

ACOUSTIC PUNK

~ Gary Marks

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Take 1

Sometimes miracles aren't really miracles. They're just something weird that happens, and a majority of people are surprised but happy about it.

But if a majority of people don't like what happened, even though it could be an amazing and rare thing, that's not called a miracle. That's called a curse, or bad luck.

Then there's the whole current political paradigm, where *lots* of miracles turned out to be bad luck, like Trump's election.

I am the son of a politician. My dad is an old cynical liar doing his patriotic best for *his* country -- which is vastly different than *my* country.

He's into saving the Middle East from the burden of having to sell its own oil. I'm into punk music and making money from what remains of the mosh pit crowd.

He has dyed shiny white hair, so as to hide the dull embarrassing gray it naturally is. I'm into girls with green and blue streaked hair and clothes that were factory ripped.

His ears are long and droopy. My ears are attuned enough to rhythm and harmony to produce and record sound for money.

His clothes are dry-cleaned daily, paid for by the taxpayer, unbeknownst to the taxpayer. He lives most of the time in his capitol office building, so he has free around-the-clock security and free food. It's kind of like a government sponsored homeless shelter for the most powerful people on Earth.

I sleep half the time in the recording studio, in between a session that starts at midnight and the one that starts at noon.

Hopefully he'll retire soon, or be voted out of office, because at this point, he's not doing anyone any good. If his views get any more conservative, or his memory starts to go, or his lies become pathological, he may even have to run for president.

I will never run for president.

I am Senator Jack Allington's wayward son, David, a record producer of some note, who has unfortunately gotten himself roped into producing and mentoring a punk band that lately, truth be told, is kind of ruining my life.

Take 2

The Puks were mediocre at best. But Aaron Levitt's drumming was absolutely awful. His time was all over the place. Envision chasing a puppy around the kitchen, trying to get it to stay on the newspaper so it doesn't shit all over everything. Now imagine that as a drumbeat. And imagine drum fills that sound like a collapsing building. When you record something like that, the inevitable result is, the puppy ends up dead, or fired.

Being a thirty-two-year-old producer assigned to a band that had been together since they were fifteen put me in a position similar to a priest on death row waiting to escort the prisoner to the electric chair: "Aaron, do you want a final meal of your choosing? The last supper? Because either way, by the end of the day, you're toast."

I planned to fire Aaron Levitt and replace him with Dorin Kingsly. My theory was, once Dorin laid down one of his signature Dorin Kingsly tracks, the other band members would magically begin to play in time too. Was that too much to ask? Time would tell.

How these kids got signed in the first place was a true mystery (if one were to compare the music industry to science fiction). Punk was barely alive demographically these days; we were past the apex for that genre. The Puks played in broken-down clubs where mosh pits still existed, but the bumping and jumping and smashing up against each other were now more perfunctory acts of desperate wannabe teens trying to do the wrong thing for the right reasons, like getting tattoos that wash off. The price of admission in these

dank dark places was a three-drink minimum. The dress code was either a black leather jacket, a piercing, or hair that was dyed one of the colors of the rainbow. (Unless, like me, you were on the guest list, in which case, the dress code was optional, the three-drink minimum wasn't.)

Why did I agree to produce a punk band in 2018? First of all, punk was one of the last modern music genres that hadn't been rhythmically kidnapped by drum machines. The irony, of course, was that hundreds of very excellent human drummers were begging for any kind of work these days, and this band had chosen, of all the drummers in the world, Aaron Levitt.

Actually, it didn't really go down like that. Aaron wasn't chosen. He was Robby Zone's neighbor and childhood friend. Aaron played drums from the age of seven, back when Robby only knew how to ride a bike recklessly over speed bumps. When Robby's electric guitar was bequeathed to him as a Christmas gift by his uncle, who deemed himself too old to play electric guitar anymore, it was Aaron who helped him learn a few chords, by showing him how to look things up online.

After that, they were inseparable, growing louder by the day. They found some other mutual friends they could start a deafeningly loud band with, then learned how to drink together, and poof -- The Puks were born.

However, a clause in The Puk's contract stated that the producer or record company had the right to replace any band member except Robert Feldbloom, aka Robby Zone, if that band member was considered detrimental to the record company's best interests.

The inconvenient truth revealed itself -- Aaron Levitt was now becoming a cautionary clause in a contract that, of course, no one in the Puks had ever read.

We all knew if Robby refused to abide by the contract's terms when Aaron was let go, his recently growing bank account would quickly vanish; his newly won financial victories would either be spent on Vans and vodka, or viciously vacuumed up in attorney fees trying to fight it.

This was not a million-dollar band. Robby was not a million-dollar singer-songwriter. In fact, no one could accuse Robby of actually singing. His vocals relied on the emo-punk music tradition of monotonal screams, preaching all good and true and mean and bad things to bored or angry teens in need of a repeated message. Consider it something akin to a rageful mantra. Or a metaphysical self-inflicted gunshot wound suffered when white suburbia tried to invade New York City.

During a particular interview at the end of their first multi-state tour the interviewer, a famous writer from Punk Online named Jersey Guthrie, wanted an explanation of three song titles from their first record:

Three Heads in Her Face
Switching Poles
Ginormous Black Hole

Robby shrugged, "Yeah, well, Three Heads in Her Face is pretty self-explanatory, you know? It's like me and Sledge and Aaron met this girl, and we all liked her, and she liked all of us, so we all got high and she, like, stared at all three of our faces from, like, a foot away for a really long time..."

"Had to be an hour," interrupted Sledge.

"Ya, at least."

"We also thought about the title, Three Faces in Her Head," but the record company liked the first title better."

"Okay," Jersey said, sounding a bit disappointed.

"Nothing like a good metaphor, right?" he added sarcastically. "So, what about Switching Poles?"

"Well, that one is like a quadruple entendre," Robby explained, pausing to see if Guthrie knew what an entendre was. Guthrie, having graduated with a degree in literature from Amherst, knew, although the term hadn't come up in quite a while at his current job.

Robbie continued, "I mean, on the face of it, it's a story of a stripper who goes from pole dancing to politics. She wins because she just said whatever her internal polling told her to say to her base."

