

The Clubbo Story

Prologue

The last minutes of my last show with my last band:

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

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

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

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

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

“Okay,” I whooped, “let’s do it!” In all my previous bands we’d hover in the wings after the last song, hoping the thin applause would coagulate into something definitive enough to justify a few more minutes onstage. Despite Flowering Judas’s popularity, I didn’t take pre-encore luxuries like urination for granted.

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

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

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

"We'll talk about it later." I meant later, as in later after I'd tied her face-down on her bed with leather guitar straps and she was telling me to sink my teeth in deeper.

She nodded. "Later."

We huddled at stageside. Nina closed her eyes, steepled her hands, and did her affirmation/meditation thing.

"What are you affirmationing?" shouted Tallulah.

Nina opened her eyes. "Give us the power to knock them dead. Disembowel them. String their fucking guts from the exit signs."

I made a feint toward the stage. Nina snatched me back by the elbow.

"Remember what I told you," she scolded. It was a pet refrain: "It's like surfing. You don't just ride the first wave of applause. You wait for the perfect one."

The crowd noise receded, then returned, stronger. Nina nodded. "This one."

The crimson tip of Otto's joint raced toward his face as he sucked down a final hit. Tallulah scribbled her fingers in her hair until blue tendrils obscured her face. She liked looking as fucked-up as she was.

Whistles and shrieks as near-naked Otto sprinted to the drum riser. Tallulah got her bass on without stumbling over any cables. I remembered to put on my guitar Nina-style. I'd been playing a decade longer, but she's the one who taught me how to lock the strap from the side instead of squirming into it like a t-shirt.

The stomping and clapping snowballed into pure white noise when Nina stalked onstage. She donned her guitar and stood motionless save for a tapping boot heel. Backlighting in blue, she radiated the cool arrogance that made fans want to line up to slap her face, or have her slap theirs.

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

Nina intoned the opening verse:

Evaporation

No more sensation

An empty ocean

As far as I can see

I directed my gaze toward the balcony mixing board, heeding another rule of Nina Sheybani stagecraft: "Play up and back." I could make out the hulking silhouette of Ron, our front-of-house soundwoman, nodding to the rising groove as Otto and Tallulah joined in. Then I

focused on the green exit signs behind Ron. I imagined them draped with audience guts. Long shiny strands that spilled over the balcony, trailed to the floor, and terminated in the expense-account cocktails of the A&R weasels crowding the reserved tables. Elinem, Rowf, Upstart, Clubbo, even fucking Magna—all had dispatched talent scavengers from LA to reconnoiter what *Murder by Music* called “the first important San Francisco band of the millennium—and probably the last.”

I could afford to be snide. Record deal offers were about to flood in. All we had to do was wait for the right one.

I favored Clubbo—not because my mom worked there thirty years ago, but because they were pretty much the last of the cool indies. “Clubbo is cool,” Nina would agree, “but we should keep all our options open.” I couldn’t argue with that, so long as we ruled out Magna—the biggest, shittiest label with all the biggest, shittiest acts.

I bludgeoned the keyboard with the guitar headstock, triggering a loop I’d constructed in Audioactive Pro by mating the thump of a Wagnerian kettledrum with an imploding Vegas casino. Nina’s voice lunged up an octave:

Evaporation

A slow starvation

She keeps you waiting

And then she fades away

She turns to vapor

No one can save her

She’ll never stay here

When all she really needs is someone to leave

Nina turned from the audience and prowled upstage. She teased feedback from her growling amp, baiting it like a wounded animal. Then she advanced on me.

Our guitars collided, moaning like ocean liners caressing icebergs. She pumped her hips. In a spasm of inspiration I pried the mood ring from my finger and wedged it between the two lowest synthesizer keys. It lodged there, sustaining two sine waves a discordant half-step apart. As anyone with even rudimentary knowledge of acoustics knows, two notes sounded simultaneously generate a lower-pitched third note defined by the distance between the two pitches. In this instance:

E1 = 82.4Hz

F1 = 87.3Hz.

Difference tone = 4.9Hz

As you probably know, 4.9Hz is a good two octaves below the lowest tone the human ear perceives. But when I floored the volume pedal, the stage, the instruments, the band, and everyone in Blowtorch shuddered and throbbed at just under five cycles per second. *Tempo di orgasmo*. It was good.

Everything between Nina and me was like a difference tone. Deep things occurred because we'd superimposed our fundamental natures.

