

At twenty-six Jeff Conaughty considered himself still cool. Not hip cool like the young guys at work who followed the hottest bands and had the newest mobile technology and partied at the trendiest clubs, but *young-dad* cool. Jeff had been married to Dana a little over three years and they already had a son, Justin, so Jeff thought of himself as having the coolest attributes of both worlds: he partied when possible; he knew music — he still *played* it when he had the chance; he was lucky enough to have kept his college good looks; and he had a smart, classy, dynamite looking wife. As for the other hemisphere of coolness, the dad half, he was that icon of modern culture: an evolved father. An active, hands-on man who was helping raise and nurture the male of the future. Padre frio. One hip dad.

On his way home from work Jeff had picked up the latest issue of his favorite music and culture magazine, the venerable *Rock 'n' Thunder*. The world had gone digital but *R'n'T* still put out a print version, deliciously tactile and tantalizing in its size and color. So after dinner but before Justin's bedtime Jeff sat down to combine two of his favorite activities: cuddling his son and catching up on the twisted world of rock 'n roll. Dana was busy in the kitchen so it was just the two of them, Jeff ensconced with the magazine in a comfortable corner of the couch, the always active Justin on his lap.

The problem with doing anything with Justin was that he always physically involved himself in what was going on in ways that interfered with the activity itself. When they tried to read a book Justin's roving hand would block the pictures on the page. When they took a photograph he would reach out to grab the camera (they'd had to delete dozens of photos featuring close-ups of Justin's palm). When Jeff played guitar Justin couldn't keep his hands off the strings. How could the lad learn

music, how could he even see or hear the instrument in action, if he kept grabbing the part of it that created the sound? Granted, most toddlers grab everything in sight, but usually they settle after a minute or give up after putting it in their mouth and concluding that it's not tasty. Not Justin. He was past the putting-things-in-mouth stage but doing stuff with him was still always a dodgy proposition. So after getting situated and opening the *R'n'T* Jeff sat back and let Justin expend some energy running his keen eyes over the cover and poking his drooly fingers over the images until he settled into a more measured pace and they could finally start doing some serious perusing.

“Okay,” he began in what he hoped was a soothing tone, “what do we have here, hmm? Well look, Justin,” he said as he opened the magazine to the first page, “here’s a picture of Blaze Fyngyrs. Look, see him playing guitar, like daddy? He’s the lead guitarist for Dissolving Pancreas.... Can you say that Justin, Dissolving Pancreas?”

Justin pointed a chubby digit at the garish face. “Dizza . . . pancake.”

“Very good! Oh and look at these guys over here. These guys are the Smatterings. Their first CD was really good: *A Smattering of Distortion*. Mommy bought that for daddy when we were first going out. That was before you were born. Their next one was pretty good too: *Smatter Witchu!*”

“Choo.”

“That’s right, Justin, yeah! Rock on!”

“Wock-ah!”

“All right!”

They turned the next page together. Justin stabbed at it and looked expectantly up into his dad’s face. It looked like he was starting to get the hang of this.

"Who are these guys?" Justin looked curious. "That's the Fear-a-Moans. Daddy saw them in concert once. They were *amazing*." He lowered his voice and said, "That was with Beth D'Aloiso, before I met mommy. Don't tell mommy, okay?" Justin didn't look like he was about to.

Jeff turned to the next page. It advertised an upcoming stadium show featuring a dozen or so bands. "Wow, look at that, man I wouldn't mind seeing that. But check out those prices; that's an arm and a leg! Concerts were so much cheaper when I was young. Let's see who they've got anyway:

"Yesterday's Yeast: their bass player is unbelievable, he used to be with The Best. A'Postro'Phe: those guys are *sick!* Let's see who else: Void Where Prohibited... Area 52½... the Sniveling Basta— whoa, that one has Parental Advisory written all over it. Luckily I stopped before I said the whole word, right buddy?" Justin didn't seem to have noticed.

"Next up is DKCL; that stands for Don't Know, Care Less. And last — oh wow, *Audrey Hepburn's Gutz!* Aw dude, that is going to be one holy hell concert!" Jeff sighed, remembering the good old days of following bands, bumming rides, sneaking into venues, crashing on friends' floors. Still, he wouldn't trade even a minute of what he had now to get any of that back.

"Let's see what this next page says, Jus," he continued, skipping over the prosey parts and concentrating on the pages showing human images. The boy seemed engrossed in what he was seeing. Maybe it was the lurid faces and clothing. Come to think of it, the get-ups weren't too different from what they have on kiddie TV: colorful, over the top, a little bit grotesque. Of course the extended tongues and pyrotechnics would've been a bit much for kiddie TV, but still.

"Here's an interview with Horrid Stank. People write off headbangers because of the screaming and all that but some of them have a lot of positive things to say,

or even do charitable work on the side.” Justin turned to him with what seemed like a skeptical expression. “No, seriously!” It continued to look like Justin was staring him down. “Well I guess we’ll have to agree to disagree then. Anyway some musicians that you wouldn’t think are smart, are. This one guy in the ’Stank, he has a degree in aerospace engineering or physics or something. Can you say that, Justin? Physics?”

