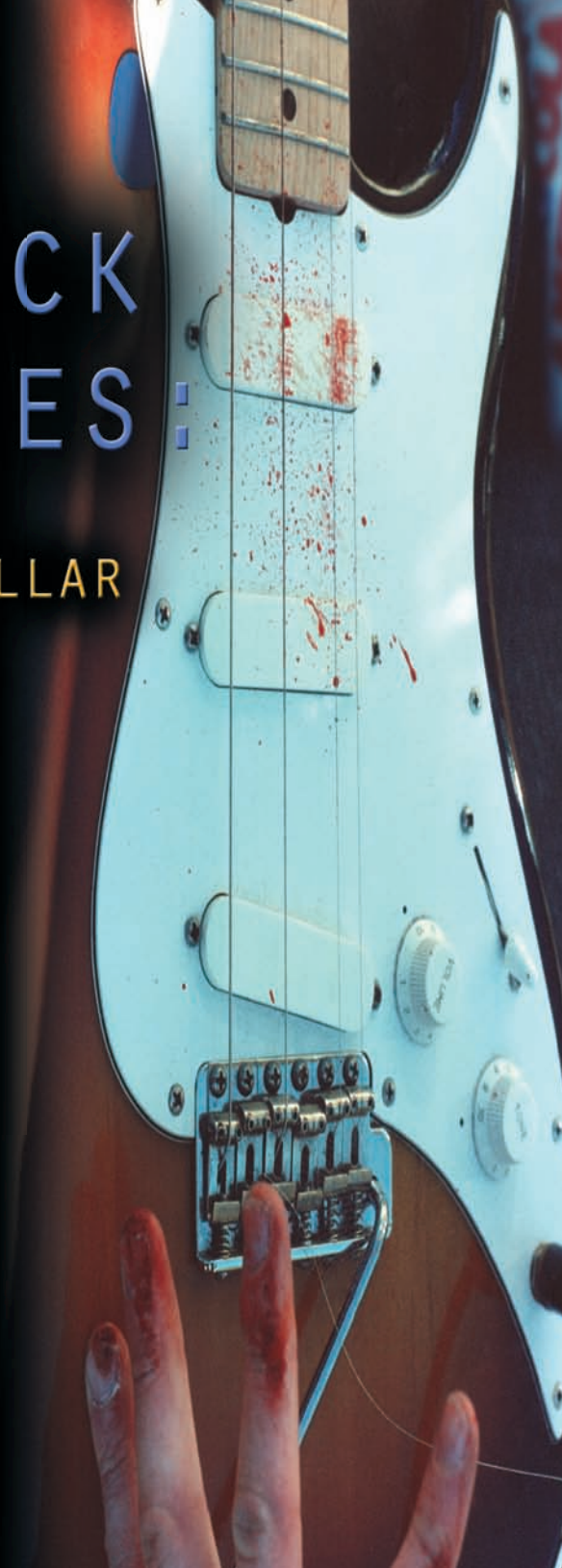
Centered around music and set in cities ranging from New Haven, Boston and New York, to New Orleans, Albuquerque and Athens, GA, in the mid-'80s through the mid-'90s, these stories cover all the classic rock and roll themes: love, heartbreak, death, friendship, travel, growing up, growing apart, class conflict, petty crime, partying and the warm sensation of cheese melting on your face.

(C)rock Stories: Million-Dollar Tales of Music, Mayhem and Immaturity

(C)ROCK STORIES:

MILLION-DOLLAR TALES OF MUSIC, MAYHEM AND IMMATURITY

DAVE BRIGHAM



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The characters and events in this book are fictitious. Some of the characters in this book share first names with, and are in part based on, friends of mine. I have changed the names of other friends, acquaintances and former coworkers, but if they look closely they might recognize themselves. Also, I use the names of real bands, and their members, in these stories. The bottom line: this is a work of fiction, and should be considered nothing other than that.

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Smashing Your Head With the Punk Rock

"Did somebody say keep on rockin'?"

It was Paul. We hadn't spoken in about a month, but talking to my oldest friend was as easy as plugging in my guitar and cranking through Black Flag's "Annihilate This Week." Whenever we called each other, we opened with a line from Rick Derringer's "Rock and Roll Hoochie Koo."

At first I found it funny, as it inevitably led to us trading mouth-guitar riffs over the phone. Eventually, however, I viewed the little game as nothing more than a test of my fidelity to a friendship that had formed in kindergarten, blossomed through elementary school and junior high, but one that had faded in the two years since he'd moved away.

Although "Rock and Roll Hoochie Koo" had become a line in the sand, and I was on the verge of crossing it, never to return, I responded.

"Lawdy mama light my fuse!"

