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# *Black Coffee Before Armageddon*

*a novella*

*by*

*Sotirios Rasiotis*

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*This book is dedicated to Luvon Sheppard  
without whom I would have given up  
before I began. You are an inspiration  
and a voice that will remain with me  
eternally.*



## TABLE OF CONTENTS

A. Prologue or the Making of my Master's Thesis.....	I
1. Last Night I Was Approached by a Prophet.....	1
2. The Mural of September.....	22
3. Gemini Girl and Sagittarius Boy (a).....	34
4. Bizarre Love Triangle (a).....	40
5. Frankie Goes Ballistic (a).....	44
6. Gemini Girl and Sagittarius Boy (b).....	50
7. Bizarre Love Triangle (b).....	54
8. Frankie Goes Ballistic (b).....	58
9. You Know I Know About the END OF THE WORLD SYNDROME.....	61
10. Gemini Girl and Sagittarius Boy (c).....	69
11. Bizarre Love Triangle (c) or Happy Birthday Stan or the Death of Detective Simone.....	71
12. Bizarre Love Triangle (d) .....	76
13. Gemini Girl and Sagittarius Boy (d).....	80
14. Frankie Goes Ballistic (c).....	84
15. Gemini Girl and Sagittarius Boy (e).....	89
16. The End of the World Party.....	91
17. Shut Up and Kiss Me, You Idiot.....	103

This book is not an accurate account of reality as it occurred, nor was it ever intended to be. It is however at times an accurate account of my reality (warped as it was and is), and also at times a completely falsified and fictitious account. The names have been changed to protect the innocent (and not so innocent. )

## ***A. Prologue or the Making of My Master's Thesis***

Tense. That was what the climate was like in the fall of 1997. I had just been hired to complete an outdoor mural with my friend and fellow artist Matty Messner. My personal life was complicated at best, and to top it all off I was supposed to begin my Master's Thesis to complete my master of Fine Arts at RIT.

There were many things that were unresolved at that point. I was an artist whose training was largely commercial and I needed to find my voice as a painter in a year. I was also an amateur musician trying to get a group together so that I could express myself musically. My personal relationships with friends and loved ones were complex and sometimes painful, and almost always fragile.

I was unsure about how I should go about my Master's Thesis at this point. If someone asked me about it I always had a response, yet none of them were completely true. Instead I was just trying to figure out what I was going to do by exercising one of my oldest talents - thinking out loud.

I knew one thing. It had to be honest. All great art is honest. It had to be honest to the reality I was experiencing at the time and would experience during the year. The problem with that was that everyone's reality is different, and everyone's reality is what they perceive at the time. Sometimes someone's reality can be completely distorted. So the dilemma I faced was reporting something honestly, even though my reality may have been false or at least not entirely true. So while my eventual work was honest, I do not make the claim that it is accurate. In fact I decided early on that while honesty was important accuracy was not.

That allowed me to conceptualize the work as a metaphor. Thinking about the arts over the course of history the use of metaphor to communicate seemed prevalent, especially in the more contemporary works. This was very apparent in the works of Roy Lichtenstein who found a need to attach in-jokes to his own life as an artist to his comic book style canvases. One of his figures says "What do you know about my image duplicator?" Another wonders "M-maybe he became ill and couldn't leave the studio!"

This to me was a sensational method of getting the point across without ramming it down the viewer's throat. By having the audience be removed from the direct meaning, Lichtenstein instead creates more interest by modestly hinting at it. The viewer in essence completes the piece by solving the mystery behind it if they can.

It seemed to me that this should be my vehicle as well, although I found better examples of more subtle metaphor as I looked at other artists. Giorgio de Chirico fascinated me with his mysterious compositions and graceful shadows. I admired his theatrical images which looked to be pulled out of dreams, or chapters in a book. They led me to think about the story, yet there wasn't enough there for me to know what went on before or how it would turn out. It was an honest account, but it was not told literally, or completely. Yet it was bold enough to trigger the viewer's curiosity.

Edvard Munch was another whose work seemed to me full of this intense drama and metaphorical story telling. "Puberty" was especially intriguing, forcing the viewer to make a connection between the title, the nude and awkward figure of the girl and the shadow which emerges from the figure quite unnaturally and seeks to dominate the entire composition with its weight.

I looked at artists other than painters and fine artists as well. After all I wasn't just



those two things and I was beginning to think that my thesis should include more than that. I looked at the works of Sylvia Plath. I enjoyed her poems which she was most well known but I was particularly moved by her novel *The Bell Jar*. It was a moving story told as a work of fiction, but in reality it was an autobiographical account of her trials as a young woman. It was honest, but not literal. This kept me interested as a reader. It made the work more powerful than if it had been a direct documentation. I found a similar narrative style in *The Fall* by Albert Camus.

Kurt Vonnegut's novel *Slaughterhouse Five* was also moving to me. His metaphor was not in the changing of names and reducing characters to stereotype however. He was master of the English language, writing the novel in a style that was quirky and vigorous. His words always meant something other than what they were saying. He describes someone as having "teeth like piano keys". The words are a translation of not only the appearance of this character, but also the feeling that his appearance provokes. And that's how the whole book was. It was a translation for Vonnegut's views. It didn't come through clearly, but it made me listen carefully as if I was listening to a static broadcast from a transistor radio.

Kurt Cobain was a musical hero of mine. The frontman of the rock group Nirvana, was also a brilliant lyricist who had a similar gift of communicating his emotional contents through metaphor. His words seemed at times completely detached from literal meaning. It was as if he allowed his subconscious thought to dictate the direction of the words. Yet his message of isolation and alienation was easily apparent, although it was told in his own brilliant language. This was what I aspired to as an artist, writer and musician. I needed to tell my story in an honest manner, yet it had to be in my own language. The language would be so personal that

it might be difficult for others to understand it. Some might be insulted by it. Some could even be offended. I knew that anything less than this would be unacceptable to me.

So all I knew at this point was that I would tell a story. A novel or novella I decided. It would be a personal story with a twist and a lot of drama, which was not a problem because my life was completely full of it. In fact most of the events that did end up going into the novella were completely true and unchanged. But I needed a hook. I needed something to spice it up.

Millennium fever had already begun to run ramped as early as 1997. There were numerous, unstable individuals who came out proclaiming the “end” at many different times. The world mourned for Princess Diana as if she were a Saint of unprecedented proportions. Several cults burned themselves (or as we later found out were burned by shadier characters in the government). Hate was everywhere from the dragging death of a black man, to the brutal torture and murder of a gay college freshman, to that murderous day at Columbine High School. The world was insane on a personal and global scale, and this was the spice I was looking for.

I was actually approached by the mysterious villain I call the “You Know I Know Man”. The event happened precisely as it is told in the beginning of the story. I knew it was a good way to start. I knew it could trigger the worst kind of insecurities and insanities to dominate the main character Stan. Those insecurities and insanities would center on Stan’s obsession with the end of the world, and would affect his and everyone’s lives in the story.

As far as the characters go, the names have been changed, and they have been narrowed down to stereotypes. Stan is obviously and quite painfully, based on

me. Or the worst traits of me. He is neurotic to the bone, impatient, selfish, paranoid and narrow-minded. He sees the world through his eyes only, no matter how misguided his vision may be. He sees himself as the only protagonist, and is often destroyed when dramas that have been going on without his full awareness, come to a boil and spill over. He sees his world as a dark and miserable place, and he secretly wishes to destroy it. The tragedies that happen to him by coincidence, only strengthen this secret wish until he decides he must take action and make the change he longs for himself. Without giving away anymore of the story, I must insist that while Stan is based on me, he is not exactly me, as none of the characters here are exactly who they are based on. They are meant to be caricatures and not portraits of specific people - metaphors intended as criticisms of the human condition.

"What does this all have to do with your thesis?" was the most common question asked when I told people of my plan to write the end of the world novella. Well, telling the story in a written format as well as a visual appealed to me. I have always considered myself a story teller, whether I am drawing, painting, writing, or playing my songs on my guitar. I think that most artists are - certainly the artists that influenced me. My earliest influence, more specifically the reason why I picked a writing utensil and decided to create a drawing, was the comic book. It was my earliest inspiration and my earliest training in the arts. Prior to going to school and eventually learning about the human anatomy and the laws of perspective this was all I knew. To me it was and still is one of the most valid American art forms. It is the only literature I can think of that a youngster will invest his own one or two dollars to buy. It tells more than a motion picture - one comic book page contains as many as six different images simultaneously. I had to admit to myself that at the age of 23 after attending art school



for six years, the comics were still alive and in my blood stream.

My oldest influence, my reason for becoming an artist, was still inside me, along with a jumbalaya of other stuff I had learned and acquired. The story had to be told, not literally but through metaphor. It would be told in a written format of a novella. To tell it visually I could think of no better context than the comic book. The problem was now that it had to be presentable in a gallery space. I had to use the comic book as a vehicle to translate the story from type to a visual, but the piece still had to be a spectacle worthy of a modern gallery, a spectacle that was a representation of a year's worth of labor.

About a year before this, Professor Ed Miller had told me to look up the artist Red Grooms. As many who have seen Grooms' work I was at first repulsed and subsequently enchanted by his grandiose, white-trash groove. It wasn't the most attractive work to look at, but there was an honesty to his unproportional, junky figures and his noisy, Technicolor compositions. It was this kind of honesty I needed. Among other things Grooms created dioramas - brilliant, 3 - D illusions inhabited by the junky figures that I have mentioned. At first I thought "I'll do one too!" but afterward the concept expanded. My scale would be grander. It would be an installation inhabited by comic book representations of the story's characters. A giant comic book panel telling the story in one shot.

The installation would represent the climactic scene in the book I was writing. That scene featured all of the book's characters and it was "The End of the World Party". It was a bar scene and most of the characters had no idea what was about to happen. Before I set out to create the pieces for the installation, I gave some thought to the way i would tell the story. I decided that literal interpretation of the text would be

contradictory to my purpose. It had to be subtle, not over the top. Most of the themes were personal, so I didn't intend to make them obvious, unless the viewer personally inquired. For that reason it was important that the installation worked on two levels. First, it had to be true to the book I was writing, and second it had to be fun to behold for the viewer that had no time to look closer and uncover its mysteries. It could be enjoyed both literally and metaphorically.

The next big decision to be made was how would the figures be interpreted. I had already decided to use the comic book as the translation, but I had not made a decision as to the style. I decided that the figures would have the characteristics of the comic book. They would be drawn in heavy black lines. The color would be interpreted by a system based on benday dots but closely resembling George Seurat's pointillist scheme, for a more naturalistic effect. The paint I decided on was Latex House Paint, which I had become accustomed to while working on the mural that fall.

The figures themselves started as tiny line drawings, which I then projected and drew onto 4X8 pieces of insulation foam. After this I cut the figures out of the foam and they were ready to paint. I chose insulation foam because it was light and easy to cut. The down side was that the figures were extremely fragile and small parts have broken off every time they've had to be transported. The paint took to them quite easily after they had been primed with several coats of primer. The colors were vivid and fun, the way that I had wanted them to be. My system of color was a simple one. I used the three primaries to mix all the colors. Using my pointillist scheme, I would lay one color over the other. For example I mixed green by laying down a flat yellow, then blue dots right over it (varying the intensity to achieve shading) and then a minimal amount of red dots to mute the color a little bit. Even though the color wasn't physically mixed, the



viewer's eye completed the illusion by optically mixing it at the correct distance. I particularly enjoyed this because it fit perfectly into the metaphor concept of the thesis. Not even the color was literal. It took the viewer to make sense of even the most basic building block of the thesis installation.

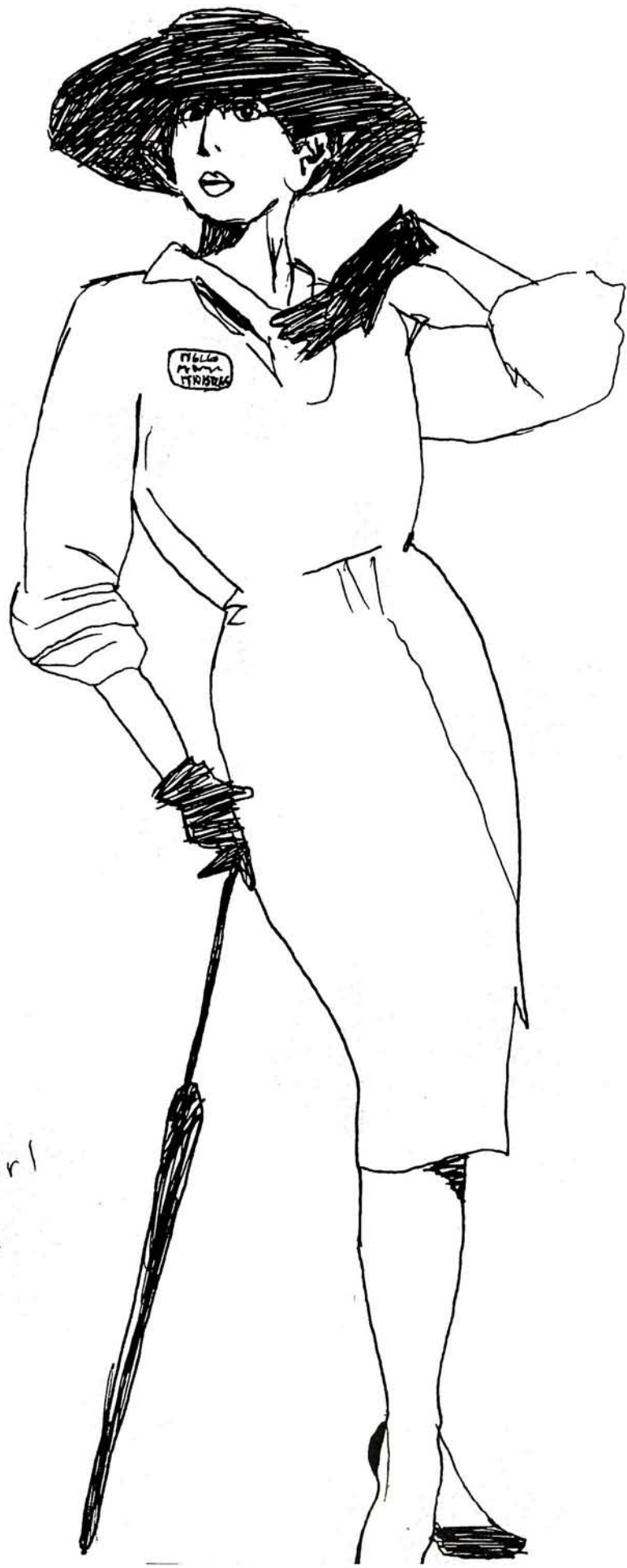
The drawings of the figures were also tied into the concept of metaphor. My original intent had been to draw them as portraits of the people they were based on. The more I thought about this, the less sense it made. Why would I create such artificial representations of these people in my book, and then do portraits? I decided that likeness was not important in the drawing of the figures. Instead I tried to capture (for lack of a better term) the essence or the personality of the person they were based on. They were not literal portraits. They were caricatures or loose representations. I was able to place all kinds of clues that further captured their essence. Frankie was portrayed as a jovial figure outwardly. He is wearing a dazzling Hawaiian shirt and bright colors. Yet his face looks worried and confused, much as his character ends up in the text of the book. Jimmy-James the Poet is stiff and unemotional. In the book his lack of presence points to this, and the blunt, careless comments he makes when he is around confirm it. Sophia is one of the most enigmatic figures of the installation. She stands smiling almost slyly, with her coat open and a big black void where it opens. This represents her secrets which she keeps hidden for most of the story; secrets so dark that they have the potential to push the confused and unstable narrator over the edge. Finally there is the Emily figure with the missing shoe. She is a party girl, drunk and saucy, and apparently with little care. It is The End of the World Party and she's going to have a good time. Yet her shoe has come off, and she is leaving it behind, much as she did her and her best friend Mellanie's friendship in the book. And while

everything in her outward appearance says that she is having a great time, she is in actuality losing an important piece of herself in the transaction. Melanie stands behind her scowling with an angry face and trying to grab her before she can go away. In front of Emily is Stan the narrator, unaware of what is really happening, because he is too busy creating hallucinations to help himself deal with the tragedies of the year that has passed. Emily continues to move toward him and away from her best friend, losing pieces of herself in the process.

To do a literal translation of the story itself, would have been impossible and pointless. Instead the visual thesis had to be yet another mutation of the real life events. I further sought to tie it together by means of a dark background. It was a very dark, shadow dominated bar scene, which contrasted with the figures severely and made their colors stand out and radiate as a result. It was also rendered in line and dots but I hid messages inside the confusion of the dots. In fact each bottle had its own special message. They were lines of significance from the book except for in the middle of the bar. Those bottles said "I am not young and wise. All I want is more fun and less bullshit". It was a half awake, three in the morning statement, that defined my current position on many things in life including the arts in general. I was prone to feeling a great deal of contempt for the big talkers of the art world. My feeling was that they had to talk so much because their work didn't really measure up. It didn't help that some of these talkers were the bigger fish of the art world as well. I also felt that the more these artists talked in their patronizing and elitist tones of voices, the less they told the interested observer. They were bullshitters - much like shady used car salesmen and politicians. I was proud that my thesis work was successful on both an intellectual level and as a fun thing to look at. Part of my intent was to make it look like

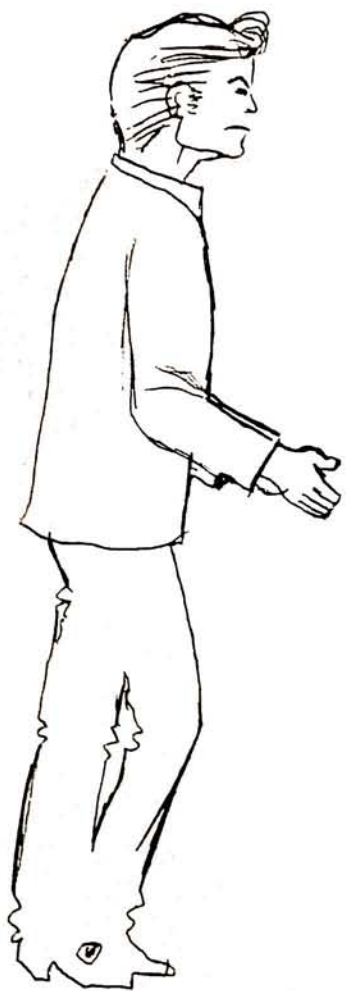
the amusement park rides I would go on as a kid. I wanted it to be sophisticated and smart but also dazzling and fun. I thought about the average person walking through the gallery and I wanted to grab their attention. If they could not look into it and solve the puzzle of the piece, they could at least feel joy from beholding it.

The single proudest moment of my career as an artist came during the later stages of the thesis show opening. It was not a professor commenting on my work, or my father telling me that I did well. Out of the corner of my eye I saw a mother and her four year old son looking at my work. She turned away to speak to another adult, and the son who she had by the hand, began to struggle fiercely, to try and reach and touch the cut - out figures in the piece. It made me feel good that I could touch someone that young. After all the thought and passion I had put behind my thesis work, the childish joy of art, the immaturity of line and color, came through loud and clear to touch everyone including the child. This confirmed to me that the universal appeal goal that I had for my thesis work was indeed realized. Physically and intellectually, the thesis was a success on all levels.



