

Lily, We Saw You Dancing in the Crowd

It's two o'clock in the morning. Too much bourbon, not enough coke, and I swear I can feel tectonic grinding in my skull: Pangaea's coming undone, right above my left eye. Ian, our singer, is in the bathroom crying. Too much acid, not enough bourbon. When he finally comes out, he looks at me, hair hanging to his ribs, his eyes rubbed raw, a little trickle of blood from his ear skirts his jaw and drips on the floor of the RV.

He says, "That's it."

"That's it?"

"That's it."

He goes back into the bathroom, slowly this time. I get up and knock at the door.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"I can't explain."

"Why not?"

"No one can explain anything. Nothing means anything to anyone. So why bother? Who the fuck am I singing for? Me? You? Some dumb kid in the crowd? I'm going home."

"Back to the reservation?"

"Man, the way you say that, it makes me wanna gut you."

I don't know what to say, so I sit back down, pour another tumbler of bourbon. What can I say about Ian? A Choctaw gone bad, he's gone native, gone Occidental, with this van full of drug-

addled freaks, college-drop outs and wannabe writers. What's his problem? He's come late to the crisis of late modernity; the metaphors are still fresh and horrifying to him: schism, void, rupture, abyss. It's just occurred to him that we're in an infinite bind of irony. It's just occurred to him we're each of us a paper-thin narrative plastered over a sucking black hole. And this is *before* he took a sheet of acid.

I drink the bourbon and then another and then another. Finally:

"Hey. Hey?"

"What?"

"I think I'm freaking out."

"I'd get your money back for that sheet if you *weren't* freaking out."

"Don't be a fuck. Don't. Just don't."

I grab the bottle and stand up, stumble over to the bathroom door.

"Can I come in?"

"There's blood."

"Yeah, well, open up and bleed, right?"

"What?"

"Iggy Pop."

"Oh. Right. Well, there's a lot."

"Hospital?"

"It stopped."

"Okay. Can I come in?"

"Could you just be there? On the other side?"

I slump down, my back against the door. I drink from the bottle.

"Ok."

After a minute or two: “Are you still there?”

“Yes.”

“How do I know?”

“You’re talking to me.”

“Okay.”

“Just keep talking.”

“My mouth hurts. Can you talk? Can you tell me, something? A story?”

“A story.”

“Yeah.”

“Okay.”

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It’s three thirty on a Thursday afternoon in mid-October. Lillian Chanterelle McGeener locks herself in the bathroom. She pulls down her jeans and underwear, even though she doesn’t really have to pee. She’s two days late. She just needs to think and likes the sense of privacy, even though there’s no one in the house. Her mother delivers auto-parts to mechanics all over Hanover County, Virginia, but she’s probably at the main office, in Ashland, with her so-called boyfriend.

Lily thinks: now, wait, that sounds super bitchy. Doug is a nice guy. He tries too hard, true. He assumes that if it’s on rock radio, she likes it. It’s not his fault that rock radio sucks. Doug doesn’t hit on her, or her friends. Doug doesn’t drink or shoot meth. Doug doesn’t hit her or her mom. Doug doesn’t do much of anything. Doug doesn’t really seem to make her mom happy. But he at least keeps her company.

Ashland isn't a great place to find The One. Her dad was from Ashland. Real winner. He wanted to name her after a mushroom, because it sounded French. Thankfully her mom got it toned down to a middle name. She can probably get through life as Lily C. or LC or just Lily and never have to explain that one. It isn't like he's around to protest.

Lily isn't the only kid on the block whose pops moved to Splitsville when the going got tough. Half of her friends have step-dads, or their moms have boyfriends, or girlfriends, or vibrators, or drinking problems. Most of them married too young or too dumb. Lily's mind wanders, she thinks: maybe they should sterilize people who are too dumb to procreate. Half of Ashland would be spayed and neutered. Like old guy on the game show reruns is always asking people to do with their pets. That weird, kitschy, day-time show, the one you watch when you're pretending to be sick... with the big wheel that old ladies always have a problem with, getting it to go all the way around... a sad, escapist fantasy for the old and the bed-ridden and the...

Ashland is the center of the universe.

