

Prologue

THE LAST MINUTES of my last show with my last band:

The four of us, wired and slick with sweat, were wedged into the basement dressing room at Blowtorch, arguing about what to play for our second encore. Above our heads the crowd chanted “*Ju-das! Ju-das!*” as they stomped in martial 2/4 time. It felt like we were inside one of Otto’s drums.

“Heels Over Head!” Otto bellowed, because the violent coda was an excuse to kick over his kit. He emptied a bottle of Aqua Prima over his shaven head. Sparkling water cascaded down his wiry torso.

“Suffer Somewhere Else,” hollered Tallulah, because she was too wasted to manage any of the other bass lines. She’d dislodged a cosmetic contact lens during the set—now she had one golden cat’s eye and one bloodshot green one. Tequila swashed in her plastic cup, partly from the vibrations, partly from her.

“Evaporation,” I said, because I knew it was what Nina would want to play.

“What Bug said!” Nina yelled from the bathroom, where she was peeing with the door open. She hiked up her jeans and scrutinized her makeup in the mirror’s largest shard.

“Let’s do it!” I whooped. In my previous bands we’d hover in the wings after the last song, hoping the applause would congeal into something decisive enough to justify a few more minutes onstage. I still didn’t take pre-encore luxuries like urination for granted.

But Nina wasn't done combing her hair. The new blonde shade still looked shocking against her cinnamon-mocha skin. Her folks were from Iran, but people always asked if she was Mediterranean, Hispanic, North African. I bobbed anxiously while she verified the alignment of every earring.

Finally she gestured for Otto to lead the way upstairs. We followed single-file, squeezing between battered aluminum kegs and storage shelves laden with toilet paper. Trailing Nina up the staircase, I leaned forward and inhaled till the fragrance of her skin overruled the smell of mildew and beer. I nipped her nape.

She turned, irritated. "You can't do that with my hair short."

"We'll talk about it later." As in later after I'd tied her facedown on her bed with leather guitar straps and she was telling me to sink my teeth in deeper.

She nodded. "Later."

We huddled in the wings, just out of sight. The crimson tip of Otto's joint raced toward his face as he sucked down a final hit. Tallulah scribbled her fingers in her hair until blue tendrils obscured her face.

I took a step toward the stage. Nina snatched me back by the elbow. "Remember what I told you," she scolded. "It's like surfing. You don't just ride the first wave. You wait for the perfect one."

The ovation receded, then returned. Nina nodded. "Now."

Whistles and shrieks as near-naked Otto sprinted to the drum riser. Tallulah got her bass on without stumbling over any cables. I remembered to put on my guitar Nina-style. I'd been

playing a decade longer, but she's the one who taught me how to lock the strap from the side instead of squirming into it like a t-shirt.

The stomping and clapping snowballed into pure white noise when Nina stalked onstage. She donned her guitar and stood motionless save for a tapping boot heel. Backlit in lavender, she radiated cool arrogance.

The crowd hushed as Nina started the "Evaporation" riff, pounding her low *E* with the blunt, up-and-down strokes of a guy beating off. Meanwhile, I conjured a sinister bone-on-bone sound by scraping my strings with the vintage mood ring I'd wheedled from my mom. "Take it," said the world's biggest hypochondriac. "The way I feel, it'd just turn black."

Nina intoned the opening verse:

Evaporation

No more sensation

An empty ocean

As far as I can see

I directed my gaze toward the raised mixing board at the rear of the room. More Nina Sheybani stagecraft: "Play up and back. Don't make eye contact with the weasels." I saw the hulking silhouette of Ron, our front-of-house soundwoman, nodding to the rising groove. The record company A&R weasels lurked nearby at the reserved tables. They'd been dispatched from LA to reconnoiter what *Murder by Music* called "the first important San Francisco band of the millennium, and probably the last."

Offers were about to flood in. It was just a matter of waiting for the perfect one.

I wanted to sign with Clubbo. They were the last of the cool indies, plus my mom worked there before I was born. “Clubbo is cool,” Nina would agree, “but we should keep our options open.”

Nina’s voice vaulted up an octave:

Evaporation

A slow starvation

She keeps you waiting

And then she fades away

She turns to vapor

No one can save her

She’ll never stay here

When all she really needs is someone to leave

Nina prowled upstage, teasing feedback from her amp. She flashed me a conspiratorial grin, sharp lower-left canine denting lush upper lip. Then she lunged at me. Our guitars collided. She pressed into me, hips grinding. Our amps moaned like ocean liners on icebergs.

In a spasm of inspiration I pried the mood ring from my finger and wedged it between two low synthesizer keys. It stuck there, sustaining two sine waves a discordant half-step apart. As anyone with even a rudimentary knowledge of acoustics knows, two notes sounded simultaneously generate a lower-pitched third note defined by the interval between the first two notes. In this case:

$$\mathbf{E1 (82.4 Hz) + F1 (87.3 Hz) = difference tone of 4.9 Hz}$$

As you probably know, 4.9 Hz is two octaves below the range of human hearing. But you can feel it—everyone and everything inside Blowtorch throbbed nearly five times per second. *Tempo di orgasmo*. It was good.

Everything between Nina and me was like a difference tone. When we superimposed our natures, deep things happened.

We staggered offstage. The applause was loud but brief. Everyone knew the show was over.



It was the rhythm section's turn to settle up, but Tallulah begged off, citing an early workday selling corsets at Hellbound Strumpet on Haight Street. (Read: phoning in sick and nursing her hangover.) Otto counted out the cash on the Judasmobile's bumper: \$351 each, big bucks for an unsigned band. He asked if we needed help unloading, even though he knew we'd let him off the hook, what with his bike and all.

After he pedaled off Nina and I slouched in the van sipping beer—stage one of our post-gig decompression process. Next up: Trundling the gear into our second-floor rehearsal room. Some hard food and fast liquor. Hard, fast sex in the nearer of our beds. Then a long, satisfied sleep, curled together like bass clefs. We weren't a couple, exactly. We just sort of gravitated together after our other relationships withered in the heat of Flowering Judas's ambitious schedule.

Nina propped a disintegrating sneaker on the dashboard, scattering candy wrappers and CD cases. The windows were down—it was September, San Francisco’s limp-wristed parody of summer. The radio had been crowbarred from the dash, so the sole soundtrack was the clatter of a bartender carting out the empties.

“Was it good for you, Bug?” she asked.

“It was fucking amazing.”

She nodded. “I wanted to go out on a high note.”

“Yeah,” I agreed. “We had how many weasels here tonight? You were right—the more you act like you don’t care, the more rabid they get. Lisa Niedelman from Magna for—what? The third time? The world’s biggest label shows up, and we say, ‘Back off, witch!’”

Nina shifted her foot. “It wasn’t just Lisa Niedelman. Donald Ravenna came too.”

“Whoa.” Ravenna was Magna’s CEO. The weasels *were* hungry.

“Actually,” said Nina, “I had lunch with him today.”

We’d always phoned each other to savor every miniscule Judas development. Not sharing a meeting of Ravenna magnitude was like neglecting to mention that Illia One had come back from the dead to invite you to play on the next Lunaire album. My throat went dry.

Nina spoke faster: “He asked if I’d ever thought about working on a non-Judas solo project. Now, if I *did* do something like that, it wouldn’t mean I’d be any less committed to—”

“What the fuck are you saying?” I barked. The bartender eyed me warily from behind the dumpster.

Nina clacked her empty can onto the dash. “I’m *trying* to tell you what the fuck I’m saying! I’m saying I might take a little break from Judas to check out this solo idea. You can’t just say ‘no thanks’ to the guy who produced *Blood on Black Lace!*”

“Yeah,” I snorted. “Twenty years ago. And he’s been spewing audio puke ever since. Me2. Piehole. Feather Footjoy.”

Nina’s eyes brightened. ““But that’s the cool thing! He said he wanted to work with me because he’s tired of all those cookie-cutter acts. He wants to do something original and edgy like he used to do with Lunaire. But I’ll tell you the same thing I told Donnie. I said—”

“*Donnie?*” I sneered. “You use nicknames? What does he call you? *Neen?*”

“You can listen to me, or you can freak out.”

“I’m ambidextrous—I can listen *and* freak out.” I folded my hands primly around my beer. “Do go on. I believe you were telling me how you’re quitting your own band. And when were you planning to notify me?”

“Let me think.” She rested a cheekbone on a fingertip, miming deliberation. “I guess I was planning to notify you right now, asshole.”

I downshifted from rage to desperation. “How much of a break? Like a month? Like a year?”

“Like I don’t know. Like a fucking *break*, okay?”

I tightened my grip on the can. “Even if it’s long enough to fuck up a deal with Clubbo?”

Nina lowered her voice. “Listen. There isn’t going to be a deal with Clubbo because there isn’t going to be a Clubbo. Magna’s buying them out. No more signings without Donnie’s approval. And Donnie’s not interested in Flowering Judas.”

I silently completed her statement: *He’s only interested in me.*

I slammed my unfinished can onto the dash like Nina had, only harder. Total beer bath.

“Fuck!” She flung open the door and leapt out, flapping liquid.

“Sorry,” I croaked.

Nina wrung out her shirt, baring her smooth brown belly. “Just open the back, okay? I think there’s a shirt with no beer on it in my case.”

I fumbled numbly for the key. As I yanked out Nina’s gig case and thumped it onto the pavement, I racked my brain for the perfect eulogy, something to enshrine the moment in the bleak poetry of a Lunaire lyric. But the best I could come up with was slamming the van door as hard as I could.

But somehow Mom’s mood ring got caught in the lock mechanism. A slab of vintage Detroit steel descended squarely on my hand.

I howled piteously, playing it up, seeking sympathy. Fucking idiot—I didn’t know yet.

“Oh, shit!” cried Nina. “Are you okay?”

“No, I’m not okay!” I pried my hand loose. Only then did I realize a piece was missing. And there was blood, lots of blood.