Strawberry Girl  
Kristine



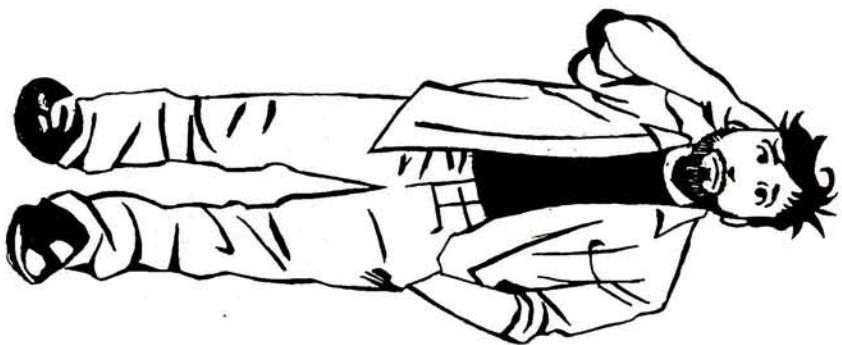
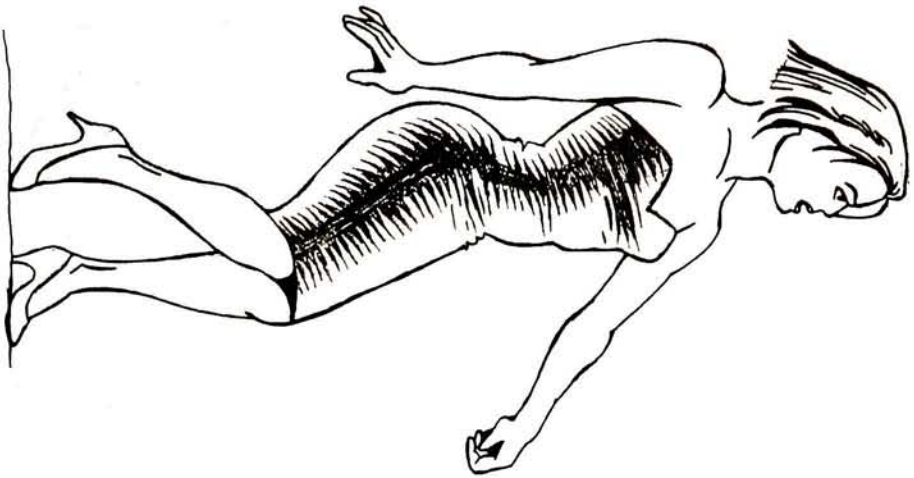


Original  
Sketches for  
Drummer  
Joe



Sopa Gran Peña  
Heartbreak Soup



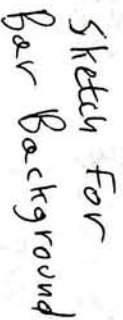


6'0"

5'6"

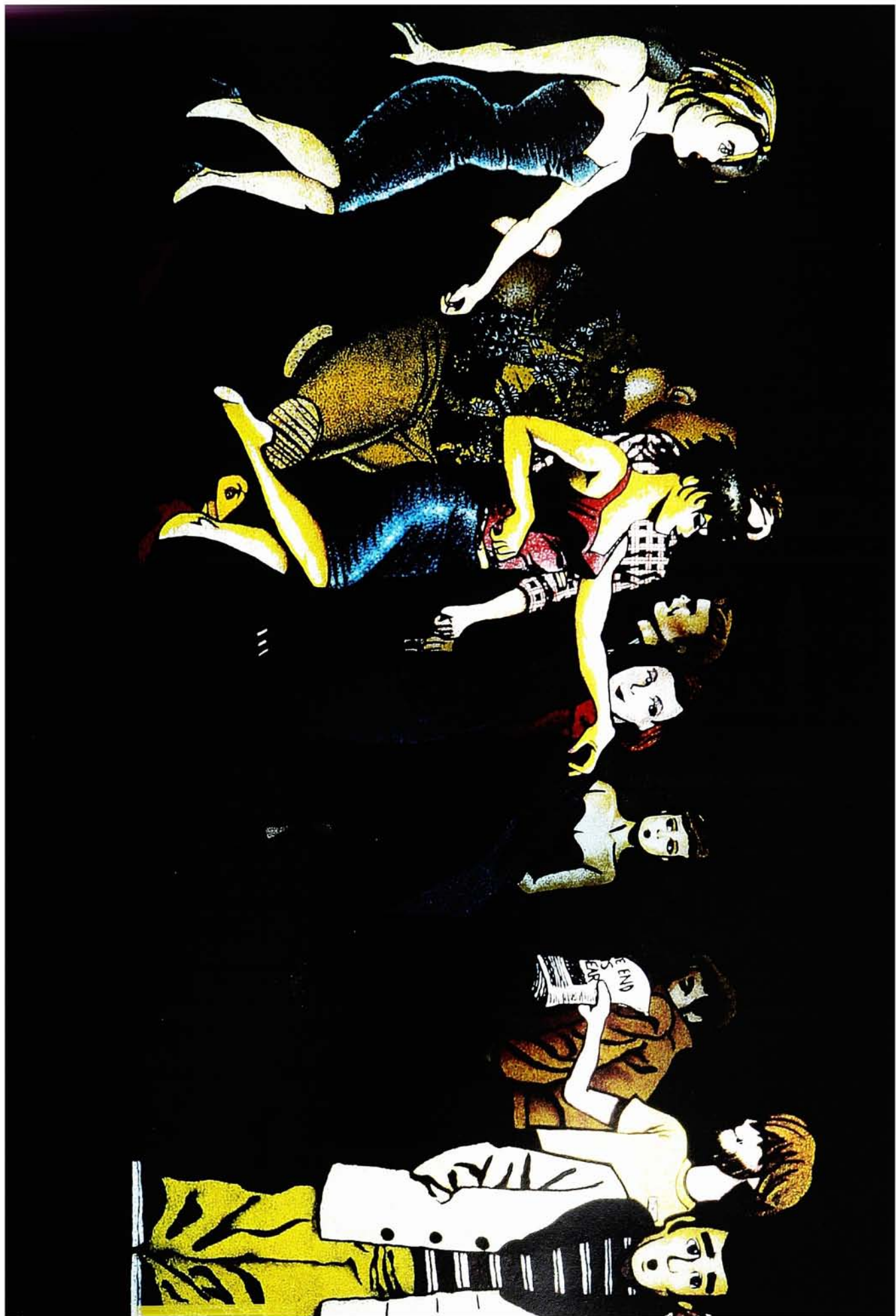
5'5"

End of the World Party;  
Just Another Day



Positively  
Rasid 15.99





## ***1. Last night I was approached by a prophet***

“You know I know.”

I had just finished a mediocre iced capuchino, and I was walking to my car with two dear friends, when we were all approached by the elderly man. He was probably in his late fifties, grey to white hair, with a chin that barely clung to his jaw. A nondescript ghost of a man, in a nondescript city, on a nondescript Tuesday night approached me and said those haunting words:

“You know I know.”

We were in our early to mid - twenties and fresh from our mothers' womb, still naive and smart enough to trust in the same life lessons that we'd been listening to for two decades, so we got nervous and picked up the pace. The nondescript elderly man also picked up his own pace, following us intently and repeating those vulgar words :

“You know I know.”

The girl - who I will call Sophia in this book (divulging her true name would make her uncomfortable and that would be inappropriate) - she showed the most obvious physical signs of irritation. She eyed the man for a split second when he made his initial approach and inquiry, after which she immediately turned forward and tried to pretend this situation was not happening. Looking back after all that has gone on since, I realize that this is how Sophia deals with uncomfortable situations - she simply pretends that it is not happening. It is very likely in fact that she may pretend I never wrote this book, but the proof is before you. This was her reaction when the foul elderly man approached us, spouting filthy fumes and wisdom on a vulgar Tuesday night in the summer of 1999.

"You know," said the evil man with a voice and eyes that intruded upon the deepest, and darkest depths of the awkward neurotic 22 year old boy that was me. "You know I know."

Ron - who's name has been changed out of respect to Sophia who is not really Sophia - was a 25 year old confident boy with brownish-blond hair which unfortunately featured a quickly receding hairline. Unlike Sophia he seems to enjoy the humorous aspects of an awkward situation.

"You know I know," the wretched old man's voice said with as much subtle violence as a slap in the face of an infant.

Ron replied with a sarcastic grin.

"I know."

"You know? You know I know?"

"Sure, dude. I know you know."

This would go on for a bit, and I shared a smile with Sophia as we couldn't help to be tickled by the bizarre situation of Ron talking to the old man as if what he was saying was truthful or reasonable. Or, perhaps, we smiled simply to ease our own nerves, however temporary this comfort was to be. One of the things that I have learned is that one must cherish the truly comfortable moments in life, for moments like that, when nothing is on your mind except the smile you are wearing on your face, are only temporary, and as difficult as walking in the rain and avoiding the raindrops. That is what I do. I cherish comfortable moments. I walk in the rain while avoiding the raindrops.

The man continued to utter the same words like a broken record. You know I know, you know I know, you know I know, you know, you know I know, you know I



know, you know I know, bla bla bla etc. Each time he varied the tone and accent of his words transforming his statement into a question at times and a command at other times. It was starting to get on my nerves when Ron decided to end it politely.

“Well, all right, man. Now you have a good night.”

The man stopped dead in his tracks, the way a movie villain pauses when struck by the fatal bullet, a split second before he tumbles to his death.

“How can you say that ,” he asked with a voice like sandpaper, “ when you know that I cannot possibly have a good night ?”

Silence. The city stopped for those few seconds and we stepped into our cars. The old man crossed the street with a walk like television static. I watched him from my car as he went on blending in with the city like a chameleon, evaporating into the night as if he had never really existed.

Ron sat in the passenger seat of my Hyundai Elantra as speechless as I have ever seen him. Sophia got in her car, an 88 Dodge (I've revealed the true identity of the automobile as I reasoned it would not object to me doing so), and we followed her halfway to her apartment to make sure she was safe, at least that's what I told myself. The fact of the matter was that I had fallen in love with Sophia somewhere along the way. I don't know how but somewhere, somehow, my feelings had transformed from that kind of embarrassing and delightful sugarcoated teenage roller skating rink crush, to feelings of love as thick and overwhelming as molasses. I was in deep trouble and I knew it.

It occurred to me that the old man might have been talking about this. I flashed back to the elderly wretched man looking at me as if all my secrets were written upon my face. How could he know? It wasn't possible, but to a paranoid-nervous-hopeless

like myself, it was especially irritating that this dark stranger should know my secrets before I'm ready to divulge them. I'm not a very secretive person since I am so terrible at keeping secrets. I always spill the beans. That's what I do. I can't keep secrets, I always spill the beans and afterwards the cleanup is a bitch.

I woke up the next day in the same bed I had slept in since I was thirteen years old. That was when my family had moved from the ghetto to the suburbs. It's funny for me to say ghetto now, since it was only when I moved into the suburbs that I realized that where we lived before was a ghetto. The crack dealers and drive-by shootings never tipped me off. I daydream a lot and what is obvious to you easily eludes me. Regardless, my parents enjoyed their monotonous existence and as far as I could tell they had achieved the American Dream of stability and routine. So why was I so unhappy? This was what everyone strived for : a camouflage existence where everyone blended in with their uniform surroundings, so much that when one watered their lawn they were no more noticeable than the skeleton trees of their back yard.

My parents would have been good at this , except one thing held them back - the fact that they were immigrants. To their credit they tried very hard to hide this embarrassing thorn in my side, but at times I wished they would try harder. Most people are proud of their heritage but I can't imagine why this would be, since we live in a country that is a melting pot, where people are poured in like many separate flavors that boil together and dissolve into one great stew. If every flavor and spice is so stubborn and proud of itself disharmony would occur, and the soup would be a foul mess of vile and cancerous tastes all competing and accomplishing nothing but spoiling the end product.

I was 22 and foolish enough to believe in America. The old man I had seen Tuesday evening knew better than that. He did not only know my secrets. He knew the cruel laws that our world operated by. He knew that no matter how hard someone tried to please everyone, that in the end the people closest to him would end up getting hurt the most. My name is Stan. I've changed it out of respect to the order of this book, which really doesn't have much order at all. Through the course of this book I try to please everyone, and in the end I wind up hurting those closest to me. I am sure that those who I have not hurt yet will be hurt when reading this book. Somehow the old man had gazed upon me and through me. He heard the silent scream that was building within me with the momentum of muffled weeping. He knew that this scream was a selfish plea and that for this reason it was forbidden and ignored. This only tormented the protagonist more, leaving him thrashing in a vast ocean: a drowning man trying to lift himself out of the water by tugging on his own hair.

I began playing my electric guitar, an Ibanez, which is a great heavy metal guitar but inappropriate for the Pixies rip off indie rock that I was obsessed with. As I played I began thinking about the end of the world again. We were approaching the millennium and there is nothing as romantic at the end of the millennium as thinking about the end of the world. It gave me a thrill, not unlike the electric feeling just before you get gang-tackled while playing "Kill the Carrier". Disaster movies were all the rage. How would the end of the world come? Some thought that a large meteor or comet would crash into our Earth and unleash tidal waves of biblical proportions, drowning us all and putting us all out of our misery. Others believed that an extra-terrestrial invasion might bring about the doom of this planet. Others still believed that God would put an end to the vile and failed existence of humanity, by coming down to judge



mankind and determine who is saved and who is damned. I couldn't think of anyone that should be spared if this was the scenario, because I did not know anyone who had not sinned, and of those sinners I knew no one who was truly repentant. People never truly feel sorry for what they've done. They are simply annoyed with the consequences.

To tell the truth I did not believe in any of these scenarios. I do not believe in God, as I have a bad time trying to believe in something I've never seen. For this reason I did not believe in extra-terrestrials, comets and meteors. Science to me is a confusing excuse for what cannot be explained, a pathetic last attempt for humans to categorize and classify everything. So while I believed in the end of the world - and I strongly encouraged it too, for I believe it is an excellent idea - I did not believe it would come in one of these easy, compact TV Dinner scenarios.

It occurred to me that the only man who must know how the end of the world would come was the disgusting, grey old man that had spoken to us the night before. That was what he was trying to tell me, I concluded, and the truth was that I had known this all along. My hands stopped playing guitar, allowing the feedback to screech and scream and crackle off of the walls in my bedroom. I sat there looking, my face like a puzzle that had fallen apart and needed someone to put it together again.

Throughout the course of my life, I have often found myself pretending, and hiding behind masks, and alter egos. When I first began writing this book I was going to pretend I was a literature student. That is, I was going to introduce my alter ego (or my mask), Stan, as a literature student. The truth is I am a graduate painting student, a fine artist and not a writer by trade, and I fear that is going to have to be my excuse

for what it is you are reading . I have another excuse too, and that is that it is the truth of what has happened to me through the course of this year. I think this is a good excuse. Unfortunately telling the truth generally gets me in a lot of trouble. It has put me in hot water with Sophia and by the time this book is completed it will probably get me in trouble with the rest of the people in this book.

So I had the love thick as molasses for Sophia who is not Sophia, as I explained earlier. Unlike most men-boys of my age I seem to be unable to function normally in this situation. I am unable to hit on women in bars and clubs, although I am a notorious barfly. Its not in me. I don't know how to do it. Even if I did I still would be too bashful to do it. This is what prevents me from functioning normally in this area.

So what do I do when I desire a woman? Well, at first I wait and think about how unlikely it would all be. I may eventually introduce myself or have someone else introduce me (the second is my favorite since it is the path of least resistance), and then if the woman is nice to me I befriend her. This I think is my big error. For after befriending this woman of my dreams, I can only watch with dread and self contempt as my feelings for her magnify into epic proportions, until they are choking me and suffocating me, and I am forced to make a stunning revelation.

This is the error of my ways. And so it was with Sophia. I knew her through friends for about half a year. At this point she was an acquaintance to whom I was extremely attracted to. Eventually we became friends. I felt the crush coming over me and I knew I would end up where I am today. But I am a blind-boy-dreamer so I dove in head first , with a smile, and my eyes shut to reality. Sophia and I became the best of friends through the course of a couple of months. This was when my insides began to hurt and expand, and I became the shaking-worry-wart-nervous that I become when I



desperately want something that I will in all likelihood not get.

So I knew what I had to do. I had to make the stunning revelation now, or live with the knowledge that I never even tried. I talked to my friend Mutt about it.

“Don’t rush it. You’ll know when the right time is.”

Mutt is great that way. He tells me that all the girls I like are trouble and then tells me to wait. I love him but I think he doesn’t want me to have a girlfriend. Note: Never listen to Mutt’s advice in romantic affairs.

So I waited. The problem was that when the time seemed to be right something would come up, and it was no longer right. I decided to tell Sophia one Sunday evening. Prior to that we were to go to the coffee shop with a group of friends. When I arrived it was painfully obvious that a girlfriend of Sophia’s, Christine, was trying to set her up with Jim. Jim was a former engineering student who had graduated and moved on to a great high paying job. He was a muscular bicycle rider, and although he was not pretty, he had that rugged stone-like quality that seems to pass for handsome machismo these days.

Suffice to say I did not act on my emotions that day. I buried them and allowed them to continue to expand getting dangerously close to my capacity. The Jim thing did not work out. Sophia was a very intelligent girl, who took pride in reading novels and newspapers, and watching as many obscure movies and Oscar contenders as she could. Jim was a grey man who enjoyed riding his bicycle and reading manuals on the latest computer programs. It was a less than perfect match. And there was one other thing, which ultimately proved to be my demise as well, in what seemed to turn into the Sophia sweepstakes. This thing was that Sophia was still reeling from the breakup from her last relationship with a man who skateboards and is named Tim. Tim

now lives far away in the state of North Carolina. I never met Tim, nor do I ever want to, although I am sure that if I do, I will probably think highly of him.

Sophia stated numerous times that she was not ready to date anyone, because of her fragile emotional state in regards to Tim. This did not phase me for I was sure I could sweep her off her feet. I'm very charming. She told me that.

One day Sophia called me.

"Stan, I just called Tim. He's moved. I'm very upset. Could you come over."

My heart felt as if it might burst, as I could hear that painfully subtle crackling quality in her voice; a quality which sounded like crumbling glass and indicated grief and despair. I felt sympathy for her, I embraced her and held her tightly when I arrived, and I looked upon her tearful eyes and found them to be the most beautiful and pathetic I've ever seen. Oh god! I am a sucker for grief. I am a citizen of sorrow and should a beautiful woman decide to visit the territory in which I reside, I am cursed to fall head over heels and give her a place in my heart. I held Sophia tightly knowing what was to come; knowing that I would soon be the one in her position but without anyone to hold me and reassure me that everything would be all right.

I reasoned that this too would be a terrible time to tell Sophia the truth. So I just stood there like a sap, trying to console her, and trying to figure out what I was to do about my own feelings. I did nothing. Sophia was able to find out where Tim was through his sister. She talked to him later that evening. The conversation went well. She decided to go visit Tim in North Carolina. She told Ron and I that she needed closure. She returned a week later. She said that Tim might return to our area in about a year. She said they talked about marriage. She would not date anyone but Tim in the meantime. Oh God, oh God, oh God. The worst case scenario had only begun.