Paul and I played a lot of air guitar to that song, and countless others, when we were kids. We also watched TV, played baseball, football and basketball, hide-and-seek, cops-and-robbers and a variety of card games, usually joined by his younger brother, Brendan. We rode our bikes around the neighborhood, ran around in the woods playing "Six Million Dollar Man" and "Mod Squad" and built snow forts from dawn to dusk on the coldest days.

It wasn't all fun and games, though. Because I was like the seventh son they never had, Paul's parents included me in the family chores. I stood dirty leg to dirty leg with the boys as they weeded the rather large family garden; helped shovel the driveway and clean their cars; and on the odd occasion answered the Jehovah's Witnesses' knock on the door and absorbed their doorstep sermons on false religions while everybody else watched "Hee Haw."

We worked and played hard, but spent a considerable amount of time immersed in music, too. We listened to the radio, obsessively trying to win giveaway albums and tickets for the circus or ice capades. Paul's house was filled with instruments. One of his brothers played drums, so we taught ourselves how to keep a beat when he wasn't around. Another brother played trumpet, which held little interest for us. Paul played the saxophone, although not very well. The thing that fascinated me most was his father's guitar. He played in a country band, which I thought was really cool. He never let us play his guitar, but after I started taking acoustic guitar lessons, Paul's father gave me one of his old guitars. It was pretty beat up, but I cherished it and used it for a few years until I bought my own.

Like a lot of boys, I dreamt of playing in a band. When we were bored or were forced to stay inside because of the weather, Paul, Brendan and I created bands on paper. I formed The Jokers, in tribute to "Rock and Roll Hoochie Koo" -- *"There was a band called The Jokers/ they were laying it down."*

We drew album covers, came up with record and song titles, and names of band members. The Jokers rocked hard, in theory. With two guitarists, a bass player and a drummer, they traded in the blues-inspired rock that I was into at the time: Pat Travers, Led Zeppelin, Aerosmith, KISS and, of course, Rick Derringer. I imagined that the three of us would form a band for real one

day, playing before throngs of screaming girls at Woodstock-type festivals on the grounds of our elementary school.

Instead of using those grounds to rock the masses, though, we spent a considerable amount of time playing baseball and football with Paul and Brendan's older brothers, as well as my brother and some neighborhood friends. It was clear early on that Paul was a better athlete than I was. He collected more hits, made fewer errors, scored more touchdowns and intercepted more passes than even some of his older brothers.

While never cocky, he knew that he was good and liked to needle Brendan and me about it once in a while.

"Come on, hit the ball over my head," he yelled from left field. "I'll move in five steps."

As Paul and I grew older and moved into junior high, his confidence helped him meet girls. I made new friends, but was awkward and shy around the opposite sex. He and I played on the same Babe Ruth league team, and spent a lot of time hanging out on weekends playing cards, listening to the Red Sox and watching "The Dukes of Hazzard."

While other kids our age were experimenting with beer and pot, we were content with buying the occasional pack of cigarettes at the local Exxon station and taking a few puffs in the woods behind our elementary school. Those woods also served as hiking and biking trails, and movie sets for Paul's older brother's Super 8 tributes to "Star Wars" and "Night of the Living Dead."

Life was good.

And then, in the beginning of the summer after we turned 15, Paul and his family moved to Florida. His parents had been talking about it for a while, so it wasn't a surprise, but still I was crushed.

The first two months were difficult. I moped around the house a lot, played a ton of Atari, cranked "Rock and Roll

Hoochie Koo" repeatedly on my brother's cheap turntable and wandered through the woods for hours.

Paul and I kept in touch through letters, postcards and the occasional phone call:

"The skeeters start buzzing 'bout this time of year."
"Hey, man, it's good to hear you voice," I'd say.
"I'm goin' 'round back, she said she'd meet me there."
"All right!" Paul answered.
"We were rollin'...."
"Hey, man, what's new in Florida?"
"You didn't let me finish."
"Yeah, I don't wanna eat up your dime, y'know?"

With the new school year, I resolved to make new friends and stop pitying myself so much. I started hanging out with friends from school who lived around the corner, playing street hockey and football, knocking golf balls around at the park and talking about girls. I spent a lot of time in homeroom talking with my new buddy, John, about punk rock.

A couple of my friends turned 16 in the spring and got their licenses. We went to parties, the movies, the bowling alley, the mall. Some of my friends went on dates, too.

Now, instead of watching "The Dukes of Hazzard," I was riding shotgun in my friend Andy's Toyota station wagon, doing donuts in the Stop & Shop parking lot.

Paul visited that summer with his family, staying at their old house, where two of his brothers still lived. Within a few minutes of our initial hug, our differences became obvious. He was tan and wore tank tops to show off his new muscles. He mentioned three girls he'd been dating lately, and said he might join the Air Force in two years like two of his brothers had.

I was still socially inept around girls. I had discovered college radio.

