposed to mean. I am who I am but I ain’t wavin’ a flag or nothin’. Is it weird for you sometimes, livin’ here?”

Denny grinned and took another toke before answering. “I love it here. I need sunshine. Besides, there’s probably more Englishmen in L.A. now than there are in London.”

“It’s an invasion!” Tom joked.

“More like a subtle incursion. But what makes it a song about a girl?”

“I dunno, it just is. I can see her in my head.”

“Who is she?”

“She’s just somebody who wants somethin’ better in life. That’s pretty American, I’d say.”

“Why past tense? What happens to her?”

“You already asked that! I dunno, man. She’s thinkin’ ‘bout the past, and it makes her sad, I know that much. And I just wanna tell her it’s gonna be okay.”

“Every character you create, there’s a piece of you in each of them. The emotions they feel, they come from you. Just remember that.”

Tom shook his head. “The girls on ‘Hometown Blues’ - I’m not any o’them.”
“No? *Do a little song, do a little dance, gonna make the best of her big chance.*” Denny smiled.

“That’s not you t’all, eh?”

Tom felt himself flush a bit even as he knew the other wasn’t mocking him, exactly.

“It’s different for girls,” he replied.

“Certainly. But you know them because you know yourself.”

“Man, I don’t even know what that means!” Tom gestured for the joint. “Give that here, lemme get behind some of them deep thoughts yer havin.’”

Denny laughed. “I don’t reckon it will help you write better songs, you already know how to do that.”

Tom smiled. It was one thing to get the guys behind him, all of them eager for someone to uncover the path and charge the hill. But for Denny to tell him *I believe in you*, however he might say it, meant the world, it was the world he had stepped into, another world away from the places he wrote about, as much relieved to leave them behind as desiring to portray them.

And he thought that’s what girls needed too. He thought about Adria, he thought about Kitty, he even thought about Jane, and how they each needed to be told that things could be better, they would be better, they just had to believe. Why shouldn’t he be the one to say so? It was just a song, sure, but as Denny reminded him on an almost daily basis, songs had power. And that was the best reason to create them.

Tom envisioned that some girl, somewhere, someday would hear this song and it would be exactly what she needed to hear at that very moment. He felt something within himself lift towards a feeling of joy. He smiled again.

Tom found himself completely enthralled by this piece of music which, in typical Mike Campbell fashion, was just another idea on a cassette which featured dozens of ideas. Its’ open chording sounded like what it must feel like to float through the air. He might never say it to his partner, but Mike sometimes had the ability to create a dream. It surprised him because Tom didn’t think of Mike as someone who possessed the same interior life as he did, the same widescreen landscape of imagination. But then again, that old cliche regarding still waters was applicable. When speaking of their personalities Denny had been fond of saying: “You are epigrammatic, dear boy, whereas Michael is merely laconic.” Tom had the feeling that Mike didn’t talk much not because he had nothing to say, but because the depth and weight of his thoughts might be beyond his abilities to express. But musically he knew exactly what to say and when. That was the language he knew best.

Tom recalled how people used to think there was something odd about Mike until he picked up a guitar and proceeded to truly speak. To watch their faces light up, watch the process of changing their minds, it amused him and also enforced his own belief that they were destined to be partners. Tom needed Mike to help him find his way to these undiscovered dreams, while Mike needed Tom to translate his deceptively simple facade into what it actually was, a very deep and nuanced language all his own.

He felt like picking up the phone, asking “Where the hell did this come from?” This beautiful dream which was unfolding in his mind as another story about love. About a girl, one of those girls passing through his thoughts always, the ones he saw in the front row, on the street, on TV and in the movies. How everything could be *better* when a girl walked in the room, into your life.
Here comes my girl, he sang on top of the repeating phrase.

Now that was a dream for certain.

“What would I do without you?” he asked the tape machine. “Wait, don’t answer that.”

“That crying thing there,” Jimmy said, pointing at Mike, “man, that is fuckin’ brilliant, it just grabs you so hard.”

“It gets under your skin, right?” Tom said. “In a good way, I mean.”

“Is that what it sounds like?” Mike asked. “I just like the way the note bends.”

“Yeah man, it’s like a voice,” Benmont commented. “Almost like another voice singing.”

“This is gonna be a hit, I’m tellin’ you, it’s just so...wow!”

The three of them eyed their producer with a certain insular amusement. They enjoyed the effect of their combined scrutiny, when he didn’t know how to process their secret communication.

“What?! You’re tellin’ me you don’t think it’s hot?”

“I possess a modicum of cautious optimism regarding this song’s success,” Benmont quipped, and his bandmates made scoffing sounds and rolled their eyes.

“Man you sound like you’re runnin’ for office or some bullshit,” Tom teased.

“Read a goddamn book some time,” Benmont shot back, but he was smiling.

“Okay okay, so how are we gonna work this out?”

“I want it to be moody, that’s all I know,” Tom replied.

“Yeah that’s this album alright,” Jimmy groused, “moody as hell.”

They spent the Fourth of July in Vancouver, where there were no fireworks to mark the occasion. After their set they did a runner and were now traversing the deep green miles of Interstate 5 on their way back to the homeland.

“Hell I figured somebody might be feelin’ patriotic,” Tom chided. “Remember when we tracked ‘American Girl’ and Max said to come see ‘cause it looked like a war zone on Hollywood Boulevard?”

“It was fuckin’ broilin’ that night, I remember that,” Stan said, “And the AC was broken. Again.”

Bugs came to the rescue, passing out numerous packets of sparklers to his charges. They all marveled at his logistical talents yet again.

“Dang, I feel like I’m 12,” Ron joked, waving one around, a shower of golden sparks falling onto the carpet.

“Wish we coulda had a cookout,” Tom said wistfully, “it’s just not the same without potato salad.”
“Well we got plenty weenies here,” Stan cracked.

“Shut up, Stanley!” his bandmates rejoined.

“Hey guys,” their driver yelled back, “they’re playin’ you up here too!” He turned up the radio and Tom’s voice proclaiming she’s a woman in loooove filled the bus.

“And I gotta pee,” Stan sang over the punchline. They all snickered and settled in for the night’s ride.

With that seeming preternatural ability she possessed to be wherever they happened to be on the road, Mike was not necessarily surprised to see Stevie in the lobby of their New York hotel. It was more like well of course she’s here. He was in a bad mood because Tom had vetoed his plans to have Marcie fly out for the weekend.

“She’s not comin’ on the bus, man, and you know that. We gotta gig on Saturday and another on Monday.”

He was first down, as usual, waiting on their ride to Rockefeller Center and the promotional obligations therein, disgusted with everything. And then their opportunistic shadow was there in his face, a mass of brown-blond curls and joyous smile which might melt the heart of a lesser man, but he was just annoyed. And tired. He was getting that condition the band called “road glaze” where all the days ran together and all the nights were lonely except for the two hours of adoration they might receive.

“Michael, oh my god, did you see the charts?! We’re number two, I can’t believe it!”

“Yeah I saw. It killed our single dead!”

Her expression changed in an instant, from elation to anguish, like she was about to cry. And for just a moment he thought yeah now you know what the price of that little bargain was.

Immediately on the heels of the thought he chided himself for being an asshole.

“Oh my god, I didn’t even think about -”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t really mean to say it like that. It’s great, we’ve been hearin’ it all over the place.”

“Oh I bet he’s mad. Is he mad?”

Mike shrugged. “I dunno, probably not.” No man, don’t lie to her, that’s worse. He sighed. “Uh, I dunno, I mean, he wouldn’t blame you for it, anyway.”

“Oh my god.”

Mike patted her shoulder, spotting Benmont and Stan coming out of the elevator. “It’s alright, it’s great. Look, we gotta go do this thing; see you later, okay?”

Stevie nodded, but she looked miserable.

“What is she doin’ here?” Stan muttered as they exited the lobby and climbed into the limousine awaiting them at the curb.

“She’s all happy ‘bout her song chartin’ so high.”
“Oh fuck,” Benmont groaned, covering his face. “I forgot all about that for a minute.”

“And here we are, going on TV to play a song no one in radio will even fuckin’ touch right now! That’s, like, the worst humiliation. And that’s not her song, man, that’s our goddamn song!”

“Not anymore it ain’t,” Mike declared, looking out the window. Normally the city intrigued him every time they visited but at the moment he wished he was home where he didn’t have to worry about whether their producer who they thought they could trust had sabotaged their continued success and what was worse - they had agreed to it.

“At least we know Iovine’s getting an earful,” Benmont said.

Stan laughed. “Yeah he’s gonna ream that asshole but good.”

Behind his sunglasses Mike closed his eyes and tried not to feel anything. It was easier that way.
the empty rattle of idols, the hollow vibrations of apotheosis

I: Some fucker

Some fucker always shouts Free Bird
Jack will slay them with a word (parenthetical).
In other tales Jack is heroic and kind
But I prefer him at his worst.
-Laird Barron, “(8)”

Tours were always best undertaken in Summer...everyone was in a better mood.

The band was killing time at a bar down in the Glitter Gulch of yore, not too far from the clamorous clang and neon riot of the city’s newer sinful center. This was a place where they could just sit quietly, have a few beers and talk to regular people.

As if anyone is really normal, Benmont mused, smirking.

None of the girls who had followed them from the hotel were sitting with him, he thought he must be giving off a do not touch vibe. He lit a cigarette and watched the smoke swirl in the eddies of the air conditioning. The jukebox was silent but the TV over the bar displayed Phil Donahue pacing amongst his studio audience and looking concerned about something.

To him this summer was all about hearing the Purdie Shuffle of “Babylon Sisters” following him around like a younger sibling, calling his name, relaying a warning toward risk and excess. For he knew however terse the expressed message was, it lay atop a whole host of concerns and nuance. This band, his band, they were certainly their own traveling roadshow version of the harlots’ revival, the five-headed rough beast (well, there could be seven, he supposed, but which two would be included?) slouching its’ way towards the final revelry.

The guys all professed to despise Steely Dan, but Benmont appreciated that beneath the carefully-wrought artifice, the so-perfect-it-becomes-imperfect, of their songs there was a dark sticky morass of cynicism and satire. And that was his kind of language.

Yet nothing was truly weird or excessive in their exploits, none of them had ventured into esoteric studies or secretive substances or kinky sex or -

Scratch that. Another smirk behind his vodka tonic. It was summer, he should be drinking beer, but it was also Vegas, which called for something a little more formal as regards libation and lubricant.

Kink...hmm.

He didn’t know how to classify his own proclivities at this point. Perhaps obsessive circling in the water, waiting for fresh blood. Stan seemed committed of late to having two or three girls at a time.

“So you fuck all of them?” Ron asked him once during the prior year’s tour.

“I don’t have to, and that’s the point!” Stan grinned, and nobody understood what he meant. But this was not unusual.
There was a definite shift, a slide, though nothing particularly shocking, when one considered what they were.

But who they were...that was different. That was the difference. They were different, now.

He didn’t think he knew that guy who appeared in reflective surfaces. Or at least not very well. But that guy showed up every night like some kind of monster directly from the Id. A convenient excuse for sly wicked behavior.

Stan and Ron were playing pool, but just barely. There were a few appreciative onlookers but none so much that the game was abandoned in favor of socializing. Mike was on his second beer while a blonde chatted away next to him and he kept sneaking glances at her. Strangers tended to fill the conversational void around Mike, made nervous by his silence.

Benmont wondered if Mike ever talked to any of them - the continual stream of blondes who appeared in every town and attempted to tease forth a response from him. He could see Mike beginning to warp like vinyl in the sun from the expectations of everyone, even the ones who understood that he was not merely taciturn, but inhabited some distant realm beyond where he didn’t have to be anything to anyone. Out in the wider world he went silent to most, but still communicative to his band brethren as rendered by his expressions. An entire conversation could be carried out in the widening of eyes, the raising of eyebrows, smirks and pouts and frowns. A sigh, a snicker.

Although Ron was technically the oldest, Mike was the older brother, the one who acted like he had been entrusted with the burden of watching out for them. It was a role he knew, and so there was a hardness to his personality sometimes - as if to say he might be shy but he wasn’t dumb.

The bar used to house some other kind of business for it had a windowed front, though the glass was polarized to prevent the intrusive glances of passersby. Outside the mid-afternoon glare of the high desert cooked the street, a light which was unforgiving and yet also full of nuance as it enveloped the landscape, illuminated the shuffle of citizens, tourists and the passage of detritus of all types. There were those who considered Old Vegas the seedier side of Sin City, but Benmont appreciated the worn glamour slipping from its’ desperate grip. He felt the sense of ambition and greed which had created this mirage from nothing at all and marveled at the effort, the sense of absolute righteousness some people possessed. Stan had insisted upon going inside the Moulin Rouge, as if he could breathe in the actual history of the entertainer he adored.

“Now this was the place where Sammy could feel like a king, back in the day.”

The others looked around and saw only the aging tawdry come-on of it all. None of them, save their drummer, were particularly enamored of such a locale. What they had learned from the experience of touring was that there might be any number of places within the world, but they would be just as apt to visit a place they didn’t like as one they did.

