

Guy Walsh is living the dream, and it's almost perfect.

He's just taken an extended guitar solo exploring all the interesting notes in the scale, throwing in the flat five to make it wail and then hitting the echo and battering the dissonant flat seven and major third tri-tone with everyone in the band joining in until it sounded like a massive traffic jam at an airport with a thousand horns blaring and planes swooping down on their heads. Now he's holding a single, sweetly sustained note up on the fifteenth fret and letting the pounding drums get all Pink Floyd spacey with the cymbals, and the bass sliding up into the clouds for a dramatic pause, an unconduted musical stasis that his high school band director would have pointed out was known as a "fermata".

Then the band roars back into the chorus and Guy's voice is exploding with the joy of a soul that's forgotten its body as he shouts the message of the song: "Give some time to the seed/You never know what could be" while the crowd of about two hundred sings along. It warms him inside. These people know his music, even the obscure stuff. It makes them rare true fans, maybe some of the last ones ever. He wants to thank them, to tell them all how much this means to him, but he's still feeling a little fragile and exposed without the cushion. Decades ago he'd figured out how to beat the crushing feeling that probably would have been labeled stage fright, had he let anyone know about it. The cure he came up with had nearly destroyed him. Tonight he's drug free and actually enjoying it. He's so excited about it he wants to tell them all,

Natural Distortion

but it isn't the sort of thing you share with an audience: "Hey everybody, look, no cocaine!" Instead he has been taciturn, only able to speak to them with the music all night, but right now that's just fine.

The song comes to its conclusion with the inevitable apocalyptic buildup crashing down onto the final chord, wringing cheers from the crowd, and Guy is thinking the only way this could be better is if Em was up here as well.

But of course, that's never going to happen again.

After the last of the feedback dies they hurry offstage to tumultuous applause.

Now Guy huddles with the band and they can hear the crowd shouting all the way from the dressing room, which in this club is a utility space behind the stage with exposed pipes and dangling electrical wires. They're all still out there, pounding the floor, clapping in rhythm, deliriously happy, demanding more.

He knows exactly what they want to hear, but the thought of going back and performing it paralyzes him. He'd been able to get through the show precisely because they'd left the song off the set list. All along he'd been distantly aware it would almost definitely be coming as the inevitable encore, but had been able to put it out of his mind, the same way he never lets himself think about death.

Dave Doma, the drummer, is in no hurry. He's lighting a cigarette.

"They'll wait," he says. "They always wait for you-know-what."

"We're not going to do it," Guy tells him, with a sudden decisive clarity that surprises even himself. "We gave them a great show. They'll understand."

“Now hold on a second.” Doma is still going with his sticks, slapping down paradiddles on his knee as he talks, cigarette dangling from his lip. “Is this because of your whole insisting on doing it straight thing? What’d I tell you about that?”

“Hey, I got through it, didn’t I?” Guy says.

“Not yet. We got one more song. Looks like you’re gonna need some help.”

There’s an old ratty couch and Guy sinks down into it. He hates this feeling. This isn’t just another gig either; it’s a homecoming of sorts. Out there tonight is what’s left of their base, old friends showing unconditional support. They’ve been loud and enthusiastic about even the most obscure material, but right now there’s no denying what they’re demanding: the song that will never die. It’s the only reason they can still draw crowds around the country, because that goddamn movie used it late spring, reanimated the monster.

He’s so tired right now. Rock and roll never used to feel this exhausting. He looks over at Doma, as the thundering continues out in the club. Biker shorts, ripped, biceps exploding out of a black t-shirt. He’s fifty-seven, a good six years older than Guy, and built like a genetically engineered super soldier from some Marvel comic: bald, big and badass. The kind of endurance this man exhibits is amazing. Hell, Guy can’t even strap on his huge Les Paul anymore without his back letting him know about it. And he certainly can’t keep up with Doma’s drug intake either.

Besides, he swore to her he wouldn’t, and even though she isn’t out there tonight, he can’t afford to break that promise. Over the summer, in places like Detroit, Miami and Manhattan, he’d been getting the powder from his drummer for the shows. Just a few sniffs got him through like a champ. But a few weeks ago Em figured it out somehow and came down hard on him.

