

## *The Fuck-Up Song*

*Right now, we're just tuning our guitars. Think of this first section as stage banter.*

This isn't a confession, just a short diplomatic plea to those who might judge me. It's a country song about a guy with a sorry story to tell. He's older now and hears trains in the distance and wants to tell his side so there's no embarrassment when they place him in that box and plant him in that cold, cold earth.

He asks your forgiveness because he's not much of a singer, a songwriter, or even a musician, though he does, at certain times of the night, sound good enough to make his old cattle dog howl. He always seems to lose the beat when he's clapping his hands, and you'd never ask him to dance. Probably his best attribute is being somewhat glib, and he does make some people laugh uncomfortably. But enough about me. My band is called Willey, but you already know that.

This story starts where they all do: "Ghost Riders...in the sky..." I always start there. This makes me think of a Stephen King novel cross-pollinated by a movie starring The Duke. I'm god-damned worried about the cattle on my watch, but I'm enjoying a tin cup of coffee just the same. And there's something scary going on. But rather than let the night get too creepy, I cross-fade the music to another cowboy tune that's kind of soothing—maybe "Cool Water"—and the cattle eventually wander back. There's always something spiritual about a dark, starry night—it's so black out you can't see anything but pinpoints—because everything is clearer than ever before. I start there.

1

My first bad decision had to do with rattlesnakes. Three of them to be exact, but who's counting when you see a coiled mass of scales, fangs, and rattles. I would've plugged them if I'd had my .22, but I was only 14 at the time and never thought to take my gun when I was walking with my girl. Pretty Polly was in my class at school and probably the smartest girl in the county. You know the type. A lot more fun than playing party games and a whole lot harder to figure out. We walked the old Smart Trail, the one down by the river, and we were holding hands. I asked her if she'd like to hear me play my guitar. She told me she didn't know I played. Kind of funny, right, seeing as I had an old folksy Martin strapped across my back. I pointed her to a grassy glade just a skip away and we sat there while I tuned up. Pretty Polly dangled her legs over the bank and into the riffle.

Most of my songs are pretty lame. All of them rhyme and there's always a story to tell, but they nudge their way closer to cowboy poetry than music you could actually dance to, sing along with, or get a hard-on over. But I like to play and playing lets me relax, and when I sing I get to stretch my vocal chords and

express myself—one benefit being physical and the other being mental. Yoga for rednecks.

But Pretty Polly wasn't listening. Instead she heard birds chirping in trees, the babbling brook babbling at her knees, and the wind whistling in the canyon of her ears. She was dumbstruck by nature when she kicked the first snake and was twice bitten. They were under a rock ledge at the river's edge, just a Pretty Polly femur away from deep sleep. Polly jerked her foot and the second one got a bite while the third just missed. She was crying when I pulled her away from the river. If I'd had my knife, I could've cross-hatched her wounds and sucked away the venom that would kill her, but I didn't so I ran for help. Pretty Polly died before the ambulance arrived—a sadder moment has never been recorded—and the words of the first verse of this song were written:

*I had a beautiful girl for a girlfriend  
A girlfriend for goodness sake  
A girlfriend like no other  
Till she was bitten by a snake.  
Or two  
Or three...  
It was all my fault.*

2

I was arrested on my seventeenth birthday after I jacked a car and crashed it into the drive-thru window of a Jack-In-The-Box. The only reason this was funny rather than tragic was that I really was trying to navigate that drive-thru, but I dropped a smoke between my legs, singed some pubic hair, and my foot hit the gas.

The cops might have given me a pass, but the empties behind the seat told a tale of under-age drinking, reckless driving, and, if I'm willing to admit it, out of control munchies. Of course, that little issue of stealing a car didn't help my cause either. They cuffed me, and one of them thoughtfully placed his hand on my head as he guided it into the frame of the cruiser's door. Close to an hour later they were booking me into county jail.

I learned a few things doing time that night, but nothing important if you expected to be outside again soon. I learned to keep my head down when it didn't matter and to jaw when it did. I learned how to skate. The next morning I was back home—Pops threw my bail—and it seemed like a good time to clean my guns.

Now, if you like guns you don't mind cleaning them because that means you've been out shooting them. I like guns. I like the sighting and aiming. I like the recoil when I pull the trigger. But most of all I like popping something. And that's how I lost another love of my life.

