

Fred Smith
THE ESTRANGED ROSE
a novella about love and music



*When you're talking to yourself, and nobody's home.
You can't fool yourself. You came in this world alone. (Alone.)*

—“Estranged”
Use Your Illusion II

Brent Sarzo didn't opt to tote much gear when he made his final exit from Placebo Effect's practice space. Whether Brent actually uttered the F word before hopping on his bike and riding off down Crawford Street was a matter the remaining members of the band couldn't agree on, despite a healthy debate. Earl swore he heard it. Van, who hadn't agreed with his fraternal twin brother since the third grade, argued that their lead singer's exit was void of foul language. Not wanting to be the tiebreaker, Dave made an objective argument that it was a moot point since Brent had split with the band's only microphone and would surely be back with his mom and her SUV to pick up the PA system before the afternoon's end.

The one thing the members of Placebo Effect could agree on was that their singer's departure was a permanent one. The band now faced the decision of either becoming an instrumental trio or finding a new lead singer.

“To hell with him,” Earl said, accenting his statement by pounding his fist into the body of his Fender bass. The gruff technique produced a heavy rumble from Earl's amp that shook the Stephensons' garage. “We're better off without him.”

“Yeah, well, he had a PA,” Van said with a light strum of his Stratocaster. Earl pounded his bass again and eyed his brother with a snarl that would have made Sid Vicious proud.

“We're keeping his PA. Call it a douche-bag tax.”

“Dude, it's *his* PA,” Van countered.

“Not anymore.”

“You can’t hold his PA for ransom.”

“We’re not holding anything for ransom.” The veins in Earl’s neck were popping, a sign Dave knew meant the larger of the Stephenson brothers was poised for a fight fueled by sibling rivalry. “It’s not like we have any demands. He walked out. He’s been a douche. We’re keeping his PA. End of story.”

“You’re a moron, Earl.” Van timed his insult with a heavy stomp on his distortion pedal. The move turned an otherwise light strum of his guitar into a rattling power chord, sending the message that Van was up to his brother’s challenge, as usual.

Dave was used to his bandmates’ bickering. From behind his drum set, he’d seen a fair share of squabbles between the brothers in the last seven months. Most of the fights Dave had witnessed were music-based and started innocently enough. Van would often suggest that a daring riff he had birthed needed an accompanying bass line that was every bit its equal in complexity. His brother often responded with a heavy riff of his own that was more hip-hop than jazz-fusion. Though the brothers would inevitably argue about the direction of the song, Dave saw the ingenious balance the two often struck. He could pacify the hotheaded twins and their egos by laying down a backbeat that married the tones in a way that yielded a unique sound for Placebo Effect.

“Maybe he’ll come back?” Dave’s speculation sounded like a question, as though he didn’t believe his own optimism.

“We’ll send him packing his shit,” Earl said. “Dude’s got LSD.”

Van nodded in agreement with his brother for the first since Dave could remember. Dave dropped his eyes to his bass drum pedal, aware that such an accusation spelled the end for Brent Sarzo as the lead singer of Placebo Effect.

LSD can contribute to any band's untimely death. When it infiltrates a group's inner ranks, its poison can dissolve the only thing that matters whether you're Aerosmith or the band in the last garage on Crawford Street: solidarity.

Lead Singer's disease is clinically described as a condition in which the lead singer of a band lets the success of said band go to his head, causing the singer to become egotistical and impossible to work with. Symptoms include delusions of grandeur, along with the rapid development of a prima-donna attitude. The lead singer may develop a god complex as he attributes the band's success solely to his own actions, rendering his bandmates as insignificant cogs in a wheel that spins at his personal will.

The ailment is often fatal for bands. Most commonly diagnosed in the rock genre, LSD has been famously noted in the demise of such giants as Van Halen and Guns N' Roses. These outfits, at the time of their encountering the disease, were among the most successful in rock history. They dominated the globe with platinum albums and sold-out world tours. The boys in Placebo Effect had never even left the garage on Crawford Street. Without a singer, it didn't look like they'd be playing their first gig anytime soon.

"So, we need a singer," Van said.

"With a PA, apparently," Dave added almost under his breath, but loud enough to be heard.

"Why do you two have your panties in a bunch about this?" Earl's neck veins were back. "Lead singers grow on trees."

“Man, I don’t know any,” Van said. “Not any good ones, anyway. Even the shitty ones don’t come with a PA.”

Dave knew it was best to let the brothers deliberate. Tempers were likely to flare. Voices were sure to be raised, and Dave would be ready to hop to his feet and play peacemaker if it looked like Van and Earl were poised to exchange blows.

Catching up on the news of the music world would be a tolerable way for Dave to bide his time while the brothers verbally sparred. He pulled out his cell phone and skimmed the latest updates on Pitchfork.com. Apparently, Public Enemy had performed the previous night with The Roots on Jimmy Fallon. Legends sharing the late-night stage with the current heavyweight champions, as far as Dave was concerned. No wonder Pitchfork had it as the top story. Moving on, he learned that September 23 was to be officially declared David Bowie day in Chicago. The Windy City’s mayor had issued a decree and now Ziggy Stardust had his own day. *Might as well*, Dave thought. Bowie, too, was a legend. Even if his day was a publicity stunt for an art exhibit he was opening at the city’s museum, the legend had earned it.

Dave scrolled past the rest of the day’s news without much interest. A lot of bands he didn’t care about were announcing tours and releasing records. A few had even made videos. He couldn’t help feeling a bit jealous. Despite his band’s endless talk of world domination, Placebo Effect didn’t have a music video, which was understandable given that they had never played a real gig, in front of a real audience, in the real world, beyond the reverberating concrete of the Stephenson’s garage.

Dave glanced at the brothers. Their voices had crept up in volume, but they were otherwise playing nice. He turned back to Pitchfork, casting his jealousy for more successful bands aside and convincing himself it was a therapeutic process. Then, buried near the bottom

of the site's feed, he saw news of another legend. This one had been down on his luck for the better part of two decades and had, just two days ago, canceled his band's fall tour of South America for unspecified reasons. Pitchfork ran a picture with the article. The legend had put on a few pounds and his hair was a shadow of what it was during its heyday in the late 1980s, but it was still the same man. Still the legend. Still W. Axl Rose. Dave had an idea.

The brothers had escalated their debate to a level Dave knew would be a waste of energy to disrupt the old-fashioned way. Instead, he pushed a spate of buttons on his phone. Seconds later, the Stephenson brothers broke from their spat mid-insult. Each reached for his phone and examined the incoming message.

"Trust me, guys," Dave said, taking advantage of the brothers' temporary cease-fire, "you want to look at this."

The next three minutes were silent. The brothers retreated to neutral corners of the garage and read the article Dave had forwarded. They finished within seconds of each other. Van spoke first: "Axl Rose?"

Earl followed with a dismay of his own. "Guns N' Roses?"

Dave couldn't help but smile.

Van said, "So, the dude cancels his tour. So what? You have tickets or something?"

"Guy's probably got herpes," Earl said. He looked bored and ready to resume the fight with his brother.

"Yeah, but guys..." Dave leaned forward over his snare drum to emphasize his point. "He's available."

"He's got more LSD in the crack of his ass than Brent Sarzo has in his whole body."

Dave smirked at Van's insight and said, "But he's available."

Earl's response was immediate. "Available for what? Hair-plug surgery?"

"Yeah, you want someone to show us how to write a power ballad on the piano?" Van's remark struck Dave as being only slightly more tactful than his brother's.

"Guys, he could sing for us." The brothers looked at Dave as though he'd grown a guitar tuner out of his head. Dave took their silence to mean they were at least considering the proposition. Axl Rose singing for Placebo Effect was more than a long shot, despite the troubled frontman's sudden availability. The truth was, The Beatles had a better chance of reuniting; and as far as Dave knew, at least two of them were dead. It would have been easy for the drummer to let his bandmates piss on the idea. They might even have a sense of humor about it. Yet, the longer it lingered in the air of the Stephenson's garage, the more it seemed viable in Dave's mind.

"Dude, you should really smoke weed," Earl said. The suggestion seemed odd, given that Dave had never taken an intoxicant of any kind in his life.

Van seconded his brother's prognosis and prescription, "For real."

"Guys, I know it sounds crazy," Dave said. "But what do we have to lose?"

"How 'bout our dignity, dude?" Earl asked.

Dave fired back, "What dignity? We've never even left this garage."

Van interjected, "Alright, Dave. Chill. Let's just— OK, suppose... Man, how do we even get in touch with the dude?"

*I know how you feel inside.
I've been there before.
Something's changing inside you,
And don't you know.
—"Don't Cry"
Use Your Illusion I*

Axl Rose had a Facebook page. It took Dave only a second or two to find it on his phone. In less than two minutes, he had penned Placebo Effect's offer for Rose to join their band.

Dear Axl,

We're a three-piece rock/hip-hop fusion band from Tampa, Florida.

We need a kick-ass singer.

Any ideas?

—Placebo Effect

Earl's lips moved as he read Dave's message. "Any ideas? Any *friggin'* ideas?" he demanded. "What are we asking this guy for, advice? Or do we want him in the band?"

"Dude, it does sound a little passive," Van agreed with his brother for the second time of the day. Dave wondered if it was a record. He could sense another of the brothers' endless debates brewing, so he held the phone with one hand and emphatically pushed the send button with the other.

Earl was hostile. "What the hell?"

Van was concerned. "Dude..."

Dave was realistic. "Like I said, guys. What've we got to lose?"

Here I am, and you're a rocket queen.

I might be a little young,

but, honey, I ain't naive.

—"Rocket Queen"

Appetite for Destruction

Girls liked guys in bands. That was a given. Dave knew it. He also knew that the world was filled with shitty dudes starved for female attention. The shitty dudes roamed the halls at school and plagued the rest of the world like sticky pollen. Dave had been one those dudes. The kind who made a babbling fool of himself while trying to be clever, not realizing he was practically dripping flop sweat on the girls' feet. Guys in bands were on stage. They were *elevated*. Their sweat was different.

After seven months in the Stephensons' garage, Dave was beginning to realize that girls liked guys in bands *that actually played gigs*. Company Jones was a textbook example. No one in that band had any serious chops, but they did have a cool way of designing their name in print so that it spelled out *cojones*. As music went, they were basically a glorified cover band. They specialized in Kings of Leon and other Top 40 jock-rock. They were the kind of band that played the popular kids' favorites, with the occasional original tune that sounded just like the popular kids' favorites. Dave thought they sucked, but at least they gigged. Hell, they practically played every high-school kegger that was worthy of a band. At the end of the night, each guy in the group had his pick of high-school groupies. They had it made.

Placebo Effect had yet to make their debut. For most of the school year, the boys had been in a perpetual state of plotting. From the confines of the Stephensons' garage, they talked of record deals and world tours and supermodels. Brent Sarzo was the usually the culprit behind the band's delusions. Ironically, he was the one guy in Placebo Effect that didn't need the band to get to second base with a girl. He may not have a driver's license, but he seemed to have an entourage of hotties hanging on his every word as though he were a rock-star prophet. Even though Placebo Effect hadn't played so much as a note outside of their practice space, Brent carried himself like he'd already sold 20 million records. He wasn't even

much of a singer. His voice was thin and his pitch was suspect, but he looked the part. That, and he had his own PA system.

Axl Rose wasn't the answer to Placebo Effect's drama. Like Brent Sarzo, Axl was the embodiment of LSD. His selfish antics were as legendary as they were destructive and led to the demise of Guns N' Roses, one of the most daring hard-rock bands of the 20th century. Unlike Brent Sarzo, Axl had *actually* sold 20 million records.

Dave found *Appetite for Destruction* on the iTunes store, and discovered a digitally remastered version celebrating the album's 25th anniversary was selling for \$9.99. A fair price for an agreed-upon classic, Dave reasoned. Then he navigated to one of a handful of free music download sites he frequented and digitally five-fingered the album's opening track.

