

Bobby and the Bedouins

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Chapter One

You do things different when you're a mute security guard. You have to. People don't naturally have your respect. Now I use a whistle. Before I would just kind of go and maybe tap them on the shoulder if they were doing something they shouldn't be. People didn't react too well to that. People don't always liked to be touched by strangers, especially big scary-looking ones. I can't help it if I'm six four, two forty and built like a rock. Also, I'm half Japanese half Mexican and look like a samurai bullfighter. My name is Pablo Yokimura. I always wore a little sign around my neck explaining my inability to speak, but when they were shouting at me and I wasn't saying anything back the shoplifters got even madder, especially since most of them didn't understand sign language. Once or twice a fight broke out. The fights were over quickly, but my dad (his name's Hiroshi) said it wasn't working out and so he fired me.

I got lucky through my mom (she's a social worker, her name's Maria Elena) and found a part-time job coaching a local middle school boys' track team. The first thing the principal did was give me a whistle on a string to put around my neck, along with the little sign which said "I'm mute". At first it seemed kind of weird, but I watched the other coaches and saw what they were doing, using the whistle to make the kids start and stop doing things. I would write down on a little whiteboard what I wanted the kids to do (run a lap, sprint the hundred, stretch), followed by a demonstration of me doing the thing myself, then blow the whistle and the kids would do it. When it was time to stop I'd blow the whistle again. You get the picture. There was this one kid named Anthony Carter who gave me the suggestion I could use the whistle to make other sounds than just the one loud blast. I started making more subtle noises, toots and peeps and trills and even a sort of language like the Morse Code, with short and long beeps and notes, depending on what I wanted to say, like, "Good job", or "One more time", or "Wait, let me show you". Pretty soon the kids all said they could understand every thing I blew. Nobody else could, of course, but the kids were all that mattered.

I started using it at home a little bit. My parents were already used to paying extra attention for sign language, and also the whiteboard thing went way back, to even before I could really write. My mom and dad taught me to scribble little drawings on it to express myself. Once I started writing it was pretty routine to use that with non-signers and even at home when I felt like it. Adding the whistle was just another way to talk. There are things that are better expressed through noise.

I convinced my dad to give me another shot at the security guard thing in his music shop. For one thing, I needed the money, and also I just liked working there. Music was always my first love, and being around my dad and the store is also cool. I pretty much lived half my life at least in that place ever since I can remember. There are pictures of me as a baby in a playpen behind the counter. As a toddler and child I roamed the store at will, sampling every instrument and listening to records. I learned to read sheet music even before I learned to read books, and the books I learned to read from were biographies of musicians and other books about music. My dad's store (I should just call it Yokimura Music, which is it's actual name), is based on the premise that if a product has anything to do with music in anyway, it has a place in there.

It worked out better once I got the hang of the whistle. That way I didn't have to engage in any physical contact with the malefactor. I'd just blow my whistle and that got their attention all right. I also made myself a big red Stop sign like you see on street corners, and I'd hold that up for them to look at when they turned in the direction of the blast. That usually did the trick. For the more hardcore cases we team up, Marshall and me, and he would do the talking. He's almost as tall and me and a little bit heavier too, and has a hell of a mean face when he wants to. Most of the time he's just a pussycat. Like I said, it usually worked. There are some situations, though, when a whistle just isn't enough. I guess that's what I started out to say.

Chapter Two

I wanted to write about what happened because it's way too complicated for whistles, sign language, or whiteboards. Mostly this is for my mom and dad and Laura Napoli but anybody else might be interested too, so if they are, then here it is. It's not going to be some kind of "I was born" chronology, but at the same time I want to tell it in some kind of order that makes some sense out of it. I could put in a whole lot of things that aren't the least bit relevant. Maybe I will. I don't know. I haven't actually done this kind of thing before.

It's probably important to tell about who and where and when and what and how. My mom and dad already know a lot of that, but Laura doesn't, so I am going to be thinking about her as I go along and what she knows and what she doesn't, and since she is also a part of the story I have to tell about her too in the way I saw it, so you'll have to excuse me, Laura, for being repetitious when I get to that part, and mom and dad you'll have to excuse me too for all the stuff you already know. Okay, enough about that.

Yokimura Music is a pretty large place when you compare it to the rest of the stores in our little strip mall here on Venezia Boulevard in the south side of Spring Hill Lake. It's about one-third of all the retail space, but only one of seven stores. There is The Pet Food Stop next door which is also pretty big. Joy's nail salon is next door to that, and then there's Mary's Donut Hole, which is quite a tiny place as the name indicates. Next to Mary's is Chiquito Burrito, also a pretty small storefront. Next to that is Gone Postal, a sort of shipping place, and on the corner is Murray's Cigars and Liquor. That's about it. Each of the stores has its own set of parking spaces with the store name painted on the green twenty minute parking curb, but nobody really cares who parks in which spot or how long they stay. As far as I know, the Curly's Towing threat posted on the lot has never been enforced. I even have a feeling that Curly himself doesn't even exist.

The parking lot gets pretty full a lot of the time, mostly for Murray's and my dad's. We also get a kind of cross-business from over there. By that I mean the drunks and punks that come around and drink and smoke outside our door, the guys I have to go outside to every hour or so and blow my whistle at to make them go away. They all know me, being regulars, like Rodney the Fish King, and Howie the Manic. Those are my names I gave them. They actually have different names and don't know about these. It's easy for me to keep a lot to myself. All I have to do is not write it down. People sometimes tell me they think that I'm mysterious, just because I cannot talk. It's not so. I'm just quieter.

Whenever I think about the strip mall, which is officially called 'Venezia SouthWest Corners', I think of it as being hot. Sure, it's warm for half the year, and especially hot in July and August, but the rest of the time it's cool and often wet but I never think of it that way. I always see in my mind the steam rising from the sidewalk, and feel the heat of the pavement under my feet. We have air conditioning inside the store and it's usually too cold for my tastes in there, so maybe that's why I think of the outside as always being hot. Whenever I go outside it's always warmer than it was inside.

There's not much else going on nearby. On this part of Venezia there's a lot of little "office parks", which means small clusters of mostly abandoned odd-looking one-story buildings with nicely kept lawns and empty parking lots. It seems to me there are more leafblower guys than office workers most days around here. There's some residential apartments and condos on the side streets, and down the ways at the next big light there's a Pay'n'Save and a SuperMart. Further than that Venezia turns into Highway 63 toward Wetford and the motel chains and fast food franchises start popping up around down there. We're kind of out of the way, and at the same time in the way. A lot of traffic heading in and out of downtown has to go by us, which is pretty much why we've been able to stay in business for almost forty years now, since way before I was born.

My dad came here from Washington state, where his parents had stayed after coming from Japan. My mom is from right around here originally, Wetford proper to be exact. They met in college, where my mom was getting her sociology degree and my dad was getting his master's in music marketing. It served him pretty well, I think. He started up this store right after he got his degree and has been here ever since, six days a week, morning til night most days. He made it exactly what he always wanted it to be. It's nice to see that. If you have a dream and work it out into the real world. I never had anything like that. Not really. Well, I always wanted to make a living playing music, but not in front of people. I'd like to do it privately if I could. Really I'd like to be paid a lot of money just to play alone in my room with a lot of fancy equipment!