Back down to Earth. Lily thinks: seriously. There's a sign that says "center of the universe". There's more than one of these signs. Last summer someone drove around and spray-painted the word "asshole" over the word "center" on each one. That was funny. And more accurate. Ashland has six thousand people. There's like six hundred teenagers in the town. Six hundred teenagers and, in the last three years, only one serious act of vandalism.

Ashland makes Lily cry. Seriously.

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Lily wipes her eyes and goes into her bedroom, comforted ever-so-slightly by her wall of fame. Posters and cut-outs from magazines. Lily soaks it in. Lily thinks:

Oh Robert Smith, you whiny shit.

Lily secretly loves Robert Smith but it can only ever be a secret love. Lily's a metal-head. She sits at the metalhead table at lunch. She does metal-head things, like drinking crappy warm beer in the amphitheater in the Hanover County park-and-glen. For Senior Cut Day, she's already planning on going to the Black Sabbath festival. She doesn't even like Black Sabbath, but it's mandatory. Must attend. Must get t-shirt to prove she was there. Must meet people from outside of Ashland.

Last year she got her tongue pierced. Her mom didn't even blink. She just asked if that was all. Lily lied and said no. She said she got her business pierced. Her mom didn't buy it, she laughed. It's been a running joke now. Ha-ha.

She wants to get a tattoo, but all the shops are in Richmond and they all card. Lily has a fake ID, but anyone with an IQ high enough to get out of Ashland won't be fooled by it.

Her fake ID name is Lily Chanterelle.

Her stupid friend's stupid older brother picked that one. What is it with guys? What the hell? Chanterelle is a dumb name. Secretly Lily pretends that she is an exchange student from France. Oh you Americans, with your strange customs, and your adorable, stupid boys that are so easily *charmed into doing whatever I want you to do*. Lily scribbles scenarios in her French notebook. *Bonjour! Je m'appelle Chanterelle!* It rhymes! *Je voudrais une bière*. Lily can't find rum'n'coke in her French-to-English dictionary. *Vous aimez Black Sabbath? Ils basculent.* They rock!

French is easy. Too bad it's useless in the center of the damn universe.

There's only two places she can use her fake ID anyway.

There's a liquor store out by the interstate. One of her friend's older brothers works there. Sometimes he'll sell her a six-pack. Then there's the Lodge. The Ash Creek Lodge is an all-purpose auditorium. Church-group lock-ins, coed basketball tournaments, bingo, and all other manner of

arcane, boring-people activities. The Lodge also hosts rock and roll shows. It's mostly old-people stuff. Beatles cover-bands, Eagles cover-bands. And, once a month or so, Hanover Fist.

Hanover Fist is three brothers from Ashland. They were in high school when they started, but now they're all at Randolph Community. Their drummer actually has a degree in biology or geology or something incredibly useless. Lily thinks: they suck. They do. No offense, Hanover Fist, but you guys suck. But they do play their own songs, and it's the only thing like a local metal band she's got. So going down to the Lodge and drinking crappy cold beer beats the pants off of going down to the amphitheater and drinking crappy warm beer.

Lily puts on mascara. Lily tugs the runs in a pair of black stockings until they rip. Lily digs through the dirty clothes until she finds the Anthrax t-shirt. It's her boyfriend's. Translation, Lily thinks: It's Lily's. He got it when they came to Richmond two years ago. She was so jealous. Stupid Theodore and his stupid old cousins. He said they played for like two hours. He even got to smoke a joint with one of the roadies. The t-shirt has all the dates and cities on it. The shirt says "I'm the Fucking Man!" on it. You can get the tour shirt from the mall, but it says: "I'm the man." No "Fucking". The "Fucking" makes it authentic.

Lily's not even supposed to have the shirt. She wore it to school and got sent home with an over-size XXL Randolph Community College AP Class Achiever T-shirt. The thing was like a tent, it's not like she was hiding one of those pesky teen pregnancies. Jeez, get a sense of humor Ashland High.

Lily puts on the Anthrax shirt. She puts on a denim skirt and the messed up stockings. She gets her clunky black boots. Lily thinks: There are boots for kicking ass and boots for getting ass. You know, Fuck-Me Boots and Fuck-You Boots. Which are these? Sorry, boys of Ashland...

