

WHAT WE DO

IS SECRET

By

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FORMING

Filthy leaned against his amp and shook his head. Every tattoo and all two hundred fifty pounds of his 6'5" frame felt the futility. If almost a decade of friendship, years of bonding over punk rock, absurd and obscene movies, and their band's volatile history had taught him anything it's that leveling with Darby was like watching a toothless hooker tackle a piece of peanut brittle - nothing but lip and going nowhere fast. He'd drowned actresses in fake blood, popped squibs on pit bulls who were more cooperative. He resolved to cold, hard reason. "We got two weeks till the gig," he said, "and a couple good candidates. We need to sew this up tonight."

"Fuck it. Cancel the show," Darby snarled then ground his smoke into the sawdust on the shop floor with his boot, keeping his eyes on the door. He crunched his beer can on the long, scarred surface of the wood-cutting router and tossed it behind his back. It rattled and settled under a half-charred hobby horse Filthy had made and torched for *Children of the Night*, this cheese-dick fright flick that had just wrapped shooting in Concord. Darby cracked another PBR from the six (now 2) pack beside him, guzzled and dribbled into his bright blonde beard. "Ain't my fault," he belched, his gravelly voice gurgling rusty razor blades, "none of these bitches got any balls."

"No way," Filthy said. "I've never cancelled a show. It's unprofessional." He'd even handled bass auditions like a casting call, taken Polaroids of each prospect because it felt legit and the camera was laying around the shop. Darby had suggested they try a casting couch, which made Filthy chuckle, but this was serious business. "Look," he said and

spread four photos across the router from Darby. "A couple of these dudes were alright. What about the dread?" He pushed a picture of a guy with a glassy-eyed smile toward Darby who barely regarded it.

"Too slow, mon," Darby said. "And he'd probably turn us into the Clash." He returned to watching the door, tapping his stubborn fingernails on the router.

"That could be cool, like the Clash" suggested Justin, Darby's hefty half-brother, from behind his drums, through a mouth full of Bojangle's fries. "I love those beats." He tapped his feet on the kick and hi-hat pedals, grunting the bassline from "Guns of Brixton."

"Shut up, Tugboat." Darby fired back. The tattoo of an amber eye on the back of his head, identical to his, saw enough. "We don't do reggae."

Justin stopped cold, shuddering.

Darby surveyed the photos for a second, pushed one of a blue haired girl toward Filthy. "Her. I pick her." He took a swig and licked his lips. "I needs me some new pussy."

Figures, Filthy thought, but no dice. Blue Hair had bigger issues. "Her tiny fingers could barely hold down a string let alone follow a riff."

"Bet she could hold down my dick."

"Ok. Fuck this." Filthy held up the picture of the lanky kid with the curly hair hanging all over his face. The plain white button-down shirt. Barely in his own photo, blink and you'll miss him. But he knew his way around a bass. "I'm calling this guy," he read the back and showed the shot around. "Lee."

Darby snatched the photo and almost threw it back instantly. But he looked once vaguely, twice vaguely recalling, a third time up and down, lingered low and swigged, licked his lips and then threw the photo back.

"Kid looks like a poodle been out in the rain."

Three knocks on the shop door. Darby grinned. "Giddy up."

A small, ashy dude in an overcoat poked his head in the door like a chimney rat checking if the coast was clear. He scoped the whole joint in seconds, all 500 square feet of it. The router. The table and circular saws. The belt sander. Shelves on every wall populated with loose hand tools, lumber, lead piping and cans of paint. Empty tanks of kerosene leaning against two oversized styrofoam tombstones. All circling the gear in the center. Filthy's Marshall half-stack, his Gibson SG guitar. The Ampeg bass cabinet Worm left behind. Justin's ramshackle drum kit. Darby's mic amp. And dangling from the rafters, ten feet above, the giant fanged spider from *Tarantula 3D*, Filthy's finest creation. Darby grabbed a spoon from the back of his jeans and sauntered toward his fixer. "Got my trusty rusty! We ready to ride?"

When Darby brought these kinds of random dudes around, Filthy's sneakers felt tighter. His head hardened. His glucose spiked from stress and he was sure if he looked in his insulin kit he'd find a syringe missing. Bad enough these scumbags got a mark on his shop. Worse was once they showed up, Darby was useless. Or gone. Nothing had changed. Prison hadn't humbled Darby at all, only sharpened his edge.

"I'm calling Lee!" he repeated.

"Fine, call the poodle." On his way out the door Darby pointed his middle finger at his hind-eye tattoo, slightly revealing another identical eye inked on the palm of his right hand. His thumb cocked like a pistol hammer. "See you fuck-os later."

"Dammit," Filthy said as the door shut.

Justin slurped the last of his soda through his straw.

INSTANT HIT

From '88 to '91, Uncle Daddy stomped the southeastern tour circuit, packed dusty biker bars, chicken-wire stages in cowboy taverns, and all-ages hardcore matinees from Miami to Memphis. Led by Filthy on guitar and Darby on "mouth", with Marco on drums and Worm on bass, their twin demo tapes *SQUEAL* and *SWALLOW* sold over three hundred copies apiece. T-shirts, ten bucks. The songs ALL TORE UP and RURAL SWINE became bonafide Southern punk anthems. *TrashZine* defined their sound as "no-apologies punkabilly; three chords and a trail of tears."

Uncle Daddy's status as regional punk legends cemented at a show in Jacksonville, NC, June 1991. A drunk Marine in a Def Leppard t-shirt, the only crew cut in a mob of mohawks and mullets, had been taunting the crowd, shoving girls into the pit and throwing elbows at anyone who dared dance within swiping distance. Darby's irritation sharpened through the first few songs. Nobody pushed his audience around except him.

"Hey anyone know what's got nine arms and sucks? Def Fuckin' Leppard."

Cheers and applause.

"God I hate marines. Navy boys, now they're the best. Nothin' like garglin' real seaman."

"How many jarheads does it take to change a light bulb? Three. One to hold the bulb, one to climb the ladder and screw it in, and one to shoot the other two in the head."

Laughter and whistling.

All the attention amped the Marine's attitude. He dodged every verbal bullet, vented his pent-up aggression by tossing his body into anyone nearby. Song by song, joke by killing joke, the crowd sunk toward the back bar, leaving the Marine ample space to stumble by the stage.

Darby dedicated a new song, OPERATION DESERT SHITSTORM, to the Marine. "This one's for you, cadet," he saluted and clicked his heels.

The Marine shook his Heineken. He released his thumb from the bill of the bottle, drowning Darby in foam. He pumped his fists and shouted, "Woooo! Wooooo!"

Darby curled a knuckle, his chest and jeans soaked, but loosened and let out a feral howl when Filthy juiced the gain on his fuzzbox and ripped the opening chords.

Worm and Marco locked in a locomotive cadence.

Darby leaned damn near nose to nose with the Marine, barking the opening lines.

Al Sadaam alaikum!

W'alaikam Sadaam!

We don't need you anymore

Cuz we got bombs!

The Marine swilled what was left of his beer. Spit it in Darby's face. Turned to face the room, celebrate his awesomeness.

Darby swiped the bottle out of the Marine's hand and smashed it across the guy's crew cut.

Shards of green glass glistened on his jarred head. Blood ran from his forehead and found his left eye. He stumbled forward and threw a wild fist.

Darby ducked and gashed the bit of the bottle he still held up into the Marine's armpit, never stopped barking, all before the first chorus.

The band kept rolling too stunned to stop.

A vindicated "OH!" from the crowd, cheering loudest of the night.

When the song was over the club owner and his goons barged onto the stage, unplugged their gear and shut Uncle Daddy down.

An ambulance hauled the Marine away. The paper said his temple would heal but the left arm was paralyzed. Within a year, Marco married his woman, had a son, and moved to San Diego. Worm, that key-locking-in-the-van idiot, went to NA for weed and found Jesus. The last Filthy saw of Darby for three and half years was Darby kicking and squealing in the back of a police car.