Perhaps this is when I began to lose my mind. Or maybe I had lost it long before, and this was finally when my actions became so bizarre, that I actually had to admit it to myself. While it is difficult to tell a hard truth to someone you love, it is almost impossible to admit it to yourself.

The whole thing ends in a rather anti-climactic fashion as most life events do, no matter how much drama I may try to superimpose on them. I freak out and begin thinking of nothing but this girl night and day. Wait, that is not entirely true because in the midst of my self indulgent teenage fantasies, I also visualize the end of the world. While this is nothing new, it begins occurring more and more frequently and it starts taking on a new romantic meaning. I take pleasure in fantasizing about the caress of the lovely Sophia, and then the pleasure is intensified by the hallucination of thousands of screaming faces, with the holy light of the nuclear holocaust casting ragged shadows on their frightened eyes. I dream about holding her, our limbs tangled and our breaths interrupting the silence of night like a whisper. Then I think about Hiroshima, and how my fifth grade teacher explained to me, that when the people there disintegrated in the atom bomb blast, their shadows were permanently imprinted on the walls. Then I think ridiculous dramatic thoughts like : "Imagine that. In life I am nothing but a shadow and in death I will not even cast one like the fortunate victims of Hiroshima." What a glorious thing to be etched in time as ghostly apparitions that haunt the streets of Hiroshima, forever reminding people of the greatest crime in the history of mankind.

As I freak out my sense of urgency becomes greater. I start to imagine things, and I create an impossible affair between Sophia and Ron. In my mind it becomes obvious that Ron is also in love with Sophia. Why wouldn't he be? She is beautiful

and delicate and has a smile that leaves me trembling with school boyish glee. She is intelligent - she is modest about the fact that she can read four books in one day if she wants to. The most wonderful thing about her though, is the fact that I can never have her. I love her for this and I loathe her too. I am certain that Ron is also in love with her.

I confront him one night as we are driving home from the nightclub named The Fallout Shelter.

"Did you ever have feelings for Sophia?"

"No," followed by a pause and then "not really. I mean I've thought about it, yes, but I've seen her in relationships before. She gets a little crazy. She gets worked up over things, and things turn into a mess. I mean with Tim one night she drove all the way to Albany to confront him about something that she said she could not discuss over the phone. It was in the middle of winter and there was snow and ice on the roads. Crazy. It was crazy!"

This should have discouraged me but instead I am touched by the way she had reacted so impulsively to her passionate feelings for - Tim. We keep talking like this, me interrogating Ron, and then him telling me why he thinks Sophia would be lousy to date, and then me getting that stupid look on my face like Ethan Embry in ***Can't Hardly Wait***. After a few minutes he figures it out.

"Let me ask you this" and I know what is coming next. "Do **you** have feelings for Sophia?"

At first denial.

"What? No, no, no... I mean she's cool but she's... It wouldn't work."

Then a slight leak.

"Well. I've thought about it, you know and..."



The flow gets more rapid.

"She's great you know. Sometimes I think about her."

The damn bursts.

"Yeah.. yeah... Who the hell am I fooling? I'm crazy about her. I've always had a crush on her. She's incredible. I haven't felt like this... I mean there hasn't been anyone worthwhile for a long time. She's amazing."

Ron proved to me how good a friend he was that night. We talked about the situation until the crack of dawn. He knew that my position was not enviable, but he agreed that I should tell her. He knew it would not end well.

"She reacts horribly to these kinds of things."

It didn't phase me. I had my blind dreamer glasses on.

Two weeks passed after this incident. Instead of feeling relief that someone else knew I felt clothed in distress. I had a few situations come and go where for a split second it would have been reasonable to tell Sophia. But during these moments I checked and there were many more moments when such a confession would have been ridiculous. Since there were so many of those later awkward moments it makes perfect sense that I decided to tell Sophia at such a difficult moment.

Things between Sophia and Tim seemed to be going well, and this was very difficult for me to admit for I constantly obsessed with finding clues that things were going very badly. On top of this I felt horrible because she was a very dear friend and I knew that I should be happy for her and her man, yet I loathed him and began to resent her happiness. Then I descended into the guilty place; the only place I've ever felt comfortable.

Sophia worked a high paying and uninteresting job, in a cubicle and behind a

desk somewhere in the vast labyrinth of the computer industry. Such a job enables one to relocate at their convenience which is what Sophia announced she was going to do.

“I’m moving to North Carolina with Tim.”

The panic button had been pushed and I was running with a head full of steam toward my marathon of disgrace.

Whoever said that good things come to those who wait must have been the world’s most clueless man. It is simply not true. I propose that those who wait lose. I began drafting a letter which I would give to Sophia the day before she left. This letter had to be a life altering revelation, something to change her mind about a major life decision she had already made. I know that I’m naive. Be rest assured that you’ve seen nothing yet.

So I went to the Fallout Shelter on the Friday before she was leaving. I had the letter in my pocket and I was ready - so ready - to give it to her. When the night passed I left Sophia with a hug goodbye and that goddamned letter had remained in my pocket. As I drove home I reasoned that I was a pathetic excuse for a man. I was a useless bag of guilt and weakness and things that were foul and reeked of disgrace.

I saw a car’s headlights in the opposite lane . For a moment I thought about how easy it would be to eliminate myself in this situation, but it came and went like it always does. Missed opportunities.

I got into my bed, but the stink of summer sweat and shame kept me from sleeping.

3:30 AM. Visions of lust and genocide. A disturbing cocktail intoxicates me. My stomach is on fire. I am then in the bathroom vomiting, trying to purge myself of the

shame of being me. The bitter taste of my insides floods my mouth and then the bathroom sink. Tears are running down my cheeks. If this is not love I don't know what is.

Down the stairs... I wind up in front of the Macintosh . Netscape is launched. User ID. Password. I'm in. I am composing E Mail to Sophia who is not Sophia.

" I know you do not see this coming but I have to do it anyway. Bla bla bla. I have to get it off my chest. Etc. The more I got to know you the more I fell for you. Meaningless words. I'm in love with you.

Take as much time to respond as you need. I will be patient - (a lie to myself).

bye bye

Stan."

Before I knew it everything had spilled out of me at once. I was on automatic pilot. A flying Dutchman ten years dead (I don't know what that means, I read it somewhere). Send Mail Now. Double click. Message sent. Jaw drops. Oh no... what have I done? The reality and irreversibility of my actions crashes upon my skull like a hammer. The relief lasts a second. Then I curse myself.

The next day I met Ron at the coffee house. I got there fifteen minutes early. I am always early when I have put myself in yet another crisis situation as I had this time. Ron got there fifteen minutes late. Ron listened as I told him what I had done. He listened as I tried to find wisdom and sense where there was only chaos and chance. He listened as I repeated and rephrased my wise conclusions in as many ways as was possible in the English language. Ron listened as he was always a good listener. When I got to close to the dark place of my soul that no one wants to see, he would



crack a joke to bring me back. He was the safety net of a torturous conversation with a man who was a sinking vessel. He slapped me gently to straighten out my crooked eye. Sock! Biff! Get a little perspective, Chicken Wing Man.

I am a man of the heart and he is of the mind. That is probably why we get along so well, like apples and oranges. We never run out of things to argue about and since we are both arguing with different parts of our body, we both leave the battlefield as winners. It is important to be correct when arguing with a friend, at least in your own respective corner. This may or may not be the key to a healthy friendship.

"Don't worry," he said and grinned. "She has a tough time dealing with her emotions but I'm sure she will respond with kindness, in her own time. If she's not interested, she should at least be flattered."

My friend Emily with sleek black hair and almond eyes said the same thing at the Fallout Shelter.

"I mean my friend Scott, he liked me and I did not care for him like that, but I was totally flattered."

"How can someone hate you for liking them?" Ron reassured me.

He was so wise. Young and wise. The rarest of combinations. And a trustworthy individual. I would have trusted him with a knife at my throat.

With that many friends reassuring me I began to believe that they were telling me the truth. But every time I checked my E Mail (twenty to thirty times a day) no message came back. She hates me. She is so repulsed by the idea of me as a lover that she will not even be my friend.

"Yeah dude! You scared her off into the next century!!!"

Frankie laughed as he embraced me into his husky frame... a squeeze of love



coupled with the wrong thing to say. Some people are so eloquent with their words that it sends you reeling and tumbling down the cliff. I reeled and tumbled that whole night, drinking Tom Collins after Tom Collins attempting to rescue and destroy myself simultaneously. It was the second Friday after the asinine E Mail. I was a weeping moron in sweet oblivion.

“What have I done to deserve this, Ron? Nothing. I can’t help the way I feel.”

“I don’t know. I’m just as confused by her reaction as you are. I’m very disappointed with her.”

Ron was so sympathetic.

“Have you talked to her since I wrote that fuckin’ stupid letter?”

“She never saw it coming. She said she had no idea.”

My friend Jimmy James the Poet who speaks like a bullet to the heart, did not buy it.

“What a bunch of bullshit !!!! Is she that clueless that a guy she barely knew starts to hang out with her every day and every waking minute, and she does not suspect something more than a friendly interest? Bullshit .”

After that he and Ron started arguing about something or other, but I was not interested in being distracted from my glorious self pity.

Frankie and Drummer Joe came up to me at that point in order to arrange a band practice on Sunday.

“Yeah, sure. Sunday at two would be fine.”

Frankie, Drummer Joe and I were in a band named Marvis. Frankie and I played our electric guitars and Drummer Joe played the drums and cymbals. We were not very good but we had the potential to be great. It had been a struggle of late,

especially since Frankie had gotten a high paying job that made him work almost every waking moment of the week. When he showed up to the practices he was tired and uninspired. The band had become a chore to him. To make matter worse he had begun to miss the practices consistently.

That Sunday Frankie had to cancel, but Drummer Joe really wanted to play so I showed up. I had not slept for two weeks now and all I could think about was the mess I had made, but I went anyway. I met Drummer Joe in our practice space, which was a tiny black closet located in the bowels of a warehouse, which in turn was located in the crotch of the inner city.

“Lets do a sound check first.”

I agreed this was the correct thing to do.

I figured I would play anything just to check the volume of my amplifier against the sound of Joe’s drums, so I randomly placed my fingers on my filthy fretboard and began strumming. A disturbingly black melody oozed out of my amplifier like ink spilling onto a stark white page. Drummer Joe began drumming along. I kept strumming my strings allowing my fingers to move on automatic pilot (a flying Dutchman’ fingers playing the melody of the dead.) I felt the viruses of the past few weeks being filtered out of me, into the cacophonous sounds that were filling our pitch black closet like nails scrapping a chalkboard. We played on for four minutes. Don’t question it . A catharsis was the wrong word for it. It was an enema.

At home I wrote the words to the song:

I have walked through storms and quagmires  
I’ve emerged from wars and controversies

and if things have become shattered puzzle  
 I swear I'll put them back together  
 I begged of you to strike me  
 I knew it took more courage than you had  
 give me the bitter pill to swallow

its no small wrecking ball, you've left me reeling  
 its getting hard to bear this shame I'm feeling  
 but it will take more than you've got  
 to tear this worn building down  
 I've caused the cancer I'll remove the cancer  
 I'm a stubborn repair-man  
 give me the bitter pill to swallow

And there it was. The first song of Marvis. "Give Me The Bitter Pill" by Marvis. Give me the bitter pill Sophia who is not Sophia. An evil boy's attempt to leave the bad place. An enema. A two week period, which felt like ten years, compressed into four minutes of anger, lust, melody, cacophony and rhythm.

"What kind of music does your band play?"

*"Rhythm and cacophony."*

It was this song which saved our friendship, dearest Sophia. It was this song that expelled all the shit that had accumulated in my insides. It was this song that gave me the courage necessary to call you in North Carolina (which was not North Carolina).

"The reason I did not call you is because I'm mad at you."

"Mad at me? What..."

I stopped because I had no bad feelings in me.

"Yes. I'm mad at you. You knew I didn't want to date anyone and you went ahead and did this anyway. I hated it when Jim liked me... what makes you think this not a million times worse?"

Because I'm not Jim. It was a simple answer to a question that wasn't put forth to be answered. So I didn't answer it. I just listened to her trash me. I was numb and ready. I was strong with the rhythm and cacophony.

"I don't... I won't date anybody but Tim."

"That's fine. But I had to get it off my chest. I had to tell you the truth."

"Why? Don't you think some things are better left untold?"

"No," I said quite sincerely. "I don't agree with that."

"Nothing is better left untold," Ron agreed with me later that evening. "Secrets always come back to hurt the people they are being withheld from."

Honest, wise Ron. A true friend. Sincere to the bone. A man who did not keep secrets. He thought nothing was better left untold.

"You talked to Ron. You asked him if he would ever try to date me," Sophia shouted. "But he wouldn't. He would never risk the friendship."

"Yes. That was what he said," I agreed.

"Now it will never be normal again. You're a danger to cross that line again."

"Never. Besides you're in North Carolina with Tim. How could I cross even if I wanted to?"

She explained that she was not going to stay there for good. She was coming



back in a couple of months and Tim would move up here in a year.

"It will be fine I swear," I said. "Two months is a long time. I know how you feel and my feelings will change. They're already changing."

A pathetic Woody Allen thing to say.

"I don't see how things between us can be normal," you said.

"Do you want them to be?"

"Yes."

"Then there's no reason for them not to be. You'll see. We'll be great friends like we've always been."

The conversation that followed was indeed a regular conversation. About random subjects. Hollywood gossip. Local gossip. How's Pete and Melanie? Still dating. How's Emily? Still single. Her and Ron, maybe they'll get together. How's the band going? Have you been to any shows lately? Did you see **There's Something About Mary**? Bla bla bla. Hooey-balooey.

After that I went and saw **Can't Hardly Wait** with Ron. I like everything but the main love story between Ethan Embry and Jennifer Love Hewitt. I know it when my life is being spoofed, and in this case I did not appreciate the happy ending I was deprived of in my universe.

It was through this mess that I bonded with Ron. He had proven to be one of the best friends I had made. When he saw me in chaos, he stuck with me and tried to keep my perspective clear. It was largely because of Ron that I did not crumble into dust and blow away into the fierce wind that swept into my life that summer. For this I would be forever grateful. A true friend is a rare thing. But he was something more. He was a true friend I could look to in a time of need; a friend I could trust to look me in the eye

and tell me easy and difficult truths. He was a friend to trust with my deepest secrets, dreams and hopes.

I talked to him about the You Know I Know Guy Prophet. He said it would be a great beginning for a book.

“Yes it would,” I said, all while secretly admiring the mass graves of the Holocaust Jews that I had seen earlier in a documentary on TV, and that were now being mysteriously projected into my cranium. I wondered what it felt like to destroy that many people. Were the Nazi Generals plagued by their conscience, sweating at night hoping to die for what they had done? No. They probably went through the motions with apathy as their medicine.

**Don't question it.**

**It's a catharsis.**

An enema.

## ***2. The Mural of September***

I often try to pretend that I am smarter than I really am. That's not to say that I am not an intelligent man-boy; I am to a certain extent. That is also not to say that I am one of the most naive people on the face of this Earth. I often think that people are being genuine from the first moment I have met them. I become an open book and immediately share everything there is inside of me. I've been told that this is my charm. I also know that it is my downfall. My best traits are often my worst ones depending on the way you choose to look at them. I am passionate. I am crazy. I am honest. I am unable to keep secrets that I am entrusted with, so I am a gossip. Hell, this book is the worst violation of this, I admit it. I'm such a gossip that I have to tell everyone about my friends and how they are great and how they are assholes, just like everyone. Perhaps I am a malicious person. Perhaps I have done this with ill intent. Maybe it is not my place to expose those in my life and hurt them carelessly as I am doing. Perhaps I should not even bare myself and allow myself to relive the pain and joy these people have given me. Perhaps I should not be so selfish, but I must ask of you, is it not the responsibility of an artist and a storyteller to tell the story as he sees fit, as a means of self expression?

Mutt is my good friend. He is a sweetheart and a cock, an angel and a motherfucker just like you and me. I met him as a senior in college. He is an artist just like me. When I first met Mutt, I did not think he was a good person, as I usually assume with most people. He was a dirty punk rocker who used egg yolks to style his hair. His clothes reeked of mildew and sweat, and that took a little getting used to. He always smiled when I talked to him and his smile gave his face the look of hyena

trying to sneak up on his prey. I always looked at him and I thought he was mocking me; that he had something up his sleeve.

Mutt stuck around long enough to prove me wrong. His smile although appearing insincere, was just the opposite. He is a noble punk rocker, with a heart full of joy and sorrow. And he has proven as loyal a thorn in my side as anyone I've met in my life.

Mutt graduated with his bachelor's degree a year after me, and unlike me did not seek the false security of graduate school. Instead he moved into an inner city apartment with his life-long friend Colt. Unfortunately he had no work or income when he first moved in. This is often the case with the brilliant artists that waste their money on a four year education at the Institute. I may be in the same predicament after wasting my money on six years and two degrees by the age of 23.

Mutt rarely complains or feels the need to relate his worries to anyone. In this he is the opposite of me. So naturally with no job and the rent of the first month looming in his horizon, he never said a word. I would call and ask him how he was doing and he would respond with his life slogan:

"I'm still alive. I can't complain."

Working at the desk that August, was becoming unbearable. The Institute prided itself in creating technicians and engineers, yet they did not have the technology for a decent air conditioning system. This caused me to secrete perspiration which interfered with my reading all the books that Sophia lent me. This caused me to slow my pace and I needed to read them quickly in order to impress her. As if this was not enough, the phone was populated by idiots and hypocrites who would routinely call me and interrupt my reading and my apocalyptic fantasies.



"Good afternoon. School of Art and Design, how may I help you?"

"I was wondering who I would speak to about bla, bla , bla. Is bla, bla, bla there?"

"I'm sorry she's not in this summer?"

"Is there anyone else I could speak to?"

"No. Blow it out yer ass. Can't you see I'm reading?"

Or , "Can't you see I'm dreaming about the glorious and vile stench that suffocated the medieval, cobblestone streets during the Plague?"

Unfortunately I never did have the balls to say something as disturbing and funny as those two last statements. I just tried to rid myself of these pests as quickly as I could.

On Thursday, I was trying to imagine what the Native Americans must have felt like when being massacred for the first time by the white European invader they had trusted and been hospitable to. What must it have been like to hear the sound of a gun for the first time, and then to feel a bullet lodged in the middle of your chest, pushing your warm blood up your esophagus and out of your mouth? What did it feel like to...

That's when the loud and violent sound of the telephone punched me squarely on the jaw and wrestled me back into the real world I had begun to dread.

The jackass that inhabited the telephone this time was named Tim El Ducco. He was a proud restaurant owner who wanted an art student to do a 40 foot mural on his restaurant wall for next to nothing. I told him that I was such an art student with plenty of expertise and impeccable technique, and to be exploited in such a manner would be delightful. He agreed to meet me for a portfolio review the next day.

I met with El Ducco the next day. He appeared to me an overgrown dwarf with a

face that made me wonder if he was not the offspring of a human and a mule. The light in the room did not flatter his already repulsive features.

I showed him the same battered portfolio that I had since my freshman year in college, and I had not updated since my senior year. He said he liked my work, but I could tell he liked the fact that I was willing to be used at the low price of two thousand dollars. Now this may sound like a lot to you but the job would take 60 days to complete. That made for \$33 dollars a day. This divided by the eight hours a day I would work it would amount to \$4 and some change per hour. He smiled with a smile that said :

“Nice to meet you. You’re just the fool I’ve been looking for.”