I do have a lot of equipment, most of it used (we sell used instruments) and most of that only borrowed (I usually get bored and return them eventually). Today I have two keyboards (one a weighted piano, the other a vintage synth), three guitars (two acoustic, one electric), a drum pad set and a drum machine, and of course my stand up bass and electric bass. I also have a computer and some decent programs but not the really fancy ones that cost way more than you would think. I can do some recording and it comes out okay enough, at least for me. I have to admit, though, it's nothing that anyone is ever going to pay me a lot of money for! Maybe I'll think of something else someday, come up with some kind of dream like my dad, but maybe not. That's who he is and he's lucky to be that way. I don't think most people get that lucky.

My mom does what she wants to also, which is trying to help people, people who are out of work, who need some help. She works for the city and spends a lot of time out on the road, going all around town, visiting her clients, checking up on them, doing whatever she can. She's got a lot to do, and some of those people need a lot more help than others. Sometimes I think she doesn't know her limitations. I mean, she doesn't believe there are any. She's always the optimist, thinking that for every problem there are multiple solutions. I'm not like her much either. I don't have that helping urge, but sometimes I will open up a

little, especially if she asks me to. That's really how I got into this mess in the first place. I'm sorry, mom, but it's true. It's not that I'm blaming you. It's just the truth.

Chapter Three

I grew up with music pretty much all the time and everywhere. Some of my earliest memories go back to that playpen in Yokimura Music and I swear I can still hear the voice of KKAS (Kickass!) DJ "Hot Rod" Shimley presenting the greatest rock and roll tunes ever, from Cream and Zep to the Stones, U2, The Flaming Pigs, Crenshaw, Jimi Hendrix, you name it, if it was awesome, if it was kickass, it was on with Hot Rod. My dad really loved that stuff, "vintage", he called it, and it could be "vintage" no matter what era it came from. Vintage was essentially anything my dad liked, and if he liked it, it was playing in the store.

The other people who worked there had their chance as well of course. They played the music they liked as long as my dad didn't hate it too much. He tried to keep himself under control. You could see him sometimes muttering in the back about Marshall's undue love of jazz, or Carrie's excessive devotion to reggae. He had his limits. If it was classical, it was unbearable, as far as my dad was concerned, and that meant classical anything - European, Persian, Indian, Chinese, Japanese (especially Japanese). If it was made for kings (that's how he put it), it was shit. It was kind of political with my dad.

It's funny but my mom was never really that into music of any kind. She loved my dad in spite of it almost. At home she demanded quiet, "peace and quiet" was how she put it. That was one of the reasons why my dad spent so much time at the store; so he could listen to his music. He especially liked to get there early, before anyone else, so he could really crank up the radio, and at night after everyone had left as well. He'd go home for periods during the day - he wasn't totally crazy - and he used to make time to do things with my mom and me outside the house and store. I know it sounds funny, but my dad was really torn between the three great loves of his life - my mom, the store, and me. I think it got easier for him when I was working in the store - I mean the time after he'd fired me and I got the whistle and came back. The first time around when I was trying to do the security guard thing, that was the hardest time for him.

I mean, I couldn't really help the customers too well. For one thing, I'm kind of shy and for another, I can't talk. I did - and do - a lot of stock work too, shipping, receiving, restocking, stuff like that, so it's not like I'm just a security guard standing there by the door all day. I only do that when it's busy, or when there's suspicious people hanging around, which is way too often, really. I just like to call myself 'the mute security guard'. It's like my superhero name. And I suppose I gave the wrong impression about my dad "firing" me too. It's not like he totally actually fired me. He just made me stop doing the security guard thing, and I cut my hours too because of that. It was kind of hard on him, I know. I felt bad about it so that's why I cut my hours back and got the coaching job, so he wouldn't feel so bad too.

I could go on and on about the store and it matters too because a lot of what happened came through there. For example, Joey Anthony Francesco was our UPS man for awhile. Marshall used to joke about Joey Anthony being a powder keg but I never saw it. Heck, he was the UPS guy! UPS guys are the friendliest, nicest people you could every want to meet. When I was a kid, I wanted to be a UPS guy. You

go around, giving people things they want, and you don't even take their money. One thing that always bothered me about working in the store, and especially at the cash register, was taking people's money. I know they wanted to give it to me in exchange for the stuff they wanted to buy, but I felt weird about it. I would rather have just given them the stuff. That is one of the reasons why my dad is probably not going to leave me the business when he dies.

Another reason is that I don't want it, and he knows that. I expect that one of these days I'll pick up and doing something else completely different. I don't know what that is yet, but I kind of know it somehow. I feel it coming. Lately I've been getting more motivated but I still don't have the idea yet, the one that's going to point me in the right direction. In the meantime I spend my days with the kids coaching track or at the store with dad and Marshall and Carrie and the part time people, or at home where I live in a little room they carved out of the garage downstairs.

I'm twenty nine years old, single, and never really had a girlfriend. There was Cindy Parker a few years back, but that wasn't what you'd call a genuine romance. It was more of a "she was there and I was there so there we were" kind of thing. After a few months we weren't there anymore. I like women all right. There have been others but nothing that stuck very long. I do think about them. Sometimes I think I write my songs with some woman in mind, that she, whoever she is, will listen to them someday and know that they were written for her. I suppose it could happen. In the meantime what I do is run a lot, and work out on my cardio equipment, and play music. I play the piano pretty well, the guitar well enough, the drums a little bit, and the bass. It's always the bass when I play with other people, because nobody else wants to play the bass and I don't mind. It's clean and it moves me. I feel like part of everything when I'm playing the bass. I'm inside the drums. I'm under the vocals. I'm right along side the guitar or whatever.

I've played in bands since middle school, but none of them were really any good. Mostly I went along because of my friends. I liked them but they weren't especially talented. Some of the bands could do reasonable covers of your basic rock and roll classics or the blues. In high school I was with the Scorchers and we did fairly decent surf music, good enough to play at The Beach House on Saturdays in the summer. That was with Jimmy Picket on guitar, Sam Alaya on vocals, Corey Dunbar on the drums. I also played with Corey in another band, Crunchtime, and Jimmy in a different one from that. These guys were always looking for a bass player, so that is what I did. I was never very comfortable at shows. You would see me trying to hide behind the amps! Fortunately no one gives a shit about the bass player, which is another reason why I played it. The other guys got most of the attention. I just got to hang out, play, enjoy myself. The money was no good. My mom always figured that eventually I'd hook up with someone really great and that would be my ticket. Maybe she's right. She wasn't, this time.