M A D D A D D Y

Filthy loitered outside Lee's building, an old 4-story brick hotel cum apartments in downtown Charlotte, and admired how the Carolina sunset bled into a purple bruise behind the red bricks. No neon, no frills. Just an honest structure and the fading final rays of daylight. Charlotte's the pits, he thought, just vomited skyscrapers, bankers and suburban lawns. But it had its benefits. In LA he could spend weeks rigging firewalls on prop houses, or in his dad's shop sketching set pieces he'd later destroy on camera. He'd lost count of how many times he'd seen every band that ever mattered -- punk: the enemy of sleep -- and partied their dicks into the dirt afterhours. When Hollywood started coming East to save money, he got ahead of the game and bought a house in NC with a huge detached garage he turned into a shop. In LA a hundred union jerkoffs could detonate a helicopter in an abandoned parking lot. But in the southeast he was the only jerkoff in three states with credentials. And he'd paid for his house what some Hollywood clowns pay annually in rent for their shitty condos. He slid the cassettes into his pockets. As he crossed the street toward Lee's building he thought I'd really like to blow this place up.

The elevator bell rang and doors started closing. Filthy barreled across the marble foyer floor, his sneakers squeaking under heavy footfalls, and caught the door just before it could squeeze his hand off. A woman inside gasped, startled. "Boo!" he said lightly and the woman grinned, maybe a little embarrassed. He checked the number on his hand, 402, and the 4 was lit on the panel. He smiled again at the woman then assumed the

customary blank stare forward, checking out her mutated image in the dented, reflective elevator doors. Tiny little thing, demure and scrunched into the corner beside him, black hair pulled back into a pony tail with a couple wavy grays emerging. Maybe in her 50s, wearing a weathered apron and carrying a bucket of cleaning supplies. He could tell she was trying not to look too, stealing little glances at his tattoos while the elevator took its sweet, rickety time climbing floors. If they got stuck maybe he'd tell her about all the bands' logos inked on his arms. Or see if she responds to celebrity gossip. Tell her sordid stories of cokehead actresses and closet-gay actors. He could always pass time with women by airing Hollywood's dirty laundry. Who knows? Maybe she'd give him a prostate exam with her yellow rubber gloves. Nothing invasive, just a little tickle. An eyebrow raised at the idea.

The elevator rumbled to a halt. The bell rang and doors opened. He gave a you-first gesture and she obliged with a nod and a soft thank you.

He found 402 easily but before he knocked he glanced to his left and noticed the woman watching him from the opposite corner of the hall, carrying her bucket close to her hips with both hands. He waved, but he didn't know why.

A thicket of black curls hanging over pouted lips peered out from under the chain lock. "Hey Lee, it's Phil. Um, Filthy. I got those tapes for you. Can I come in?" The door shut, locks scraped undone, then swung open as Lee turned and walked down a long hardwood hallway that emptied into a living room with west-facing windows, the sunset in bird's eye view of Charlotte's jagged skyline.

"Damn dude, this place is tits!" Filthy let himself in. "How long you been here?"

The place smelled like cumin and onions, and a hint of weed. When he passed the kitchen nook he noticed a skillet on the stove with a few stranded grains of rice, a couple kidney beans and big round caramelized onions.

Lee sat slouched on an old green couch and hovered over a bowl on a coffee table in the middle of the living room. Behind the couch stood a bookcase filled with records with an old Panasonic hi-fi flanking it under a window.

"Damn, how many pieces you got here, a thousand?" Filthy said. He pulled out a couple records at random. *Monk's Music. Mingus Mingus Mingus.*

Lee put his bowl down. "Ff. Fff. Fifteen th-thirty two," he answered with a little effort, his voice soft and reserved but confident after an initial challenge.

Ff-finally a word, Filthy thought. No wonder the kid barely spoke. The kid Barely Spoke. He checked out what was on the hi-fi. Sun Ra, *Space is the Place*. The jacket beside it was crazy. A guy in Egyptian robes staring up at the sky with two spires holding a clear orb ascending from his headdress. Sun Ra. Why was that name familiar? He turned around, about to ask about the record, when he noticed the upright piano on the opposite wall.

"Oh man, nice hobo teeth!" Filthy said. He walked over to the upright, sat down on the stool and played a short, white key/black key scale: "one tooth there, one tooth gone, one tooth there, one tooth gone."

Lee laughed lightly through an awkward smile, holding his lips close to his teeth.

Two spiral bound notebooks of sheet music were spread open under the lamp above the keys, all scratched with notes he hardly understood. On top were three framed

photos. The one in the middle caught his eye first, the guy in the baby blue butterfly collar with the afro and miracle smile. "Daaamn! Is that Smokey Robinson?"

Lee nodded, his head hung toward his bare toes.

Filthy looked a little closer. Smokey's arms surrounded a bald black guy, tall and proud, a white woman who looked like a younger, more vivacious and supple version of the woman in the elevator, her cheeks flushed red, and a little kid with curls in the bottom corner, smiling with all his teeth. "Where was this taken?"

"Detroit," Lee said a little glumly but without stumbling.

"All right, Detroit! Ever listen to MC5, the Motor City Five?"

Lee shook his head.

"Man, they're like the godfathers of punk. Them and the Stooges, also from Detroit. You should listen to *Kick Out the Jams*." Then it clicked. "That's where I knew that name! They do a Sun Ra song," Filthy furrowed his brow and snapped his fingers.

"Starship! It's wild," he played an abrupt air guitar, "tons of noise and weird rhythms, and feedback."

"Ss-ouuun, ss-ouuun," Lee started and stopped, breathed deep through his nose, frustrated. The way Lee crooked his mouth as he tried to speak looked like it hurt. His eyes rolled up a little as if pleading for his brain to let the words come out. "Ssoouuunds like SsSun Ra." He finally relaxed, and plopped himself back on the couch.

Filthy laughed. "How did you meet Smokey Robinson? Is he like your cousin or something?" He put the photo back on top of the piano, only half joking. The hard flash of the photo lightened Smokey's complexion, almost matching Lee's.

Lee shook his head but leaked a little smile and made eye contact with Filthy for the first time since checking who was at the door. "Nno. Just a sshh, a sshh a show my dad got ti-, got tiic," Lee slammed his fist into the couch cushion, "got passes for."

"Nice. My old man worked in movies as a carpenter. Is yours in music, like a producer or something?"

"Nno. He worked for Chryyyysler."

"What brought you to Charlotte?"

Lee folded his arms, shook his head and then stared out the window.

Filthy fished the tapes out of his pockets and set them on the coffee table with a piece of paper. "These are our demos," he said, "and a list of the songs we usually play. And a couple covers. I see you're into jazz, do you know Screamin' Jay Hawkins?"

Lee lit up a little bit as he turned the tapes around in his hands and inspected the list.

"We do a badass version of 'I Put a Spell on You'," Filthy said, bouncing his leg. "Real deal but faster. Nastier. Not like that Creedence Cockwater Revival bullshit."

Lee laughed, a full bellied agreement.

Filthy felt like he might have finally gotten somewhere with the kid. "Think you can learn these by Thursday? We got a gig a week from Saturday and we'll need to practice a few times."

Lee nodded, still looking at the tapes. "Yeah," he said. "I can do that."

"Great," Filthy's knees cracked as he stood from the piano stool. "7:00, same place as before." He offered a handshake but Lee was busy opening the cellophane on the

cassettes, clearly eager to dig in. A good sign. Filthy just said "ok man, see you then. I'll let myself out."

As he opened the door he heard Lee yell Thanks.

"No problem. See you Thursday!"

Back in the elevator, he had no doubt Lee was the right choice musically. The kid surrounded himself with sound; even his voice had an involuntary rhythm to it. Nothing else in the apartment pointed to any other hobby or obsession. No sports memorabilia, no porno mags, not even a television. He cooked, which meant he could keep himself fed, more sensibly than Justin anyway. But his stutter could be a disaster around all the loudmouths and lowlifes in Uncle Daddy's circle of fiends. How long could he expect this kid last around those animals? Once they smelled weakness they were insatiable. Darby would eat him alive.

WHITE MINORITY

They nailed the last hit of PIGTAILS like they'd been playing together for years, not just an hour. The ringing in Filthy's ears from blasting through a short set of tunes was welcome like an old friend. Uncle Daddy coming around again, minus one for the moment. With Darby working in the Outer Banks for a few days Filthy handled vocals, which benefitted two fold. It pumped him up to sing and they could actually get things done. Run through songs a few times without anyone complaining or forgetting their lines. He'd handled the local press, done an interview for the Charlotte Weekender, hung fliers all over town. But the bigger news, the job and the opportunity it could give the band, he kept to himself. Much as he wanted to rally the troops, better to let them play it natural.