When the download was complete, he cued up "Welcome to the Jungle" and stretched out across his bedroom floor as the slashing guitars of the album's intro filled his ears. Dave knew his reaching out to the aging rock star was like throwing a message in a bottle into a volcano. So what? Someday when the band was kicking it backstage at Madison Square Garden, it'd make for a good story.

There was a time when Dave thought Placebo Effect was destined for super-stardom. After their first three practices, he knew they had clicked and figured it was only a matter of time before they embarked on a tour bus bound for platinum record sales. In recent months his optimism had waned with the onset of reality. Losing Brent Sarzo was just the latest in a long line of setbacks that kept the band in tuning mode. Now he wondered if Placebo Effect would ever play a gig in front of an actual, live audience. They needed a singer. Maybe he could sing from behind the drums? He'd been the one to lay down the vocal tracks for Place-

bo Effect's two-song demo when Brent was out sick with mono. Then he remembered his singing sucked, or at least Brent thought so.

Axl Rose may be a joke today, but in 1988 he was a rock god. Dave was reminded of this as "Welcome to the Jungle" entered its first chorus: *Sba-na-na-na-na-na- knees-kneeeees. In the jungle, Welcome to the jungle...* Though he respected rock's history, Dave was hardly a connoisseur of it. He gave credit where it was due, and Guns N' Roses (in their early days) deserved props. So what if Axl Rose had put on a few pounds and lost some hair while spending the better part of a decade recording an album everyone thought sucked? (Dave had never heard so much as a single track from *Chinese Democracy*, but he knew the album's story and therefore knew it sucked.) *Appetite*, by comparison, held up. Its kick-ass was timeless.

It was one of the rare albums that begged Dave's biased ears to focus on more than the drums. Axl's vocals couldn't be ignored. They fought their way into your ear canal with a piercing battle call, then made themselves at home when you realized these screams were in tune. They were melodic. The kind that make a drummer lip-sync when no one is watching. The kind that didn't need fancy software to morph it back into key (*Appetite* had been recorded in the late 1980s. Did they even have computers then?)

Dave closed his eyes and pictured himself at a GN'R show at the apex of their fame. He was in the front row surrounded by girls in black leather and teased hair. (The classic Sunset Strip look was somehow still hot.) They were going wild. Why wouldn't they? Listen to the band. When you sound like this, the world strips itself naked and bows at the foot of your stage. Axl Rose must have made a deal with the devil. Dave wondered if the boys in Placebo Effect should consider making a covenant themselves. Then he picked up his phone and noticed he'd received an instant message on Facebook:

Yo,
Listened to your tunes.
You suck, but you got promise.
I'm in Tampa this week.
Wanna jam?
—Axl

Holy shit. Dave sat up just as “Welcome to the Jungle” came to a climactic close.

In the jungle, welcome to the jungle.
Watch it bring you to your—
It's gonna bring you down. HUUUUUH!
—“Welcome to the Jungle”
Appetite for Destruction

“It’s not him, you gullible douche.” Earl slapped his bass and stared at Dave with a look of disgust.

“How do you know?” Dave held his phone as though it bore the visage of the Virgin Mary and no one else could see it. Deep down, he could feel his faith teetering like an uneven backbeat.

“Axl Rose doesn’t talk to shitty dudes like us on Facebook. He’s got people for that.”

Dave considered the odds. “Maybe he likes our songs.” He was referring to the two tracks they’d recorded in this very garage and uploaded to YouTube three months ago. Upon completing the upload, the boys wondered how long it would take to reach Justin Bieber-level fame. To date, the videos had been played 29 times apiece, mostly by Dave.

“Dude,” Van interjected, “we need a singer. Preferably one born last decade.”

“Who doesn’t have herpes,” Earl added.

There was a knock at the door leading to the house. Van and Earl’s mom poked her head into garage like a saint who respected her boys’ sanctuary.

“Boys,” she said with a motherly voice that reminded the band that while they may someday trash hotel rooms in far away continents, for now they were still in a place where you had to wipe your feet before entering. “This nice man is here to see you.” The door from the house swung open. The boys took in their surprise visitor, from his snakeskin boots up to his braided, red cornrows that clung to his head like a ghetto-fied rock star’s exclamation point of style.

“Thank you for the muffin, Mrs. Stephenson,” he said in a deep voice, prompting a smile from the mom.

“You’re so welcome,” she said. “I’m sorry; what was your name, again?”

“Axl.”

“Well, boys... this is Axl. You have fun.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Stephenson,” Axl said like a grown schoolboy.

She turned back for one last reminder, “And remember, boys. No smoking.” Van and Earl tried their best to keep from sinking in embarrassment as their mom made her *I’m watching you* gesture, a reminder that mom was second in command to God, but they were both *always* watching. The door closed, and Placebo Effect was left alone. With Axl Rose.

“She’s right,” Axl said with a grin. “Smoking kills.”

Had the entire cheerleading squad shown up at Placebo Effect’s practice space and invited the band to an impromptu make-out session, Dave wouldn’t be more shocked than he was now. Even as he answered the man’s Facebook message, even as he gave the man the ad-

dress to the Stephenson house, he didn't think he'd ever be standing face-to-face with Axl Rose. Now he was, and the room was quiet—it reminded Dave of sci-fi stories where the good earthlings meet the alien and neither knows what to make of the other.

Dave had to say something. Reaching out to Axl was his idea. *Say something. Anything. Say it before Earl does.*

Earl beat him to the punch. "I thought you'd be taller."

Dave tried not to cringe, even though he couldn't help feeling the same.

Axl chuckled. "I used to be taller in the 80s. Lifts in the boots. Little trick Gene Simmons taught me. Shrinking is a side effect of aging. That, and MTV doesn't play you anymore."

"MTV?" Van tilted his head like a dog trying to understand human speech.

"A relic from the past," Axl said. "Leave it there. No band should ever dream about a better *past*. Now, exactly how old are you guys?"

The boys looked at each other as though Axl had asked them to name the first video MTV ever aired.

"Anyone at least got a driver's license?"

"Learner's permit," Dave said.

"Well, you're doing better than me, kid. Doesn't matter. This band isn't going anywhere until we work out some serious kinks. Let's do that first tune."

The boys stood in place like their shoes were made of heavy metal. Dave asked, "You mean, you want to play 'Codswallop for Haters'?"

Axl fixed the band with a drill sergeant's stare. "That's the name of the song?" His voice offered no hint of approval. "Who came up with that?"

“We all did,” Dave said. He could feel his bandmates turn on him. “Mostly me, I guess.”

Axl took two steps toward the boys and now seemed at least a foot taller. “It’s a good name,” he said. “Now get on your instruments and play it. It’s a school night and I’m betting the Van Halen brothers over here haven’t done a lick of homework.”

The band didn’t have time to laugh. They did as commanded. Once they’d armed themselves with instruments, they stared at each other as though what came next were a complete mystery.

Dave said in a quiet voice, “I guess I’ll count it off?”

“Hold on there, Tommy Lee.” Axl held out his hand toward Dave like a traffic cop, then turned to the brothers. “You guys in tune?”

Van and Earl looked down at their instruments.

“Play an E,” Axl said.

Earl looked confused. Van spoke up, “Uh, which one of us?”

“Both of you.”

The boys complied and even their drummer knew they were out of tune. A few months back, Van had declared that his guitar being sharp and his brother’s bass being flat produced a dissonant balance that would define Placebo Effect’s signature sound. Dave appreciated the metaphor, but thought it was a ridiculous idea from a musical standpoint. Still, he hadn’t fought for the alternative.

“You’re flat,” Axl charged pointing to Earl. “And you’re sharp,” he said to Van.

Van countered, “Well, actually, that’s our signature sound.” His voice lacked the conviction it had when he first explained the theory to Dave months earlier.”

Axl smirked. “Let me guess. You brothers haven’t gotten along since birth, so playing out of tune is a metaphor for your relationship and your band’s big artistic statement.”

Axl’s belittling tone made Van feel unoriginal.

“Look, kid, here’s a bit of a history lesson. The Black Crowes had that idea about 30 years ago. You know what happened? A producer who knew a lot more about the music biz than they did told them to get in tune and they’ll make a record. So they did, and they toured the world and made millions of dollars and slept with the hottest chicks on each of the seven continents. Moral of the story? The audience doesn’t give a shit about your sibling rivalry. They wanna rock; and if you don’t give it to them, they’ll get it from the next band. Rock and roll doesn’t have many rules, but playing in tune is one of them. So what’s it gonna be?”

Silence. Earl looked to his brother as though Van being the older Stephenson by two-and-a-half minutes somehow made him the wiser soul.

Earl blurted out, “Who are The Black Crowes?” So much for letting the wiser soul do the talking. Van shot his brother a scolding glare, then reached in his guitar case and pulled out a tuner. A minute later the Stephensons were in tune and Placebo Effect was ready to jam an original song with Axl Rose on lead vocals.

“Count it off,” Axl barked, prompting Dave to sit up on his throne and hold his sticks high in the air as if the band were about to play Wembley Stadium. The drummer banged his sticks together with such force that the one in his right hand unleashed a crack down its center that looked like a violent split at a fault line. Dave glanced at the now-useless stick, then up at his bandmates. The brothers stared at him with blank faces.

Axl tried to hold back a laugh. “Let me guess. That’s your only pair.”

Dave’s body language wilted as he answered, “Uh, yeah.”

Axl went to the door that leads to the house and opened it. Every molecule of optimistic air whooshed from the garage as the boys realized their once-in-a-lifetime chance with a bona fide rock star was about to vanish forever like a one-hit wonder from the pop charts, never to return again. A fledgling band's big break foiled at the hands of an overzealous drummer whose only mistake was arming himself with weak hickory. Dave tried to look at the bright side: Placebo Effect was right back where it was an hour ago. And he needed a new pair of drumsticks.

"OK," Axl said, locking eyes with Dave, "go in the house and ask Mrs. Stephenson for a bottle of oregano. The bigger the better. Go."

Dave didn't think. He didn't argue. He didn't even ask *why*. He hopped from behind his drum kit and scurried to the Stephenson kitchen on a mission for oregano.

Axl turned his attention to Van. "You got an acoustic?"

Van nodded. "Uh, in my room. Yeah."

"Get it."

"What are we—" Van caught Axl's scowl and stopped his insubordinate questioning mid-sentence. He took off his guitar and followed Dave into the house.

Once the boys returned with the requested items, Axl sat them on the ground and positioned the band in a tight circle, so they could see each other.

The singer stood over the band, then leaned back against a dusty workbench and said, "Play 'Codswallop.'"

"Dude," Van objected, "it's an electric song."

Axl folded his arms. "It's a song. Notes and rhythm. Playing acoustic gives you patience and instills discipline. You can hide sloppiness behind distortion and cymbal crashes, but acoustic is pure. So let's hear it at tempo and volume."

Dave looked at his plastic bottle of oregano as if it were an accordion. "What do I do with this?" he said. Axl snatched the oregano from Dave's hand and held it in his own. He turned his palm up and shook the bottle from front to back, causing the oregano to dance in a rhythm Dave saw could increase or decrease in tempo depending the holder's technique.

"Shaker," Axl said as he tossed the bottle into Dave's lap. "This is how Don Henley auditions drummers for Eagles. Give it a try."

Earl couldn't help butting in. "The Eagles?"

"Not *The* Eagles," Axl corrected. "It's just Eagles. Like you guys are Placebo Effect. Not *The* Placebo Effect."

Earl looked confused, which meant Axl could turn his attention back to the drummer. Dave held the shaker as Axl had. He shook it back and forth with little grace and even less rhythm.