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Theo has to work late at Wal-Mart. He's going to meet her down at the show, so at least she'll have a ride home. For now, she catches the M42 bus down to Ash Creek road and hoofs it the rest of the way. She's supposed to be getting her own car for a graduation present. Not new. Not even this decade, but if it's got four wheels and it can get her out of Hanover County she's going to name it Thelma. She's going to kiss the tires and name her first born after it.

On the bus she does her nails with black nail-polish and listens to one of the cassettes Doug got her. It's okay. It doesn't totally suck. It's mostly generic. There's one song on it, second from the last track. It's five minutes, too long for radio play. It's like the record company let them put one good song on the album. It's fast and they let the singer say "fuck" even though the album doesn't have an explicit-lyrics sticker. Even though the album is lame and radio-friendly, this one song is good. It's almost really good. It's fast and their drummer keeps things up for the whole time. Most long songs have like a slow, boring part in the middle that the radio could cut out and make it into a three minute nugget of crap. This one goes all the way through.

She rewinds the song three times on the way to the Lodge.

Theo thinks that maybe they're really diabolical and snuck this one song on, like a computer virus or something, that would spread this one song to all the people who buy lame-shit rock-radio type albums. Like replacing one in every hundredth Tylenol with LSD or something. Theo has some out-there ideas about things. It's part of his charm. That and gullibility. And he's a good kisser for a dude with braces.

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There's already a line outside the Lodge. They're not even using the ultra-violet wand on the IDs. Lily breezes by with a wink and a curtsy. The Lodge is done up in black curtains along the

sides and a black stage set up at one end. The bleachers are rolled up and stacked against the walls. Hanover Fist's stuff is set up at the front of the stage. Lily recognizes the two big, cherry-red kick-drums. The band's logo is a giant cartoon fist squeezing Hanover county. It's stencil-painted on both drums.

Theo meets her at the bar. Hanover Fist are tuning up. Mixed drinks are four dollars. Lily thinks: ridiculous. A fifth of El Cheapo Blanco rum is like eight bucks. That's like twenty drinks' worth. Insanity. PBR cans are a dollar. Lily has one in each hand. She hands one to Theo when he shows up. His face lights up.

"Aw, babe," he says.

"Gotta take care of my man," she says.

He kisses her. A good one. Not too messy. She's warned him about that. Lily waxes metaphorical, just to mess with him: Just because you've got the keys doesn't mean you have to go driving it around like an idiot. Theo behaves. Good boy, Lily thinks.

Lily thinks: If he asked, she'd jump off a bridge.

"Who else is playing?" Theo asks.

Lily shrugs.

"Some guys from out of state. I heard they broke down here."

Theo laughs.

"In the asshole of the universe. Fuckin' lucky bastards."

Lily laughs.

Hanover Fist's singer grabs the microphone and flicks it on. A tooth-rattling squeal sends everyone ducking down and grabbing their ears. The band chuckles. A crowd of about fifty underage kids forms a wall at the front of the stage. The older guys hang out by the back and by the bar. The singer says:

“Hey, everybody, everybody, if I could just have your attention for a second...”

He kicks on the distortion pedal at his feet and grabs the neck of his guitar and screams:

FUCK YEAH.

The band is slightly out of tune and definitely out of sync. But they are very loud. A circle pit opens up directly in front of them. In the middle, a scrawny kid in just a pair of swim trunks and Doc Martins thrashes his body around. He grabs his own foot and hurls his body at another kid. Theo launches himself into the crowd. He forms a little wake of safety for Lily, catching the majority of elbows and knees that come flying at wild, anatomically confusing angles.

The first three songs go by in five minutes. A slippery layer of beer and sweat glistens in the stage-light. The band stops. Theo scrambles to the bar for more beer.

“Hey, hey everybody,” the bass player says, “I just wanted to tell you guys, the floor in here was waxed last weekend for the basketball semi-finals and it’s really slippery when wet.”

Someone makes a bad Bon Jovi joke.

“Fuck Bon Jovi!” Someone yells.