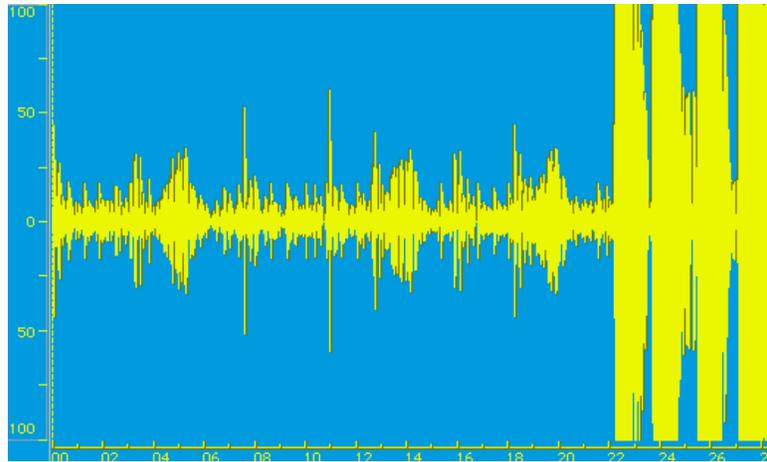
“*Oh fuck!*” Nina shrieked from miles away. “*Jesus fucking fuck!*”

Chapter One: 18 Months Later

WHEN I WAS OLD ENOUGH to love music but too young to make my own, I liked to stand beneath the piano while my mom played. I'd clutch the mahogany legs and push my head against the soundboard, clenching my teeth until the Chopin nocturnes and Beethoven bagatelles seemed to originate inside my skull.

I flashed on the sensation decades later as I stood on my desk with my forehead pressed to the ceiling, listening to my upstairs neighbors screwing. It wasn't voyeurism—I was squeezing as close as possible to the conductive surface to capture the clearest possible signal through my headset microphones. This rhythm was particularly promising, practically a drum groove in itself. *Boom-squeaka-boom, UH! squeaka-boom-boom.* They rocked.

But the problem with using stolen sex noises as rhythm tracks—other than high-frequency attenuation due to thick Victorian flooring—is that no matter how steady-rolling the fuck, it's never as metronomic as you want it to be. You inevitably spend hours cutting, time-stretching, and quantizing the audio file before it locks in. I wanted to shout, *Keep a fucking beat, and vice-versa!* But I had the input level cranked so high that my voice would have drowned out the good stuff. See for yourself—here's how it looked on my laptop after I loaded it into Audioactive Pro:



It's as easy to understand as the cardiac monitors that flicker meaningfully in hospital dramas. The numbers across the bottom indicate elapsed time in seconds. Distances from the horizontal axis depict loudness. Reading left to right, you can discern the tantalizing promise of a groove, until you reach the deafening blasts at 00:22, which indicate the ringing phone that nearly toppled me from my perch.

I climbed down and slogged through a sediment of unwound audio cables, unsorted discs, unread music mags, and unwashed underwear. A CD-R case went *crack*. I plucked my phone from atop a tower of hard drives.

“Yo, Bug,” said a manly baritone.

“Ron?” I stubbed a finger into my ear, muting the climax from upstairs. I hadn't talked to our old soundwoman since the final Flowering Judas gig. When Nina signed her solo deal and swirled down the drain to LA, Ron dribbled along behind her on the promise of Magna engineering work.

“Sorry about your mom,” said Ron. “She was a real cool lady. I would have called when it happened, but I just found out. That’s so sad, being an orphan. Do they still say ‘orphan’ when you’re 30?”

“I’m 29.”

“Anyway, guess where I am.”

“Where?” I hoped my tone conveyed the full extent of my curiosity.

“I’m on my way into the city. I had a gig at Uncle Cindy’s in Guerneville last night, and tonight I’m doing the Valentine Fantasy Ball at the Gaffe.”

Both were drag clubs. When Ron wasn’t mixing, she worked as a male impersonator. She was pretty good, at least when it came to certain heavy-set male entertainers.

“I wish I could make it down,” I lied, “but I’m in the middle of a session.”

“I’m not asking you to make it down. I’m asking you to mix it. I only know two people in SF tonight who can manage a decent mix, and since *I* will be onstage, I want you to loan me your golden ears.”

“I’m just sitting down to dinner.” I glanced at the cereal bowl next to my laptop. Choco-Puffs marinated in warm brown milk.

“I’m desperate, bro. I’ll make it worth your while.”

I snorted. “It’s just a lip-sync gig.”

“No, check it out: It’s *Queers with Ears, Dykes on Mikes*. Everyone really sings! I’m getting pretty good at the singing part. But not good enough to survive some sorry-ass monitor mix.”

I was silent. So were my drained upstairs neighbors.

“Help me out,” Ron pleaded, “and I’ll cut you in on the ultimate killer engineering gig. Deep pockets, bro.”

“Deep *Magna* pockets?”

She hesitated. “Sort of.”

“I don’t do work for the Magna Music Group.”

“I don’t do work for the Magna Music Group,” she echoed in a nasal whine that bore no resemblance to my actual voice. “Okay, final offer: Fifty bucks, cash. A line on an awesome gig. And a burrito.”

“Taquería Tulúm?”

“Tulúm,” she confirmed.

“Done.”



Forty-five minutes later I heard the hoofbeats of wild stallions echoing against high canyon walls, followed by long-range artillery fire. I hadn’t done much to fix up my Mission District bachelor flat, but at least I’d replaced the vanilla door buzzer with a sampler that dispensed random sound effects when anyone pushed the button downstairs.

I peered out the window at the top of Ron’s head. A gleaming black pompadour had supplanted the old magenta dreadlocks, but her bulk was unmistakable. So was the double-parked Judasmobile. I’d assumed Nina had liquidated it like she liquidated the band. Yellow light seeped from a single headlight into the moist San Francisco night.

Ron leaned into the doorbell again, triggering a recording of a police bullhorn: “*Drop your weapon and lie face-down on the ground, shithead!*” I shouldered my gig bag and clopped downstairs.

“Happy Valentine’s Day!” Ron brayed, spreading her arms. She came from Kansas City meatpacking stock—it was like hugging a water heater with boobs. A prosthetic sideburn tickled my ear. I smelled French fries and hair tonic.

I wiped my cheek. “It’s Saturday. Isn’t Valentine’s Day always supposed to fall on a Thursday?”

“Like I’d know. I haven’t had a Valentine’s date in three years.” She hefted my satchel. “Let’s scoot. I’m barely going to have time to wrap my tits.”

The Judasmobile still snorted and shook like a palsied pig. The only cosmetic changes were new additions to the filo-crust of band stickers: Vanessa Frog Stomp. Cradlesnatch. Chicano Space Program. The remains of my left hand formed a fist when Ron tugged the rear doors open. I detected a dark stain on the lock, but it was probably just oil.

Ron loaded my bag and slammed the door. I flinched.

She noticed. “Oh, shit. Sorry, Bug. These doors are probably like—shit. Sorry.”

“It’s okay,” I lied. “And most people call me Chris now.”

Ron tried to sneak a peek at my hand as we climbed in, but I’d secured it in my jacket pocket. She started the engine and the interrogation: “Tell me what you’re up to, Mr. Bug. *Shit.*” She sucked air through her teeth, mimicking the sound of rewinding tape. “Tell me what you’re up to, Mr. Chris. How’s music?”

I refused to fidget. “It’s great. I’m thinking about my next project.” Whatever the fuck it was.

“I’m going to make you tell me about it, but right now I’ve got to warm up.” She jammed a CD-R into a new Takahashi player. The sleek titanium faceplate complemented the decrepit van like a velvet tassel on a toilet plunger.

Ron punched play. A bonehead metal riff rattled my head bones. It was an instrumental mix of some Piehole track—typical Magna pigmetal. Ron threw back her head and discharged a dead-on imitation of Deadly Ernest’s lead-footed Caucasian rap:

*Goin’ to a dyke bar lookin’ for chicks
Librarian tongues do cunning lil’ tricks
But tonight I’m gonna teach ‘em what to do to a dick
Gonna find me a bitch . . . TO SIT ON MY GIRLFRIEND’S FACE!*

The van hyperventilated down Folsom in second, its stick shift neglected as Ron made flapping hip-hop hand gestures. The seat springs chiseled every pothole into my bony ass.

“Great song,” I shouted. “I find myself captivated by the crisp imagery. But isn’t it just a *wee* little bit homophobic?”

“It fucking *rocks*. Chill out, Mr. Berkeley.” That was uncalled for—I hadn’t lived in the East Bay since high school.

Ron was so focused on her performance that I had to point out the club. She careened across two lanes and pulled into the alley behind the Gaffe, where a bevy of drag queens refreshed lipstick and straightened seams before pawnshop mirrors. A girl with a lofty

Cleopatra Wong coiffure blew a kiss into our headlight. I felt a stab of sadness when she removed her wig to reveal a flesh-colored shower cap. There's always something poignant about an unwigged transvestite, even when she doesn't remind you of your mom, post-chemo. We could hear the *tuck-a-shik, tuck-a-shik* of dance music, even inside the van.

Ron peeled off her lumberjack shirt. A new tattoo of a 45-RPM disc encircled her navel. She began wrapping her chest with an elastic bandage. I went inside to scope out the mixing board.

The club's interior was festooned with hearts and cupids and shit. But I was cheered by the music's walloping lows and articulate highs—they'd obviously upgraded the sound system since the last time I'd been there. I swam across the roiling dance floor to the booth. Sure enough, they'd installed a new board, one of those sexy little Nielsens.

The DJ was spinning that old disco warhorse, Decoupage's "Dress Rehearsal." Hundreds of voices chirped along to the falsetto *whoop-whoop* chorus. Surveying the scene from the back of the room, arms folded, I wondered yet again why queer clubs are so much livelier than straight clubs, where everyone stands with their arms folded at the back of the room, surveying the scene.

The audience cheered as the Cleopatra Wong impersonator tottered onstage, her coiffure drooping ominously as she attempted the '70s disco queen's trademark shimmy. The visuals were superb, but she sang in a harsh, honking monotone. The audience dispensed a tepid mercy ovation. I hoped Ron wouldn't suck so hard.