Pearl was a gun dog and she knew how to point. Being late fall, I knew the quail were plentiful, and when we walked over the ridge and down into the meadow I expected she would flush a nice covey. But it's hard when you hunt

alone. Three hunters can cover a left, right, and center flight pattern, but a solo gun can only rely on his quick-shoot instincts. Pearl was circling through the high brush, definitely onto something. Clearly, she was on point when I got so excited I rushed my old Remington over-under to my chin, banged my jaw, and caught my foot on a tangle of roots. I flew forward, crashed into the ground, and my chest landed upon my trigger finger. Of course it was a low shot, catching Pearl broadside, and most likely she was dead by the time she hit the ground.

This isn't a place where you cry. You go into shock. You think about sticking the gun in your mouth, but hope you're out of shells.

Later that night we got the second verse, and it goes like this:

*I had a wonderful dog named Pearl  
She sparkled in the sun  
I sure didn't mean to kill her  
But I couldn't control my gun  
She ran fast,  
She ran out of time...  
It was all my fault.*

3

*This part is the meat of the story—what I'd call the sirloin—so I'll have to ask you to chew a little slower, let your digestion take over, and just listen as the story unfolds. This is the bridge to the chorus, so your patience will be much appreciated. 1...2...3...4...*

My intentions have always been pure, but I make missteps with precision. Folks today would call that the law of unintended consequences. I met Ricki in a roadhouse just after my second divorce, but by my way of thinking things were looking up. I had a steady job down at the meat packing plant, a quiet apartment on the okay side of town, and an indifferent cat that shared a place I called home. On weekends, the band was branching out from local gigs to hitting the state fair and rodeo circuit. With enough radio plays, I was thinking about quitting my day job. Better yet, the parole board wasn't asking for a piss test anymore. Ricki looked like a good addition to my life, and certainly something I could handle. She had brown eyes, and if you overlooked her addictions, you might have thought about settling down, finding a place in WalMartville or Costco City, and popping out a couple of kids with purchasing power. But Ricki had other ideas. She was a painter, an interior decorator, a talk show host, or anything else she cooked up in her overly-medicated mind.

The first time it showed up was when the barn burned down. Ricki never liked living out of town, even though it was her idea to move in with me because it would save her a lot of money. We had a productive garden, chickens, two horses, apple trees, a somewhat balky pump, and an obstinate pig. But Ricki was bored. So stone-cold bored in the morning she started cleaning house.

Everyday. Then she popped a few pills, sipped some wine, and waited for me to come home.

But it's not all nuts and apples out in the country, and Ricki soon figured out she had to get back involved in life. A hobby, a job, a passion, might give her a reason to get up in the morning. While the band was on the road, she had the place to herself. My indifference could be ignored and poured into her art, which was turning out to be a type of high-flame pottery. She packed her clay bowls and pots and goblets into mounds of straw buried into the dirt floor of our barn and then torched them expecting a high gloss finish. But she didn't bury them deep enough and embers caught a cross wind that settled at the base of one of the stalls. The horses, Dolly, a smallish Arabian mare, and Lumberjack, an elderly draft horse, sniffed the smoke and became restless. Ricki had the good sense to lead them out, but the barn was a goner.

When the band got home, I reviewed the damage and concluded that I'd been inattentive, if not down right negligent. Of course, I should've built Ricki a kiln, but her needs were too abstract to fit into my songs and easily forgotten when we were smoking dope, drinking whiskey and jamming on the tour bus. Ricki was an afterthought in a slash burn out in the pasture—and I'm not saying I'm proud of that, just that's the way it was—so she packed up her pharmaceuticals and waved me a one-finger goodbye. I'd never say that Ricki was my muse, but she did give us the chorus for this song:

*Life is full of fuckups,  
That's the way it's always been.  
Life's a place  
To make some space  
And comment now and then.*

*Life is full of fuckups,  
Some are yours and some are mine.  
Life's a place  
To make some space  
For fuckups...like mine.*

A band is a band of brothers until it turns on itself and eats its innards from the inside out. I could tell the boys were restless after the first two songs charted and we started hearing them on the juke boxes in the bars we closed. We talked about the division of wealth and who sang what and who wrote what, but none of it mattered when I invited Rhonda on the bus. She had big hair and big tits and two boys nudging puberty, and when Trask, her oldest, busted Slow Finger's guitar by knocking a microphone out of the park, the revolt was on.

All I ever wanted to do was keep from having a regular job. Write more songs, make some music. But we also carry all the wrongs we want to right. We swerve when a crow lands in the street, a squirrel races in front of our tire, and

especially when a dog crosses the road. If god ain't turning the wheel, you are, and there will be consequences. And that's just what happened. I'm not saying it was Rhonda's fault, but if she'd stayed in her seat, we'd have made Nashville by daylight and that damned old tree would still have its roots in the ground.