"It's amazing," I said about the University of Hartford station John had turned me on to. "The stuff they play is totally different than what we used to listen to."

"Yeah?" he said skeptically.

"Yeah! Dead Kennedys, The Velvet Underground, MDC, The Circle Jerks, The Sex Pistols, The Clash."

"I like The Clash," he said.

"Cool," I said.

"But why do you listen to that other crap?" he asked.

"It's not crap," I snapped. "Have you heard any of those other bands?"

"Don't need to," he said. He still loved Foreigner, and was also into Hall & Oates and Journey. Frankly, I was surprised he liked The Clash, but hoped they could be his gateway drug to punk and hardcore. After eating hot dogs and beans with his family, we went back to my house and I put Black Flag's "Damaged" on the turntable. He listened to the first two tracks, "Rise Above" and "Spray Paint," with no discernible emotion on his face. He chuckled a bit at "Six Pack" but then told me to turn it off.

"You don't like it?" I asked.

"No. Do you?"

"Yeah, that's why I played it. That's why I bought it…."

"Let's go back to my house. I gotta call my girlfriend."

Over the next two weeks Paul and I had a great time reminiscing, telling stories about our respective grocery-store jobs, playing whiffle ball and ogling girls at the mall.

"Don't be so lame," he said after I passed a girl from my homeroom, but didn't say a word to her. "You talk to girls who are your friends, so why can't you talk to the ones you wanna date?"

"I don't know," I said, feeling like his kid brother, just as I did when we were younger and he'd beat me in a foot race, or hit for a better average in Little League. "It's just hard."

"You're lame."

I asked why he wanted to join the Air Force.

"I wanna work on jet fighters. Learn some discipline. Serve my country. You know, just like anybody else."

"But you'd be a jarhead," I said, proud of using a word I'd recently learned.

"Don't use that word," he snarled, jabbing his finger in my face. "My brothers aren't jarheads. My father wasn't a jarhead. It's called being patriotic."

"OK, OK! But what about college?"

"So I can learn about 'college radio'?" He said 'college radio' the way Jerry Falwell said 'atheist.'

"No, well, yes. But so you can learn about lots of stuff, and meet new people and find new opportunities."

"You sound like a brochure," he said, waving me off.

I wasn't a debater. Live and let live is my motto. You tell me what TV show or movie you like, I'll ask you a few questions about it and tell you if I've got an opinion either way about it. But I'm not going to question the fact that you like it. I'm not going to insist that you're wrong, or stupid, to like what you like.

I wanted Paul to like my music, but if he'd simply said, "I don't like it," that would've been fine. But his calling it "crap" and mocking college radio without any knowledge of the subject irked me.

Of course, I was a total hypocrite. To someone's face, I would say "That's cool," whether they said their favorite band was Big Black or Tina Turner. Behind their back, though, I would call them "an idiot" if what they liked wasn't really

something that I thought was cool. Less honest, yes, but also less hurtful.

I let his "brochure" comment go. We talked a few times on the phone over the next several months, and exchanged half a dozen letters apiece. In my letters I expounded on my failed efforts to pursue girls I liked, mentioned a really bitter song I wrote called "Ballroom of Love," ranted on about the Red Sox and, of course, promoted the latest music I was listening to -- Killing Joke, Naked Raygun, 7 Seconds and other hard-hitting bands. He told me about his girlfriends, hanging out at the beach, playing high school baseball and for the most part ignored my music comments.

I continued to immerse myself in punk rock. John and I decided one Saturday night to check out a hardcore show at a VFW hall a half hour away in East Hartford. I had seen my first concert, Rush, a few months prior at the Hartford Civic Center, but this was completely different. I was fascinated by the scene: tattooed guys and girls slam dancing, stage diving, smoking, drinking, popping pills. The bands were loud, fast, sloppy and greasy. I was hooked.

"When's the next show?" I asked John.

A week later, Paul called.

"I hope y'all know what I'm talkin' about."

"I gotta tell you something that changed my life," I said in uncharacteristic overstatement.

"What?"

"I went to see…"

"Did you forget something?" he asked in an accusing tone. "What about the next line, huh? What about a little, *"The way she wiggled that thing, it really knocks me out."*

He was looking for a line, but not the one I was crossing.

"Yeah, you know what? I don't care about that right now. I've got something I wanna tell you about."

"You don't care about our favorite song?"

"Just drop it, alright? It hasn't been my favorite song for a long time, man."

Our conversation was short and uncomfortable. Needless to say, I didn't tell Paul about how much fun I had in my first mosh pit.

While my musical tastes were evolving, my efforts to find a girlfriend were stuck in the Caveman Era. I stuttered and stammered when talking to a girl I liked, if I talked to her at all.

"Maybe I should just club one over the head and drag her to a movie," I joked with John.

"You should work out," he said.

"What?"