When the MC signaled from the stage via pom-pom, I commandeered the desk and dialed in the monitor mix I knew Ron wanted: a splash of reverb to lube her ego, but not enough to

obscure her pitch. A stiff corset of 8:1 compression. A feedback-nixing filter. I inserted the Piehole disc and pressed play. The sound system vomited the idiotic intro riff.

Ron slouched onstage, knuckles dragging. She'd nailed Deadly Ernest's look: the huge bronze nose ring, the simultaneous cigar and cigarette, the spiked German helmet, the works.

"Fuck you!" roared a nun.

"Go back to LA!" bellowed a ballerina.

Piehole was not loved by queer SF. Everyone knew Ron wasn't really Ernest, but they hated her anyway.

Ron unzipped and extracted a two-foot rubber cock from her khakis. She wagged it a few times before ripping the mike from its stand. She spat out each syllable like a rogue pubic hair:

*My big-boob betty used to think she was queer
Till me an Lil' Ernie talked her out of that idea
But she'll still eat seafood if I fill her fulla beer
Gonna find me a bitch . . . TO SIT ON MY GIRLFRIEND'S FACE!*

Ron dropped into a full split at the first moronic squawk of the guitar solo, catching the cock in her teeth on the way down. It's always impressive when a large person pulls off a graceful gymnastic feat, especially when it involves auto-fellatio. Even I howled in delight. A sea of fists started to pummel the air.

While Ron rapped, I tweaked the mix, notching out 4 kHz shrillness and loosening the constipated bottom end. Nothing could have made it sound *good*, but I did improve Piehole's mix by a factor of approximately 37 billion.

Ron took it home, smacking the dildo against the mike stand on 2 and 4.

My dolly's no dyke—she just know what I like

Gonna find us a bitch . . . TO SIT ON MY GIRLFRIEND'S FACE!

And when my bitches are through

They can sit on my head and Lil' Ernie's too!

Everyone went gorilla-shit. Ron had transmuted Piehole's turd into a camp gem. The crowd ignored the DJ's first two songs, whistling and stomping until it was clear Ron wouldn't reappear.

"Keep 'em wanting more," panted a low voice at my ear. Ron, red-faced and sweaty, had jogged around the block and reentered via the front door.

"Damn," I said. "You've been practicing."

Ron smiled almost girlishly. She actually cared what I thought. There was a moment when I might have hugged her again.

I made a show of studying my watch. "Well, it would appear to be burrit-o'clock."

"True," she admitted. "But let's stay for a little bit of the last act. It's Rikki-Rikki. She's one of the best drag artists in Southern California."

"One song," I sighed wearily.

But Rikki-Rikki's intro music woke me up real fast. Now *I* wanted to shout, "Fuck you! Go back to LA!"

Even if you avoid radio as religiously as I'd done post-Judas, you've probably heard "What You Said" at your local gym, DMV, or strip club. And if you're part of that statistically

insignificant percentage of moviegoers stupid enough to see *Ghost Mall II* yet smart enough to read, you may have noticed these words in the closing credits:

“What You Said”

Performed by Shey

From the Magna Records album *Shey Moi*

Produced by Keith Burchill for Burch Bottom Productions

Written by Shey, K. Burchill, A. Glover, E. McNair, O. Madison, C. Fine

Magna Charta Records (a division of Magna Music Group)

I’ll translate: Shey was Nina Sheybani—no way would Magna try to launch a pop star with an Iranian name, even if we hadn’t been suffering through a patriotic episode. Keith Burchill is the oily producer responsible for such mega-sellers as Me2’s *Me2 II* and Feather Footjoy’s *Sunny Supersounds*. But no single mortal could conceive the greatness that is “What You Said”—hence the participation of veteran song hacks Alford Glover and Edison McNair. Rapper Omar Madison from Myndz I got a wedge of the cheese for coughing up a few prefab couplets on the breakdown. There’s a roped-off VIP lounge in hell for all “What You Said” perpetrators—especially for C. Fine, who is me.

Nina must have prided herself on doing the right thing when she credited me, since the song’s central riff was swiped from an unfinished Flowering Judas song and repurposed for bimbo-pop via surgical removal of the interesting notes. I was principled too: Even though I was broke enough to make career decisions on the basis of a six-dollar burrito, I never opened the Magna royalty checks. I’d scribble the words “Return to sender—addressee maimed, betrayed and unknown” on the envelopes and spit them back to Santa Monica.

Rikki-Rikki wafted onstage. She looked, walked, and wiggled like Nina. She wore the same cobalt angora minidress Nina wore in the video, or at least in the fragments that had jostled their way between my eyelids before I could switch to the Ancient Worlds channel. She brushed aside her asymmetrical blonde pageboy to cup one ear like Nina sometimes does:

*I couldn't speak, I was so happy
Last night when you told me you loved me
But today I saw you with your friends
Couldn't help but hear what you were telling them*

The music was a little bit rock. A little bit hiphop. A little bit Latin. And a whole lot of test-marketed, focus-grouped, formula-bound bullshit. So much for Donnie Ravenna's supposed desire to create something "original and edgy."

But Rikki-Rikki's impersonation was so good, it hurt. She captured the taut, contents-under-pressure quality of Nina's voice. Her asymmetrical phrasing. Her asymmetrical smile. Her wicked little underbite.

*What you said really hurt me
What you said was so untrue
Tell me why—was it all a lie?
Was it just a joke to you?*

"She's great, huh?" Ron was so engrossed that she didn't even notice me leave.



The thick night air damped the music to a distant throb. I sulked down Folsom Street, recalling the morning Nina and I concocted the “What You Said” riff.

Flowering Judas had sold out Hamboner’s the night before, thanks to the *Murder by Music* cover story. We wound up at my place at 3:45 AM, a little drunker than usual.

I slammed the door. I slammed Nina against it. She whimpered softly. I clenched my hand in her hair—it was still long, black, and matted—and tugged, exposing her neck. “Don’t,” she whimpered. I released her.

“Fuck!” she squawked. “I didn’t mean let go of me!”

I tried to reinstate my grip, but she squirmed away. “What do you want?” I cried.

“I want to not have to *tell* you what I want.” She tugged her shirt back down over her bra. “I want you to show me what *you* want. Like, you want to shove me down and fuck me and call me a bitch. Do you think I’m a bitch?”

“Big time!”

“Then treat me like one, asshole!”

I lunged for her. She tried to slap me, but I caught her wrist. She flashed that smile. “That’s more like it, faggot.” She tried to wriggle free, but I pinned her arms and shoved her facedown on the mattress. She feigned dazed submission while I shook a guitar string (an unwound G, gauge .018) from its paper pouch and weaved it around her wrists, threading the wire through the little metal ball-end. I started to tug off her jeans.

“Take my boots off first,” she coached.

I smacked her half-bared ass. “Shut up, bitch!”

She mewed contentedly. “Call me other things too.”

I forced her thighs apart with my knee. “Show it to me, cunt!”

“Not cunt! I don’t like cunt. Slut’s okay.”

Slut worked for both of us, and whore went over like gangbusters. Afterwards I freed her with a wire clipper and kissed the grooves in her soft brown wrists.

Nasty sunlight blasted me awake at the ungodly hour of 10:00 AM—I’d forgotten to lower the shades. I tried to let Nina’s *pp* snores lull me back to sleep, but I felt something scratchy beneath my back: a \$20 bill, part of the gig money I’d thrust beneath Nina’s nose at the climax of the whore scenario.

Awake now, I fixated on Nina’s quiet exhalations. They were pitched an exact minor-third above her inhalations. My fingers tapped her naked haunch like a keyboard. She muttered irritably.

I slid out of bed and grabbed a guitar, fingering the frets without plucking so as not to disturb Nina. But she mumbled, “That’s cool,” and began humming along. I played louder.

“No,” she coached, “go *up* on the third note of the repeat.” She fetched her toothbrush from her gig case and tapped a tinkling obbligato on my toy xylophone. I turned on the computer. We didn’t get dressed till dark.

I never made music with such blind, brutal abandon as I did with Nina.

“Brutal abandon,” I muttered two years later as I slumped past a shuttered Palestinian corner store. Would the owner grieve if his partner abandoned the business for a hot supermarket gig? I paused at the window of a store selling nothing but wheels and casters.

Would the Exalted Order of Caster Vendors swear a vendetta against a member who betrayed the brotherhood for a chance to sell monster truck tires?

I considered walking all the way to the Embarcadero, but the East Bay was the last thing I wanted to see after Ron's "Mr. Berkeley" crack. I kept making right-hand turns because they required less initiative than crossing the street, and eventually found myself back in the alley behind the Gaffe, deserted now save for the Judasmobile and a single marabou-trimmed mule. I kicked the shoe. It struck the side of the dumpster, producing a feeble *ting*. I picked it up and hurled it against the metal a half-dozen times, but couldn't attain the righteous *KLONG* I desired.

I jimmed open the van's passenger door with a discarded coat hanger, correctly guessing that Nina had never fixed the lock. I crawled in back so I could lie miserably on the steel floor till Ron showed up. Then I noticed a faded sticker on a steel suitcase:

**THEY CAN TAKE AWAY A WOMAN'S RIGHT TO CHOOSE
WHEN THEY PRY MY COLD, DEAD FINGERS FROM AROUND MY HANDGUN!**

It was Nina's old gig case, the last thing my fingers touched before the accident. She'd lugged it to every Flowering Judas show, from our first public farts to that final night at Blowtorch. The contents never varied: Spare strings and cables. A tuner. A rat-brown ski cap to hide her hair while setting up the stage. A Bollingen V-17 in a black leatherette case, because Nina loathed the beery reek of house microphones. The expensive Tartini cosmetics she'd obtain even when she couldn't afford them. A flask of the nasty La Belle France brandy

she drank even when she could have had something better. Black sweatpants and crisp, clean underwear for after the gig. I fingered the latch.

Something grabbed my foot. Maybe I screamed.

“Jeez!” cried Ron. “How about if you don’t rummage through my stuff, Bug?”