Justin dropped his sticks and got up from behind his drums, said "gotta wizz," and made for the door.

Lee thumbed through his notebook of music paper, every tune mapped out. He stopped on a page, looked it over, and started playing the odd turnaround in ALL TORE UP again with the volume on his bass turned off. The amp hummed beside him, waiting for a signal.

Filthy set his guitar down then looked over Lee's shoulder at the page. A few notes but mostly chord outlines. A, D5, Baug4, an F with a squiggle next to it. He pointed to the squiggle. "What's that mean?"

"That's where the break is, just the bbeat and ffeedback, before the ccchorus," Lee answered.

Filthy nodded. He understood the point in the song, but he still didn't quite understand Lee. The stutter came and went. He could almost read it in Lee's posture. When he spoke his head sunk into his shoulders or faced the floor. If he had trouble with a word he'd sink further, his shoulders closed in on his ears. His neck almost disappeared. But when he played, he stood arrow straight, confident and poised. Never fudged a note or missed a transition after the second try.

"Shit man," Filthy said, "you got a better grip on these songs than Worm ever did."

Justin returned, walking like he was shaking his dick from inside his sweat pants, and hoisted himself up on to the table of the router.

"Justin, how's this feeling to you, not bad right?"

"Yeah it's okay," he said. "I never seen nobody play punk bass with their fingers before. Where'd you learn to play like that?"

Lee shrugged, slouched a little, "Ccc," he stopped. Took a breath and a beat. "Cccollege." First word the kid had said all night other than Hi, and Yeah when asked if he was ready to play a song.

Justin's eyes glinted. A grin pushed his chubby cheeks aside. "Cccollege, huh? Where'd you go? Cccclemsen?"

"Jesus," Filthy said under his breath, tapped his foot and fidgeted with his keys. He pulled an eighth of weed and some papers from his pocket, walked over to the router and slapped Justin's knees together. "Get your ass off my gear, dude."

Justin scooted himself off, taking a butt-swipe of sawdust with him. "Ever listen to the Cccramps, Lee?" he asked. "You could totally sing 'Mad Daddy'. Ma ma ma ma mad mad daddy!"

Filthy leaned over the router table, cleared some seeds away from his stash, rolling loose grass up a folded newspaper with the flap of the paper pack, and kept a corner of his eye on Justin. No wonder he got nowhere with girls and had no friends. His own brother barely tolerated him. The kid had as much class as a turd in a tiara.

Lee's voice shrunk. "No. I went to Eeastern Mmmichigan for music and ch.. ch," He stopped and furrowed his face, started breathing heavily through his nose, eyes closed. "Cello performance," he finished and opened his eyes.

"Sure as shit wasn't communication," Justin snorted.

"So Lee," Filthy said as he licked the glue on the paper and rolled the joint shut, "lemme ask you this. Why'd you audition for Uncle Daddy? Isn't this too easy for you?" He lit a cherry and inhaled down to his toes.

Lee picked his head up a little. "No, I needed a change. I left school because I didn't wanna spend my life in an oorchestra anymore. It's boring as shit."

"Do you listen to punk at all?" Exhale. Pass to Lee.

"I like the Dead Kennedys and Bad Brains. And slaa, slaa, Slaayer." Inhale.

"Really?" Filthy cocked his head. "Wouldn't peg you for a Slayer fan."

Lee exhaled like an asthmatic dragon and coughed till a tear came to his eye. "Their music's really bizarre." Coughed some more. "Breaks a lot of rules of theory. I transcribed *Reign in Bbblood* for a string quartet for my theecesis." Pass to Justin.

Justin slapped Lee's hand away. "Fuck that shit, man," Justin sneered. "I'm drug and alcohol free. I don't poison myself like that." Sure, Filthy thought, and all that fast food you eat is nature's bounty. Filthy retrieved the joint from Lee and was about to ask about the Slayer thing but Justin had other plans. His fat fists rested on his hips, like he was taking a stand; he stood in front of his kit, really close to Lee, as if positioning for battle. "So Phil tells me you're a Oreo".

Lee turned his head sharply toward Justin and started pulling at the bottom of his t-shirt, deep breaths through his nose.

"Yeah he said he saw a picture of you and your folks and that all you could see was your dad's teeth."

"I never said that," Filthy corrected. "All I said was it was cool you met Smokey Robinson." He took another hit and tried to pass to Lee, who didn't notice. He tapped Lee on the arm, nothing.

"No, you said his parents got jungle fever and that's why he stutters, cuz he can't figure out whether to talk regular or talk jive."

"Dude, you're full of shit." Smoke got in Filthy's eyes from sucking the joint down to the quick right under his nose, singed the pads of his fingers.

Lee huffed harder, and locked his stare on Justin. The skin around his ears glowed red. His shoulders rose and fell.

"So who picks the cotton out of the aspirin bottle, your mom or--"

Before Justin could finish his sentence, Lee shoved him into the drum kit. Crash cymbals collided. The floor tom rumbled under his butt and broke his fall. Filthy sprang in as Justin picked himself up and lunged toward Lee. He could feel Justin leaning into

him, trying to react, but he stood his ground. Lee barely moved but had reverted his posture. He sunk his hands into his pockets and shook like he'd just gotten a chill.

"Just shut up and play," he told Justin, walking him back behind the kit by his neck. "You know your brother woulda done worse," which was true. Darby was an asshole in a lot of ways but one thing he wasn't was racist, not even as a joke. "We need to get this shit tight as a choirboy's asshole. Trust me, it'll be worth it. Can you do that?" Justin mumbled while he picked up the fallen cymbals. Filthy grabbed his guitar and turned the amp back on. Under a wave of feedback, he leaned in to Lee's ear and said "Right on, dude. Don't take any shit from that little bastard."

Lee nodded and wiped his nose with his wrist.

"All right!" he called out over the feedback drone. "Let's do 'Finger' again. Count us off, Tugboat!"

Justin raised his sticks over his head, scowled at Filthy, then clicked his sticks.

"1, 2, 3, 4!"

O R P H A N S

Rats. Dead fuckin rats. Everywhere under the church by the ocean. Enough to fill every pew a few times. Take cheese communion in praise of the Holy Rodent. The bones of their fathers as altars. Darby shimmied through the crawlspace below the Ocracoke Baptist Church, throwing every rat carcass in a bag, snapping the skulls off skeletons and hiding them under his hard hat. Only perk of an HVAC license was he could get hired by some cheap-ass contractor to do jobs no one else touch with a ten foot dildo. Send him out to some rundown church or office building to clean crawlspaces and above ceilings, tear out dead duct work and take measurements for replacements. All at a wage only a felon could be thankful for. He didn't mind a little consecrated dirt trapped in his coveralls, fiberglass in his beard, the salt-air mildew that seeped through his respirator. The construction and framing guys had already come and gone, good old boys who took three full days to plot how they'd resurrect the building without doing a stitch of real work. Not a soul around except for the rat holocaust filling his bags. No other crew. No supervisor. No Zoë.

Nobody on the beach in November either. He brought his lunch to the end of the pier near the job site, opened his Olde English 40, unpacked three fifty-cent hot dogs with chili that looked like they fished it out of a port-a-john, and took a whole sixty minutes to finish. He tried to remember some of his lyrics but most of them were broken. Something about a pretty little princess in a pink tutu, a barbed wire fence and a chicken coop, na na na na Finger Lickin' Good. Most of his choruses were song titles shouted a few times.

Those were easy. Filling in the blanks not so much. Last thing he wanted to do was listen to the old tapes, dig up those demons. Hell if he could decipher his own rambling let alone remember what he might have written down once. The crowd came to see him perform, to witness whatever horror he could inflict on them or himself, not for lyrical accuracy. He swished the backwash at the bottom of the bottle and gagged when it hit his tongue. "Ugh!" he spat then shouted his best Dennis Hopper at the nearest seagull. "One thing I can't fucking stand is warm beer, it makes me fuckin' puke!"

He threw the bottle as far out to sea as he could.