“Nice to meet you. I’m just the fool you’ve been looking for.”

El Duche told me that furthermore the supplies would be paid for from the two thousand dollar budget. I smiled like a chump and thanked him again for his generosity. He then told me that I could bring along another artist and split the generous profits with him if I wanted to. That's when I thought of Mutt, who in spite of his unwillingness to complain, I knew was in dire need of money.

“So there’s this guy El Duche who wants me to do a mural for him. He said I could bring along another artist if I wanted to, so I was thinking...”

“Yeah-yeah I’ll do it.”

Yeah-yeah. That’s how Mutt spoke. Yeah-yeah. It was unusual and contagious as was his personality. I introduced El Duche to Mutt and he was hired so now we were splitting the generous pay of \$2000 for two months, \$33 a day, and \$4 an hour. Each of us would get \$1000, \$16.50, and \$2.00.

“Nice to meet you. We’re just the fools you’ve been looking for. Yeah-yeah.”

Mutt and I sketched for a week before we decided on the final design of the mural. During the day we would sketch while listening to Bruce Springsteen and Elvis Costello. Mutt had an acoustic guitar and so did I, so we started writing western songs together. Peyote-western I called it because it wasn't your usual brand of western music. The songs were entirely sinister and un-American, with themes about the death and destruction of all that is American. I wrote a song called "The Blood Will Flow Like A River". It was an anthem about the massacre of the American forces at the Alamo. My hatred of America rang out loud and clear. Fuck John Wayne. He's dead. Those are the things I liked to sing about in late August as September came around. I did not know how it was all going to end, but I could take comfort in the years of human atrocity that preceded me. I could only dream of taking part in such mayhem but dream I did.

We presented the sketches on the last Friday of August. Il Duche loved them and gave us the go-ahead. We were talented. We were terrific. We could start on Monday. I had not heard from Sophia in almost a month now. I was afraid to call her and she was afraid to call me. We were afraid of each other.

"Just call her," Ron said.

"It's gonna take a while," Mutt told me. "You can't expect her to feel comfortable right away. She sounds really confused right now."

I don't know why I go to my friends to solve my problems. It only creates more problems. Confused? Well that's what I am. I'm the King of Confused, the Duke of Worry and the Baron of Self Inflicted Wounds. A drama-queen-worry-wart-nervous-pathetic. Yeah-yeah.

I finally gave in and called Sophia, Sunday evening. I was fortunate and she



was in at the time and she was able to speak to me. It was a grey conversation. Nothing important was said, as was to be the rule for the amount of time it took for us to cease being afraid of one another. How is everything going? The band? A mural? That's terrific. How soon till you get back? A month. Great. Goodbye.

I got in my car and went for a drive. Mutt had told me that when he needs to figure stuff out he goes for a walk. I am lazier than him so I took a drive. The radio would not cooperate with me and play a good song. Techno, techno, techno. Artificial beats spewed out by a computer system more intelligent than me. It was more intricate than my music but it had no soul. Mine had soul. I had soul. I had more soul than anyone should ever be given in this life; so much soul that it gave me nausea when I got into the cycle of not being able to fix things that I broke.

I saw cars passing by that night and reasoned it would be unwise and unfair to provoke a head-on collision. So I kept on driving still. Loneliness sliced through my interiors like a buzz-saw. I needed a new obsession.

I flirted with pornography when I was eleven years old. That's when I first came across one of my father's videos in his closet. I began to watch it, at first disgusted and then thrilled. I watched it several times until I became completely fascinated by the glistening bodies engaged in this frightening act of violence. Then I was caught by my mother who was completely ashamed of me, and of her husband, and of herself. The video went away and we never discussed it again. It is the way people must deal with these awkward moments. Put it away. Throw it in the trash. Lock it in the vault. If you believe it never happened then it can't hurt you.

I wound up in the stinky bowels of the city again, only this time I was not in the band practice space or in Mutt's apartment. Instead I was in the back room of



one of those seedy video stores, with stench in the air and grime on the walls. I eyed the video packages until I was in a trance. I was repulsed and fascinated. Shocked and titillated. I looked at the women that were being abused and brutalized on these packages and I derived pleasure and self-loathing. Or perhaps it was in my own self-loathing that I found extacy. Yeah-yeah. That was it. I knew that this was the ultimate in human degradation, and I loved it ! For this I despised myself. I had proven to myself that I was worthless. Hopeless. A piece of dung. A waste of sperm and eggs.

I walked out of Video Palace that day with two four-hour videos and a new addiction. I watched all night as Ginger St.Claire and Sunset Deveraux seduced and devoured men in all kinds absurd situations and terrible, contorted positions. Their muscles flexed and their legs thrashed. Their breasts dripped with sweat . Semen oozed out of their mouths.

I had an East German friend once. He was a foreign exchange student. He told me that in East Germany they still do not teach the children about the Holocaust. They put it away. Throw it in the trash. If you believe it never happened it can't hurt you. Yeah-yeah.

So that September my second year of graduate school began. I was given great responsibility in my second year. The Chairman of the Art School, Ted Heavytoe, hired me on as a graduate teaching assistant.

“ Stan, I've been watching you. You're an upstanding young man, and you know a thing or two about art. We have a freshman class that you could teach. We could hire a real teacher and pay him real money, but we would like you to do the same job with just as much responsibility, less experience and a lot less money. What do you say? ”

“ I'd be delighted. I'm just the fool you've been looking for Mr. Heavytoe. Yeah-yeah.”

So I pulled what Mutt and I would call a bullshit maneuver. I talked to all my professors about my mural and was able to use it for credit in three of my classes. Painting 1, Painting 2, and an Independent Study in Mural Painting. So that's what I did in September of 1999. By day I painted a mural on a wall for hardly any money, with my good friend Mutt who was broke after a college education. By night I spent that money on porn which I watched secretly in my parents living room while they slept. When I lay in bed I could not sleep. I dreamt about Sophia, trashy women, and human suffering. Once a week on Friday I was entrusted by the Institute to educate the tender young minds of incoming freshmen for as little money as possible. I spent that money on pornography, nudie bars and band equipment.

Working on the mural was an absolute joy. Mutt and I had no idea what we were doing. That is to say our process was unorthodox. We sketched the cartoon of the mural on the wall with graffiti spray paint. It looked like shit, but it was good enough. The underpainting looked like a kindergartner's crayola drawing, that only a mother could be proud of. The employees of the restaurant mocked us. Il Duche was clearly nervous.

“That's great fellas but I don't know about the shocking pink color of that building wall.”

Mutt just told him that people walked by and they said they liked it. That was enough for Il Duche, who's eye balls turned into dollar signs after a comment like that. More customers, more money, cha ching, cha ching, cha ching !!!

As with any work of art it looked rough in the beginning but we knew enough to

round it out in the end. It was fun to work on something like that with a friend, and occasionally other friends would stop by. Once in a while I would eat lunch with Ron at Martin's Diner. Emily would visit in the late afternoon while she roller bladed in the Park Avenue area.

Jimmy James the Poet visited me a few times as well. Whenever he did he spoke like a bullet to my heart.

"You never call me anymore. I got rejected at every grad school I applied to. My mother is dying of cancer."

"How was your trip to Philly?"

"Fine. We went to New York. I got mugged, lost a tooth and on the way back my car blew up with me in it."

He was a heavy dude. I called him but his answering machine was in a state of crisis. The only grad schools he applied to were Harvard, Yale, Princeton and Cornell. His mother was misdiagnosed, the tumor was benign. His car didn't really blow up, he was standing and in front of me without any burns or wounds. He was the opposite of Mutt. Positive and negative. A battery.

"How are you Mutt?"

"Still alive. Can't complain."

"How are you Jimmy James the Poet?"

"My car blew up. I'm still alive. I'm gonna complain."

Jimmy James the Poet had been my life long friend. He was the unluckiest person I knew and if anyone had a right to complain it was him. He had a deadbeat dad, a chronically ill mother and a runaway sister. He'd gone through two cars in a year. One was totaled in a head on collision that he walked away from with a mild



concussion. The other was the one that may have blown up. He had too much weight to lift, so he tossed it at me, the only friend that he had left, the only friend who would put up with his shit. The weight was getting heavy on me as well.

My friends Melanie and Pete rarely stopped by to say hello anymore. I had known Melanie from my undergrad years at the Institute. She was a vision but a bit of a nerd, but she'd always been nice to me. In the previous summer she began to go dancing at the Fallout Shelter with me and Frankie. Frankie brought his friend Pete. Melanie brought her friend Emily who was introduced as her "best friend", and eventually became her roommate. Now Pete and Melanie began dating. I always thought they were meant for one another although everyone of their friends disagreed.

"It'll last a couple of months", said Frankie.

It lasted much longer. They clicked so well that they eventually became glued to one another in a symbiotic relationship. We called this new person that they became the Pellanie.

The Pellanie rarely visited me at the mural site, and they never called me at my house, but I took no offense because they were scarce to everyone. They were in love. We hung out once in a while, but it seemed the more in love they were, the more difficult they found it to talk to anyone but their other half. Being that when we got together it was usually the Pellanie, myself and Emily the Roommate, I found it increasingly easier to have a conversation with Emily the Roommate. I thought nothing of it. I could not foresee the growing resentment on both sides of this.

As we got near completion of the mural things began to fall into place for myself and Mutt. He got another job at a 50's style diner called Ricky Rocket's. It was washing dishes and it was blue collar, but Mutt was a blue collar as it gets. E Mail



conversations got more frequent and more personal between me and Sophia. I felt better about this, because it seemed as if there was hope of salvaging the friendship we once had. Teaching was my new love. I decided to try and do the best job I could, because the kids I was teaching deserved the best education they could get. I quickly overcame my brief flirtation with pornography.

That is not to say I gave up my hobby of being a Good Time Charlie. At night after a long sweaty day of painting the mural with Mutt we would go to Club Vertigo. It was a black place with broken mirrors and cobwebs for atmosphere. Sometimes I did not even know the music, and sometimes they would play things that never should have been recorded. I'll tell you, you have not danced until you dance to Sid Vicious's adaptation of "My Way". Once we danced to the Ramones "I Wanna Be Sedated" and I ended up with my head spinning and my nose bloody.

I ran to the bathroom with my nose oozing onto my hand and overflowing onto the floor. It really did not hurt until I saw the blood. The pain always comes when you see the blood. I was over the bathroom sink washing the exterior and interior of my nose, when I saw a boy younger than me with a syringe in his arm. I used to cringe when my grandmother used to shoot her insulin into her veins in a similar fashion. I knew that he was in all likelihood not a diabetic and that it wasn't insulin in his syringe. Then the boy made a face like he was having an orgasm. The sound that came out of his mouth was like he was being suffocated.

Later that night I dove into bed with the notes of the Smiths, Ramones and Social Distortion still ringing in my ears, but without anything contaminating my veins. There was already enough impurities in my heart and soul that I was trying so desperately to cleanse. I had a dream that night. I was the boy in the Club Vertigo

bathroom with its grime on the walls and the rancid smells of accumulated piss and shit. Around my throat was a noose and the syringe was in my hand. I was about to shoot up, when the You Know I Know Guy walked in like a ghost from another era, too distant to be touched but close like an itch you can't reach in the middle of your back.

"Ha, I knew it!" he said.

"What? What?"

"You're no better than the rest of them even though you think you are."

I tried looking away in the hope that he'd be gone.

"Go ahead boy," he cackled like a witch. "Pull the trigger like you want to."

Pull the trigger. I inserted the syringe into my arm like a professional junkie. I pumped it into me, only noticing in the end that it was full of nothing but air. I awoke. I rthought that one of the most painful deaths there is, is when air is injected into the veins causing an air bubble in your blood stream, which quickly goes to your heart and causes it to burst into one million pieces. Many men have died from a broken heart. There's worse ways to go I reasoned.

### **3. Gemini Girl and Sagittarius Boy (a)**

Emily is a Gemini. I am a Sagittarius. I ride a white horse and try to fix everyone else's grief. She is like several different people at once, or at different times. I'm heavy metal. She's punk rock.

I met Emily through my college friend Melanie. That was prior to Pete and Melanie dating. That was prior to the whole Sophia web. Melanie said "this is Emily, my best friend." I should have known then they were doomed roommates.

It all began to fall apart when my good friend Pete began to date Melanie. They were soul mates anyone could see, but most resented their happiness. I like to think that I did not, but I can't say that after all this time has passed. As their courtship evolved to the kind of sick love that a parasite has for its host, the whole world began to crumble under their combined weight. Emily's world was the first casualty.

After a while Melanie and Pete began to be absent on Friday nights at the Fallout Shelter. As Frankie and I tore up the dance floor I saw Emily all alone, her hourglass silhouette like a black hole cut out in the facade of the bar. She had a gin and tonic in her delicate hand and a melancholy cloud in her almond eyes. I went to her without warning and pulled her out to the floor. James Brown was screaming for me to shake my moneymaker. I did and she laughed. Then she shook hers as well. Her gin and tonic shook and spilled all over her shirt.

"Its OK. Its old. If it doesn't come out, I'll just throw it out."

We laughed as we danced. It was a bright moment in autumn.

"My favorite season is autumn," Jimmy James once told me. "The brilliant colors of the leaves enchant me so. I write my best stuff in the fall."



It is my least favorite season. It seems to start out with such high hopes, but by the time November comes the trees have become bare like the ailing children of death camps, and the leaves have all become chameleons that blend in with the muddy earth. Then winter comes and everything dies.

I began seeing a lot of Emily. I would call Melanie and ask if she and Pete wanted to hang out. No, not tonight. OK, then let me talk to Emily. Sure we'll meet for coffee.

"Not to touch on a sore subject, but has Sophia come back yet?"

"Yes," I said. "It'll take a while but it'll be fine."

"Yeah," she agreed. "It'll all be OK."

Two pessimists trying their damndest to be optimists. I sipped my coffee. It was black not because I liked it that way, but because I was too lazy to brighten it with milk and sugar.

It was true that when she returned it was like old times. Sophia, the beautiful Sophia rarely spoke of Tim around me, and that maintained a comfortable situation for both of us. Ron was also a very calming influence, and somehow we all kept it together. We would go to coffee together, then we would eat our dinners in fancy restaurants. Then we watched fancy movies that most people didn't like or understand. They were yuppies, and I was a yuppie by association.

I started to bring Emily along. She was quickly becoming one of my best friends. I could tell I was earning a similar place in her heart. Her smile was tame but her eyes were wild.

Her relationship with her best friend Melanie was dissolving.

"I don't know her anymore. She never wants to hang out...."



“Stop,” I said. “I am good friends with both of you and I can’t get caught in the middle of where this is heading.”

The middleman wanted to avoid being caught in the middle. Ha!

Melanie was in grad school with me and on Wednesday mornings we had computer class with Professor Dave together. Afterward we’d go to the Union and have breakfast together. While I enjoyed cheese danishes, she enjoyed burdening me with her room mate problems.

“She hates me. She wants Pete. She’s jealous, I can tell. She never pays her rent on time. She has so many guys over, its disgusting. She acts like such a bitch to me. I hate her cat. She will hurt you. Do you know how much it hurts when you call and ask for her?”

My danish was good and sweet that day. It made my black coffee taste more bitter than usual.

Sometimes I grabbed lunch with Sophia who worked near the university. Sometimes Pete who also worked nearby would join us.

“Emily is such a slut. She has all these guys over, different ones every night. She doesn’t even talk to me anymore. She just gives me a dirty look. I hate her cat.”

I asked Sophia if her submarine sandwich was good. It was but she would save half of it for later that day. I wouldn’t because I hate it when the bread gets soggy.

The middleman was unsuccessfully trying to avoid the middle. I was being pushed there anyway, whether I wanted to or not. I continued to seek the company of my dear friend - Emily the Whore with the Evil Cat. Ironically for such an evil entity, she was remarkably respectful of my wish not to hear about her troubles with Melanie and Pete. Ironically for such an evil entity, she seemed to understand and respect my

motives and actions more than most friends I've had. I didn't like her cat either.

Mutt called me up to go to Club Vertigo that Thursday night.

"I don't know. I have to teach the kids tomorrow. We have a big critique."

"Come on Mr. Stanley. You know you want to dance."

It was true. I was in the mood and I was confident I could handle the critique on three hours of sleep. I agreed. Then I began dialing people one by one to get a big party going to Vertigo. I was the connection of the social circle. I invited people. Some accepted and some declined. And some I forgot and then they felt forgotten and got annoyed with me.

Melanie and Pete initially said they would go as did Emily. Then I called Ron and Sophia. Ron had the week off and accepted but Sophia had work tomorrow so she did not. When I went to Melanie and Emily's apartment Melanie had changed her mind as did Pete.

"I don't know."

"We don't know."

Subtitled: We did want to go but Emily is going so forget about it.

"OK. Well you know where it is if you decide to join us," I said. There is nothing more tiresome than indecision.

I drove with Emily and picked up Ron from his place. We would meet up with Mutt at the club. We walked into Vertigo and its black walls, broken mirrors and strategically placed cobwebs. Up the stairs we went to the haunting melody of Depeche Mode's "Enjoy The Silence". It got louder and louder as we neared the top of the stairs.

When we got there I surveyed the scene for Mutt. I spotted him at a very unusual place for him: the bar.

"What are you doing?" I asked him.

"Its open bar until midnight."

He gulped down his beer. Mutt had been straight-edge for five years before that. What that means is that he did not touch any chemical substances. Drugs, liquor, and beer were vices he refused to indulge in. Tonight it was different. Mutt had obviously changed his mind about his personal beliefs of the last five years, at least as far as alcohol was concerned. He gulped down the last of that beer and asked for another one.

Emily and Ron had never been to Club Vertigo before. I could tell they were bewildered by the surroundings. Fortunately the music was the saving grace of Vertigo. The Smiths, The Cure, Billy Idol, The Go-Go's, it was an eighties new wave heaven. Soon propelled by the music we were all out on the floor dancing. Luckily on a Thursday night there are few people indulging in the pleasures of the nightlife, so we were basically able to dominate the dance floor by ourselves.

Mutt was a rock and roll star that night. He was catapulted into the stratosphere by The Clash, shaken to epileptic fits by The Knack. He would kneel to the floor during the refrains and raise his fists to the sky crying out "Oy!" rhythmically and defiantly as he was completely overwhelmed by the music. He was the court jester and the rebel. He was the ridiculous leading man. He climbed on the speakers and leapt of like Nighthcrawler onto the beer soaked dance floor. Sometimes he slipped and fell on his ass. Sometimes he was able to stay on his feet. Then he yelled "Oy!" triumphantly.

We were all moved by Mutt's reckless abandon. He had a disease and his



fever was contagious. We were whirling dervishes. We were epileptics possessed by demons. We shook and trembled together, and the adrenalin brought joy to our hearts. We were the only pirates on this ship and we were having a delightful mutiny. Rabid dogs salivating and frothing.

Emily held out her hand to me to dance with her. The power that was in me only a split second ago slipped out of my knees. I halfheartedly cooperated with her but then abandoned her in the middle of the dance. It wasn't her fault, but as well as I could dance by myself, I was lousy when dancing with a partner. I got really nervous and shy, and for that reason I went to the corner and hung out with the wall for the rest of the song. She seemed only mildly annoyed.