Nina didn't deign to sing the elegiac outro verse—it would have been anticlimactic. We staggered offstage. The applause fell like a redwood, loud but brief. Even our thickest fans knew the show was over.

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It was the rhythm section's turn to settle up, but Tallulah begged off, citing an early workday selling corsets at Hellbound Strumpet on Haight Street. (Read: phoning in sick and nursing her hangover.) Otto showed us the numbers:

615 (-27 guests) = 588 @ \$7	\$4,058
\$1,000 guarantee + 50% of gross > \$2,000	\$2,029
\$125 to Ron (F.O.H. sound)	(\$125)
Band exp. (rehearsal, drum repair, etc.)	(\$500)
Band total	\$1,404

That was \$351 each—big bucks for an unsigned band. Nina counted out Otto's cash on the Judasmobile's bumper. He asked if we needed help unloading, even though he knew we'd let him off the hook, what with his bike and all.

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

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

“Was it good for you?” she asked.

“It was fucking amazing.”

“I wanted to go out on a high note.”

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

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

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

“And that,” said Nina, “is something I need to talk to you about.”

I looked her up and down. Even in baggy, after-show schlep-wear she was delicious. “I’d rather talk about what I’m going to do to your neck.”

“First this.” Nina looked me up and down too, but in a different way. “I’m going to have to take a little break from Judas. I had lunch with Ravenna today.”

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

She spoke faster: “He asked me if I’d ever thought about working on a non-Judas solo project. Now, I know what you’re thinking, and I just want to say that in no way does this mean that I’m any less committed—”

“What the fuck *are* you saying?” I barked, loud enough for the bartender to eye me warily from behind the dumpster.

Nina clacked her empty beer onto the dash. “I’ll tell you what the fuck I’m saying if you let me finish a sentence! I’m saying I want to take a little break to check out this solo idea. I mean, you can’t just say ‘no thanks’ to the guy who produced *Blood on Black Lace*.”

“Yeah,” I snorted. “Twenty years ago. And he’s been spewing audio puke ever since. Me2. Piehole. Feather Footjoy.” I leaned closer. “Is that what you want? To be the next Feather?”

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

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

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

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

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

I downshifted from rage to desperation. “When you say, ‘a break,’ you mean what? Like a month? Like a year?”

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

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

“Listen,” said Nina, “and this time hear me. There isn’t going to be a deal with Clubbo because there isn’t going to be a Clubbo. Magna’s buying them out. No more signings without Donnie’s approval. And Donnie’s not interested in Flowering Judas.”

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

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

“Fuck!” she squealed. She flung open the door and leapt out, flapping beer.

“Sorry,” I croaked.

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

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

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

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

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

“No, I’m not okay!” I pried my hand loose and held it up. A piece was missing. And there was blood, lots of blood.

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

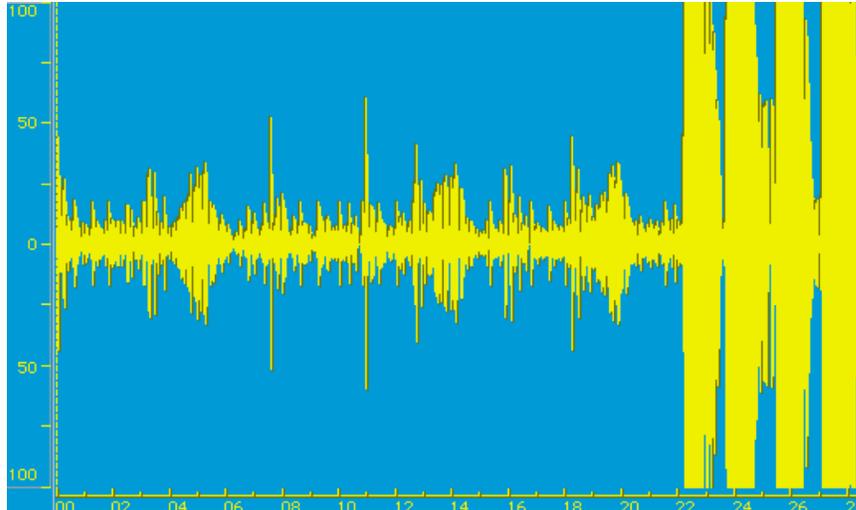
Chapter 1: A Year and a Half Later

When I was old enough to love music but too young to make my own, I liked to stand beneath the piano while my mom played. I'd clutch the mahogany legs and press my head up against the soundboard, clenching my teeth until the Chopin nocturnes and Beethoven bagatelles seemed to originate inside my skull.