But Rhonda, help me Rhonda, had nowhere to go. She just had to make it to the bar in back—maybe another whiskey sour—when she rose from her first-row seat and half-stumbled and half-fell into the driver. As amazing as it might seem, that driver just barely turned the wheel but his front left tire pulverized an armadillo. The skid marks were long and fast approaching a ditch, but we rolled just enough times to make the band play a whole lot tighter for a while after we got out of the hospital.

Rhonda wasn't the answer and the lawsuits didn't help. You never think your friends will turn on you, but of course they will when there's money, sex, religion, or politics involved. You could write a song, a book, a movie, or a poem about how our animal instincts, buried somewhere in our DNA, put self-preservation first.

Everybody in the band hired an attorney and sued everybody else even though we were playing better than ever before. We were tight, grooving off each other, finding riffs we'd only dreamed of. We were out of our minds. And just before we crashed and burned we wrote another verse:

*The band was a band of brothers  
Brothers till the end of time  
Brothers like no other  
Till they weren't any brothers of mine  
Just a circle jerk  
Was all it was.  
It was all my fault.*

5

I woke up at 7 a.m. or so in the dressing room behind the Tropicana Dance Hall where we'd played the night before. In Bakersfield. A fly kept buzzing my ear and landing on my eyebrow and that brought me back to life more than the warm pleasant woody my dreams would've preferred.

Bakersfield was another planet, a place I didn't understand, but the tacos were good and all the sidemen knew how to play. We had brought the house down in The Tropicana, a dusty old palace next to a cotton field. The patrons wormed in and out as they're want to do in hot places, but that was okay with me because we played a lot harder with the doors open and the Santa Ana's cooling our beer. We'd nary a moment between taking a morning piss and making our sound check, but that's how it goes when you're out on the road and your nutritionist is a short order cook named Paquito, who served up breakfast burritos with shots.

I was thinking about having a rehearsal, but the guys looked like they'd be in bed till Thursday, which would be coming up sometime next week. But Hal,

my percussionist, a drummer at best, was awake and motioning that maybe he might whisper in my ear. Hal had bad teeth and an unconventional rhythm, but he always showed up, so there was that.

"I heard you were inside."

"Not true," I said.

"Fine. We're looking for a wheel man. Heard you drove some stocks."

"You heard wrong."

"11:30 behind the 7-11."

"I'll be there."

Robbery is seldom appreciated. It's mean and deceitful in the way you'd tell a lover you'd never cheat on her, and it demeans anyone facing a loaded gun. But if you're sober, there may be an art to it.

Hal's plan was simple.

I'd drive us all up in front of the 7-11 in his super-souped Charger, and he and our bass player Carlos would pile out of the car like a couple of juco students on a beer run. When they made the door, I would bang the front right fender which would set off the car alarm and catch the counter guy's attention. Worked like a charm. Hal knocked him over and never had to pull his gun, then emptied the cash register. That should've been enough for the adrenaline rush. We could've been laughing and heading down the highway, nobody the wiser. But Hal and Carlos weren't without material desires. Some Hagan-Das Macadamia Nut was in order, plus jerky sticks and a couple of six-packs. Hal was thinking about printing out a couple of lottery tickets when the police closed in on the lot.

It was dumb from the get-go, but the thing about robbery is it's fun till you get caught. We told the cops we were professional musicians just pulling a prank, but they didn't see it that way. I did 6 months in a minimum security facility while Hal and Carlos went down for a third and second strike respectively. They released me early for good behavior, and by the time I got out Slow Finger had put it to words:

*I made a bad decision,  
Some folks called it a crime.  
Being stupid isn't illegal  
Says my lawyer all the time.  
But I'm sorry now  
I apologize...  
It was all my fault.*

*Thank you very much for coming. Willey's going to be in town for a couple more nights, so purchase your tickets accordingly. Some introductions are due. We've got No-Beat Hal on the drums, recently released from a long vacation hosted by the California correctional system. Two-Strikes Carlos Mendoza is on the doghouse bass. Of course, Slow Finger will be sliding in on the pedal steel and guitar with those long silky riffs that make you want to take it just a little*

*slower sometimes. Now, if I can just find my rhythm—somewhere between No Finger and Slow Beat, as I like to call ‘em—let’s see if we can finish this story in a way that matches our expectations.*

Thunder showers were coming down on a gray day in Denver, but the Reunion Tour was not to be denied. We had a fan base somewhere out here in the western portion of the country and, god-damn-it, we were determined to find it. We were feeling pretty good about ourselves—the bus hadn’t broken down for a week—and eventually we found our outdoor venue up in Estes Park, a little closer to the lightening. Late September in the Rockies with juiced-up college kids getting ready to get on back to school? Our kind of crowd. We opened with a cover of “El Paso”, probably the sweetest love song ever written, and one that would cover up my singing with some real fancy guitar. Then we segued into one of Slow Finger’s compositions that was light on lyrics, but had not one, but three different guitar solos, each of which could’ve been a song in itself. I could feel the crowd heating up, but the rain was pouring down.