Chapter Four

It's funny how physical characteristics played a role in all of this. Take the case of Joey Anthony, the UPS driver. He had this thing against Carrie. I remember he never wanted to deal with her. With everyone else he was fine, his usual happy charming self, that big grin on his ever sweaty face. Joey Anthony (we always had to call him by both of his names, never just Joey. He was apparently sensitive about that and would actually get this pouty look on his face before patiently explaining to the wrongdoer that his name was not just Joey, it was Joey Anthony and he would appreciate it if the wrongdoer would do him the

courtesy of addressing him by his real, full name. Joey, I mean Joey Anthony, was about five eight or nine and weighed around two hundred pounds. He wasn't fat, he was solid, and strong like a UPS driver has to be. He had thinning curly black hair that he wore long and always looked wet. Joey Anthony himself always looked wet, now that I think about it. It's the same as the parking lot always seeming hot. I guess it's because he worked hard and was just naturally sweaty.

Carrie thought he was repulsive and liked to imitate what she called his "phoney-baloney" Italian-American accent, his kind of old-world mafia pretension. I don't think he knew she did that, but even if he did it was only a reaction on her part to the way he acted towards her, which was to literally act like she wasn't even there. If she was the only one at the front counter he would park his hand truck, slide the boxes out, and call out across the store to Marshall or my dad or me or anybody else to come and sign for delivery. Carrie would roll her eyes and sometimes she would say something like, "hello? I'm standing right here! Am I invisible to you?", to which he would not respond, not even acknowledge that he'd heard her.

Marshall told me it was because of his prejudice. I didn't get that at first. When I think prejudice I don't think of skinny, freckled pale-faced pretty redheads, which is what Carrie was. I would think of maybe Marshall, because he's African-American, or maybe me or my dad or my mom, but not Carrie. When I explained that to Marshall he laughed and told me that Joey Anthony was actually married to a n African-American woman and that his kids were "black", in the same way that I'm "Japanese" because I look more like that than Mexican, even though I don't know very much about Japan or Japanese culture or traditions because my dad was basically an American hippie pot-head who never gave a crap about the old country. I actually know a lot more about Mexican stuff because of my mom, but I never looked very Mexican so there you go.

It was all about appearances. I was used to the occasional taunting growing up but I guess it was nothing like what my dad went through in his time. Of course it was not only a different time back then but also my dad is pretty small (he's only about five three) so he got picked on a lot. I was bigger than both my mom and dad by the time I was twelve, and bigger than most of my classmates too. Most of the kids I grew up with weren't even white, so we had a wide assortment of confusing bigotries. The Asian kids who were supposed to be so smart weren't very, and the Mexican kids who were supposed to be lazy weren't very, and the African-American kids who were supposed to be tricky weren't very, and so on. We used to laugh about how everything was definitely all fucked up when you couldn't even count on the old stereotypes being true.

The problem Joey Anthony had with Carrie was her red hair. It was because she was Irish, or so he thought. She was actually of German extraction, but Joey Anthony would never have believed that. Red hair was Irish and Irish was red hair and that was that, as far as he was concerned, and I don't know why, and nobody does it seems, but he really had this thing against the Irish. Maybe he got it from his family. Maybe he got it from his neighborhood. I really can't say. All I know is he refused to have anything to do with her, but other than that, you would have thought he was the nicest guy in the world.

My mom didn't really think much of Carrie either. She always had this idea that people ought to live up to their potential, and she knew that Carrie was a world-class violinist who could have had a spectacular

career if she had only "applied herself", which meant not working in a little old music store in a stupid old strip mall in a boring old town. One of these days, my mom would tell her, you're going to wake up and smell the coffee. My mom was very big on smelling the coffee. She used to say that to me too. She was haunted by the notion of people getting old and suddenly realizing that their life was shit and they'd wasted the whole damn thing.

Carrie just laughed it off and would say something like "yum, I love the smell of coffee". She was happy, completely and even deliriously happy. She loved her husband, Miles (another suspiciously Irish-like name) and her little boy Kelvin (who is only seven right now and a total delight. Miles is a solar roofing contractor and Kelvin spends his after-school time right there in the store, like I used to do when I was his age. Carrie has been with the store for years, ten I think. Marshall's been there even longer, maybe almost twenty. That seems right, because I remember him there when I was only nine. He taught me a lot of what I know about piano, which is not to blame him or anything. It's not his fault that I never got the hang of it properly.

Chapter Five

And then there's mom. You know when mom shows up because the volume goes up too. She's a talker and she always has something to say. It doesn't matter what the topic is, with mom it deserves a full and complete exploration. I think that explains a lot about the strays she's always brought home from her job. Even though they've been a varied bunch, and this stretches back as long as I can remember, must have been forty or more in that time, they all had that one thing in common. They were talkers. Most of them were fast talkers too, like mom, although they didn't all have as much to say. Maybe it's because my dad is just the opposite - a slow talker and a long talker. Dad will take all day to get around to the point, if he ever even gets there. He just likes to "take it slow" (one of his favorite expressions).

It works like a charm with customers, who love the attention he gives them. Most of his job consists of hanging around and chatting. These people come back again and again, and do all of their music business with dad. The customer is always right, the customer is always king, the customer is what it's all about. Dad repeats these mantras every opportunity he gets, and it works. You can't argue with success. You can't even argue with my dad, which drives my mother crazy sometimes. He's just so agreeable, and mom likes a good fight every now and then.

She gets them with her strays. These are young people, anywhere from fourteen to twenty-four or thereabouts, who are down and out on their own. Sometimes they come from troubled families. Sometimes they have no family at all. A lot of them are runaways but just as many are just out of luck, got no job, got no home, got no one to give them anything, not even the time of day. Our house always has an extra kid or two or three staying there. I don't have any actual brothers or sisters but I've had a ton of temporary siblings. Most of them I haven't cared for very much. There's been a lot of stealing, a lot of lying. They use us, especially my mom, but she doesn't care. She knows it's coming.

"It's my job to give them a chance", she says. "It's their job to take it".

And they do take. They're good at that. Boy or girl, woman or man, fast talkers every one of them, they sit down to dinner and they eat. They make some excuse and they leave before they might have to do a thing like dishes. They make a mess of their room and sneak out at night. They act like mom is their mom. They yell at her and apologize. They cry on her shoulder then steal money from her purse. This one girl, Rita, stole one of my guitars and tried to sell it to my dad at the store! She didn't realize, didn't recognize the man at the counter was the same man who'd just made her breakfast that morning. These were not the smartest people in the world.

I was pretty used to it. My mom never bothered to ask my dad if it was okay if she brought home another stray, and he never let on that it did. Bother him, I mean. The chaos at home was just another good reason to spend more time at the store. At home mom had her rules, and the strays ignored them at their peril. One of the rules, you already know. Peace and quiet. If they stray made too much noise they were gone.

"I don't ask for much", she would yell at them, "just a little peace and quiet when I get home".