"Seriously. Build up your muscles, build up your confidence, focus on yourself and don't worry so much about girls."

"Do you work out?" I asked.

"A little bit at home," he said. "Helps work out the frustration."

The next day after school I went for a run around the block. I felt like I was going to die, but focusing on that was better than thinking about my failed Love Connections.

I kept at it, adding some push-ups to my routine.

About a month later, a girl at work approached me while I was loading peppers into a display and began chatting. What's your name? Where do you go to school? Doesn't work suck? What time are you taking a break?

Frankly, I was flabbergasted. That Saturday night Delia and I had our first date. "John, you were right!" I screamed into the phone the next morning.

"Told ya," he laughed. "You owe me!"

"I'll buy your ticket for 'Decline' on Friday."

"Friday? Aren't you going out with your new lady?"

"Oh, crap! I don't know. I'll buy you the soundtrack then."

Over the next few weeks, Delia and I went to the movies, played mini golf, went bowling and out for ice cream and you couldn't slap the smile off my face. She liked Rick Springfield, Fleetwood Mac and Journey, but what the hell did I care? I had a girlfriend, and she was from the next town over, which somehow made it even more exciting.

We talked about all sorts of things, from our favorite books to our mutual interest in atheism, our least favorite classes to our favorite childhood TV shows. She was a straight shooter, which I liked. I complained about my brother treating me like a little kid, and she said, "Tell him to the cut the crap! Duh!"

I told her all about growing up with Paul and his brothers, and how much fun it was. I mentioned that he would be visiting soon, during April vacation, and that I expected things wouldn't go well.

"Why?" she asked as I flipped channels in her living room.

"We used to be best friends, but we're different now. We don't like the same stuff. He questions what I like, who I hang out with. I don't like that."

"But you guys have known each other forever, right? How bad can it be?"

Paul's first night in town went worse than our last phone call. I told him I was going to John's house the next day to listen to the new Butthole Surfers album, and that he should consider coming along so he could make a true judgment of what I was into. I had decided to provoke him a little; I knew he wouldn't agree to go with me.

"The Butthole Surfers?" he said derisively. "What the hell kind of name is that? Are they a fag band, singing all about their buttholes?"

Without thinking, I reared back and punched him right in the mouth. I'd never punched anyone and I didn't want to punch

Paul. I was sick of him ragging on my music, and me, and felt that was the only way to make him see how I felt.

He staggered back a few feet, then ran toward me and pushed me so hard I fell to the ground. As angry as he was, he knew that if he punched me he'd probably knock me out.

"What's your problem?" he yelled.

I didn't answer him. I walked back home, satisfied that I'd finally gotten through to him, but angry at myself for the way I'd done it. I sat in my room until the sun rose, trying to figure out what had gone wrong between Paul and me.

"Now my ears started ringin' like a fire alarm."

I couldn't get that line out of my head.

At first I placed the blame for our souring friendship squarely on his shoulders. He was intolerant, closed-minded and had turned into a redneck. I, on the other hand, was open to new things and was an enlightened man. I had convinced myself I was totally in the right, and that by punching Paul I had scored a victory for punk rock, liberalism and picked-on people the world over.

Then I thought about all the times we'd argued when we were kids, and how we never held those disagreements over each other's heads for more than 10 minutes. I would admit if I was wrong, and even though Pat didn't always say he was at fault, I could tell by his actions – he'd let me win at Crazy Eights or "horse" – that he felt bad.

Now that we were on the cusp of adulthood, however, we were less willing to give an inch to the other. I realized that I'd been a jackass by harping on music. I should have just moved on to other subjects, and not tried to convert him to my way of thinking.

But was that good enough? Should I have to tuck away part of who I am just to remain friends with someone? I went back and forth on this stuff all night long.

When I called Delia and told her that I'd punched Paul, she broke up with me. Five minutes later, after I explained the anguish I'd been in and that I hadn't slept, we were back on again.

"You have to patch things up with him," she said.

"How?"

"Maybe if the three of us go out together, I can mediate."

So we had a plan, and I decided to sabotage it.

I walked down to Paul's house after lunch and told him to hit me. He refused, thankfully. I told him I was sorry, and asked if he wanted to go to a party with Delia and me. He hemmed and hawed until I lied to him and told him she was bringing a friend.

I told Delia that this girl Ann-Marie we worked with was having a party, and that we should go with Paul.

"Sounds great."

When we arrived, the party was in full swing. I introduced Paul to some of my work friends and got him a soda. My co-worker Shaun skanked across the lawn right up next to me.

"What's up, New Wave Dude?" he said in his fake surfer dude voice.

"Not much, man. What time are you guys rockin'?"

I hadn't told Delia and Paul that Shaun's band was playing. Shaun had turned me on to Bad Religion and Agent Orange, even though he called me a "freakin' poser" on a regular basis. Paul was a little taken aback by Shaun, with his Flock of Seagulls hair, earrings and studded leather bracelets.