On his back under the church, he wrapped his boots around the last run of duct and tried to yank it down. With only two feet of wiggle room from dirt below to nails in the floor above, getting any kind of leverage was damn near impossible. He'd cut clean around the run but whatever bible-thumping genius installed this system reinforced all the seams around the elbows with mastic, a thick industrial glue known to ruin sheet metal snips and clothing. "Fuckin' bat shit Baptist sadist," he coughed through his respirator.

Why did Filthy have such a hard-on for Uncle Daddy these days anyway? He wrestled with the duct. Run out of suckers to tell Hollywood stories to? Nobody needs a house fire or a half-eaten werewolf on film somewhere? He bashed his boot heel into an opening near an elbow, widening the gap with each blow until he finally knocked the run loose; the elbow still clung to the joist. An avalanche of rats fell from the hole, tumbled down the duct like furry rocks and piled onto the dirt.

And why Justin? He kicked the pile and scattered the bodies. Kid was a decent drummer, sure, and he knew the songs but Darby had been trying to shake the ugly little

tugboat off his tail for twenty-two years. He knew Justin kept a stash of Zoë's panties, that he sniffed them and shoved them in his mouth while he tugged, the image of catching him seared permanently in Darby's brain. He gagged, grabbed the duct elbow where it dangled, still screwed into the joist, and shook it. The sharp edge of snipped sheet metal rubbed against his worn gloves.

Whoever Filthy gets to play bass, he shook harder, better be able to pull some pussy and be willing to share or else this whole thing's a waste of time. The elbow came loose suddenly and the drag from his grip cut his glove and gashed his right hand. "Jesus Motherfucking Christ, you cock sucking bastard!" He ripped off his glove. The cut sliced straight across the eye tattooed on his palm and bled like hyper-stigmata. He clasped his hand under his armpit to quell the flood, shimmied back out of the crawlspace toward low simmering daylight, gave the church a bloody finger and called the day done.

He stood shirtless, wavering over the hotel sink. The room throbbed. Cold water ran over his wound, washed blue black blood onto his collection of rat skulls, carried all the consecrated dirt and holy shit down the drain. A snake of bloody duct tape, peeled off his hand, laid on the vanity under a mirror that took up the entire bathroom wall. Hard light against yellow tile drowned the whole place in piss sepia. He stared at his palm. The sliced tattoo looked back at him.

"What have they done to its eyes?" he grinned.

He shook another pill onto his tongue, chased with a taste of Aristocrat vodka.

Every fleck of fiberglass crystal on his skin tingled. Under his skin, tiny needles prickled. The warm swell of nausea before euphoria churned low. He dried his hand on a

complimentary towel and couldn't feel a thing. Not the cut, not the terry cloth, nothing but the inside/outside itch. His eyes rolled back. His stomach revolted. He lurched over the toilet and lost his lunch. The hot dog chili looked the same in the bowl as it did on the bun. It mocked him, having escaped his body intact. Murky brown islands floated toward the porcelain edges. A long arc formed a bearded face wading in the water, with a black hole in the center.

"He has his father's eyes," he laughed.

He wobbled to his feet, flushed, then scooped the skulls out of the sink. He propped his booze under his elbow close to his ribs then stumbled toward the bed. His ass missed the mattress and hit the floor. The impact spilled skulls onto the carpet. A sip of vodka splashed above his nipple. He ran his finger across a tattoo of the word SPITE that hovered above his heart, and licked off the liquor.

"Don't you go runnin' off now, boys," he giggled as he gathered the rat diaspora back toward his crotch. "We got us a show comin' up."

He unlaced his boots then named each skull as he strung through its eye sockets.

"Darby... Zoë... Filthy... Screamin' Jay... Exene... Ike & Tina... Eraserhead... Rosemary's baby... Bunny rabbit... Cowboy hat..."

Within an hour he passed out with a pool of vodka drool seeping into the carpet under his beard, Baptist rat skulls circling his neck, sink still running.

WE'RE DESPERATE

The van rumbled down the gravel through the trailer park by the interstate. Neighborhood dogs trailed behind, barking into the dust. Relentless hangover drums marched in his head. Every time Darby came home from work he barely resisted ramming the van into his trailer. Marrying Zoë was one of the worst ideas he'd ever had, and he knew it, but it was the only way to get a conjugal visit in prison. In her prime, Zoë's petite frame and icy blue eyes could make a hail of bullets break down and cry. A real cool killer with a wink more dangerous than a shank filed from a spoon. If it wasn't for her smuggling her prescriptions in and screwing his brains out once a month, he might not have survived in the joint. But by the end of his bid, her meds and her claws had gotten under his skin. One prison for another.

He cut the ignition then grabbed his duffel bag from the passenger seat. When he opened the van door, half a dozen dusty dogs jumped at his legs. "Scram, you little shits." He swung his bag at them. The trailer door handle didn't budge. She got somebody in there? He pounded on the door, sending a ripple of pain through his duct-taped hand, wrap still bloody at the seams. He expected to see some dude in his skivvies wiggle out of the bathroom window in a panic, or maybe he'd be hiding in the shower, or maybe he'd be a she. Either way their open arrangement made for great opportunities, but she was never as fond of sharing as he was. He slid in his key and unlocked the handle but it resisted again.

"Gimme just a second, okay?" he heard her muffled voice from inside. She did have someone in there. Probably the plumber's son from a few trailers up, the one with the brand new peach fuzz. She's probably zipping him up, trying to make it look like he just came by to "watch movies" again. He waited exactly five seconds before he threw the door open, tossed his bags down and surveyed his territory. Zoë swung around from the stove brandishing a bloody butcher knife. Her eyes wild behind her glasses. "Goddammit, Darby! I asked you to wait outside."

He scoped the scene. Couch didn't look recently rumbled-on. No one behind the bathroom door. No strange underwear stranded in the hallway. Just Zoë standing by the stove, carving a huge hunk of meat. Well ain't that some shit, he thought. She'd listened for once. He raised his chin and took a long whiff. "Smells like flesh in here."

"Haw, haw, very funny," she said and slid a plate of food on to the tiny two-seater table by the window. "Here's your steak dinner, asshole." Best meal a man could ask for before a gig or an execution: boiled green beans, baked potato split in its foil, brimming with butter, barely seared sirloin rubbed with garlic and celery salts, doused in Worcestershire, so rare that by the third bite the whole plate's drowning in moo juice. She either wants something or she's covering something up. No way this is genuine, but damn did it look delicious. He sat down and dug in.

She cracked two PBRs, untied her apron and sat down across from him. "Well?" she asked as she nibbled her black painted fingernails.

"Well what."

"How is it?"

"Could you give me five seconds to taste it?" He stared at her and ate. Vampira, embedded in a full sleeve tattoo inked on Zoë's forearm, stood with her impossible hourglass waist, arms reaching out, undead and upside-down while she chewed her nails without breaking them. Two lotus flowers, paling purple blossoms covering her soft pink shoulders, hung above her favorite yellow tank-top: UNCLE DADDY in black ransom note letters across the chest. It's fucking perfect, he thought while he gnawed a piece of fat. He wanted go back in time to meet the cow and slap its ass for being so future-delicious. He had to hand it to her. Only thing she could cook better than a guy's dick was his dinner. "It's okay. You're not hungry?"

"I'm good." She sniffled hard and cleared her throat. Sipped her beer. She shook her leg so hard under the table the blinds swayed. "Filthy called." She lit a cigarette, took a pseudo-French inhale from the mouth to the nose. Quick exhale. She tapped the lighter on the table. "Said he had some big news but wouldn't say what it was."

"Is that right?" Steak juice swamped the potato fallout he'd scraped from the skin. He drained half his beer in one sip.

"He said don't be late, 9:00 sharp, and wear something you don't care about."

He'd heard that from Filthy before, the Halloween show in Savannah. The crowd never saw it coming. People talked about it almost as much as their fateful final show in Jacksonville. He grinned at the prospect. Perfect for a comeback show. Filthy could be a perfectionist bitch a lot of the time and expect too much from everyone, but when he had a great idea he pulled it off like a pro. Darby knew just the something he didn't care about.

"What's so funny?," she ran her finger under her nostrils and pulled back her cheeks.