"You're not my mother", they'd yell back. There would be a brief scene, sometimes with things being thrown or trashed, and then the stray was gone for good. This has happened so many times, it's just predictable. There were only two or three strays that stuck and stayed awhile. Those were good kids. I even liked them. They still write letters to mom every now and then, and she is so proud of that. Two or three (I'll make it three, counting Morris, because he really tried hard even though he's back in jail again) out of maybe forty isn't the greatest winning percentage in history, but for my mom it's total vindication. She'll never give up, never stop trying, never lose hope, never fear for the worst always hope for the best, is what she says. It's never a surprise when she drags on in from the cold. This last time it was another fast talker, another part time charmer, an older kid, mid twenties, a hot-headed, scrawny and scraggly loser who went by the chipper name of Bobby O'Bannon.

Chapter Six

I should probably give you a sense of the house where we live so you can picture Bobby in there with us. We're about a mile from the store, easy walking distance, in a pretty small cottage you'd probably call it, right up against the waterfront, just a little bit down the road from the main harbor where the fishing and pleasure boats park. Our backyard goes right up to the water's edge and if you're not careful you could just fall right over and topple in, because we never put a fence or a wall back there, just a row of stones to give the idea. We didn't want to block the view because it's beautiful, looking over the river to the grassy hills on the other side. At night you can hear the cows mooing around over there if the wind is right.

There's about ten houses exactly like ours on the street. We're the last one on the left at the end of the dead end block. Across from us is a dusty little park that no kids ever play in. The swings and stuff are all rusty and old, and the sandbox is basically a dirt box. It's kind of a deserted street, even though people live here. Most of them are like us, old timers who've been here forever. My best friend Clayton Thomas was two doors down before he moved away. His mom and dad still live there though, and the Redburns next to them. Victoria Redburn was in my school as well, a few years older than me. Now she's on the city council and lives downtown somewhere. It's just to say there used to be kids around here but then we all grew up and no new families ever moved in to start up a new generation.

The house has got two floors, sort of. The first floor is basically the garage which is now my room. It's halfway underground. The driveway is steep and unpaved. We park out on the street. From the walkway you go up a half a dozen red brick steps to get to the landing where the front door is. There's an old wicker chair on the landing like we're pretending it's a porch, but nobody ever sits out there. Who wants a view of the abandoned park and the scrubby vacant lot that's next to that? We sit out back in the yard where we can look out over the river.

Anyway, you go inside and on the right is the master bedroom where my mom and dad are, right above my room. On the left is the living room and behind that is the kitchen. Those rooms display the history of domestic struggles between my mom and my dad. He's got his things and she's got her things and it's more or less been divied up by compass. He has the north and east. She gets the south and west walls. Her stuff is a lot like her; warm and lively, colorful, active, lots of reds and yellows and things on fire. His stuff is more mellow and cool. He likes his candles and his "vintage" rock posters. Neither of them ever cared very much about furniture so it's all pretty old and shabby, leather mostly, and glass for the tables.

Behind the kitchen is a sort of pantry or what used to be a pantry that they got fixed up a long long time ago so it could be a bedroom. It juts out into the back yard a bit and doesn't contain much beyond a bed on a box spring, a brightly painted blue dresser with yellow parakeet knobs, a Stevie Ray poster and a folding card table and chairs. There used to be more stuff in there but bit by bit it all vanished along with the strays. It didn't matter what it was, they took it, whether it was my collection of toy soldiers, an old electric race track, a cut glass chess set, books about electrical wiring, all of it gone, gone, gone. It's a good thing I never got attached to my stuff because it sure doesn't stay attached to me very long.

Across from the kitchen is the bathroom (behind the master bedroom), and between those is the back steps going down into the yard. So you can see there's not a lot of room. That pantry bedroom used to be my room. That's before my mom began collecting strays. That's when they fixed up the garage and stuck me down in there. I was about five or six at the time. At first I didn't like it, because it's a steep and narrow stairway up from there to the kitchen, plus like I said it's halfway underground and kind of cold and dark and damp, but I got used to it, and most of the time I'm glad I'm there and not up where the strays are. I can get away, which is something I often need to do.

Most of the time the strays respect my boundaries. A few of them would come down there and hassle me for money for drugs or booze, or just to waste my time by hanging out. Some of them like I mentioned tried to steal my equipment. There were some who wanted to use my stuff and I let them if they asked politely and didn't make a mess. I try to keep things neat and clean. I really don't like chaos. I'm pretty easy to take advantage of. Girls especially figured out if they were nice and smiled I'd pretty much give them anything. I used to beg my mom to not bring any more girl strays home. I told her I couldn't afford it and she laughed, but I meant it literally!

Bobby O'Bannon played that game as well, the old "I want to be your friend" routine. Maybe he really meant it. I never saw him have any other friends that I could tell, and when he told me all about his life (the way that almost every stray would tell me all about their lives, knowing I would be polite and sit there and listen, knowing I would not say anything because as you remember I can't talk, and because

they were in my own room in my own house and where was I going to go?) he only mentioned former friends, not current ones. I told you that he talked fast. He also talked a lot. Right from the very first night my mom had brought him home he came down there to my room and offered me a lemonade (I wonder who told him I was a sucker for lemonade) and took my spot on my couch and started in to talking.

I should tell you about the room while I'm at it. My mattress is on the floor, right in front of where the garage door is. You can't get directly into my room from the outside. You have to go upstairs, and through the living room, into the kitchen, and then down the steep and narrow staircase. Outside my door is where the washer and dryer are kept. There's also a few steps up to a door that goes out to the backyard so you could get in from there but I don't usually. Anyway on the left wall facing the mattress there's my favorite red velvet-like couch. On the wall across from that there is a small desk with my computer on it and a pile of pedals and effects boxes and the floor below it. There's a rickety old folding chair I use to sit at the desk. The floor is covered by a pretty worn pale blue carpet that once upon a time had gold stars woven into it but all the stars are gone or faded now. The rest of the room is filled with my music and recording equipment all set up and a trunk where I throw all my clothes in.

There's not much room to move around in and you even have to scoot around the drum kit to get to the couch from the doorway. It's cluttered but it isn't chaos. I know exactly where everything is. There's only one window, and that's a long and narrow one up above the couch that faces out onto the side yard, which isn't really a yard but just a gravelly space where we keep the garbage cans. I don't get a lot of light down there. I also have to stoop a little bit sometimes because the ceiling is only seven feet high and the doorway's only six and like I said I'm six foot four. I want to get the hell out of there someday. That's part of the motivation that's building up inside.

So as I was saying, there was the new stray, coming right in, offering me a lemonade, taking my favorite seat, and right off talking fast and telling me everything I never wanted to know about him and never asked.

Chapter Seven

I know, I know, you don't have to tell me. I'm a sucker. I'm a loser. I'm a fool. I always get into these things and I just can't help it. Sometimes I blame my dad, who's never been known to say 'no' in his life, not so far as I can remember. As a kid I was so tempted to take advantage of him. Dad, can I have some candy? Dad, can I have that toy? Dad, can we go fishing? It was always 'yes' or 'sure, why not', or 'okay'. The only time he ever told me 'no' was when he asked me to please stop trying to play security guard in the store, before the whistle, of course. Other times I blame my mom, who is always doing things for other people. If she isn't dragging home strays she's out grocery shopping for shut-ins, or driving old ladies to their medical appointments, or calling random strangers on behalf of wonderful charities. My whole life has been full of nothing but mister and missus nice guys left and right.