I introduced them; Paul refused to shake Shaun's hand. Delia giggled nervously and said she couldn't wait to hear him play.

Shaun went off to set up, and the three of us chatted about stupid stuff. Finally, Paul whispered in my ear, "Where's Delia's friend?"

"I don't know," I said. "Ask her."

"Ask me what?"

"Where's your friend?"

"Who?"

"I thought you were meeting a friend here," I said innocently.

"I never said that," she said, giving me the evil eye.

"Oh," I said.

Shaun's band hit their first distorted note and I took off to slam and mosh with about 10 other guys in front of the garage. The band was crappy, but I loved the fact that I was in suburbia watching some future hairdresser scream about injustice while his middle-class brat band mates flailed away like any of it mattered. Knowing that Delia and Paul hated it made me feel good, too.

Every time I checked back in with the two of them, they looked at me like I was a mental patient. "What are you doing?" "This band sucks!" "Let's go somewhere else!"

I looked back a little later and swore I saw them holding hands. My plan was working a little too well.

I drove Delia home and walked her to her door. She told me she had a shitty time.

"Looked like you and Paul were getting along," I said with a little too much jealousy.

"I had to talk to somebody, didn't' I?"

Paul and I drove home in silence.

Delia called me the next morning to break up with me. This time I didn't talk her out of it. Sure, it hurt like hell. I sat in the house all day, ignoring my parents when they told me I had phone calls, and refusing to eat. Once it was dark I snuck out

my window and walked around the block. I got to Paul's house and saw Delia's car. I spit on her windshield and then went to the school behind my house, climbed the roof and sulked for an hour.

I snuck back into the house, then cracked the door to my room and said goodnight to my parents. An hour later, once I knew they were asleep, I tiptoed into the dining room, and ever so gently removed a bottle of gin. I padded quietly into the kitchen and poured myself a Dixie cup full of the stuff.

I downed it, and immediately started coughing like crazy.

My mom opened the bedroom door. "Everything all right down there?"

"Yeah," I croaked. "Just got a little tickle in my throat. Getting some water."

"Done got tired of payin' dues
Said goodbye to all my blues."

Dis Me On the Bus

The rain was falling in cold, gray sheets as Andy wrestled with the Opel's shuddering steering wheel. He guided the car into the Gemini's parking lot, the headlight beaming across assorted yapers and their feathered-hair girlfriends dashing through the puddles toward the back door of the club. We wound our way past Camaros, B-210s, and borrowed family cruisers and found a spot as far across the storm-ravaged parking lot as it was possible to be. Donna asked if either of us wanted a toke; we politely refused.

"You two are such fags," she said.

While she inhaled her happiness, Andy and I talked about recent shows we'd seen at the club.

"Richie Havens was intense," I said. "He looked just like he did in the Woodstock movie."

"Badfinger was pretty good," Andy said.

"Too poppy for me," I said. Donna's cackle from the backseat hit the back of my head like a wave, a spine-tingling, smelly-breath wave.

"Too poppy? What the hell do you listen to?"

"He likes punk rock," Andy answered. "Loud and fast."

"Whatever…," she said.

"Andy likes it, too," I added. "Shouldn't you know that?"

Donna and I got along OK, but sometimes I got jealous of her time with Andy.

"What's that?" Andy asked, pointing past the wind-bent willow tree in front of us and toward an eerie glow of lights coming from the river bank.

"Tour bus," I answered. "Man, I'd love to be on a tour bus," I said in a voice I usually reserved for discussing my crush on

one of the Ethel Walker girls who shopped in the Stop & Shop where Andy and I worked.

"You ARE a fag!" Donna said.

"As a band member!" I shouted.

"That would be cool," Andy said. "Playing in a band, traveling the country, eating and drinking for free."

"You forgot the groupies, man," I said. "There's nothing bad about that life."

"OK, dreamboys, let's get in there and get a good table before your boyfriends in the bus hit the stage," Donna ordered.

We settled in, ordered beers and clapped half-heartedly for the opening band, local blues rockers Riverbottom. During a particularly awkward spin move, the singer knocked the mic stand down. Pissed off and motioning frantically for a roadie, he was less the smooth, petulant rock star he'd once hoped to be, more of a crotchety, nursing-home resident too proud to clean up after himself.

The roadie, clad in the de rigeur roadie wear – grimy black boots, jeans and t-shirt (Sabbath, natch) – was this guy Junk who worked at Stop & Shop. Well, "this guy" doesn't quite capture him.

Junk was one of the founders of The Resistance at the store. The Resistance's politically incorrect mission was three-fold: impress female coworkers; taunt non-members; and get under management's skin. We did our best work with magic markers, defacing price guns, bathroom stalls, bulletin boards, cooler doors, pallets and box cutters with the words "The Resistance" underneath a Jolly Roger.