"You'll see."

She mashed her cigarette, only half smoked, into the ashtray. "He also said something else about Justin and the new guy fighting but it's fine now and fuck, Darby, don't you notice anything else?" She twirled her hair and locked eyes on him. He dropped his fork and looked around the trailer. Pile of dirty dishes in the sink. Trash bin overflowing with empty bottles and cans. Cockroach running over the threshold into the bathroom. Clothes in giant mounds surrounding the bed in the back room. Same as it ever was.

"You found the celery salt?"

She slammed her hands on to the table, sending her lighter skittering across and onto the floor. "I'm not a redhead anymore, you prick!" she cried.

He swirled a bean in buttery blood and looked at his wife like she was a refreshed, but still too familiar, woman. Her bob haircut and bangs a dark frame on her face, like their first drinks after an Uncle Daddy show, a war of bourbon shots; when they'd blow lines and screw in dive bar bathroom stalls across the city; how she'd worn a black cocktail dress and veil when they married; the way the prison priest eyeballed her, probably stood outside the door listening to her grunts echo around the slime green cinderblock conjugal visit room. "Oh yeah," he chewed. "Looks good."

"You don't really mean that." She pulled another Kool 100 from her pack, lit it with the still-smoldering ember of her last. "What happened to your hand?"

"It's nothin'."

"Can I see?" she asked. He nodded and speared more beans onto his fork. She unwound the tape slowly, careful to not tear any scab that might be forming, and set his palm up on the table before her. The scar had collected a hard reddish scab, still a little tender around the flesh, the eye tattoo lacerated like in a weird French silent film, the one with the dead horses in the pianos. She smiled with the savage glee of a succubus. "Damn that looks nasty." She poked at the scar. He flinched. "Want me to stitch it up?"

"Nah, it's nothing," he repeated. "It'll be fine."

"Pussy." She eased back in her chair and puffed her smoke. She tapped an ash onto Darby's wound. He shook it off and tried to make a fist but the cut stung as he closed his hand. She laughed and parted the blinds with her fingers. "Nothing from nothing means nothing," she sang to herself. "You gotta have something if you wanna be with me." She stood and swayed her hips, snapping to a song only she could hear. "Nothing means nothing from nothing," she danced toward Darby. "You gotta have something," she ran her hands down his chest, rested her cheek against his as he chewed. "If you wanna dance with me," she groped over his pockets and across the fly of his jeans. "You got something for me?" she asked and gently bit the cartilage on his ear. She reached in his pocket and pulled out the pill bottle. A light rattle in the bottom, two left. "Damn, baby, you did good!" She kissed him on the cheek and massaged his fly. "How much did you make?" she jiggled the bottle. "Must have been a good three hundred in there right?"

He mopped up the last drop of steak blood with half of a potato skin and popped the whole thing in his mouth. His beard bobbed over heavy chews. Saliva squished. A sip of beer.

"Right?"

He belched and wiped his mouth with his arm. "Ain't no money." He got up and walked around her, barely squeezing between her and the narrow hallway.

"What do you mean there ain't no money?"

"Wasn't any crew. Just me." He headed toward the bedroom.

She darted ahead and planted herself in front of him. "You couldn't find some desperate chick in a bar to sell to?"

"Whole town was empty, Zoë. Off-season in the Outer Banks. Not even the cockroaches crawled out of the woodwork." He kicked a pile of clothes away from the closet and started rummaging. She stood in the doorway tapping her fingers on her hips.

"Then what happened to all my meds?"

He knelt on the floor and dug through shoes, bras, shirts and jeans, coulda sworn that old suitcase was around somewhere, and said nothing.

"Jesus, Darby. There was enough oxy in there to put down a horse."

He stood and whinnied, brushed his boot back twice then looked around the top shelf. "Not really," he said and turned to her. "I think they reduced your dosage."

"Goddammit!" She threw the pill bottle at his back. It hit the carpet and rolled under the bed. "Did you get paid at least? I spent all our money on your stupid steak dinner."

"Sure you did," he said. If all the money was gone and she had no stash somewhere she'd be throwing a real shit fit. He still had a faded three-fingernail scar on his chest from the last time she ran out of drug money and blamed it on him. Compared to her usual meltdowns, this one was tame.

"Don't you judge me," she wiped her nose again.

He stooped down and searched below the bed. "Why'd you make me wait anyway?" he asked as he felt around the baseball bat and more of Zoë's Converse collection.

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"At the door. Why'd you make me wait at the door?" He swatted the pill bottle back out then felt around until his hand landed on a hard plastic handle. Bingo.

"Because I wanted to do something sweet and wifey like have your precious dinner on the table when you came home," she stomped her foot and said half-indignant, half-brokenhearted. "I almost had it ready too but you just barged right in."

Darby made a point never to apologize for anything. He'd stricken the words I'm Sorry from his tongue long ago in favor of a motto of No Regrets. But as she stood there, the sunset through the blinds dividing shadows across her body, the low light bringing out a subtle blue in her black hair dye, still the baddest bitch on the block and still his number-one fan and ultimate pain in the ass. "Next time, I'll wait," he said.

"No you won't." She smiled.

He hoisted the suitcase onto the bed, a pink and gray paisley nightmare that smelled like mothballs and Ben Gay. She circled an arm around his waist, gently pressed her head into his shoulder blade. The frame of her glasses hard against his spine, he shimmied to get comfortable. Her spidery fingers crept up his side. His face flushed as she neared his armpit. He bit his lip and tried to deny it. When she dug in he buckled and giggled in a wave of ticklishness. As he wiggled out of her grasp he felt her hand dip into his back pocket and pull out his paycheck.

"I'll take this, thank you very much," she said and slipped it under her bra strap.

He shoved her onto the bed beside the suitcase and straddled her. He bent over and grazed his beard across her chest, felt her squirm and moan beneath him, then removed the folded check from her bra with his teeth. "You can have that later," he said after he spat it aside. Another twinge of subsiding pain ran through his hand and up his arm while he unbuttoned her jeans. It almost deterred him, but he had to help himself. She raised her hips to help him slide the tight denim off.

"What do you want with my grandmother's old clothes anyway?" she asked as he ran his hands softly over her legs, letting the scar graze across her skin, before parting them.

"You'll see," he smiled then disappeared between her thighs for a little dessert.

WHEN YA GET DRAFTED

Zoë whipped the van into the parking lot behind the Three of Clubs and stopped beside the truck where Filthy, Justin and the new guy were congregated. Darby, with his head out the passenger window, howled like a deranged Doberman when he saw the gang. "What's up, bitches!"

"You're late," Filthy said pointing to his watch.

"Bah," Darby scoffed. "The party don't start till I arrive, so I'm never late." He dipped his key into Zoë's baggie, sniffed a double diamond, then shook his head and flapped his lips. "GodDAMNIt I'm ready to blast this crowd a new b-hole."

"Good cuz the second band's almost finished."

From the parking lot, the Dregs, an anarchist grindcore trio from Durham, sounded like a rumble of muffled madness, like the whole band was falling down a staircase in rhythm together.

"Alright, let's fuckin' do this." Darby spilled out of the door, already three beers and four bumps in the bag, stumbling directly into Filthy's arms like a newlywed. Filthy threw his head back and laughed as Darby batted his blonde eyelashes. "What, don't you think I'm pretty anymore?"

Zoë leaned over the seat, her cleavage capturing the lone light in the lot. "Hey Filthy! Treat my man right, okay?"

"He's only my problem while he's onstage. I think I can handle that." He set Darby down.

Justin walked over to the van. "Hi Zoë," he said with his gaze glued to her chest. He squirmed in a Dead Kennedys shirt clearly too small for his pudge, even with the sleeves cut off.

"Ugh," she rolled her eyes then looked past him, adjusting her tank top. "Hi new guy," she stretched the vowels in hi and guy, waving with flirty fingers.

Filthy cleared his throat.

Darby licked his chops.

Lee waved back and shuffled his feet.

"Wait a sec," she said to Justin, "is that my shirt?"

"Yeah," he blushed. "Darby said I could keep it. It smells like you."

"Eww. Here's your shit, Darby." She tossed a grocery bag of clothes at him. "I'll see you inside." She drove off so abruptly the van door closed on its own.