So I ended up with the worst of both worlds. I don't do any good for anyone, and I don't help people who need it. Instead I always end up helping people who don't. I'm like the guy who's driving healthy people around because they're lazy. I'm like the guy giving a ten percent discount to a rich kid (not really, dad, it's just an example). I'm the pedestrian who gets out of the way of the car in the crosswalk when it's a

pedestrian crosswalk for heaven's sake! I'm the guy who lets the other guy go first even though I'm the one in a hurry. You should see me sometimes. It's pathetic. I usually apologize to people when THEY screw ME over. I would probably adopt a dog if it bit me.

Of course I ended up spending my evenings in my room with Bobby O'Bannon working out his songs. It's not that they were bad, they weren't. Some of them were even pretty good if not exactly my style. He had a tendency to slack on the bass lines, find a simple groove and stick with it no matter how boring it got. He wasn't big on bridges, preferring a typical patter of verse verse chorus, verse verse chorus, verse verse fade away. Also he wasn't kidding when he said he could live in C. Most of his songs got around to that eventually if they didn't actually start out there. C, A and D. C, E and G. C and F, C Em Gm. That was pretty much his repertoire. On the guitar he could basically strum those chords and that's about it, no fingering, no soloing, but that's okay. If we were going to have a band we'd need more people anyway, a lead guitarist and a drummer at the least.

He was all about the singing, and the act that went along with it. That rooster strut he did around my room was merely a shadow flickering on a wall compared to the strutting he liked to do when vocalizing. He was your typical rock and roll lead singer imitation all the time, and like a kid with it, a kid who's broadcasting his fantasy world when he thinks that nobody's paying attention. I even expected to hear him cheering for himself after every song. The twitching and fidgeting he normally did was accentuated to infinity when he was singing, and I could hardly tell if the one was the product or the inspiration of the other. Did he perform that way because he lived that way, or did he live that way because he performed that way? It is possible that he was performing all of the time in his mind, and the bodily jerkings were just the outward manifestation of this raucous inner world.

I never asked him. I'm not sure I ever asked him anything beyond "what does this notation mean?" in his little notebook. I took to transcribing the songs into actual sheet music and tablature, making him write the lyrics in standard English lettering and translating the secret codes into accepted musical instructions. Within a couple of days our system was down to a simple matter of finger pointing, shrugging and nodding. My mom was pretty ecstatic that "you and him are getting along so well", and I have to admit there were parts of it I truly enjoyed - playing, mostly, and adding some livelier variations to perk up his songwriting. We sounded okay, at least to me. My dad even liked what he heard and proclaimed it "promising". We were down there every night for a few weeks and by the end of that initial period we had whittled the set down to ten or twelve songs we decided to concentrate on. We spent so much time in that basement that Bobby joked we were like anti-nomads. That's how he came up with the name of Bobby and the Bedouins, although when you think of it, I was the only Bedouin, and Bedouins ARE nomads so it was exactly the opposite of what he meant to say.

The best thing about those sessions was it limited his bullshit to a manageable quantity. Whenever he started to wander into metaphysics, ancient history, inaccurate science, or who he'd fuck, I would just start playing something and he would shut the hell up and get back to doing his performing thing. After the first two days I'd already heard everything he was capable of playing on the guitar, which wasn't much, but I could pretty much use that knowledge to get him to accompany my own stuff as long as I kept it within his range. I could tell he wasn't always happy to be going along with my "songs" (which are more like endless improvisational jamming around a simple theme I happened to come up with at the

moment and would never remember or repeat ever again), but as long as I let him vocalize to the music he was satisfied. He liked to think he could make up lyrics to go along with anything, and this is what he would try to do, but the truth is he never came up with decent material that way. The only times he wrote good lyrics or songs was when he was alone, and especially when he was outside, walking around, going nowhere. For some reason, this was the magic formula he required.

He had no job, so during the day he had plenty of time to walk around, going nowhere. My mom was trying to get him a job, but she had to admit it was hard. Bobby was full of enthusiasm, and claimed to be able to do anything. He said he'd worked in construction, driven a cab, done office work, but whenever she found him a possible position he flaked and backed out. The few times she forced him into an interview for a kind of a job that he'd said he had done, she heard later that the interviewers were convinced he was lying, that he'd done no such thing. He also had no references. He lied about where he had come from, where he had lived. He lied about everything, so much in fact that his lies were confused, all mixed up, and he wouldn't even try to keep them all straight. Every day brought a new fictional Bobby. We wondered aloud how he'd made it this far.

Mom snooped in his room and found nothing. Aside from his notebooks of songs he had only clothes and not many of those. He had no identification, for example, not even a library card. As far as we knew his name wasn't Bobby O'Bannon. There was no way to tell. He would say that it wasn't important who he was, what he'd done, where he'd been. He was living transcendently, he claimed, alive in the moment. He had showed up one day in the unemployment office, was shepherded into my mom's. He said he'd been fired from Randy O Tire Co. It wasn't true, as a phone call soon proved. Even while my mom was talking to the actual Randy O, Bobby just sat there, fidgeting and smiling, maintaining his lie. Sticking to it, he'd say. My mom even told me, this was much later, that Bobby was the hopeless case she'd attempted, her words, and for mom, that was saying a lot.

Chapter Eight

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Chapter Nine

I was starting to feel a little trapped. I couldn't come home without Bobby waiting for me on the front steps, eager to get back to work in the basement. I had to fend him off just get something to eat and it was getting to be a bit of a chore. I was thinking maybe this is just more of the motivation I need to find myself another place to live and get on with my life. It wasn't just Bobby and his omnipresent agitation. It was also my mom, who was beginning to take a sort of pride of ownership of what she called "this budding partnership". She was thinking maybe this was the collaboration she'd been wishing for me for so long. I had to tell her the truth. It was probably going nowhere.

"What we need", I told her in sign language, "is something big, and between me and him, we've got nothing big. We're nobodies nowhere."

She suggested we go out and perform but I had a really bad feeling about that. I didn't have a lot of faith in Bobby. The few times even just my mom or dad came down to watch us play, he tended to freeze up, stop twitching, and when he lost that bodily disorder he lost his rhythm and he lost his focus and it all went out the window. He was toast. I figured there was no way he was going to be able to keep it together in public, so that's what I told her.

"What we need", I told her again, "is a missing ingredient".

Maybe that was the big mistake, because once she heard that, she made up her mind that she was going to find that missing link, the final piece of the puzzle. I didn't really mean it, of course. I didn't think there was anything that was going to make it work. Bobby was weird. He was truly fucked up. I just didn't know how to get rid of him. Like I said, he was there, every day, every night, doing nothing but waiting for me to appear. If I was home, I was his, like a prisoner in my own deep dark dungeon. I was sick of his songs pretty soon. I was tired of his face, of his manner, of his talk. Most people think I'm so patient. It's only because I can't scream.