Its funny how life mocks you sometimes. The next song that came on was Billy Idol's "Dancing With Myself". I wondered if the DJ knew more than he should.

When I was a young boy and lived overseas my father would take me to the cafeneio with him. The older men would sit and argue about subjects as diverse as American imperialism and the declining prices of the tomato crop in Greece. I was unafraid to speak my mind in those days and I often participated in their conversations, making remarks and observations that no six year old had the right to make. This astounded the villagers who would call me "Yero" . Subtitled: Old Man. Tonight I was not an old man. I was not wise beyond my years. I was naive. I was a dreamer. I was irrational. I was going to bed at three thirty in the morning and I had to teach my kids at eight in the morning. I felt empowered with the freedom and irresponsibility of youth. I saw the headlights of a car passing on the opposite lane. I thought of how foolish my thoughts had been.



#### 4. *Bizarre Love Triangle* (a)

It was a good time for Stan the Melancholy. A rebirth, a renaissance. Stan the Melodramatic imagined he was not unlike the Phoenix which rose from the ashes to conquer the world (or something like that). Anyway, this Phoenix was set to conquer the world all by himself. Sometimes during this year I felt so low that I wished I would die. Now I felt so high I wished I could live, and I was very close to fulfilling that potential.

I began to visit Sophia's apartment regularly. We would sit and watch the fashionable yuppie programming of the day: Friends, and anything on the WB network. I was amazed to discover that this beautiful sophisticated woman who was the biggest bookworm and movie-snob I had met, was also a hopeless TV addict in the worst way. Ally McBeal was a staple on Mondays, NYPD Blue on Tuesdays, the teen shows of FOX on Wednesdays and Thursdays was "Must See TV" on NBC. Fridays we would catch a movie or go out dancing.

Ron was always present at Sophia's as well. We were three of a kind, best friends, the Three Amigos. Honesty was our weapon of choice in this three way relationship and with it we all turned out winners. Ron could not always be there because his job called him on week long road trips once in while. He would travel to fancier cities than ours like Detroit and Pittsburgh, but none as fancy as New York City or Chicago. Those are *megalopolises*. The fanciest cities are called *megalopolises*. They sprawl out like viruses and infect entire coasts, taking over other smaller towns the way cancers conquer individual cells. Fancy city = Megalopolis = Virus = Cancer.

Ron did not visit cancers. He taught computer classes to fully grown adults who

were not computer literate and as a result had no hope of getting a decent job, and as a result were temporarily wastes of society. Ron turned these wastes into employable commodities for billion dollar corporations. It was not unlike recycling a piece of useless trash into something that had a place in someone's kitchen.

Ron was not there when Sophia and I rented **Dancer Texas: Population 81** from the Blockbuster on University Avenue. The premise was unique. It was about what has to be one of the smallest towns in the US (surely one of the least fancy places I'd ever seen) where the graduating class of the local high school is four boys and three girls. One of the guys was dating two of the girls. This caused resentment among his friends as it should have. There were many humorous subplot and stories and details like this in the film but there was one which particularly caught my attention. Ethan Embry played the most awkward character in the film, the kind of Don Quixote jive turkey I could sympathize with easily.

"Is he retarded?" Sophia asked laughing.

No. He was fucked up in his head because his dad was a pathetic alcoholic who picked up trashy women at the bus stop, fucked them and threw them out the morning after. Then he would drink until he passed out for the rest of the week. One of the women he picked up stuck around. She was a sweet woman on the wrong side of life. She cooked breakfast for Ethan Embry while his dad was passed out. Ethan Embry asked her why she was sticking around. She replied that she cared for his father and wanted to help him. As they talked she told Ethan Embry that he was sweet and that in no time some sweet young girl would pick him right up and fall in love with him. Ethan knew this was not true. He told her that women would rather waste their time fixing men that are broken and have no hope of ever being repaired - just as she

was doing with his father.

“See,” I said. “Women should not waste their time like that. Repairing somebody should not be a prerequisite of a relationship.”

It was a particularly relevant thing to say since I knew in my heart that this was Sophia’s situation with Tim. There was no response from her. I looked over and she was asleep.

My suspicions about Sophia’s failing relationship with Tim were to be confirmed the weekend after that. We went to Syracuse to visit Ron on his birthday. He was on a business trip that Saturday but we did not want him to be alone on his birthday. We were in a city that was not very fancy but we ate our food at a fancy restaurant and then charged it to the company Ron worked for, as a business expense. It was Thai food, so foreign that it was definitely the epitome of culture, but its taste was not very good. I’ve learned that this is unimportant when it comes to things like food, music, and clothing. Bad tasting food is good as long as it is from some rare and exotic land. Bad music is good as long as the scene is cool. Clothing can be uncomfortable as long as it is trendy.

After that we visited Sophia’s sister in her college dorm at Syracuse University. She was a blond bombshell with plastic skin and Barbi Doll blue eyes. This was acceptable because despite her outward mannequin like appearance she had a mouth that cursed like a sailor. I don’t believe I’ve heard the word “fuck” uttered more times, except maybe in the stand-up comedy of Andrew “Dice” Clay. Nothing relevant was really said that night except when Sophia’s sister asked her how things were going with Tim.

“I... lets not talk about that right now,” she replied stuttering nervously.

Sophia saw me look over with a puzzled look on my face.

“He’s grumpy,” she added, trying to dismiss my gaze.

I did not ask her about it on the drive back.



## **5. Frankie Goes Ballistic (a)**

We got back from Syracuse late Saturday night. It was actually 3 in the morning which I suppose is closer to Sunday morning. I dropped Sophia off at her apartment. We hugged as we always did at the end of our evenings together. As I hugged her I stared into her crystal blue eyes, strong, beautiful and moist with tears ready to burst. I hesitated for a moment and imagined kissing her. Then, like the passing headlights, the moment was gone. I let go of her and waved goodbye as I returned to my car.

On Sunday we had practice scheduled for 2 in the afternoon. Frankie called just as I began to haul my equipment to my car.

“You can’t make it?”

“No. No I can. I just need to sleep for a couple more hours. I had to work last night.”

“Saturday night?”

“Yeah... yeah. It was a big project. Would - um - five, lets say, be OK?”

“Sure”, I told him. Then I quickly called Drummer Joe to tell him we were playing later.

Drummer Joe arrived to the Marvis practice room shortly after I did. I plugged in and we began to mess around until Frankie would show up. We did a couple of covers. A slow hypnotic version of “Whole Lotta Love”. He was John Bonham and I was Jimmy Page. A punk version of “My Generation”. He was Keith Moon and I was Pete Townsend. A straight version of “School”. He was David Groel and I was Kurdt

Cobain. He was the dead rock star two out of three times. This and a lot of joking around in between killed about forty minutes.

In through the door walked Frankie. He was a smiling cartoon-head. A bear with a Hawaiian shirt on. His pants were burlap potato sacks and his shoes had hand painted checker designs on them. He was a style monger and a freaky deakie. A modern day Rick Nielsen plus a few pounds. He smiled even though he was carrying more weight than he should have been.

He plugged in and we began to play. "Voice of Reason". Through the first two choruses we were fine. Then it began to sound like a train wreck. We stopped. Frankie forgot about the bridge. Lets do it again. A couple of sour notes that time but nothing we couldn't get past. "Give Me the Bitter Pill". Frankie had forgotten the main riff. I taught him it again for the tenth time. We tried a couple other ones. I had a new song "Jean" which was a punk rock classic about my seventh grade crush. Frankie couldn't understand the transitions and he was clearly getting fatigued by this point.

"That's OK, Frankie," I said. "I'll make a recording of my parts and then you can figure out your own parts."

"Cool. Yeah... That sounds good. I've got a new one too."

Frankie's song began as a pretty acoustic number. The strings rang out sweetly into the open space of our practice room, a beautiful melancholy with a shade of hope. In the chorus the guitars blared with crunchy, dirty distortion. The song got angry quickly. Frankie was taking a lot from life. His employer was paying him extremely well but was abusing his dedication. Frankie was willing to lift and carry the weight until he realized how heavy it really was. He was ready to explode and trash it all. To throw all the junk back at those who so carelessly piled it on his back. I heard it in the motion of

his song. The violent chorus made me understand that all was not well in Frankie's world. It was a raw take but we definitely had a new song.

I went back home and wrote words to it. The refrain was talking to Frankie.

Hold on, my wicked child  
your day will come.

I felt for my friend and tried to keep him company as much as I could. We would drink coffee together and talk about anything, but through it all Frankie stubbornly refused to give up his jovial court jester persona. But I could tell it was eating him from the inside out. He still had a joke for every comment that was made, but they kept getting more and more stale, or he would say them with such lack of life that no one would notice. He began not to be able to go to coffee because of extra hours at work. He then began to not show up at his favorite venue The Fallout Shelter. This was a very alarming sign to me, because that was Frankie's haven from stress - from life's bullshit. During this time he began to miss the Marvis practices consistently.

I talked about it with Drummer Joe. We had both been in many bands and we could never go very far with them, because not everyone was pulling their weight. Now Frankie was holding us back, but we knew it was not his fault. We felt bad for his work situation. He was consistently working sixty to seventy hours a week. He was being swallowed by the corporate world he had worked so hard to join. We knew we were witnessing a tragedy unfold and we wanted to help but could not. Frankie was stranded on a ship that was sinking. We weren't close enough to save him but we were close enough to watch his agony and frustration as he continued to go down.

Drummer Joe and I decided that we could not kick him out.

"I don't care," I said. "I don't care if this band goes anywhere or not. Frankie was there from the start and I wouldn't feel right to get rid of him because he's going through a rough time right now."

I always talked about the band around my friends, because even though we were dormant, I felt like we could erupt and impress the world at any minute. I don't think they felt that way. Sophia's face scrunched up like a frightened animal in headlights, telling me that I was pathetic even though she still respected me. Ron joked about it, although he had no faith that we would ever get this vehicle on the road. I refused to accept that we could not. We had to.

"Someday", I told Mutt. "Someday I will sing my songs and I'll get it all out, and then everyone will know."

"I know you will."

Sometimes he was the the only friend that had any faith in me. He was a beacon in the darkness.

"How ya doing?"

"Can't complain. I'm still alive."

It was a dreary November. No snow yet but enough rain to turn the concrete into mud. They said it was La Nina. Under the charcoal grey clouds, events were happening, situations were arising and tragedies were beginning to unfold. Three boys were trying against all hope to express years of emotions through a few desperate songs. Secrets were being kept behind the veil of honesty, people were



scheming and I entered the roller coaster ride with clothing made of dreams. I was popular. I had many friends that loved me I felt more than any I'd had before. I preferred them to anything in the world. I would have died for them. They seemed healthy, but they all had diseases that were being left untreated. Some were contagious. Some like Frankie were already beginning to show the effects of their illness, despite their futile attempts to will themselves back to health before they reached their crisis.

On a dreary Sunday evening, while the Green Bay Packers were losing an incredible playoff game to the San Francisco 49ers my telephone rang. It was Frankie. Our conversation was painful for the both of us. He did not want to quit the band and I did not want to kick him out. There wasn't much of a band left without him. It was his vision and mine that had originally formed this sputtering engine, and without him it was difficult to imagine it going on. He didn't want to hold us back. He was unable to practice anymore because of a heavy work load. I appreciated his honesty but loathed it too. Both our hearts were breaking. Frankie said he had no choice. I loved him like a brother, and all I could do was agree with him as he sank helplessly.

"I'm drowning. I'm sinking into a swamp of *suicidal depression*."

"You're drowning. You're sinking. OK. I appreciate your honesty."

That night Frankie went to the practice space and took his guitar and amplifier home. He had quit Marvis even though he did not want to and nobody wanted to. He couldn't hold us back anymore. Yeah - yeah. Still alive.

Before I called Drummer Joe I had to reassess my priorities. I wasn't so sure anymore that it was worth it. How would we go on without Frankie? Could we really

replace him? It was getting to the point where the negatives outweighed the positives severely. It would have been an easy decision had I loved music any less than I did.

I reached into my pocket and pulled out a quarter. I decided to let fate make a decision which was too important for me to make. Heads we keep it going, tales we're through.

Flip. Tales. OK. Two out of three. Flip again. Heads. OK, there's still hope. Last flip. Tales. I had to call Drummer Joe and tell him that I couldn't do this anymore, because Frankie quit and it was too hard, I was putting in too much effort and getting little results, bla bla bla. Instead I called him and told him about Frankie and then I said we had to keep going. I knew somehow we would make it. We're gonna do it. Schlameel, schlamazzle...

Frankie's tragedy had just begun. I wasn't sure what was coming next, but I knew it wasn't good. I saw it in the charcoal grey, waterlogged balloons in the sky. I could hear it in the violence of the refrain.

## **6. Gemini Girl Sagittarius Boy (b)**

I hadn't spoken to Emily for a while. She had called and left several messages on my machine but I never called her back. I had so many friends. Frankie, Drummer Joe, Ron, Sophia, Pete, Melanie and Jimmy James the Poet who spoke like a bullet to the heart. I was popular. Too popular to call her back.

I saw her Friday at The Fallout Shelter. She was an elegant sculpture that was being ignored, a goddess that nobody worshiped.

"Hello," I said. (Sorry I didn't call you but I'm too popular).

As we danced that night, it became obvious that Emily had acquired an admirer. He was a man of less than desirable height, with a trapezoid face and a square jaw. His hair was yellow like lemonade and his smile was as sour as lemons. He wore thick black frames around his spectacles, not unlike Jam Master Jay from RUN - DMC. Emily decided to let herself be convinced by his masks.

Brendon Calhoun seemed to be a nice enough guy when I met him the following week at The Fallout Shelter. We spoke about nothing quite well and that is always a positive trait. Emily kept smiling her nervous smile. As we spoke the fire alarm began to ring out rhythmically. I thought of the air raid sirens of London as the Blitzkrieg descended about the city, the masses huddled in cellars listening to their homes and memories being destroyed by the Nazi regime. Then I thought of the air raid sirens at Hiroshima and how pointless such a belated warning must have been.

Fortunately in this case some drunken jackass decided that it would be a funny thing to do. Emily, Brendon and I gathered outside with the rest of the masses - gathered in drunken bewilderment outside of The Fallout Shelter. As the Fire Marshall

and his big shiny red trucks arrived, a girl cursed. I looked to my left and a girl in a sports bra had another girl in a head lock and was giving her a noogie. No, she was actually punching her in the face. Larger men tried to separate them and some had their flesh scraped off their faces. Finally the bouncers and the fire marshall's people were able to put an end to the fracas. Regardless, there was too much of a negative vibe and The Fallout Shelter was shut down indefinitely.

We drove to The Pit to complete our drunken adventure properly. I drove Emily who had drank quite a bit, and Brendon who was a slobbering drunk at this point drove himself. He didn't swerve or hit any pedestrians, but he managed to make me nervous. Even Emily in her own drunken universe was able to recognize the wrong of Brendon's actions.

At The Pit we drank many elixirs and potions. Inebriation took hold of the orbiting planets which were our heads. We were cartoon characters with bubbles floating about our scalps. Led Zeppelin was playing on the jukebox. I pretended I was John Bonham in the drunken haze that was the end of his life. I thought that maybe I should vomit to make the fantasy complete but I wasn't that drunk.

I noticed that Brendon had stepped aside a second.

"He just asked me to go home with him," Emily said.

"Um, well it sounds like you have a decision to make."

"I'm not sure-"

Before she could finish Brendon reappeared in his previous spot.

"Lets go," I said.

"Well, you don't know everything that's going on," Brendon told me. "I asked her to come to my place after The Pit."



I tried to teleport to my bed so I would not have to respond.

"I am aware of that, and frankly I don't think it is my decision to make."

Not as good as teleporting but a close second.

"Well you're not gonna take advantage of me are you?"

She was pretty drunk and blunt. A blunt-drunk-stupor-girl.

"Now that's a legitimate question," Brendon chuckled. He was a *chucklehead*.

"You don't know for sure. I would tell you that I wouldn't but you have to trust me with that."

We went back and forth like that for a while, and somehow it was decided that I would come hang out for a while also. The more I thought about this the less I liked it. We followed Brendon to his apartment, Emily beautiful and drunk in my passenger seat. I didn't want to go into his place, and I couldn't tell if she wanted me to go or not.

"You can come in. I don't care either way."

I couldn't read the subtitles to this confusing statement. I decided to go my own way.

"But you better call me tomorrow. I need to make sure you're safe. Melanie would kill me if I let her life long best friend get in trouble."

People are hypocrites. I am not an exception to this rule. Earlier that night I was appalled that Brendon would drive his vehicle in a drunken state. Now at three in the morning I was doing that which had repulsed me earlier. I didn't swerve or hit any pedestrians. As I passed the University, Elvis Costello started to sing through my radio speakers. It was his song *What's So Funny About Peace Love and Understanding?* It caused me to hit the gas and race my automobile at a rising velocity, until I was going

somewhere above seventy.

The music was so loud that I didn't notice the sirens wailing from behind me. The light hit my mirror and I looked back. It was a copper - a dirty pig. I thought about getting into one of those dramatic police chases like you see on CHIPS but then I remembered that the bad guys always get caught so I wised up and pulled over. I'm not sure what happened that night but I know I kept thinking of how to fool a breathalyzer. I couldn't come up with any realistic way of doing that so I began to feel desperate, and wanted to ask the cop not to give me one.

"Do you know why I stopped you?"

"I was going way too fast."

"Have you been drinking?"

Honesty is not always the best policy.

"No."

"Where are you coming from?"

The Fallout Shelter and then I went to the Pit....

"The University."

He took my license and registration back to his car.

Please don't give me a breathalyzer... Please don't give me a breathalyzer...

Please don't give me a breathalyzer... Please don't give me a breathalyzer... Please don't give me a breathalyzer... Please don't give me a breathalyzer...

The license flew into my car through my window. I caught it in mid-air.

"Do me a favor and slow down, please," he said and then was gone.

## 7. Bizarre Love Triangle (b)

NYPD Blue was one of Sophia's favorite programs. The self confessed *media junkie* was infatuated with the golden skinned Jimmy Smits who's character was up for massive changes this season. Much as we all were.

Ron returned from Syracuse that week. He wouldn't go away again for a couple of weeks. So the three of us consistently got together and watched Sophia's favorite TV shows on her television. She was obsessed but we weren't, and I wasn't quite sure why we went every day despite us not being such media junkies. Perhaps we were becoming media junkies without realizing it. Somehow that seemed doubtful.

"We got this new guy in the band," I told them. "His name is Jeffrey and he is the best guitar player I've known."

It was true that Frankie was replaced one day after he quit, by a tall lanky manboy named Jeffrey. He was schizophrenic nervous like me, and he kept his face hidden behind hair like a mop, and a beard like sandpaper. He wore a shirt from the hospital with name tag of "Doc" and for that reason he is Doctor Jeffrey. His eyes were crystal blue but no one could ever see them behind the curtains of golden brown hair that swallowed his face. He was also a painting student, but unlike me he actually worked on his work at least five hours a day. Since I had completed the mural I had become lazy and frightened.

Doctor Jeffrey did more than fit into the band. He was able to take the songs that Drummer Joe and I had created and put schizophrenic new textures on them, which enhanced and completed them. He was more gifted than me and Frankie combined, and with him things would move forward in hyper-speed.