Axl looked at Dave like an encouraging teacher who wasn't going to give his student a free pass. "Think of it as your hi-hat. Eighth notes front to back. One and two and three and four. The whole note is on the front swing. The half is on the back. Try it."

Dave shook the bottle from front to back with little improvement.

"Count as you play," Axl directed. "One and two and three and four."

Dave felt like he'd never played a musical note in his life. Then he remembered three years earlier, when he was a wishful 12-year-old who'd never before sat behind a drum set, and recalled the hundreds of YouTube videos he'd watched about learning how to play. All of

them advised prospective drummers to count the rhythm during the learning phase, just as Axl was instructing now. He tried again.

Dave's voice was soft: "One and two and three and four." His rhythm shed its awkwardness and with each shake tightened before his bandmates' eyes. He couldn't help but smile, yet he could feel Axl wasn't ready to celebrate.

"Now," Axl said, as though the hard part were next, "imagine your snare hits are on the two and four counts. Put an accent there by hitting the forward shake a tad *harder*. One and *two* and three and *four*."

Dave followed suit and was surprised at how easy it came. He beamed up at Axl with the grin of a first-time skeet shooter who actually hit the clay target.

Axl was stoic as he said, "OK, boys. 'Codswallop.' Count it off."

*I've been walking the streets at night,
Just tryin' to get it right.
It's hard to see with so many around.
You know I don't like being stuck in the crowd.
—"Patience"
Lies*

After Googling *Axl Rose acoustic*, Dave learned that in 1988 Guns N' Roses released their follow-up album to *Appetite for Destruction*. An eight-song EP (which meant extended-play record, as Dave soon learned from Wikipedia), *Lies* had four live tracks (mostly covers Dave didn't recognize) and four entirely acoustic tracks of original songs, including "Patience," the only single released from the album. Wikipedia also informed Dave that the song eventually peaked at number 4 on the Billboard 100. Whatever that was.

It didn't take Dave long to find the video for "Patience" on YouTube. A short ad for a new line of Beats by Dre headphones played before the music video, which gave Dave just enough time to notice the video had collected more than 55 million views. He glanced down to the video's first comment: "Can't believe it's been 25 years..."

The video's opening shot focused on a reel-to-reel tape recorder commencing its roll. *Jesus*, Dave thought. *How old are these guys?* A light strum of the first few chords reminded Dave he had heard this song before. It was a relic buried deep in the vault of rock history, but he'd heard it. It was the kind of song kept alive by corporate radio trying to sell ads to old dudes who were Dave's age when "Patience" was released.

The camera's initial pan around the band's well-adorned recording studio showed Guns N' Roses in their prime. At first glance they may all look alike, but the calculated composition of each shot introduced the musicians as though they were characters in an epic film. They were individuals, with depth.

Dave always thought the 1980s were a decade of absurd style. Rock stars aiming to look like girls by donning eyeliner and skin-tight leather pants, while killing the ozone with multiple cans of aerosol hairspray made him eternally thankful he was born more than a decade later. But GN'R seemed to transcend stereotype. Their style had grit in its teeth. They were cool.

The camera held on Axl. Dave felt like he did when he gazed at an old photograph of his dad. Like he was staring at a ghost.

He'd seen Axl just hours earlier, but the person in the video seemed like someone else. It was as though the onward beat of rock's metronome halted its march just long enough for someone to capture the moment with a picture, then pressed on for another 25 years. You

could tell it was Axl if you stared at the eyes. The rest of him floated as though he'd been created in a lab by some mad scientist on a quest to create the perfect rock star. His hair was long and straight. His skin looked like a doll's. His frame was the kind of rail-thin that could rock sold-out stadiums on a nightly basis.

As the video played, Dave detected a narrative and honed in on its meaning. The story was set in an old hotel, the kind that reminded Dave of California, even though he'd never been there. Members of the band hold their place in each scene, while the patrons of the hotel randomly disappear around them through a series of tasteful dissolves. Dave felt like he understood the intended metaphor of fame's fleeting nature and the loneliness that ensues when the world moves on without you. In one particularly poignant sequence, Slash, the band's iconic guitar player, lies shirtless on a bed with a cigarette dangling from his mouth. He handles a boa constrictor while an array of scantily clad groupies dissolve in and out of the frame beside him. Slash doesn't offer so much as a glance in their direction, content instead to play with his snake. Dave felt like he understood that metaphor, too.

The most telling scene of the video involves Axl sitting alone in a dimly lit hotel room watching videos of Guns N' Roses on TV. He leans forward with eyes that pine for something he's lost, like looking at an old yearbook and realizing you can't go back. He wraps his arms around himself as a quick cut to the TV reveals an action shot of Slash and him onstage. Dave felt a lurch in the pit of his stomach and wondered if Axl could have possibly known how prophetic the scene would prove to be 25 years later.

Even the greatest bands break up, but most of the popular ones find a way to set aside their personal differences and reunite down the road when the money's right. In Guns N' Roses' case, all the money in the world couldn't sway the original members from their staunch

position that they would *never* again share the stage as a band. Dave had learned from the Internet that the band's reason for staying on a permanent hiatus was singular: Axl. Somewhere along the way, the great rock star had succumbed to LSD. The fallout included his own band turning against him in a mutiny that forced Axl to go the better part of 20 years with an outfit that was GN'R in name only, a patchwork of mercenary musicians hounded without mercy by the tabloid press.

Watching the final seconds of "Patience," Dave wondered if Axl's coming to Placebo Effect's garage had something to do with the singer's desire to go back to a time when the music was pure for him. Before the fame and the clichéd problems that come with it had tarnished what used to be fun.

Prior to the end of today's rehearsal, Axl had told Dave he needed to spend at least 15 minutes a night with his oregano shaker and a metronome, exploring various tempos with perfect *meter* (which Dave learned from Axl was a fancy word for rhythmic pulse). When Dave informed him that he didn't own a metronome, Axl shook his head in disappointment and realized why Dave didn't understand what meter meant. He reached into his pocket and produced a beat-up plastic box about the size of a cigarette pack and laid it in Dave's lap. "Get to know each other," Axl had said. When Dave turned the timekeeper on, he was shocked to find it didn't come to life.

"Find a 9-volt," Axl charged, with a look that asked if he was responsible to do the thinking for the whole band.

That night, while sitting on the edge of his bed, Dave spent nearly 34 minutes chasing the metronome's pulse with his homemade shaker. He hated the feelings of inadequacy that consumed him when he knew he was off-tempo. Yet when he locked onto the unwavering

beep, a rhythmic tuning fork went off inside him. This was what it felt like to be the beat. This was rhythm. This was meter.

Dave picked up the metronome and ran his fingers over its weathered contours. He wondered where the timekeeper's journey had taken it, and imagined the stories of rock-star debauchery it could tell if only it had a voice instead of an incessant beep. How many Guns N' Roses jams had it witnessed? How many fights had it endured, remaining mute while the band it loved ripped each other to shreds? Like a child peering around a corner while his parents argued for the millionth time, this metronome had seen the demise of one of rock's greatest bands and was powerless to do anything to stop it.

Dave had been the kid peering around the corner. His parents gave up caring if he heard them fight when he was five. They finalized their divorce when he was nine. A year later, Dave got a drum set for his 10th birthday—a gift he attributed to his mother, with whom he spent most of his time. She was the one who stayed in Tampa while his father traveled the country in an attempt to conquer a new sales racket every 18 months.

Dave had learned to play by watching YouTube videos and banging away on his drums in the garage. Even in the Florida summer, he would spend countless hours practicing in heat that made the paint on his tom-toms peel. His mom never bothered him. Not because she didn't care. An adolescent boy venting his frustrations with a pair of hickory sticks in a sweltering garage seemed an appropriate release of pre-pubescent tension. The constant pounding and crashing meant she knew where he was, which was more than she could say for his father.

Now the metronome was in Tampa with Dave, who made a promise that while the journey may not be as adventurous as GN'R's, the pain was over. This family would get along

*I'll never find anyone to replace you.
Guess I'll have to make it through,
This time, oh this time...without you.*
—“Estranged”
Use Your Illusion II

“Hold it. Hold it!” Axl barked while throwing both arms in the air like a beat cop holding up traffic from both directions. “That’s a train wreck,” he said. The members of the band tried to hold their composure, but couldn’t help wilting like a trio of soldiers who’d failed to please their drill sergeant and now faced an afternoon of latrine cleaning.

This time Axl locked his focus on Earl, who seemed to struggle more than the rest of the band. The singer stood at a whiteboard he had brought to the practice space to help the band organize song structure. The board turned out to be a helpful aid for other lessons the boys had slept through, until now.

Axl said, “It’s not rocket science, Earl. It’s algebra. There’s a simple mnemonic for multiplying two binomials.”

Earl looked as though Axl had just asked him to sight-read the Brandenburg Concerto’s second movement. The bass player’s head was ready to explode.

“Foil,” Axl said with a soothing voice. “F. O. I. L. That’s all you have to remember.” He wrote the words on the board under the equation: $(6+4)(7+2)=X$. “First, outer, inner, last.”

Dave never imagined when he sent a request for the great Axl Rose to join his band that the singer would end up tutoring them in math. But the agreement sat well with Mrs. Stephenson and proved to be enough of an incentive for Van and Earl’s mom to allow Axl to conduct band rehearsal for three hours *every* day of the school week.

Axl's demand for precise guitar-tuning and laser-focused drum meter was nothing compared to his imposition of sound mathematics. He tossed the dry-erase marker into Earl's lap, a cue for the bass player to rise and step to the board. Dave, who had always understood the principles of cross-multiplication and distributive law, nodded to Earl in a way he hoped encouraged his bandmate before his slow march to the scholastic gallows.

"First," Axl said.

"Six times seven?" Earl had hesitation in his voice.

"Is?" Axl queried.

"42?"

"You *asking* me?" Axl demanded. "Write it down." Earl did. Axl kept the pressure on. "Outer."

"Six times two equals 12," Earl said with a bit more confidence.

"Take it home," Axl urged.

"Inner," Earl said, "four times seven is 28. Last...four times two is eight."

"Solve for X." Axl's voice was that of a teacher who couldn't help being proud when his student was on the right path.

" $42+12+28+8$...carry the two. Equals...90." He turned to Axl for confirmation.

Axl turned to Van and Dave. "Is he right, Van?" Van picked his head up from his notebook, having just completed the computation on his own.

"90," Van said. Dave nodded in agreement.

"You sure?" Axl tried to plant a reasonable doubt, to offset the band's shared confidence.

Earl spoke first, "Final answer."

Axl looked at the board and held his stare for several beats, then said, “Nice work, boys.” The band let out a triumphant sigh and exchanged looks of accomplishment as though they had just performed a complicated song without the slightest hiccup. Even Axl showed his approval with a head nod and what might pass as a smile.

In the previous five weeks (26 rehearsal sessions if anyone cared to count, which the boys did), Placebo Effect had performed their three original tunes more times than any of them could count. Through it all, their conductor had drilled them like a sergeant in pursuit of rock-and-roll perfection. No matter how focused the boys remained or how impressed they may have been with themselves upon a song’s conclusion, Axl pushed them to do more.

Every moment of every rehearsal was recorded. Axl made the band listen to themselves and learn from their mistakes and wins like a football coach presiding over his team in the film room. It wasn’t exactly what the boys had envisioned the path to rock stardom would be, but Axl had related again and again that *no one rolls out of bed and plays Wembley Stadium*. When it came to interjecting stories of his own band’s climb to the top, Axl proved to be a captivating raconteur, spinning tales of GN’R’s marathon practice sessions that often ended with the band sleeping in their rehearsal space atop their instruments. Instead of an alarm clock, the members of Guns N’ Roses would wake to a deafening power chord from Slash’s Les Paul. Then they would do it all again.