It was getting rough out here, and all of them were too stubborn to cease the torture.

Benmont thought of that other guy, holed up in his hotel room, probably asleep, dreaming of something which might spur him on towards further action...while they drank the afternoon away and awaited the justification of their current labors.

Suddenly he didn’t know what he wanted, exactly, but he knew it wasn’t here. It was that bad point in the tour where he wanted to kill everybody. He wouldn’t, but the impulse raged red in his brain. Emerging from his previous stupor he felt as though he had washed up on some anonymous shore and was expected to make his way back into the world, no memory of what came before.
That it’s cheap but it’s not free
That I’m not what I used to be

He looked over at Mike again, who caught his gaze and widened his eyes. Benmont thought perhaps it meant save me, please but he shrugged in response. Hey, you handle it, buddy. Mike rolled his eyes and drained his beer. A definite fuck you, then.

Yeah, fuck me. Won’t somebody put me out of my misery?

The clack of balls, Stan’s taunting of Ron’s distracted performance. Ron was always distracted these days. He just wasn’t here anymore. Nobody wanted to talk about it, but they were all thinking about what it meant, what it would mean in the months to come.

But goddamn it, this was his band. They were a bunch of assholes - himself included - but the moment he began to consider what it would be like in some other band a voice within shouted, “Fuck that!” Yeah, fuck that - it was unthinkable. Another drag, another exhale. The road was crushing, it wasn’t a place for sensitive souls. Yet another strike against the one who was fading before their eyes. Ron didn’t seem willing to just tough it out and self-medicate - or at least not at the same level the rest of them were doing. The way he anesthetized himself with various substances against his depression which hung about him like a shroud, and if the others could see it, they weren’t acknowledging it. The way Stan mitigated his mood swings and insecurities with the endless pursuit of pussy, as if to seek reassurance for merely existing. The way Mike was obviously drinking way too much because he didn’t know how else to deal with having to be someone he didn’t want to be, as a result of waking within a dream he did desire. Too ambivalent to enjoy success, yet too determined to succeed to just give up.

All for the roar of approval...nothing else they had ever done or could ever do would match that rush. Whether it was 15 or 15,000, it was potent and it was pure.

The way Tom had removed himself to inhabit whatever bubble allowed him to survive, allowed him to endure the demands and the responsibilities and all of the bullshit they didn’t have to suffer. Protecting himself as need be, because love was sometimes too much to contemplate. That weird love of people who didn’t even know you but fervently believed they did.

Benmont sighed smoke and smirked again. What a crock of shit, you selfish spoiled lazy bastard you.

A van pulled up outside and Richard emerged, adjusting his trademark hat against the punishing rays. He entered without calling attention to himself, walking up to the bar.

“Did anybody eat yet?” he asked quietly of his charges. Stan raised a hand but everyone else shuddered at the thought. Heat and hangovers did not aid the road warrior’s malaise. Richard shook his head, bemused.

“You guys. Okay, let’s hit up a place on the way to the gig - I know you don’t want the catering.”

“Man, I wish we could get some decent barbeque in this town!” Stan said, setting his pool cue back in the rack.

“Can I have these pretzels?” Mike asked the bartender, picking a basket up off the bar. “Like, all of them?” He waved a five-dollar bill and the other shrugged and claimed it.

As the band walked out, Richard placed himself between them and anyone who sought to follow.

“The boys have got to go, sorry, hope to see you at the show!”
“What a nice guy you are,” Benmont teased as they entered the van, jostling each other for space within the vehicle. The heat made him feel as though gravity itself had been increased somehow.

“I’m a prince,” Richard declared cheerfully. “Uh, I guess go to Farm Basket, right?” he remarked to their driver.

“Who’s up for a Great Gobbler?!” the other asked, putting the van in gear.

“What the fuck is that?!” Benmont shot back.

“Obviously it’s you with your purty mouth,” Stan teased.

“Whatever it is, I don’t think I want it,” Mike said, looking queasy.

“Pay no attention to the loudmouths in the back,” Richard advised, and Mike began throwing pretzels at him.

The driver turned on the radio just in time to hear a gorgeous Greek chorus enthuse Babylon Sisters, shake it! and all his bandmates groaned.

“Get that pretentious bullshit outta my ears!” Stan demanded.

“No, that would be the sound of your own voice, Stanley,” Benmont replied.

“Eat shit, College Boy!”

“Actually that sounds delicious right now,” Benmont retorted and everyone cracked up.

Now this is my band, he thought.

II: collisions

A friend’s beach house became available during their rehearsal period, so they decided to vacate the crappy apartments they had been inhabiting and act like they were at least deserving of better accommodations. Every afternoon once they had reacquainted themselves with consciousness they would sit out on the back porch and appreciate the view and the weather and their shared determined optimism.

“Campbell I know we’re back home and all, but you ain’t doing nobody no favors by lettin’ them birdlegs poke out!” Tom gibed as Mike wandered out in probably the same cutoffs he’d been wearing on the night they met.

“It’s too hot for pants!”

“Hell it’s too hot for everything, but you don’t see me going around half-naked!” Benmont retorted.

“And thank gawd for that!” Stan concluded, turning up his accent.

“What time we playin,’ again?” Ron asked.
"It's gonna be dark, I know that much," Tom said, opening a bottle of Coke.

"Where's Reggie, man?" Benmont asked.

Everyone else shrugged. Benmont looked at his watch. "I think we got up too early."

Scattered laughter. The breeze off the ocean reached them, threading itself through the thickness of the air, carrying a salty tang and the rumor of rain.

"I got an idea for somethin'," Tom said, gesturing for them to come inside.

"Yeah I got an idea to stay in this damn hammock," Stan shot back.

"C'mon, we're gonna play this tonight."

"Tonight? Somethin' we've never rehearsed? Somethin' you haven't even finished, maybe?"

"Are you tryin' to tell me you can't handle it?"

"I can handle anythin'. But are you gonna do this to us every day? Write a song in five minutes?"

"Sometimes that's all you need," Mike said.

"Hell, if you can even last five minutes I'd be surprised, Campbell." Mike smirked at Stan and shot him the bird.

"Well he must have done something right at least once," Benmont teased.

"Blair you gotta fix this here TV," Tom said, pulling the other from his chair. "Do that first then I'll play y'all the song."

"Tommy I told ya, I think it needs a new tube. I don't think I can hotwire it like the one at Shelter."

Ron, Mike and Benmont went inside, and Tom stared at Stan, who now lay in the hammock with his eyes closed, one leg hanging down, swinging his foot. Tom imagined Stan knew he was being stared at, and he kept the pose as a couple minutes passed. From within the house sounds of music and static could be heard.

"You givin' me a hard time 'cause of last night?"

Stan opened his eyes. "Like you weren't givin' me a hard time? Like you didn't know exactly what you were doin'?"

Tom blinked, looking down at his bare feet, an unusual feeling of heat upon his skin but also beneath it.

"It was only 'cause you -"

"Look, I said 'let's pretend it didn't happen,' and you said 'yeah' and so now what're you doin' to me?"

"To you?"

"Yeah man." Stan got out of the hammock and stood in front of Tom, looking down at him. "You know what you were doin' and it's not fair to blame it all on me. Some of it, sure, but not all of it."
They stared at one another in a show of attempted dominance and Tom broke up.

“Just some, huh? Which part?”

Stan laughed. “That part where I said I was gonna give Campbell an education and maybe you might learn somethin’ too.”

“You and your damn mouth.”

Stan shrugged. “I didn’t tell anybody ‘bout what you heard that night in Tulsa.”

“And if you do -”

“I won’t, don’t worry. I can tell you won’t let this go, so fine. But you can’t hold it over my head when I said I would.”

“Why? Why did you do it?”

“What does it matter? It’s done. I don’t even think that’s what you’re mad about.”

“I told you I wasn’t mad, but it’s not -”

Stan held out his hand. “Tommy just stop, alright? If you’ve gotta keep tellin’ yourself all those excuses then leave me out of it.”

Tom stopped himself from shouting by taking a long noisy breath. In the intervening days he had thought about it, how he was surprised that he didn’t try to punch the other, didn’t even shove him, just stepped back.

But not too quick.

Stan could be stubborn and green, but he wasn’t stupid. He knew all of this had nothing to do with what happened.

You weren’t mad, and you’re not mad now.

“We can’t do this.”

Stan held out his hands, a gesture of what are you talking about? “We’re not doin’ anything, we’re not even talkin’ ‘bout anything, are we?”

Their eyes met again and Tom wasn’t sure what they were trying to say to one another, but maybe it didn’t matter.

“I don’t guess we are.”

Stan put a hand on his shoulder and squeezed. “But when we do, well, then you’re gonna hear somethin.’” He winked and walked past him into the house.

Tom sighed and ran a hand through his hair. What was happening? It was all tumbling together, the hunger for success and experience and just to finally get out of his own head and into the world. And something else too.

That tension between them, a bright thin wire connecting them, tugging at each of them, a pull he could feel at nearly every moment. Hours earlier he had wandered through the house, everyone else unconscious and he had stared for longer than he thought he should have at that tangle of limbs, a
face pleasing in repose and it replayed in his mind: their collision. He stared hard enough that he thought the other might wake, blink slow and then smile.

*Can’t sleep? Were you dreamin’ of me, Tommy?*

He shook his head at how ridiculous the situation had become but he couldn’t stop it.

*Can’t stop it? Or won’t stop it?*

“Hey man you gonna come in here and play that song you supposedly wrote?” Stan taunted.

“Hell, I wrote another one just standin’ here, so you gonna get two!”

His bandmates mock-groaned and he let go of the thought, for now.
I can’t give you what you want if you don’t know what it is

-107-

“It’s not the right blend,” Denny opined. He wasn’t entirely visible in the eternal twilight of the control room, obscured by smoke and dim lighting. “Not dramatic enough.”

Tom stood in the vocal booth, frowning. “Well that’s why I’m overdubbing.”

“Why am I not hearing Stan’s vocal?”

“There’s too much snare in his vocal mic,” Noah answered.

“Well he needs to be there, it’s got to be big.”

“I was thinking we could get Phil -” Max began.

“No, don’t disrupt the balance.”

They had to call him back in, and in the meantime Tom continued to work on other ideas, specifically the one he thought they were meant to sing.

“I dunno how good I’m gonna blow,” Stan informed them once he arrived. “I’ve been up all night.”

“That’s good, we need a bit of raggedness,” Denny said.

“I want a Rascals sound, you know?” Tom told him once they were back in the booth. “Soulful, kinda loud, but not too smooth. Don’t try to go up or down, just stay with me.”

“Yeah man - you said that when we tracked it, I know.”

They gave it a run-through, but Tom had to stop just before the chorus, having gone off-key. Stan cracked up and placed a hand on Tom’s shoulder, a tinge of wickedness in his smile.

“I know, it’s intimidating bein’ around me.”

“Fuck off.” Tom said it like he would say anything else, with a grin.

And when they hit it, just as when they’d recorded the song itself, he felt the rightness of the thing, the way their voices seemed to seek a way to entwine. There was a passion in their delivery, even beyond the intensity which the song was meant to convey. Something so intimate about harmonizing with another person. Tom felt that flutter again, something that only the music could give him when it showed him what happiness truly meant.

“Now that is a fucking chorus, gentlemen,” Denny said once they’d made it through a take and then he left them, having performed his most important function in this enterprise.

“We can’t mix it till Campbell gets here - where is he, anyway?”

“He called, said the Ghia Monster was bein’ a bitch again,” Max answered.

“He’s still drivin’ that tempermental piece o’shit?” Stan exclaimed.

“The boy loves that car, leave him be,” Tom said. “Why didn’t somebody go pick him up?”
“I don’t drive that well in general, but especially in daylight,” Max said, his eyes closed.

Stan started laughing and Tom realized how comical it was to expect that either of their studio cohorts should have gotten behind the wheel.

“Did he say we should go get him?”

“I’d go but I don’t think I got the gas to get out there,” Stan said. “Runnin’ on fumes as it is.”

“I don’t remember what he said, entirely. I mean, that was hours ago.”

“Well shit, I guess we’ll wait a little longer, then. Hey Stanley, c’mere and listen to this.”

Tom moved into the live room and picked up his guitar. Stan sat down on one of the equipment cases. Tom played him the song, explaining that the lyrics weren’t quite finished but the melody was worked out.

“I was thinkin’ ‘bout givin’ it to Dwight and Phil, but I like it too much to do that. Do you think we can do it?”

“Sing like them? Not quite, but why would we?”

“Just ‘cause it’s that style, I guess.”

“You don’t wanna be like them, do you?”

“Naw, but there’s somethin’ really cool ‘bout their harmonies. I want somethin’ like that.”

“I can sing with you, you know that. I can get right in there. But can I sing real high? Not unless I put my nuts in a vise, and I ain’t doin’ that!”

“Where’s your team spirit, Stanley?”

In mere seconds Tom was cracking up and Stan let out with a cackle of his own.

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“Have you ever been in love? Really in love?”