“Chris,” I pleaded weakly.

“Whatever.” In one hand Ron clutched her spiked helmet, stuffed with crumpled bills. The other hand held my shoe. “I spent 20 minutes looking for you! I thought maybe you had a heart attack in the little boys’ room. I even asked some guy to check for you. ‘Look for a skinny straight dude with fucked-up hair.’”

“Can I have my shoe?”

“Then it hit me: You’re still tweaking over Nina. You have such a tender soul that you flip out just seeing someone who *looks* like her!”

“He looked like Shey,” I pointed out. “Not Nina.”

“News flash, bro: They’re the same person.”

“No, they’re not!” I insisted. “Would the real Nina Sheybani sing lame-ass victim shit like, *What you said really hurt me, what you said was so untrue?* No! The real Nina would have sung, *What you said really hurt me, and that’s why you’re in intensive care, fuckface!*”

Ron clenched her huge jaw, still shiny with spirit-gum residue. “Let’s not talk about Nina then. Instead you can tell me about all the great music *you’ve* been making.”

I held out my good hand. “Shoe.”

But Ron smelled blood. “Yeah—tell me about all the great, pure, not-affiliated-with-the-Magna-Music-Group music you’ve been making in your great, pure, bedroom. What style is it? Can I hear something?”

“Back off, Ron.”

She leaned closer. “Are you playing out yet? Or are you just sitting around with your finger up your ass, waiting for the world to come around and apologize?”

She asked for it, bringing up fingers.

“No,” I replied with impeccable calm. “I’m not playing out yet. For *obvious reasons!*” I yanked my left hand from my pocket and thrust it right in her face. I imagined it from her point of view. A horror-flick close-up. The cannibalistic sewer troll whipping off its flesh-colored mask to the accompaniment of shrieking violins.

Ron considered my hand for about 200 milliseconds. “That’s *it?* I heard you totally fucked up your hand! You just lost a little piece of your pinky.”

“Fuck you.” I withdrew my hand and rolled over. “Why don’t you chop off one of *your* fingertips and see how it feels?”

Ron plopped down next to me. “Look, I’m not saying it’s a *good* thing you hurt your hand. But come on, bro! You quit music for *that?*”

“Who said I quit music? I just quit *playing* music. I still do music on my laptop.”

She shook her head. “Jeez. You only play about two zillion instruments. There must be one or two you can jam on with nine-and-a-half fingers. Jason Fleming from Flem has *two* metal fingers on his right hand, and he gets around on guitar pretty good.”

I was impressed. “Just two? He plays like he has at least six or seven metal fingers.”

“At least he’s doing something.”

“I *am* doing something,” I stomped the steel floor like a drummer auditioning a new bass drum pedal. “I’m collecting sounds.” *Boom*. “I’m experimenting.” *Boom*. “I’m coming up with ideas.” *Ba-boom*.

“Are you writing *any* songs?”

“You know me. I don’t write songs. I *react* to songs. I’m best when I can bounce my ideas off a great writer.”

“Then find one!”

“I’ve been spoiled.”

“Jeez!” spat Ron. “A minute ago Nina was a no-talent bimbo. Now she’s a one-of-a-kind super-genius. Which is it?”

Hey, I knew the answer to that one! “She’s a one-of-a-kind super-genius who has decided to fly so low to the ground that she’s scraping her nose off. Or maybe that’s just cosmetic surgery.”

Ron muttered something unintelligible, though I detected many c’s or k’s.



We didn’t talk all the way to the taquería.

Ron double-parked and slapped on the blinkers. “Look. I didn’t call you up to fight about shit that doesn’t matter anymore. And to be honest, I didn’t call you up just to do my sound, though you did a killer job.”

I shrugged. “One fader. One mike. One cue mix. Chimp work.”

“No, you have a unique touch. Which is probably the only reason anyone ever works with you. I’m going to shoot myself later for telling you about this.”

I bit. “About what?”

“One word.” Ron lowered her voice 15 dB. “Clubbo.”

“One word,” I replied. “So?”

“That’s it. I give up. I’m an idiot.” She dipped into the helmet and started counting out crinkled fives and ones. “I get a chance to work on *The Clubbo Story*, the first-ever Clubbo compilation. I figure, ‘Hey, maybe my old friend Bug can get paid good money to help archive and engineer 40-some years of great music. Maybe the family connection will mean something to him.’”

I snorted. “My mom was just a secretary looking for a record deal. Which she never got. Kind of runs in the family. Except she probably never got fucked over by her friends. Or had her—”

“Shut up. You should also be thinking, ‘Hey, I’m the number-one all-time Lunaire fan. I’d gladly sacrifice the rest of my little finger for a chance to work with some of Illia One’s actual session tapes.’”

I’d barely listened to Lunaire since the accident. “Since when am I the number-one all-time Illia One Lunaire fan?”

“Since you and Nina named Flowering Judas after a Lunaire song. Since you always did your extra-special sulk when we didn’t let you play *A Breath of Air from Other Planets* in the van for the 700th time. Shit, bro—you and Nina wanted to *be* Illia One and Junko Watanabe. And now

you've even got some Illia amputation action happening on your little finger there." She pinned both pinkies to her palms with her thumbs.

"I didn't cut off *my* finger on purpose."

"Plus there's all the Clubbo hits Illia One produced before Lunaire. And who knows what other cool stuff? Remember how you always said Flowering Judas should sign with Clubbo? How Clubbo was the only—"

I covered my ears. "Stop *Clubbo Clubbo Clubbo*-ing me! This is a Magna project!"

Ron tugged my hands down. "Look, I'm not saying everything Magna does is good. But not everything Magna does is automatically bad. Lunaire was on Magna."

I rolled my eyes. "After they left Clubbo. And they weren't as good."

"That's your opinion," she sniffed. "*Blood on Black Lace* sold about ten times as many copies as *A Breath of Air from Other Planets*."

I nodded. "Yup. There are always ten times as many stupid people as smart ones."

She withdrew her hand. "Yup, that's right—we're all fucking idiots. Especially me. I keep forgetting how pure you are."

"No, *I'm* the idiot." I whacked my head with my palm. "Now I get it. Magna is really cool! It was a cool idea to buy all the indie labels, turn them into Magna shit mills, and then sell boxed-set memorials to what they killed for \$79.99 per unit."

Ron sighed. "You probably don't realize this, being so super-pure and all, but more than 35 percent of the industry's been laid off in the last two years. And here's evil Magna, offering us a sweet little job. I guess you have all the work you need."

"I'm doing okay." I still had \$2,000 of inheritance money.

Ron forked over a wad of bills. “Fifty-six dollars—I didn’t forget your burrito.”

I climbed out and walked around to Ron’s window. “You *did* sound great.”

“So did you.” Ron paused. “Look, Bug-slash-Chris. It’s time to resolve your Nina issues. If I can get over being in love with her, so can you.”

“It wasn’t love. It was more. It was less. It was different.”

“That’s what I thought too. Give me your hand.”

I reached through the window. Ron pinned my forearm to the sill and scrawled a number on my skin. “I’m crashing at Squid’s tonight. What I *hope* happens is you call my cell in the morning. Then we can drive down together in time for the Monday morning production meeting.” She released me. “This could be an amazing opportunity for you.”

I rubbed my arm. “Typical. Always putting the welfare of others before your own.”

“More than you know, bro.” She started the engine. “Promise me you’ll at least *think* about *The Clubbo Story*.”

“Okay. I’ll think about *The Clubbo Story*.”



I stalked home inhaling my burrito and weighing Ron’s words.

Yes, there were microscopic specks of truth embedded in her bullshit. Technically speaking, I could have played any number of things on any number of instruments. But since the accident, the results had been unbearable. I felt impotent with just a partial pinky. Think keyboard: The left hand’s little finger safeguards the bass, the fundament, the invisible wire

grounding you to earth. Minus that connection, I fluttered like a tailless kite. Stringed instruments were even worse. When you cradle a guitar neck, it's the left-hand pinky that claims the out-of-position high notes like brass rings. That's why all my instruments had been exiled to a Bayshore Boulevard storage locker.

One thing Ron was *definitely* wrong about: my supposed Illia One fixation. As soon as I got home I extricated both Lunaire albums from a tottering stalagmite of CDs. I rubbed my thumbs against the ridged edge of the *Blood on Black Lace* jewel case, recalling the first time I handled that disc.

Five years ago. The Music Monster on Market. I was buying the newly remastered collectors edition of *Blood* (even though I owned it on vinyl and CD, and there were no new bonus tracks) plus some new releases that seemed essential at the time. Waiting in the checkout line, I hoped I'd be rung up not by the aloof, mocha-skinned beauty at the near register, but the more approachable nerd-girl at the other station.

I'd always adored record-store girls. Their sarcasm. Their sloppy-hip clothes and cumbersome glasses. Their acidic disdain for conventional taste. How many of my best flirtations began when some winsome geek and I exchanged barf expressions in response to the preceding customer's clueless purchase?

But instead of getting the pale girl in the frayed cardigan, I got Nina.

I was too timid to initiate conversation, even though she'd just sold some doofus a copy of *Me2 II*. But as I was marveling at the outline of Nina's collarbone against the tight fabric of her Evilspeak t-shirt, she nodded at the Radiant Boys CD atop my stack. "Awesome album." She dispensed verdicts as she scanned each disc: "Incredible album. Not as incredible as their

first two albums, but still really, really incredible. I play *this* one so much on my shift that my manager hides it in the Albanian folk music bin.” But when she reached *Blood on Black Lace*, the chatter stopped.

“This,” she whispered, “is my Bible.”

I etched Nina’s name at the top of the pest list when my band, Trauma Poodle, opened for Negatron at the Basshole. To my surprise she showed up, standing out among our dorky fans like a Roman candle in a bowl of oatmeal. Her evaluation: “Your crazy keyboard noises are incredible. Some arrangements are okay. Everything else sucks.” Before the night was over I’d agreed to help her start a new band, and she’d gone back to Hotel Medusa with Negatron’s bass player and his girlfriend.