"Yeah," Sledge said, "but it's also about my polish mom who got divorced from my Polish father and married another Pole."

Aaron said, "But if you listen to the last verse, it's obviously also about what would happen to us if the magnetic poles switched. They say it's gonna happen, you know. Could be tomorrow. I mean, that's why you have to live for the moment. Shit like that."

Robby said, "So yeah, there's like lots of different underlying meanings."

Guthrie nodded, "Okay, got it. And Ginormous Black Hole?"

"Well Black Hole is, it's like this pain we were all born with...." Sledge whispered, "that just *sucks up* all the light until nothing escapes."

Robbie says, "Yeah, and whatever does escape, it comes out all rearranged and unrecognizable. You know what I mean?"

"Of course," Jersey said." He made sure the voice memo app on his phone was still recording everything.

"One last question, guys. Why is the band named, The Puks? And is it pronounced Puk like puke? Or Puk like puck?"

Robbie said, "It's *punk* without the 'n'. And I guess, Puck without the 'c' too." Another double meaning. But it's open to interpretation after that. You know, some words that rhyme with Puk get very erotic, hence more memorable for the fans. That's the beauty of it. I think that's why we got signed. We have really good marketing."

Guthrie stopped the recording and put the phone in his pocket. He started to laugh. They laughed with him but didn't quite know why.

This interview made it into a number of different punk magazines, not just Punk Online, and fans ate it up. They saw Robbie and the band as honest, deep, philosophical, and capable of more than double entendres.

Because of all the press, their club concerts began to sell out all over New Jersey.

They were therefore signed to do a second record. And I was chosen by the company to be the producer of their second attempt at making actual music. Their first record was what they called "ragged." It was up to me to clean things up without losing the charm of the raggedness.

And that brings us to my meeting with Aaron Levitt in the lunchroom of the Alta Vista Recording Studio in L.A.

Take 3

"So, Aaron. Sit down, dude. We need to talk."

Aaron slid into a gray fold-up chair, using the back as the front, and hugging it with his arms.

"You know, I've been listening to the basic tracks with the people upstairs and, well..."

"Let me guess. They don't like the snare sound... I know, I know. I told them I needed to replace the heads."

"No, yes. I mean, the snare head does need to be replaced, someday. But they don't like *any* of it. They think you aren't cutting it as the drummer for the band, and we need to replace you, not just the snare head."

Come on, David, stop fucking with me." He was trying to laugh but it came out as a croaking sound.

"Not."

"Serious?"

"Dead."

Aaron quickly got up from the chair and kicked it across the room. He screamed, "I started the goddamn band with Robby. I interpreted his insane lyrics that don't really mean anything! You know that, right?"

"Yes. But you can't play."

He pushed his long dirty blonde hair back and I saw his eyes for the first time in days, "*I know I can't play!* But neither can they!"

"Well, that may be true. But when the drummer can't play, it gets people nervous."

"What people?"

"Me, actually. The producer hired to make this project work. I can't record tracks if the bottom of the track is swaying like a palm tree. And we could fix it with Pro Tools if we spent fifty hours on each song, Aaron, moving every kick and snare into a place. But that costs money. And, you're all insisting you want to get a live sound. And, yes, I agree, none of you can play live, but you, my timeless friend, can't play live even *more* than they can't play live. If that makes sense."

Aaron stormed away from me, picked up the gray metal chair that he'd thrown, and threw it across to the other side of the room, apparently aiming for a poster of a gold record that the band had made with their name on it, hoping it might inspire greatness. As soon as the chair smashed against the wall with a loud metal clank, not unlike the sound of Aaron hitting his six-year-old crash cymbal, which he refused to replace because it brought him luck, one of the chair legs flew off, reminding me of the last stage of a rocket pulling away from the mother ship, then spun around on the floor in a circle, like a compass needle gone insane.

Robby walked in. "Hey, what's going on, man? Someone throw a chair?" It was supposed to be a joke, but then he looked at Aaron.

"This fuck just fired me."

Robby looked at me, then to Aaron, then back to me again.

"Well, you fucking *un*-fire him!"

"Can't."

"And why's that?"

"Because I don't want to."

"Why? Give me a reason?"

"Okay, because his drum tracks lurch all over the place like a drowning hand in a stormy sea. I can't give the company a product like that. This isn't the '70s. Even *crap* has to be in time these days."

Aaron moaned, "Everything is in time because the rhythm tracks are all *machines*. We're a live band!"

"You're out-of-time, Robbie, literally and figuratively."

"You know what? *That's the end. I swear, I'm leaving.* I don't need this shit!" Aaron screamed.

Robby was about to say something but then, amazingly, he stopped himself.

Aaron's fists were punching the walls all the way down the hallway. His retreating boot heels created a Doppler effect. He pushed his way outside through the heavy metal front door into the horridly brilliant sun, where night owl eyes go to die. Then he walked across 8th street, joining the colony of the unemployed. I heard he eventually wandered his way into a discount music shop and bought a new snare head, just in case I was delusional enough, or hearing impaired enough, to change my mind.

I looked at Robby.

In his eyes, I saw an acknowledgment.

I knew *he* knew, and had always known, that as a drummer, Aaron sucked.

I had done him a favor, and he realized that.

I also saw in his eyes the realization that this had become a business. It was no longer about a bunch of kids with a dream rehearsing in his mom's garage. And, because he was now *in* this business, he'd just lost a friend. It was a business decision. Nothing more, nothing less.

The fact was, this second record they hired me to produce was going to have to match corporate expectations or there would be no third record. No more Puks. No more Robbie Zone.

They were selling out small clubs now. That was going to have to turn into selling out big clubs, and then small auditoriums, or Robbie Zone, at the age of twenty, was going to be thrashing and screaming his way all the way back to his mom's garage.

Take 4

Meanwhile, my father was having a hard time figuring out how to get under Trump's skin so Trump would tweet about him in some derogatory way. He figured if he could just get Trump's attention long enough to be insulted and belittled by him, it would guarantee his reelection in our mostly liberal district. If you hate Trump and think he's a monster, vote for dad, "the man the monster hates."

