

## Black Patches on Wis Hwys

Liam spat the last of the excess toothpaste foam into the basin of the rest-stop bathroom sink and returned his toothbrush into the ziplock bag that contained the rest of his meager toiletries. He frowned at the solid pink foam being washed down the drain. His gums were bleeding more than normal. He looked up into the mirror, stretched his lips into a wide grimace and turned his head from side to side, using his tongue to push against the back of each tooth. Sure enough, several of his teeth were outlined in red, the blood tracing the gumline and down the length of each tooth.

He gathered what saliva there was in his mouth and spat again into the sink, this time more red than pink in color. He ran his tongue over his teeth. Beneath the mint of the toothpaste, he tasted coppery blood. Making eye contact with his reflection and furrowing his brow, he made a mental note to do something about this if it started to hurt. After this tour, he'll definitely make an appointment with the dentistry school at the community college. He didn't like the judgmental looks of the students when he opened his mouth and even more judging instructors when they came to check the students' work, but it was either that or go without, though he knew he'd probably go with the latter.

These intrusive thoughts of vitality and mortality acted as a mental filter as he looked into the mirror, adding a layer of ennui over his reflected image. At 21 he was still almost ascetic-level scrawny, his 6'3 frame accentuating his scarecrow-like visage, all lanky limbs and sharp angles. Except for his face, which retained the last of a youthful fullness that would soon melt, but for now his face was handsome enough in the traditional sense, his vivid green eyes bright against his pale, almond-hinted skin.

He stood in front of the rest stop bathroom mirror, slowly adding to the puddle at his feet, lightly soaking his Chuck Taylor's and black denim jeans, scarred with hasty and amateur stitching. He had forgotten to grab his towel. This probably meant that it was buried under amps and cabs in the van. That or soaking the bottom of the cardboard merch box, spreading the mildew smell to the few shirts and e.p.'s they lugged around under the auspices of earning gas money or, loftily, a place to sleep that had a door with a lock and, hope against hope, actual beds.

His long blond hair dripped past his shoulders over his bare torso from a cursory sink washing, really more of a symbolic gesture than a functional one. He looked at his only tattoo, a shoddy stick-and-poke chaos compass over his heart, the faded outline of arrows in every direction. He was absentmindedly thinking of redoing it when a father came in holding the hand of his small child. The man pulled up short, nearly yanking back on his son's arm when he saw Liam.

Liam smiled at the man in what he hoped was a friendly way, but the man's eyes widened and he guided his child back out, saying, "Ope, let's try the other one, buddy." Liam turned back to the mirror and saw that his teeth were still bloody. *Fuck*, he thought and spat into the sink.

He grabbed his shirt from the full sink to his right and spent the next 30 seconds wringing it out before pulling the *Insect Warfare* t-shirt over his head, long arms stretching out through cut-off sleeves. Grabbing his ziplock bag of toiletries, he squeaked his way through the rest stop lobby and out into the early morning and parking lot beyond.

The rest stop was right across the Wisconsin border, the welcome sign prominent and promising wonder and excitement, and as such was very well maintained. The surrounding lawn was recently manicured and the trees and picnic areas were thoughtfully placed and free of

litter. Liam and his brother, Owen, had arrived here just after four in the morning, having driven from Chicago.

The two brothers had played a show in the basement of Albion House, a DIY venue on the North-side, the night before. The Albion show was the third of ten shows they had lined up across this 13 day tour. Liam had been fully expecting to crash on the floor of the venue, which, while not exactly worth looking forward to, was to be expected whenever they played a show out of town. Instead, Owen, whose turn it was to drive, was sober and therefore easily annoyed by people, decided to press on.

Due to frequent stops for the bathroom and/or pulling off onto a side road to relieve their bladders, it had taken longer to get to Wisconsin than they had imagined, so they had decided to risk being hassled by state troopers and pulled into the rest stop for a few hours of sleep.

Squinting against the sun reflected off of his brother's van, Liam walked up to the passenger side and climbed in. The dim cabin flooded his eyes with relief, though he winced again at the door creaking loudly as he pulled it shut. He sighed and looked at Owen. His eyes were clearly exhausted, but he had that shit-eating smirk on his face that meant he had some insult locked, loaded, and pointed at his younger brother.