Axl stood over the palm-sized digital recorder he had rigged to a tool bench in the garage and held his finger over the record button. “To your instruments, boys. Let’s do ‘Codswallop.’”

The boys knew the drill and hopped to their posts. Dave gave Axl a look, signaling that they were ready, and the singer pushed record. Axl said, “Rolling.”

Dave snapped his sticks together for four beats that were as tight as a metronome's pulse and the band launched into what was becoming their flagship song. Each member of the band locked into his part. As he pounded away at his drums, Dave was overcome with a sensation that seemed to command his every limb. Placebo Effect ebbed and flowed and punched like a living organism, alive and controlled not by a brain, but by a heart. This, Dave thought, was a feeling he craved. Playing music like a band—a tight band—was the closest thing to a drug he'd ever known. He was hooked, and so was the band.

When the punch of the song's final note sustained and reverberated off the walls of the Stephensons' garage, the boys looked at each other as though they had just returned to earth from a three-minute, out-of-body experience. Axl held his silence for a few beats and the boys waited in anticipation of what their master would say of their performance. The singer maintained a stoic face, but couldn't hide a faint smile. Before turning off the recorder, he let slip two words the boys had never yet heard from *anyone* who'd experienced their music, much less one of the most dynamic lead singers in rock history.

"Not bad," Axl pronounced.

The affirmation nearly brought the boys to tears. It *felt* good to play as a cohesive unit. And to hear Axl confirm that they *sounded* good was enough to pump Placebo Effect with the naive pride of soldiers just out of boot camp who, armed with the sudden praise of their drill instructor, feel like they're ready for war.

Earl asked, "So, does that mean you're gonna start singing now?"

Axl had his coat halfway on when he turned to Earl and gave his reply: "No."

The boys exchanged puzzled looks. Gone was the pride of moments ago and now they each silently wondered if Axl would make them repeat boot camp.

Axl looked the boys over. “Me singing for you guys would be a gimmick at best,” he said. “You’re better than that. That’s why you have to find your own singer.”

Van felt cheated. “So why did we—“

“Six weeks ago, you guys sounded rough,” Axl explained in an honest tone. “In that shape, the right singer would have passed on *you*. You’re a different band now. You know how to play together. You know how to work. Now all you need is a singer who’s as hungry as you.”

Dave understood Axl’s point. The former Guns N’ Roses frontman knew how the world saw him, and didn’t want his baggage tarnishing Placebo Effect’s reputation before it had a chance to live on its own merit. Dave spoke up, “How do we find a singer, then?”

Axl opened the door to the house and looked back just before his exit. “Same way you found me,” he said. “Let your fingers do the walking on the World Wide Web.”

*I’m out here on my own,
And drifting all alone.
If it doesn’t show, give it time...
To read between the lines.
—“Estranged”
Use Your Illusion II*

Studies have claimed that, even today, nearly 80% of the entire Internet is pornography-related. The remaining 20% of the Web, the boys in Placebo Effect would soon learn, was apparently filled with YouTube videos of people singing cover songs. Yet for a guy whose best professional days seemed to be behind him, Axl Rose proved to be quite the savvy online con-

sumer, exemplified by his showing Placebo Effect how to cut past the garbage and hone the band's search to relevant singing candidates in the Tampa area.

Axl explained to the band that there were three crucial qualities they were looking for in a vocalist. Age was first; Axl made it clear they needed a singer who was in high school. Location was next; the singer needed to live in the Tampa area. And finally, ability; the singer had to be good. Good, Axl further explained, was a relative quality, one the boys were likely to disagree on. According to Axl, a certain amount of disagreement was healthy for a band. In the end, they would know *good* when they saw it.

After nearly an hour of watching dozens of videos that featured Tampa teens singing the latest top 40 pop hits (which the band agreed to be laughably atrocious), the boys had their three finalists. The first was a classic metal-head. Username: zeketheslayer. Zeke had long, jet-black hair that complimented his black Mastodon T-shirt and Flying V guitar, also black. True to his username, Zeke sang a Slayer cover. His rendition of "Seasons of the Abyss" was spot-on and would have made Slayer vocalist Tom Araya proud. Even more impressive was the way Zeke played guitar, running his fingers up and down the fretboard with a master's ease. Not bad, the boys thought.

Next was a pretty boy. Username: hitmaker. He was clean-cut, with the kind of good looks that belonged on the Disney Channel. He did have a set of pipes, though, and proved it when he belted out a solid version of Fall Out Boy's "Number One with a Bullet" over an instrumental track. A better wardrobe and haircut might have made the kid a legitimate candidate, but the boys felt he looked too much like Brent Sarzo. That was a deal-breaker.

Next was a girl. Username: jennarocks. She wore a tight Minor Threat shirt, which the boys would have noted as a plus if they weren't so distracted by her arrow-straight, bright

pink hair. She looked right into the camera with green eyes and locked onto each member of Placebo Effect as if she were grabbing hold of the band's collective soul.

"Hi," she said in a soft and almost nervous voice. "I'm Jenna, and this is an oldie."

The boys were captivated and watched as Jenna sang an a-cappella version of Billie Holiday's "God Bless the Child." The band didn't know the song, but were moved by the singer's ranging abilities, highlighted by her sustained vibrato that intensified as the performance progressed. She couldn't have been more than 16—a teenager, just like them. Yet her ability conveyed experience, as though she knew about a world beyond the halls of high school.

When the tune was over, Jenna opened her eyes and locked them on her audience. Then she touched her hand to her lips and blew a kiss that jumped off the computer monitor, split equally into three, and landed on each of the boys' cheeks. Had the band glanced at Axl, they would have seen him roll his eyes at Jenna's showy gesture. But the aging singer had to hand it to the girl. Even he knew she was the best choice, based on ability alone. The kiss meant he didn't have to explain the nuances of her performance to the boys. The kiss was Jenna's way of saying *pick me*. And the boys did.

"She rocks," Van said. "Now what?"

Axl grinned, "Now you drop a few recordings in her lap and ask her to jam."

Dave was one step ahead and already had his phone in hand. No sense letting destiny linger.

Axl said, "One condition." The boys paused their excitement and looked at their leader. "It's time for you guys to take off the training wheels." None of the boys understood, and each held his gaze on Axl awaiting further enlightenment.

“Don’t mention my name. You guys have worked hard. You sound like a band. No need to carry a flag with my name on it. It’ll just attract the wrong kind of drama. Placebo Effect is better than that.”

Dave understood why Axl invoked his chosen strategy. He could imagine the complexity involved in trying to explain to jennarocks that the band’s mentor was a 1980s rock icon who’d spent the last two decades on the fringe of pop-culture excommunication. Axl wanted Placebo Effect to walk its own path, without his muddied name to help or hurt the band’s cause.

A day after informing the boys they were on their own, Axl sent a parting gift to the Stephensons’ garage via UPS. The uniformed driver needed a hand truck to load three big boxes into the garage. The boys had procured a utility knife and were freeing the mystery contents from captivity before Mrs. Stephenson had even signed for them. Out of the plastic foam stuffing, Earl produced what looked like a piece of cardboard. He was about to discard it when Dave noticed the writing.

“It’s a note,” Dave said, taking the card from Earl, who was fine with letting Dave be the band’s official reader.

Dave looked it over and read aloud: “Never pawn an instrument, no matter how bleak things get. But know that pawnshops can be a musician’s goldmine. Here’s proof. —Axl. P.S. You can pay me back when the record company cuts you your first royalty check.”

By the time Dave had finished reading, the Stephenson brothers had pulled the gift from its packaging. The boys stared in awe at what Axl had sent them. It looked like it had been dragged around the world and witnessed more bar fights than the boys may ever know.

But it was now theirs. For the first time in Placebo Effect's young history, the band had its own PA system.

"Why do you play music?" Axl's question had caught Dave off-guard when the two were alone in the garage after one of the more grueling practices the band had endured. It was on the tip of the drummer's tired mind to say *money for nothing and chicks for free*, but Dave thought better of letting the timeless Dire Straits lyric do the talking for him. Over the years, he had heard the gamut of answers to this query offered by legitimate rock stars, who always managed to spin the question into a philosophical sound bite. Dave couldn't think of any grand answer, so he looked Axl Rose in the eyes and spoke from the heart.

"It just feels right."

Axl held his gaze on Dave, prompting the young drummer to brace himself for a lecture. But the frontman for the once-great Guns N' Roses simply nodded in agreement.

"Yeah," Axl said, "it does."

Dave respected Axl's decision to let the band handle its own affairs without his real-time interference. Axl promised to be in close contact through Dave with post-practice calls and would offer any advice or guidance the band needed.

The teenage drummer couldn't help but chuckle when he added Axl Rose to his contacts. His phone now held the kind of social currency that would be the talk of the school for weeks. Yet it was a card Dave knew he could never play, no matter how volatile the high-

school halls would get. That was the deal; and Dave, Axl could tell, was a drummer of his word.

*Rags to riches, or so they say,
You gotta keep pushin' for the fortune and fame.
You know it's all a gamble when it's just a game.
You treat it like a capital crime,
Everybody's doin' their time.
—“Paradise City”
Appetite for Destruction*

Jenna's hair was even pinker in real life than it was on YouTube. The singer with the voice of a rock goddess strolled into the Stephensons' garage like she had been downloaded from the Universe of Cool. She wore black boots, black jeans, and a black tank top that clung to her skinny frame in a way that looked Photoshopped. Slung around her back was a guitar case. *Jesus*, Dave thought. *She plays guitar?*

The Stephenson brothers played it cool and pretended to tweak their instruments as Jenna quietly introduced herself and settled in an unoccupied corner of the garage, where she laid down her guitar case and readied herself for the imminent jam session. Dave couldn't help but stare from behind his drum kit. One aspect of Jenna caught him by surprise and captured his fascination. Glasses. The girl with the golden pipes, who looked like a teenage rock star, wore dark-rimmed glasses. *She's smart*, Dave thought. *On top of everything else, she's smart.*

Jenna had her back turned to the boys when she slid her guitar around her neck. She spun around and revealed another accessory that added to her mystique. The girl played a Les Paul. Jenna looked at Dave and said, “You're Dave.”

Dave searched for something clever to say and managed, “Yeah.”

Jenna nodded. "You said you guys had an extra amp."

Earl interjected with a condescending tone, "You don't have an amp?"

"I have a Marshall Half Stack, but I rode my bike here."

A bike. At last Jenna revealed a piece of herself that the boys could relate to.

Dave tried to deepen his voice as he spoke up. "Yeah, we've got an extra amp. Right, Van?"

Van pointed at the small box in the corner of the garage. It was the first amplifier he'd owned, a birthday present received when he turned 12. Even now it looked childish, the musical equivalent of an outgrown tricycle. Jenna plugged in and strummed a few twangy chords. Before any of the boys could apologize, she whipped out a distortion pedal, plugged it in and turned a few dials on the amp. She pressed her foot on the pedal and let loose a massive power chord that shook the Stephensons' garage to its core.

Cocked and loaded, Jenna looked to Van. "Gimme an E," she said like someone who wouldn't think of commencing a jam session without first making sure she was in tune with her fellow players. Van complied and seconds later the trio of stringed instruments was in tune.

Jenna stepped up to the mic of the new PA system, which looked as though it had been with the band for years. "OK, boys," she said with a voice that reverberated with amplification, "lets's do 'Codswallop for Haters.' Count it off."

Dave was entranced, yet managed to slap his sticks together for a four-count and the band launched into their flagship tune.

“She looked like Hayley Williams, you know, from Paramore? Except she had pinker hair. And she played guitar. And, you won’t believe this, she wears glasses. But like, not all the time, just when it’s right. You know?” Dave had the unrestrained giddiness of a schoolboy as he described the band’s initial jam with Jenna to a reserved Axl over the phone.

“So she looked the part,” Axl said, “but can she sing?”