As far as my father's view of me, I was a massive disappointment. I had become the typical kind of high I.Q., low motivation parasite my father hated. I had no interest in politics, or social revolution, or getting a job, or paying taxes. I wanted to live off the grid -- for instance, maybe someday starting a communal wind farm with enough acreage to grow my own food. That kind of possible future was bad enough, in his mind. But the present reality was even worse. I had settled for being the producer of a punk band. Those who can't play, produce.

Ironically, according to the official proclamations of Congressman Allington, (dad), punk was a clarion call from the desperate youth of our country. It was music of the people, by the people -- and they were good young people at heart, as long they were willing to register and vote. For him.

The problem with his well-scripted message was that the punk crowd couldn't care less about voting, not for him or anyone. Through their eyes, the country was already beyond gone. It was in the grave of history. All that was

missing was a tombstone and an appropriate epitaph, like, "Here lies a country whose democratic principles died from lies."

The only thing punkers could think to do now was to exist in a state even further gone than the country itself -- *beyond* gone -- become incognito, missing in action, hide their Google searches so no one could secretly find out what sized nose rings they were thinking of buying on Amazon, or covertly poll them, or overtly arrest them. Or have their social security numbers scooped up by cookies hidden inside algorithms created by clever marketers of online punk fashion magazines, only to see all their newly gathered private information stolen by Russian hackers.

So last month, while father courted the disenfranchised young in his congressional district, his younger opponent, Dale Donnelly, courted the disenfranchised seniors, mostly by getting them scared of the disenfranchised young. Donnelly also began every speech, and every TV ad, by reminding everyone of his Irish heritage (although he was born in Connecticut and had never even visited the Emerald Isle except in his dreams).

Father lost in a hair-raisingly close election, with the scales tipped by Russian Facebook ads surreptitiously paid for by a group of rich Irishmen.

Take 5

After Aaron left the band, suddenly we had a record. A good record. Even I was amazed.

Then we found out that Sledge and the drummer I'd brought aboard (the pre-eminent rock studio hired gun in our neck of the woods, Dorin Kingsly), got into an argument over lunch. Or should I say, *about* lunch. Sledge was getting agitated that Dorin was using the band's advance money on gourmet organic fare while the rest of the band was eating fast food, all of which was a walk away.

Specifically, Dorin was drinking twelve dollar two-ounce glasses of beet-kale juice and enjoying twenty-dollar raw food lunch plates taxied over from across town. While the rest of the band, including Sledge, was eating sludge.

The food war came to a head one day when Sledge's Egg McMuffin was ignored a little too long and tasted cold to him. The reason for this faux pas was that Dorin had to write a check to the delivery boy because he'd run out of cash because his share of the advance money was almost completely eaten up, so-to-speak. And, truth be told, Dorin writes very slowly. High school was not considered a necessity since he'd been playing live gigs since he was twelve.

Sledge took one bite out of his Egg McMuffin, and tempers flared. Fists began to fly. Dorin pushed Sledge into the ancient Studer two-inch tape machine located in the dark corner of the control room -- it was used to warm up digital mixes -- and the capscam became dislodged. At that point the engineer kicked them both out of the building, and

seconds later, with his eyes squinting from the aforementioned hideously bright mid-day sun, Dorin quit.

I tried blaming the whole thing on global warming -- tempers do tend to flare in L.A. in one-hundred-degree heat with fires burning in the distant hills. Inhaling smoke while cars are lining the streets trying to evacuate as quickly as possible is not conducive to building friendships, I reasoned.

I then tried talking dollars and cents to Dorin, but he said he had been asked to tour with Red Hen, an up-and-coming rock band that apparently lured him with the possibility of creating his own personal nest egg. Damn hens. They also promised to tour in cooler climates. He was flying to Iceland on Saturday.

If he had stayed, The Puks tour would offer him take home pay rivaling that of the cooks at the heath food restaurant he was frequenting, and the closest thing to a nest egg was getting cold in a box containing a three-hour-old Egg McMuffin. Therefore, I had no serious tools of persuasion left. Dorin was soon flying off to be a Red Hen on a tour of the arctic.

The Puks record would be released with him on it. But we needed a replacement drummer for the live gigs. One record exec asked Robbie if he had any ideas. Enter none other than Aaron Levitt. I begged the president of the record company not to commit suicide in public, but I lost the argument. And Aaron was officially back with the band.

Meanwhile, my father had officially lost his mind. Having lost a close election to a fake Irishman, he not only fired his staff and pollsters, he fired his stockbroker of twenty years. His reason was simple. When you lose, just

fire everyone. Burn the house down to the ground and start with good dirt and the seed of an idea.

He studied the financial markets for a few weeks and became enamored of a little company called, *Blue Buffalo Pet Products, Inc.*

Feeling like the magnetic poles had switched in his world, and that he had nothing to lose, he invested all of his four-million-dollar fortune in this tiny company's stock -- a company whose name sounded like it had been conjured up by a pet supply scientist tripping on acid, and whose stock price was at an all-time high of four dollars because pet stocks were in a bubble.

Six months later the stock was above forty, and he ended up with over forty million dollars, making a bet only a fool would have dared to consider.

What are the odds of a greedy pissed off seventy-year-old ex-congressman making thirty-six million dollars in profits in six months by betting on a stock called, *Blue Buffalo Pet Products Inc?*

My irrefutable conclusion was: *This is what you call a miracle.*

Take 6

Fireflies are my favorite flies, whereas houseflies are useless disgusting creatures.

But when it comes to keeping time, very few people can hear the difference between a firefly drummer and a housefly drummer, or a drummer that sounds like malaria. Aaron was malaria.

The few times the record company insisted I attend a Puks gig I would break out in a hot sweat. I knew by the end of the night I would walk out with a vicious headache. And, while these are also the symptoms of an overindulgence in alcohol, I assure you, Aaron was the primary reason I would stumble out of the club sober in the middle of the set and feel like I was being pulled down into the netherworld.

Still, it had nothing to do with Aaron as a person. Aaron was by and large a nice kid, with nice polite politically correct suburban parents. He forgave me for firing him and always gave me a high-five when he saw me. And I therefore promised myself I would be a lot kinder when the tour was over, when I would have to fire him again.