"What?" Liam said, just wanting to get the jab that was so clearly coming over with.

"Brother, your tone wounds me!" mocked Owen, adopting the haughty affectation he used when he felt he had the moral high ground. Though, to be fair, they both did this. It stemmed from the fact that they had grown up with a single father who couldn't afford a babysitter whenever an extended family member was unavailable, and so that particular duty fell to the television that could only pick up two channels (three on a clear summer night), one

being PBS, which exposed them to a range of British programs. This did wonders for their vocabulary as young children, but led to an early proclivity for sharply wielded sarcasm.

“The sun is but newly risen,” intoned Owen. “What have I done to cause such offense? Say, and I shall endeavor to make recompense!”

“C’mon, man. It’s too early for this game,” Liam replied, rubbing the bridge of his nose in annoyance. Indoors, the water had felt cool dripping down his scalp and neck, now in the sun and the enclosed cab of the van, it felt hot and uncomfortable. He turned in his seat to look for his towel through the wire cage separating the cab from the rear of the former electrical company van, now Black Metal duo conveyance. He frowned at the state of the back of the van.

Instead of the usual tetris-level organization he usually carefully orchestrated, music equipment was haphazardly shoved wherever it would fit, which meant most things didn’t. This meant that Owen had packed it after the show without his help. That would explain why Owen was leaning so heavily into his moral high ground character. Liam mentally kicked himself for drinking too much to notice Owen packing the back of the van himself, giving him meat to sink his teeth into for this character exercise. And he couldn’t see his towel. He’d have to just ride it out until it dried up, both his hair and his brother’s enthusiasm for the game.

“Too early, indeed, to endure such a barrage, such a *deluge*, of animosity from mine own flesh and blood!” Owen exclaimed, enjoying his own performance too much for Liam’s liking. “Heavens forbend I ask a question of someone, as thick as thieves we may be!”

“Hmm, slipping into pirate a bit at the end there,” Liam pointed out. Owen paused and wagged his head to the left and right, acknowledging the slip.

“I was merely going to *inquire*,” Owen continued, “if the facilities were to the princess’s *discerning* tastes,” he ended with flair, signaling the end of the performance.

“Really?” blinked Liam. “All that for an insult towards my masculinity?”

“Eh,” shrugged Owen in his normal, strident tone. “It’s early.”

“The restroom is actually pretty nice,” Liam said, glad the game was over. “They use unscented soap. Even got a sign saying it’s on purpose for people who are allergic to fragrances and stuff.”

“Huh. That is pretty considerate for a rest stop,” Owen said and Liam nodded his agreement. “Welp, if it’s good enough for the princess’s whore’s bath, it’s good enough for me.”

“That’s actually an outdated derogatory term,” corrected Liam, rolling his eyes at his brother’s excuse for a quip.

“Consider me flummoxed. Absolutely gob-smacked,” replied Owen dryly as he got out from behind the wheel and walked to the back of the panel van.

Owen was a year older than Liam so Liam often thought of Owen as more crass, less *refined* than himself and Owen knew Liam felt this way, so he would often lean on Liam with a haughty affectation.

Owen unlocked the rear door and dropped the heavy-duty lock, which to Liam resembled a hockey puck, onto the floor of the van with a loud clatter. Liam always had trouble locking and unlocking the unwieldy puck, but was grateful for the security. There had been a noticeable upswing over the past several years of band vehicles being targeted and broken into, thousands of dollars worth of equipment being stolen. He couldn’t imagine anyone wanting their particular equipment, which was third-hand amps, guitars, and homemade, barely functioning rat pedal clones, but better safe than sorry.

Liam put his foot up on the dash and wiggled his back against the seat. The damp shirt

was making his skin itch.

“Let me know if you see my towel back there, yeah?” he called back over his shoulder before using the hand crank to lower the window to let a breeze in.

“Why, so we can drag it out behind the semi’s and into the treeline to shoot it?” his brother replied sarcastically. Liam let the halfhearted jab fall flat.

Owen carefully pulled his backpack out from under the box of their 7”, *Fucked Beyond Belief*, the release of which was the impetus for this tour and the only thing they’d managed to sell so far. If they sold the remaining 87 of 100 copies they’d brought with them, they’d break even on what they had paid for the pressing.