Tom couldn’t really see Stan’s face in the faint light from the control room where Noah and Max worked their late-night mixing wizardry, and considered that was purposeful. He took a hit on the joint they were sharing and passed it back. From where they sat on the far side of the live room it felt like what he imagined it was like in outer space, floating in limitless darkness with the faintest bit of background noise.

“Have you?”

He couldn’t see the smirk, but he could hear it.

“I asked you first, man.”

“Yeah, sure I have. I’m guessin’ you don’t think you have.”

“Like, is there somebody I thought I couldn’t live without? Nah.”

“Well you’re young yet.”
“Yeah but, you’ve already been married for years. So it’s not about that, is it?”

“If you already knew the answer then why did you ask?”

“It’s ‘cause you tell these stories about love - and it always seems like it’s a complicated thing.”

“It is, and it ain’t.”

Stan laughed. Tom could hear him take another hit. After a few moments he exhaled then laughed again.

“Wow...that’s heavy.”

“Fuck off, kid. Look, I can’t explain it any better than that. You just know what it is when you know it.”

“If you know what it is, then why can’t you tell me?”

Tom took a moment to consider the question. This weed was slowly chipping away the edges of his tendency to keep his own life under wraps. He felt like they were melting into the darkness, if not each other. And that feeling was not entirely unfamiliar.

“There are things even I can’t put into words.”

He didn’t sense Stan shift and turn toward him, but then he felt breath against his face, and that weight leaning into him. That form he had observed with an appreciation for its’ power and grace.

“Like what?” It was just the barest whisper, he wasn’t sure if he’d actually heard it.

“I can’t -”

“Yeah you can. You don’t want to. But let me say this.”

Tom felt Stan lean his head against his. He shivered at the contact, he flashed on a moment which had been replaying in the back of his mind for a while. A party they’d all ended up at after a session - just to hang out, drinking and bullshitting and listening to the music of other people, music they all loved and grinned at each other as it played.

“We’re gonna do that too.

Tom could imagine it so clearly - in some distant bright future people would be doing this very thing: seated around a stereo, driving in their cars, and his voice would be heard, their unique noise, offering solace and joy and even more profound experiences. Rock n’roll could save your soul, he knew it to be true.

At some point, in the midst of a discussion which had moved through the shared obsessions of the Beatles and the Stones and then somehow onto Todd Rundgren, Tom looked across the room where Stan was flirting with a couple girls, making comments which caused them to laugh and blush and they had locked gazes - in that very moment they could see into one another far deeper than he had expected.

What was it about one particular moment in time which caused such a epiphany?

_Yeah I’m trouble. But I’m also exactly what you need._

But Tom also knew it all came from that one night, in which he was hearing things he was almost
certain were being said to him, rather than the person one would have assumed they were meant for. And since that time he waited to hear it again, not knowing if he wanted to attempt to deny the emotions again. It was like drowning, almost, warring impulses of struggle and surrender.

Heat rose within him and he closed his eyes, awaiting revelation, wanting to remain in the dark forever.

-109-

“Yeah I know you’re mad, so what? I can’t keep apologizing for somethin’ that wasn’t even intentional.”

“So what?! You’re basically saying you don’t give a fuck about my feelings. That I’m just some guy who you wanna use sometimes, and sometimes you don’t. You know what? Y’all talk some shit all the time ‘bout how I treat girls, but I wouldn’t treat a casual fuck the way you treat me!”

Tom gaped at Stan. “Man, that’s low.”

“Tell me the truth then, goddamn it! If you’re thinkin’ fuck Stanley then I just wanna know that’s how it is.”

“That’s not how it is. We know we can’t do this without you. And we don’t want to.”

“So I’m gonna have to play songs I wasn’t even on?!”

“You’re not the only one, kid - get over yourself already.”

“How can I get over this?! You deliberately excluded me and you didn’t even have the balls to tell me. Talk about low, Tommy, that’s pretty much sewer-level behavior right there.”

“I told you, it wasn’t like that!”

“And I’m actually supposed to believe that Campbell - the guy who hasn’t been talkin’ to me for, like, a year now - just happened to have Phil at his house at the exact same time that you wanted to come over to record a song? Really?!”

“Michael wouldn’t let a grudge interfere like that. I wouldn’t let him.”

“Uh-huh. And someday I’m gonna walk on the moon.”

Tom couldn’t help but smirk. “Well you might, sure, though I can’t see a stringbean like you bein’ able to fit into a space capsule.”

Stan turned around and walked back to the couch where Tom was seated. He crouched down in front of him. “I don’t accept your apology.”

“I didn’t apologize! Stop being such a goddamn diva already.”

Stan stood up. “Why did you come here? Why didn’t you just have Tony call me?”

“Because I knew you were gonna be difficult.”

“And?”

Tom reached up and pulled at Stan’s shirt and Stan allowed himself to fall onto the couch.
“I need you, you know I do. We do this every fuckin’ time, man.”

“I don’t see you refusin’ to keep on doin’ it.”

“You neither.”

Stan sighed. He put his forehead against Tom’s shoulder. They sat there in silence for a few moments, Tom wishing he had a cigarette.

“You really hurt me,” Stan said, and his voice was low but it cracked just the slightest. He sat up again, his eyes alight with resentment. “Look, if you had said somethin’ like, ‘Mikey just can’t deal with you right now but we’ll find a way ‘round it,’ I would have totally understood.”

“Naw you wouldn’t - you woulde said ‘Fuck that!’ and gone off all pissy.”

“I honestly thought you were gonna fire me again. We all thought that.”

“Y’all are some paranoid assholes, then. It was a solo project, so that means I do whatever the fuck I want.”

“Don’t even try to pretend that’s not what you do all the time!”

It was then that Tom enacted another collision - anything to stop the spiral of Stan’s accusatory reasoning. There was anger within each of them, but also pain. It was the last line of defense, a way to beg which didn’t feel so much like begging as it did acknowledging a particular ambivalence for which there was no particular solution.

This was more intense than the other times had been. The divide wider, and thus took longer to cross.

A particular silence followed such occurrences. Tom smoked and stared out the window towards the ocean. He watched clouds and seagulls glide across the sky. Stan fixed sandwiches. The phone rang.

“Hello...hey girl, what’s up? Yeah, he’s here.”

He held out the receiver. “Mary says you’ve gotta come back to the office for your press calls.”

Tom gestured for the phone. “Hey darlin,’ can I have the list? Yeah, just read it to me. I’ll do it from here ‘cause I ain’t drivin’ nowhere this time of day. Hang on, lemme get somethin’ to write with.”

Stan handed him a pen and a flyer for a tanning salon, rolling his eyes.

Tom spent the rest of the afternoon on the phone with various journalists, describing the process of his recent projects and how he was looking forward to touring with the Heartbreakers again. He watched, amused, as Stan cleaned out his refrigerator and sorted through his laundry.

“How much longer you gonna hang around and bullshit all these people, huh? I got things to do.”

“Oh yeah? Like, you got a thing to do that’s more important than this?”

“You mean like all those things that were too important to call me for?”

They stared at each other, each of them smirking.

“I’m here now. That’s the best I can do.”
“I don’t think I’ve seen the best you can do. So are you gonna show me?”

“I don’t think you were payin’ attention earlier.”

“That was just to shut me up. You do whatever the fuck you want, right? So just do it then.”

The phone rang again, some time later. But it went unanswered.
meanwhile in Oblivion

They were two superior eels
at the bottom of the tank and they recognized each other like italics.
— Anne Carson, Autobiography of Red

-110-

It was boring to take the freeway out to the Valley - Ventura Boulevard featured all kinds of scenery
to appreciate as one embarked upon a nighttime journey to that so-called Bedroom of the Stars.

And it gave him time to think about things...especially those things he didn't want to be thinking
about, but knew it was necessary.

Stan felt like a thief sometimes, coming in through the back gate and the side door. He would check
in with the guard, a cheerful kind of guy who never seemed to be bored or irritated at residing all
night long in the tiny shack at the edge of Tom’s property. They would tell each other jokes and Stan
would get the rundown as to that evening's visitors. Some nights he was ready to turn around when
the hangers-on were disclosed. But he was trying to be good even as the attitude chafed, he of
unreserved bluntness and sardonic snap judgments.

He recalled a mildly decadent night with Ben at the Rainbow, they happened to be sitting at the bar
next to Tom Hamilton, who told them about his band's experience recording at an abandoned
convent.

"It was haunted," he whispered with drunken gravitas. "Swear to God."

"Weren't you guys, like, totally fucked-up at the time?" Stan asked, and Benmont had tried not to
laugh.

"Just the Toxic Twins," Tom replied. "Man, we've got hours of stuff of the three of us jamming. Not
that anyone will ever hear most of it, but things were weird, for sure. Like, Steven started bringing a
gun into the chapel."

"Chapel?" Ben responded with a wry grin.

"Yeah that's where we recorded, it had great acoustics. The ghosts were in other parts of the
nunnery."

Stan shrugged. "Yeah, I can think of reasons to bring a gun to a session."

"Dude, you would never."

"No, I wouldn't. But I can understand why, is what I mean."

"It was just...a bad vibe. But with the ghosts it was kinda, like, they would make you feel like they
were watching, all the time."

There was something haunted about this enterprise too. Stan entered the house and went down the
stairs to the studio, hit with a cloud of familiar smells: fresh-brewed coffee and cigarette smoke and
dog fur and stale air and a metallic odor whose origins could be many things.

"Remember when we used to record in the daytime?" he asked those assembled.
Tom smirked, feet up on the console, cigarette in hand.

"I'm sorry that we're cutting into your valuable conquest time, Stanley."

Stan chuckled. "Now that's just like summer TV, man - strictly reruns."

It didn't earn him a laugh so much as a begrudging grunt of acknowledgment. Stan dropped down on the couch next to Howie and scratched the heads of various dogs who came to give him an investigatory sniff.

"Adria came home from school and said, 'Dad, are you a troublemaker? Some guy on the radio called you a troublemaker.' and I said, 'What did your mom say?' and she said, 'Mommy just laughed.'"

"I hope you told her the truth," Stan said, offering a smirk of his own.

"I told her, 'I never look to start no trouble but when you fight for what's right that's what they'll call you.'"

Mike gave him a skeptical look. "I have seen you start some trouble when maybe you didn't need to."

Benmont and Stan and Bugs all chimed in with an "Uh-huh." Howie remained silent possibly because he hadn't witnessed such a thing, possibly because he believed it wasn't his place to participate in such a discussion.

"I am not a cantankerous person," Tom insisted. "I'm just stubborn."

"Oh is that what you're callin' it today?" Stan replied, and everyone but Tom laughed.

"Wait a minute," Benmont interjected, pausing to add some brandy to his coffee, "I thought they meant the same thing."

"Naw," Mike conceded. "Somebody's an ornery old cuss, that's cantankerous. If you're stubborn you might not be fightin', just not going along with whatever it is that's going on."

"What?!" Benmont shot back. "Campbell are you drunk again?!"

"Fuck you, I've had two fuckin' beers tonight!" Mike replied, mock-outraged.

"Hell it's only 10pm, that's way too early for anybody to be drunk yet," Tom opined.

"Speakin' of time, what are we doin?" Stan inquired.

"Damn, you mean we gotta play now?" Tom teased. "Don, you got everythin' ready to go then?"

"Yeah man," their engineer replied, "I've been ready."

"Shit, let's go," Howie said, instantly on his feet and moving into the live room.

"You ever get the feelin' that we're just not cool enough for Howie?" Tom asked.

"Hell, who is?" Benmont muttered. "That's just a fact."

"I mean, why hang out with us when he could be cruisin' with the Hell's Angels or whoever the fuck those guys are, right?" Stan cracked, "Havin' a goddamn larcenous adventure."
"Hmm, now there's an interesting title," Tom said.

Stan hung back, filling the doorway and looking down at Tom. "I gotta title for you, man - 'Repressed and Obsessed.'"

A long stare, and Stan could see that blue blaze which told him their eternal conflict was never far from Tom's thoughts.

"How about ‘Shut Your Goddamn Mouth Already?’"

"That will never get played on the radio," Benmont called out.

-111-

He had told everyone to stay away for the past week as he stared at numerous sheets of paper bearing proposed running orders, Jimmy’s edict in his head - one album, T.P., double albums are a tough thing to pull off even when you do have enough great songs - and he still wasn’t in his right mind to do this, but it had to be done.

He must have written twenty different sequences of songs, starting over each time on a new sheet of paper. After a while he reached a conclusion he didn’t want to.

He thought of the look on Mike’s face whenever he handed back cassettes of demos with a shrug. “Yeah I couldn’t figure out any of these.”

Mike had a practiced blankness but Tom could sense that his eyes were alight with something he wouldn’t acknowledge aloud. Some version of disappointment, though he wasn’t sure who was meant to be receiving it.

But this song, he was worried Mike might push back, ask where he put his sense because they had already decided the potential had been recognized and fulfilled. They had worked for weeks on that song.

And that was precisely the problem - Tom could hear the effort, the strain, the hours and the fights. It was a great song. But great was not good enough right now.

“You mighta lost your mind for sure.”