“And get this,” Dave continued to gush, increasing the pace of his speech from a hurried allegro to an almost frantic vivace. “She shows up and says she didn’t bring her amp ‘cuz she rode her bike, so we all thought she meant a bike, like a regular bike with pedals and a chain. But when we were done and we all went to the driveway, she drove off on a motorcycle. Her bike was a motorcycle!”

Axl suddenly voiced concern, “Is that legal?”

“She’s 15. So, yeah.”

“She wear a helmet?”

Dave paused as he pictured the way Jenna sat atop the *bike* with the engine roaring and tied her pink hair up, then covered it with a helmet that would have been right at home in the European countryside during World War II.

“Yeah,” Dave assured, “she wore a helmet.”

“OK,” Axl said, steering the conversation from public safety to current events, “how’d she sing?”

Dave thought of all the ways he could describe how Jenna’s voice made the band sound like rock stars. He longed to feel the way he did from behind the drums as the group

locked in and pulsed through their songs, led by a singer who knew just how to drive each note around the corner and into the face of anyone who came within earshot. He thought of all the ways he might describe to Axl how Placebo Effect had finally found its lead singer.

But all he managed to say was, “Awesome. She was awesome.”

“Yeah, well, I’m sure you guys are ready for a six-album record contract and a world tour. You record the session?”

Not only had Dave recorded the session, he’d practically been listening to it on an endless loop right up until Axl called.

“Oh yeah,” Dave said. “It sounds...”

“Awesome. I get it,” Axl grunted. “Let me be the judge of that. Send me the file. I’ll take a listen and give you some notes for next practice.”

Silence.

“Dave?” Axl’s voice had the hint of a dad calling his son’s name with a sneaking suspicion that the kid had committed a foolish mistake. “You set up another practice, right?”

More silence.

“Dave, did you at least ask Jenna to join the band?”

Sustained silence.

“Dave?”

“Uh, no.”

Axl couldn’t help cracking a smile while trying to remember if he was ever *that* young. “Jesus, Dave. What if Blondie had been so gaga over Deborah Harry that they forgot to ask her to join the band?”

“Blondie?”

“Call her, Dave.” Axl’s tone was that of a stern parent during a teachable moment.

“Text her. Send her a message on Facebook. Do whatever you kids do to talk to each other. Tell her you guys have thought about it and want her to join the band. Got it?”

Dave started planning the words he would use.

“Dave?”

“OK, OK. I’ll do it right now.”

“Damn right you will. And, Dave? Don’t forget to send me the file of today’s practice.”

Time just fades the pages in my book of memories.

—“Yesterdays”

Use Your Illusion II

The number had been dialed and the phone was ringing before he settled on what he was going to say when she answered. The loose assembly of words that sounded right enough during rehearsal had fled, along with his last ounce of self-confidence. They sneaked out in tandem through the back of his brain, overrun and replaced by waves of panic and flop sweat. Three rings; now four. If he hung up now there’d be no harm, right? Of course, he couldn’t get away clean. She has caller ID. Everyone does. If only he could travel back in time to the 1980s, when everything went easier with a bottle of hair spray and a pinch of angel dust.

She answered on the fifth ring.

“Hello?” She sounded optimistic, like it could be a friend or someone she talks to every day who was calling her. The sound of her voice leveled him.

“Hellooo?” Her second greeting was still playful, which inspired him to wrestle his vocal chords from the invisible death grip that had turned him into a mute.

“Hi,” he managed. “It’s me.”

“It’s— Who is this?”

“It’s Axl.”

Silence.

“If this is your idea of a joke, I don’t think it’s funny.”

“It’s me. It’s Axl. It really is.”

“I’m hanging up. And if you call me again, I’m calling the police.”

“Is that ‘cuz you still think I’m an impostor, or you believe it’s me? God, the way you sounded just now reminded me of that time in Paris when you threatened to jump from the Arc de Triomphe if I didn’t leave you alone. Right around the time of ‘November Rain.’ Weren’t those the good ol’ days, huh, Steph?”

“Axl?”

“Yeah, I’m still here.”

Silence for a few beats. Axl knew it wasn’t his to break.

“I read somewhere that your tour was canceled.”

“South America just didn’t feel right.”

“What does?”

“Not much these days. But I thought I’d give Tampa a try.”

More silence. Axl let it hang for a few seconds.

“Stephanie?”

“I’m not that person anymore, Axl. That was a long time ago.”

“I’m still the same guy. Little fatter. Can’t hit all the notes like I used to.”

“I have a life here. I have a husband. *We* have a daughter.”

“How is she?”

“She doesn’t need her life to be made complicated. Neither do I.”

“I never wanted to complicate things, Steph.”

“No, you wanted to be the brightest star on the boulevard.”

“I was young.”

“We were all young. Now we just are.”

“Does she know who I am?”

“I can’t have this right now, Axl.”

“Steph, please. Does she know?”

“God dammit, Axl. She can work the Internet. She knows.”

Silence. The death grip was back on Axl’s vocal chords.

“Axl...stay the fuck away.”

Call me. Wanna hear.

That was Jenna’s response when Dave had texted to inform her that the band had made up its mind. *Call her.* It had taken him the better part of an hour to compose a simple text and now she wanted him to call. She wanted to talk, in real time. Could she think the news was bad? Is it possible that after the blistering jam she’d led Placebo Effect on that the band would do anything other than drop to its knees and beg her to join? Dave hovered his thumb over the portion of his phone’s screen that contained Jenna’s number. Beads of sweat formed on his forehead and the drummer wondered if kids who came up during Axl’s time, digitally

prehistoric as it may have been, were somehow better equipped to handle social pressure since they couldn't hide behind the detached medium of texting and were forced to talk on the phone all the time.

He pushed the number and could feel his heart race as he saw his screen's status: Calling Jenna Rocks.

She picked up on the first ring.

"What up, Dave?"

"Yeah, uh. Hi. It's Dave."

"Kinda figured, *Dave*. Said so on my caller ID."

"Oh. Yeah, I guess it would." Dave hopped to his feet and paced around his room.

"So, you guys are pretty tight," Jenna said.

"Who? The band?"

"Yes, the *band*, Dave. You play together like you actually practice."

Finally, Dave had something he knew he could talk about. He could tell her about Axl Rose and the grueling sessions he'd put the band through and how far the group had come since Brent Sarzo had walked out on them. Then he remembered the deal he and Axl had made and held his tongue before it could break the pact.

Dave said, "Yeah, we practice a lot. It helps."

Jenna hardly let Dave finish his sentence before launching her own. "I've been in a bunch of bands that thought they were too good to practice." *Of course she had*, Dave thought. Anyone as good as her didn't get that way by playing alone in a bedroom. "I go to Blake and the talent there is pretty top-notch. But those kids..."

Those kids were awesome, Dave thought. Blake was Tampa's magnet school for the arts, a high school you had to *audition* for. He imagined Jenna was the school's reigning rock star.

"...those kids are posers," Jenna said. "They may have the chops, but they have no feel. Not like you guys."

"Us?" Dave didn't know what to say. Other than Axl Rose, no one had ever told him that his band was any good.

"Oh my god," Jenna huffed. The exasperation in her tone put Dave on alert. "Sorry," she said, "my mom is in one of her moods."

Dave didn't know what to say, so he settled for "Yeah?"

"She shuts herself in her room and plays this poppy crap from the 80s. Her way of letting the world know she's depressed. It's embarrassing. Can you hear it?"

Dave couldn't and chalked it up to a benefit of modern cell phones and their ability to minimize background noise. Pop fluff from the 80s wasn't his thing.

"It's just so pathetic. Anyway, I've got a proposition for you, Dave. That is, if you want me in the band."

If we want you? Dave couldn't wait to tell her the good news. "We want you, Jenna."

"Fancy," Jenna said. "Nice to be wanted by three dudes. Though, the brothers aren't really my type."

Not really her type? Did that mean what he thought it meant? What did it mean? Dave was circling his room at a frantic pace in orbits that grew tighter with each pass.

Jenna said, "So that's settled. On to our first gig."

Dave couldn't believe what he was hearing. *If the brothers aren't really her type, that must mean that I am, right?*

“There’s this show at my school,” Jenna continued, “sort of like a battle of the bands. I know music isn’t a competition and all that, but we’re gonna play that show. And we’re gonna rock.”

Dave didn’t know what to say, so he settled for, “Yeah.”

Two weeks.

That’s how long the new Placebo Effect had to prepare for their first gig in the real world. Not just any gig, but a battle of the bands at a high school of art prodigies. No one in the band seemed worried about being ready. Dave felt like he was going to puke on the floor of the Stephensons’ garage.

Earl smacked his bass and declared his position. “Battles of the bands are lame.” Van leaned against his amp in a posture that said he was in agreement with his brother.

“Really,” Jenna said. “And how many have you won?”

The Stephenson brothers dropped their eyes in unison.

“We can blow the place away,” Jenna insisted. “We can win.” She was barely five feet tall, but still the most commanding presence in the garage. According to Dave, she was also the cutest, though there wasn’t much competition. With her Les Paul hanging low on her hip, she looked like the voice of a generation.

“We’ve only been together for one practice,” Dave said, feeling the need to interject a dose of reality with an update on current events.

“We’ve got two weeks,” Jenna fired back. “The Sex Pistols could record an anthology with that much time.”

“What do we get when we win?” Van asked.

“*When* we win,” Jenna repeated. “Now *that’s* the way to think. *When* we win, we get a \$1,000 gift certificate to Sam Ash and...drumroll please...” Jenna pointed to Dave, who was sitting behind his drums. He stared back, then snapped to attention, realizing his cue.

“Oh, yeah,” Dave said, fumbling for his sticks. He pressed them against his snare drum and produced a wavy roll that would have made any band teacher cringe. Jenna let Dave’s feeble rattle breathe for a moment, then snapped her hand like James Brown performing the universal *cut-it* gesture.

“The real prize is 10 hours at SkyRoom.”

The band looked puzzled. Jenna shrugged. “SkyRoom? The recording studio?”

The boys nodded their heads, feigning recognition. None of them had a clue.

Jenna took their silence as a sign of compliance. “Fancy. Then it’s settled. OK, we get one song. So let’s do ‘Codswallop.’”

Dave held his sticks in the air, ready to count off. Jenna held her hand up like a cop halting traffic.

“You, Dave—play faster,” she instructed.

“Faster?” Dave asked.

“Just a few beats off double time.” Jenna turned her attention to Van. “You, Van, play *dirtier*.”

Van cocked his head. Jenna knelt by his amp. “May I?” she asked, then turned a few of the amp’s knobs to her liking. “Little gain, some more distortion and a pinch of presence. *Voila. Dirtier.*”

She looked to Earl. “And you, Earl...” Earl stood tall like a lout poised for a fight unless he liked what he heard. “Actually, you sound good. The whole caveman-bass-bottom-style works.”

Jenna walked over to the mic and yelled into it. “Hello, Howard Blake Magnet School of the Arts! We’re Placebo Effect, and this one’s for your overactive super-ego.”

Jenna leaned the upper part of her body back, jutting her hip forward and letting the feedback from her Les Paul fill the room. She looked at Dave, who counted off the fastest four beats he could, and the band vaulted into the song they would play at their first gig.

*I know it's hard to keep an open heart,
When even friends seem out to harm you.
But if you could heal a broken heart,
Wouldn't time be out to charm you?
—“November Rain”
Use Your Illusion I*

Axl turned the volume knob as far to the right as it would go. Then he dialed it back to an appropriately obnoxious level for rock and roll. He was heading south down Dale Mabry Highway, past the neon glow of the strip joints that had given Tampa a notorious reputation. The lights of oncoming cars passed in and out of his field of vision like stage lights on an endless world tour. To Axl, it was just another road he was meant to travel down alone.