The label they were on, Future Offal (which was pretty much just their friend Sam and her partner when he wasn’t teaching during the summer and winter break), had fronted half of the cost. She had already sold enough to break even, but it had been some bulk deal along with the only other band on the label, *Socially Still Nothing Moves You* (which happened to be Sam’s power-violence band), to a music store chain that only existed in a single region of Turkey. So, if they ever play a show in Mersin, which, Sam excitedly explained, was Turkey’s tenth largest city, they might have a fan base to sell t-shirts (that smelled like Liam’s towel) to.

“I actually feel dirtier after touching this,” Owen said cheerily as he tossed Liam his towel through the open window.

“Hey man, as long as it’s dry,” Liam began to say before muttering a disappointed, “Oh...” as he felt how damp it still was, and probably would be, until the end of time. Owen made a single bark of laughter at Liam’s misfortune and continued walking into the rest stop, backpack in hand. “Still drier than my shirt,” Liam said to no one and tucked the towel around the back of the seat. Leaning back, he followed Owen’s progress up to the lobby doors.

Neither of them had what anyone would call an idyllic childhood, but of the two of them, Liam thought that Owen had had the easier time growing up. He was quicker to laugh and more closely resembled their father and the Pakistani side of the family. Liam, with his blond hair and very-light tan skin, looked more like their mother than their father and he always felt like his father kept him a bit more at arm's length, as if he were just waiting for him to run off like their mother had when he was four and Owen was five.

He didn't resent his father, though. Or his mother, even. He just felt a dull ache at all times that Owen didn't seem to share. Liam knew that this probably wasn't fair, but whenever he had tried talking to him about their mother, he would wave it off. If Liam pressed, Owen's quick humor would be replaced by an equally quick anger. It was Owen's manic energy and Liam's introspective nature that bordered on nihilism which had drawn both of them to grindcore and Black Metal. Liam felt like their style of blackened-grind exemplified their two blended personalities well.

Though they had grown up poor, their family had been close. At least on their father's side. Their paternal grandparents, who had come from Pakistan to settle in East-Central Illinois of all places, in the mid-70s and started their family. Their father was the eldest of three, though their uncle and their aunt were born one year and two years after their father and all three were as close as Liam and Owen. The entire family lived within 50 miles of each other, so there was never a week that went by where one of their homes wasn't full of assorted relatives.

They never knew their mother's family. She had been caught in the orbit of their father's world like an errant moon, making a few revolutions around and depositing two tall, skinny boys before continuing on its way across the cosmos, indifferent to the permanent pull on the tides left behind in its gravitational wake.

No one in their family badmouthed her for leaving. No one scowled at the mention of her name. They just got a little quiet and a little sad. Their father was of course heartbroken, but he had two little boys to raise. So he swallowed his sadness, burying it a little deeper each time so it never really left his body as if this alone could hold on to her presence.

Liam could see it sometimes, just behind his father's eyes when his father looked at him. But not at Owen, his first born child, the son from the same woman. The son with his father's same brow, same nose a little more pronounced, same hair when it was grown out and not shaved as Owen's had been the past few years. Not him. Not Owen. Just Liam.

Liam was looking through the plastic shopping bag containing the cassettes they'd thrown together for the tour when the driver-side door creaked open and Owen climbed in, slamming the door shut which shook the whole van.

"Did you see that guy with the kid when you were in there?" Owen asked as he buckled himself in.

"Yeah, why?"

"Dude was, like, screaming into his phone, calling his wife or whoever a bitch and all kinds of shit," he said, turning the ignition. Liam quickly ejected the loaded cassette to keep it from playing and turning down the static of the radio before returning to rifle through the plastic bag.

"He shouldn't do that in front of the kid," Liam remarked, adding another cassette to the small pile in his lap.

"Yeah, I feel bad for the kid. Assholes like that shouldn't have kids."

"*Most* people shouldn't have kids," Liam corrected. "Unfortunately it's a slippery slope into fascism from mass sterilizations." Owen made a single percussive sound of laughter.



“True, and this country has a shit track record with fascism,” he said and Liam grunted his agreement. “Buckle up, yeah?” he continued, shifting into reverse and backing up.