"So," Darby got close to Lee, "you're the fresh meat, huh?" Lee stood straight up from his lean against the truck. Darby tried to lock into his eyes but could barely find them behind Lee's poodle mop of curls.

"Lee's serious about the bass," Filthy interjected. "Classically trained, got all the songs down in one rehearsal. He's gonna kill it tonight."

"I'll be the judge of that," Darby leaned in and sniffed around the nape of Lee's neck, then followed his nose down to Lee's armpits, across his plain black shirt, then as near to his ass as he could while Lee stood motionless, barely concealing a nervous grin.

"So does he talk or does he just put the lotion in the basket?"

"He don't talk, dude," Justin snickered. "He's a stutter."

"Pipe down, Tugboat. I ain't talkin' to you." Darby kept trying to find Lee's eyes. Whenever he caught them, they darted away.

"Lee? You wanna say something?" Filthy asked.

Lee took a deep breath and returned Darby's glare. "I can ssssm, ssmm, I can smell your ccccount!"

"Ahh, quid pro quo, Clarice," Darby smiled menacingly. "Actually," he wiped his beard, "that's my wife you smell. Had to get me a piece before the gig." Justin groaned and started tapping his drumsticks on his thighs. "You'll excuse my brother. She's a wet dream he'll never get." He flicked his fingers on the side of Justin's head. "By the way, I heard you and Tuggybear got into a scrap. Is that true?"

Lee huffed, "uh huh," toward his shoes.

Darby bent over and looked up, not wanting to be denied Lee's attention. "Did he deserve it?"

"Yeah."

Darby glanced at Justin, who kept drumming on his thighs like a boy drowning out the guilt of bringing on the boogeyman. "Good!" He stood. "Then you're family now." He locked an arm around Lee's shoulders and pulled him close. "Welcome to Uncle Daddy. We're gonna break your cherry real good tonight."

"Bravo," Filthy slow-clapped. "Look, I hate to break up such a sentimental moment but I got a little business to fill you in on."

The Dregs hit their last note like a Mustang running into a wall. "Thank you, Charlotte!" the vocalist said to applause.

"These guys are all set up," Filthy said as he thumbed toward Lee and Justin. He pulled a squib, a plastic diaphragm filled with dark red goo, from the bed of his truck. A tiny antenna poked out of the top. He handed it to Darby. "You remember how this works?"

"Sir yes sir," he said.

"Are y'all ready for Uncle Daddy?!" the vocalist shouted.

"We're going by a set list tonight. No curveballs." Filthy hardened his stare. "Quick too. Six songs, the blast, then the encore. Leave 'em wanting more."

"Gotcha. Short and sweet... like my cock."

"The opener is 'Finger Lickin'. You walk in after the sample. Got it?"

"Sir yes sir," Darby answered, still hugging Lee who'd begun to feel shaky. "Don't worry, dude. Squib only stings a little." He gave an extra squeeze.

"It's nnot that. Just sshow jitters."

"I said... are y'all motherfuckers ready for Uncle Daddy?!" the vocalist bellowed into the mic. The crowd roared and whistled. "Then stay tuned for the return of the beast!"

"Shit, I stole a couple chill pills from my wife." Darby pulled a tiny cellophane wrap with two of Zoë's missing oxycontins from the change pocket of his cutoffs. "Want one?"

Lee shook his head. "No thanks."

"Your loss."

Filthy turned his head toward the door as the Dregs filed out, their coveralls drenched in sweat. "They're all yours, fellas," the vocalist said and shook everyone's hands before he and his band disappeared into the parking lot.

"Who's got the trigger this time?" Darby asked.

"The bartender. I told her the cue. She knows the song too."

"Tits. in. the. mouth." Darby grinned, his appetite whetted.

"And the owner and the bouncer are in on it too. Should go off without a hitch."

Filthy opened the stage door. "Alright boys, show time." Justin and Lee walked in to a light applause. "One last thing. Don't fuck with the camera guys."

"What camera guys?" Darby shuddered. The only thing that got him more anxious than cops were cameras. At any opportunity, he'd ruin a photo or destroy a soul-stealing lens.

"I'll explain later. Just promise me you won't mess with them other than hamming it up. I need you at peak performance tonight. No bullshit other than on the mic."

"You got it, boss man," Darby assured him.

Filthy nodded and made his entrance to generous applause and hollers.

He stood outside alone, his heart racing while the band soundchecked. After a few strong throat-clearers, the acrid twang of coke cascading down his gullet, he planted his hands on the pavement and kicked his legs up against the wall. Ten vertical pushups with long, deep breaths, his daily exercise regimen in prison, pumped blood and oxygen to his brain. He dismounted then began shadowboxing. With each jab he imagined crunching some asshole's camera, but a promise was a promise. He pulled the cellophane out of his

pocket and shook a pill onto his palm. "Even keel... even keel," he said and decided to pop both pills. He flooded his mouth with saliva, then tilted his head back. The little pellets skiied down his throat. Almost immediately the itch washed over him. Mixed with the blow and beer, the oxy relaxed his body and muddled the edges of his mind. "Ahhh, party brain." He shook like a wet dog to center himself. The hiss of Filthy's smoke machine got the crowd audibly excited. He pulled the tab off the squib's adhesive, pressed it to his chest. He pulled his costume out of the grocery bag. "Time to shine, grandma."

DISH IT OUT

The club shook while Lee adjusted the volume on his bass cabinet. Swarms of low tones rattled the crowd closest to the stage. The sound rolled through the room all the way to the front window. Justin warmed up, blasting a flurry of rudiments all over his kit. Crouched into the acrid-sweet, burnt-coconut smelling fog spilling into the room from the hissing machine beside his amp, Filthy set up his arsenal of foot pedals: two fuzz boxes for maximum overdrive, the delay that could slap-back his riffs or carry one note for a whole minute, the wah-wah to make any solo sassy, and a long, narrow black box with four unmarked switches and four tiny antennae. All tested and ready to roll.

The soundman mimed for a mic check. Filthy leaned in. "One, two, one, two!" An Okay hand signal preceded a point to the other mic, rested on top of the vocal amp. He flicked on the silvery meshed mic. A gale of feedback peeled through the room. Most of the crowd blocked their ears. "One, two, one, two," he said into the piercing howl. Through the gathering fog, he could see the soundman frowning, shaking a thumb down. He reduced the juice just a little, barely tempering the beast, repeated his ones and twos then said, "this is how we like it, man. Deal with it." He wagged his tongue at the camera, filming front and center. One for the blooper reel, he thought.

He opened the volume on his guitar and let a dirty G major chord blare out. Lee followed an octave below. Justin kicked his bass drum beater as fast as he could while crashing his cymbals. Cheers and whistles from the maximum-capacity crowd cut through the fog. He hopped in place, pumping his adrenaline. His weight wobbled his mic stand.

He flapped his wrists, wanting to play every song at once. He raised his chin toward Lee.

"You ready?" Lee nodded then took a sip of his beer. "Justin, you ready?"

Justin pounded twice on his snare and floor tom. "Fuck. Yes!"

All sound stopped.

Filthy tapped a button on the sampler near his pedals. A wash of dead TV static poured out of the PA speakers. A little girl's voice, sampled from one of Filthy's most impressive résumé entries, warned of heinousness to come.

"They're baaaack!"

Immediately the band locked into a sinewy, off-meter shuffle. Filthy coaxed his melody out of the high strings. Lee alternated bass notes with each pulse of Justin's kick drum.

Darby emerged from the fog like a backwoods high priest, nodding his head piously against the moderate tempo of the intro, in a straw gardening hat with a fuschia bow and some weird pink and silver and blue patterned shirt with a wide neck and no collar. The hem shrouded in mist past the hips. He took his place at center stage, between Filthy and Lee.

Wooos. Hands shot up in the air.

When they hit the D major hold, Justin filled the space with cymbal crescendos. Darby flicked on his mic, letting his feedback loose. He raised one hand in the air then snarled *Sheeeeeeeeeee's* for as long as his breath would carry. When he dropped his hand, the shit hit the fan.

a pretty little princess in a pink tutu

barbed wire fence and a chicken coop

bred for juicy breasts and thighs

bring a tear to a dead man's eyes

she's FINGER LICKIN GOOD

I'm FINGER LICKIN GOOD

FINGER LICKIN (drum fill) GOOD!