Instead of stumbling from band to mediocre band like I’d done since school, Nina had a plan. Literally—it was written out longhand in a 7" x 9" notebook. She’d already inscribed the cover with the title of her favorite Lunaire track, “Flowering Judas,” using the jumbo Perma-Mark destined to tag a hundred dressing rooms.

We shanghai’d Tallulah and Otto from the Gimme Pigs and plunged into a seven-day-a-week schedule of writing, rehearsing, wheat-pasting posters, compiling email lists, clipping reviews and crashing parties. Nina took me shopping for hip, flattering clothes. She showed me how to stand, move, and emote onstage. I never finished college, but that time outside the piercing parlor when Nina said, “Okay, *now* you look cool” was as gratifying as any graduation.

We’d always argue about which Lunaire album was best. I stumped for *A Breath of Air from Other Planets*, stressing its sheer innovation. She held out for *Blood*: “It was incredibly innovative *and* incredibly successful. We will be too.” Once she tried to bolster her argument

with a copy of Byron Jenkowitz's *Record Rants*. (How the fuck did she steal a book that big from Music Monster?) She opened it to page 826, where Lunaire was sandwiched between kraut-rockers Lüftwaffle and metal morons Lunchmeat:

LUNAIRE:

American rock duo active in the 1980s.

PERSONNEL:

Illia One: guitars, keyboards, bass, drums, woodwinds, production

Junko Watanabe: vocals

DISCOGRAPHY:

★★★★ A Breath of Air from Other Planets [Clubbo]

★★★★★ Blood on Black Lace [Magna]

“See?” Nina smirked. “*Blood over Breath*.”

I snorted. “Byron Jenkowitz is deaf. If he agrees with you, it proves I’m right.” I snatched the volume and read aloud in an effete, pinch-faced tone:

Few would have predicted, on the evidence of the innovative but ultimately self-indulgent excursions of the duo’s debut LP, that Lunaire’s swan song would become, as of this writing, the fifth-best-selling rock disc of all time. *Blood on Black Lace* marks the last instance in American pop music in which Brobdingnagian sales were matched by commensurate vision and invention.

Nina laughed. “I know what *you* think. What does Byron Jenkowitz say?”

“Fuck you.”

“Seriously. You guys talk exactly alike.” Nina was about to laugh again, but she screamed instead because I dropped *Record Rants* on her foot. She slugged me in the chest—hard!—and

withheld forgiveness until I'd restrung and intonated all six of her guitars, including the fucking 12-string. She propped her not-really-fractured toe on the gutted bass cabinet she used as a coffee table to ensure I felt duly contrite while winding all 42 strings.

I felt bad, but not *that* bad. I hated it when Nina made like I was from some pompous intellectual background when *her* dad was the neurosurgeon with the Sorbonne sheepskin. My dad was the guy with "Streakin' Up a Blue Streak" on his demo reel.

I shook Nina from my head and scanned the CD spines for more Clubbo titles. There weren't many—most of what I had was in the Gold Box.

Oh shit. Was I really going to disinter the Gold Box?

I turned on the closet light and burrowed past the ironic polyester shirts I used to wear with Judas, revealing the Gold Box and the other things I couldn't toss but preferred not to see.

The Gold Box wasn't so golden anymore. Much of the paint had worn away, exposing the blue plastic beneath. It was a parting gift to my mom when she quit Clubbo to move north, meet Dad and have me. Someone at the label had swiped a dairy crate, spray-painted it gold—Mom's nickname was Goldie—and filled it with back-catalog vinyl. It was a sweet, sentimental gift that conveniently cost Clubbo zip.

I carried the box to the bed and flipped through the discs like I used to do when I was too young to read the labels. There was the soft rock Mom loved, like Devon Shire's *The Lady & the Lute*. There was the overproduced schlock Dad preferred, like Plynth's *Stone Age Symphony*. The album sported one of Dad's stickers:

This Record Was Purlioned from the Collection of David Fine

He'd bought a lifetime supply. More, actually—there were thousands left when he died.

I fondled a 45 of "Soda Pop Shop," a novelty song about burping that literally made me puke with laughter at age six. I'd written "This Record was Purlioned from the Collection of Chris Fine" in a labored crayon approximation of antique script.

The last record in the box was *Faith to Faith with the Prayer Bears*. The Prayer Bears were the sole constant of my scattershot moral education. Mom imposed a steady diet of their cartoons, records and books because their "every belief is beautiful" message harmonized perfectly with her own sloppy joe spirituality. The disc had worn a circular impression through the cardboard, forming a nimbus around the bears' serene faces.

I suddenly wanted to hear "Faith to Faith," the Prayer Bears theme song, so I cleared the stack of dusty software manuals from the turntable. But when I lifted the album, the disc razored through the brittle, plaque-colored tape that bound the jacket. The vinyl stuck the hardwood floor with a sickening *crack*.

I inspected the bite-sized divot in the disc's perimeter. A drop of fluid materialized on the vinyl, like the wound was seeping. I swabbed it away with my thumb. Another drop appeared. I wiped my eyes on my sleeve.

I lowered the disc to the turntable, set the stylus just inside the fissure, and listened to the surviving second half of "Faith to Faith" for the first time in decades.

I used to shiver with delight at the shimmering flourish depicting Shaman Bear's Wand of Wonder. Now I heard a chromatic xylophone gliss and a piccolo trill, a stock arranger's trick.

The slick horn charts hinted at some superannuated big band arranger exiled to kiddie Siberia. Why is it that the older and less relevant musicians get, the likelier they are to make children's music? The baritone sax lagged behind—probably a tenor player winging it on bari and angling for double-scale. The half-step modulation into the final chorus was a hack move—how much hipper it would have been, I reflected between sobs, to descend a major third.

After the song came the story: Beelzebug and his henchbugs had swarmed little Buddy Bear, toppling him from his spirit tree and sucking up his honey. While the bruised everybruin cowered in his cave, the Prayer Bears convened in the Den of Devotion to mull the situation.

“Let's give the big bug a taste of his own medicine,” growled Jew Bear. “An eye for an eye.”

Muslim Bear agreed: “We should fabricate a very large stink bomb and drop it down the Bughole.”

“But if we were to do so,” countered Buddha Bear, “might we not become a bit too much like Beelzebug ourselves?”

After much respectful debate, the Bears attained consensus on the key issue: Buddy Bear must venture from his cave despite the possibility that Beelzebug might torment him again. If he didn't, he'd lose his soul *and* his honey. As Buddy stepped into the sunlight, the ensemble joined voices in a reprise of “Faith to Faith.”

I stretched out on the mattress, listening to the gentle *shik shik* of the needle orbiting the inner groove. My last thought before nodding off was that instead of mimicking ocean waves and gurgling brooks, those New Age relaxation boxes should generate the soft hiss of well-loved vinyl.



When I awoke it was light enough for me to read the number on my arm. I dialed it.

“Yeah?” mumbled Ron.

“It’s me.”

“I told you to call me in the morning. It’s seven AM!”

I didn’t care. “I’ll do it. There, I said it. I’ll do it.”

Chapter Two: Sunday

A RECORDING OF A SATURN V LIFTOFF announced Ron's arrival. I tottered downstairs with my steel gig case, laptop backpack, and three lime-green Music Monster bags stuffed with clothes.

Ron, looking all cop in khaki and aviator shades, stood at mock-attention by the open van door. She loaded my stuff, securing the plastic bags between our his-and-hers gig cases so my clothes wouldn't spill out. Once crew, always crew.

I sprinted back upstairs for the Gold Box. On the way back out, my neighbor stopped me at the mailbox. "You're Christian Fine, right? I'm Annika? Upstairs? I got some of yours again." She wedged a taco of folded mail between two LPs. "You're a musician, right?"

"Yeah." I didn't have time to explain.

"Cool," she nodded, her nose chain swinging like a hammock.

I climbed into the shotgun seat, where steam rose from a pair of grandissimo coffees. Ron was smirking. "That chick you were talking to? She digs you."

"Fuck you."

"You really can't tell?"

"Tell what?"

"Never mind." The Judasmobile lurched forward.



We drove east for an hour, then veered south on Interstate 5, the 350-mile stretch of farms, pastures, and blank space that secures San Francisco to Los Angeles like the string of a rainbow-colored balloon tied to the wrist of an obese child in \$300 sunglasses.

The I-5 experience varies with the weather. The first time Flowering Judas drove to LA to open for the Gun Sluts at Bongsuckers for \$50 plus beer, the Judasmobile crept tentatively through the gummy gray fog. When we returned a year later for a round of industry showcases, the hills and fields were as green as a freshly stocked salad bar. On the last trip, right before the end, the brown sky was heavy with dust, manure, and vagabond So-Cal smog. I was too hyped on impending success to read the meteorological message: “Shit storm ahead.”

But today the cold, crisp air etched every almond tree, cow and fast-food joint with the clinical precision of an Audioactive Pro waveform graphic in Hyper-Zoom mode.

Ron yawned and stretched. “How about some tunes, bro?”

I groaned. I’d inspected the CD case before we hit the freeway and promptly hidden it under the seat like a cat burying a turd.

She made me dig it out. It was mostly hard rock and pigmetal: Piehole. Trowel. Headcake. I managed to veto Mukus’s toxic *Dude Descending a Staircase* in favor of Hellmuffin’s merely annoying *Quit Lookin’ at Me*. But after just a few tracks, Ron’s PDA blared the “drunken piccolo” theme from Turetsky’s *Little King Nicolai and the 99 Clarinets*. I told her it was my favorite when I was a kid.

“Right,” she snorted. “Like they had cell phones back then.” She jabbed the device at me before I could explain that *Nicolai* was a Russian ballet for children. “Read me the message.”

I had to spell it:

MEETNIG MOND10 SM CLUB O IMPOTENT11111

Ron sighed. “That would be Lisa. The boss. She’s probably typing on the freeway again.”

“Lisa *Niedelman*?” I squawked.

“Yup. She’s Vice-President of Special Products, so she’s in charge of *The Clubbo Story*. Either she’s trying to say something about a meeting, or she’s a little kinkier than I thought.”