Membership was open only to guys working in the produce and grocery departments. You had to be tapped; not everybody was asked to join. Once you'd been deemed worthy, the group's elders conducted some mild hazing. I was given two arm-length tattoos with black permanent ink and forced to keep my sleeves

rolled up and avoid soap for a week. Other guys got a jacket twist, in which one of the hazers inserted a broomstick through the straps of the victim's smock and twisted it until it got really tight, and then they threw him on the ground. There was also the warehouse brawl, which sounds a lot worse than it was.

Junk loved The Resistance, and took it very seriously. He would continuously drill Andy, me and the other produce department drones with questions about kumquats, star fruit, seedless watermelons, Chinese cabbage, jicama root and countless other obscure fruits and veggies. Junk would harangue anybody who missed one of those questions, but mete out more severe punishment for messing up a rock and roll query.

"What year did AC/DC's 'Highway to Hell' come out, and who produced it?" Knowing that it came out in 1979 was good; citing Robert John "Mutt" Lange as producer was better. But not good enough.

"What studio was it recorded in?"

"You don't even know that," I barked at Junk.

"Demos were cut at Albert Studios in Sydney; the album was recorded at Criteria Studios in Miami and Roundhouse Studios in London." Of course, there was no way to check him on this. Junk's dad had some shadowy music industry connection, so Junk had access to obscure knowledge.

Everybody in the back room whooped it up when Junk spit out his answer, because they knew what was coming next. I did, too.

"Grunts and whistles only for you, my four-eyed friend," he said, dead serious. "No talking until I say so."

And so it was.

We were a pretty tight bunch, The Resistance. We had a lot of fun in the backroom, and spent many a night drinking beer in the parking lot after hours. But we rarely saw each other outside the store. We had separate groups of friends and the founders,

Junk especially, wanted to make sure we didn't dilute the mystery of The Resistance by contacting each other "on the outside."

So it was a bit of a shock to see him onstage at Gemini's.

"I know that guy," Donna said. Andy and I traded bemused looks.

"You do?" Andy asked.

"Uh, yeah," she answered, in a rare moment of embarrassment.

Like Donna, Junk was a little older than Andy and me. He hung out in the East Parking Lot in high school, smoking, discreetly popping pills, fighting with greasy fists and yakking about Zeppelin, the Stones and Aerosmith. Andy told me Donna was cut from the same flannel cloth.

I half-considered pressing Donna for details about how she knew Junk, but didn't want to make Andy uncomfortable. With his blonde mullet, bulging muscles and sarcastic edge, Junk seemed a better match for Donna than Andy, with his golf-course courtesy, goofy sense of humor and love of comic books.

Junk fixed the mic stand and disappeared backstage. Once Riverbottom finished, we moved up front.

Andy and Donna were slow-dancing to Nazareth's "Love Hurts," which was cranking through the fuzzed-out P.A.

"It's pretty goddamn funny that Foghat's playing Simsbury," I said to no one in particular.

"You don't like Foghat?" said the guy next to me. He was about two inches shorter than I was, but seemed taller because he was so skinny, the kind of skinny that shows up on "COPS" with a plump wife, a meth habit and outstanding warrants for child endangerment.

"Yeah, I like Foghat," I said, leaning back just a bit. "But they're playing a club. 'Foghat Live' was recorded in front of tens of thousands of screaming, maniacal fans!"

"That's an awesome album, dude. Foghat fuckin' rocks!"

"Yeah, they do," I said.

"Say it." I turned to see whether Andy and Donna were gonna be able to pull me away from this guy. They were still clinging to each other, even though the music had stopped.

"Huh?" I replied.

"Say that Foghat fuckin' rocks." He was getting a little angry, and a few other guys around us were moving closer.

My brother owned "Foghat Live" and when I was in junior high school, I went through a phase where I was on stage kickin' it with the boys four, five times a week, sometimes jamming lead guitar, other times pounding the drums, but always workin' it like I was gonna be the one chugging Jack Daniels and getting laid after the encore. I envied Roger Earl's Fu Manchu mustache and Lonesome Dave Peverett's gold-lamé jacket. And while I wouldn't admit it to my punk-rock friends, I still really liked "Fool for the City" and "I Just Want to Make Love to You."

But this wasn't even the full band. It was Roger Earl's Foghat, a shadow of its original incarnation. And when I pictured that live album, the album that had meant so much to me 10 years earlier, the one that inspired so many dreams of stardom in my head, I saw only "Spinal Tap."

"Foghat fuckin' rocks," I said. I may as well have been discussing Chaucer.

"Can't hear you, dude," a couple of guys said.