I flashed on the sensation decades later as I stood on my desk with my forehead pressed to the ceiling, listening to my upstairs neighbors screwing. It wasn't voyeurism—I was squeezing as close as possible to the conductive surface in order to capture the clearest possible signal through my headset microphones.

This rhythm was especially promising, practically a drum groove in itself. The thump of the bed frame was the kick drum—dig the virile lows! The thrumming bedsprings were a swaggering hi-hat. The boy-grunts were big snare backbeats, the girl-gasps the offbeat syncopation that kept it funky. *Boom-squeaka-boom, UH! squeaka-boom-boom.* They rocked.

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



It's as easy to understand as the cardiac monitors that flicker meaningfully in hospital melodramas. The numbers across the bottom indicate elapsed time in seconds. Distances from the horizontal zero axis represent loudness. Reading left to right, you discern a tantalizing *promise* of a groove—until you reach the deafening, off-the-meter blasts at 00:22, which shows the ringing phone that nearly toppled me from my perch just when I was getting something good.

“Shit.” I hissed, tearing off the headphones. I climbed down and slogged through a sediment of unwound audio cables, unsorted discs, unread music mags, and unwashed underwear. A CD-R case went *crack*. I plucked my phone from atop a chest-high tower of hard drives.

“Yo, Bug,” said a manly baritone.

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

“I’m sorry about your mom,” said Ron. “She was a real cool lady. I know it was last year, but I just heard. That’s so sad, being an orphan. Do you still say ‘orphan’ when you’re thirty?”

“I’m twenty-nine.”

“Guess where I am.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I was silent. So were my drained upstairs neighbors.

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

“Deep *Magna* pockets?”

She hesitated. “Sort of. Not exactly.”

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

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

“Taquería Tulúm?”

“Tulúm,” she confirmed.

“Done.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

*Goin’ to a dyke bar lookin’ fuh chicks
Librarian tongues do dangerous tricks
Tonight ah’m gonna teach ’em what to do to a dick
Gonna find me a bitch . . .
TO SIT ON MUH GIRLFRIEND’S FACE!*

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

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

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

Ron was so absorbed in her own performance that I had to point out the club. She careened across two lanes and pulled into the alley behind the Gaffe, where a bevy of drag queens refreshed lipstick and straightened seams before pawnshop mirrors. A girl with a lofty Cleopatra Wong coiffure blew a kiss into our headlight. I felt a stab of sadness when she removed her wig to reveal a flesh-colored shower cap. There’s always something poignant about an unwigged transvestite, even when she doesn’t remind you of your mom, post-chemo. We could hear the *boom-shick, boom-shick* of house music, even inside the van.

Ron peeled off her lumberjack shirt. She had a new tattoo: a 45-RPM disc encircling her navel. She started wrapping a beige elastic bandage around her chest. I went inside to scope out the mixing board.

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

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

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

When the MC signaled from the stage via pom-pom, I commandeered the desk and dialed in the monitor mix I knew Ron wanted: a splash of reverb to lube her ego, but not enough to mess with her pitch. A stiff corset of 8:1 compression. A feedback-nixing filter. I inserted the Piehole disc and pressed play. The sound system vomited the idiotic intro riff.

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

“*Fuck you!*” roared a nun.

“*Go back to LA!*” bellowed a ballerina.

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

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

*My big-titted betty used ta think she was queer
Till me an Lil’ Ernie talked her outta that idea
But she still eats seafood when I fill her fulla beer
Gonna find me a bitch . . .
TO SIT ON MUH GIRLFRIEND’S FACE!*

Ron dropped into a full split on the first moronic squawk of the guitar solo, catching the rubber cock in her teeth on the way down. It’s always impressive when a large person pulls off a graceful gymnastic feat, even when they aren’t performing auto-fellatio. Even I howled in delight. By the time Ron tore into the third verse, hundreds of fists pummeled the air in unison.

While Ron rapped, I tweaked the mix, notching out upper-mid shrillness and loosening up the constipated bottom end. Not even Jesus Bear could have made it sound *good*, but I did improve Piehole’s mix by a factor of approximately thirty-seven billion.

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

*Mah dolly’s no dyke—she just know what ah like
Gonna find us a bitch . . .
TO SIT ON MUH GIRLFRIEND’S FACE!*

*And when muh bitches are through
They can sit on muh head and Lil' Ernie's too!*

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

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

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

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

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

"True," said Ron. "But let's stay for just a little bit of the last act. It's Rikki-Rikki. He's one of the best drag artists in Southern California."