I told Sophia and Ron all this. They seemed glad but unconvinced. I told them also that there was a possibility of playing a show with my band and a few others. It would be in a derelict building in the least fancy part of downtown, which was in actuality an urban ghetto (though not as bad as my childhood ghetto with the drive-by shootings and crack). I assured them this would be the friendliest and most civilized of ghettos.

On Friday, Marvis had band practice. It was only our third time with Jeffrey but the songs sounded divine. We were able to master three new songs per practice and at this rate we'd arrived at a miniature set of nine songs. Midway through practice I told the boys about the possibility of a show. Doctor Jeffrey was hesitant and Drummer Joe a little less so, but they were still a bit nervous about the situation. I decided to take the bull by the horns. I told them that I had accepted and that it was in a week. They laughed nervously. I knew that we'd be fine.

Immediately after band practice we all headed down to The Fallout Shelter. There we introduced Jeffrey to the limited palette of characters that was there that night. Initially I sat with Ron and Sophia. Pete and Melanie were there too, which was unusual and unexpected. Frankie was noticeably absent. I had been very nervous about how he would react to his replacement. Now I was more worried that he wasn't there to de-stress as he always was. Emily was nowhere to be found either.

Ron and Sophia immediately took a liking to Jeffrey, who was a social person that matched their wits. I felt good about this, because I really liked Jeffrey and wanted him to be accepted by my friends.



As we talked Ron and Sophia kept teasing and flirting with one another as they always had. This confused Doctor Jeffrey who was not familiar with the situation.

"Is he your boyfriend?" he asked Sophia.

"**No!**" she replied immediately. "*We're good friends.* My boyfriend lives out of town right now."

Her face was now contemplative and suspicious looking. It wasn't a look she wore well. I wondered what had inspired such a change.

Before I had much time to consider it, I was introducing Jeffrey to Emily who had just arrived.

"Let's go get drinks," she said.

"I won't be drinking for a long time," I said. "Are you here by yourself?"

"No. I came with Brendon."

Brendon was across the room socializing with his friends. I waved but he wasn't looking our way.

"I'll say 'hi' to him later," I said and then ordered a Coca-Cola.

Doctor Jeffrey had gone to the dance floor. Emily and I were taking a break when we looked across the room at Ron and Sophia.

"What's up with them?" she asked.

I knew what she was getting at and it stung.

"Nothing!" I snapped. "I don't know. She's moody tonight."

Then I returned the favor.

"What's up with Brendon?"

We looked across the room and there he was: a pathetic hipster socializing with

what he thought was his fan club of friends, and not paying any attention to the girl he brought with him.

“Has he introduced you to his friends?” I asked.

“No. I don’t know what’s going on.”

A feeling of doubt overcame us both.

“He’s really nice,” she added.

Pete and Melanie had nothing to say that night. I didn’t wonder what was up with them. Their actions or lack thereof had become the norm.

## **8. *Frankie Goes Ballistic (b)***

“Dude. I got issue.”

It was Frankie's way of saying that something was off kilter. His alarm was going off. London was being Blitzkrieged, Dresden was being firebombed and Hiroshima was being leveled by the first atom bomb. Frankie had issue. Mad issue.

I picked him up at his apartment in the fanciest part of town. He was a rich man. Young and rich. Living the good life. I hadn't seen him for three weeks. He had been working ninety hours a week at this point.

“Last week I slept in my office for two hours on Thursday. And did I get a thank you? Did I get some birthday cake?”

His head hung low and his heart hung lower. I had never seen the distress that polluted Frankie's face reach this level. I could hear his air raid sirens going off and I was the Allied Force coming to desperately try to save him from his enemy.

“One of these days I'm gonna go off, dude. I'm gonna step up and deliver a beat down to the Man!”

Over coffee we discussed the situation further. Frankie had worked harder for his Master's Degree than anyone I knew. He spent many long hours, working until the crack of dawn sometimes, just so he could do the best job he could do. He accepted a salaried position in the computer industry and he went at it with just as much fervor and tenacity as he had his collegiate studies. Frankie went at everything with gusto. He was *carpe diem*. He was seize the day.

His reward should have been greater than what it had turned out to be. His employers abused his position as a salaried employee, to suck free overtime hours out

of him. Now Frankie was starting to crumble under too much weight.

"You've gotta stand up to them Frankie. You can't let those assholes push you around like that."

"Yeah, it ain't right. But its not that easy."

No matter what credentials you might have, nobody respects you when you're young. Its just the way it is. Some things will never change. When I was young, I would always try to challenge my parents. They would crush my rebellion quite easily.

"Why?"

"Because!"

Now Frankie was beginning his mutiny. He knew he didn't have a fighting chance.

"So how's the band going?" he asked.

"Good," I said hesitantly. "We got this new guy. Jeffrey. Real good. He's a painter like me."

Frankie flinched but recovered quickly.

"Rad!" he said overcompensating so I wouldn't think it hurt him as bad as it did.

"Yeah, I know that guy's work. He's a good painter too. Great color."

"We're playing a show in a couple of weeks. I'll let you know the exact details when I know."

"Rad!!!"

It was as painless as it could have been, I suppose. I still felt bad for my friend - my brother - who was on the ropes in the twelfth round. I could do nothing but give him advice about a situation I had never been in, and I did it gladly. I knew that probably none of what I was saying could directly make a difference in Frankie's situation but I



knew that it was important to talk anyway.

"Snow's supposed to start one of these days," I said. Frankie was a snow boarding maniac and I knew this would get him excited.

"Yeah, that's what they're saying," he agreed. "But La Nina is fucking shit up."

"La Nina," I frowned. "That's bullshit, dude. They don't know what they're saying."

"Yeah! Its all hype."

We then fantasized of winters continuously being named after Hispanic items. There was El Cuervo summer, and La Mancha spring. We decided on Don Quixote winter as our best fictional scenario. It featured ninety degree weather with snow accumulation on the slopes, so that people could snowboard in their Hawaiian shirts and Jams. We laughed like children do when they had no worries.

I will get him some birthday cake I thought. Or some ice cream, or donuts. He felt unappreciated and he certainly wasn't.

## ***9. You Know I Know About the END OF THE WORLD SYNDROME***

"You know I know."

What?

"You know I know."

Shit! Its you again. I open my eyes and there you are Old Vile Man standing like an apparition in the mist of the street light, a cancerous creation of my mind, which has now begun to infect my other tissues and sinews. You know I am disturbed for you can read all my thoughts. You smile with teeth like rotting crustaceans.

"You know I know."

God! Jesus! Say something else for once, worm! Fine... fine. You've driven me to madness even in my dreams. I'll ask the question. What? What do you know? Does that make you happy? Huh? Tell me what the fuck it is that you know.

"You know."

About what Old Vile Man? I know a lot of things.

"For crying out loud, you are dense."

I remember seeing a famous photo from the 1950's with a boy wearing a Dunce cap. He had written a phrase on the blackboard of his classroom one hundred times.

"You are diseased Stanley."

No I am healthy. For the first time in my life I am healthy, and good, and nice and happy. I threw away all of my pornography yesterday, and I haven't broken a guitar string in almost a month.

"No, you are infected, still. Your virus cannot be defeated except if you acknowledge that you have it."

Oh God! Wait, I don't believe you. I've worked so hard to reestablish my friendship with Sophia, to get my band where it is, to help my friend Frankie and my friend Emily. Pete and Melanie are OK too.

"Pete and Melanie are devils. I created them to torment you. Hah!"

Why won't you just go away?

"They will all destroy you, Stanley. Unless you destroy them first."

No. They are my friends. My brothers and sisters. I love them more than life itself.

"I hope that's not true. You don't actually believe that, do you?"

Why do you ask questions that I can't answer?

"You refuse to answer them because you want to deny the truth. If you deny the truth the truth will destroy you. If you embrace the truth, you can destroy your reality. That is what you want isn't it?"

I turn away to walk toward the coffee house. There you are sipping shots of espresso and chain smoking tobacco. A cigar stained chuckle rises from your innards.

"The disease that you have is called: THE END OF THE WORLD SYNDROME. It is a fatal disease. It is a disease of the great ones."

I know. I know you know, and I know that too. Circles and gibberish. The maze of dreams/ the labyrinth of night mares.

"Look at history. The history of man. Do you not agree that man is the greatest animal I created?"

Yes. Man is superior in knowledge, and intelligence. Man uses his wits to survive.

"Man uses his wits to destroy himself. That is his greatest talent. You possess

this talent more than the average man.”

No. I am not more gifted than others. I am humble and modest. I have worked hard to obliterate my ego.

“Your ego has worked hard to obliterate you. And it will. You are the Great One, Stanley. Born with the wits to destroy not only yourself, but your universe as a whole.”

I shift my compass north toward Main Street. You are there blowing smoke into my face. I smoked a cigar once when I was drunk. It tasted like beef jerky. It smells like death.

“Think about it, Stanley. Look at the history of your accursed race. The greatest men through time have used their wits to destroy their world.”

No. I refuse to believe this. Its unacceptable.

“Alexander the Great expanded the power of Macedonia all the way to India. He was a conqueror, a hero, a killer. He burned villages and then placed schools in them. The schools taught the children the Macedonian culture. The schools destroyed the children’s knowledge of their past, their history. The schools destroyed the children’s ability to think. It taught them that the man that had killed their fathers and raped their mothers, was the greatest man on the Earth. And he was. Until he believed in his own myth and destroyed himself by the banks of the Brahmaputra.”

To believe in one’s own myth is the way to destroy one self?

“Yes. And you are guilty of this, Stanley. Do not believe you are better than you think. You are a saint but you are still mortal.”

Perhaps Alexander the Great is a good example but there are so many others which contradict what you are saying...

“Like, Albert Einstein? He was the greatest mind of this- the final century. His



theories and laws and mental chess games led to progress for humanity. It also led to destruction and death in record numbers. Without Einstein there could not have been a Hiroshima. There could not have been a Chernobyl. The greatest mind of this century has bloody palm prints too. All the Great Ones do. All angels fall. All angels rise.

Some are heroes by reputation, some are villains and some are both. Napoleon was both. They said he went power mad, and he was a killer, but he freed France from oppression a decade earlier. He felt entitled to more and he was. What greater freedom is there than to take away another's? He spent the last days of his life in exile, watching the others that defeated him attempting to run the same course as he had.

Douglas MacArthur. He was a hero of the second world war. He destroyed the German war machine, bringing it to its knees. He then perceived a greater threat in the economic system of the Russians. He wanted to rearm the Nazis and send them to kill the Communists. Harry Truman did not realize the greatness of this ruthless plan. A few months later Truman ordered the first atom bomb dropped on Hiroshima, killing millions instantly, making their blood boil and explode out of their veins. Shortly after the first one he dropped another bomb on Nagasaki, knowing full well the devastating effect of the weapon. Give 'em hell Harry.

Doug MacArthur was the leader of the UN forces in the Korean War. This was another war fought over the sovereignty of economic systems. Communism is better. No, capitalism is better. The communists were too many. The Red Chinese would come across the border, wave after wave being destroyed by capitalist bullets, yet the river continued endless, infinite. MacArthur seeing the hopelessness of the situation proposed that fifty atomic bombs be made and dropped along the coast of China and

Korea in order to keep Asia in a radio-active belt. Truman fired him shortly thereafter.”

OK. So what? MacArthur was great and so was Truman, you have a point. But what about the true villains of history? They were not great! They were the embodiment of evil!!!

“Hah! You are naive aren’t you my boy? These villains that you distinguish so clearly in your black and white dreamer’s goggles - these were the greatest of all time.

Mao Tse Tung was a murderer and a liberator. Just like all the others I have mentioned. He rescued his people from years of oppression. The Chinese had been enslaved by the Europeans for centuries. They were divided amongst the European powers, and their women were raped. Then the British were able to destroy their minds with opium. The Japanese conquered them during the second world war. Mao resurrected their will. He taught them to be proud. He united them for the first time in centuries. He once was asked how he felt about the possibility of a nuclear war with the United States. He said it did not bother him, for the population of China was so great, that in the end he would have more men standing than the USA.”

Stalin was a killer. He was an oppressor of his people. A true villain.

“Joseph Stalin. A proud man was he. His palms were also stained with blood and freedom. He murdered all the former members of the Communist Party when he took over as the Soviet leader. He led with an iron fist, behind the Iron Curtain. When the Germans attempted to conquer Russia, Stalin’s people had iron hydes. They took the Nazi bullets gladly, to save their country from the enemy. Stalin was cruel to his people for he knew it was the only way to unite them against a greater enemy. Unite them he did. And he saved them, only to destroy them himself.”

Fidel Castro? Pol Pot?

“Fidel is the last living legend on your Earth. He too rescued his country from oppression. He used the West to do this, and then he used Moscow to protect him from Washington.

Pol Pot murdered more people than anyone in this century. His Khmer Rouge stored the skulls in chests, like pirates. He used the Communist mask to do this as many greats of this century did. He destroyed his people under the pretense of liberating them. He liberated them with a promise to destroy them. He too was infected with THE END OF THE WORLD SYNDROME.

Now. Ask about him. You’ve been avoiding asking about him, because you are frightened of my argument. Ask about the greatest villain that I ever produced. Ask and I will tell you the truth.”

I know who you're referring to and I am repulsed. I wish to vomit, yet I am in a dream, so I cannot. And you’ve infected my dream - invaded my game so I must play by your rules. OK. What about Adolf Hitler? One cannot defend his atrocities. He was a villain of the worst kind. *A monster. A devil. A beelzebub.*

“Adolf was infected with many viruses. He was born to be a leader, it is true. But this was not apparent in his youth. He learned to hate his mother and yearned to kill his father at times. He was a psychotic and a devil as you say. Yet, humanity had to inspire these virtues before they could truly manifest themselves.

Adolf fought in the first world war. He had never felt a purpose in life until he fought along with his fellow Germans, murdering one by one the enemies of Germany who so desperately sought to take his precious freedom away. Wounded in the war, he awoke to discover that this freedom had indeed been taken away and Germany had been left in a state of ruin and catastrophe.

His rage was unlocked, and he was able to express the frustrations of the German people in the clearest possible ways. He was a pirate inspiring a mutiny against the naval fleet, a devil rebelling against the heavens. And the down trodden sought their liberation through him. They supported his rage for they too had the same rage. He was the only one with the courage and method to express it. He murdered. He conquered. He liberated and destroyed. He was just like Alexander. Or Napoleon. Hernando Cortez slaughtered the natives and was named a glorious conquistador.”

I cannot take this anymore. What you say cannot be true. I’ve been taught otherwise by wiser men than you.

“Those who think they are wise, are the biggest fools of them all. Do not let their over inflated egos dominate you, Stan. Or you too will explode like a balloon that has been pricked.”

I looked at my heroes at that moment. I saw that they too were villains. And heroes. And villains.

Kurt Cobain had inspired me to buy my first guitar and to play in a rock band and to express myself in the most honest way. He was my liberator. He also caused me to dive into frustrations and illnesses that I had never acknowledged. These consumed me all the more as I confronted them, and had left me delusional and stinky. Cobain shot himself in the head, because the demons he had been so honest about destroyed him. Honesty did not empower him. It killed him.

What is the moral of the story then? Tell me vile creature. I see you smiling at me, sometimes with the sarcasm of a shark and sometimes with the kindness of a grandfather, and it drives spikes through my soul. You have told me so much, yet I understand so little.



"You have edified your friends in your life, Stanley. They are your gods, your heroes. Heroes are villains and gods are devils. They liberate and corrupt. They save and destroy."

You talk in circles!!! Stop talking in circles!!! If you have not come to lead me to the truth then what have you come to do?

"Only you can do that, Stanley. Not I, and certainly not your friends that you so depend on for living. Ask yourself this: In the light of this revelation, what worth is there to the world you are living in? You are an intelligent man, and man is intelligent by nature. Man has progressed further than any creature on this planet. Yet, is his progress not his downfall? His rise, his eventual collapse. Up is down. Down is up. Wouldn't it be fitting that he destroy himself?"

If man is as intelligent as you say, then it is the only logical conclusion.

"Man should and will destroy himself."

Man should and will destroy himself. Yes. That is the truth. But I still love my friends. I live for them.

"Then it is you that must destroy them, Stan. You are the only fitting candidate. You are a Great One. Infected with the END OF THE WORLD SYNDROME."

I know you know.

"You know I know."

## 10. Gemini Girl and Sagittarius Boy (c)

December 16 1999

I could talk to Emily about most things, but not my dreams. To tell anyone about the Vile Old Man, would be folly. They would certainly think me odd, perverse and a worthy candidate to be locked away somewhere where I could do no damage. But I was OK. I was healthy. I'd quit the pornography. I was in a great rock and roll band, and had great friends. And aside from occasional hallucinations and dreams featuring a ghost that wanted me to destroy the world, everything was going well.

Not for Emily though. Brendon's stock continued to drop, as he had proven to be something of a walking contradiction. He would romance her in private and be a true gentleman, yet in public he denied her any access to him, completely ignoring her and tossing her in the trash. It was a mystery why he put her through such abuse. Such a beautiful person deserved better.

To add to her plight, her roommate situation had degenerated further. I heard about it from Melanie at the Union over danishes, every Wednesday morning, at ten o'clock. Melanie had begun to repulse me, but that secret was one I could not share, even with myself.

Pete and I went to get beers.

PETE: Its kind of strange how you and Emily have become such *good friends*.

STAN: In what way?

PETE: Well, you know, you guys are so completely different and all. Its a little weird.

STAN: Its not so strange to me. She's really nice to me. It makes me happy to be around her.

PETE: Melanie is so pissed at her.

STAN: So I've heard.

PETE: From Emily?

STAN: Melanie, actually. Every Wednesday morning over danishes.

PETE: Hmmm. Well, something's gonna go down real soon.

STAN: Its too bad they don't have Murphy's anymore. I like it better than Guinness sometimes.

PETE: So... what's up with Ron and Sophia?

STAN: Nothing. Why does everyone keep asking me that?

PETE: I don't know. Something's up. They're awful friendly to each other lately.

STAN: I don't want to talk about it.

Pete's conversations always left me feeling like shit afterwards. I told him about the show that Marvis was going to play in a week at the Fallout Shelter.

"Cool," he said with complete lack of enthusiasm. He walked out a tired old man at the age of 23. I went back and ordered another Guinness to lift my spirits.

### ***11. Bizarre Love Triangle (c) or Happy Birthday Stan or the Death of Detective Simone***

I got back at 11:30 that night. There had been a telephone call from Emily. I decided to call her even though it was late.

I told her that December 17th was my birthday and if she wanted to hang out. She said yes she would love too. Before we could get beers I would have to go over to Sophia's however because it was an important NYPD Blue and we had to watch it. She said to call her after or just stop by and we could go out drinking.

December 17 1999

I was now twenty four years old. I made it through another year and that is no small accomplishment for a paranoid-schizophrenic-ridiculous like myself. If you suffer from similar afflictions, you know what I'm talking about.

I had many plans that night, and I wasn't sure how many of them I could keep. I had to watch NYPD Blue at nine o'clock with Ron and Sophia. We would then hook up with Emily and go out drinking. Afterward I would hang out with my good friend Mutt, who I had not seen much since the mural was finished. Being popular was a burden sometimes but I loved being adored.