They sat in near-darkness, only the glow from various pieces of equipment and Don’s collection of lava lamps allowed them to see each other, though not clearly. They were each shadows within shadows in this underground lair.

“You’re makin’ the mistake of gettin’ too attached to any one song.”

“Oh that’s bullshit, c’mon - we know when a good song is a good song.”

“We? I seem to recall you were all too eager to tell me that ‘Don’t Come Around Here’ was a terrible song.”

“I never said that. What I said was I played it for people and nobody thought it was our kind of song.”
“Meaning: what the fuck do you think you’re doin,’ man?”

Mike sighed loudly. “Do I think we’ve fucked this up? Yeah, but you expected me to say that.”

“Well at least you took on your part of it all.”

“You’re blaming me ‘cause you knew I was gonna be mad? Why are you mad at me for actin’ like you knew I would?”

“I’m mad at you because I expect you to be able to see what I’m tryin’ to do here.”

“I think you don’t even know what you’re tryin’ to do. And I think maybe you should ask me.”

“I know what I want!” Tom snapped. “Even if I don’t know how to find it right now.”

Mike leaned forward, his face lit by a greenish glow, his expression set in lines of fatigue, frustration, and anger.

“We’re all off the rails here,” he said quietly. “And the least you could do is let me help you figure it out. You call Jimmy and now he’s gonna make the decisions?”

“You don’t trust him now?”

“I trust that he’s gonna do what he thinks is right for us, but why can’t we do that?”

“I’m cuttin’ ‘Walkin’ from the runnin’ order.”

“Why?! You already cut ‘Trailer’ too, what is gonna be left of the story if you keep doin’ that?”

“It’s not as good as it could be and we can’t get there.”

“Can’t - or you just wanna give up?”

Tom snorted, took a drag and looked through the glass into the live room. “Goddamn, we ain’t even high and we’re scrappin’ like we got hangovers.”

“I feel like you don’t believe in me anymore, but you’re too scared to tell me. Are you just lettin’ this go ’cause you don’t care now? Let me try and fix it, then, I can do it.”

“I’m lettin’ it go because it’s gotta get done and we’re in no shape to do it. Look at us, my damn hand is broke, we’re all fucked up and worn out.”

“But it made us all stop - what happened. We all knew we’d gone too far.”

“You can’t just stop and then decide everything is okay. Look, I know you love that song.”

“It’s a good song, goddamn it!”

“- and you worked really hard on it, I get it.”

“You keep takin’ out all the good songs, I just don’t understand what you’re tryin’ to do.”

“I’m tryin’ to get this done because we are in deep shit, and that much you do know.”

Mike turned his chair away and looked at the back wall.

“And lemme tell you somethin’ - I know you’ve had all kinda people in your ear tellin’ you how
great you are, and that’s good, it really is. Those people don’t understand what it took to build this, but you do. So I’m askin’ you: do you trust me? Because if you don’t trust me anymore then I don’t know what else to say.”

“Are you mad ‘bout that?”

“I ain’t mad ‘bout nothin’!”

“Bullshit, Tommy - you are mad, you’re always mad, you just manage to keep it at a simmer most of the time. If you’re mad ‘bout me havin’ a hit without you then that’s pretty mean. I give you everything first, you can’t say I don’t support you. I’ve been spendin’ pretty much my entire goddamn life supportin’ what you want. Don’t that give me the right to speak my mind sometimes?”

“I have never told y’all you can’t do that - everyone’s got somethin’ to say and they do. Doesn’t mean I’ll agree with it, but I’ve never tried to stop it.”

“Are you mad?”

Tom sighed. He stubbed out his cigarette and lit another. “I’m not mad at you. I’m mad at me.”

“Cause even though you told me you thought it was good, I still felt bad.”

“Now if that don’t prove how fucked up this all is, then I don’t know what does.”

Mike shook his head, and Tom could tell he was past the point where he could laugh at stupid shit.

“You’re gonna have to let it go, Michael. Can you do that? I don’t wanna listen to the sound of us tryin’ to find our way out of the dark. I can’t take that.”

He was back to himself, to that expression he could conjure when faced with dissention in the ranks. You know how it goes, so take it or leave it. Mike didn’t bother to face him, though Tom understood it didn’t matter, they were close enough that Mike could envision it.

“You won’t hear me complainin.’”

Tom opened his mouth to form a jibing retort but Mike departed the control room, delivering the more definitive answer.

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“You didn’t tell me that stuff was gonna make me throw up!” Mike exclaimed.

His bandmates chuckled at Mike’s pale and hollow-eyed visage after emerging from the bathroom. They all had different reactions to the offered substance. Benmont enjoyed the way it made him slightly numb, Tom was marveling at the way it turned off the loathing he had been feeling of late, Howie felt the way he always did with it: like he was wrapped in the most comforting of blankets. But Stan, who wasn’t adverse to a bit of psychonaut experimentation, was suspicious of anything which made him feel too good, and the accompanying shivers along his spine and across his scalp, the warmth and euphoria he knew from great sex made him see the attraction of it, but this came on all of a sudden, out of nowhere. It shouldn’t be possible, no wonder it was totally illegal.

But it didn’t seem to take with their lieutenant.

“You feel better now?” Howie asked Mike twenty minutes later. “Is it kicking in?”
Mike shook his head. “I don’t feel anything.”

“Wanna try again? You might not puke this time.”

“Nah, I’ll stick to the good green that Memphis brought in.”

“Hey man, don’t be smokin’ too much of that - we were so fucked up t’other night it was ridiculous,” Tom cautioned, chuckling. “I dunno where he got it, but that ain’t no dirtweed, I tell you what.”

“Do we wanna play?” Stan asked. “I wanna play.”

Tom flapped his hands in a shooing motion. “Go on, then.”

They jammed for two hours and didn’t come to any resolute progress on anything, but they all played well enough to recognize none of them were fractured beyond functionality. Returning to listen through what they had done, Howie curled up on the couch and was asleep within minutes, Mike was dozing off in one of the chairs, and Tom and Benmont helped themselves to a bump from the stash Tom kept in a tape box behind a loose panel at the bottom of the recording console. Benmont knew that the spot would change tomorrow - Tom was just as paranoid as any other cokehead, and he included himself in that category.

Stan shook his head at the new offering and poured himself another cup of coffee. Mike made a gimmie motion and Stan handed him one as well.

“Well that was fun, but we gotta do something next time,” Tom said.

“Why don’t we do something now, huh?” Stan retorted.

“Just let it go,” Benmont advised. “C’mon, I know for a fact that we can hit the Game Room and find some interesting company.”

Stan shook his head again. “Those girls, man, they’re too spoiled.”

“But they’re up for anything!”

“Now what kinda nonsense are you thinkin’ ‘bout?” Tom chided. “For one thing, I wouldn’t be up for no acrobatics at 3:27 in the morning.”

Stan grinned. “Daaaayum, T.P., that’s not what I heard!”

“You ain’t heard shit, boy.”

“I’m not asking anyone to join the Flying Wallendas or anything, I swear!”

“I gotta go home,” Mike mumbled, seemingly to himself.

“Bugs!” Tom called out. “Shit, is he even still here? I thought he was.”

“C’mon Campbell,” Stan said, placing a hand on Mike’s head. “Time to clock out of the opium den.”

“I can drive him,” Don offered. “I mean, if you guys are gonna hit the town.”

“I ain’t hittin’ nothin’ but a firm mattress,” Stan proclaimed. “That shit was heavy.”
“Maybe you shouldn’t be drivin’ then,” Tom said.

“Fuck, none of us should be drivin’ but we’re gonna anyway. At least I’m partially sober.”

“Let Don drive Michael home. Don’t forget to write down your mileage so Mary can pay you for it,” Tom said, ever the exacting supervisor.

Their engineer looked at the band’s slumping sagging forms and tried not to smirk. He had heard tales of recording sessions which went on for months on the record company’s dime and accomplished nothing listenable, but he couldn’t tell if it was amusing or alarming to actually find himself in that situation.

“I’d drive everybody, but my car’s not big enough. I think you guys should just call a cab.”

“Fuck that,” Stan said, downing the rest of his coffee. “If I can’t make it home on this toxic sludge Tommy calls coffee then I might as well just surrender my balls.”

“You’re a damn fool but I can’t stop ya,” Tom said, and Benmont smirked.

“What are you going to do with Howie?”

“Let ‘im sleep, he won’t hurt nothin.’”

They turned out the lights and climbed the stairs and opened the side door to breathe in the cold air of an after-hours world. They all shivered and gulped and felt the head rush which accompanies the shock of a complete change in atmosphere. Even Mike blinked sleepy and slow and looked around.

“Where did I park?” he asked, and they laughed and laughed like it was the funniest goddamn thing they had ever heard.

What are you even doin’ out there?”

Tom turned around, looked around, and saw that Stan had once again found a way to corner him. Even Stevie wasn’t there, and she was usually shadowing him every moment.

“What the fuck do you mean?”

“I heard you, I heard what you said to Bob ’bout my playin’ - that if I was too far behind then you’d make sure I didn’t fuck up again, and let me fuckin’ inform you that he doesn’t have a problem with me. But you, you don’t even know what to do out there.”

“Fuck you.”

“No, fuck you, man. You’re gonna trash-talk me to other people?”

“Like you don’t do that to me?”

“I haven’t said shit ’bout you on this tour. Everybody is tryin’ to do their best, including me. And if you can’t see that then there’s something really wrong with you.”

“You always have somethin’ to say ‘bout me and that is a fact.”

“You’re goddamn paranoid now - what, are you still on the blow? Your little road wife settin’ you up with that shit again?”
Tom stepped up to Stan, eyes narrowed and icily focused. “Don’t cross that line, Stanley.”

A moment measured in heartbeats and breaths moved slow but inevitable, then voices in the corridor beyond broke the impasse.

“There’s no line anymore,” Stan whispered, leaning in close enough to kiss. He moved away just as quickly and out the door.

It nagged at him throughout the gig. The songs were all muscle memory for Tom, he could anticipate Bob’s changes quicker than anyone - as someone who had also spent his career working the innate nuances of live performance. Had he said something to Bob? He couldn’t remember. But he did know that Stan liked to start fights. He had noticed when Stan pulled this same routine on the others they rolled their eyes and cried bullshit, often shutting him down as a unit. But he couldn’t let it go, when provoked he wanted to strike back just as hard.

Do I enjoy it?

He was worried he might. Tom allowed Stan to find that vulnerable spot and dig into it, because it was easier to get angry at him than at something he couldn’t control. And Stan knew he could do it, could disturb him in various ways.

Their anger was each the equal of the other’s, and it warmed them, reminded them of the passion they were supposed to feel for their shared labors. But it wasn’t always there now.

He looked over at Stan with a grimace from within his introspection and Stan caught it, switched his sticks to one hand and flipped him off, mouthed Fuck you! as he did so. Ice in his veins to see it, realizing that it was quick and subtle enough to be meant for him alone, but the thought of it sent him into a blind rage. He handed his guitar to Bugs and left the stage, his body shaking. He shut the door on the tuning room and yelled at Tony to keep everyone out. Just managed not to break anything as he sat there gritting his teeth and trembling.

When Bob finally came in - because who would bother to keep out Bob Fucking Dylan of all people - to coax Tom back to the stage, to remind him that this whole thing was bigger than any of them, he was sick with shame to know he had allowed Stan to manipulate him in such a way.

Why do you care?

Bob was gentle but firm. Making him see the sense of being the man who doesn’t allow anything to throw him. Determined not to pay him any further attention but he couldn’t help but give the other a quick glance and Stan looked almost smug, giving him a look like oh, where did you go?

Showed you, motherfucker was more like it.

And how ridiculous would it be to admit that Stan had thrown him? To give off even the slightest hint of insecurity. That could not be allowed to happen.

Why do you care?

But he did.
quintessentially three parts of one person

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And there we are, up on the screen
him and me
and our brothers of blood and of righteousness.
Rebel angel, nothing more warm
and nothing more distant, shining like some kind of beacon
catching the light of dreams.
There we are, and every time I see
us all
and we are pretending so hard
to be what we thought we wanted to be
but also so very real.
Transparent skin when he looked into me
to see what he wanted to see
and I gave it to him when I could
longed to bleed for him when I couldn’t.
And there we are, literal ghosts
and fantasies
and I try not to look because I don’t want to see
the memory
of him and me
of us
of everything.

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“I think about a time,” he said, after a long silence in which they could each hear whispering static
between their two shores. Distance, literal and figurative, defined their relationship now and for
longer than the years in which they had known each other in real time, and yet they could also
immediately bond once more with just a few words.

Hey asshole…

“I think about a time when I won’t be able to speak any longer. I’m not giving up, mind you, but I
do think about it.”

“Words, man, what good are they when you can play like you do.”

A wry chuckle, almost as dry as the rattle of bones.

“Thank you kindly. But I can’t nag you with a song.”

“Sure you could. You played very angry some nights, man. I could feel it in the way the notes hit
me, like I was dodging arpeggios.”

“And some nights…”
“Yeah?”

“Yes?”