"One song," I sighed wearily.

But Rikki-Rikki's intro music woke me up real fast. Now it was my turn to want to shout, "*Fuck you! Go back to LA!*"

Even if you avoid radio as religiously as I'd done post-Judas, you've probably heard "What You Said" at your local gym, DMV, or strip bar. And if you're part of that statistically insignificant percentage of moviegoers stupid enough to see *Booty Buddies II* yet smart enough to read, you might have noticed these words in the closing credits:

"What You Said"

Performed by Shey

From the Magna Records album *Shey Moi*

Produced by Keith Burchill for Burch Bottom Productions

Written by Shey, K. Burchill, A. Glover, E. McNair, O. Madison, C. Fine
Magnapop Records (a division of Magna Music Group)

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

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

Rikki-Rikki wafted onstage. He looked like Nina. He walked like Nina. He wiggled like Nina. He wore the same cobalt angora minidress Nina wore in the video, or at least in the parts that had jostled their way between my eyelids before I could switch over to the Ancient Worlds channel. He brushed aside his lopsided coiffure to cup one ear like Nina does:

*I couldn't speak, I was so happy
Last night when you told me you loved me
But today I saw you with your friends*

Couldn't help but hear what you were telling them

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

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

What you said really hurt me

What you said was so untrue

Tell me why—was it all a lie?

Was it just a joke to you?

“He’s great, huh?” Ron shouted. She was so captivated, she didn’t even notice me leave.

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

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

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

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

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

“I want to not have to *tell* you what I want.” She tugged her shirt back down over her bra.

“I want you to show me what *you* want. Like, you want to shove me down and fuck me and call me a bitch. Do you think I’m a bitch?”

“Big time.”

“Then treat me like one, asshole!”

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

“You should take my boots off first.”

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

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

I pressed her into the mattress and forced her thighs apart with my knee. “Show it to me, cunt!”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Brutal abandon," I muttered as I slumped past a shuttered Palestinian corner store. Would the owner grieve if his partner abandoned the business for a hot supermarket gig? I paused at the window of a store selling nothing but wheels and casters. Did the Exalted Order of Caster Vendors swear vendettas against those who betrayed the brotherhood for a chance to sell monster truck tires?

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

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

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

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

Something grabbed my foot and pulled. Maybe I screamed.

"Shithooks off!" barked Ron. "Jeez, how about if you don't go rummaging through my stuff, Bug?"

"Chris," I said weakly.

"Whatever." One of Ron's hands clutched her spiked helmet, stuffed with crumpled bills. The other held my right shoe. "Jeez! I spent like 20 minutes looking for you. I thought maybe you had a heart attack in the little boys' room. I even asked some guy to go in and check for you. 'Look for the tall, skinny straight dude with the fucked-up hair.'"

"Can I have my shoe?"

She ignored my outstretched hand. "Then it hit me: You're still tweaking over Nina. You're such a tender soul that you throw a hissy fit when you see someone who *looks* like her!"

"He looked like Shey, not Nina."

"News flash, bro: They're the same person."

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

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

I held out my hand again. “Shoe.”

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

“Back off, Ron.”

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

She asked for it, bringing up fingers.

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

Ron considered my hand for about 200 milliseconds. “*Aww!* You hurt your little pinky.”

“Fuck you.” I withdrew my hand and rolled over. “Why don’t you chop off one of *your* fingers and see if you feel like playing out?”

Ron plopped down next to me. “Look, I’m not saying it’s not fucked-up, you fucking up your hand like that. But come on, bro! You only play about two zillion instruments. There must

be at least a few you can jam on with nine-and-a-half fingers. Jason Fleming from Flem has *two* metal fingers on his right hand, and he gets around on guitar pretty good.”

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

“At least he’s doing something.”

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

“Are you writing *any* songs?”

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

“Then find one!”

“I’ve been spoiled.”

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

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

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

• • •

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

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

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

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

I bit. “What?”

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

“One word,” I replied. “So?”

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

I snorted. “My mom was just some fetch-it girl looking for a record deal. Which she never got. Kind of runs in the family. Except that she probably never got fucked over by the musicians she was working with. Or had her—”

“Shut up. I’m telling you what you should be thinking. You should be thinking, ‘Hey, my Dad was a Clubbo staff songwriter. He would have—’”

“‘Staff songwriter?’” I hooted. “The only ‘staff’ was the one they used to hit him with when he came around pitching his shitty songs.”