However, my nuanced act of kindness would not come to pass. Because by the end of the tour I myself was fired.

The company said they couldn't afford me anymore. When I mentioned that I might be able to work for free if the right band came along -- *any band* but The Puks would receive my strong consideration -- they responded in a way any record company in L.A. would -- with smiles and handshakes and 'we're interested,' and see-you-real-soons -- i.e., they were *not at all* interested.

My production of The Puks was not up to their standards apparently, despite Dorin Kingsly playing the rhythm tracks. They were at the same time pissed that Kingsly was not on the tour. They blamed that on me, since I hired him. I tried to explain to them that Iceland was beautiful this time of year, but it fell on deaf ears. Music can be a cold business.

So you see, in a roundabout way, Aaron Levitt got me fired. I got fired for firing him. Damned if I did, and damned if I didn't.

Then a miracle happened -- The Puks' worst song on their record, a song called, Lay Me Downers, broke into the top 500.

They began to play in bigger venues. And the record company, by sheer coincidence, begged me to come back and produce their next record -- for free.

I wrote them the following brief text, which politely turned the project down while thanking them in a way I was sure they'd understand: "I'm flattered, but -- how can I say this? -- *NO*."

Take 7

My savings, which I planned to use during my retirement years, was at a high-water mark of \$4,320.

Old age suddenly seemed too bankrupt of a concept to think about. It was time for me to drain the account and have some fun.

The best way to do that was to call my friend, Tara.

Tara Radcliff, a lightly tattooed chestnut-haired twenty-two-year-old punk aficionado was a staff writer for a local music rag in town.

Her parents were rich, but they disowned her on her twenty-first birthday because of her one very tasteful -- (subjective, I know) -- tattoo. They were also appalled by her terrible taste in music. The Puks were not well-appreciated in the Radcliff home. They were not so much misunderstood as understood, and therefore not played a second time, and not missed.

Bel-Air, where her parents laid in repose, or what we might call semi-retirement, was a place far more predisposed to old standards, like Brown Sugar by the Rolling Stones, usually blaring from yet another red Lexus convertible, with the listener's fat rump settled comfortably into the bone-white leather driver's seat. Brown Sugar was played on those special hair-blowing-in-the-wind occasions, like driving to Whole Foods. Or speeding away from Starbucks after downing a double espresso. The eternally insipid, *Just the Way You Are*, with Billy Joel's fake vibrato oozing out of every bullshit line, was saved for the obligatory Sunday drives with family to the Unitarian

church, with the children squeezed into a back seat the size of a carry-on suitcase.

Tara liked to shock and mock her rich parents, and occasionally hock her mother's jewelry -- none of the pieces would be missed since they were an insignificant part of the twinkly amalgam of infuriatingly entangled diamond chains and bracelets in her mother's least favorite jewelry box.

Tara was now sharing an apartment in Venice Beach. Tara's mother was unaware of her contribution to Tara's monthly rent. Her best friend, Rosemary was her roommate.

Tara and I met at a Puks show. She was immediately attracted to me because I was the producer, and she was hoping I would introduce her to Robbie -- songwriter, lead singer-screamer. But I explained to her Robbie already had three girlfriends. Whereas I had a grand total of none. (But, I explained, this was only because I'd been going through a bad astrological period which had just now begun to shift.) I offered her a few drinks and an extra set of ear plugs. She accepted the former and rejected the latter.

Tara was so gorgeous I asked her if she wanted to join me back at my hotel and stay with me for a few decades. She accepted the former and rejected the latter. It was a memorable evening. She was sexy, funny, smart, just crazy enough to be mysterious, and just real enough to be endearing, which meant I was massively addicted to Tara the drug. Tara the angel. Tara the charismatic ever-desirable savoir of my uncharismatic, undesirable, meaningless life.

By calling her now, I was hoping for an encore of that evening, oh so long ago. It had been three very long weeks since we'd seen each other.

In the interim, she had gone to Paris with Rosemary, and I had been fired.

"So how was Paris?" I asked, hoping it was a disaster.

"Rosemary had a great time with Jacque. He paid for our flights and hotel. But I was bored. The Paris punk scene sucks, and who wants to go all the way to London from Paris, you know?"

"I know."

"*Do you?*"

"*Do you?*"

She laughed. "You're funny for an old guy."

"So, you want to see me again. I have some free time. Because I've been fired."

"Why?"

"Because I like you."

"No, genius, why were you fired?"

"It rhymes with the fucks."

"You smashed into Robbie Zone's truck?"

"Worse."

"Well, your life is never dull," she laughed.

"Astrologically I hit a dull period once. I think it was from noon until dinner on Christmas Day 1998."

"Hopefully never again. At least, not with me. I hate dull. Pick me up around 8. We can hit some clubs and then, I guess you can stay here tonight.

"What about Rosemary?"

"Paris. Jacque. En cours."

"Ah, good. Because, I was going to insist, no ménage trois. You're a one-person orgy."

"Smart people feel what they say, but only say what they dream."

That stumped me.
Then she added, "Jacque told me that."
"Remind me to never meet him."
"Yeah, he's pretty creepy. But he's got that unshaved
look."

Take 8

Tara and I blew through my life savings of \$4,320 in a week. Was it worth it? Every penny. Expensive hotels, expensive dinners, epic bottles of wine, room service for breakfast while in our soft white hotel bathrooms with soft white hotel slippers, spas for the lady, a wasted tennis lesson for the gentleman, a limo to and from a Dave Matthews concert.

After this unforgettable week, I found myself sleeping on her couch on day eight and nine, with no money left to pay my rent, which I forgot had come due on day six.

When Rosemary returned from Paris, sans Jacque, she was very understanding, but I knew in my heart of hearts she was not going to let me sleep on their couch for the next twenty years.

Plus, by then Tara's hair would probably be streakless, and her tattoos would make her look homeless.

It was time for me to find a new gig. Money was of the essence.

Looking to my rich and famous father for inspiration, I came up with one of two possible jobs -- corrupt politician, or hedge fund manager.