Now this is where Laura Napoli comes in. I don't have all the facts but I'll tell what I know. Once again, I blame mom for this part. She's the one who put the pieces together. Laura works over at St. Catherine's. She's the activities coordinator for the basket cases they like to call clients. These are the bag ladies, the homeless, the nut jobs, the half wits and losers who are out on the streets. I suppose that I should be kinder. Excuse me if I'm in a bad mood but just thinking about it, it gets me. The fact that these people, who are really in terrible shape, are left out to die and decay on their own, who'd have nothing and no one if it weren't for people like Laura, makes me wonder what kind of a world do we live in? Most of them need to be in hospitals, institutions, places of refuge, but most of them have nowhere to go.

The church does something at least. It gives them some food and a place to hang out during the day. Nowhere to sleep, of course, no not that! That would be asking too much I suppose. Nowhere that they can call home. Nowhere they can get mail, get a phone call, take a shower and shave. Well, the church can't do everything, they say. Yes it can. The church is tremendously rich. They've got treasure and property all over the world. They do just enough to look good. Don't get mad at me, Laura, it's just what I think, and you know that I love you and I love what you do. You're trying your best. I believe that.

I think that Laura is a lot like me in some ways, the bad ways. The way that other people can get her to do anything for them, the way she never says 'no' like my dad and the way she's always helping, like my mom. I can't help it if she brings out a certain tenderness in me, though it's something I'm not used to. Who is going to take care of Laura? She never looks after herself. You would think that someone as young, as pretty, as nice, would find it too dirty, too stinky, too creepy to work in that place. You would have to be some kind of saint, and maybe she is, or maybe she just wants to be. Sometimes you want to shake her, point out the simple fact that saints don't get far in this world. They don't get rewards or nice houses or noticed or even appreciated most of the time. Doing good for it's own sake is perfectly fine, I suppose, but like my mother would say, someday she might wake up and smell the coffee, and then where will she be?

Laura gives them all something to do. She reads to them. She plays with them. She teaches them and talks to them. Part of her job is to give them a sense of a purpose in life, at least for the moments she's with them. She tries to build on whatever they are, whatever they have they can offer. So it was, with Mario Flambeau. You probably remember him, if you're a rock fan at all. You'll remember his band, The Flaming Pigs and their hits, like "Can't Get Away", "Nobody But You" and "Heat of the Day". At the heart of that sound was Flambeau, his guitar, the way that it felt it was coming from heaven, coming down from perfection eternal.

The Pigs had a couple of years where they were the top, they were the best, they defined rock and roll. It was magic. Of course, that was then, this is now. What happened was the usual story. Johnny Bricks died of heroin, trash in some alley. Kerry Smash fell about ten stories to his death. Billy Ray still survived, the bassist of course. He's out on some riverboat gambling ship now. And Mario Flambeau just burned out. Drugs, booze, whatever, you name it. His brain was all gone and it never came back. He had vanished completely several years back, then somebody found him out on the pier, staggering around, destitute, ruined. I don't even know how they found out who he was, but they did, and he was, dirty, smelly, in rags, you can imagine. They put him into some halfway house here, and that's how he ended up down at St. Catherine's, another pet project for Laura. She found a guitar and some pedals, an amp. She found him a chair, sat him down, put the thing in his hands, and what do you know? He could play. He could still play the way that he used to back in the old days, only now with no awareness, no presence at all. It was weird, like a ghost making glorious sounds.

Naturally it was my mother's idea that here was the missing ingredient. She's the one who arranged for Bobby and me to go over and visit the place, see him play. Of course Bobby knew who he was. He had practically built his persona on the Johnny Bricks model. Of the very few other people's songs he could play, almost all of them were Pigs'. His excitement was practically out of control from the moment mom mentioned Mario's name. It didn't bother him a bit, I'm not sure he ever even noticed, that Mario was basically a shell. He was Mario Flambeau. He was God.

Chapter Ten

You could tell that Bobby had won over my mom by the fact that she had waived her "peace and quiet" requirement. She had never minded my noise for some reason - maybe because I did try and keep it from bothering her. I would use headphones as much as I could but with Bobby that didn't work out. Even with headphones his singing was loud and to tell you the truth kind of grating. He could carry a tune well enough, and I'm sure it would have been fine for most people, but something about it started driving me crazy. It probably wasn't the voice by itself but the building resentment I had to this pest who was infesting my space and polluting my air with his breath. Okay, that sounds kind of harsh, I admit.

Other than the noise he was the typical stray. He contributed nothing, and took and took and took. He ate and he drank and didn't do dishes. He didn't clean up or offer to cook. He didn't do anything, really, but sit there and wait for me to come home, and then pester me to play music with him. My mom, like I said, she had the idea that this was the thing, both for him and for me, and when she heard about Mario Flambeau, well, there was no stopping mom and no stopping Bobby. My dad was curious too. The Flaming Pigs were naturally "vintage" and he wanted to see for himself. We made a family expedition out of it one late afternoon, when Laura had "made some arrangements", which is how my mom put it. What it turned out to be was something straight out of a movie, and by that I mean zombies.

We piled into the bug and drove over to St Catherine's, dad driving with mom up front, and in the back there was me next to Bobby. Bobby was talking so much that dad turned on the radio, KKAS, and blasted it as loud as he could. You see, up to this point dad had pretty much avoided the scene. He never liked strays anyway, and especially fast talking mutts. He had figured out when it was safe to be home, which

was when we were down in my room after dinner. This way he didn't have to listen to the babbling rambling perpetually emerging from Bobby. It just so happened they were playing a Triple Shot of Flaming Pigs, which got Bobby singing along at the top of his lungs, never noticing the looks that we gave him. You can just see us, the three way-too-nice guys, trapped in a small car with Asshole Supreme.

"I wanted you forever", he screeched in that Johnny Bricks way, a goofy falsetto mixed up with rasping, "but you couldn't hold a candle to my lo-o-o-o-o-v-e".

We got there eventually, and we were relieved to get out of the car. Bobby had raced on ahead to the church after mom had pointed it out. I followed along slowly, me and my dad, while my mom strode ahead to make contact with Laura. We found her downstairs in the basement. There are two ways to go into the church. Up the wide steps to the main place that everyone goes, or down to the side to the cellar. The wide steps were marble and clean. The side steps were concrete and chipped. The church was a nice one, all shiny and wood, with plenty of stained glass and polish. It had all the stations of the cross and all the various trimmings that go with the Catholics. The Jesus had a sad look on his face, but wasn't too bloody. I went up there first with my dad because, well, we just wanted to see. When we go on outings, me and my dad tend to wander away from the main destination. We tend to save it for later, like with ice cream. If we get a chocolate, vanilla and strawberry ice cream sandwich, we'll go for the strawberry first, and then the vanilla, saving the best part, the chocolate, for last.