“It felt like you wanted to fuck everybody.”

A sound came out of the person on the other end which moved Benmont to tears. Goddamn self-pitying morose moody bastard that I am. It salved the wound of his despair, made him forget himself momentarily. The one person who could make anyone laugh, they all counted it as a victory to tease laughter from him.

“I probably did!” And Stan sounded proud to state it.

“Polymorphously perverse, as they say.”

“Listen, you’re gonna be callin’ me and mutterin’ ‘bout shit forever. Don’t doubt that for a second. You are just too goddamn ornery not to.”

*Time used to crawl*
*and time used to stretch*
*but time has learned to dance faster*
*and fall farther*
*and confound me with its’ disappearances*
*things tumble together confused and capricious*
*and time ignores me when I ask it to fetch.*

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It got too intense sometimes. For the both of them. They burned like magnesium in certain situations, and people knew not to get too close. Theirs was heat which could only dissipate in a particular way.

“This scares the shit out of me,” Tom said. He was standing on the patio, looking out at the water, almost muttering to the wind. But Stan heard him because he was carefully attuned to everything about the man before him.

“It ain’t worth it if it don’t.”

“Don’t be glib, kid.”

“I’m not.” Stan came over to him, looked down and their eyes locked, and he allowed himself to inhabit the honesty he didn’t always want to feel because it was painful. “Do you scare me? Yes, because I’ve let you have so much power over me. Do you know how fucked up it is to have someone you love control your destiny? It’s fuckin’ insane. You can’t just be rational about the way things are, the way you feel, it’s all bound up in this emotion and you feel like you might drown. When you look at me, and we’re playing, and we’ve connected, you fucking own me at that moment. And I don’t want to admit that! Who the hell would ever want to admit something like that?! You make me fuckin’ crazy but I can’t stop this. This is what we all dreamed of. You’re scared? You’re scared?! Try being me for five minutes and you might really know what scared is, bubba. You could destroy me so easily if you wanted to.”

But all he could hear was that one word, perhaps not consciously meant to be spoken, to be admitted,
to be released into the world and it was out there now, hanging in the air between them. Tom felt like he was choking on it.

“And I fight you because I have to.”

That word, a poison and a panacea, and also something profound. He understood that Stan was more exposed in the admission than if he had stood naked before him. The look in his eyes felt like the guilty thrill you got from doing whatever you knew you shouldn’t but you did it anyway.

“You’re the only one really controls what you do,” Tom said, muttering again.

“Oh I do? Really?” Then they collided once more. “So tell me,” Stan breathed, his voice raw around the edges, “you had nothin’ to do with that at all?”

There was nowhere he could run, pinned as he was by a desire so ambiguous he sometimes thought he had imagined it all, those things they had said and done.

“Just shut up for once in your goddamn life,” Tom whispered back.

“Oh-huh.” That low murmur, and the smartass smirk... *oh you think you’re crazy? You ain’t got nothin’ on me right now, boy.*
Author’s note: I cannot thank you ENOUGH

Over 200 kudos?! Oh hell yes!

Seriously though, THANK YOU SO MUCH to everyone who has taken the time to read this story, either from the beginning or sometime later or perhaps only yesterday.

I write this for all of us who have a Tom-shaped hole in our hearts. And who love those five boys (in either configuration) and also for the fans of the latter days, although admittedly I’m not writing those so much. Old fans, new fans, casual fans, die-hard TPATH geeks and research freaks like Yours Truly, I’m honestly trying to write for all of us.

And those who have taken the time and effort to leave a kudo and/or a comment, I am so incredibly grateful for your generosity. As I’ve stated before, I believe in parity and if I’m giving you something which makes you want to give back to me, then I’ve Done The Thing we all aspire to do. I’m doing myself a favor, not anyone else, with my acts of creation and that’s my commentary on the writer-reader relationship and the recent trend of the commodification of validation as regards fanfic.

For most of my fanfic life I’ve figured I was an acquired taste because I write realistic RPF and rather more naturalistic stories, based on historical events and settings. Stories which have a mosaic-like structure and are non-linear. And that’s not always so popular or appealing. But I love this music and the people who made it too much not to attempt my very best to do justice to it and to them as actual human beings. To the joy and sorrow, the humor, the grind, the small moments of Life, disappointment and delirium, love and hate, hope and heartbreak. As realistic as I can possibly make it. Even so it’s not entirely real but I do hope it reads as entirely true in the emotional sense. Because that’s what really matters.

And in this case, creating a version of a relationship which I believe was so very deep that it left scars on each of them. But it had its’ moments of beauty even so. And I can’t stop thinking about it. And this story is what happened as a result. Missing scenes from a communal life which was fairly well-documented on the whole (for which I am also eternally grateful).

I can only be who I am, and write what I write. It’s a labor of love and I do it because I have chosen this and I don’t ask for anything in return because it’s in me and it wants to come out. But your pleasure in the fact of it is an eternal gift to me.

So I thank you so very deeply for coming on this journey with me. We still have miles to travel and the road ahead is difficult, my process is long and hard and I hope you can hold on. My heart is entirely full thanks to all of you. Every single one of you.

xoxoxoxoxo
Contentious when we kissed

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Every night before they went on, T-Bone would thank his band for deigning to support him rather than pursue some other high-profile gig and his drummer - as drummers were wont to do - would diffuse the solemnity of his gratitude with a joke.

“Hell man, this is free time for me!” Stan would declare and everyone would laugh, the pressure lightened. The kind of pressure which is felt so much more intensely the smaller the venue, the closer everyone could be viewed on both sides, their specific judgements and reactions. But the bandleader took the meaning, that Stan was free from the machine for now and appreciated the chance to play without the type of big money pressure-cooker expectations which encircled his professional life these days. Everyone was forthcoming with their admiration of this man they stood behind and how it was a privilege to do so, because it was far easier to do the opposite. Even as the opposite was paradoxically less rewarding.

A natural storyteller, Stan was certainly entertaining to have around, but more importantly - he wanted to know your stories. And thus two brothers who were trying not to call too much attention to themselves, to hang back and learn from those around them, found themselves caught up in that scrutiny when socializing post-gig. They may have looked more than a bit freshly-scrubbed, all sandy-haired and blue-eyed, but Stan knew what truly mattered was what you saw when you looked in someone’s eyes. And there was age beyond their years there - nearly the same number of years he had also been inhabiting the planet - and experience. Not all good, but a commitment to what they knew they wanted, what they were made for. Eyes which knew the world for what it really was.

“So twins, huh...what’s that like?”

They wanted, with a sickening thrill, to ask him it was like to be in the one of the biggest bands in the world, but no - he wanted to know if they’d ever pulled pranks on people, specifically girls. The kind of pranks only twins could.

“I mean, ya gotta be curious, right? To see if you can get away with it?”

Andrew and David exchanged an ambivalent glance, a kind of emotional shorthand.

“Well…” Andrew began, “I’m not saying we never did, but -”

“- we’re pretty boring,” David concluded.

“Oh man, you do that thing! You finish each other’s sentences!”

David grimaced slightly. “We try not to, but sometimes it just happens.”

“So c’mon Stanley, what’s Tom really like?” Andrew asked, attempting to reroute the conversation.

“Tom Petty is...well, you can’t really reduce it down to one thing. He can be funny as hell, totally driven and a complete asshole, and then make you wanna cry with a song. He’s all those things and more.”

“I really love those records,” Andrew said. “They’re so honest.”

Stan grinned and fiddled with his beer bottle, looking down at the worn surface of the table, shining
under god knew how many layers of varnish. “That's the real trick, y'see - you get everybody else to believe in what you’re saying so that it becomes real.”

“Are you saying he doesn’t believe it?” Andrew asked.

Stan focused his gaze on the two seated across from him. They were so talented, with the voices of angels, and good-looking too, even as they tried their best to downplay what people were likely fascinated with in terms of their twin-ness. Andrew wore his hair long while David kept his short. But the symmetry was too ingrained to attempt even superficial deflection. And as was the way of the world it was just as likely that they wouldn’t make it on their own even as naturally-blessed as they appeared. But they were born for this, and it made Stan wonder if he truly was, or if it was just luck. He had worked hard, certainly, but it wasn’t all that hard work which had put him in the right place at the right time. A fated enterprise then? Maybe. But he wasn’t sure he really believed in that sort of thing.

He wanted to tell them oh I wish I could just put you up there and let them all see. But connections weren’t always the key to success. The scariest thing was you couldn’t ever predict what would put you on top.

“Oh he totally believes it. It’s just that he’ll never let you see any deeper inside than that.”

David nodded, in the way of someone who sympathized with the notion of keeping certain things below the surface. "You two have such great harmonies."

Stan shrugged, suddenly embarrassed. "We try, but we can't even touch what you cats have, my God it's amazing. Y'know what? When we get home, I'm gonna make some calls, I promise. Y’all deserve a real shot at this.”

The two smiled at each other and their bandmate, but Stan could see that they’d heard all the same promises before. Not that they didn’t believe him, or appreciate the offer, but theirs had been a long road and even as they had come to recognize the right reasons, the right motivations, the weariness behind their smiles made Stan feel that much older in the moment.

He didn’t like being bummed out, but Stan accepted it as the price of this new perspective. Still, he couldn’t stop himself from scanning the bar, looking for any likely prospects in the crowd. The other two occupants of the booth gave each other a wry glance and finished their beers.

Rock stars, they thought. What was that like?

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Men of a certain age, raised in the South, they knew how to be charming. Moreover they thought of the chagrin of their mommas, grandmaws and aunties if they didn’t at least display the proper smiling deference to any female they encountered. So when the promotional machine delivered a woman to take stock of them, either in words or images, they did their best to obey the echoes of their upbringing.

Certain ladies never took to it. Always viewed it as a southern-fried sham, which made them try that much harder to crack a smile, tease out a giggle or a blush.

Lynn was one tough chickie, though. She had already been exposed to so much rock star bullshit over the years that she was protected by a palpable shield, hardened by experience and a dedication to her craft, even as she was open to the experience of communing with her subjects. She took charge of the session within seconds, but also encouraged them to have some fun, to allow their
lighter side to show through the too-tough bluff of their established image. She could sense, almost
instantaneously, that here were five guys who laughed at themselves more than anyone else. They
might present a unified blase scrutiny, but could crack each other up to the point of actual collapse.

“You really get us, don’t you?” Tom had remarked, looking over the Polaroid test shots.

“It’s my job, man,” she replied with a smirk. “To see into your soul.”

Tom made a mock-horrified gesture at the notion, and everyone laughed.

“Lynn, you’re scaring him now,” Stan cautioned with a grin.

“Good,” she declared, holding out a hand for her reloaded camera.

She wasn’t the first to discover those singular personalities embedded within the cohesion, but she
was always successful at uncovering it, her prompting causing them all to react in different ways. If
asked for a unified mood, someone might still smile, or look serious in the midst of levity. They each
understood the world in a different way, even as they understood each other in a united empathy. A
connection born of years of knowledge, the kind of deep knowledge one attained when you were all
from the same town, same state, same circumstance, same dim recesses of childhood and formative
experience.

“Tom...I like Tom,” Bruce had said to her the first time she got the assignment. “He’s a funny guy.”

Tom had wanted her because she represented a particular eschalon which he believed they had
attained, to avail themselves of her eye, always enthralling in her portrayals. At their meeting he had
greeted her with her own work, a portrait of Patti.

“That’s what I always wanted,” he admitted, “I mean, look at her, doesn’t she look like the most
rock n’roll thing ever?”

Lynn nodded, smiling. “She was. She is. All I had to do was just point my camera at her.”

She never mentioned that she sought to find that spark of holy wisdom within each of her subjects,
the wild revelation they brought forth in the coded language of sound and revelry. The presence
within the presence. She wasn’t interested in persona or artifice unless it also revealed something
about what their music sounded like. She looked at them, as rendered through her lens, and when
you later viewed that moment, you knew. More than just an evocation. But she couldn’t ever talk
about what she wanted, what purpose she was trying to achieve.

*It’s really a service industry,* she thought, *but who is serving who?*

“Tom, you’re looking kinda stiff there, maybe move back a little?”

Tom pretended to be a rigor mortis-hardened zombie advancing upon Lynn when Stan stepped in
and deftly hefted him, Tom going slack if not completely limp in his bandmate’s grip. The others
showed no surprise but rather laughing complicity as Stan lifted Tom off the ground. Benmont made
a quip about their literal supportive capabilities. She caught the motion before she knew it, which
was always how the best images were obtained. There was something not only *strong* about what he
did - Stan’s drumming muscles flexing in his upper arms and Tom relatively light for a man of his
size and age - but *powerful.* The power which comes with knowing what you can do and then
knowing when to do it.

Something told her Stan had done this kind of thing any number of times. And furthermore, Tom had allowed it.

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“Well I guess y’all wanna have some more fun, ain’t that right?”

The audience roared their assent.

He started at the familiar weight of hands on his shoulders, Stan coming around his right side as he stood at the mic, one hand now on his chest, and his smile...it was full of light and full of joy.