Lightning flared on the horizon, which put a little hesitation into my singing, but it sounded good so I thought maybe we were onto something. No-Beat suddenly found one and that just turned Slow Finger loose for one last time. It was magical, like peyote was wafting through the air like pollen. He played a riff with the rain pelting down on his hands, and as I watched in amazement from the corner of my eye, I could see that his fingers never once slipped.

Slow Finger had the crowd on its feet even though the scene was getting muddier than that muddy scene at Woodstock. He bowed. Next up would be our composition of the “The Fuck Up Song”. The debut. Never played before, not even recorded, just rehearsed. Slow Finger would sing this one.

One more bow and then Slow Finger grabbed his microphone. It was over in seconds. His mic wasn’t grounded and the 200 volts set his hair on fire. Half the audience thought it was a special effect and the other half vomited. Of course, it was all my fault. I was the leader of the band, and the safety of my mates should have been my first concern. But I dismissed our plugged-in instruments and the wet conditions on stage as no more threatening than the lightning strikes in the distance because I wanted to play and be loved by the crowd. Yep, there would be one less doggie making it home tonight. And it made me realize that this story not only starts, but ends with “Ghost Riders In The Sky” as the last verse of that mournful, prophetic song pounded through my head:

*As the riders loped on by him he heard one call his name  
If you want to save your soul from hell a-riding on our range  
Then cowboy change your ways today or with us you will ride  
Trying to catch the Devil’s herd, across these endless skies.*

Of course, in memory of Slow Finger, we never performed “The Fuck-Up Song” for anyone anywhere. For a while I had this fantasy that Eric Clapton, the

original Slowhand—perhaps an admirer of our band—would agree to sit in on a few gigs while we struggled to get back on our feet. But that’s all it was—a fantasy—because Clapton’s manager wouldn’t return my calls, and who, exactly, is surprised by that? Still, I think Clapton could have made “The Fuck-Up Song” the juke box standard it was meant to be. Sure, every now and then when I’m in a pensive mood, I may pull out my guitar and sing the first verse, but I usually stop there and tell myself to give it a rest.

So now, all you music cats out there—if you’ve read this far—this is the part of the story where you come in. I’m not talking about 3-part harmony or some kind of hootenanny, I’m inviting you to write your own song. I’ve given you the lyrics, so all you have to do is work it out on your piano, guitar, or with your sweet, sweet voice. Of course Slow Finger and me had our own melody—one we really liked—but maybe yours could be so much better. We need something catchy, but I’d also like something homey enough to bring all that cattle home. We need a song that stays with us, one we can sing along with even when we don’t remember the words. So here’s what Slow Finger would’ve sung that fateful night had he lived long enough to sing it:

*I had a beautiful girl for a girlfriend  
A girlfriend for goodness sake  
A girlfriend like no other  
Till she was bitten by a snake.  
Or two  
Or three...  
It was all my fault.*

*I had a wonderful dog named Pearl  
She sparkled in the sun  
I sure didn’t mean to kill her  
But I couldn’t control my gun  
She ran fast,  
She ran out of time...  
It was all my fault.*

*Life is full of fuckups,  
That’s the way it’s always been.  
Life’s a place  
To make some space  
And comment now and then.*

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Some are yours and some are mine.  
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For fuckups...like mine.*

*The band was a band of brothers  
Brothers till the end of time  
Brothers like no other  
Till they weren't any brothers of mine  
Just a circle jerk  
Was all it was.  
It was all my fault.*

*I made a bad decision,  
Some folks called it a crime.  
Being stupid isn't illegal  
Says my lawyer all the time.  
But I'm sorry now  
I apologize...  
It was all my fault.*

*Life is full of fuckups,  
That's the way it's always been.  
Life's a place  
To make some space  
And comment now and then.*

*Life is full of fuckups,  
Some are yours and some are mine.  
Life's a place  
To make some space  
For fuckups...like mine.*

*Yeah, life's a place  
To make some space  
For Fuckups...(SHOUT)...LIKE ME!*

*Thank you for coming tonight. The band is Willey, and we hope to see you again real soon. Goodnight y'all.*