“We can do a cover instead,” Guy says, looking up from the sunken couch that has nearly swallowed him. “How about Roadrunner?”

“Right,” Doma puts his sticks down, claps his enormous hands together. “That would be a bigger asshole move than no encore.”

He reaches into a suitcase on the floor and tries to hand over a vial with a white substance in it. Guy pushes it away.

“I promised Em,” he mumbles.

“Sure, I know,” Doma nods confidentially, not wanting to be the jerk here. “But we have to go out there and do it. Right *now*, before they give up and go home pissed. You gonna let her run your life?”

“Nobody runs my life,” he says, defiantly. “And you just stay the hell out of my personal business.”

“Fine. Look Guy, this is really just between you and that crowd out there. They’ve been patient. But now they want to hear the fucking hit.”

He hates to admit it, but Doma’s right. They’ve got to finish the job. This is the last gig on the schedule for a while. Em will never know. The crowd doesn’t care what this song does to him. He’d written it on piano in the first place, it never fit with the other material, and he’d had to adapt his keyboard part to guitar to do it live, so it’s always sounded wrong to him. But none of that is the real reason. It’s what the song is about. It takes him back to when he was a different person; makes him relive something that no one should ever even know about, something that he was a fool to put to music in the first place. With the coke he’s a different person, and it’s like the whole thing happened to someone else. Gives him the courage he needs. This is the only way he’s going to get through it.

“Okay,” Guy says, “Just one.”

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The steps of this place seem to be going on forever. Jesus, why did she choose heels? She'd forgotten Paulo's Palace was up on the third floor. For that matter, why did she even bother to dress in the first place? It's a rock show, that's all. But that's probably the reason – she didn't really think about it, but now realizes it was to distance herself from all the people in jeans, leather jackets and T-shirts, the kind of clothes she always used to wear onstage. Hell, some of the things they're wearing might even have *her* picture on them, if they're sporting vintage Precious gear. The thought of that makes her shudder for some reason. It's not like she thinks she's better than all that, it's just that there should be no mistake that this is no longer the person they once thought they knew, and she's not about to go back. Her tattoos will always be there, but she's a grownup now, an author with a book under her belt, a charity foundation and an entirely different life than rock and roll.

She's incredibly late, but it couldn't be helped, you can't just brush off someone in need, and Gloria was beyond desperate. Anyway, it doesn't matter if she sees the entire show, or any of it for that matter. She's heard the songs so many times that listening to them is like breathing; she barely notices when she's doing it. Anyway, it would just be a further reminder of how thin the threads are that still hold her and Guy together these days. The important thing is that she's there at the ending to hang around, hug old friends and remember the good times. She's pissed off still of course, what he did was stupid and brazen and not easily forgiven. But she also knows the man is an addict and can't help himself. She understands well what that means, but her

Natural Distortion

understanding will only extend so far. She's here because she's convinced herself that last incident really was a relapse, a misstep, that's all. She read him the riot act and he deserved it. He's not stupid, she's certain he's learned his lesson. Mostly she's here because this return to an old haunt is a special night for him, really for both of them, and she knows that her showing up unexpectedly like this will mean something. Despite all the crap they go through she still loves him enough to want to give him that.

At the top of the stairs she hears a roar from the crowd and the voice of her husband, talking to the audience.

He must be in an extraordinarily good mood tonight.

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The shouting turns to a roar in the darkened club as Guy rounds the corner, guided by a roadie with a flashlight. He picks up his guitar; makes his way to the microphone as the stage lights slowly come back up. The audience quiets quickly. He stands there surveying the crowd. They're pushing right up against the front of the stage. He can see their faces.

"It's great to be back at the 'ol Palace," he says. "We've had some great shows here over the years. You make us feel real welcome, right here in our own backyard."

"We love you!"

This sets off a wild round of cheering.

"Well, we most certainly love you, too," he says, poker faced. "Individually as well as collectively. Go see our drummer Dave about that after the show. You *will* have to take a number."

“First come, first served,” Doma says into his snare mic.

“It’s the Dave Doma deli!” Conrad, the bass player quips.

“Finest sausage in the Northeast!” Doma adds, taking it too far.