We spent a few minutes examining the various idols. My dad is especially partial to graven images. I liked the stained glass. After awhile, though, we crossed paths in the middle and with a look we agreed it was time to go down. We went back outside and down the bad steps, where we entered the poor people's place. Remember I said the church could do more? Well, that's what I meant, from the look of this place. Compared to upstairs was like heaven and hell. Up there was beautiful, quiet and glowing. Downstairs was cramped and dirty and stank. It was full of odd people, rushing around. Several old ladies dressed in grocery bags were passing out baskets of prunes. Some old men were scratching the lice in their heads as they shuffled along from one side of the room to another. Chairs were placed here and there, strategically to make an adventure of moving about. I saw some young people grabbing styrofoam cups and hiding them furtively in heavy wool coats. I saw a thin girl in a tight fitting skirt turn around and she could have been seventy instead of seventeen, so messed up from drugs you couldn't tell.

I am not easily spooked. I've been around town and I've seen what I've seen. I know about bad things in life, but I was not at all ready for this. I looked at my dad and saw that he too was shocked and surprised. He was eying the exit like me, but then my mom showed up and shouted

"This way", and gestured for us to follow her. She led us to a side room, down a wet corridor, around a corner or two. In the room were four people, not counting us. There was a short greasy man wearing duct taped glasses who was sitting inside of a drum set, smashing away at the snare with a stick that was held together with tape in two places. There was an old woman who seemed to be making a pot of coffee way back in the corner. It turned out later to be a doll tea set and she was the Queen of the Netherlands. There was a lovely young woman wearing jeans and a jacket, who was sitting on the floor beside a bent over old man, and that old man was holding a battered old red electric guitar. He was Mario Flambeau. He was no one.

Bobby had already attempted to talk with Mario, but that had gone nowhere, and now he was pacing around in the room. Without me being there he was talking real loud to the drummer, who was too busy making a racket to hear him.

"Count it out", Bobby said, "on a one and a two", but the drummer was counting it out to a different numerical sequence. It was difficult to tell what he thought he was doing. He seemed to know something about playing the drums, but it was merely a pestilent noise he was making. Suddenly the room got even louder as Mario started to play and his amp was turned up way too high. He was still just as hunched, sitting there on the naked concrete, the guitar on his lap and the look on his face was just frozen. His fingers were moving but nothing else was. Combined with the drums it was scary. That is the word. terrifying.

And then Bobby started to sing. I told you how he liked to make up songs to my jamming, and how those songs never worked. Same thing here.

"Pop-corn kool-aid in the sun-shine", he wailed, "rest rooms for customers only".

Bobby was back to twitching and dancing and doing his rock and roll superstar thing. His right hand was clenched in a fist and held up like he was carrying a microphone. The Queen of the Netherlands rushed over and started clapping in time to some rhythm or other. Laura turned toward me and smiled. That was the moment I lost my heart, forever. Then the drummer's stick broke and he started wailing, and Laura rushed over to fix it again. As soon as she had it taped up he continued. Mario and Bobby hadn't stopped for even a moment.

My dad had less patience than me. After I broke out of the hypnotic stupor which was caused by my falling in love, I noticed he was gone. My mom was also turning to leave. I followed. The three of us regrouped up stairs on the sidewalk. For a minute, nobody so much as gestured. We looked at each other in stupification. Finally my dad said he wanted to go up to the church for awhile. We went with him. My mom was nominally Catholic, but she hadn't practiced in years. In fact, I couldn't remember the last time she even said anything about church. We were atheists, mainly, because we didn't have any reason to be anything else. My dad had his store and his music. My mom had her good work to do. I had my life which was pretty much all I could ask for. 'What more could you want?' I would say to myself. Religion always seemed kind of greedy to me, as if this incredible world wasn't enough. It was more than enough for me.

We sat down, the three of us, all in a row in a pew, and I think my mom prayed. My dad and myself were enjoying the vibe. We always liked churches when they were empty.

"Well, that was a sight", my mom said as we left some time later. My dad agreed with a snort. We met Bobby outside on the sidewalk. He was grinning.

"Fucking awesome", he said, "Oh man, that was great!".

All the way home in the car he was raving. Mario Flambeau was incredible, amazing, stupendous, mind-blowing, a genius, a star, he was excellent. The rest of us knew he was out of his mind, but Bobby saw nothing of that. All I could think was I hoped I would never have to be in that basement again.

Chapter Eleven

We weren't the only ones who saw that sorry spectacle. It turned out someone else was there, sneaking and sniffing around as he had been ever since he'd read the news about Mario Flambeau in the local free weekly. Laura's ex-boyfriend, Theodore Godfrey, had written a column for that rag in the hopes of a) cashing in and b) sucking up to Laura who'd been avoiding him ever since he'd fired her from his band. Laura was always a better musician than he was - she also plays bass, by the way, and very nicely - but Godfrey had to have total control and one time Laura had made the innocent suggestion that maybe they could play a different tune once in awhile, and Godfrey had blown his cool, kicked her out of the band and broken up with her, not for the first time. When he found out she was nurturing the long-lost soul of the great guitar player, he'd come poking around and gathered enough information to write that magazine article.

It was the article which had caught the attention of Mr. Roy Everson, a once prominent agent and promoter for Pigeon Weather Records. In his heyday, Everson had managed several significant local bands, and had produced popular outdoor concerts at Sea Dragon stadium and the Waterfront Festival. Since that heyday, more than a decade ago, he had fallen on leaner times. It hadn't helped that he'd aged but his style and tastes had not kept up. He had become a figure of ridicule to some extent, still pretending to be hip and young though clearly balding, paunchy and foolish. He sucked up to everyone in the music business, but doors were always closing in his face, and he was desperate for another bug score.

He'd known my dad, of course. Everyone in town who was into music knew my dad in one way or another. It's a fairly small set of people, you know, and when you count up the venues and the coffee shops, the record stores and music shops, the musicians and the roadies and the groupies, the total scene numbers in the hundreds, thereabouts. We see most everyone of them come through the store at one time or another. The bands want to put up their posters and promote their albums. The regional distributors want to play nice with the locals and like to throw parties where everyone goes. One hand washes another, as my mom always says, so you get to know people and they get to know you.

Roy came around pretty regular, and loved to talk shop with my dad, who of course loves to talk shop with the world. That is how he came snooping around the next day, started up casual chit chat with dad, and worked his way round to Mario Flambeau. When my dad found out he was there he commiserated with Roy about the state of the desolate man. Roy feigned some concern but really that wasn't the point. He had the idea that all Flambeau needed was some "positive musical therapy". This was his term. I had to drag it out of my dad later, according to whom it went something like this:

"I'll bet you if old Mario had real musicians around him, he'd perk right on up and get back to being himself", reasoned Roy.

"I don't think so", my dad shook his head. He didn't like to disagree, but he'd seen for himself. The guy was a complete basket case.

"It'd be worth a try, don't you think?", Roy persisted. "I wonder where we could get people like that, people who can play, and who'd like to help. Good people, you know what I mean."