The ambient hiss of the recording's first few seconds were a welcome sound. Every recording Dave had passed along showed a band on the rise. Placebo Effect was growing with each practice session. Jenna was leading the boys just as he would if he were a teenager, just as he had when the world was new and conquerable. She was pushing them in ways they never would have found on their own. It was music to his ears.

"A lot of these bands are gonna try to win over the judges with a big show." Jenna stood before the group like a coach giving a pre-game speech. "Lights, smoke, costumes... bullshit to hide the fact that their music is sub-par. These kids have had institutionalized art crammed down their throats their whole lives. They don't know jack about winning over a mosh pit."

It was the eve before the battle of the bands, and though none of the boys would outright admit it, the butterflies were starting to flutter.

"Who's the best?" Van asked, and the rest of the boys looked to Jenna to help them size up the competition.

"We are," Jenna confirmed with authority.

"I thought it wasn't a competition," Dave said.

"The judges pick a winner," Jenna explained. "The winner gets the prizes. But the real winner, as far as I care, is the band that wins the audience. That's what I want. We're outsiders. I go to Blake, but I don't drink the Kool-Aid. And you guys are complete unknowns."

Picking us to win isn't a great political move for the judges. But I want every band on the show's bill to know who ruled."

The butterflies started to swarm. The show was 24 hours away and Jenna had already set the bar at a level the band had never reached. She'd push them when the time came, like always. For now, they played it cool.

*So come with me.
Don't ask me where, 'cuz I don't know.
—“It's so Easy
Appetite for Destruction*

Dave must have made a face when he read the incoming text.

"What's up?" Jenna asked as she straddled her motorcycle and strapped on her helmet.

"My mom's gonna be late," Dave said. As soon as the words left his tongue, he tried to call them back. *My mom?* He could have made anything up. How could he let that embarrassing truth slip?

"It's cool," Jenna said. "I'll give you a lift."

"Yeah?" Dave blabbered. His mom would kill him if she found out he'd been on a motorcycle. But he'd die a slower death from shame if Jenna knew he had to call his mom to ask permission to ride on one. Jenna handed him her guitar case. Dave took it and strapped it across his back.

"Hop on and hold tight," Jenna instructed. Dave eased himself onto the back of the bike just as Jenna gave it a kick and brought the engine to life. The vibrations felt like they

could rip him apart and Dave wondered how such a slight girl like Jenna could control such a turbulent machine.

Jenna turned around and placed her helmet on Dave's head. "You'd better wear this," she said while tying her hair back. "Wouldn't want mom to worry." Before Dave could assess how much bite her comment had, Jenna had grabbed his arms and locked them around her waist. Dave felt suddenly warm. He had never had his arms around a girl in his life, unless he counted his mother, which he preferred not to think about at the moment. Jenna revved the engine.

"Ready?" she called, with a look of fiendish glee in her eyes.

"Yeah," Dave replied. The motorcycle locked into gear and the pair launched from the Stephenson driveway into the Tampa twilight.

There is no such thing as an uncomfortable silence when you're riding on a motorcycle. This truth Dave discovered as he watched the streets of Tampa pass him by in a noisy blur while holding Jenna around her waist. At first, he held on for his life, squeezing Jenna's tiny frame like it was the only thing keeping him from flying to his death. "I can handle a little pain, Dave," she said when they stopped at their first light, "but you'll enjoy the ride more if you relax. It's like drumming. When you're stiff and tight, the notes don't come out right."

Dave eased off and realized Jenna was right. What did he have to fear? She knew what she was doing. Dave tried to find a level of squeeze intensity that was more appropriate than the death-grip he'd originally employed. He settled on something he thought she might even like. Then he realized he had no idea what girls liked. Even if he did, would Jenna be like other girls? She wasn't like any he'd known at his school. Maybe at Blake, girls with Jenna's flair and style roam the halls in droves. Dave doubted it. She was rare. And he had his

arms around her while she gave him a ride home on her motorcycle. If the world were to somehow end right now, Dave figured he could call it a good life.

He hadn't told her where he lived, and she didn't seem to care. Jenna had turned off of any roads Dave recognized and before long was weaving around the streets of downtown Tampa like she was the lone rider in an urban race. Did she know a shortcut? No, Dave reasoned. She was just having fun. This was a joyride.

They cut a path through the heart of the city, bound by the high-reaching buildings Dave had seldom seen in person. How long would this excursion last? Dave had already made up his mind about avoiding utter embarrassment and revealing that he needed to check in with his mom. She would understand. Even if she didn't, Dave was certain he didn't want to do anything to disrupt what he had in this moment. He was riding on a motorcycle with the coolest girl he'd ever known.

She ducked under an overpass and shot across a drawbridge that spanned the Hillsborough River. In an instant, they were screaming down a road Dave recognized. The bay was on their left and an endless row of mansions lined their right. This was Bayshore Boulevard. Scores of slow-moving joggers, bikers, and inline skaters navigated the famous sidewalk next to the bay. Dave felt superior to them all, like he was getting away with something the rest of the rat-race world was too self-obsessed to understand. He felt free. No wonder why Jenna played the way she did; she must feel like this all the time.

Jenna turned off the boulevard into a parking lot that overlooked the bay and the Tampa skyline. She stopped in front of a pirate ship Dave hadn't seen or thought about since he was a kid. Back then, he was convinced the ship was real and abandoned by true buccaneers during an invasion of the city. These days, he knew it was just a photo op for tourists.

Jenna didn't bother to kill the engine. She had one foot down and looked at the ship, which was dappled in the light of the setting sun. Silence lingered, and Dave realized he hadn't let go of her waist since they'd stopped. Should he? She didn't seem to object.

"That's what we are," Jenna said. "Pirates. They have a ship. We'll have a tour bus. We both go from place to place blowing it up, then hit the road and it's on to the next one. That's rock n roll."

Dave wasn't sure he followed, but had resolved to keep his arms locked around Jenna's waist. He wondered if this was one of the signs girls cryptically gave when it was time for the man to make the move for a kiss. Jenna turned her head from the ship to Dave. Her skin was glowing. Her eyes sparkled in the orange hue of the moment just before sunset. This was it. This had to be it.

Jenna held her gaze on Dave in a way that turned the drummer's heartbeat into a pounding kettledrum. This had to be it. What was he waiting for?

"We're gonna rule tomorrow, Dave. Take no prisoners." With that, Jenna put the bike in gear and the pair tore out of the parking lot and screamed up Bayshore Boulevard to a destination unknown.

Within minutes, they pulled off the boulevard onto a driveway that led to the kind of house Dave thought only pro athletes lived in. Jenna brought the bike to a stop and killed the engine.

"What's this?" Dave asked. In the back of his mind, he prayed they weren't there to pillage the place."

“This is home,” Jenna said. “You’re not the only one who has to follow mom’s rules. Mine won’t let me ride after dark. C’mon in. We can hang for a while, then my mom can give you a lift home.”

She may live in a house worthy of Donald Trump, but hearing that Jenna, too, had to play by the rules eased Dave’s racing heart.

The home’s interior wasn’t what Dave expected. He’d imagined tacky opulence, but was greeted with the sensation that this was a dwelling inside of which there was a family who loved each other. A large collection of framed pictures adorned the walls and told a story that seemed a lot like the one Dave had lost when his father left. The happiness of a nuclear family didn’t fit the picture of the angst-ridden, teenage rebel Dave had conjured for Jenna, but it was a welcome sight. Maybe she was from this earth, after all.

Dave caught a glimpse of an older woman whose beauty leapt from the boundaries of the picture’s frame and demanded a stare. Jenna picked up on Dave’s sightline.

“My mom,” she said.

“Yeah?” Dave answered.

“She used to be a model,” Jenna explained, like a tour guide who couldn’t care less if she got fired. “If you’ve got a spare week, she’ll show you her book.”

That the woman who gave Jenna life was a model made perfect sense to Dave. Jenna may have come to this planet by way of maternal birth, but it was clearly through elite stock that she made the trip.

“Wow,” Dave said.

“Yeah, she’s beautiful. So I’ve heard.”

“She looks just like you.” It was the truth, but as soon as the words left Dave’s mouth, he wanted them back. Jenna’s face shifted from annoyed to soft. She looked as though she’d been caught off-guard and was unsure how to handle a compliment. Her eyes locked onto Dave and seemed to say thank you.

“Oh my god,” Jenna said looking up, “not again.” Her tone was one part annoyance, two parts exasperation. Maybe Dave had gone too far. Maybe he’d overstepped his boundaries and was about to be slapped down like a hundred other guys who must have offered Jenna the same premature flattery.

Jenna pointed to the ceiling. “She’s playing that song...again.”

Dave tuned his ears and could hear music coming from above. The quiet intro of a piano ballad and somber vocals gave way to a powerful rock beat with a melodic guitar solo. It was clearly audible on the home’s first floor. It must have been pounding on the second.

“She plays this 80s crap all the time,” Jenna lamented. “Lately she’s had this band on repeat.”

“Who is it?” It sounded familiar to Dave, but he couldn’t quite place it.

“Guns N’ Roses,” Jenna said, as though they were an embarrassment to music. Dave tuned his ears again to the sounds from above as the song’s second verse came about. It was Axl. Unmistakably Axl.”

“You don’t like ‘em?” Dave asked.

Jenna let out a sigh. “It’s a long story. Follow me and I’ll tell you all about it.”

She led Dave through the house and onto a lavish backyard replete with a pool Dave figured was worthy of a retired model. Their outdoor destination was a small cottage tucked

in the corner of the yard's foliage. Jenna produced a key and unlocked the door. Dave entered and took in the room.

"Wow," was all he could muster as he looked around. The place looked like a musician's last-stand bunker, fully stocked to wait out the apocalypse. There were at least three guitar amps, no fewer than a half-dozen guitars on stands, a keyboard, a small drum set, and a spaghetti-mess of cables strewn across the floor. The walls were festooned with posters and makeshift punk art. It was musical heaven.

"This is my little sanctuary," Jenna said, leading Dave into the space and giving him a make-yourself-at-home look.

"Nice sanctuary," Dave replied as he eyed the drum set and silently declared it to be the second most beautiful thing in the room.

Jenna plopped down on a small couch and tossed a tuner and a few guitar strings to the floor to make space for a second person. Then she patted the space next to her, giving Dave the universal have-a-seat gesture. Dave complied and felt his palms sweat as he tried to look comfortable.

"You burn?" Jenna's question came with a casual tone, but might as well have been spoken in Martian since Dave didn't have a clue what she was talking about. Sunburn? It had been a while, but why would she care?

"I'll take that face to mean no," Jenna said as she threw her weight onto her knees, arched her back, and reached across Dave's body to an end table whose drawer she opened and pulled out a small wooden box. Dave's eyes landed down Jenna's shirt. He couldn't help it, but didn't look away. She was wearing a pink bra. He felt guilty for noticing and willed his eyes to the ceiling to avoid being caught as Jenna returned to her side of the couch with the

box in hand. Dave focused on the box and watched intently as she slid a few small panels, popped its top, and pulled out a small ceramic pipe and baggie.

“Had a feeling I’d be corrupting you sooner or later,” she said, taking a small pinch from the bag and stuffing it into the pipe. She handed the combo to Dave along with a cigarette lighter. It was then that the *a-ba* moment hit Dave. This was marijuana. The actual stuff. The real thing. The gateway drug. The reefer that led to madness. He should say no, but today was fast becoming a day of reckless firsts. Dave took the pipe and lighter.

“What about—”

“Don’t worry. Nobody’s busting us. This place is like an authority-free safe zone.”

Dave considered the situation. There was still time to decline. He could say he wanted to keep his head clear for the gig tomorrow.