Ron narrowed her eyes and made a fist. “Didn’t I just tell you to shut up? You should also be thinking, ‘Hey, I’m like the number-one all-time Lunaire fan. I’d kill for a chance to get my hands on some of Illia One’s actual session tapes.’”

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

“Since you and Nina named Flowering Judas after a Lunaire song. Since you would always do your extra-special sulk when we didn’t let you play *A Breath of Air from Other Planets* in the van for the 700th time. Shit, bro—you and Nina wanted to *be* Illia One and Junko Watanabe. And now you’ve even got some Illia action happening on your little finger there.” She elevated both hands, pinning her pinkies to her palms with her thumbs.

“I didn’t amputate *my* finger on purpose.”

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

I pressed my hands to my ears. “Stop *Clubbo Clubbo Clubbo*-ing me ! This is a *Magna* project!”

Ron gently tugged my hands down, leaving one of her big mitts resting on my wrist. “Look, I’m not saying everything Magna is good. But not everything Magna is automatically bad. Lunaire was on Magna.”

I rolled my eyes. “After they left Clubbo. And they weren’t as good.”

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

I nodded. “Yup. There are ten times as many stupid people as smart ones.”

She withdrew her hand. “Yup. We’re all fucking idiots. Especially me. I keep forgetting how pure you are.”

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

Ron sighed. “You probably don’t realize this, being so super-pure and all, but more than 35% of the industry’s been laid off in the last two years. And here’s evil Magna, offering me—offering *you*—a great little job. I guess you have all the work you need.”

“I’m doing okay.” I still had about \$2,000 of inheritance money.

Ron shrugged and forked over a wad of bills. “Go ahead and count it. Fifty-six dollars—I didn’t forget your burrito.”

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

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

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

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

I reached through the window. She pinned my forearm to the sill..

“Ow.”

“Shut up.” She scrawled a phone number on my arm with a felt-tipped marker. “Look, I’m crashing at Squid’s tonight. What I *hope* happens is you think about it tonight and call my cell in the morning. T, then we can drive down together in time for the production meeting on Monday morning.” She produced a felt-tipped marker and scrawled her number on my forearm before releasing me. She released me. “This could be an amazing opportunity for you.”

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

She started the engine. “More than you know, bro. ”

I stood on tiptoe and tapped my cheek against Ron’s.

“Promise me you’ll at least *think* about *The Clubbo Story*.”

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

• • •

I walked home inhaling my burrito and honing comebacks for the next person who interrogated me about my music. Back at my place I joggled my laptop awake and booted Audioactive Pro, intending to review the day’s sounds. But my brain kept replaying Ron’s various accusations in random-shuffle mode.

Okay, there were specks of truth embedded in Ron’s bullshit. Yes, I *could* have played any number of things on any number of instruments. I’d tried, really tried, after the accident, but the results were unbearable. Do you have any idea how impotent I felt with just a partial pinky? Think keyboard: The little finger of the left hand safeguards the bass, the fundament, the invisible wire grounding you to earth. Without that connection, I fluttered like a tailless kite. Stringed instruments were even worse. When your hand cradles a guitar neck, it’s the left-hand pinky that claims those out-of-position high notes like brass rings. They’re the chromatic spice that differentiated what I used to play from the bland porridge doled out by wankers like Piehole’s Vlad the Inhaler.

One thing she was definitely wrong about was my supposed Illia One fixation. I extricated both Lunaire albums from a tottering stalagmite of CDs. I rubbed my thumbs against

the ridged edge of the *Blood on Black Lace* jewel case, remembering the first time I'd held that very disc.

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

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

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

I was too timid to initiate conversation, even though she'd just sold a copy of *Me2 II* to the doofus in front of me. But just as I was marveling at the outline of Nina's collarbone against the tight fabric of her Evilspeak t-shirt, she nodded at the new Radiant Boys CD atop my stack. "Awesome album." She dispensed verdicts as she scanned each disc: "Incredible album." "Not as incredible as their first two albums, but still reasonably incredible." "I play this so much on my shift that my manager hides it in the Albanian folk music bin." But when she reached *Blood on Black Lace*, the chatter stopped.

"This," she whispered, "is my Bible."