“Bizzik!” Justin seemed to be getting into this. He was really enjoying quality time with dad.

“That’s right. Which I guess might help someday to find the connection between science and music, maybe even express it mathematically. I know it’s there, we just have to figure it out.”

“Bizzik!” Justin exclaimed again.

“What’s that?” Dana called from the kitchen.

“Nothing. We’re just reading.

“So who are some of your favorite bands, Jus?” he continued, still in kiddie-voice. “How about Eye Dude Eclair? I don’t know much about ‘em but they’re big right now. A couple of guys at work listen to them all the time. They had this CD called *We Never Heard of You Either*. It had a song with the greatest blues title ever: “Woke Up This Morning and Shot a Man in Memphis on the Midnight Train to Georgia Down by the River.” How do you like that, little dude?” He looked down to see Justin gazing up at him with a look of total incomprehension. A little saliva bubble had formed in his mouth. Then he looked back at the magazine and poked at a picture of a female guitarist. “Mommy,” the boy said.

“Mommy? You think that looks like mommy?”

“Mommy,” the little guy said again.

“Hmmm, can’t say I see the resemblance.”

“Mommy!” he insisted.

“Okay, well I guess it does look a *little* like mommy when she has her unhappy face on, so let’s just call that a maybe. Here’s another one though, Justin, what do you think of this lady? Is she pretty too? This is Jennette Toomer, of the Jennetic Mutations.”

“Tay-shun.”

“And that’s their keyboard player, Travesty.”

“Tay-shun.”

“Which is pretty funny because that’s his real name – Travis Damien Torrey, or Travis T.”

“*Tay-shun!*”

“Okay okay, don’t get excited. Anyway they’re doing this tour: Jennette Toomer and the Jennetic Mutations, Charlotte Faux and the Charlottans, and Huck Toohey and the Expectorators. They’re calling it the “...AND THE...” tour. Pretty neat, huh?” Justin leaned back and arched his body so far back he almost fell off the couch.

“Well *I* thought it was clever. But maybe you’re right, maybe it is too self-referential; good call buddy. But let’s see if there’s any others you might like....” Jeff said, continuing to turn the pages. “Oh look, this is about that Will Whatsizname concert, with his back-up band, Some Anonymous Backup Dudes. They had a free-for-all there, the seating was first-come, first-served. They call it “Festival Seating”,” he said with disgust. “I call it, if they don’t cut it out more kids are gonna die.”

“And after that they’ve got OBNII, that stands for Our Band’s Name, It’s Ironic. Then there’s The Fistful. Justin, do you think you like The Fistful? A guy at work played them for me today, they were *amazing!* I do not know how X Crescence gets those sounds out of his guitar. The dude is from another planet!”

Justin's cherubic face lit up.

"You like that, huh little guy? All right! I think you and I are going to be sympatico."

"Potty-go!"

Jeff continued reading. "Over here on this page is Morbid Inbreeding," he said. "See them? Daddy had their CD back in high school. Gramma hated it. She kept threatening to throw it under Grandpop's riding mower. So daddy stopped listening to it. Well, in the house at least. Boy did my mom ever hate some of those bands I listened to.

"Okay who else have we got?" They were coming to the end of the magazine. "Okay, these guys are called Los Cuspidores. They're a little like Santana. But not *like* Santana, know what I mean?"

"Tana! Tana!"

"That's right. I should get out my guitar and see if I can still do Soul Sacrifice. Not like Carlos, of course. Nobody can do it like Carlos. But a reasonably close approximation —hey, that'd be a good name for that song suite I'm working on: 'A Reasonable Approximation'."

"Tana!"

From the other room: "Jeff, is he calling my name?"

"No, he's saying something else."

"What?"

"Nothing. Tell you later. We're fine."

Then to Justin again: "These guys here are Edith and the Skanks. See this man here?" Justin dutifully looked. "Well, he's Edith." Jeez, Jeff thought, I'm gonna have a lot of explaining to do when the little guy gets older.

“And finally,” Jeff said, “here’s the last page. These guys are The Undoing. They’re one of daddy’s favorite bands. Mommy’s not into heavy metal but even she likes some of their stuff. They actually did a whole album once of just acoustic songs – tight harmonies, the whole deal. But mostly they crank it up and kick some serious guitar butt.”

“Butt! Butt!”

“Jeff!! What are you teaching our son?!”

“Nothing. Tell you later. We’re fine.” Then quietly to his son, “Come on, buddy, don’t get daddy in trouble. We don’t want to see mommy’s unhappy face, do we? Not tonight. Daddy was hoping to get some special cuddling time with mommy after you go to bed.”

Jeff closed the magazine and looked down at the enigmatic bundle cradled in his lap. Justin was at that tipping point between wakefulness and sleep, content for the moment but who knew for how much longer. Jeff looked at him, then back to the image on the page. How did we get to the point, he wondered, where we’re not satisfied with anything less than spectacle? Fundamentally, he reasoned, music is sound, it’s aural, so when a musician takes the stage, logic would dictate that everything else – dress, hair, presentation – becomes irrelevant. But obviously that’s not the case. Performing, no matter how you slice it, is putting on a show. There’s more than sound involved. Especially with singing: one sings with one’s whole body. Music is expressive, rock more so than many other forms. It just isn’t humanly possible to sing without emotionality, without gestures and snarls, grimaces, and a certain amount of writhing and gyrating.