“How do I—”

“See that little hole on the side of the pipe?” Jenna sounded every bit the sage guiding the newbie through his first foray into the drug arena of the rock-and-roll lifestyle. “Put your thumb over that. That’s the carb. Then put your mouth on the end. Light the bowl and suck. When you’ve got it lit, take your thumb off the carb and keep sucking.”

It sounded complicated. But Dave followed each instruction like there may later be a test. He sparked the lighter and managed to fumble his way to a sustained flame on the fourth try. Then he shoved the end of the pipe into his mouth and turned the fire on the bowl. He sucked with all his might and instantly ushered what felt like an inferno down his throat, causing a throbbing pain that flooded his eyes with water and sent him into a coughing fit. He wondered if he’d ever breathe easy again.

“That’s good,” Jenna said with encouragement. “Coughing opens up the capillaries in your lungs.” Dave finally caught his breath.

“That’s a good thing?” he grunted.

“It means you’ll get high. A lot of people don’t their first time.”

Jenna took the pipe and lighter from Dave. He watched as she lit the bowl and took an expert hit, punctuated by her blowing a pall of smoke into the room.

“Wanna try again?” she asked in a crackly voice.

“Don’t think I can,” Dave answered. Jenna took another hit from the pipe and leaned over to Dave, bringing her face to within inches of his. Then she eased her hand around the back of his head and leveled her lips to his. Before Dave could even react, he felt a cloud of smoke rush into his mouth and into his lungs. This didn’t feel like the painful blaze he’d self-inflicted moments before. This was easy. He closed his eyes and felt Jenna lean his body back against the couch as she regressed to her side.

“Now, blow it out nice and smooth,” she said. Dave did and felt his head become light and his body tingle.

“That’s called a shotgun,” Jenna informed him. “And I think you’re cool for now.”

She thought he was *cool*. Dave felt like he’d held his breath for too long.

Jenna leaned back against the couch and said, “I owe you a story, don’t I?”

Dave tried to think through the mental fog brewing in his head.

“My mom and Guns N’ Roses. There’s a history there. Guess I needed to get us high before I could tell it.” Dave remembered now. She’d said it was a long story. Was that today?

“See, back in the early 90s, my mom was this big model for Victoria’s Secret.”

Dave could only stare straight ahead.

“You know, the underwear?”

He snapped to attention. “Right.”

“Well, Google my mom and you’ll get like a thousand pictures of her in her bra and panties. Sometimes I think every boy in my school has. But hey, at least she wasn’t a porn star. So back in the day, she and Axl Rose were this item and she was in a few of his videos. And then they broke up, and now whenever she’s depressed, she plays this one song over and over again.”

“What’s the song?” Dave asked.

“‘Estranged.’ It wasn’t really a big hit, ’cuz it’s like nine minutes long. But they did make a video for it, just after Mom and Axl broke up. A lot of people think the video is about her.”

“What about the song?”

“They were together when the song was written. She was supposed to be in the video, you know, playing the *part* of the estranged lover. Instead, they broke up. My mom is like a lot of geezers who’d rather worry about the past than dream about tomorrow.”

Dave let the facts run in his head. He’d seen at least one of the videos Jenna was talking about. “November Rain.” In that one, Axl was getting married to a gorgeous woman in a short wedding dress. He imagined the scene—the pot was oddly helpful in focusing his vision—and could see how it was a younger, flawless version of Jenna’s mom. The story in the video ultimately turned tragic as the song morphed into a somber tone. For reasons never made clear, Axl’s would-be bride dies, leaving the GN’R frontman in emotional disarray. Dave looked over at Jenna. Wait a minute. Things were beginning to become clearer. If Jenna’s mom was a former supermodel who dated Axl Rose, could it be that...

“Is Axl Rose your father?” For once, Dave had blurted something that he didn’t try to instantly recall back to his mouth. Maybe there was something to marijuana, after all. Jenna held a stoic gaze on Dave. Then she cracked a smile that gave way to a full-blown laugh.

“Congratulations, Dave. You’re officially high.”

“But—”

“My dad is a real-estate investor. And as lame as that sounds, it’s a lot better than if I were spawned by some has-been rock star with hair plugs.”

Dave wanted to come to Axl’s defense and explain to Jenna how the guy she just called a “has-been” had transformed Placebo Effect from a bunch of never-would-bes into the tight band she was now fronting. But he had made a deal, a promise he knew he had to keep. Mum would be the word on Axl Rose.

“Yeah,” he said. “My bad.”

“Believe me. It’s tough enough having one parent living in the past. But let’s talk about what’s really on your mind.”

Dave felt his armpits tingle with sweat, the kind triggered by the sudden onset of paranoia. Could she really read his thoughts?

Jenna continued with her mind-probing. “There’s something you’ve been thinking about since the moment you walked in here.”

She knows. My god, she knows. Dave was catatonic and couldn’t tell if the next moment of his life was about to be his most triumphant or embarrassing. Either way, it would be up to Jenna to make the first move. Dave was frozen with panic. Jenna leaned in closer.

“I know what you’ve been thinking,” she said with a playful tone. “Don’t think I haven’t caught your little peeks here and there.”

She knows about the peeks. Dave made a mental note that being inconspicuous while also high is a physical impossibility. Jenna leaned back against the couch. “Be my guest,” she said, blessing Dave with a permission he didn’t fully understand. What was she inviting him to be the guest of? What was he supposed to do?

Jenna reached a hand to Dave’s face, then she gently guided his head to the right and held her fingers under his chin as if to focus his hormone-infused attention away from her and onto something else. Dave’s eyes pulled focus and landed on the drum set. A badass drum set.

“I know you like what you see, Dave. Go ahead. Take it for a spin.”

Dave slowly stood, careful not to be too obvious about the modest erection the previous exchange had induced, and gravitated to the drums. The set was a three-piece Slingerland, a setup normally reserved for jazz and a brand typically priced for the professional. Dave gripped the sticks as he sat on the throne and gently tapped each drum—his way to get a sense of feel and how the room would react to the sounds.

“Place is soundproofed,” Jenna assured him. “Grip ’em and rip ’em. Neighbors can’t hear.”

Dave dropped his go-to rock beat and was instantly taken by the sharp feel and crisp response Jenna’s set provided. He felt clunky in his playing. It was as though his drumming style wasn’t up to standard for so precise an instrument. Instead of the booming echo of the Stephenson’s garage, Jenna’s cottage offered an acoustic quality Dave figured was on par with a recording studio. Clunky or not, he could stay in here all day.

A ripping power chord shook the room and made Dave look up. Jenna had strapped a guitar around her shoulder and was poised to jam. Dave readied himself to give a four-count

and launch into ‘Codswallop for Haters’ when Jenna clicked her foot pedal and transformed her sound from a distorted agent of doom to a clean master of smooth.

“And now for something completely different,” she said, playing a set of jazzy chords whose collective groove grabbed Dave. He listened for a few bars until he felt like he understood the rhythm, then lifted his sticks to the set and let them fall onto the heads. The finesse was a departure from his customary pounding-like-they-owed-him-money technique. His desire to drive his sticks into the drums like a rocker gave way to the urge to snap them like a jazzer.

Now the drum set made sense. His playing made sense. He and Jenna were locked in instrumental harmony, and Dave felt free to fill the empty spaces between the notes with percussive accents and splashes that were as spontaneous as he’d ever felt. He wasn’t trying to execute a pre-written piece of music. He was improvising, creating on the fly. His mind was focused. His hands and feet were interdependent, and felt as though they were being controlled remotely by an inspired source that lived outside of Dave’s body. This was jazz. Jenna was pulling it out of him. He never wanted it to stop. *We should be recording this.* Maybe there was something to marijuana after all. Dave couldn’t help but let a grin stretch across his face. Where had this been his whole life?

*I knew the storm was getting closer,
And all my friends said I was high.*

—“Estranged”
Use Your Illusion II

“Are you high right now?”

Dave leaned back on his bed and smiled, then said into the phone, “Guilty as charged.”

He could hear Axl chuckle.

“Dancing with Mr. Brownstone’s innocent sister,” Axl said. “Guess it was just a matter of time.”

“It’s amazing, Axl. I mean, you should have heard us playing.”

“Trust me, kid, it doesn’t sound the same on the outside as it does in. That’s why you should record the high sessions, too. But I hear ya’. Music and weed are like cookies and milk. May not be the best thing for you, but they sure do go good together. Keep a clear head for tomorrow, though. It’s your first gig and you’re gonna want to remember it.”

“Roger that. Can I ask you a personal question?”

“Go ahead, kid. I’ve been aloof for 20 years. Might as well keep up appearances.”

“Jenna, she’s— I mean, she’s not...are you her father?”

Axl laughed. “You really are high, aren’t you?”

“That’s what she said, too.”

“No, Dave. I’m not Jenna’s father. Her mom and I were in love 10 years before she was born.”

“But it can’t just be a coincidence. I mean first you show up. Then we get her and it turns out that...well, you know what I’m saying?”

“Helluva thing about being estranged in the Information Age. You can watch the lives you fucked up evolve. Funny thing is they can do the same to you. I’ve been watching Jenna for a while. Watched her grow as a person and a musician. It’s not that hard when you’re the kind of kid that posts your whole life online. She’s not my kid, but I loved her mom. In a way I guess I love Jenna, too, so I wanted her to find something good. When I found you guys, I

did what I had to do to bring you up to her level. Then I got you and Jenna together and stepped back into the shadows.”

“You mean this was all a setup?”

“Dave, I’ve gotten so many things wrong in my life. Maybe I’ve got a few songs that got it right, but that’s art. Life is...well, life is something else. You can’t control it with knobs and faders. Someday, when you’ve been around the block, you’ll understand what I’m talking about.”

“Well, what happens now?”

“Now, you play every note like it’s your last, ‘cuz, man, you never know when it is.”

“Are you coming tomorrow?”

“My time here in Tampa is done. Record the gig for me.”

“Yeah,” Dave said, not knowing how to express his thanks.

“You guys are ready,” Axl said in a voice that sounded like the conversation was coming to a close. “And, Dave...take care of her.”

Where do we go now?

—“Sweet Child O’ Mine”

Appetite for Destruction

The band-rehearsal room at Blake High was the makeshift green room for the night. The institutional markings of a public school were visible, but only if you saw past the art-student decor—an attempt to make the place cool, if only for one evening. This is where the contestants of the Battle of the Bands congregated before it was their turn to take the stage. Dave and the Stephenson brothers stood at the threshold of the main doors and took in the room.

There were a lot of kids in black. Black clothes. Black hair. Black glasses. Just about everyone held an instrument, mostly guitars, and produced a flurry of acoustical notes that made each player sound like a virtuoso who'd been practicing scales since the womb.

"They don't look so tough," Earl said with his head held high and his chest pumped with air, like a kid from the wrong side of the tracks amongst a spoiled clique from Easy Street. Dave didn't know how to feel at what he could clearly see was a social cross-section whose likeness he'd never known.

As the trio moved through the room, they felt like tourists in a local haunt. The native super-hipsters would glance at them, make a face, and then return to their musical drills. Dave felt oddly relaxed until his eyes found the drummers in the room. Each was spread out amidst the bustle, in isolated pockets. They prepared for the imminent performance with what Dave could see were impressive displays of rudimentary sticking skill that far outweighed his own. His judgment of the room began to shift. This place was hostile and well rehearsed. What the hell had Jenna gotten them into?

"Welcome to art-school Hell," this from a voice behind the boys. They turned around to find Jenna, a friendly sight whose knee-high stockings, short plaid skirt with studded belt, and signature tight black tank top made her look like a punk-rock schoolgirl. The collective eyes of the room took notice. The boys felt a bit more like they belonged, knowing that their lead singer and band centerpiece could command attention long before she took the stage.

"Don't mind everyone here," Jenna said as she stepped in front of the boys and took to the lead position in the band's formation. "Camaraderie and magnet schools don't mix." She moved with a purpose and the boys followed.