Darby flung himself around the cramped stage, knocking into Filthy a few times, bending to shout his verses into the mic, which he held upright under his mouth like it was part of his beard, then arching his back to wail the choruses at the ceiling.

The sheer intensity of the volume, the neck-snapping tempo, precision performance, barely contained feedback, and Darby's wild antics gripped the crowd and set them loose on each other like atoms bouncing around in a nuclear bomb.

she's FINGER LICKIN GOOD, Filthy and Darby shouted the last chorus together.

I'm FINGER LICKIN GOOD

it's FINGER LICKIN (long drum fill) GOOD! Full stop.

The crowd roared.

Darby punctuated the last *GOOD* by sending the heel of his boot toward the lens of the camera. The cameraman stood his ground, unflinching but plenty knocked around by the sweaty horde surrounding him. Filthy scowled. Last thing he needed was to pay for a busted camera and wasted roll of film, not to mention losing a potential job. Darby winked and licked his fingertips. "I promise," he mouthed while crossing his heart.

"Welly welly well," Darby said into Filthy's mic so the crowd could hear him clearly. "Been a long time since I seen so many ugly motherfuckers in one room."

A mix of cheers and boos.

The fog had dissipated revealing Darby's outfit in all its glory, a pastel floral housecoat that hung on him two sizes too big and reached almost to the floor.

"Same to you, Nana!" someone shouted from the back.

"I ain't your nana," Darby clarified. "I'm the wolf that ate your nana."

Laughter.

"We love you Uncle Daddy!" a girl screamed.

"We don't love you," he replied. "And we're not Uncle Daddy anymore."

Groans.

"Nope," he said, "new band, new name. From here on out we're Edna Bingo and the Bedpan Disaster. Write it down." He waved a phantom pen in the air.

Laughs and cheers.

"ALL TORE UP!" someone demanded.

"Shut up. We're not your fuckin' jukebox," Darby responded.

Awww.

Filthy tapped him on the shoulder and pointed to the set list laying on the stage.

"Actually, that's the next song."

"No way." He moved the mic away from his mouth. "Not after some asshole thinks he can tell us what to play."

"No curveballs, dude," Filthy reminded him. He'd planned the set list to flow seamlessly and keep the energy high and tight. Any deviation could derail the momentum. He was suddenly acutely aware of the heat from the spotlights and the sweat pooling around his armpits and under his man-teats. He cranked his volume and started to play the opening riff. Justin and Lee jumped in quickly.

The crowd approved.

"Fuck that," Darby insisted and waved his arms to cut the music. Justin stopped immediately. Lee kept playing until Darby grabbed the neck of his bass, muting his strings. "I've got a better idea."

Filthy boiled. How the hell was he supposed to show Serge, the director of the film he'd been hired for, he could run a crew if he couldn't even keep his own band in check, let alone impress him enough to hire Uncle Daddy to be in the movie? Maybe he should've told Darby what was going on, and how much money was involved, but that might have only tempted him to monkey wrench the works even more. Hand above his eyes, he block the lights and scanned the crowd for Serge; found him back by the bar smiling under his curly handlebar mustache. Serge raised his cocktail glass as if to bless the proceedings.

"Alright," Filthy said, a little relieved. "Whatcha got?"

"Necktie."

"Daaaamn." Filthy's eyes lit up. The song was nowhere near the set list but far as curveballs go, this could be an early home run. Lee had nailed it in rehearsal, but they didn't focus much on it. "Alright. Let's do it."

"So we got us a new bass player, y'all," Darby said into the mic, pacing the stage. "Ain't he cute?"

Woos and a couple cat calls whistled in the distance.

Lee bowed, sweeping his hand.

Zoë, posted up in front of the stage, nearly eye level to Lee's crotch, hollered loudest and longest.

"Let's see if he's got the goods. This one's called RED NECKTIE!" More cheers as Darby returned Filthy's mic then clicked on his own. He stood with his legs wishboned, like a cowboy ready to duel, his back to the crowd, while his feedback flat-lined a single, shrill waiting-tone.

Lee flipped back and forth through the pages of the notebook on the floor in front of him.

Justin leaned over his drum kit grimacing, Filthy thought, like the moment he'd been waiting for was on its way. Precious Lee was about to mess something up.

"Any day now." Darby broke the feedback.

Lee found the page and began running through the notes he'd scrawled, his fingers scaling his bass, volume off.

"You suck!" someone yelled from the back of the room.

"So do you," Darby replied. "And next time don't bite so hard when I cum."

Filthy crossed the stage, past Darby, then leaned down to Lee. "Clock's ticking."

"Yeah, hang on," Lee said and ran through the line one more time. "Okay!" He stood and said to Justin, "Gimme four, man!"

Justin glared at Lee and hit the hit-hat once. His foot barely on the pedal made the twin cymbals sizzle.

Darby shouted through the tension, "Fuck's sake Tug-"

"Two, three, four!" Justin bashed the hi-hats fast as he could scream the words.

Lee's fingers crawled around his bass like two spiders taunting a moth in a web of four fat strings. And faster than Worm ever played it with a pick. Filthy almost missed the first unison hit.

Good old boy, three B-flat power chords and snare drum pops. Lee filled the gap, creeping toward the next chord.

Gets a job, two D chords, and Lee went off the grid with his fill, but it fit.

In a bank's high-rise, three Gs. Darby mouthed "holy fuck," at Filthy while Lee played Worm's third fill backwards.

In his redneck tie!!! A battery of C-sharps launched the song.

Everywhere Filthy looked, bodies bounced. Not a single bag of bones stood still. Even a couple of Green Day kids and Dregs guys mixed it up on the dancefloor without attitude, all in good fun. He relaxed and busted some moves of his own. The wah-wah pedal got a whole lot of love.

Justin hit his marks like a madman. Filthy'd never heard him play so hard.

When Darby jumped to deliver his punchline, *red necktie, hang him high!* his old lady hat fell off. He immediately picked it up and patted it on the cameraman's head. Wasn't long before someone swiped it and the hat made the rounds. Darby mimed gallows with the mic cable, kicked and made faces at the camera, always a little too close for Filthy's comfort but never breaking his promise, or the lens.

Lee shredded the impromptu spotlight, banging his curls like a true metalhead, weaving wicked new threads into Worm's masterpiece.

Filthy wondered if the kid could read his notes through all that flailing hair, or did he just need a jump-start so the tune could come back to him, like Darby and his lyrics, or was he just messing with everyone and knew the song all along, playing the suspense in his favor. Whatever it was, he decided, it was working.

When the song was ending, Lee stopped a little early to take a few sips of his beer.

"Lee on bass, everybody! Fuckin' A!" Darby shouted into the mic then moved his hands over Lee like Vanna White showing off a shiny new fridge.

Loudest cheers of the night.

Lee bowed again, and when he rose he pushed his hair back behind his ears and smiled as wide as he had in the Smokey Robinson photo. His teeth gleamed in the spotlights, his almond-shaped hazel eyes squinted below long eyelashes, his cheeks flushed, fully rouged as his lips, his chin a subtle crescent of skin framing his delicate yet undeniably striking features.

For a second Filthy thought the only things that separated Lee from femininity were his wide-bridged nose and huge, yet slender, hands. A splash of eye shadow, maybe some silver hoop earrings, and he could devastate a drag show. Filthy's pants tightened a little, so he hoisted up his belt to re-position himself before reprising the first licks of **ALL TORE UP.**

Darby made no argument.

Fans chanted lyrics, and Darby pointed the mic at several people up front so they could shout into the feedback storm.

By the end of the song, the cameraman had disappeared. Probably got all the footage he needed, Filthy thought, but it would be a shame if the finale wasn't caught on film. Through the crowd he noticed Serge was still leaning on the bar, wearing Darby's hat, clapping while crutching his cocktail glass in his elbow. Good, you just stay put, he thought. The best is yet to come.