The NYPD Blue proved to be Jimmy Smitts' final episode. It was an extended affair - two hours I think - with drama and tears and gut wrenching agony. I sat there



watching, pretty apathetic to the whole situation. In the end Detective Simone - Jimmy Smitts' character - didn't pull through after all. His operation failed and the central character in the series passed away causing everyone grief. His wife was traumatized, his partner was destroyed and the entire department he worked for was brought to its knees.

And Sophia began to whimper. And then the flood gates opened and she began crying uncontrollably. She was a wreck. I couldn't believe it! How could somebody lose it like that over some television character? I didn't know what to do. She was in a fetal position, with tears like waterfalls. She was trying to stop, convulsing like an engine running out of power. Then she would start again her shrieks even more horrible than before.

Ron put his arm around her. I squeezed her shoulder.

"Come on, settle down," he said.

He was so good in these situations. Just like dad. Ron was full of the dad-like quality. He was able to temporarily comfort Sophia. I was running late.

"He's just a TV character," I said. "Come on. What is the matter?"

Through her constant whimpers and aggravated sobs, Sophia revealed her source of pain through the course of an hour. She had lived in constant fear of death for nearly a decade. A decade ago - that was when her mother got ill. Sophia's father became the full time bread winner for his family, leaving Sophia and her sister to take care of their ailing mother. Sophia's sister had been something of a wild child and didn't pull her weight in this department. So basically Sophia had been forced by life to assume responsibility for her mother's life at a very young and difficult age.

When she was in college, Sophia would go back home almost every weekend,

because of a growing irrational fear that her mother would perish without her. She never really stopped doing this. She still went back home every chance she got, and when she wasn't able to she would torment herself with guilty thoughts to the point where she would lie awake all night without any sleep.

This was only part of it. She had also broken it off with Tim earlier that week, but she had kept that hidden from everyone. That was her way. Hide it until the dam bursts, and everyone sees the secrets in detailed full frontal nudity. I looked at my watch again.

As ridiculous as it sounded to me, Detective Simone's death caused Sophia to completely lose it. She was so weak. So vulnerable. When she began talking about her ex-boyfriend I took it as my cue to leave. I was too emotionally involved to give any objective advice.

"It's good that you broke it off with him. Now you can be with someone who would be kind to you... someone who would treat you like the angel you are."

Ron did not leave. They both wished me Happy Birthday, I told them about the Marvis show at the end of the week, and then I raced to find Emily.

Melanie opened the door. I saw her standing tall and proud, beautiful like a hyena about to destroy its prey.

"She's not here. She already went to the Old Toad."

I turned around and hoped back in my car.

"Happy birthday!" she shouted with disappointment as I started the engine. I pretended not to hear.

At the Old Toad all I did was talk about Sophia's outburst.

"It's a good thing that Ron is so good in situations like that," I said. "I didn't know what to do. I didn't understand. I still don't."

"Stan," Emily told me. "There's something going on between those two."

"No, no way!" I said putting down my beer. "Look she was dating Tim until a couple of days ago."

"So she broke up with him?"

"Yeah," I said. Emily could tell I had my blind dreamer glasses on still.

"You still like her don't you?" she asked.

"I don't know. Yes, maybe... probably. She's just so wonderful. And I would be so good to her."

I was in love. I was one of those fools in love that all those fifties songs with the doo-wop singers talk about. But I wasn't in love with Sophia. Not anymore. I was in love with the idea of being in love. My smile was too big for my face.

Mutt arrived in his usual style. His hair was slick with engine grease, and his clothes were hand-me-downs from the trash bin. You could smell his body from the outside, and although most people faulted him for this, I did not. Why should anyone hate another because of their natural scent? There were plenty of other good reasons to hate a person without that.

"Hey there Mr. Stanley," he said with a smile. "Happy birthday. Congratulations! You're still alive."

Yeah-yeah. Mutt drank a beer with me. Then Emily said she had to go home. It was past midnight and she had to work tomorrow.

December 18 1999

Since it was past midnight I guess it was officially the 18th of the month. I was 24. I had a rock and roll band. We were going to play our first show and we were going to be terrific. I had a lot of friends, and a girl that I loved in Sophia. Life was great. Soon the world would end and I was going to make the best of it while I was here.

I dropped off Emily. Her roommate was asleep. As I drove Mutt back to his place (he had walked to the bar) I passed by Ron's house. I stopped.

"That's strange," I said. "That's Sophia's car outside Ron's house."



## 12. *Bizarre Love Triangle (d)*

December 19 - 21

The boys and I practiced intensely. It was so important that we get this right. Our nine song set was a tale of love, sorrow, defeat and rebirth. The year that had passed was in the words and its trials were in the music. I played bashing the guitar strings with my aching knuckles. I sang with compassion and then I screamed until my vocal chords were raw. It was going to be incredible. I could feel it , and so could Drummer Joe and Doctor Jeffrey. I wished Frankie was still in the band.

December 22 1999

Our big night was here at last. We had to be at The Fallout Shelter by eight o'clock for our sound check. The hours would not pass. I picked up the telephone and called all my friends. Frankie, Mutt, Emily, Ron, Sophia, Pete, Melanie and even Jimmy James the Poet. I wanted them all there. They all said they would be.

On the stage the lights were blinding. This made me feel more comfortable because I wouldn't have to see the people in the audience as I played.

"Good luck."

Through the haze of the lights I saw Frankie smiling. He was very proud of us. He was wearing an ARMY jacket like Bobby Deniro in **Taxi Driver**.

Doctor Jeffrey was very particular about the lead guitar and he was busy tuning

with precision. I looked through the lights as the audience gathered. Jimmy James the Poet stood by the back corner isolated from the rest. Emily also stood on an island. Pete and Melanie stood closely together, their silhouette creating one solid sculpture in the middle of the night club. They were beautiful and in love like sexual parasites. Mutt was there smiling and happy for me that finally my dreams were coming true. Frankie wore his ARMY jacket like second skin, staring out past the narrow walls of The Fallout Shelter.

Ron and Sophia were nowhere to be found.

"Something's going on with those two." Echo, echo, echo...

I played that show half in a trance and half in solid insanity. I was a groovy epileptic, and then a lonely lover staring out into the audience as I played a G chord to see if my beautiful Sophia had arrived. Why wasn't she there? I had told both her and Ron about the show. Several times also. I didn't get it.

"Something's going on with those two." Echo, echo, echo...

My fingers were bloody. My heart was aching and my mind was delusional because I was having a heat stroke from the intense lights. They were burning my face, but we were playing great. I screamed so hard sometimes, that I thought I might vomit. I didn't. I was dehydrated, because of the sweat and tears. I was the sad punk. I was a stupid fuck.

"Something's going on with those two." Echo, echo, echo...

The Vile Old Man sauntered through the audience a couple of times. He made me very angry, and I could barely contain myself. He just smiled at me. I looked again and all my friends had temporarily acquired his face. His mocking smile was everywhere and I could hear my own beating heart over the blaring decibels of our

music. I looked at Doctor Jeffrey. At Drummer Joe. His face was everywhere.

“Great show!!!”

“You guys were great!!!”

Frankie shook my hand.

“You guys rocked the house!!! Yeah, brutha!!! Right on!”

Just like that it was over. We had played incredibly. Better than I ever expected.

I was wiping the sweat from my hair and the blood from my fingers.

“Where are Ron and Sophia?” Emily asked me.

“Something’s going on with those two.”

In a split second I had teleported to my car and was racing down Monroe Avenue to Ron’s house.

My mind was plagued and my soul was infected. I needed an emergency procedure, to stop my internal hemorrhaging but I had gone into critical condition too fast for anyone to intervene.

It was way past midnight when I arrived to Ron’s house. Both their cars were there. I was insane with jealousy and fear. How could this be? Sophia was supposed to fall in love with me. She had seen that Tim wasn’t worth the time she was wasting on him, and now the coast was clear for me to make a move. But I was a gentleman. I was going to wait until she had healed and could make a level headed decision.

Apparently Ron did not suffer from such high morals. He had seen his golden opportunity and gone for it without hesitation. *Good things come to those who wait.* That’s why I was the one bewildered on the outside, while Ron was embracing her, loving her, fondling her....

My vomit hit the asphalt like a brick, shattering into a million tiny food particles, which in turn resembled insects that feasted on corpses and excrement. I threw up until nothing but bile and blood oozed from my lips.

Sophia and Ron came out of the house. I considered confronting them. If this had been a made for cable movie, I would have had a semi-automatic pistol and blown them both to smithereens. Instead I just watched them kiss in the pale moonlight, unaware that their every move was being observed by a psychopath, who held the fate of the entire world in his hands.

The Vile Old Man was right. Perhaps I should destroy them. Perhaps this had been my destiny all along.

“Something’s going on with those two.” Echo, echo, echo...



### **13. Gemini Girl and Sagittarius Boy (d)**

December 25th 1999

The Jealous Place is a block away from the Guilty Place, and sometimes they are next to each other. Other times its one big complex like the strip malls of Chicago. The menu is not expensive in terms of American currency, but the toll is paid by your heart. The dishes consist of snakes, alligators and devils, put together as stews, and you have to eat them while they are still alive so they can kill you from the inside.

The Jealous Place is located in a hole in the wall of my attic, somewhere between the spiders and their cobwebs. I was there for three days with my guitar and my sadness to keep me company and irritate my burns. There was a blizzard outside, but it was my insides that were frozen and stuck. It was painful and foolish feeling not unlike putting your tongue on frozen light post on a dare, and then having the fire department have to bail you out, with a bucket of hot water.

Emily was the fire department. She called in timely fashion after three days of my disappearance. I told her what had happened. She said we should go to coffee and talk about it.

"I guess I can't be pissed," I said.

"I would be. You were lied to. Friends don't do that."

"I trusted Ron so much. I loved him like a brother."

Trust with a knife at my throat.

"Have you told them you know?"

No. Ron was out of town on a road trip to Pittsburgh. It would be unfair to burden

only Sophia with this. But... nothing about this was fair.

The second round of the E Mail Wars started that night. I noticed that it was Christmas Day. It meant very little to me.

“Are you and Sophia having a secret relationship? If you are and you’re worried about my reaction you need not be. Just tell me the truth.” A trap for Ron, with the bait of unawareness and lies. Merry fuckin’ Christmas. The lord is born. The world will end in six days.

December 26 1999

Ron fell for it. He called up and spilled his guts.

“I know I said otherwise but I really fell in love with her. I was always in love with her.”

“Hey, don’t worry about it. It hurts a little but we’ll get through this.”

Subtitled: You dirty motherfucker. You will be the first to die.

“When do you come back into town?”

“New Years eve.”

Perfect.

December 27 1999

I showed up to Sophia’s unexpected. I wanted to scare the hell out of her and I could tell that I did. Her face shriveled up like some exotic rotting fruit and her lisp turned into a stutter.

"Lets go to coffee."

OK.

December 28 1999

I went to breakfast with Melanie. She looked beautiful and hard, like a wild eagle made of stone. She had the profile of a vulture.

"You were lied to," she said. "You have every right to be angry. I would be."

"Thanks," I said. I thanked her for pitying me.

Enough about you. Now about me.

"Emily is treating me like shit," she said.

"What the hell are you telling me that for?"

"Pete is upset that you stick up for her all the time."

"If Pete wasn't talking shit about her I wouldn't stick up for her. She's my friend. Like you. I would stick up for you if someone was talking crap about you."

"I'm moving out. You can tell her when you see her tonight."

And with that Melanie walked out and never spoke to me again. Or I never spoke to her again. I forget which. Its not important. We hadn't really talked to one another for a long time.

I called Emily up. It was my duty to deliver the bad news. She became apathetic. This was always her first reaction.

"I don't care," she snapped quickly. "The hell with her. The bitch."

"Lets go to coffee," I said. "These are difficult days."

I saw the scene at Emily's house just before I got into my car. She was running out trying to put on her black coat, her face stained with black mascara tears like sewer water. I barely had time to unlock the passenger side door.

"Drive!" she screamed.

Melanie had arrived in the half hour it had taken me to drive through the snow covered streets. The confrontation was the last in a cold war that had erupted into a full scale thermonuclear catastrophe. Somehow I had ended up in Emily's corner. It was too early to assess the damage.



#### **14. *Frankie Goes Ballistic (c)***

December 29 1999

Sometimes when you're in the Guilty Place, you have blindfolds on, so that your personal tormentors can torture you with anonymity and without guilt. That must be why I had not seen Frankie there enduring his own version of pain. He hadn't been seen since the Marvis show. That was a week ago. He had been in a hole, between the spiders and the cobwebs.

Frankie reemerged on an icy ledge on the sixth floor of his building, outside his window. There was police there. Emily and I were driving by and stopped to see that our friend was trying to rewrite his expiration date.

He was an overgrown buttercup in a Viet Nam veteran's clothing. The wind was trying to push him off and the ice was making it difficult for him to stand straight. He was hugging the wall with his back in a way that it was difficult to tell if he regretted his current predicament. He was a deer caught in headlights. He was a powerful damsel in distress.

The police lights flashed that evening; the sun was already down and the sky was black shades of police red. Frankie was so cold that he'd broken into a violent sweat. I didn't know what to do. I'd already given him a lot of useless advice. There wasn't much else I was good at.

I called Pete from a pay phone down the street. He and Melanie arrived shortly after. Sophia wasn't around. Mutt and Drummer Joe were working. I didn't know where

Doctor Jeffrey was.

So there we stood, four opponents in an insane tug of war, too busy to notice that Frankie had beaten us in the race to lose our minds. And now he was set to take the final leap across the finish line. Frankie was muttering to himself. We were too scared and proud to talk to one another.

The police kept saying ridiculous things through their megaphones : "COME ON NOW SON. DON'T JUMP. ITS NOT AS BAD AS IT SEEMS."

The chief asked the officer where the fire department was with the trampoline. He didn't know. Frankie kept muttering, sweating, and slipping.

I wanted to shout to him.

"What the hell are you doing? Stop it! It'll pass. Somehow you'll get through it. I'll help you. We'll help each other. We'll leave America and avoid our student loans, man. We'll hide in a cave in Columbia and eat spiders and insects. And we'll call ourselves Insecticons. The Insecticon Bruthas."

Nothing came out. Pete kept looking at me with accusing eyes.

Drummer Joe's station wagon squealed into the confusion and chaos.

"I saw it on the news," he said. "What the hell is going on? We have to help him get down from there!"

"I don't know how," I said. "He's gonna die. Oh God! Frankie's gonna die."

More arrivals. Sophia. Mutt. And then Doctor Jeffrey. And even Jimmy James the Poet, who was now Jimmy James the Raver Fuck-face.

"I once saw a guy leap thirteen floors and live. He was on acid. He lived the rest of his life in a psychedelic coma! What a lucky bastard."

Or :

“This reminds me of Albert Camus’ book **The Fall**.”

I wanted to punch him out.

Kali arrived last. She was a short, round vixen; hour glass shaped but she still had her baby fat. I had worked with her at the gallery in the summer. Her eye lashes were elegant but her walk was powerful that night. Her breath was like gusts from a steam engine.

POLICE LINE: DO NOT CROSS, meant little to her. She was through it, and with her powerful gait she was headed for the front door of Frankie’s building. The officer tried to step up but she was already inside. In my mind’s eye she was already at the elevator.

Frankie, tried to move back toward the window. He looked down and temporarily became an animation balancing on his heels on the villainous ice. The carpet still hadn’t been yanked out from under him, but soon his luck would rebel against him.

“I know too!” Frankie shouted. “I have seen the Lord of the Apocalypse! I HAVE SEEN THE LORD OF THE APOCALYPSE!!!”

Everyone must have thought he was having a Son Of Sam fantasy. He began to strike his head with his fists.

“My father too was in the Nam. Viet Nam, man!!! And my sister was a dirty heroin junk head.”

The world would end in two days. Everyone was an observer. Some like myself and Frankie could see things from the inside. Frankie wanted to end his second sight. The Lord of the Apocalypse wanted me to end it all. Kali wanted to keep Frankie alive.

She emerged from the window, reaching her hand out for Frankie. He stopped slapping himself in the face, and looked at her through his blood, sweat and tears. He was a real American.

"Come on," she smiled. "Come on brutha, its cool, no?"

He smiled a little through the confusion.

"Yo, come on kid! You come to mama, an' she takin' care of you real good."

He wasn't convinced. The fire department arrived with the trampoline.

"Go away!!!" Frankie shouted from behind his sleeve. "You tell them to go away!!! Far away!!!"

Kali was losing him. Frankie moved away from the window. The fire department trampoline holders tried to follow, but the snow was too tall and they could not.

"It will end! All of it!!! At The Fallout Shelter on the arrival of the New Year!!! Our blood will be on the hands of Stanley! You know I know! YOU KNOW I KNOW!!!"

"Hey, baby. Come on to me honey. Come to me baby, they're all gone."

"Kali?"

"Yes. Yes its me," she smiled trying to be strong for both her and Frankie's baby fat. "Its me Kali. Come on now, handsome. That's right. Take a step this way."

Frankie was an infant - six feet tall and six stories high. He smiled. He drooled. He wept.

When dancing at The Fallout Shelter, Frankie was as coordinated and funky as James Brown. His dance that night ended with a sliding back heel, against the thin ice of a thinner ledge. He reached to the heavens as he plummeted. Kali remained there terrified with her hands outstretched. We watched as he exploded into the tall snow, a bomb falling from a German bomber plane onto the Tower of London. The



professional trampoline holders dropped the trampoline they were holding.

### **15. Gemini Girl and Sagittarius Boy (e)**

December 30 1999

"He was lucky," she said. "The snow saved him. Only some broken bones. A little blood. A chai tea, please."

Emily always ordered chai tea. I had my coffee black. I was too lazy to put sugar and milk in it. Emily had a surprise for me. That's what she had said before we got together. I told her my surprise would not be revealed until New Years Day.

She pulled a book onto the table. It was an astrology book.

"What are you?"

"What?"

"What sign are you silly? Your birthday was on the seventeenth right?"

"Yes."

"A Sagittarius."

She read from the sacred text of the astrology book. A Sagittarius apparently rides on a white horse. He perceives himself as a knight, but is really a Don Quixote. He sees disasters before they happen, and chases the lambs off of the fields, thinking he has chased entire armies away from his friends, who he is desperate to protect. He is then rewarded by life, by promptly being walloped and dropped on his bottom.

"It sounds exactly like me," I said. "What about you? What are you?"

"A Gemini. The twins."

A Gemini girl it turns out is something of a chameleon. She can adapt to most environments although never completely. She can have many masks, some which are

flattering and some which are hideous. Her moods change with the seasons as do her motives and goals. She as unpredictable as a game of Russian Roulette.

“Maybe I should quit trying to save others and save myself,” I said.

“Get off your white horse,” she replied. “Or maybe not. I don’t care.”

The bottom of each page said which signs were compatible.

*Gemini girl and Sagittarius boy.*

## **16. *The End of the World Party***

December 31 1999

Somewhere in my dreams I entered The Fallout Shelter. It was empty and black and cigarette stained, like my bruised exoskeleton. I asked for a drink at the bar. The bartender was a black silhouette without features, who was the Vile Old Man, who was the Lord of the Apocalypse, who was a devil and a god and symbolized me.