“So what’s it gonna be?” Stan mouthed so that the mic would not pick him up, as they were still arguing about what to play for the encore as they walked back onstage. “‘Shout’ again? Really?” he had said, just to be a punk. But sometimes that was okay, because now, in this moment, that smile was everything Tom could have desired from anyone. But especially the one driving him to that state of transcendent bliss, the music its’ own world of wonder.

Tom put an arm around his drummer. “And we’re gonna do it soon as Stanley here assumes his rightful place.”

An offhand remark, a moment of unscripted playfulness. Yes. But also.

Another grin bestowed upon the golden-haired King, enveloping and mischievous.

*Oh you know you love me.*

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“You just never know,” Mike had once told a journalist, “when they’re gonna decide they need to scrap.”

“Do they actually fight?” he was asked, “Like punching each other?”

“Naw, there’s a rule. You can’t be punchin’ nobody. But it’s a battle of wills all the same.”

Benmont was known for making the following joke or a version of it: “If you think the rest of us have no personality, then you’d be right. It’s because Stanley took it all.”

Every so often Tom would attempt to bring Stan into line, in some particular fashion. Usually when the pranking had become too much. His drummer was a master mimic and impressionist, and had spent enough time around their British manager to perform not only a dead-on impersonation of Tony D., but also the average Londoner. Stan’s pranks generally involved him knocking on the hallowed door at all hours asking after their leader in a variety of English accents, and Tom would usually end up falling for one of them. But then there were times that he answered the door and Stan would get a face full of Silly String, or some other viscous substance.

Weeks into a leg Tom would have to insist upon a truce if only for the sake of his own sanity. He knew why he was being pushed, but understanding did not mean he could tolerate it for long. And so he tried to imbue their performances with that spark, the heat and the joy they could create between the two of them.

But it wasn’t always enough to satisfy either of them.
He was afraid to collide, sometimes. And he would sit and stare at the other, warring impulses of resistance and surrender making it so he couldn’t look away.

This would lead to a hotly-whispered showdown behind the scenes wherever they might happen to be.

“You can’t expect me to just sit there while you look at me like that.”

“Like what? What am I doin?’”

“You know exactly what you’re doin.’ You always know what you’re doin.’ Don’t piss in my glass and tell me it’s lemonade, you asshole.”

“Watch it, boy. Ain’t no need for namecallin.’”

Stan’s expression turned incredulous. “You really don’t know, do you?”

“Know what?”

“Just...stop starin’ at me. Else you and me are gonna have a talk behind a locked door.”

“Look -”

“No you listen to me, man. Nobody wants to be reminded of somethin' they can’t have. Nobody wants that in their face every goddamn night.”

It was agreed upon, but never discussed, that the real reason Tom obtained his own bus was not for family travel, but because they needed the space of separate vessels, he and Stan. And sure enough as they glided down the highway, Stan would often be staring out the window at the vehicle in the next lane.

“What are you doing? It’s dark out there,” Benmont would remind him.

“Just wonderin’ what Tommy’s doin.’” As if they all should be.

“You know what he’s doing: caffeine, nicotine, potato chips and Elvis. Maybe a magazine or a Western.”

“Yeah,” Stan would answer, but in such a way that it seemed he was still so curious.

And sometimes one of them might catch Tom looking out his window too, as if he wondered how they were getting along without him.
...only flesh and bone, how come I can’t let go

Mike: “What’s next?”
Tom: “I don’t know - if we ain’t in it I ain’t volunteerin.’”
- Heartbreakers Beach Party (1983)

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He had given up the debauch...or so he thought. But no.

To awaken within a tangle of limbs. You’re why I do this. To keep my distance. To keep my sanity.

And wasn’t that a ridiculous crock of shit? He would shower, the lithe bodies would sleep on. He would abandon them there, get back on the bus, ride off into the glowing new day, new bodies awaiting his pleasure elsewhere. Down the road, down the line.

Everyone aching. Everyone empty.

Everyone alone.

Too easy to blame the golden King. God, the Devil, the false idols of sanctioned notoriety. Way too convenient when they existed for just that purpose. Taking on your sins and your sorrows, people searching for the momentary ecstasy.

Even him. Especially him.

A glance in the mirror at any time of the day, or whatever reflective surface offered itself for scrutiny. He knew he had been blessed, somehow, with a particular attractiveness. Watched people grow weak in his sight. Learned to make it work for him.

And that first time they had truly looked at each other, at the family picnic all those years ago, it was the strangest thing to realize you could spark with someone, feel that particular gravity, move so close, too close in the space of a glance, and be unable to do a goddamn thing about it.

Now that was fate, more than likely. The tether could stretch but never snap. Two years later, give or take, to walk into a room and be met with that same sudden sharp inquiry, so intense you couldn’t stand it for more than a few seconds.

Of course, later it was all they could do not to look at each other. Look into each other, for all the things they could never articulate.

But they were there, and they always would be.

“Something’s got you bad,” Dylan said to him.

Sometimes he would be summoned to dressing rooms, hotel rooms, the back of the bus, just to hang out, listen to music. He would never speak of these requests to anyone else, but there was something important about them, casual as they seemed to be. Bob teased him for his populist tastes, but tried to teach Stan about how it was important to have something to say, and sometimes it was important to
“I used to be so stringent about fun,” he said. “I denied myself simple pleasures because I wanted whatever lay beyond all that noise.”

“And what did you find?”

“That it’s all the same noise, just different frequencies.”

Stan nodded. “Sure, it all comes from the same thing.”

“The hindbrain.”

Stan felt his cheeks go hot and studied his shoes. “Yeah, you’re right. And I don’t know what to do about it.”

“Sometimes there isn’t anything to do. You stop thinking something has to be done, and just let the thing be.”

“I -” A lapse into silence then, feeling himself flush again.

Bob chuckled. “You with nothing to say, now that is an interesting occurrence.”

“I just thought - at this age, I would have...something.”

“I forget, how old are you now?”

“31.”

A full-fledged belly laugh, then. Not to mock but perhaps in wonderment.

“And how long have you been living with this impossible thing?”

“Ten years, I reckon.”

“You can’t just walk away?”

“I don’t want to.”

“Then how impossible is it, really, if you refuse to give up?”

Stan smirked, though he tried to make it seem as if he was seriously engaged in the conversation.

“I’m just a stubborn asshole. You might have heard that about me.”

“It appears to be the defining characteristic of your entire ensemble.”

It was Stan’s turn to laugh, and he felt it had purged him of something, if only momentarily.

“So what’s so funny about me being 31?” he asked.

“Your thirties are the absolute worst time to think that you know what you want, or who you are, or anything like that.”

“So what am I supposed to do?”

“You just live, kid. Just live.”
And then every night they would get to that couplet -

\[
I \text{ got troubles, I think maybe you got troubles} \\
I \text{ think maybe we’d better leave each other alone.}
\]

- and Stan would turn cold beneath the sweat on his body. What did they call it? Terminal velocity? The speed at which you would eventually go splat. That’s how it felt to him now, everything around him was going as fast as it was going to go and then eventually it would crash.

And he couldn’t stop it. There was no gentle way to walk away from this.

He thought of a particular long-ago image, all of them in their tender ambition: he was smirking, as usual, and Tom looked like the least likely to turn out to be a genius bandleader and bard of a generation. But there he was at the center of it all, and even then that was exactly where he belonged.

-122-

Of an evening, playing a round of Stump Ben on the way to the next town, and suddenly they all feared that maybe Mike had one beer too many again when he began crying.

Nobody fucking cried in the Heartbreakers. They barely disclosed themselves to each other, preferring to keep their emotional revelations within the boundaries of their performances. To communicate in the deepest and most immediate of ways. No words, only emotion as rendered by their particular talents.

Stan possessed a surfeit of empathy and wanted to do something, but Benmont put a hand on his thigh and gripped it hard.

Don’t.

Howie began softly strumming, which then resolved itself into “Angel From Montgomery” and Stan and Benmont harmonized with Howie’s silvery-sweet tone.

\[
\text{Just give me one thing that I can hold onto.} \\
\text{To believe in this living is a hard way to go.}
\]

By the second verse Mike had joined in, his face still wet with tears, and they let the music attempt to heal them as it had always done.

The miles rolled by, and the band played on. And nobody asked Mike why he was crying. They knew he preferred it that way.

-123-

They all had their vices, for various reasons - which weren’t directly discussed - but nothing was particularly secretive. These were all prosaic pastimes in their world.

Except for this.

It was a game, a continual series of dares. And he would step in, close in, and take what was never going to be offered. There might be a struggle, but never a serious one. The surrender was inevitable.

He knew he was desired, even as that fact might be denied, never acknowledged.

And his own desire consumed him. To pin him down and make him confess. Admit to this
obsession.

An entire conversation rendered in the narrowing of eyes, pursing of lips, hands through lank hair, stretching, smiling, then the direct glance. The dare.

*You can’t look away, I know, I know why you stare. I know what you want. And I dare you to come get it.*

But within the confines of nomadic communal life it had to be left to the small gestures, wholly expected. Laying hands upon those slight shoulders, leaning in to whisper.

“I gotcha, Tommy, you know I do."

Then to walk away and feel those eyes following his exit, imparting an electric shiver like no other.

In the aftermath, so hungry for what he couldn’t have. His vice: to wallow in willing flesh, the attention he couldn’t get otherwise. They were *all* starving somehow, and wasn’t *that* just so fucked up?

-Caught up somewhere between the darkness and the light between safety and sorrow. Caught up somewhere between what you make me feel and what is real.-

“Are we actually going through this bullshit *again*?” Benmont demanded.

Mike looked trapped, like this was a marital spat rather than a bandmates’ discussion regarding the current state of affairs.

“Yeah I don’t get it either,” Howie opined. “Like, what do you guys want from him? He’s doing what you ask and then you say it’s not right? I’m not hearing what you’re hearing, I guess.”

“And neither am I,” Benmont agreed.

“What am I supposed to say? It’s not me who’s sayin’ it.”

“Yeah but you’re *not* saying anything else. You know you could stop it.”

“Stop it? When Tommy’s of a mind? Nope!”

Howie looked embarrassed to be saying *anything*, Benmont thought, as he was the New Guy, but the other appreciated that he cared enough about this enterprise he found himself in to put forth his own thoughts.

“I feel like he’s trying really hard. Like, trying hard to get it together with *me*. Because we’ve gotta work *together*. So he’s not, like, being lazy or anything.”

“It’s just what happens,” Mike replied, looking at Benmont. “You know it’s what happens every time.”
“But why? Why does Stanley always have to be the scapegoat? Why does there have to be a scapegoat in this process? What does that even have to do with music?”

“Nothin,’ but it’s the way it always goes. I can’t come between those two.”

“Which two?”

“Either of ‘em! Are we doin’ this now, Ben? We’re really gonna break it all down for Howie, here?”

“And why shouldn’t we? He’s got a right to know what he’s gotten himself into.”

“Oooookay,” Howie said, his eyes darting between the other two as they occupied lawn chairs in Mike’s garage which Howie thought could only loosely be considered a studio. “So...what, then?”

“Iovine has had a hard-on for Stanley since the day we met him. Two dogs constantly looking to tear each other’s throats out.”

“Not all dogs are that mean,” Mike murmured, and Benmont rolled his eyes.

“The analogy is entirely apt, Michael.”

“Stan’s not belligerent, not really,” Howie said.

“You just haven’t seen it yet, but he can be the first one to jump down someone’s throat if he wants,” Mike assured him.

Benmont broke in. “Basically, Jimmy has never thought Stanley was a good drummer and tried to talk Tom into firing him. And so, on every album, this strategy almost works, until Tom figures out that there’s nobody else who can play the way he really wants. And then he has to come back to the reality of us, which is: Stanley is our drummer. He is in this fucking band for a reason.”

“It doesn’t help that Stanley is a shit disturber of the highest order,” Mike countered.

“Who the fuck said that?”

“I did!”

“Nuh-uh, that is not a thing you would say, so who said it?!”

Mike shrugged, looking chagrined. “Tony D. But it’s true!”

“Now here’s the other thing,” Benmont continued, turning his gaze to Howie once more. “You’re probably going to fall under it too. You can’t deny it, Campbell, you two are hell on bass players.”

“I was hell on Blair because he stopped carin’. But Howie’s a pro, he’ll be fine.”

“Can you promise that?”

Mike shrugged and pulled another beer out of the cooler at his feet. “Can’t promise nothin,’ you know that. I’m only one person in this whole thing. Well okay - for me I can. I’ll be fair.”

“Recording is always an extremely stressful process,” Benmont noted.

“But I saw you guys with Del, it all seemed really cool, y’know?”

“Yeah but that wasn’t us, y’see,” Mike explained. “When it’s our record, it gets real personal.”
“To an entirely pathological degree.”

“Ben, would you stop droppin’ them 20-dollar words on me, goddamn!”

Howie had sat back with a smile, sipping his beer.

“What are you grinning at, New Kid?” Benmont demanded.

“Bands, man. They’re always the same.”

And there was no more fitting response than to drink to this particular truism.