My father tried to discourage me from either avocation. He compared both to being the guy at the circus who sticks his head in the lion's mouth. Pays well. Lots of accolades. But eventually you're eaten alive.

He did offer me a boring but good paying job as a junior vice-president of sales at *Blue Buffalo Pet Products Inc*, since he now sat on the board.

I told him I knew not one person on the planet who would buy 'blue buffalo' *anything*, or want to feed one of whatever they make to their dog or cat. But he replied, "They sell fish food. And the blue buffalo logo was a marketer's dream."

I said, "Oh, now I get it."

After a long silence he became impatient, "You know, if you have to think about my offer for this long, you're fired."

To which I replied, "Fine. How's the severance pay?"

I was met with a distinct lack of laughter. Not a chortle. Not even a guffaw. Because he hung up on me.

Being without a father, and a mother long gone, decades ago, therefore orphaned, brought me to the following conclusions: I was broke, and without any current way to stop being broke. And I was an orphan. In that order.

So being the parasite I am, I asked Tara if I could move in with her, which would mean kicking Rosemary out. Her first reaction was -- I can't do that to Rosemary. My response to her response was something like, "Well, it's not like she has a baby or anything."

Tara told me she would never kick out a friend. I said, "Am I not a friend, mon cherie?"

She laughed, "Kicking *in* a friend is different than kicking out a friend. I can't do it."

I decided to stay in my rented, but no longer paid for, apartment until I was evicted.

This is what we in the parasite business call "low-cost housing."

Meanwhile, with the cat away, having been shooed off the feline's couch, Robbie Zone -- punk mouse extraordinaire -- decided to play. Not music (if he ever had, by strict definition, been creating sound deserving of such a beautiful word). He wanted to play with Tara.

They ran into each other at a local bar while Rosemary and Tara were having a celebratory drink. Rosemary had gotten a new job as a salesperson in an herbal and spice shop downtown. I was home alone watching a Dodger game, wondering why they hadn't yet turned off the electricity in my apartment.

Robbie tried to hit on Tara because he knew she wrote for a local music magazine, and also because he knew she and I had been hanging out together of late. It was payback time for having fired Aaron, over and over.

Robbie sat down next to Tara as casually as possible, dressed in a black leather jacket, of course. His green eye shadow created an odd counterpoint to his foggy brown eyes. "So, David... you know, he thinks he's hot shit in the studio," Robbie began. A subtle and thought-provoking opening line if ever there was one.

"Maybe he's trying to prevent hot shit," Tara replied. "At least that's his take."

Robbie was a bit taken aback. But he continued to play mouse, "Yeah, well, last night we laid down some great tracks in the studio with our *new* producer. You wanna...?"

Tara interrupted, "Good for you, man."

Deaf to nuance, Robbie pulled out his iPhone and started playing a new song. It was a vocal track of screaming, layered on top of another vocal track of screaming. The screams were accompanied by twelve tracks

of guitars, some of which were not in tune - which meant that when heard as a stereo guitar track they sounded like, well, a stereo track of vastly out-of-tune guitars. Tara thought it was reminiscent of one of John Coltrane's later pieces, but without any talent.

He put his phone back in his pocket. "So, you want a drink?"

Tara said, "That's what I'm doing." She raised her half glass of wine and downed it, trying to get something more agreeable to play in her head. She began thinking of one of her favorite songs at the time, *The Essence of Us*.

Sensing distance and disinterest Robbie, unfazed, decided to turn his attention elsewhere. "Who's your friend?"

"Rosemary."

"Nice." He looked into her eyes. "And do you have a *last* name?"

"No."

"Oh. Well... I'm Robbie *Zone*." He emphasized 'Zone,' assuming that his fame extended at least to the bar across the street from the recording studio. It did not. He held out his hand, "Pleasure to meet you."

"*Bonsoir*," Rosemary bowed her head, foregoing the obligatory reciprocal handshake.

Robbie, a bit confused, returned his attention back to Tara, having thought of one final lure with his initial heart's target. He had a convertible sitting out front. It was a warm summer night....

"Listen, Tara..."

"I did. One time was enough."

Ignoring her cynical quick wit, he carried on, "I have a hot convertible sitting out front. I have dynamite speakers. I

can play you the track we're going to release first. No one's heard it yet. It's like this tornado of sound."

"Sorry, Wizard. I left my hearing aids in Kansas."

Getting visibly flustered now, he pivoted back to Rosemary. "How about you, babe? You look so fucking hot tonight," he smiled.

"Sorry, I've already got a date." She put Tara's face in her hands and gave her a long wet kiss.

Tara returned the kiss, moaning loudly, while her eyes tried to capture the recipient of the joke.

In that instant, Robbie Zone's evening of Choose Your Own Adventure was prematurely obliterated.

Take 9

"Ray! Ray, Ray, Ray!"

"Who is this?"

"David! David Allington."

"Oh! Well, if it isn't Mr. 'Thanks, but fuck you.'"

"That's not exactly what I said."

"Paraphrased."

"Fair enough. But in fact, as fate and luck would have it, I'm calling to see if you might have any work for me."

"That would take a miracle."

"Yes, well, maybe I could create a miracle for both of us. I produced The Puks record, right? How many units did that sell, despite the fact that their live gigs sounded like an exploding hand grenade on a tape loop?"

"No one who went to see them play wanted to hear the record. It was too slick. Exploding hand grenades on a tape loop is the new sound now."

"Okay, well, I could reproduce that sound in the studio on an incredibly small budget. Just send me a demo of what you want it to explode like. You want a field grenade? A grenade thrown under a house? A bus? Different reverbs, difference types of compression..."

"No thanks."

"I'm not actually asking you to thank me. Not yet. Not until I prove that I can be a cash cow for you, for us. In fact, I won't charge you anything upfront unless I can create a hit for you and your company. How's that sound? Pro bono all the way, due to the fact that I already have a new surefire

super star under contract. Yes, in fact, I'm the producer and the manager of..."

"Who?"

"It's a girl. A girl singer. She's going to be huge."

"What's her name?"

"She doesn't have a name yet. We're working on it."

"A girl that sings that has no name."

"No stage name."

"What's her actual name?"