Lisa Niedelman had haunted the last few Judas gigs. I’d only talked to her once, but it was enough. It was our final LA trip. Noiseland was packed, and not just because Penis Fly Trap was on the bill. Judas had snagged “critic’s pick” mentions in both *Free LA Free* (“That rarity, a San Francisco band that doesn’t reek of patchouli”) and *sNOT RAG* (“Boasting a sex-bitch singer backed by a posse of adventurous musos, Flowering Judas dishes up No-Cal rock that won’t leave you famished”).

Naturally, we killed. Afterwards I went out front to check out PFT’s set. I wasn’t especially into them, but it would have been tacky not to lend moral support since their drummer was letting us crash on her floor that night.

I wanted to have a shot of La Belle France waiting for Nina when she finished toweling down and changing, but the bar was lousy with industry. I elbowed my way between a fat Goth chick sucking a parasol drink and a runty, red-haired she-weasel over-enunciating into her phone.

“*Very* impressive.” She raised a finger in a “just a sec!” gesture as if I were waiting to speak with her. “I’m talking to one of her musicians *right now*. *Very* impressive. I still have their last song stuck in my head.” She winked and hummed a few notes of “Evaporation,” proving she’d listened to at least ten seconds of our set.

I ordered two brandies. The weasel finished yammering at the phone and started on me. “That was very impressive. *Very* exciting.”

“Unh.” I was happy to obey Nina’s “don’t kiss up to A&R” dictate.

Lisa oozed closer. “But do you know what the *most* exciting thing for me was? Closing my eyes and imagining what Flowering Judas *could* be.” Classic weasel tactics: extravagant praise laced with a pinch of disappointment—and an implication that they alone could provide the missing ingredient.

I peered down at her. Ruddy, overheated face with vestigial freckles. Collar-length, orangutan-orange hair. A silky camisole thing under an expensive blazer thing. Thirty-five? Forty? She prodded me with a business card:

Lisa Niedelman
Associate A&R Director
Magna Music Group

Magna. That explained a lot.

Lisa hammered home her executive status by introducing the fat girl as “Shoshana, my brilliant intern.” Rather than transfer her drink from her right hand, Shoshana shook with an inverted left like a guitarist lugging a case. Henna tattoos laced the back of her hand. Her black lips never relinquished the pink straw.

Over Shoshana’s shoulder I saw Nina part the paisley bedspread that served as a backstage curtain. Even dressed down in a Clockwork Nympho t-shirt and that greasy brown ski cap, she

seemed to accelerate the room's air molecules. Was it love or star quality? I looked around, confirming that others had registered her arrival. Star quality, I stupidly concluded.

Clubbo's Bas Carlton intercepted her. His silver hair counterpointed a lanky surfer's physique. After a few words and a cheek-kiss, he excused himself with a nimble motion that suggested a bow without actually being one. Nina watched his ass depart.

I flagged her with a shot glass. The crowd seemed to part for her. She rested her hand on mine. Callused fingertips. Warm palm.

"Was it good for you?" she asked.

I savored her soap-and-cinnamon smell. "It was fucking amazing."

"It *was* amazing!" Lisa ferreted her way between us. "*Very* impressive." While Nina plucked matches from a Noiseland matchbook, Lisa told her exquisite collarbone how very, *very* important it was for a rising band to assemble the *right team*. Then Lisa lectured my armpit about how Flowering Judas was at a *very* important crossroads. *We could* be an artsy-fartsy little band on a label like Lo-Fido or Clubbo—not that there's anything *wrong* with that . . .

As I watched Lisa's lips flap, I wondered whether her upper-midrange shrillness was a naturally occurring phenomenon, or if her voice was a purpose-made implement, honed to a crude but deadly point through years of chipping away at dumb musicians in noisy clubs. Nina, meanwhile, had surreptitiously erected two unlighted matches, antennae-style, in Lisa's phosphorescent hair. Now she looked even more like a Martian attempting to pass for human. I heard a faint gurgle: Shoshana the Brilliant Intern tittering into her straw.

I never adored Nina so much as when we were united against losers like Lisa. Who would have dreamt that someone who instantly pegged Lisa's pitch for the bullshit it was would be seduced by the same arguments from Lisa's boss just days later?

"Awesome," I told Ron. "I always hoped I'd get another chance to hang out with Lisa Niedelman."

"Listen—" she started, but the PDA chirped *Little King Nicolai* again. Same message, only in English:

CLUBBO PROJECT PLANNING MEETING TOMORROW. LISA SAYS: VERY VERY VERY VERY VERY IMPORTANT. MAYBE 6 VERYS. 3RD FLOOR CONFERENCE ROOM D 10:00 AM SHARP!!!! (LISA'S EXCLAMATION POINTS, NOT MINE.) ♥ SHOSHANA

"Shoshana," I muttered. Yeah, it would be awesome hanging out with her again too.



We pulled into a rest area and parked under a skeletal tree. An old lady in a vinyl wig shuffled across the dead grass, encouraging a shivering chihuahua: "Come on, Pepe—do your business!"

While Ron was peeing I retrieved my misdirected mail from the Gold Box. Great—*Guitar Now* had yet another Piehole cover story: "Lord of Pigmetal: How to Riff Like Vlad the Inhaler!!!" (*Guitar Now's* exclamation points, not mine.) There was Vlad with his onyx teeth

and earlobe extensions. I didn't need to open the mag—I knew what the interview would be like:

Q: You've evolved into one of pigmetal's most unique stylists. How did you cultivate your distinctive approach?

A: [*Shrugs.*] I don't fuckin' know, dog. I just play it as fuckin' distinctive as I fuckin' can!

Q: How did you attain the Brobdingnagian tone on "Ass Burglar's Syndrome?"

A: Fuck if I know. We just like stumbled on it one day at the chateau. It's like that, dog. Sometimes for no fuckin' reason at all you fuckin' stumble across the greatest fuckin' thing.

[*Sniffs glue, jibbers.*]

Q: What kind of pick do you use?

Ron returned, phone to ear. "Can't wait. See you tomorrow. Bye." She hung up. "That was Alan, the music historian guy who's going to write the liner notes and shit. What do you have there?"

"A guitar magazine for retarded children."

"Not that." She plucked my latest Magna envelope from the junk mail pile. "This."

"It's trash."

"Looks like a check."

"Maybe. But it's trash."

"Then can I have it?"

"No—it's *my* trash." I tried to grab it back, but Ron danced away. She was fast for a refrigerator. She waved the envelope and sang : "*D-d-d-dirty dirty money, dirty Magna money,*" to the tune of Suthrn Cuzn's "Dirty Macon Momma."

I finally snatched the check back. But Ron's idiotic money song reminded me that I'd neglected to ask some basic questions about the impending gig. Inspired by *Guitar Now*, I conducted my own little Q&A:

Q: So where am I supposed to stay in LA?

A: My place. My housemate's out on tour till next month. No charge. Just chip in for toilet paper and coffee and shit.

Q: How long is the project supposed to take?

A: Two weeks if we work fast—and we want to work fast. We're being paid by the project, not the clock. We get nine each.

Q: I'm selling my soul to the Mephistopheles Music Group for 900 dollars?

A: [*Laughs condescendingly.*] Nine thousand! Damn, bro—what cave have you been living in?

Q: [*Mutters.*] I thought I was asking the questions.

A: What?

Q: I said—oh, never mind.

Now Ron was pawing through the Gold Box. She extracted an LP. "Check it out! Devon Shire! *Once Had I a Castle Keep.*"

"Spare me," I moaned. "You're way too queer to go for anything that gay."

"I like him!" she protested. "Sure, it's hokey, but he dropped some decent tunes. It was probably your parents' make-out music. Who knows, bro? If it hadn't been for Devon Shire, maybe there would be no Bug Fine."

"Right." As if my dad the songwriter was my biological father. Mom never would specify the culprit, even when I'd asked again near the end.

I studied the album cover. Neo-medieval man-child Devon was perched on some dolmen, megalith, or otherwise meaningful rock, clutching a clump of wildflowers and gazing dreamily into the middle distance.

Ron sighed. “I tried to lose my virginity to that album. It didn’t really work out. Paul Deschamps was the biggest faggot at McKinley Middle School. As if being a K.C. dude more into ’70s folk-rock than Stoner Vee or Evilspeak wasn’t a total giveaway. Shit—did we *park* in a pool of oil, or is that all from us?”

Ron was right. There was enough black grease beneath the Judasmobile to lube her pompadour through the next rockabilly revival. After a somber dipstick consultation, we shifted the luggage around to retrieve the emergency quart from the tool well.

Ron topped off the engine. “There. We should be okay now.” She put the funnel away, secured our bags, and then started rifling through the records again. “You’ve got some great stuff here.”

“Careful!” I pried Rockfinger’s *Alright Tonight!* from her greasy mitts. It’s not like I *liked* the record or anything, but I didn’t want oil and shit on my mom’s stuff.

“Sorry.” Ron wiped her hands on her thighs. “Too bad these aren’t on CD. We could get psyched up for *The Clubbo Story*, listening to a little Yorgi or Devon Shire.” She slammed the van’s back doors. The impact no longer fazed me.

The van shuddered onto the freeway. “What always cracked me up,” said Ron, “was the way Devon Shire was supposed to be some Celtic-mystical Scottish guy—”

“Welsh,” I corrected.

“He’s not that either. He’s a dude from New Jersey. Now he’s this big-ass music lawyer dealmaker guy in LA. His real name is Chris Parmagiano. Like the cheese. Pick out a CD, bro.”

I looked at the discs again and winced. “Don’t you have any of that nice, mopey lesbian folk music you used to listen to?”

Ron shrugged. “I get these for free from Magna.”

My lip curled. “Do you only like stuff you get for free?”

“I like most stuff,” she replied. “So free works for me.”



After 73:59 numbing minutes of Flem’s *Time Crunch*—whatever happened to succinct 33-minute LPs like the Bacchantes used to make?—we stopped for gas and another quart of oil. I offered to drive the next stretch.