Guy looks back at his rhythm section and then turns to the audience with an expression of mock disgust, getting the biggest laugh of all. He tosses his long chestnut brown hair, with its slight streaks of gray. It bounces around his shoulders, and he enjoys the sensation. He could easily be twenty-three again. He knows the drugs are buoying him, making him feel this loose and talkative. But now that he’s buzzing, he’s got a plan. He’s going to have fun with it.

“There’s something you might be wanting to hear – ”

The audience erupts, and Guy chuckles.

“And you know, I have to say, that song...uh, well, I never really liked it all that much.”

There’s a chorus of good-natured boos.

“Hey I wrote it. It’s okay for *me* to be sick of it. But I was at a football stadium, watching The Patriots beat The Jets a little while back and it comes booming across this sound system that’s about three or four times louder than God. And I had a flashback. I remembered exactly what I was doing when I wrote it. You know? I mean it was July, really hot. I was sitting there in my underwear –

“Boxers or briefs?” a girl shouts.

Guy glances out at the crowd but can’t tell who said it.

Without skipping a beat he cups the microphone and in his deepest most seductive voice says: “Guess.”

“Show us!” the voice comes back again, and this time he catches a glimpse of his heckler. She’s a statuesque white-skinned beauty with sultry eyes behind nerd glasses and dark curly hair captured in a Byzantine series of tangles, loops and braids.

Right on cue Doma kicks into a bawdy swing drumbeat and Conrad badly tries to fake the melody to “The Strip” up an octave on the bass. Guy starts to shimmy a bit and reaches down towards the fly of his black jeans, decides against it and waves the band to a stop.

“Okay, okay, if you really have to know, the answer is...”

He bends down to pick up a glass of beer, drains it, and then changes the subject.

“So anyway, I’m looking for a volunteer from the audience.”

He shades his eyes and pretends to be searching for possibilities, but he’s already decided.

“You,” he says, pointing at his heckler, who is right up against the front of the low stage.

“Me?” she says.

“Come on up here, c’mon, c’mon,” Guy says, beckoning with his finger, as if he’s an impatient king expecting to be obeyed.

The girl looks mortified, but someone from behind pushes her forward, and the crowd joins in, cajoling her.

“Okay, okay,” she says and steps onto the stage. Now the audience breaks into applause and she bows nervously.

“Such a beautiful woman, isn’t she?” Guy says, causing hoots and hollers. “What’s your name?”

She leans towards the mic and says: “Honest”.

“Yes, I honestly want to know your name,” Guy says. Now the two of them are sharing the mic back and forth like a comedy act.

“No, that’s my name. Honest.”

“Honest, it’s Honest?”

“Yes!”

Guy pretends to be taken aback, shakes his head as if righting himself from a blow.

“Well, okay then!” he says. “So I’ll bet you know what song we’re about to do. I’ve just got this crazy feeling.”

“Man on Fire?” she says, anticipation flaring in her eyes.

“Good. You’re on the ball. I bet you even know all the words.”

The woman nods, cautiously.

“But the thing is, I’m tired of singing it by myself,” he says to the crowd. “So, our friend Honest here is going to help us out.”

“But I...can’t sing,” she says.

“That’s okay,” Guy says. “Neither can I. Never stopped me before.”

“No seriously. I mean I can and I want to, but...I can’t. It’s a...medical condition.”

Shit. He’s managed to pick the one person in the crowd that’s actually going to have a problem with this.

“Okay,” Guy says, thinking fast. “When we get to the chorus, you wave your arms, and everyone is going to sing along. Got it?”

“Got it.”

“Perfect” he says. “Now tell everyone out there what song we’re going to do...”

“Man on Fire!” she shouts.

The crowd explodes and Guy begins playing the introductory riff. The band comes in and he sinks into the opening line, like a million times before:

“Once upon a match head/The deal was struck.”

He looks over and sees she’s mouthing the lyrics and staring at him, transfixed.

When it’s over, the applause is like a wall you could climb up and stand on.

She smiles as if they’re sharing a secret and disappears back into the throng.