I etched Nina's name at the top of the pest list when my band, Trauma Poodle, opened for Negatron at the Basshole. To my amazement, she showed up, standing out among our dorky fans like a Roman candle in a bowl of oatmeal. Her evaluation: "Your crazy keyboard noises are

incredible. Some arrangements are okay. Everything else sucks.” Before the night was over, I’d agreed to help her start a new band, and she’d gone back to Hotel Medusa with Negatron’s bass player and his girlfriend.

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

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

We’d always argue about which Lunaire album was best. I stumped for *A Breath of Air from Other Planets*, stressing its sheer innovation. She held out for *Blood*: “It was incredibly innovative *and* incredibly successful. We will be too.” Once she tried to bolster her argument with her copy of Byron Jenkowitz’s *Record Rants*. (How the fuck did she steal a book that big from Music Monster?) “Look,” she said, flipping to page 826, where Lunaire was sandwiched between kraut-rockers Lüftwaffle and metal morons Lunchmeat:

LUNAIRE:

American rock duo active in the 1980s.

PERSONNEL:

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

Junko Watanabe: vocals.

DISCOGRAPHY:

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

★★★★★ *Blood on Black Lace* [Magna]

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

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

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

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

“Fuck you.”

“Seriously. You guys talk exactly alike.” Nina was about to laugh again, but she screamed instead because I dropped *Record Rants* on her foot. She slugged me in the chest—hard!—and withheld forgiveness until I’d restrung and intonated all six of her guitars, including the fucking 12-string. She propped her not-really-fractured toe on the gutted bass cabinet she used as a coffee table to ensure I felt duly contrite while winding those forty-two strings.

I felt bad, but not *that* bad. I hated it when Nina made like I was from some pompous intellectual background when *her* dad was the neurosurgeon with the Sorbonne sheepskin. My dad was the guy with “Streakin’ Up a Blue Streak” on his demo reel—in the ’90s.

I scanned the CD spines for more Clubbo titles. There weren’t many—most of what I had was in the Gold Box.

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

I turned on the closet light and burrowed past the ironic polyester shirts I used to wear with Judas, revealing the Gold Box and the rest of the stuff I couldn't toss but preferred not to see. I hoisted the box and carried it to the bed. I was breathing shallowly, like I was afraid of inhaling some toxic nostalgia spore.

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

I flipped through the discs like I used to do when I was too young to read the labels. There was lots of the ditzy soft rock Mom loved, like *The Lady & the Lute* by Devon Shire. The overproduced schlock Dad preferred, like Plynth's *Stone Age Symphony*. There was one of his stickers. He'd bought a lifetime supply. More, actually—there were thousands left after he died.

This Record was Purloined from the Collection of David Fine.

Lodged between two LPs was a 45 of "Soda Pop Shop," a novelty song about burping that literally made me puke with laughter at age six. On the sleeve: "This Record was Purloined from the Collection of Chris Fine" in a labored crayon approximation of antique type.

My face was damp by the time I reached the last disc in the box was: *Faith to Faith with the Prayer Bears*. I backed out of the closet cradling the disc.

The Prayer Bears were the sole constant of my scattershot moral education. Mom imposed a steady diet of their cartoons, records and books because their "every belief is beautiful" message harmonized perfectly with her own sloppy-joe spirituality. Plaque-colored

cellophane tape bound the jacket. The disc had worn a circular impression through the cardboard, forming a nimbus around the bears' serene faces.

I suddenly wanted to hear "Faith to Faith," the Prayer Bears theme song, so I cleared a stack of dusty software manuals from the turntable. But when I reached for the record, the disc razored through the brittle tape, striking the hardwood floor with a sickening *crack*.

I inspected the damage: a bite-sized divot in the disc's perimeter. I retrieved the fragment and pressed it back into place, wondering despite myself if I could repair it with glue. A drop of fluid appeared on the vinyl, like the wound was seeping. I wiped it away. Another drop appeared. I wiped my eyes on my sleeve.

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

I used to shiver with delight at the shimmering flourish depicting Spirit Bear's Wand of Wonder. Now I heard a chromatic xylophone gliss and a piccolo trill, a stock arranger's trick. The slick horn charts hinted at some superannuated big band arranger exiled to kiddie Siberia. Why is it that the older and less relevant musicians get, the likelier they are to make children's music? The baritone sax lagged behind—probably a tenor player winging it on bari and angling for double-scale. The half-step modulation into the final chorus was a hack move—how much hipper it would have been, I reflected between sobs, to descend a major-third.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Yeah?” mumbled Ron.

“It’s me.”

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

I didn’t care. “I’ll do it.”