“Sorry,” said Ron. “I need my head attached to my body for my work.”

“What does *that* mean?”

She drew an imaginary line across her neck. “That time with the cymbal?”

“Jeez!” I cried. “That was *Otto*, okay?” Driving back from a Judas gig in Cotati, I’d braked to avoid hitting a sofa that someone had thoughtfully deposited in the middle of the Golden Gate Bridge—a maneuver that sent one of Otto’s cymbals frisbeeing into the passenger compartment. Ron had somehow gotten the idea that her barely visible scar was my fault, when Otto was the one who couldn’t assemble a professional set of road cases.

“Fucking Otto,” I grumbled. Every time we told him he needed cases, spare drumheads, or a hi-hat stand that didn’t collapse during the coda of “Suffer Somewhere Else,” he’d try to get the band to subsidize it. As if Flowering Judas paid for my CD-Rs or Tallulah’s tequila. Otto’s sense of entitlement surpassed even Nina’s. He truly believed that his shit smelled better than the rest of the band’s because of his staunch veganism. Or so he’d argue every time he stunk up the Judasmobile with a potent legume fart.

“Hey,” chimed Ron, “remember that time we were all so pissed off at Otto, we took a steak break just to fuck with him?”

Of course I remembered. Judas ate cheaply on the road, and our meals were inevitably accompanied by stern Otto Storch sermons on the evils of fast food. But on that last LA trip—the one where I’d bonded with Lisa the Death Weasel and Shoshana the Brilliant Intern—Otto’s unapologetic flatulence demanded retaliation. Ron, flush with cash after a big drag gig at Women’s Week, offered to treat everyone to lunch at the Beef Chief in Coalinga, the bleak stockyard town that squats midway between LA and SF.

Nina was driving. “You know me. I’ll always brake for Coalinga.”

Tallulah parted her thighs and lolled her head. “I know I wouldn’t mind stretching my legs for a bit. Of Coalinga.”

Thermonuclear manure stench bombarded the van. We were passing the immense cattle pens north of town.

Nina smacked her lips. “Mmm-boy! The savory aroma of factory meat production makes me want to sink my teeth into a nice, juicy *steak!*” She caught my eye in the rearview mirror. She’d just bleached her hair, and the blonde/dark clash still caught me by surprise every time.

Tallulah giggled. “I want a nice, big, steaky *steak* burger. With a side order of *steak*. And *steak* fries.” She hissed the words at Otto, driving each *steak* into his affronted heart.

He bared his teeth. “Fuck you, you fucking carnivores. I hope you come back as veal calves.” He hugged his chest and gazed morosely into the bovine sea.

Otto would have sooner sworn off pot than set foot inside the Beef Chief. While we dined, he sulked in the van, refreshing his buzz and masticating whatever medley of leaves, roots and bark he’d packed for the trip.

Ron chuckled at the memory. “Remember what Otto said when Tallulah gave him the trucker hat she stole from the gift shop?”

I smiled. “No fucking way are you putting that Cowschwitz Death Cap on me!”

“Let’s stop there now. Old times’ sake.”

“It’s kind of expensive,” I pointed out.

“You can afford it.”

“Don’t roll your eyes like that!” I protested. “I told you I don’t cash those ‘What You Said’ checks.”

“I don’t care if you roll them up and stuff them up your butt. You have a \$35 per diem, starting today.”

I just sat there while Ron hummed Devon Shire’s “O Westerly Wind.”



The Beef Chief labored to present itself as a shrine to Amerindian culture. A huge Geronimo portrait glowered down over the reception area. Reed baskets and beaded vests lounged in climate-controlled cases. The soundtrack: traditional bone flutes and buffalo-skin drums marinated in cloying New Age reverb, the kind of crap Mom loved. Antique photos revealed the restaurant's origins as a wigwam-shaped diner staffed by buckskin-skirted carhops.

I caught Ron checking out the black-denimed ass of the Chicana hostess who conducted us to our booth.

"I love your belt," said Ron as we scooted into the banquette.

The woman smiled. "It's Navajo turquoise."

"Definitely a sister," whispered Ron as the hostess retreated.

"What? Did she like give you the secret lesbian hand signal?"

Ron clacked open a menu—two oak planks on iron hinges. "Actually, there *is* a secret. The secret is getting out of your own head long enough to notice other people. Long enough for them to notice you noticing. And guess what? It works for straight people too!"

"Hey," I squawked. "Why are we talking about me all of a sudden? All I did was ask a perfectly respectful lesbian question."

"Did I say I was talking about you?"

"You didn't *say* it. You just started doing it."

"If the moccasin fits, bro," said the voice behind the menu.



Ron's PDA tootled again as we were finishing our food. Was Turetsky still alive? Maybe he was a spry nonagenarian basking in *Little King Nicolai* royalties.

Ron viewed the message. "Lisa. Triple-checking about tomorrow."

"Jeez. What's her problem?"

Ron excavated a cube of beef from the ruins of her Anasazi taco. "Well, she's never what you'd call laid-back, but she's especially intense about the Clubbo project. I guess she still has a chip on her shoulder about the whole restructuring thing."

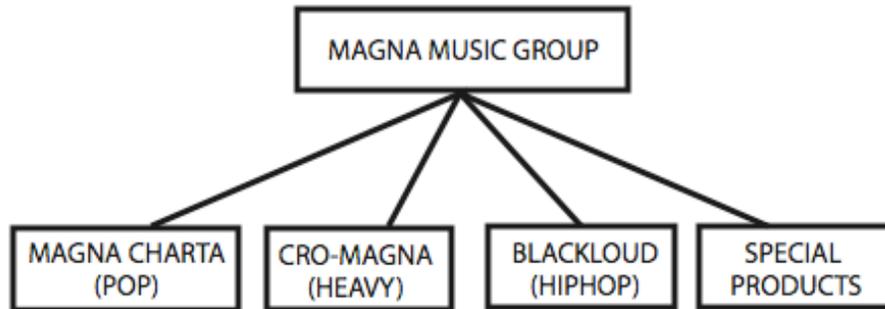
"Restructuring thing?"

Ron drew a long breath. "Okay. It used to be that whenever Magna bought another label, they'd just release whatever artists they decided to keep on the Magna imprint, right? But that changed after Magna bought Blackloud. Here's Darrell Driggs's little hiphop label, and suddenly it's responsible for a huge percentage of MMG profits. Darrell D isn't just selling shitloads of records—he's making and marketing them a lot cheaper. Here's an example: Magna spent almost eight million making *Me2 III* and twice that much marketing it, but it sold less than a third as much as *Me2 II*."

I nodded. "Yeah, I was real upset about that."

She ignored me. "So the very same week *Me2 III* comes out, Blackloud releases the first Myndz I record. It sells six million. It cost \$10,000 to make. And Darrell D snagged two-thirds of the publishing. So Donnie Ravenna made Darrell D the head of Magna Charta, the biggest division. Here—I'll sketch it out for you."

Ron nudged her dish aside, exposing the paper placemat. “Okay, Magna Music Group is part of Maddox Magna Footjoy. Not the biggest part, either. Music is third, after pharmaceuticals and athletic shoes. Here’s how it looks from MMG on down.” She produced a marker.



“Magna Charta has most of the mainstream pop acts: Feather. Me2. Alexei Bulyanov. Plus a certain Iranian-American singer we both know. Cro-Magna has the hard rock and pigmetal. Blackcloud does what it does. And Special Products is everything else, including historical reissues like *The Clubbo Story*.” She stubbed a finger against the last box. “We live here. And our landlord is Lisa Niedelman.”

“Okay,” I said. “But why is she being such a super-psycho stress-weasel?”

Ron beckoned for the check. “She’s still angling for the Magna Charta presidency.”

“I thought the Blackcloud guy was president.”

Ron rapped a knuckle against my skull. “Darrell Driggs? Criminal conspiracy? Big trial on TV? Five-to-ten in Chino? Ring any bells? It was like front-page news.”

Hell if I was going to apologize for not reading that crap. “So Lisa wants his gig?”

Ron nodded. “And so does Damien Pugh from Cro-Magna. And so does Tanisha D, who’s running Blackcloud now. Darrell’s sister.”

“Who’s winning?”

Ron sucked a tooth. “Well, not Tanisha. The rumor is, Darrell made Ravenna promise not to give her the job while he was locked up. So I guess Damien’s in the lead. Donnie Ravenna digs the fact the he came up from the street like the Driggses. Damien started out in Florida, selling Piehole records from the trunk of his dad’s Ferrari. But you should never underestimate Lisa.”

“I wish I didn’t have to estimate her at all.”

The waitress brought the check. She and Ron exchanged smiles rife with inscrutable lesbian subtext.

“So,” I asked, “do you freelance for all the Magna warlords?”

Ron left a 25 percent tip. “Pretty much. I do lots of second-engineer stuff, plus odd jobs, like making clean radio versions with all the ‘fucks’ and ‘niggaz’ blipped out.”

I whistled. “Cle-*ver*! You get paid to record crappy music, and then get paid again to un-record it.”

Ron declined the bait. “So that’s why the pressure’s on Lisa to kick ass in Special Products.” She folded the placemat to the size of a credit card. “Here. Your cheat sheet.”

I pocketed the paper. “So we’re basically coming onboard to improve Lisa’s chance of getting a promotion.”

Ron shrugged. “That’s one way of looking at it—the cynical burnout way. There are other ways to see it: a chance to reintroduce people to some great music. The adventure of working

with master tapes no one's touched for decades. The privilege of working with super-talented people like Alan, the music writer. You guys will totally hit it off—he's as big a Lunaire freak as you. He wrote the book on them. *Really* wrote the book. The one you have."

"Alan Asch?" I suddenly realizing we were talking about the author of *Nonstop to Nowhere: The Lunaire Story*.

Ron nodded. "And if Alan Asch isn't too pure to work on this project, why should you be? No one's pure in the music business, unless they just sit in some dark room all day beating off with headphones on."

"Fuck you."