It had begun, as many good ideas did, with the simplest of things. A dirty groove, spooling from a cassette into his ears as he paced around the room wherein he brought the ideas to life. A room sparsely furnished so as to not distract from his imagination.

There wasn’t much to it other than that riff, sounding so nasty. And something inside him responded immediately to that mood, provoking a feeling of licentiousness.

Those hours he spent contemplating his ambivalence.

*I never have made my mind up about it*
*I’ve just decided to let it all ride.*

But now it was time to face it. Of two minds, inhabiting two worlds. The road, and whatever this was - the place where he did the work. Both possessed an equal allure, but they were each so different. And there was only one thing which followed him from spotlight to sunlight.

The desire which felt so dangerous it made him shiver. What would it be like to finally give into it fully...to admit to it, to name it, to claim it. Instead of pushing and pulling in equal measure.

He couldn’t deny that he saw pain in those other eyes sometimes.

Circling back to what sounded good to him, Tom knew Mike enjoyed coming up with ideas perhaps somewhat outside of his normal inclinations, and there were a few of those moments in the tapes he been given to listen to - crunchy and thick, making him nod his head, words and characters coming to the fore immediately.

All these people populating his imagination had one thing in common.

They were lonely.

He wasn’t entirely certain how it had happened. One morning he woke up to realize that he definitely didn’t have that deep resounding love for anyone save his daughters. And it made him think of standing on a far shore, alone, profoundly alone, with nothing but his own voice filling his ears.

*Sure of yourself and bulletproof.*

It hadn’t really come to that, had it? When he thought of that particular character, it was always Stan he had in mind, his very own lead asshole. And as always, as frustrating as it could be, he loved that Stan could be that guy. He needed that energy sometimes, to absorb it and transform it into his own version of cool. An essential component in the many facets he embodied.
Not two people, no. There was only him.

But someone of myriad perspective. It’s just that he couldn’t admit it. To anyone.

Much less the one who really needed to know.

Working out the tempo to the song born out of Mike’s raunchy riff had been hell, certainly, but they had an instinctual understanding that it needed to reside in a liminal space between fast and slow, but neither could it be classified as mid-tempo, not like “Darkness” was. It needed to slink, not run, not crawl. It had to lift in some spots and sink back down in others.

And then that crucial echoing in the chorus...not a typical chorus, more like a desperate admission. For each of them.

_I said oh yeah_
_(oh yeah)_
_I’m outta my mind, I’m between two worlds._

Stan’s response the same phrase but raspy and nasty and completely right, entirely true. He could be so motherfucking good when he wanted to, that asshole. Goddamn him.

The final take had been one which was not entirely perfect, but for a song about obsession of a kind it was better if it sounded loose and frayed around the edges. They all grinned when it ended, knowing it was a good one. Stan had pointed at Tom with a drumstick as if to say _you led us somewhere good this time_.

He wanted to go outside after that, just for a little space and light… and then there he was. Tom hung his head, fiddling with his cigarette.

“A danger zone? Is that what you think I am?”

“It ain’t ‘bout you.”

“You’re a goddamn liar, Tommy. But that’s alright. I just want you to know that I’m not a threat, okay? I mean, I must not be if you begged me to come back. Again.”

“You always get like this, like you think you’re such a goddamn hero just because -”

“- because I’m still the only drummer in this band? I mean, that’s some kinda heroics, wouldn’t ya say?”

“Shut your goddamn mouth.”

Stan grinned, stretched, and put his hands on his head, looking down at Tom in all ways with bemusement. “Then what am I?”

“You’re a Heartbreaker. Wear it proud.”

“Oh I do, believe me. But mainly ‘cause there’s a crack in that heart only I know how to fill.”

Tom knew it wasn’t necessarily meant as a salacious aside, though he snorted at one particular word. Stan’s repartee was normally appreciable on several levels.

“As valuable as you might believe you are, remember that there’s always someone who thinks the
opposite.”

“Yeah but -” at this Stan leaned in close (Tom could smell him in that olfactory totality he knew as Stan: honest sweat, that apple-scented shampoo he had been using for years, warm skin), and grasped Tom’s shoulder tightly. “- it ain’t you.”

He walked off, whistling Benmont’s melody line from ‘You Got Lucky’ and Tom cursed himself again for something he knew was his own damn fault. That boy - big dog, cock of the walk, lead asshole - had gotten beneath his skin once more.

*You ain’t never gonna dig him out now, T.P.*

“I just might, one of these days,” Tom murmured to that voice, and heard a memory of Stan’s mocking laughter in reply.
Interlude: some strange control

Chapter Notes

I almost feel like I should provide a disclaimer? I know that some readers probably didn't have a good reaction to the "ghosts" chapter and this one is somewhat along the same lines. Not sad, but following a particular tangent. So I'll say that you may want to read the first part but not the second. But for me as the author, the second part was necessary in setting up something which will happen in a later chapter. I never like to tell people how to feel about my work - it's cheating, IMO - but I wanted to provide some context. Also: part of this chapter was based on a video I came across entirely by accident and watched several times with the intensity of whomever analyzed the Zapruder film, and it took me a while to figure what was going on in it, but it's yet another example of how this shit just writes itself.

I: you gotta be careful what you dream

The ceiling fan spun above them, as such devices do, that perpetual motion which became hypnotic if you stared at it long enough. Stan followed its motion with his eyes and another part of his brain focused on the whirring sound it made. He kept waiting for his eyes to finally close but his brain was too loud in its questions and contemplations.

What does this mean?

He turned his head very slowly to the left, to look at the person asleep beside him. A person who did not like to sleep but as dawn stained the sky would finally step off into oblivion. Someone who had come to him, entering his room without a word and dropping onto the bed. His bed. Not a word about what he wanted, or didn’t want, but the expectation of getting it because he knew Stan wanted to please him.

Stan had learned, in the past few years, what that meant - when someone was willing to please you, put your desires before their own. He had never understood the feeling before this, had always been too ornery to acknowledge there was pleasure in such a thing. And even now it scared him, that need to be granted a moment of consideration.

What is this?

Tom slept, his body in a kind of slump, curled in on himself, with a snore which wasn’t loud but persistent, issuing from his nose. That face, its’ unique architecture enthralling him as it ever did, looking somewhat at peace in sleep.

And so he was just supposed to let this man sleep beside him like it wasn’t a sign of intimacy, of trust. Dropping his guard, perhaps reluctantly, perhaps this was a test. Stan knew Tom did not entirely trust him, his motives or his loyalties. He didn’t trust anyone who opposed him, even in the abstract sense. His world was very simple: you were either on his side, or you weren’t.

The day before there was yet another skirmish in that regard and he’d lost patience with Tom’s attitude, cornering him in the back of the RV, speaking in a hoarse heated whisper.
“How the fuck can you tell people I’m not behind you when I let you -”

He left it at that but his eyes had widened to express the unspoken implication.

“You let me?” Tom had replied, equally hushed. “I think you mean you beg me.”

“Fuck you, Tommy. I have never had to beg for anything -”

“Are you fuckin’ kiddin’ me? You think I’m stupid?”

Stan took a moment to notice that the swaying of the vehicle as it traveled the highway had them leaning against each other as they stood on the opposite side of the partition from the other passengers. The sleeping area retained that funky kind of stale Frito corn chip smell of unwashed male.

“You think I don’t hear you with those girls? You never demand anything, you weasel. You spend all your time bamboozlin’ people to get them to do what you want and then make them think like it was their idea. You’re some kinda evil genius at that, kid.”

And there it was. Everyone had accused Stan of being devious for one reason or another over the years. But wasn’t everybody trying to get what they wanted? He just had a more subtle way of doing it. His father had once told him that manipulation could be a very blunt instrument, or it could be wielded with the precision of a scalpel. It wasn’t the method that was the problem, it was what you wanted to gain from it.

_If I want you to love me, is that so bad?_

“Can’t nobody force you to do what you don’t wanna do, Tommy. Now that is a fact!”

“I don’t know why I’m tellin’ you this because you’ll just use it against me someday, but that ain’t true. Like, right ‘bout now I’m ‘bout to walk away from you and forget we even had this conversation. I don’t want to do that, but I’m gonna do it.”

“I just can’t believe you don’t think I’m behind you.”

“Ya are when ya wanna be. I don’t wanna talk ‘bout this no more.”

Stan held him in place. Tom stared up at him with annoyance but Stan was willing the ice in that gaze to melt with his mere presence. To feel the heat of their bond.

“Can’t you just realize when you hurt somebody? The minute you get your feelings hurt we all gotta feel it too. So why can’t you feel this, what you did to me?”

Stan meant more than the slight caused by the comment. He meant _everything_ which had passed between them since they had reunited to pursue a common goal.

“You know what I think?” he continued. “You hate anybody who makes you feel somethin’. Hate that you have to admit that it’s not up to you.”

“Stop your nonsense and let me up. I’m only gonna ask you once.”

Stan leaned in, his breath against Tom’s cheek.

“What is nonsense is to deny it.”

He stepped back and Tom opened the partition, moving forward into the kitchen area. Stan came out
behind him, rolling his eyes at the questioning glances he received from Mike and Benmont, and seated himself on one of the benches. The silence went on for several minutes while Tom lit a cigarette and opened a bottle of Coca-Cola. Benmont handed Stan a section of newspaper, folded back to the Editorials page.

“Get a load of this horseshit, man,” he said, and Stan gave him a look which said thank you.

The miles rolled by, the band played on.

Was this the necessary dynamic for their relationship? A constant struggle to equally embrace and repulse? And was it even worth it?

The band was certainly worth it. Every single moment.

Stan blinked slowly, studying the other who was trying very hard to look at anything else but him. He thought he understood him, the essential Tom, the person underneath the facade which had now solidified into a personality. That person needed what was happening between them, for reasons he would probably never disclose. And Stan had to accept it, or just walk away. And to such a thought his internal response was always fuck that!

And maybe that’s what Tom was counting on: they would both be too stubborn to ever walk away.

II: don’t read your words into my words

(the blonde in the record store)
The blonde in the record store thought she was the star. It was the middle of the afternoon on a Wednesday (a sunny day but rather frigid given that it was November), and she was dressed exactly like the girl in one of T-Bone’s songs.

She wore a low-cut black satin dress
slit up the front and down the back
she wore black high-heeled shoes
with laces that went up her ankles.

She wore black velvet gloves
with rhinestone bracelets around them.
She had long blond hair, she had long blond hair
(long blond hair, long blond hair).

David knew this was a thing which fans sometimes did. But then she gave T-Bone a shoe to wear around his neck.

“Did you write that song about her?” he had to ask after witnessing the gift. “Is she Kim Boston?”

T-Bone laughed, made a face and David couldn’t tell if the other was amused or annoyed.

“She thinks she is, so it doesn’t matter either way.”

At first the band thought she might be there for Stan - they had noticed over the weeks they traversed the East Coast that girls would just show up looking for Stan. As they hadn’t actually played a gig in Boston, it was understandable that the groupies would look for any opportunity to interact, even a rather low-key in-store appearance. Discount Records was far too cramped for a typical record signing, so T-Bone walked around talking to people and signing whatever they handed to him.
But no, it seemed she was there for their star, who appeared diffident but polite. She was beautiful, after all, although not exactly (as another of his songs might describe) fatally beautiful. She was vivacious and the kind of girl considered the life of any party she attended. Might have even been rather uncharitably characterized (also in the words of that other song) as a dumb blonde whore.

She had flirted with David several times, throwing herself at him but in a gentle fashion. Perhaps hoping he would embrace her as she hung on him. But his diffidence was genuine, whereas T-Bone’s might have been merely studied. He supposed she was just that way, a flirt, a butterfly flitting from flower to flower. She kept returning to T-Bone’s orbit, impressing upon him the depth of her devotion. And David stood there and considered the nature of expectations. He recognized them when they were proffered by others.

The band had come along on this promotional obligation and congregated at the back of the store so their boss could work the front. But a couple guys had recognized Stan and peppered him with questions. Stan loved to talk so he was happy enough to indulge them, but made certain they knew about T-Bone and the new album, talking it up like a hype man. Andy and David traversed the aisles and a few times were asked if they were with the band, answering honestly but with a sense of duty.

“Have you talked to T-Bone?” they would ask. “He’ll sign anything you’ve got.”

They took the chance to really listen to the new record through the store’s hi-fi, it sounded great. They glanced at each other, blushing slightly to hear their own harmonies, but knowing they had done the best they could for their newest mentor. At least it wasn’t as embarrassing as the video for “The Murder Weapon.” With their prior acting experience they knew what to do when a camera was pointed their way but still it was deeply weird to observe themselves even briefly in the kind of cinematic fantasy which the video portrayed. T-Bone had wanted them in it, wanted people to see them and wonder: “Who are those guys?”

Who are we, yeah I’d like to know too.

It was a question they were still on their way to discovering.

David watched Stan, had been watching him since the day they met.

Stan knew who he was, he was easy and friendly with everyone, and so funny. When they had worked on “Stunned” together, Stan had made Andy blow so many takes with his feedback, which were just smartass teasing observations and suggestions. Finally T-Bone had sent Stan out of the studio to go make time with Ocean Way’s receptionist, turned to the other and proclaimed, “You’ve got this in one take, Andy, I know it.”