"I can't reveal that at the moment."

"Does she have a following?"

"She's the world's best kept secret. Trust me."

There was a long pause.

"You're full of shit, David. I know that. But I'll tell you what I'd consider. My son wants to record a song he wrote. It's not bad. He's never recorded before. He wants to record it in a studio in Ventura owned by a few friends of his. The band he wants to hire to lay the tracks down isn't terrible. So, if you would be willing to produce and mix the song for free, and help arrange it, I'll listen to a demo of your nameless super star. My son respects you, for some reason. But if you do me this favor, I'll agree to listen to your girl with no name. But listening is all I'm committing to. Understood?"

"It's a deal."

"Fine. Make me a demo of Miss No Name. But first, I need to hear the final mix of my son's song, and I want him to be happy with it."

"Well, O..."

Ray hung up.

"Hello?"

Why do people say hello when people hang up? It's like a sonic oxymoron.

By the time I assessed our conversation as either hopeful and modestly successful; or a dim light of possibility seeping into a dark muddy cave bereft of any other options; or a single breath of oxygen in a world filled with carbon monoxide -- he was already on another call.

Take 10

"Tara."

"Hello, Mr. Evictee."

"I have a question for you."

"Let me guess. Will I sleep with you even though you're homeless?"

"Of course, you will. But that's not my question. Can you sing?"

"... Can I sing?"

"Or can you at least *hum*?"

"I can sing, mon amour! Remember, in the Turkish bath at the hotel where you blew the last of your money? I sang Lolita's hit, *Love Myself*?" She began to sing the first line, "Yeah, when I get chills at night, I feel you deep inside... *deep* inside me."

"Not... bad.... and the lyrics are... very deep."

"Why are you asking?"

"How would you like to be a star, instead of writing for your music magazine for chump change?"

"A star? Or a nebula shadowing you around like a cloud of dust, Mr. Star-monger?"

"Tara, I'm talking mega-star."

"David, why are you trying to fuck with me?"

"It's consensual, right?"

"Seriously! Is my singing is that good?"

"Look, that's not really the point."

"Oh, great answer."

"We could make a lot of money."

"I was born in Bel Air, remember?"

"Fame then."

"David, I don't get it. What is it that you really want?"

"That's an impossible question to answer on one level. I don't know myself well enough. But I guess if I were assigning a true desire to it, it's not just about fame and money, it's a dream of actually creating the sounds I want to hear. Something in my head that I can't explain in words. Something that creates movement, and an overwhelming wall of energy. But on the material plane, it's about fame and money. And, having my girlfriend become a super star. Then I'd be sleeping with a super star! It's a fantasy of mine."

"Well, at least you're honest."

"Look, Tara, if you can just get your parents to put up the money, as an investment, not just a loan, I can buy us the studio time we'd need to make a super-hot demo, and get some killer head shots, and maybe a video of you dancing -- you can dance, I've seen that -- and by the time I'm done, I..."

"We..."

"What?"

"We!"

"Oui, as in yes? Or 'we,' as in us?"

"*Us*, you hound! I'm not letting you turn me into your little golden puppet. By the time *we* are done in the studio...."

"Yes, by the time *we're* done, they'll be calling you Lady Tata, or just Tara... or, choose a color besides pink for your stage name. Pink is taken."

"David!"

"I'm dead serious. I have Ray Hollander on the ropes. He's ready to sign you. I see a gold record in our future."

"... Golden."

"A *golden* record is not a thing."

"No. Golden! That would be my stage name."

"I... Damn! I actually love it. I really do. You see what you did there? You named yourself!"

"Well then, make Golden a star, not just a nebula floating around the star of David, and I'll see if I can get the money..."

Tara self-referred, which is one of the first things a would-be star has to do to. I was encouraged.

"Just trust David," I said, not to be outdone self-referring.

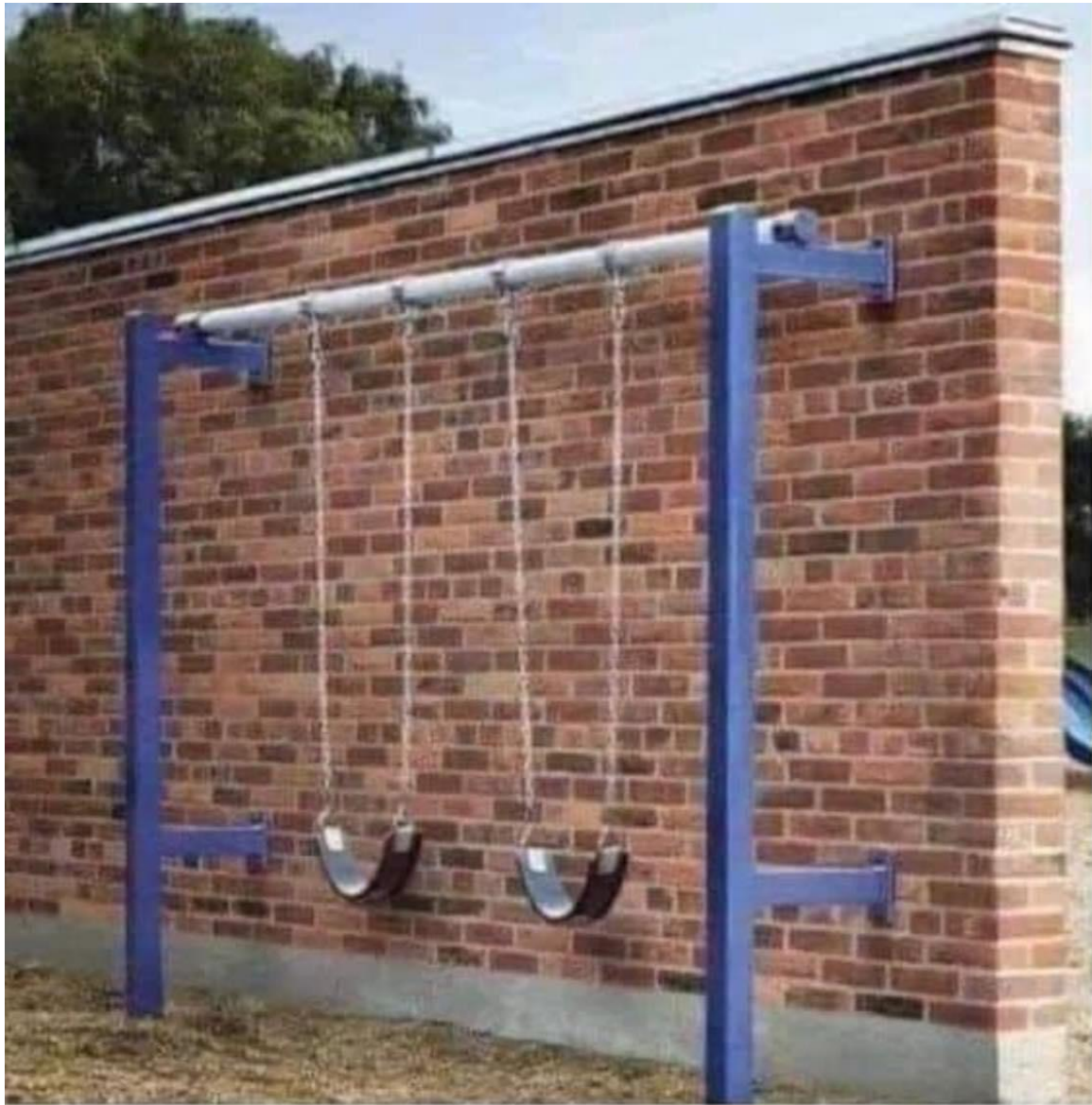
And so, the next chapter of my life was set to begin.