Jeff thought playing guitar was like that too. To him it felt like detonating a series of massive but exceedingly satisfying explosions and then using all his skill, musical instinct, body english, and sheer will to guide the resulting chunks of sonic mass to

where he wanted them to land, having only his guitar, strategically positioned at his pelvis, to do it with. All while staying in sync with his bandmates... and nailing the harmonies... and not forgetting the words... or drowning out the keyboard... or kicking out a power cord and killing the sound to the whole stage. It's not something one does standing still or with a passive demeanor.

Also, when you're out there with all eyes on you, you want to give your audience a show, so you're probably going to want to dress a little flamboyantly. And let's face it, when you live in a fishbowl, it's easier to put on a persona than let everyone see who you really are.

He knew too that rebellion was a fundamental part of rock. Rock was brought into being by and for young people and was largely about exuding power, displaying sexual bravado, and establishing one's identity. But where does it end? Excess for its own sake? Why should we care about a band's image as headbangers or goody-two-shoes as long as the music delivers?

At the same time Jeff knew he was as big an offender as anyone else. Back when he'd played he'd always gone a little overboard. And now as a consumer he still got into the craziness as much as anyone. But how, he wondered, did popular music go from tuxes, suits and gowns to long hair & let's-mock-authority clothes, to nearly nude erotic outer-space-meets-industrial-accident rock shows? Yeah there's room for spectacle, he thought, but does it have to crowd out everything else, leaving no room for the little guy who doesn't have the desire, the need, or the stomach for theatrics, much less the budget or the PR machine to manage it all?

And shouldn't even rock 'n roll animals be able to regulate their behavior enough not to trash their hotel rooms all the time? Jeff's family had come up from modest circumstances. His mom had done housekeeping at a resort. A lot of rockers seemed to have come up from tough circumstances themselves, some from

situations it would be a stretch to call families. Couldn't they relate? Did they not see the little guy who had to sweep up the broken glass and wash the puke out of the bed sheets the next morning?

All this was not even to mention the excesses of metabolically debilitating substances. Jimi Hendrix, Janis Joplin, Jim Morrison, Brian Jones, Pigpen from the Dead, Kurt Cobain, Amy Winehouse... all gone at the age of twenty-seven. That he was on the verge of turning that age himself wasn't lost on him.

Jeff sighed. He sympathized with the bands on a lot of points, especially as to the fans' demands that in their shows they stick to the hits that made them famous when the musicians were constantly trying to evolve, like any creative person does. Rock 'n roll got started by musicians breaking out of forms that society tried to impose on music. How ironic was it that the fans now tried to imprison their rock heroes in forms that they, the fans, demanded?

He let out another sigh and looked down at Justin again. Yep, little guy, there's sure going to be a lot to talk about when you get older. But then, why try to anticipate what music will be like? The only sure prediction is that it'll be unpredictable.

But what *is* going on in that little pumpkin head of yours? Do you like music? Do you *love* it? How do you process it? Can you hear harmony? Chords? Syncopation? Or is it all linear, one-dimensional, sing-songy? Do your neurons fire up when you hear a screaming guitar riff? How about a haunting Celtic duet in a high female register? A Bach fugue? Jazz riffs on a hot sax? Latin percussion? Gregorian chant? Is your brain forming new connections right now that will determine how you hear music when you grow up? Or how you *make* it? He looked down at his son's innocent face and beatific smile. It didn't seem possible that it would ever be

capable of a grimace or a sneer. But every punker who ever snarled his way to mugshot notoriety had started out as some mother's precious little baby.

Aw hell, he thought, I'm overthinking it. Like the man said, it's only rock 'n roll. In the end it's still all just 1-4-5.

"You know what, Jus?" he whispered. "Surprise me." Then he closed his eyes and drifted off.

Dana came into the living room, dish towel in one hand, sippy cup in the other, and beheld the two guys in her life: one large bundle of bones, innards, emotions, and experiences sprawled out on the couch – the one she'd fallen in love with four years ago – and a miniature version of the same, whom she cherished just as much, or more if that was possible, in a different way of course, nestled against the big one's chest. Both had drooping eyelids and dots of saliva at the corners of their mouths. Both were breathing in measured rhythms, the man's slow, the toddler's more rapid. *Rock 'n' Thunder* lay on the floor next to the couch, open to an ad for a two-volume bio of Sid Vicious and the Sex Pistols.

"My guys," she sighed. "My rock heroes."

Not the prototypical picture of domestic bliss? Maybe not. But maybe a reasonable approximation? Close enough for rock 'n roll anyway, as they say. But what brought satisfaction to her heart was knowing it was real. Something solid that she could grasp and hold in the right here, right now. To her that meant everything.

As Justin would say, "*Wock-ah!*"