They were pros, of course they did.

But still - out on the road, away from everything they had ever known, doing the job of a working musician night after night...they had to wonder, sometimes, if they really did know.

Stan was a rock star, the only one among them (even as T-Bone possessed an impeccable pedigree himself), and more importantly, the one who had succeeded. T-Bone’s first gambit at success had not panned out, and now here he was trying again as a solo and you had to wonder...how many times did you get to fail and then keep going?

David watched Stan flirt right back with this girl who probably thought that song was about her and wondered if they could do it, even as they might fail. It was a possibility. She was onto him, the way in which a girl with plenty of experience would be.
Yeah buddy, you just keep talking.

As she gave him a cold shoulder, in a manner of speaking, sashaying her way back down the aisle to T-Bone, Stan smirked and winked at David.

Easy come, easy go, right?

David’s heart made a lurch which he was familiar with, even as he didn’t want to be.

He looked at the blonde, dancing around T-Bone, desperate for his attention and experienced a moment of such absolute empathy it left him aching and breathless.

“Dave,” his brother said softly, coming to stand beside him. “Look what I found.”

It was a copy of *Stories We Could Tell*, which they had been listening to in the van for the past few weeks, all of them singing along to the Everlys’ take on country rock, the title song especially fitting for their current travels. There was a night in which David and Stan had harmonized so perfectly on the song, it felt like -

Andy grinned at him, expecting David to instinctively respond to this moment of synchronicity.

- falling in love.

“Wow, it’s like it’s following us around,” David quipped, and Andy snickered.

At least he still knew how to talk to somebody. With his prescription sunglasses on he could watch Stan without being obvious about it.

“Dude, what are you doing?” Andy asked.

Scratch that.

David sighed, wondering how long he was going to feel so obsessed.

(stage fright)

The Bottom Line was a fairly better class of shithole, but still rather basic as clubs went, despite its fame. But T-Bone realized they needed a bit of time and space to prepare themselves every night and so arranged for them to decamp elsewhere as the band got ready.

“Where’s my black jacket?” Andy asked, looking slightly frantic.

David stood staring into the mirror on the wall. It was pitted in a couple places but not enough to fully warp the reflection staring back at him. This might be the last time they were onstage together, and what was he going to do with all the days after this? It wasn’t entirely certain if Stan was going to Europe with them. He felt like he was living inside one of T-Bone’s acerbic articulate intellectual love songs.

First he would fall in love like a building imploding and not be able to control his emoting.
Then he would spend a few speechless weeks goggling his beloved and reading Dante and reading Keats.

“You’ll have to be a little more specific.”

“My black jacket, the one I wear onstage.”
David sighed. Life was going on and he was the only one who wanted to sit down right in the middle of it all and start crying.

“It’s not in the road case?”

“Would I be asking you if it was?”

“I guess not.”

“Man, what is wrong? You sound, like, totally morose.”

_I guess it’s finally time._ “I’m so fucked, that’s all.”

“Why? Is it your voice?”

“No. I just... remember when you had that crush on Laura Agonista?”

Andy let out a wistful sigh. “Oh dude... that was _rough_.”

“Right? So I’m having a moment like that.”

Andy raised an eyebrow into his thick fringe. “A crush? On who?”

“Somebody totally out of my league and utterly impossible.”

“Impossible because they’re straight?”

David leaned against the graffiti’ed wall, feeling like he wanted to die. “Yeah.”

Andy crossed the room to his brother and squeezed his shoulder. “I’m sorry. Is it something that might fade because…” His voice trailed off to imply something he wasn’t sure he wanted to say, or needed to say.

“Maybe? I dunno. But man, this just _sucks_. I feel like I’m gonna go out there and forget all the goddamn words.”

Andy couldn’t pretend he didn’t know now. “Oh man - it’s Stan, isn’t it?”

There was a rap at the door. “Ten minutes, guys!” their tour manager called out.

“Okay thanks!” they replied in unison.

David softly knocked his head against the wall. “I’m sooooo pathetic.”

Andy rubbed David’s back. “Yeah, you are. But you know what will make you feel better? Helping me find my jacket.”

David looked at Andy in the mirror, grinning. “Fuck you.”

Andy grinned, and the mirror mirrored their twinned expression almost like one of those photographs where someone’s reflection is reproduced to near-infinity. “Backatcha, bro.”

_(you’ve got me stunned)_

A rare rainy night, and coming down hard enough to provide its own percussive accompaniment to David’s meanderings at the piano. Andy was out on a date, so David was left to work on a melody in fits and starts, as their new producer’s mandate to work on songs for their project was uppermost
in his mind.

The buzzer startled him when it sounded. This wasn’t their house so they had been careful about inviting other people over, not many people knew where they were currently living. At first he thought it might be Andy, having forgotten his key, so he went over to the security panel by the front door and hit the button for the gate. Then the doorbell sounded minutes later and he was shocked to see Stan’s lanky form dripping water onto the doormat. David could only stammer and invite him in, hurrying off to fetch a bath towel and put on a pot of coffee.

“Thanks man, I kinda got caught out in that.”

“What brings you all the way up here?”

Stan had shed his wet sneakers and took a seat on the couch, toweling his hair.

“I thought you might want some help - I ran into Andy at Dan Tana’s earlier.”

David willed himself not to blush. Andrew, you are a dead man.

“I appreciate it; sometimes it feels like it takes me hours to work out a basic structure.”

“Yeah it’s always tough, you might have one little part and then you’re thinking…well now what?”

David laughed along and thought oh this is okay, we’ll just talk about music and I won’t even think about him.

“Oh…”

Stan put his feet on the conversation table and wiggled his cotton sock-clad toes. “No lyrics yet?”

“Yeah I’ve got...some. Let me see if that coffee’s ready.”

He thought about what he had written when they got back to LA.

*Oh down comes the night, just another forever.*

...*how long…*

*How long till you see we’re in this together.*

...*how long…*

It meant several different things to him, it was about his impossible feelings, but it was also about what they were doing. What they were meant to do.

*I don’t want you to be the one I remember.*

“I can’t do this,” he muttered to himself. “I can’t do this, I don’t have to do this.”

When he returned to the living room, mugs in hand, he nearly dropped them to see Stan flipping through his lyrics notebook.

“Hey, this ‘Spark of Life’ one, I really like that. Sing me the melody.”

“It’s just the hook, really. So far, I mean.”
“Okay, let’s hear it.”

It was something David had done countless times in his life, singing cold to someone - his brother, his parents, his uncle, his family, friends, strangers. He knew how to do it, to be the voice in that moment at the command of others, the thing he was born to do. His was a voice of exquisite beauty, or so he had been told. And for the very first time, he wanted to use it to impress this man before him in a very specific fashion, even as he knew it was all folly.

He set down the mugs and closed his eyes to summon the power within.

We are moving through the night
and my heart is beating
this new rhythm.
I am reaching for the light
that you are shining
you have given
oh - the spark of life.

David let it flow out of him, molten silver but also crystal, even as he was missing his brother’s high harmony. He imbued it with all the beauty he knew how to create.

“Damn, that’s amazing,” Stan said after the echo died away.

“How do you think the arrangement should go?” David asked, taking a tentative sip of his coffee. “Oh, uh - if you take it any way other than black there’s cream and sugar in the kitchen.”

“Thanks, I do need me some sugar, Sugah,” Stan replied, in a theatrically Southern drawl, and David let out a breathy laugh.

“Don’t you know what it should be?” Stan asked as they moved into the kitchen.

“I always let Andy work on that stuff, he’s so intense when it comes to the music.”

Stan sipped his coffee after adding a couple heaping teaspoons of sugar, his expression thoughtful. “Andy’s the oldest, right?”

“Yeah, by thirteen minutes.”

“You do let him lead, I’ve noticed. Like, you always look at him. You don’t say, so what do you think, but I can tell that’s what you’re doing.”

Can you tell what I’m thinking right now? Andy wished that the other could, it would make things easier even as it would complicate everything.

“Yeah it’s that brother thing, I guess. You don’t have a brother, do you?”

“I have four of them,” Stan replied and David frowned, then realized he was referring to the Heartbreakers. “And so that’s four varying shades of annoying.”

David laughed as Stan smirked and he thought do you even know how gorgeous you are?

Well of course he did. David remembered the near-constant presence of women wherever they went while on tour. Like it was just another part of the routine.
Stop it, he chided himself. But oh...he couldn’t. He just couldn’t stop feeling what he was feeling to look at this man. He wanted to know him in all ways, because he was so easy to know, easy to talk to. When he moved within the boundaries of the other world he had become a part of, a place where he was accepted solely as his true self, he had yet to meet anyone so easy to talk to and be understood by.

“If you really wanna know what I think, it sounds like it should be dramatic in some way. Almost like in a movie.”

“Huh, that’s interesting. I’ll have to think about that for a little while.”

“Sure.”

They wandered back to the couch and discussed the sessions thus far, their own ideas as well as the ones Mike had come up in producer mode.

“Lemme tell you somethin’ ‘bout Campbell. He may seem kinda odd sometimes, but this is all he cares about - which is why he’s a great producer, even though he hasn’t done it much for other people. But we’re here for you, honestly.”

“We’re so grateful,” David said. “Especially after T-Bone told us he wanted to produce us but didn’t have the time.”

“Yeah he’s got his own thing to look after. But hell, it’s not like Petty is gonna be leadin’ anybody anywhere anytime soon, so…”

“That was really awful, I can’t even imagine -”

“Oh Tommy is the stubbornist sumbitch you can think of. He’ll be fine.”

David laughed in disbelief, not meaning to, but the reports of Tom’s broken hand were pretty gruesome. “Really?!”

“That man will not allow anyone to tell him he can’t do somethin.’ Never in his life. Goddamn, he’ll be dead and kickin’ up a fuss on the other side, talkin’ ‘bout ‘I ain’t dead, what the hell you mean?!’”

They laughed again and David ran out of things to say. He wanted this moment to go on, quietly, just the two of them sitting there, drinking coffee and appreciating the company of the other.

Was he on a date too? Couldn’t have been, but maybe? What did Andy say to him?!

“It’s really nice that you came by. I’m sure you had better things to do.”

“On a night like this? This is the best thing to do, right here.”

“Are you sure about that?” David teased, then felt himself flush. Don’t flirt with him, moron.

Stan grinned, but didn’t answer the question.

See, he can totally tell what you’re thinking. Just stop it.

Stan had set down his coffee and stared into space. David counted seconds until a couple of minutes had elapsed.

“What are you thinking about?” he asked quietly.
“It’s been a year already.”

And David knew what he meant. His heart accelerated.

*Hey, when we get back to LA, we’re gonna get to work, I promise. Okay? Okay. So don’t forget me! How could we?!

(They stared at each other longer than was necessary, and David was dying inside again.)

How could I, you mean - how could anyone forget you after they’ve heard you sing.

(A grin, preening with erotically-charged pride but also embarrassment.)

We’ll haunt you, I promise.

(Stan leaned in close and whispered, “Maybe you already do.” and then walked away.)

“*Tempus fugit*, isn’t that the saying?”

“Yep. So **did** you forget?”

This conversation had turned into something else entirely. David had to proceed with caution.

“Not a single day.”

“Me neither but - well, if things were different -”

“You don’t have to explain it if you don’t want to. It’s okay.”

Stan laughed, a kind of high-pitched shaky laugh. “It’s really **not**, but damn, I like you a whole lot and I’m bein’ selfish, tramplin’ on your feelings and all.”

“No, it’s okay - we want to work with you more than anything.”

“Lemme tell you somethin’: you think that, but you’re always wrong. There’s always somethin’ else you want more than anythin’. Somethin’ that’s not the thing you thought it was.”

“Yeah I know. But I think maybe we just shouldn’t talk about this, not right now.”

Stan shrugged and finished his coffee and not long after he took his leave out in the rain. David asked that he drive safely - for a variety of reasons - and then sagged against the door, shaking his head.

When Andy returned around 2:30 he was surprised to find David waiting up for him.

“Hey man -”

“What the fuck did you think you were doing?!”

His brother stopped short, then shrugged as he slid off his jacket. “Stan asked what you were doing tonight, I said you were at home working on a song, and he said he needed to talk to you. So did you? **Talk?**”

“Almost. But I decided it would be better if we didn’t.”

Andy threw up his hands in frustration. “But why? This was the perfect opportunity!”

“Because sometimes you can like somebody, or the idea of somebody, but not **want** them. That’s his deal.”
“But you said -”

“I know what I said, and that is what happened. But he doesn’t want me, he just likes me. He probably imagines what it would be like but that’s all. And that’s okay, I can live with that.”

“Wow man, really? ‘Cause I’d be going crazy right about now.”

“You missed that part. That happened hours ago.”

Andy sighed, kicking off his shoes and picking up his guitar, coming to sit next to David on the couch. “I always miss the good parts.”

They sat in silence for a while, Andy noodling around with chord progressions.

“So you didn’t even kiss him?”

“Fuck off.”

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