But as fate would have it, that chapter was never written. The sounds of the world were about to change.

Take 2020

IF 2020 WAS A MATH PROBLEM

**If you're going down a
river at 2 MPH and your
canoe loses a wheel, how
much pancake mix would
you need to re-shingle
your roof?**



IF 2020 WAS A SWING

If 2020 was
a slide...



I guess we all should have seen it coming, with humans being the vultures that they are, and the eaters of bats that they are. COVID 19 hit. It spread. It killed. And it slowly changed everything from who would stay alive, to what the reasons were for being alive.

My idea of turning Tara into Golden quickly turned to a dirge-like static hum, a single low note, rejoining the ever-present Bb sound of a black hole. I was now fifty-seven octaves below middle-C and feeling like I was invisible.

But that was no surprise. The virus was turning millions of dreams into black holes every day.

Tara put me up at her place. Rosemary found us old rock and jazz concerts to watch on YouTube. But the evening would end with the three of us binge watching a Netflix series -- Queen's Gambit, Black Mirror. Live music stopped. New music was rare. The world had become silent, except for sober newscasts, and the ranting of a president who had clearly lost his mind. Trump's "it's just a flu" became a meme.

I called my long-lost father to make sure he was still alive. For some reason, images of my childhood kept popping into my head. After my mom died my father turned ten-year-old me on to The Beatles to try to cheer me up. Time had allowed Beatles music to transcend the band's mopy hair, their war protests, and their use of drugs, even for a conservative politician like my father. How did they do that? That time became the time when music, and the dream of what life could actually sound like at its best, at its highest point of joy, was born in me.

"Dad, it's David."

"*Boy, how are you?*"

"I'm fine. Are you okay?"

"Let's see. I'm trapped, alone, sitting at home in my four thousand square foot house with no company allowed, I haven't played tennis in a month, I can't use my indoor gym because the flywheel on my exercise bike is broken, and the post office is a month behind delivering me a replacement. And, well... I'm just about broke."

"What do you mean broke? I thought you were worth thirty or forty million dollars!"

"In stock certificates I was, yes. But since the pandemic began, the stock price of *Blue Buffalo* has gone from forty-three dollars a share to... well, about twenty-two cents the last time I looked. Hold on. No, twenty-one cents now."

"Why didn't you sell it at forty dollars? Or thirty? Or twenty?"

"To whom? It has a very small float."

"What does that even mean?"

"It means not a lot of shares are traded on any given day. I got stuck with a tremendous amount of paper."

"What happened to the company itself?"

"Not a lot of people are buying fish lately. So, fish food... well, only fish eat fish food, in case that's breaking news."

"Dad, I can't believe this. You're seventy-two years old. Mom died decades ago. I'm your only heir, and a year ago you basically disinherited me because I didn't want to sell fish food for the rest of my fucking life... and now this is where..."

"Please don't say 'fuck,' David."

"Sorry, but why the hell couldn't you have sold at least *some* stock, a little each day, so you would at least have enough money to live on?"

"That was the plan. But I thought it was going to fifty. I wanted to wait to start selling at fifty. Maybe buy some Bitcoin with it. Besides, I was on the board. Still am."

"What does that have to do with it?"

"We *all* thought it was going to fifty."

I was stunned into a rare silence. I whispered, "Dad, you're broke."

"It's the pandemic's fault."

"Where have I heard that before?"

"David, it's still a great product. Even dogs love it."

"Well, last I heard, not a lot of dogs are buying stocks."

"Point taken."

I said, "Look, just be careful out there, Dad. This virus is not a joke. And it's not going away just because Trump wants it to."

"I know that, son. He's saying all this because he knows if a miracle *doesn't* happen, he has no shot at re-election. So, he may as well predict a miracle, in case the virus magically disappears. He has no choice politically. But I don't give a rats, frankly. He's a sociopath. And an ass. It's like the COVID virus is reflecting the man himself attempting to suffocate democracy."

"I never heard you talk like that before, Dad. I'm impressed."

"Well, I'm broke and all alone, but at least I've impressed my son."

"It's a hard-won consolation prize! Anyway, please do be careful. I know you don't respect me or my work, but I'd still rather you not die."

"I appreciate your concern."

"It's your fault, you know, Dad. You turned me on to The Beatles. All I wanted to do after that was immerse myself in the world of music."

"Yes, it was my one mistake."

"Well, please wear a damn mask. Or that could be your second and last mistake."

"Have you ever seen The Lone Ranger?"

"Dad, I have to go."

"Okay son."