“Speaking of fascism,” muttered Liam in reply as he snapped his seatbelt into place.

“Dude, it’s not fucking fascism, it’s just common fucking sense!” insisted Owen, accelerating along the curve that ejected them back onto the highway.

“Relax, I was just making a *joke*. I’m buckling, see?” he said, rearranging the seat belt and the bag of cassettes on his lap. “Brutal Truth- *Need to Control*, Tsjuder, or Whitney Houston?”

“Which Whitney and which Tsjuder?”

“Just ‘*Whitney*’ and ‘*Desert Northern Hell*,’ reissue.”

“Oof, that’s a tough call...,” Owen said, looking over his shoulder as they merged out of the ending on-ramp lane. “Move the fuck– fucking big ass pick-up– Uhh, ‘*Desert Northern Hell*.’ These assholes are being way too aggressive for ‘*Whitney*.’”

“Excellent choice, monsieur,” Liam said as his brother assertively inserted their van in front of an inconsiderate pick-up truck, rocking them from side to side within the cab. He swapped the tape and returned the others back into the bag, turning up the stereo. “You know what Náströnd was telling me about the interstates in Wisconsin?”

“Náströnd from the Lost Cross house show or Náströnd from your D&D?”

“D&D.”

“Nasty Naaaaas!” intoned Owen. “No, what did Nasty Nas have to say about the Wisconsin interstates?”

“That they’re haunted as fuck.”

“*Haunted?*” Owen asked. “How is a highway haunted?”

“How is *anything* haunted?” Liam asked, incredulously.

“Right, yeah, I know its not like *haunted* haunted,” Owen said, quickly taking his hands off the wheel to make air quotes before retaking the wheel. “What I’m asking is why does Náströnd *say* that the highway is haunted?”

Liam twisted to either side of his seat before unbuckling and leaning over to reach behind him. Owen glanced over at the motion and did a double take.

“Dude, seatbelt! We’re going like, 80!” he scolded.

“I’m trying to get my water!” Liam insisted, indignantly.

“Wait til we’re— *Jesus fuck!*” Owen exclaimed as the large pick-up from before swerved into and through their lane in order to catch an off-ramp at the last possible second. Owen was forced to slam on the brakes and jerk the wheel to the left and right back to avoid the speeding semi truck coming up behind them. The sudden sharp movement caused Liam to pinball into Owen’s seat and back into his own, dropping the metal water bottle into the space between the two bucket seats.

Having narrowly avoided the back of the exiting pick-up and the front of the speeding semi truck, the two brothers sat wild eyed as their van continued to speed down the highway. Liam was bracing himself with the dashboard and strap above the door and Owen was trying to scan in three directions at once. They sat in silence for a few seconds assessing any potential danger, chests heaving with flushed adrenaline.

“*Buckle,*” snapped Owen, eyes glued to the interstate.

“Buckling,” replied Liam, embarrassed.

The two brothers continued down the Wisconsin highway at the reasonably posted, and quite generous, 70 miles per hour. Owen gripped the steering wheel with both hands, leaning

forward like a stone gargoyle surveying the landscape. Liam awkwardly re-situated his towel that had fallen from the ordeal. He didn't risk unbuckling.

Settling in as best he could, Liam spotted his metal water bottle on the floor and picked it up. He unscrewed the attached lid and took a drink.

"Ugh, it's *warm*," he said.

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Their show that night, at a Milwaukee DIY venue called The Crow's Nest, could have gone better, but wasn't a disaster. They had pulled into an Ikea parking lot and slept for a few more hours. It was necessary, but resulted in making them stiff and mildly heat-sick.

Since they had several more hours to kill, they hit up a grocery store and purchased a loaf of bread, a plastic jar of peanut butter, and a plastic jar of grape jelly. They then drove to the lake before realizing they didn't have any utensils to spread the peanut butter and jelly.

Scrounging through the glove box, their bags, and equipment, the best they could come up with (which didn't run the risk of making themselves sick) was to use a single, thick napkin to scoop and spread the peanut butter and, needing to replace the high E string on Owen's guitar anyway, the paper sleeve the coiled string came in to scoop and spread the jelly, logic-ing that the coated paper would hold up better to the moisture of the jelly than the napkin would.