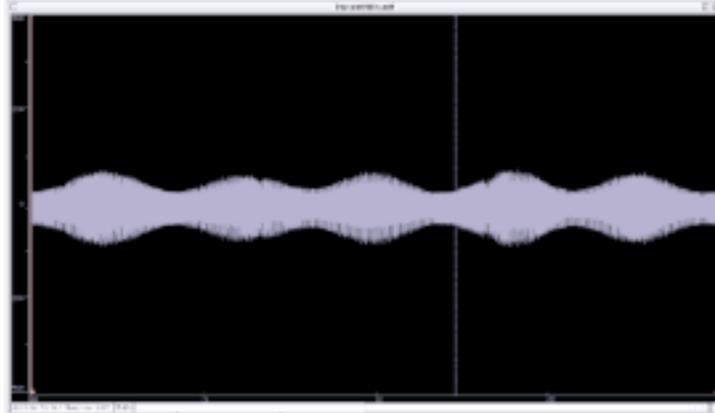
She stood up and grabbed her jacket. "Why do you always think I'm talking about you?"



South of Coalinga the landscape devolves into sad, scrubby plains speckled with stunted crops. Crisscrossing ranks of electrical towers muster only token rebuttal to the flatness.

"Nice sunset," said Ron.

"Yeah," I yawned, listless from a tureen of Algonquin Winter Vegetable Stew and the van's artificial warmth. I gazed at the low hills in the remote distance. Framed by the passenger window, they reminded me of an audio waveform representation of some softly pulsating timbre:



A low-register flute tone with mild vibrato, perhaps, or a leisurely cello bowstroke. No sharp attacks. No nervous silences. Just a lonely oscillation, placid and predictable.

It was dark when Ron nudged me awake.

“We’re fucked, bro.”



We awaited the tow truck in a turnout midway up the Grapevine, the 40-mile mountain pass that fails so miserably at shielding the Central Valley from LA’s smog. The huffing heater and a Spanish-language radio station downgraded the passing traffic’s roar to a diffuse rumble. We read my music magazines by vanlight.

Ron flipped to *Guitar Now’s* Vlad the Inhaler feature. My “dirty Magna money” envelope tumbled into her lap. She held it up to the light.

I covered the bulb with my hand. “Why are you so interested?”

“Why are you so *not* interested? Aren’t you curious how much it’s for?”

“Not as curious as you.”

“You let Magna buy you lunch. How is cashing their check different?”

The radio answered before I could: “Ahora mismo tenemos para tí una nueva cantante fabulosa y sexy. Esa muchacha se llaman . . . Shey.”

The way he stretched Nina’s bogus name across two syllables slowed my reaction time. The first few words of “What You Said” *en español* spewed from the speakers.

Lo que dijiste, que me dueló,

Lo que dijiste, que mentira

I slapped the radio off. “Fuck! Nina barely even speaks Spanish. I guess they have to pass her off as Mexican because everyone hates Arabs.”

“Nina’s from Cupertino. And people from Iran aren’t Arabs. And I guarantee you the only reason Magna cut a Spanish-language version was to sell more units.”

I reopened my copy of *Infinite Replay* with a snap. “Well, I hope that answers your question about why I don’t open the checks.”

“Totally. You’re a fucking psycho.” She flicked on the functioning headlamp. “I need some light to take a leak by.”

“So?” I didn’t look up from a comprehensive feature on third-wave Swiss Invasion bands.

Ron clambered out. A bayonet of icy wind pierced the van. I idly wondered why she needed a headlight to pee. Then I realized she intended to read the check by the light of the high beam.

I scrambled into the bitter air. “Hey! Don’t x-ray it!”

She knelt on the asphalt, holding the check to the light. The headlamps of passing semis projected a dozen attenuated Ron silhouettes onto the rocky hillside behind her. A halo of steam encircled her head. She looked like the Demon Dyke of Kern County. “I think it’s for 6,000.”

“Six *thousand*?” I gulped.

“There’s a six followed by a bunch of zeroes. Not that it matters. Here, I’ll get rid of it for you.” Ron tugged a disposable lighter from her hip pocket. She clicked it, but the icy wind snuffed the flame. She tried again, deploying her bulk as a windbreak. The flame inched toward the paper.

I folded like a Quik-Set keyboard stand.

“Give me that!” I snatched the envelope and gutted it. It took a moment to realize they’d stuffed the check into the envelope upside-down. I righted the paper:

PAY TO THE ORDER OF MR. CHRISTAIN FINE: \$00.09

Ron yanked it from my slack hand before the wind could. She smiled. Then giggled. Then guffawed. “It’s your valentine from the Magna Music Group!” She formed a heart with her thumbs and index fingers. “They even spelled your name wrong.”

Then it started raining. God’s timing was immaculate. If he was a session drummer, he’d get triple-scale in Hollywood, no problem.



Incredibly, the mechanic stopped to help us. If it were my tow truck, I would have hightailed it back to the garage the second I spotted Ron sprawled on the wet asphalt, cackling dementedly. He towed us to Gorman and suggested we book a room at the Lodge-4-Le\$\$\$. But Ron, hell-bent on making tomorrow's meeting, insisted we patch the leaky radiator and take our chances.

Once we were rolling through the rain, Ron started in again. This time she hurled the Qs:

Q: [*Laughs.*] Who's your music attorney, bro?

A: I don't have a fucking lawyer.

Q: [*Laughs more.*] How many points did you have?

A: Just one. On top of my fucking head.

Q: [*Still laughing.*] You know what they say about lawyers?

A:

Q: I said, you know what they say about lawyers?

A: Shut up and tell me already.

Q: I can't shut up *and* tell you.

A: [*Transmits visual death rays.*]

Q: Okay. They say, "He who has himself for a lawyer has—"

A: —has to ride with someone who won't shut the fuck up.

Q: That's not how I heard it, but okay. Alan will probably bring Chris Parmagiano in for an interview. Maybe he can give you a few pointers on points. [*Laughs more obnoxiously than ever.*] Well, at least you can try to be philosophical about it. Think of it like in that Devon Shire song: *Once had I a castle keep...now in greeny glens I sleep.* Or is it *greeny glades*? What the difference between a greeny glen and a greeny glade anyway?

A: They both suck.

Q: Well, at least you're no more broke than you were this morning. You're nine cents richer. You're not penniless—you're *pennimore*. [*Laughs until seized with coughing fit.*]

A: [*Mulls homicide.*]

I glared at the wiper blades twitching against the windshield. As mad as I was at Magna and Ron, I was angrier with myself—and ashamed. The fact that I'd been spurning mere pennies of Magna money made my check-chucking an even emptier gesture than it already was. My purist stance had been founded on the belief that substantial royalties were waiting should I ever deign to accept them. Now I wanted—*needed*—the work I'd scoffed at the night before. I felt my spine softening by the second, and not because of a 350-mile ride without decent lumbar support.

Ron plucked her PDA from her belt. I figured she was ringing Local 6 to schedule a cautionary piece about me for the next Musicians Union newsletter. But no—she was calling Shoshana, asking if we could bum a ride to Magna in the morning. “See you then, Shoshana my love.”

Ron switched off the wipers. “The rain stopped. We'll be at my place in 45 minutes. Now before we get there, I wanted to talk to you about—”

“Look,” I snapped. “Don't you think we've talked enough about Magna and Clubbo and Nina and shit? Can't we just drive in silence for a few minutes?”

“Fine.” At least Ron knew better than to ask me to put on another CD.



Ron's place was just off Sunset in Silverlake, a once-modest neighborhood gone upscale hipster. We chugged up a hill on Edgecliff and pulled into the driveway of a white-stucco, hacienda-themed house with a red tile roof and a wrought-iron security gate.

I whistled. "Not bad."

"We like it."

But like a Wilkins guitar amp, the house was spiffy on the outside and shabby within. The vinyl living room sofa was patched with duct tape. Dark stains supplemented the pattern of the faux-Persian rug. Stereo components threatened to topple from a shallow piece of furniture designed to hold something other than electronics. I immediately started to feel at home.

I nodded toward a large poster for Rosie Flowerwater's *Trail of Truth*. "Mopey lesbian folk music."

"Rosie's a friend," said Ron. "Or whatever. It sort of fluctuates."

"So where's my terrarium?"

"Just leave everything by the door," she said. "I need a beer before we unpack. And so do you."

Ron fetched two cans of Mexican lager. She swept open the gray living room curtain, revealing a covered balcony with a 180° Hollywood view. The rain had stopped—the city twinkled prettily, and you could even discern a star or two. I hadn't realized we were so far uphill. We stood outside, inhaling night air and beer.

Ron cleared her throat. "I know you're tired of talking about Nina, but—"

I put up a hand. "Look, I know you guys are still tight. That's fine, as long she keeps out of my face."

“She’s on a promo tour. She won’t be back till after we’re done with Clubbo.”

“Great.” Was I imagining that low rumbling sound in the distance?

Ron sighed. “I’m worried about her, Bug.”

“You’re doing a real bad job of not talking about her.” I was too tired to remind her that my name was Chris. And that noise was getting louder.

“She’s having a lot of problems, especially since—”

The rumbling noise suddenly ratcheted up 80 dB. The cement floor quivered beneath our feet.

I grasped the metal railing. “What the fuck?”

An LAPD helicopter burst into view above the rooftop, hovering imperiously over the house as it traced its searchlight over every backyard on the block. I considered tossing my can at the chopper, but I’d learned the hard way that using beer for expressive purposes usually ends in tears.

When the chopper moved on to harass another block, Ron started in again: “Have you ever thought that maybe you and Nina should talk again?”

I answered truthfully: “Every 90 seconds. Then I remind myself that I’m never going to speak to her again.”

Ron crumpled her can. “Well, I’m about ready to collapse.”

I retrieved my luggage sacks and followed Ron down a short hallway. She indicated two closed doors. “Yours. Mine. There are fresh sheets and towels and shit.”

The first thing I saw when I opened my door was a huge Day-Glo poster for last year’s KPAB Big-Ass Summer Jam, with Nina’s fake name prominently featured. I’d already removed