"I know," I cut him off before he spoke. I stole his thunder. "I know you know."

"Hah!" he cackled with a voice like broken glass. "You know shit, boy!"

He gave me a potion that was red like fluorescent blood.

"I know what I have to do," I said. "I don't want to, but I will."

"Good. Good. You must sacrifice yourself; a martyr like Jesus Christ. Only your cross will be made from the bones of your friends and enemies."

"I will begin with Ron. At the airport?"

"No. He will arrive early. At The Fallout Shelter. That is where you must fulfill your journey Stan."

"Yes. But how?"

"It will be the End of the World Party, Stan. You will know how it will end when the time comes. Until then, there are still issues to resolve; questions to answer."

Where was Frankie? How did he know about the Vile Old Man? Where did Kali come from? Did she know? And whatever happened to Brendon Calhoun?

"Whatever happened to Brendon Calhoun?"



I was at the coffee shop with Emily. It was noon. A black coffee before Armageddon.

"I'm going to the party with him," she said. Then her face became twisted in a knot. "I haven't seen him for a long time. I don't know what's going on. I don't care."

"The End of the World Party?"

"You're obsessed," she laughed.

"There's worse things to be," I replied. "How's things with Melanie and Pete?"

"Shitty. She packed her things this morning."

"They aren't talking to me. Or I'm not talking to them. We haven't spoken since it all went down."

"I'm sorry," she said. "You must hurt so badly right now."

"No worse than you."

Why was she putting up with this reality? That bastard Brendon Calhoun was going to be with her at the End of the World Party, even though he treated her like shit every time she was around him. She deserved someone better.

The truth of the matter was that reality was awful for everyone concerned. The villains were victims and the victims villains. The world was a scummy place to be, and that's why I had to put an end to it. That was what I had been chosen to do. I was the last prophet and doom was the message I was bringing. I still didn't know how to do it. Kali was drinking coffee at a table in the back corner. She looked at me with eyes that could read my thoughts.

I found out that Frankie was in the hospital with multiple fractures. I had become adept at walking with multiple fractures by now, I thought.

I told Sophia that The Fallout Shelter was having an End of the World Party, and that she and Ron should go and celebrate the new millennium there with the rest of us. Then I called Mutt. My punk rocker friend Mutt. My skate boarding brother Mutt. My twin of the sour smell and sweetest smile. It was difficult to convince him to go with me. He didn't feel comfortable at social gatherings. He said he would hang out in the back corner and think to himself. I said I'd pick him up in an hour.

There was a beep. Call waiting. I answered it and it was Kali.

"Kali," I said with a little fear in my voice. She was onto me. I don't know how but she knew. "Don't do it, Stan. How can you do this to your friends?"

"The Fallout Shelter is having the End of the World Party," I replied. "You should come. It'll be a hoot!"

Mutt and I arrived at The Fallout Shelter at ten o'clock that night. He was wearing his fifties style captain of the football team varsity jacket. I had a fake fur coat, and three shirts of different stripes and plaid patterns. For pants I had khakis with semen stains on them. It was hot so I removed two of my shirts, and threw them in the trash. Then I put my coat back on.

Everyone eventually arrived. Jimmy James the Raver Fuck-face tried to speak to me. He was wearing big pants that caused him to talk about drugs all the time. I walked away and he kept on talking. Pete and Melanie arrived cloaked in misery and misfortune. Drummer Joe and Doctor Jeffrey walked in. Joe was wearing his plastic orange jacket that looked more like a movie prop than an article of clothing. The Doctor Had his doctor's smock on and a newspaper in his hand.

"Tonight," he announced. "Tonight will be the last night of your lives. It says so

right here in the New York Times!!!!”

THE END IS HERE it said. Everyone laughed, except for me. And Kali.

She had arrived with Frankie. She walked across the room the way a room ought to be walked across, in a dress that was devil red. Frankie was in a Hawaiian shirt that featured blues, yellows, greens and tropical fruit of many breeds and sorts. He was limping noticeably, but was also becoming adept at walking with fractures and lacerations.

“We have to talk,” he said.

Not now. Emily was walking in, without Brendon. She only had tears to keep her company. What had happened?

“Its over,” she said. “Its over before it started.”

I felt sympathy for her. She didn’t know how accurate her assessment of the situation was.

“We have things to discuss, Stan,” Kali said. She grabbed my arm but it was Ron who grabbed my attention as he walked in. It was one minute to midnight. One minute until I pulled the trigger and tightened the noose.

Sophia was in his arms. They were a spectacle intended to humiliate me. They smiled smiles in unison, and their embrace castrated me. I wondered if should have shot Ron when he hugged me. No. It wasn’t time yet, and I wanted to see his dirty face before it burst like a mosquito that drank too much blood. The confident, arrogant Ron, reduced to a tiny stain on the floor.

It was delicious but something didn’t seem right about it. I couldn’t put my finger on it. Maybe there was a better way to do this. Quicker too. There was no way I could end the world quickly enough using the conventional firepower I had inside my fur

coat. I felt useless. I couldn't even get this right. But how could I make plans for a task so enormous with such short notice? And I only had a minute left.

"Stan, what can I do?" It was Emily. She was crying still. I wanted to relieve her misery. She was talking a lot of sad stuff but she was on mute. I wanted to hear her but Kali kept tugging on me. Ron was embracing me at the same time.

"Are we cool, baby?" he said. My face went epileptic for a second.

Mutt was talking to no one. Pete and Melanie were finally physically joined into one biological entity, a Two Headed Hydra that only a Hercules could kill. Finally Kali pulled me free. She and Frankie dragged me into the men's room kicking and screaming.

"We know what you're going to do, Stan," she said.

"Dude, don't. Just don't. You don't have to," Frankie shook me.

"I have to! I am the chosen one!!!"

"He's right," said the ghost.

The Vile Old Man had entered the room. Suddenly we weren't in the men's room. Instead we were on a massive stage, an arena in front of millions of screaming fans. The spot light kept moving from one player to the next depending on who spoke. Behind us were giant video screens showing the action at The Fallout Shelter from as many angles as one could ever imagine.

The spot light was on the Vile Old Man. He was still a silhouette without any features.

"It is true. Stanley is the one chosen to complete the existence of humanity on this, your Earth. And this he will do once this moment is up."

Frankie stepped to the front of the stage. He was a glowing Hawaiian angel.



"No. No. No way. He came to me. Asked me to do terrible things. I almost did. I hated my life. My work was killing me. My friends were my enemies. They were pulling me in every direction."

"Me too," I said. The audience went wild, with applause like piranhas near a drop of fresh blood.

"I couldn't do it," Frankie continued. "So I tried to kill myself. And I would have if it weren't for Kali."

She was majestic now. The light flattered her; it grabbed her and did not want to let go. She was hope. She was liberation.

"Frankie is a kind and descent man. He was on the icy ledge. He was ill. And Stan is ill. He is far worse than Frankie ever was. The Vile Old Man has given him the unenviable task of destroying us all."

They shouted and rejoiced. There were fireworks in the winter sky. At Times Square Dick Clark was counting down the seconds to the end of the world. I hated him too. What had he ever brought me but grief?

"Why must you do this, Stan?"

I stepped up now.

"I've known for a long time now that my world must end. People are vile. They are filthy. They seek your trust only to violate it. They smile at you only to accuse you. Liberate you so that they can control you. What use is there for a race such as this?

I'm doing the world a favor really. We've been trying to destroy ourselves since time began. We use excuses and pretenses. The Crusades were fought over religious differences. The wars of the Cold War over economic differences. The rest were turf wars backed by tyrants. I offer no excuse. I am the honest one, that will destroy you



because I am as cruel as any man that has ever set foot on this wretched Earth. I will destroy you because - well because you deserve it, quite frankly!"

Instant approval. A standing ovation!!! I had them foaming at the mouth.

"That's my boy," said the Vile Old Man. "Nobody has hated human kind as completely as you have."

"No," Kali insisted. "No. This is not acceptable!!! Humanity is loathsome it is true. It is true that our nature is to destroy."

What was this? Reverse psychology. I was ready to light the dynamite.

"But it is our nature to create. It is our nature to love and be loved, and it is our nature to defy the odds. Let me ask you, Stan, if we have been trying to destroy ourselves since the dawn of time why have we not? Are we not capable of doing what you plan to do? Have we not always been able to do this?"

Yes. She was right about this. The masses sat back down in their seats. She continued.

"Then why haven't we? We keep getting closer and closer. We destroy part of the world and we rebuild it with something better."

I thought of how skin dies and is reborn, a constant cycle of metamorphosis.

"That's right. A constant cycle of metamorphosis and rebirth. Like skin. Humanity is a constantly evolving entity just like the human being itself."

"But, I have been infected," I said. "I am wretched. Perhaps I should at least those who have made me this way."

"It is true that you have been infected Stanley. And you are wretched and weak. Just like many people. You must stop looking for others to blame. You are to blame alone."

"Then perhaps,.... Perhaps I should destroy myself. It would be easy. I have plenty of firepower!"

The masses once again rejoiced at this. They loved me. They adored my black eyes and my evil mind. They loved it when I spoke of destruction, in any form.

"I cannot tell you what to do, Stan. Do you want to be pathetic? Do you want people to pity you instead of genuinely loving you? That's what they will do if you destroy yourself. In time they will resent you and view you as a villain. Then you will be forgotten."

This was my worst fear. She had hit upon the one thing that terrified me worse than anything else. It was the thing that had kept me from sleeping since I was a young boy.

"I don't want to be forgotten," I said. "But my world is vile. Its shit. All these people who were supposed to be my good friends, have hurt me very, very badly. I am like a wounded animal, biting any hand that comes near it, trying to kill whatever it can before it too dies.

I was so much in love with Sophia. And I trusted Ron with my deepest feelings. Instead he took her from me. He was unjust in doing this. I was honest and he was secretive."

"People make mistakes. Sometimes they hurt those they love the most. Sometimes they are in unusual situations that don't have easy solutions. What would you have done if Ron had come to you and asked you your permission? Would you have said it was OK?"

"No! No way!!!"

She smiled and put her hand on my shoulder.

"Don't you think Ron knew this?" she asked. "Don't you think he probably felt bad about how he handled it but -"

"At the same time he knew he could do nothing else."

I still had anger toward Ron. But the freedom to forgive him entered my lungs and flowed through my capillaries without any clots.

"What about, Pete and Melanie?" I asked. I hated them. I loathed them. "They tried to destroy Emily. They hurt her, and hurting her means hurting me. I would like to destroy them."

I desired vengeance. I had been accused of many things by those two. I had been slandered and violated in the worst ways.

"Don't be a pawn," Frankie said. "You're a pawn, Stan. Those differences are between those three, and do not concern you."

"I was told who my friends could be. They had no right to tell me who my friends could be. How dare they tug of war with my emotions like this?"

"It's obvious to everyone but you what is really happening, dude," he said. "You all know! And you should too Stan. Hurting her is hurting you? Of course Sagittarius boy. She's a Gemini girl."

"I don't know what you're getting at! Don't even try to accuse me of this!!!"

Frankie stepped up to me and looked at me fiercely in the eye.

"Sagittarius boy and Gemini girl, fool! Tell her how you feel!!! She probably feels the same. Tell her what is in your heart, or else you will never grow out of this cycle of misery. Go with your heart and fuck everybody else."

I looked back at the Vile Old Man. He was a quadriplegic on a piece of cardboard. A beggar and a leper. I looked at him squarely in the face. His mouth

opened but he was unable to speak - choking on one thousand worms.

I was alone on the stage now. Frankie and Kali were nowhere to be found and the Vile Old Man had become a pile of ashes. He hadn't known anything after all. Had they been there at all? The audience was silent and Dick Clark was frozen waiting to count down the final second before the end of the world.

The same question was posed in front of me in a bold faced font:

**HOW WILL YOU END THIS WORLD?**

**HOW WILL YOU END THIS WORLD?**

**HOW WILL YOU END THIS WORLD?**

**HOW WILL YOU END THIS WORLD?**

**HOW WILL YOU END THIS WORLD?**

I looked through my fragmented eyes and saw myself from a different angle and from all the different angles at once.

"You know I know", the Grey Ghost had said to the three Coffee Children. Sophia (who is not Sophia) got very uncomfortable, while Ron the Logical tried to wipe away the ghost with mockery. Stan the Nervous saw the Phantom's prophesy of the end soon to come.

There is no better venue for Armageddon than the arrival of the millennium. How would the end of the world come? How should it come? Some thought that a large meteor or comet might do it. Others believed that extra-terrestrials may obliterate human kind. Others still believed that God might crush the Earth with his mighty fist. I did not believe in God - I had a hard time believing in anything I had not seen. For the same reason I could not believe in extra-terrestrials, comets and meteors.

For Stan the Hopeless, the end of the world arrived through a series of personal failures and tragedies. He was a romantic idealist which meant that even though most found his naivete charming, nobody took him seriously. His ability to dream meant that he might never be wise. His tendency toward honesty made him a terrible secret keeper. This led to distrust on the part of Pete the Private and Melanie the Secretive. These relationships and others would crumble into dust as the year went by.

For Stan the Manboy, the end of the world arrived through a series of personal triumphs and successes. He was able to put a musical act together with his good friends Frankie and Drummer Joe. When Frankie could no longer play, Doctor Jeffrey stepped in. The music was terrific and all the doubters were surprised and enchanted.



Stan the Tortured had been tormented for months by the Grey Ghost, or the one he called the Vile Old Man. Frankie had similar visions, causing him to rebel against himself and try to commit suicide. He was unsuccessful, managing to only break his leg. A few broken bones, and a little blood. Ultimately it was Kali that saved them both. She came as an inner strength that emerges within a person at their darkest hour; a blinding ray of hope erasing the black mass of the Vile Old Man.

As the millennium approached Stan the Resilient sought to re-establish self control without losing his ability to dream, to fall in love and to be truthful. He was able to do this through creative energies that were thought to have burnt out long ago. He did it on a gas tank that was thought to be running on fumes. It was Kali that rekindled his inner strength, but it was Stan who fought through a year of pain, and torment to embrace hope and faith in himself.

It was my choice ultimately that the world would end at the party, so that a new one could begin. The new world would be one where I had regained the self control I desired, not using my naivete as an excuse for being manipulated by friends and acquaintances. It was a world of successes instead of failures. It would be a world free of dead ends and full of possibilities.

## **17. Shut Up and Kiss Me, You Idiot**

“HAPPY NEW YEAR!!!”

So The Fallout Shelter never turned out to be the birthplace of a holocaust as I had promised it would be. Dick Clark counted down the last second, confetti flew and fireworks exploded, and people embraced. Ron was the first to hug me along with the mass of Frankie the Survivor. Sophia kissed me on the cheek. Pete shook my hand and Melanie nodded. No words were spoken but it was more than I had expected anyway.

Doctor Jeffrey made some incoherent toast . Drummer Joe and I drank shots although we didn't understand what he'd said. It wasn't important.

“Mutt. You're the greatest. The best friend a guy could have.”

“Mr. Stanley!!! I'm glad you made the right decision tonight.”

A hug for Mutt. A tight squeeze. Happy New Year boss. Happy New Year chief. Yeah - yeah. Still alive. Can't complain.

Jimmy James stood alone in the corner. I used to be able to read his mind so well in years past. Now I could not, or was afraid to.

“I've given up bad luck for the new millennium,” he said.

I smiled and tried hard to believe him.

Kali was gone. In and out so quickly. I owed her a lot. She had made me face myself and try to do something to improve what I saw in the mirror. She took on the Vile Old Man and turned him into a pile of ashes.

“Thank you,” I said.

Emily had remained at the bar. Her black hair was full of confetti, and her face

had a mask of apathy on it.

"Did you drive here?" I asked her.

"No. Did you?"

"Yes," I said. "But I'd rather walk. I'm a bit drunk."

OK. So after saying our goodbyes, and squeezing the right people and shaking hands with the others, we were on the sidewalk walking on asphalt glazed with a jeweled veil of snow.

"What a shitty year," she said. "What the hell am I supposed to do with everything that has happened Stan?"

"I've thought about that a lot. Believe me," I said.

"And... Have you come up with anything? If you have, please tell me cause I don't know."

"That's the point," I said. "That's it Emily. Don't you see? Nobody knows much of anything. You feel your experiences differently, depending on which way you look at them. And then you react according to the way you felt them. And it keeps going. Like a chain reaction or something."

"What?" she said. "That sounds like a bunch of self - help bull !!!"

"All I know is -" I stopped and grabbed her by the shoulders. "Like tonight... Tonight I hated Ron for what he'd done. I looked at it from one set of eyes - mine. What an asshole, right? He knew he was hurting me but he didn't give a fuck! But wait.... That's not it. That's not Ron!!! He's a good guy in a difficult situation. He acted the way he thought was right. Whether it was or not, makes no difference in the long run. Besides he loves Sophia. I have no doubt of that. He probably loves her more than I ever did."

"You still got screwed. And not just by him."

"No... Yes, maybe I got screwed. Or maybe I screwed myself. But Ron did not have ill intent and if he thought he could have done this any other way, I'm sure he would have. But you're talking about Pete and Melanie..."

"Yes," she said. "They - they've been so awful! To you and to me..."

She started to weep again. I touched her chin and wiped off her tears.

"They have," I said. "Its true. I don't know why they became the way they have become, nor do I want to. I know I'll never be friends with them again, and that you probably will not be either. Sometimes people act in rotten ways. Sometimes... I don't know, they drift apart. Blame sucks. They did what they did, we did what we did. We didn't like it, and they didn't like it. Fuck it! Who cares? In their eyes we're as much to blame as they are in ours. They're in love. And I wish them the best."

Emily looked at me curiously. I was Todd Bridges and she was Gary Coleman.

*"Watchoo talkin' 'bout Willis?"*

"I'm not sure I get you Stan," she said. "Maybe I get it kind of... But how can you expect me not harbor ill feelings after all that's -"

"I'm not asking you to be superhuman Emily. Your heart doesn't lie. But you have to fight the temptation to be hopeless. You have to find hope in other things. Pete and Melanie are a lost cause. Let them become a dying memory. Bury them into the ground. Mourn them, but move on with your life. What is good about your life right now?"

"Not much," she said.

"A lot," I said. "Well, enough for sure. And if you're down about Brendon, well, don't be."

"That's easy for you to say."

"He sucked!!! That trendy hipster with the non-prescription glasses... Who wants an asshole like that? You deserve better. You're lovely. You're amazing. He was not any of those things. He was just a pretentious motherfucker."

She laughed.

"He did look like a Backstreet Boy!"

"Come on, Bonita," I said. "He's not even worth making you sad like this.

Concentrate on what is good, and the shitty things will... well, they just may become a big old pile of ashes."

"Concentrate on the good things?"

"Yes."

"You're good."

I got a little scared.

"You're embarrassing me," I said.

"I know you, Mr. Stanley. You've got a good heart, and don't you dare deny it."

I didn't know what to say.

"Thank you, but you must be drunk."

She giggled.

"Straight as an arrow."

"Oh."

She looked terrific in the muted haze of the moonlight and the neon glow of the city. I saw myself in her almond eyes, and regret was a word that temporarily left my vocabulary. My heart went pitter-patter.

I tried to say something wise, but incoherent sounds came out. She smiled at me and said:



“Shut up and kiss me, you idiot.”