Having enjoyed their sandwiches and the view of the lake long enough to be considered merely early instead of insanely early, they drove to The Crow's Nest, which was, ironically, the brothers agreed, a basement venue. They pulled into the small driveway behind the building to

see four men; two ambling around the backyard and two sitting in the minivan, doors open with amps, cabs, and drum equipment clearly visible within. They had known there was another touring band playing this show, but that was about all they knew. Owen pulled up alongside the open driver-side doors of the van and Liam rolled down his window.

Liam nodded to the man lounging behind the wheel of the minivan and again to the man sitting directly behind the driver and reading a book, bare feet up on the back of the seat in front of him.

“Hey,” Liam said. “I’m Liam and this is my brother, Owen.” Turning off the ignition, Owen gave a half-wave. The two men said, “Hey,” and “What’s up,” respectively.

The man behind the wheel looked to be in his mid-to-late 20s, the man in the backseat perhaps slightly younger. Both men wore glasses, black t-shirts and pants, though the man in the back had cut off the sleeves of his shirt and his jeans into shorts.

“I’m Kevin,” said the man in the shorts, resting his open book on his chest.

“Chase,” said the man behind the wheel. He gestured with his thumb towards the other two men closer to the house, now kicking a slightly deflated soccer ball back and forth, the ball making a *‘plop’* sound each time it was kicked. One of them was also in shorts and a green flannel, the other in faded black jeans and white t-shirt. “That’s Lou and Sean,” he continued. “Though we don’t expect you to remember all of our names.” Owen laughed and Liam gave a closed lip smile.

“Same,” Liam assured. “That’s about par for the course. You meet like dozens of people each night on tour and each time a person tells me their name it’s gone in two seconds.”

“And they’ll get super offended if you don’t remember after hearing it a single time,” nodded Chase. “We get it. Maybe not dozens of people tonight,” he continued, tilting his head

and raising his eyebrows. Kevin in the back snorted.

“What do you mean?” asked Owen, leaning over.

“Did you guys get a hold of Greg, guy that set up the show?” asked Kevin. Both Liam and Owen shook their heads in response. “Well, apparently, he forgot about the show entirely, so there’s no local band playing and no one fliered.”

“*Fuck*, really?” asked Owen.

“Is the show canceled?” asked Liam.

“No,” replied Chase, exhaling. “He’s inside calling people and begging them to show up.”

“Welp, a pity show is better than no show,” joked Owen.

“We’ve played worse,” agreed Chase in a matching tone.

“Is that an Insect Warfare shirt,” asked Kevin, nodding at Liam’s shirt.

“Oh, yeah,” said Liam, looking briefly down to remind himself which of the three shirts he had brought on tour that he was wearing.

“Nice,” nodded Kevin. “You a grind band?”

“Kinda. Like, grind-y black metal,” answered Owen.

“But the anti-capitalist, anti-religion black metal. Not the...,” Liam made an exaggerated grimace, “Other kind of black metal.”

“Fuckin’ nazis, man,” Kevin said, shaking his head sadly. “Fuckin’ ruin shit for everybody.”

“Two piece?” asked Chase.

“Yep,” said Liam. He pointed at Owen. “Guitar. Bass and vocals,” he said, pointing to himself. “And a drum machine,” he concluded, thumbing towards the equipment in the back.

“Ooo, nice. No drums to lug around,” said Kevin. “We’re Community College. More on the metal-y side of math and post-rock.”

“Nice,” said Owen and Liam simultaneously.

“If it’s just the two of us playing, do you want to share equipment?” Kevin continued.

“Sure,” replied Liam. “You can use our cabs if you want to use your own amps, since we don’t have to set up any drums.”

“Sounds great to me,” nodded Chase. “What’s your band called? Since there wasn’t a flier made,” he added.

“Total Fucking Bedlam,” Liam replied. Kevin and Chase looked at the brothers for a few moments before Kevin broke the silence.

“That’s the most blackened-grind band name I’ve ever heard.”

“Thank you,” Owen said. “That’s very kind of you to say.”