I PUT A SPELL ON YOU

The next four tunes bled into each other, a fusillade of raucous punk authority. Filthy barely allowed any downtime between songs. Soon as a tune ended, he blotted the sweat off his brow with his towel then called the next number, or just started playing an intro riff. Laying down the law kept everyone rumbling and breathless, crowd and band included, and lent Darby no room to taunt anyone or shotgun a beer, hard as he tried. Only once was Lee unprepared, frantically flipping through his notes so he missed the first two beats of THANK YOU EASTER BUNNY, but he hopped in so quickly Filthy knew the kid wasn't behind the ball, just testing how far he could push a small boundary. Fine once or twice, but a third would warrant a conversation about efficiency. By the end of PIGTAILS he was exhausted, yet exhilarated. His arms felt like sacks of potato batteries, heavy, starchy and electrically charged.

After the last hit of the tune, Justin looked like he was about to fall off his drum stool. He was red as a brick shithouse, sweaty and panting. Filthy tossed him a clean towel and said "take a breather, man. You've earned it." Justin caught the towel then lurched over to the bucket of beers and bottled water behind the bass cabinet, plunging his head into the melting ice. When he came up, water poured from his face down his shirt. He settled back behind his kit then briefly dried off, slung the towel around his neck. Filthy saw the tiny antenna poking out from Justin's cut-off left sleeve. Kid's gonna regret that little bath.

Darby followed Justin's trip to the reservoir and took advantage of the downtime to properly chug a beer. He let the empty bottle drop to the stage then took Filthy's mic and belched for five full, disgusting seconds.

"Yummy," he said, smacking his lips.

Ewww! the audience reviled.

"Well, it's the moment you've all been waiting for."

Cheers and whistles.

"Our last song of the night."

Awww!

"But don't worry. Play your cards right and maybe we'll be back soon."

More cheers and applause.

"Just leave your wallets at the door."

Laughter.

Filthy said to Justin, "go for it."

Justin twirled his sticks between his fingers, a drummer move Filthy hated, then kicked into a drum solo.

While Justin rolled over his tom-toms, crashed his cymbals, then started introducing the beat in fragments, Filthy surveyed the room for the bartender. Where the hell was she? Serge hadn't budged, but if the bartender had bailed then all his hard prep work would be ruined. He turned his back to the audience and placed a small gelcap pill under his tongue.

Lee pounced on his bassline when the beat finally kicked in. Darby waited four repetitions before joining.

Six-toed sheriff got two teeth left

The mayor's a mule

From the back of the room, a commotion stirred. A woman was shoving her way toward the front, parting the crowd in her wake. Lee, Darby and Justin kept rolling.

Only crime for the rural swine

Is --

"Darby, you lying sack of shit!" the woman shrieked in a thick Carolina drawl when she reached the stage.

All music stopped.

The room fell dead silent, except for ear-splitting feedback.

"The fuck do you want, Monica," Darby asked.

She stood with her fists on her waist, a blonde in a black spaghetti-strap tank top and daisy dukes, built like a soft-serve ice cream cone, sturdy on the bottom, wide in the middle and tapered off toward her swirly butterscotch up-do.

"I'm sick of you saying you're only going out for a drink then you ain't come back for days," she said loudly. "What you got to say for yourself?"

"Just calm down. Can't you take this outside, maybe later?" Filthy intervene.

"You shut your fat ass up, bitch," she retorted, swirling her head on her neck and holding up a shush finger. "I want answers, Darby. Now."

Filthy inched toward his black box.

"I don't answer to nobody," Darby said, defiant, with his chin raised. "Not no parole officer, not my wife, and sure as shit not some two-bit blowjob machine like you." He flipped her the finger. "Fuck off."

Cheers and applause. Whistles from all corners of the room.

Zoë stood right beside the woman, her hands shoved in her pockets, her eyes sizing up her husband's accuser.

The woman pulled a pistol from the back of her daisy dukes. The crowd shrieked. Half of them ducked or bolted for the door.

"I'LL SEE YOU IN HELL YOU BASTARDS!" she howled and shot wildly at the stage while Filthy stomped his unmarked pedals.

BAM! Darby's chest exploded, bursting blood through his housecoat. He fell backwards into the drums then tumbled down onto the stage.

BAM! Justin's shoulder sparked when it blew up. He yelled "Owww!" and clutched it as he slumped to the floor.

BAM! Lee's thigh erupted. A thud of un-muted bass rattle accompanied his collapse to the ground.

BAM! Filthy's chest popped a blast of blood that sprayed in the faces of the nearest fans. The impact gnashed his teeth, tore open the gelcap. He rattled back on his feet, kicked on the fog machine. His eyes rolled back as he slowly slid down his amp, drooling blood down his chin.

The room filled with fog and mercilessly stoic feedback. Bottles shattered on the concrete floor. Sounds of panic and boots scurrying toward the door perforated the thickening drone.

Filthy could barely make out formless humps of humans running, some standing shock-still. He tapped a button on his sampler. A savage snorting and diabolical laughter filled the room on a loop.

Justin started kicking his bass drum pedal.

Kick... Kick... Kick... Kick-kick-kick.

Kick... Kick... Kick... Kick-kick-kick...

Lee, still on the floor, joined in on the bass.

G... G... G... G-Bflat-C.

G... G... G... G-Bflat-C...

Filthy turned all his pedals on at once to bathe everything in distorted, echoed noise, shards of a solo in saucy wah-wah.

Darby mimicked the loop with his own terrorizing laugh.

"Think you can get rid of Uncle Daddy so easily?" he asked, his voice booming through his amp.

The few fans left in the club hollered and whistled, maybe two or three dozen by Filthy's foggy count. They clamored toward the stage.

Darby rose from his slump, already having slipped out of his housecoat and removed the spent squib. A ring of tiny skulls strung around his neck. Traces of fake blood dried on his bare stomach. He sang in his rotten, gravelly baritone, half snarl, half undead crooner.

I put a spell on you

Because you're mine!

Stop the things you do

WATCH OUT! I ain't lyin'!

The bartender stood smiling in the same spot where she'd fired blanks at the band.

Darby grabbed her hand and pulled her onstage.

You know I can't stand it she sang, staring into his eyes, dancing chest-to-chest.

Your runnin' around. You know better, daddy!

You know I can't staaand all your puttin' me down. Yeah Yeah. She put a little Nina Simone spin on it which Filthy appreciated but doubted Darby would recognize.

I put a spell on you they sang together.

Becauuuuse you're mine! Whoooa-ooooh!

The two danced together through the instrumental break like they'd just shot down the whole world and were enjoying a slow turn through their wake of victims, the only lovers left alive.

On the other side of the stage, Zoë had wrapped her arms around Lee's shoulders from behind. She rested her head on his back and swayed her hips, grinding in to his jeans, partly glaring at Darby and the bartender, partly looking like she'd sunken in to a wonderful new plush toy.

Lee took no chances with his bassline. Played the whole song as straight as he stood, his eyes wide and wired.

When the song was finished, the bartender curtsied then left the stage, blowing kisses.

"G'night, little zombies and zomb-ettes," Darby signed off. "See y'all on the other side." He dropped the mic then followed the girl he'd decided to call Monica to the bar.

Applause and cheers.

Still at his post in the back, Serge clapped and whistled, and shook Darby's hand when he approached the bar.

Filthy felt triumphant. They'd nailed it. If the new hot-shot French director could stick through the false-starts, the furious noise and farcical chaos, then they were a shoe-in to be in the movie.

Zoë refused to let go of Lee, still dangling on him as the rest of the band started packing up. When he tried to wiggle free to unstrap his bass, she slid her arms down around his waist. She whispered something into his ear then squeezed his bony butt before letting him go. Lee jumped, a little startled. He watched her walk away and disappear behind the ladies room door before he began coiling his cables.

Filthy tapped Lee on the shoulder, shaking him out of whatever wormhole his mind was spiraling down. "Oh hey, man," Lee said, looking up at him. "Ggg, gggood show, huh?"

"I'm only gonna say this once," Filthy replied. "That bitch is more trouble than you can handle. Just say 'No' and walk away."

Lee nodded, eyeing the bathroom door again, slowly coiling his cable from his elbow to his shoulder. "Dddon't wwwo-," he blinked hard then looked at Filthy, "-oorry. I won't let you dddown."

"Good," Filthy patted him between the shoulder blades and remembered the cooler full of chicken wings and the new kerosene grill back at the shop. "Now let's fucking party!"