Taking a Different Track ~ Take 2021

After that conversation, I was officially *un*-disowned by my father, which technically means I was re-owned, I suppose.

But at this point, the only financial asset he had besides his heavily mortgaged house was an almost worthless mountain of stock in *Blue Buffalo Pet Products, Inc*, which, following up on my father's idea, was now trying to turn their patented fish food formula into a dog food formula without changing the formula.

Dogs were in demand during Covid. People living alone were buying dogs to have company, since they weren't allowed to have human company anymore.

They came up with a label that had an impossibly cute dog on it -- a dog that was also going to be put in a TV commercial. The poor dog would be expected to happily lap up a bowl of fish food. They would probably have to starve the dog for a few days to create just enough desperation to where it would eat almost anything, even if it tasted like glue and cardboard. And then quickly film it.

My father offered to pay me union scale to produce the TV jingle in my recording studio of my choice. I also hired myself to write the jingle, and therefore made enough to live on for five full months.

Lesson learned: Nepotism, for lack of a better word, is good.

Bonus Track

The truth is, I liked Tara better in the Covid-19 world than I did in the previous iteration of the world.

I liked sitting home with her at night with nothing to do far more than when we used to go out to clubs checking out the latest local bands.

Early in 2021, right in the middle of the worst of times, Ray Hollander called me. He said he was putting together an unplugged punk concert to air on cable -- an acoustic punk concert was something that, for sure, had never been considered before.

It would take place in various remote locations. Robbie Zone was one of the stars that was willing to sing acoustic versions of their songs. When Ray asked if I would be willing to produce the show, I said of course, and, to be honest, I could use the money. I planned to spend it recording my budding super star's demo after the virus was eradicated, or died a natural death.

He said, "Well, *un...* fortunately, the entire production is a benefit for the COVID19 care givers -- nurses in particular, risking their lives to save other people's lives.... Fortunately for *them*.... Unfortunately for whoever decides to be the producer. We can only afford to pay union scale, that's about it."

Normally, union scale would have been a good start since this was going to take hundreds of hours of work. But sometimes a meteor, an internal kind of meteor, hits the planet you exist on and internally blows everything up. And it has all sorts of after-effects.

Here I was, living off the money I'd made writing and producing a dog food jingle, and otherwise depending on Tara for my survival. But the words just came out of my mouth without giving it a second thought. "No, that's fine, Ray. I'll donate my pay to the care givers too. I can't take money for something like that."

"Well, that's very generous of you David. Your father would be proud."

A second smaller meteor struck. What did the first meteor have to do with my father?

I suddenly realized, it wasn't related to the offer to donate my time. It was about me letting go of the mad race up the slippery mountain -- trying to turn Tara into a star instead of just being my girlfriend, and trying to turn my mediocre producing career into a million-dollar venture somehow.... to impress *who* exactly?

Now that my father had accepted me back into the fold -- accepting me, at least on some level, for who I was -- the entire mountain of quiet desperation that had ruled over me, tempted me, shadowed me, ever since I began my career manipulating sound, begin to lose its power. In fact, just the awareness of this secret little game that I'd been playing with myself lessened its hold on me.

It took the silence and stillness of this terrible tragic time in the world to tame me, teach me.

Silence and stillness - two things I rarely experienced in my field of work, were now becoming a part of my daily life. Because I had no choice. I spent some days hardly talking at all. Just thinking. Just listening.

This is what I heard:

Birds singing in Tara's backyard in the morning. They would have normally been drowned out by rush-hour traffic, but no one was driving to work these days.

I heard an innocence in Tara's laughter that had previously sounded cynical to me. Her laugh hadn't changed. It just sounded different to me now.

I heard excitement in my father's voice when he told me his *Blue Buffalo* stock had soared back up over a dollar because the Covid bear market had turned bullish.

So many animals beginning with 'B' to keep track of -- buffaloes, bulls, bears, but it brightened me to hear my father's voice sound happy and confident again.

Rosemary took a chance, medically and romantically. She flew to Paris with the virus raging, sitting for hours on a nearly empty Delta flight, and moved in with Jacque in his villa in the hills above Sarlot. Covid was relatively quiet there. Everything was quiet there.

I heard joy in her whispers to Tara during WhatsApp calls -- "Jacque picked me a bouquet of flowers from the garden for no fucking reason," she would gush. I took note for the future, when someday I too might have a garden. And maybe Tara would be there, living with *me*, rather than me mooching off of her.

After the new year, I began to hear the noise of the world revving back up again in a slow roar, like the igniting of a jet engine, as the dawn of vaccines began to diminish the panic and fear just a little.

In February, I produced and coordinated the benefit concert for Ray Hollander's hopeful stars. I organized everything via Zoom from their private homes and lofts and apartments. They were all nervous to sing without a band.

Most of them were not choosing their hit songs, but what they felt were their best songs, with lyrics that actually had some meaning to them. They had to be ready to lay it on the line. They would be exposing *themselves*, not their band, and not just their persona.

I too was trying to figure out how I fit in during this birth of a strange new world. A world that saw the death of mosh pits -- no one was going to a club to smash into a hundred bodies like ping pong balls in a tumbler in this new world.

I interviewed the five performers, including Robbie Zone, and taped their answers. I asked about their beginnings, and about what music meant to them, and how they were personally dealing with COVID. I used edited versions to introduce each of them before they performed.

They all admitted they were experiencing the same kind of disorientation, and sadness, and sense of loss, that the rest of the world was feeling. Some of them had family members or friends that had died. They were quite honest about it, quite human. Even Robbie.

During the taping of their songs, no one used props -- there were no dark clothes and make-up to hide behind, no fictitious personalities they needed to hide behind. And some of their songs, accompanied by a single guitar, were really good. Far better than the recorded versions.

Their willingness to simply be themselves was nothing short of a miracle. A very somber miracle, born from broken dreams.

As for me, it became clear the game was changing. And I was changing. I no longer identified myself as just a producer of other people's music. I was no longer living my

life grabbing on to someone else's race to the top, living vicariously through their success, helping them with their sound in the studio. I had my own life to live, down here in the foothills. And all the sounds I was hearing now were mine.

The End
~ GM