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Eventually Liam and Owen met Greg and his housemates at The Crow’s Nest who lived above the basement venue on the second floor, an empty retail shop separating the two. They were all in their early 20s and nice enough, throwing together shows as an excuse to have a party and as such were able to attract a small crowd on such short notice, even on a Sunday. By the time Community College finished their set, an enjoyable amalgamation of aggressive instrumental post-rock and technical metal, there were about twenty people who came for the show, excluding the five housemates and four members of Community College.

“Thanks for coming out and sticking around,” Liam said into the mic. The small crowd

clapped and whooped, mostly buzzed, sweaty and lurching into each other. Owen's guitar feedback swelled to fill the space with the promise of assured, divine retribution against an unjust world, Owen himself with a Death's head grin nearly splitting his face in two, waiting and listening to the drum machine countdown like an explosive device. Liam re-tuned his bass to lung-crushing depths as he spoke into the mic.

"This is our last song. Thanks to Greg and The Crow's Nest and Community College. They're on tour too, so buy their shit. Buy our shit. This last one is on the seven-inch we brought. It's called, "*Organs Will Be Randomly Harvested to Assure Quality Control*" and it's about fuck you."

A single snare snap was all the warning the crowd got before the auditory onslaught of their closing song was unleashed like a bottled demon exploding from a thousand year imprisonment. Liam's lyrical vitriol washed over them in a blasphemous baptism. If anyone in the crowd could have heard the actual lyrics, they would have heard,

*"Rejoice!*

*Never again to breathe this awful air,*

*This atmosphere.*

*Cremation dust,*

*Bitter to the tongue.*

*Funneled through nasal cavities,*

*Straight to the brain of*

*Chief Executives.*

*Your desperate pleas have been noted*

*And will be assessed  
By the proper parties.  
Rest assured, your concerns are important  
To us and our enjoyment.  
While you wait, please enjoy the sound  
Of our fucking laughter,  
You fucking cattle!"*

The song ended as abruptly as it started, leaving behind nothing but the loud buzzing of their amps, which they snapped off as they switched to standby. The crowd woo-ed and clapped as both brothers put their instruments back in their cases. Someone flipped the basement lights back on and the tightly packed crowd dissipated, blinking in the light, to the other parts of the basement in groups of two, three, four.

This was the part of shows that Liam hated. Their job was done and now it was just socializing. He didn't know anyone besides his brother and he didn't like just standing by him while he interacted with strangers. It came more easily to Owen, which didn't bother Liam. He knew it was a part of the experience, so he usually just sat at whatever was currently functioning as a merch table.

"Great set, man," said Lou, raising up his Pabst in salute. Liam picked up his own PBR to reciprocate. The Pabst really did taste better here, so close to the brewery. Fresher, more crisp.

"Yeah, fucking brutal," intoned Sean. Liam gave a rare genuine smile. He knew that blackened-grind was a pretty niche genre that not a lot of people knew about, let alone actually enjoyed, but most musicians could at least appreciate the skill it required.



Liam often assuaged his own ego by viewing their band as “*musicians’ music*,” a lofty description that made him feel not as bad when a crowd wasn’t into it and actively thinned out while they were playing.

“Thanks, guys. You, too,” Liam said genuinely. “I love technical stuff. 4/4 gets to be predictable.”

“For sure,” laughed Sean. “We wanted to see if you were down to trade records,” he continued, offering their LP to Liam.

“We just have our seven-inch with us,” Liam said.

“Oh, no worries about that,” assured Sean so they exchanged vinyls.

“Yeah, there was a delay at the press so there isn’t the inset for ours,” Lou said.

“Fucking South-By orders pushed back our order even though we placed it months earlier than they did.”

“Fuck the little guy, right?” nodded Liam. Lou and Sean both agreed, raising their beers again. “Hey, have you guys ever heard about the highway through Wisconsin being haunted?”

“Haunted?” asked Lou, eyebrows raised. “Like, Casper and Ghostbusters haunted?”

Liam nodded.

“Mmm, not really,” mulled Sean. “Though there is an exit for something called Circus World and it’s the same exit for some park called Devil’s Lake which is probably a trap or, like, a portal to Hell.”

“100% a portal to Hell,” agreed Lou. “Fucking brutal set, though.”

And so went the fourth show of the brothers’ tour.

At around one the next afternoon, the brothers declined the invitation to accompany Community College to a vegetarian restaurant nearby and continued on their way, \$40 dollars

richer from the show.