“These kids play music like it’s part of a science experiment,” Jenna said. “Bunch of wannabe avant-garde brats. No heart. No soul. No balls.” There was disdain in her voice. Each set of eyes in the room glanced at Jenna like their owners knew something the boys didn’t.

“When do we play?” Van asked.

“The organizers are from the drama department. They don’t have any sack, either. Figured the best way to make a lineup was to let everyone reach into a bag and pull out a number. What the hell kind of show can you put on like that?” The tactic seemed objective enough to Dave, but he could detect Jenna’s mood shifting more toward pissed by the minute.

“So when do we play?”

Jenna stopped her march and turned back to the band. “Second. We drew the second spot.” He didn’t know whether the band’s draw was good or bad luck, or whether playing early or later held the advantage. He just knew they were on soon. The butterflies started to swarm in Dave’s stomach and floated to his throat, where they left the stinging taste of his lunch.

“Testing. Testing.” The crackling words from the intercom brought the room to an obedient hush.

“Testing. Is this— How do I make sure this is on? It’s this button? Yeah. It is? OK.”

Jenna rolled her eyes.

“Attention, bands. The Battle of the Bands will begin in five minutes. Cloverheart to the stage. Placebo Effect to the side stage. Break a leg, bands.”

“Let’s go,” Jenna said as she continued her up-tempo pace through the band room. “We’ll watch the from the side stage.”

Earl said, "Who the hell is Cloverheart?"

Jenna stopped just before a set of double doors and turned around to face her band. "They're the group I want to blow off the stage." She leaned her petite body into the doors and popped them open, ushering Placebo Effect into a darkened world that brought them closer to the stage, where the ultimate battle would take place.

The silence that lingered was more than awkward. Four kids who looked like poster children for an art-school rock band walked past the members of Placebo Effect en route to the stage. Each looked at Jenna like she was *persona non grata*. Dave watched the scene unfold and could tell by the body language of the principal players that there was a history here. Jenna had a grudge against this group. They felt the same about her.

The last of the black-haired quartet gave Jenna a condescending glance as he passed. "Enjoy the view," he said with a hint of arrogance. "Next time you see us, you'll have to buy a ticket."

The kid had the kind of face you see on a poster in a franchise hair salon. Corporate advertising's persona of cool. His aura embodied everything Jenna had warned them about. If this kid was born with a soul, he must have traded it in exchange for looks that would peak in high school and slowly devalue after graduation. He was a poser.

Dave waited for Jenna to tear into him and get the last word. But it never came. She just watched in silence. Something was wrong. The kid shot Dave a final glance of superiority be-

fore turning his back and heading to the stage. That's when Dave noticed the drum sticks in his hand.

"You OK?" Dave asked Jenna. He could tell she wasn't. Jenna was rattled.

"I gotta change," she said. "Come with me."

Jenna led Dave around a backstage corner and down a hallway. She opened her bag and pulled out a shirt and tie.

"We're gonna bury those guys." She took off her glasses and handed them to Dave, who could see her eyes instantly adjust without the visual aid.

"OK, but who are they?"

Before Dave could finish his question, Jenna had turned her back to him and stripped off her tank top without a hint of modesty. Dave didn't know where to look. Jenna threw on the new shirt as quickly as she'd discarded the last. This one was a white button-down with the sleeves ripped off. She turned around with the shirt still unbuttoned, revealing a black bra that stood out in contrast to her ivory skin.

"Dave, relax. It's just like a bathing suit. Besides, we're in a band. What's it gonna be like when we tour?" She buttoned her shirt just past the halfway point, leaving an open area below her neckline that was pushing it, even for an art school. Then she tied the shirt in a knot that rested just below her bust, and placed the pink tie around her neck.

"Guess I owe you another story," she said as she tied the necktie like a punk-rock executive, letting it dangle just below her cleavage and above her navel. The crowd's cheer found them through the winding tunnels of the backstage area. Jenna made a face as Cloverheart began to play. The sounds were muffled and hard to make out, but Dave could tell by Jenna's grimace that she disapproved.

“I was in that band. The prick with the attitude is my boyfriend. I wanted them to go in one direction, he wanted to go in another. I lost. He cheated on me with a skank from the theater program. And I quit.”

Dave stood catatonic as he processed the information. *She said is her boyfriend. Is, as in present tense.*

“God, too slow,” she complained. “They always play this song too slow. My ex is an asshole with lousy timing.” She reclaimed her glasses and slid them onto her face. She looked like herself again.

Ex, as in past tense. Timing...as in drummer?

“Slow isn’t my thing, Dave. Neither are cheaters.”

Dave didn’t know what to say and settled for “Me, too.”

There was a silence between them. The muffled sounds of the competition filled the space. Dave had something to say.

“They’re crazy to let you go,” he said. “You rock, Jenna.”

She looked at him. Really looked at him. Then she said three words Dave never new could have such an effect. “So do you.”

Jenna’s face softened, as though she understood *this* compliment. She held her gaze on Dave, who could see in her eyes that the fearless lead singer of Placebo Effect didn’t know what should happen next.

Dave grabbed Jenna by her studded belt and pulled her to him. Before he had a chance to over-think and back down, he pressed his lips to hers. For once, Dave’s heart outraced his mind. This was kissing. The real thing. He was backstage, about to play his fist gig,

and kissing the coolest girl on the planet. What should he do with his hands? He settled for her waist, and didn't dare let them wander. Kissing was fast enough.

By the time Dave's head leveled and he found his rhythm, the crowd was cheering. Louder this time. Jenna slowly pulled away and locked eyes with Dave. He could feel his knees shaking.

"We're on," she said with a smile. "Let's go kill it."

Jenna walked the path back to the side-stage area with a rock star's grace. Dave followed and suddenly understood the perspective of every music video that ever tried to capture the moments before a band hit the stage. He wasn't nervous. He wasn't anxious. He was invincible.

They met up with the rest of the band at the side stage, and watched as Cloverheart took a bow and waved to the adoring crowd as though they'd just completed a world tour. Dave tried to be inconspicuous as he glanced at Jenna and saw her looking down at her feet. Crossing the threshold to the side stage, the band of black-haired waifs walked past Placebo Effect with a cocky air that was meant to intimidate.

"Good luck following *that*," the ex-boyfriend said to the band as a whole, but to Jenna in particular.

Dave stepped in front of Jenna and got in the face of Cloverheart's drummer like a bodyguard defending his superstar from the paparazzi. Before Dave had time to second-guess his actions, he was staring eye-to-eye with Jenna's ex and realized he might be on course for his first fight since a playground scuffle with Timmy Palmer in the third grade.

Dave cocked his head and tried to sound like Clint Eastwood. "Where we come from, you get your ass kicked when you act like an asshole." He forced himself to hold his gaze on

the drummer as he delivered his line. It was then Dave realized the guy he was facing off against was wearing eyeliner. A surge of self-assurance poured through Dave's body as though his confidence knob had suddenly been cranked to 11.

Earl fell in behind Dave and established at least a six-inch height advantage over the band of foes. He inflated his chest with an intimidating swagger of his own as Van joined his brother and stared down the competition with a look of street-gang solidarity. *You fight one of us, you'd better be prepared to take on all of us.*

The art-school band looked up at the boys from Placebo Effect and cowered in unison. Dave mustered every ounce of will he could to keep from smiling in his moment of triumph and said, "But since this is your turf..."

Jenna pushed past the blockade of testosterone her bandmates had established around her and finished Dave's sentence, "We'll let the sounds do all the slaying."

On the heels of her quip, the coolest girl Dave had ever met slung her Les Paul over her shoulder and walked out onto the stage. Placebo Effect followed and didn't offer so much as a glance back to the side stage as they took their places and plugged in.

There were a few catcalls as the crowd took in Jenna's punk-rock schoolgirl getup. Dave didn't look out to the audience as he stepped onto the drum riser. A drum riser. This was a real gig. He knew it was serious when he saw the microphones attached to the drums.

Dave gripped his sticks as he eased onto the throne behind the kit. He looked out toward the crowd and was blinded by the flood of stage lights. The audience was out there somewhere beyond the halo of the lights, waiting to be entertained. Waiting to judge.

The MC introduced the band, but Dave barely heard him. All he could focus on was Jenna. The silhouette of her tiny frame was backlit and made her look like a rock angel. Her

low-hanging guitar seemed like a natural extension of her body. And her glasses, god, her glasses. On top of it all, she was smart. Two minutes ago he was kissing her. Five minutes from now, who the hell knows. But he was about to play a gig, a legitimate gig, in front of real people. How the hell did he get here? Then he remembered Axl, and the promise he'd made to the GN'R frontman. Dave pulled out his cell phone, found his recording app, and pushed record just as the MC concluded his introduction.

“Give it up for Placeeeeeeebo Efffffffect!” A few isolated claps amidst a whole lot of audience apathy let the band know they weren't the favorites and had their work cut out for them if they had any hope of winning the Blake High Battle of the Bands. Jenna didn't care. Contest or no, this stage was a battleground and hers was a scorched-earth policy. She stepped to the mic and grabbed it like a seasoned pro.

“This song's called 'Codswallop for Haters,'” she said in a voice that reverberated as though she were addressing an arena instead of an auditorium. “Look it up if you don't know the word.”

Jenna turned her back to the audience with a rocker's defiance and stepped to her amp, shaking her Les Paul as though it were alive and the key prop in a holy ritual. A sustained feedback filled the auditorium and shook the rafters as the stage lights intensified. This was it. The nerves were starting to creep into Dave's psyche. Then he looked down from the riser to Jenna. She winked at him.

Dave slammed his sticks together for a four-count, and Placebo Effect launched into their flagship song.

Lyrics by W. Axl Rose.



About the author

A product of the Florida public school system, Fred Smith is a multimedia storyteller who believes that the readers of today are the leaders of tomorrow. His work aims to show young adults a glimpse of themselves in a way that resonates with the adult world and inspires the youth of today to fall in love with the joy of reading.

Visit www.theonlyfredsmith.com to learn more about his books, plays and films.

While you're there, sign up for *A Crack in the Room Tone* to receive free stories from Fred delivered directly to your email's inbox. Get free book from Fred when you do.

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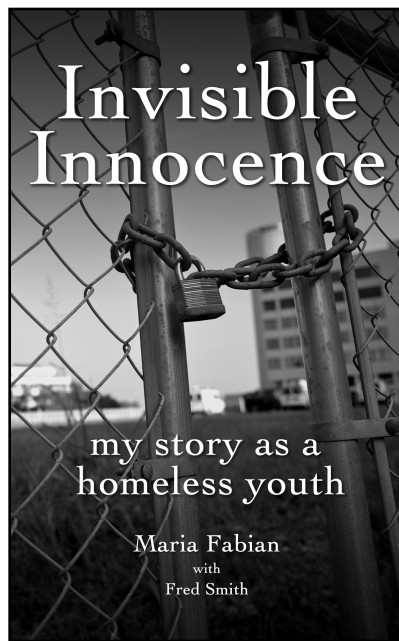


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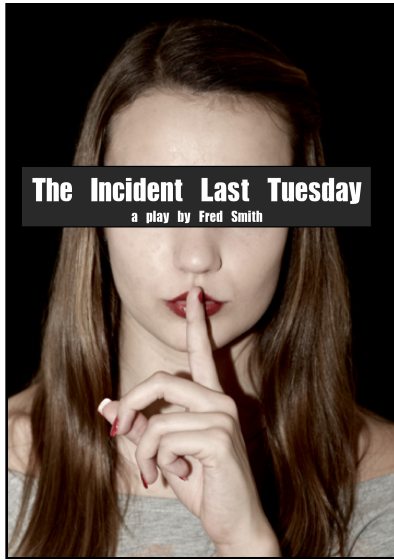
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