“Yes, yes. Definitely fuck Bon Jovi. But seriously folks.”

The crowd chuckles.

“It’s slippery out there, so be careful.”

The bassist makes a scolding mom-finger motion at the crowd. Theo returns with two beers. He opens them and hands one to Lily. They start chugging. The singer shakes his head and says:

“Okay Dan, that was nice. Now –”

He sucks in a big lungful of air and screams:

BREAK YOUR FUCKING NECK!

This song is slower and the band actually manages to keep mostly in time with each other. Lily gets that feeling in her chest, like someone is lifting her up by her heart. It hurts in a really good

way. Someone slams into her and her beer goes spraying into the crowd. Someone stomps on it and a spray of foam bursts into the air. Lily throws herself into the crowd. Someone elbows her in the side and she slips. Three different hands reach out and catch her. She stands up and Theo clears a space for her again.

“UP!” She screams.

Theo smiles and grabs her at the waist. A second later she’s on her stomach and then on her back, rolling around on forearms and hands. Theo brings her down at the front of the stage. They’ve reached the vaguely cultish, synchronized head-banging part of the show. Lily whips her hair up and down in big, long splashes. Theo holds her hand.

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The second band comes on. Their singer is wearing only his boxers. Lily blushes. She thinks: yikes. Theo, thankfully, is oblivious.

“Dude, that guy has a Les Paul. That’s like a thousand dollar guitar.”

Lily does some quick math: That’s two hundred hours at Wal-Mart. A prison sentence.

“They’ve got so many tattoos,” Theo says, “that’s like, fucking, years of tattoos.”

Theo has exactly one tattoo, his mom’s name on his shoulder and two calendar dates in flowing black script. Lily traces the portrait with her finger when Theo is nervous. He says it calms him down. Lily thinks it’s weird. It’s okay, she thinks. Lily likes that it’s weird.

The singer turns on the mike. Unlike Hanover Fist, he seems to know how to hold it to keep it from screaming and deafening everyone.

“Hey there.”

The crowd says: hey there.

“We’re the Skullfuckers, from Port City, North Carolina. How are you?”

The crowd rumbles. Theo smiles. He likes the name.

“We were going to play a show in New York City tonight.”

Lily’s eyes widen. She thinks: New York City is Richmond on steroids and acid.

“But FUCK New York City.”

The crowd cheers.

“We wanted to play the asshole of the universe!”

Someone cheers and sprays beer foam over the band.

“Thanks, thanks for that. Okay, no more bullshit. This is the first song we ever wrote. It’s a true story. I want to see you get into it. Ready?”

The kids shout: Ready.

The drummer smiles underneath a huge pile of red hair. He does a four count. The guitar player lets his guitar feedback scream to a blinding point of sound.

The singer screams: ONE TWO THREE FOUR.

Lily has just enough time to shrug in approval to Theo before the crowd explodes. Best Lily can make out, the song is about being thrown out of a club by the cops. The details are lost in the maxed out fuzz of the Lodge’s cheap PA speakers. The chorus, on the other hand, is a real shout along.

I PISSED IN THE GAS TANKS!

I SLASHED THE TIRES!

I BROKE OUT THE WINDOWS AND LIT IT ON FIRE!

THEY TRIED TO SHUT US DOWN

AT SEVEN THIRTY

AND SO I FOUGHT THE LAW

AND I FOUGHT DIRTY

If Lily wrote a review for the Hanover Sentinel: The Skullfuckers low-balled their intellectual pitch in favor of drunken debauchery. Come on, guys. Just because we're the asshole of the universe doesn't mean we're savages. Still, as far as brute power went, these guys weren't exactly lacking. Cute singer, too. She'd leave that last part out, though, for Theo.

The band plays a few more songs, mostly fast, heavy, and hard. The circle-pit kids really get into it when the band drops into low gear and muscles through some actual heavy riffs. The kids keep it up for the better part of an hour. The band buys a round of beer for the whole crowd. The bartender shakes his head. He's never seen that before.

"Hey, thanks everybody," the singer says.

The crowd raises their free beer: thank you!

"This is our last song. It's self explanatory. Thanks for letting us play."