The walls were closing in, the darkness was descending, my life was passing in front of my eyes. I didn't want these guys to think I was just another preppie slumming it in their bar, a college kid too good for some old-time boogie rock. I dug deep and found my inner redneck, and let loose a a blood-curdling yell and pronounced for the whole bar to hear that yes, indeed, "Foghat fuckin' rocks!"

And with that, the lights went down and the band hit the stage.

I was expecting the foursome from "Foghat Live" but was disappointed. Only the drummer was the same, and he had aged noticeably. They sounded good, but I just couldn't get into it. I moved back toward the bar. "If I have a few more beers," I thought, "maybe I won't care." More visions of Spinal Tap flooded my mind. "These guys are a joke," I said to myself. "They've been reduced to a roadhouse band." I quickly downed two Buds, scanned the room for Junk, to no avail. I wondered whether he would own up to being Riverbottom's roadie when I saw him at work on Monday.

I saw this girl Kathy who worked with my friend John. She was with her sister; I waved them over.

"What are you doing here?" I yelled over the din. "I thought you were a punker."

"My boyfriend's a classic rock dude," she said. "He's up front."

"Yeah, my friends are, too."

"What are you doing here?" she said. "Why didn't you go to see Dag Nasty with John and his brother?"

"I had options; I chose this." Although I wasn't sure exactly why. I did like Foghat, and hanging out with Andy, but if I'd gone to see Dag Nasty I'd probably be having a better time. The three of us sat there, forlorn, drinking mindlessly.

"'Fool for the City' is a good tune," I said. "They did a good job with it. And 'I Just Want to Make Love to You" was OK, too." They nodded. "But it's just not the same as it was on…."

As I blathered on, the singer was introducing the next song, "Honey Hush." It was a Big Joe Turner song, he said, covered by loads of people over the years, yeah, yeah, whatever. I thought about how I was too cool for this show, and that I

should have gone to see Dag Nasty and moshed away my frustrations.

The drummer hit the snare and in the split second before the rest of the band kicked in, I snapped back to reality. The bass and guitars exploded with a vicious riff that very quickly morphed into something akin to Aerosmith's version of "Train Kept A Rollin'" and the dance floor went nuts. Foghat, who up to this point had been playing serviceable boogie rock, in the blink of an eye had found a new gear and turned into Metallica.

Roger Earl was pounding the drums faster and faster, hitting them so hard that the whole kit began to slide forward. A roadie dashed out (Is that Junk? No.) and, assessing the problem, decided that the best way to keep Earl from driving right off the stage was to plop himself down and turn himself into a human drum-kit blocker. The guitarists were whaling away on their axes, and the bassist was thrumming on the strings so rapidly that his fingers began to bleed. People started slam dancing in pathetic attempts to imitate the punk rockers they'd seen on the TV news.

I was suddenly way more into the show, but on principle I refused to slam. "This isn't a punk show, and these aren't punks," I told myself. I didn't want to dilute any future slamming experiences by bouncing off rednecks and grease monkeys who didn't know Black Flag from Big Black.

"Aren't you gonna slam?" Kathy asked.

"No. Are you?"

"I think my boyfriend would get a big kick if I did," she said. Her sister laughed. "But I'm not gonna."

Just then I caught a glimpse of Donna pushing Andy into the fray, squealing with delight as he pinballed around the dance floor. She looked my way and motioned for me to join them. I put my hands up, telling her, "No way."

I wanted to get into the mix, bounce off a few yapers and live it up. I really did. But I didn't want to look like a fool. I had a hard time letting myself go in social situations. I only liked being the center of attention when the circle was comprised of people I knew very well. Amongst strangers, I got very self-conscious.

As the last power chord was feeding back at the end of Foghat's set, Andy and Donna joined us at the bar, sweaty as Bachman-Turner Overdrive wearing snorkel jackets on a hot summer day. Kathy quickly excused herself to find her boyfriend. Her sister followed; I got stuck with the tab.

After about fifteen minutes, we headed out to the parking lot. Andy and Donna were walking with their arms around each other, hands in each other's pocket, in what I hoped was an ironic display of '70s affection. Because they were drunk, they kept bumping hips, thereby knocking me into a variety of things: people's cars, puddles, couples who were making out. The whole time, I kept my eyes on the bus.

The clouds from earlier in the evening had cleared, and the brown-and-silver tour machine was now supernaturally shiny, backlit by a giant, yellow moon. With the willow trees hanging solemnly in front, and the mountain in the background, the bus looked like something from a Dixie Dregs concert t-shirt. Nobody was so much as even looking at it; either they didn't know what it was or simply didn't care, the stage show satisfying their rock and roll jones. As fascinated as I was by the image in front of me, I quickly flashed on how lonely it could be playing washed-up songs for small-town America, over and over and over.

"I guess it beats working at a grocery store," I thought.

Donna was laughing.

She was pointing at my feet.