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The utility space behind the stage is now jammed with well wishers, all standing around talking at once, unwilling to let the party end. Doma is collapsed on the couch with his arms around two young girls, both wearing bright orange and blue tie-dyed T-Shirts with the words “The Precious: Keep The Fire Burning Tour”. Guy has been pushed into the corner, surrounded by a group of older men and women, laughing and hanging on his every word. Next to him is a barrel filled with ice and Budweiser, compliments of the club, and he’s downing beers, clowning around trying to balance a bottle on his head, and every few minutes turning away to sniff powder off his wrist, alternating between two white vials, one with a black top and the other green, he’s keeping in his shirt pocket.

One of the times his back is turned, a girl in a leather halter-top puts her arm around him and leans in to join him in a very intimate snort. Just as this happens, a tall figure appears at the open door and the milling throng seems to part as if it knows enough not to mess with her. She’s supermodel thin, in her 40’s, dressed like a businesswoman out on the town, heels, a light-gray power pantsuit with a jacket and a pink shirt. Her face bears the kind of natural

striking beauty that stands out in a crowd: green Siamese cat eyes, angular cheekbones and straight cut, shoulder length dirty-blonde hair. Her expression is one of simmering anger.

Guy spins around and sees her, mortified to realize he's still clutching both vials. He winces, and then forces a guilty smile.

"Em!" he cries out. "You came!"

She doesn't say anything, just holds out an open palm. Obediently he places the drugs in her tiny hand. She stares down at them with an expression of equal parts fear and revulsion, then tosses both vials at Doma on the couch, hitting his face.

"What the fuck?" Doma says.

She turns and walks out.

"Gotta go, everybody!" Guy announces, and stumbles after her.

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They reach the car where she left it at a parking garage around the corner without having uttered a word to each other. She's been leading the way and he's been straggling behind, watching glowing pixilated shapes perform extensive ballet moves in front of his eyes. He knows he's pretty far gone.

"I...had no idea you were going to show up," Guy says.

"Thought I'd surprise you," Em says.

"Wow. Well, that's great. I mean I was surprised."

"Yeah, I can tell."

Natural Distortion

Just as he's about to open the door, something seems to burst through his chest. He makes a strangled sound from deep in his throat, and for the first time Em speaks.

"You going to be okay, Guy? You sound terrible."

"I'm just...ulp..."

The word he wants to utter is 'fine' or some equivalent, but his mouth has been hijacked for another more immediate purpose: to unload the contents of his stomach. He coughs out a quick burst of something that plops onto passenger side window.

"Hey!" Emily shouts.

"Sorry..." Guy manages to mutter. Then he leans over and lets it fly.

"Jesus!" Emily says, holding him up as he nearly falls over. The substance covering the side of the car is not just vomit, there's blood involved.

"You fucking idiot! I told you not to —"

"I just...just a little..."

Guy is wheezing and shaking. He wants to say he's really, really sorry, to apologize from here to the sky, but his body isn't having it. His stomach is convulsing. He can barely breathe.

Without another word she pushes him into the passenger seat, slams the door and gets in. She leans over to snap on his seatbelt and then guns the engine.

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Emily barrels through the streets of Cambridge with Guy moaning quietly over in the passenger seat. At this point she's incredibly pissed off but also deeply concerned. She's figuring once he's safely at the hospital she can really focus in on what all this means, what needs to be

done, because when it comes down it, both anger and pity lead to the same place. Her husband has a serious problem. He hasn't quit drugs, and he's lying about it, same as he used to. It's fucking 2000 again, like the last fifteen years never happened.

She turns onto a narrow backstreet, a shortcut she likes, and suddenly a beast runs out in front of the car, a dog so large it might be a bear. There's no room to turn off and she's moving too fast. She's going to have to plow ahead and Hail Mary it, but for a second its terrified eyes flash in her headlights. Emily is not equipped to take the life of something that has so revealed itself. She freezes for a moment, and in that second Guy looks up, and in his inebriated state seems to see something horrific in front of them. He shrieks, grabs the wheel and yanks it all the way to the right. She screams "No!" and slams the brakes. A chain link fence looms a couple of feet off the raised sidewalk. All she can do is to ride the screeching momentum, helpless, watching as the hood hits the fence, puncturing it effortlessly, like a hand through a spider web. There's a heartbeat of silence as they tilt downward into darkness below. Her eyes blink once. She's aware of glass shattering, and of rushing forward.