The guitar player kicks on a delay pedal and the sound of his guitar starts spilling over itself, like a dozen guitars are playing drunkenly together in a chorus. Lily's a little drunk and those sparks and streamers are going off in her head. She's holding on to Theo's chest and the two of them sway.

Someone yells: Nice Fucking Ballad!

Lily shushes them. The singer says:

"It's called, If You Go I Go."

They play the song. It's long and aching and beautiful. There is something triumphant about it and also something sad and final. As the song comes to an end the sound of the singer's voice and the sound of the guitar have bled together, roaring, howling, screaming. Lily feels something in her chest. She thinks: some critical point, some critical mass or critical voltage has been reached. Something passes from them to her...

...and there really are no words for it...and...

...tears pour down Lily's cheeks. She looks at Theo. The song is like that one magic Tylenol. The winning lottery ticket you find in the trash. The song on the radio that stops traffic at three in the afternoon. That fairy tale about the tree that grows a thousand years just to produce one piece of fruit. The nice guy you find in the asshole of the universe.

The next thing Lily knows, she's sitting in Theo's car, in the parking lot, crying.

"Are you okay babe?"

Lily tries to nod.

"Whatcha thinking?"

Each thought is a metal tooth and all Lily can hear is the sound of a zipper buzzing through them:

Tomorrow is Friday. The way that beautiful boy sang. Lily has a physics test she's going to fail. The pain. She and Theo will probably have the same old fight about whether he'll register for classes at Randolph Community. The beauty of it. She'll have a hangover. The years compressed into a few words, a few moments. Her mom will probably hear through the Ashland grapevine that she was out at the Lodge drinking. Life. She'll get grounded. Death. Money will still be tight, and that graduation car dream will get a little hazier. Love. Maybe she'll get a scooter. Loss. And, with her luck, she'll be three days late and she'll have that to freak out about, as well. The sound of a soul, pure communication. It's probably nothing. Unspeakable. Probably stress. A word that erases itself when written. Stress on top of boredom. A god for the godless. In addition to claustrophobia.

She wants to tell Theo, everything, but can't. She wants him to already know. Wants it not to come out mangled, or backwards, or cheesy. Wants not to be trapped in teenage solipsistic hell. Lily's head pounds, she shivers in her seat. They stumble around with words:

"That song..."

"So epic..."

“Final...”

“Hopeful...sad...”

Lily runs her hands through her hair. She wants to tell him, what happened, standing there, as if an entire lifetime had passed, or had been given to her. All the things a human being would have to live through, all the things they would have to see and do, all the things they would have to feel and love and lose...just to, just to sing a silly little song. But how can you possibly? Explain? Describe? And if she tells him, of course, she'll always wonder if he felt it too, or if he just agreed. Not to get in her pants, or anything manipulative, but because that's what people do. He's a nice boy. Still, there's an abyss between her and him.

“That song,” she tries again, “it did something...”

Lily shakes her head and starts crying again.

“I'm sorry,” she says, “this is so stupid.”

Theo stares out the window for a long time and Lily actually starts to get a tingle of anger, but then he breaths out slowly and says:

“Remember that class trip we had to take with Ms. Macintosh?”

Lily nods, wiping snot from her nose. Of course. It was the day she met Theo. Sixth grade trip. The Agricultural and Horticultural Exposition. They were assigned as buddies. Matching puke-green wrist-bands. They had to wait for each other outside the bathrooms, dank little bamboo huts that smelled like piss and fertilizer. Their first date.

“Agro-Ho expo,” Lily giggles, in spite of herself.

Theo nods.

“Remember the century plants?”

Lily nods and now the tears are really coming down. They were Agave plants, clinging to rocks and gravel, hanging on for dear life for twenty, thirty years. Then, in a few days, they shot up a giant stalk and one massive, bright white flower. They did this only once.

“They die,” Lily says, realizing how drunk she sounds, “all that and then they die.”

“We were there to see it, though.”

Theo takes her hand and she buries her head in his shoulder. Lily can't speak. She holds on to him, her eyes screwed shut, thinking of something she read once. In the darkness, in her mind's eye, she sees it: a tiny strip of pavement, fragile, tenuous, and reaching across the void.