I was stepping in puke.

"Son of a bitch," I barked.

"It's not that bad," she said, genuinely trying to make me feel better. She grabbed my hand. "Take them off and let's go see what's up with that bus." She took Andy's hand and we galloped across the muddy, pot-holed parking lot. We were five feet from the door when it swung open slowly, deliberately, leaking out Buddy Holly's "That'll Be the Day." A pair of grimy black boots slowly descended the stairs. Followed by a pair of black jeans…and a Sabbath t –shirt.

It was Junk.

"What's up girls?" he said to Andy and me. Then, spying Donna: "And ladies, too, of course."

Donna smiled weakly in a rare speechless moment. Did Junk remember her? Was he hoping she didn't recognize him?

"What were you doing on Foghat's bus, man?" Andy asked.

"Taking a piss, asshole," came the smarmy reply.

"But how…" was all I could manage before Junk waved his hands to cut me off.

"Not that you're worth it, but…." He took a swig off a bottle of Southern Comfort, wiped his mouth with his sleeve, hucked up a lougie and spit it between Andy and me, and clapped his hands three times.

"I smoked a bone with Roger and the guys, did a few lines with the driver, and talked about my old man, who partied with the *real* Foghat in London in 1973 because he knew one of the guys in Mungo Jerry, who played piano with Foghat at one point. End of story." He slugged some more SoCo. "And you guys are never getting on that bus. Her," he said, pointing at Donna, "she might have a chance. Maybe…."

He started to walk toward the club, but Donna stopped him in his tracks, angrily yelling his name.

"Junk! You bastard!"

"One of us is getting hit," I thought, "and it ain't gonna be Donna." Junk tolerated Andy and me, but taunted us -- "college boys," "preppies," "slummers" -- on a regular basis. We were just two of the many college kids working at the grocery store during the summer and over Christmas break. A lot of our coworkers went into full-time work after high school, rather than college, but none of them gave us as hard a time as Junk did.

"You know who I am," she snarled as he turned slowly towards her. "We partied at the sand pits together. Your friend Doug was cranking *Led Zeppelin II* while you and your buddy Mike had shotgun races and threw rocks at the bats flying around. Starting to sound familiar?" Junk was deadpan.

"Some girl threw up in Mike's car and he flipped out, calling her a bitch. We made out but I refused to follow you to the maintenance trailer. Then *I* was a bitch and as I was leaving with my friends you flipped us off."

"If she tells him who produced *Led Zeppelin II,* I swear I'll let her play *Hotel California* in the car on the way home," I told Andy.

"You've got the wrong hombre," was all Junk said to Donna. She flipped him off and headed toward the Opel. Andy and I shifted our feet uncomfortably as Junk watched her go. Donna said and did a lot of things that bugged me, but she wasn't a liar.

Junk looked at Andy and me, back at Donna and then over to us, a big smirk on his face. Then, tapping his watch, he held up six fingers.

"What the hell does that mean?" I asked.

"I'm working tomorrow at six," Andy answered. "I think he's either gonna kick my ass or show me pictures of something I don't wanna see."

Just then the door to the bus swished open. It was Roger Earl. He had changed out of his shorts and tube socks and was wearing tight black jeans, cowboy boots and a sleeveless Nazareth t-shirt. He walked right past us and up to Junk. He handed him what looked like a lighter, said something that they both laughed at and then ambled back aboard. Junk headed for his car.

The bus groaned forward and wheezed out of the parking lot. We watched in silence as it pulled onto the main road and disappeared into the distance.

"Off to the next big gig," I said.

"Yeah, probably going to Scranton," Andy cracked.

We turned to head back to the Opel, and were cut off by Junk in his Bondo-filled Camaro. I was going to tell him how impressed I was that he was hanging out with Foghat; I'm sure Andy had a few things on his mind about Junk and Donna.

Junk, on the other hand, was in a nonverbal mood. He gave us a cold stare, stepped out of the car, pulled his pants down and mooned us, got back in and tore away.

"Did he have a skull and crossbones on his ass?" Andy asked, incredulous.

"The guy's a freak," I said. "Let's go see how Donna's doing."

I thought a little less of Donna knowing that she'd partied with Junk, but was glad to know she hadn't done more than make out with him. I'm sure Andy knew that he wasn't gonna see much more of her, but I didn't want to bring it up.

"She's probably passed out," he said. "She won't remember any of this."

He gave me the keys.

"Let's get outta here," he said. "I got a long day ahead of me."

Centered around music and set in cities ranging from New Haven, Boston and New York, to New Orleans, Albuquerque and Athens, GA, in the mid-'80s through the mid-'90s, these stories cover all the classic rock and roll themes: love, heartbreak, death, friendship, travel, growing up, growing apart, class conflict, petty crime, partying and the warm sensation of cheese melting on your face.

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