My dad wasn't easily convinced, but Roy kept at him, nosing around to see if my dad would turn up some names. You see, Roy had a plan to make a big score. He figured if he could get Mario up on the stage, wow, what a hero he'd be. Even better if Mario did make some progress somehow, but just the sight of it, the show, the talk of the town, even national talk. He'd be the one again, he'd be the man. Roy Everson might have lost it but he found it again, exactly like Mario Flambeau. He was practically seeing the movie in his head, selling the television miniseries rights, authoring books, going on tour, appearing on all of the talk shows.

Naturally, my dad finally broke. He had to say 'yes' in the end, or he wouldn't be dad, and I'm sure you can guess who he named. That's right. Me. By this time my dad was convinced that my mom would approve, that I'd go along, that it was for the best after all.

My dad. What a nice guy. A wonderful guy. I mean it, I do, but sometimes, I don't know.

Chapter Twelve

Sometimes I can remember every detail of a moment, even if the moment is completely insignificant. I often recall these moments in reverse, from the instant the important thing happened, back through time to the surroundings and the settings and the people who were there and the colors and the noises. I trace it in my mind until I cannot trace it any further back, and that is the memory, wide screen, surround sound and all. The important thing I'm remembering now is the sound of Joey Anthony Francesco's voice calling out,

"Can anybody sign this?"

I was in the back of the store, over by the glass case which housed the trumpets, the flutes and the one tenor sax we had at the time. Marshall and I were inspecting the lock, which looked like someone had been trying to tamper with. Marshall was showing me some scratch marks he was certain hadn't been there in the morning. I was thinking back to everyone who'd been in the store, who I'd seen wander back that way, and all I could come up with for a suspect was a little old lady who'd been interested in Chopin. This wasn't much help.

At the sound of Joey Anthony's voice, both Marshall and I looked up and noticed right away that standing next to him, of course, was Carrie. As usual, the UPS guy was ignoring her presence and she was walking away with her back toward him, making a little "he's crazy!" gesture with her right hand index finger circling her ear. Marshall shrugged as if to say "we'd better go", which is how I interpreted it anyway. He probably meant to shrug "I'd better go", but for some reason I tagged along. It only took one of us to sign the darn UPS ledger.

My dad also felt the summons and was on his way to the front, so all three of us, and Roy Everson, who was like a mosquito buzzing around my dad's head, was also right there beside him. Roy was still talking about his plan.

"So your son can play the bass, is that right? I know he's been in some bands, but do you think he can scrape up a drummer? That's really all we would need."

"I'm a drummer", Joey Anthony announced, startling everyone into silence. It seemed so unexpected.

"Yeah", he went on, "I've been playing for years."

"Have I seen you somewhere?" Roy asked. He was eager, but suspicious. He thought he knew everyone in town who had ever even looked at a musical instrument. I saw the same look in my dad's face as well. I don't know why. The look on their faces, it makes me laugh now, it was like they were members of an all-boy's club and a girl was trying to climb into their treehouse.

"Probably not", Joey Anthony admitted. "I haven't played out very much. Mostly I do it for exercise. Keeps my brain sharp, you know what I mean? And it's a physical workout too."

"You must keep in pretty good shape with your job", was Marshall's suggestion, and it was true that Francesco looked fit, and never seemed weary or slow.

"Yeah, I do", Joey Anthony smiled. "It's why I like doing this. I'm a pretty active guy, if you know what I mean", and he winked as if telling a joke. It struck me then, and still strikes me now, that we'd been seeing this guy every day in our store for many years yet we still didn't know much about him. It was always the same old routine. An odd joke and a smile, that whole thing about Carrie, in like the wind and out like the wind. It wasn't surprising to me there were things we did not know about him.

"Cool", Roy Everson said. "If you're game then I'll set it up."

"Woah woah woah", Joey Anthony replied, "Game for what?"

"Oh right", Roy said, "I'm getting ahead of myself. It's just that I'm, what am I saying?", he chuckled.

"You've heard of the Flaming Pigs, am I right?"

"Of course", Joey Anthony told him, "who hasn't?"

"We're forming a band with Mario Flambeau", Roy continued, "the guitarist from ..."

"Yeah, I know", Joey Anthony interrupted. "THE Mario Flambeau? I thought he was dead."

"No, that's Johnny Bricks", Marshall suggested.

"And Kerry Smash", Roy Everson added.

"Billy Ray's still around", Joey Anthony said. "You could get him to play bass."

"We thought about that", Roy Everson told him. "I even got in touch with his agent, but they've got their plate full right now. Anyway, we've got Pablo right here to play bass, isn't that right?"

He was looking at me. It was the moment I first heard that idea. I looked at my dad. He looked down at the floor. I could tell he was already sorry. I looked back at Roy Everson who was saying,

"I can set it all up. I'll book time in a place that I know. You just bring yourself. We'll have stuff. Oh Pablo you can bring your own rig if you want but if you don't it's okay we'll have stuff like I said. I'm sorry, did I get your name?"

This last bit he said to Joey Anthony Francesco, who exchanged introductions with Roy. Roy got Joey Anthony's number and gave him his card, said that he'd be in touch. Then both of them, just like that, were out of the door and gone. I wanted to laugh. I signed to my dad.

"He can't be serious. You saw that guy. He's a wreck."

"I know", my dad said, "but maybe Roy's got a point. You see, he's thinking it would help the guy out if he played with some talented people, not like we saw at the church."

I shook my head. Musical therapy is one thing. Miracles are quite something else.

Chapter Thirteen

I don't know how he arranged it. Laura Napoli said it had nothing to do with her. She'd told him 'no' from the start, and told him 'no' over and over again. She had asked him to leave, politely. She had told him to leave, a less politely. She had gotten the church security guard to escort him out of the building, but Roy Everson was not taking 'no' for an answer. He figured that Mario was an adult, and he could decide for himself. It wasn't that easy, of course. Once he tracked down where Mario was living, in a shabby little halfway house not far from the church, he had started visiting there and had met with the same kind of reception as Laura's. The woman in charge of the house, whose name I forget and who I never met, apparently told him 'no' the same way and repeatedly. Somehow, though, Roy managed to get through to Mario alone.

My opinion is he basically kidnapped the guy in the name of doing a favor. The next time we saw Mario was at the studio Roy had arranged for rehearsal. Mario was cleaned up a bit. His beard had been trimmed and his hair had been washed. He was wearing new clothes, and didn't smell bad. For the first time I could study his face. His eyes were his prominent feature. They seemed much too big for his face, they were set wide apart and were a sort of very pale blue you don't often see on a human, as if they'd been worn down like faded old jeans. His nose seemed to have been broken in more than one place over time. His mouth

was as overly small as his eyes were overly large, and the thin lips that covered the big teeth that filled them were so cracked and broken it seemed they could chip off in pieces.

His hair was thick, long and white, like a wizard, while his beard still showed traces of yellow. He was not very tall, five seven perhaps, and slight, maybe a hundred and forty. He had very long fingers, the kind that are made to play music. His fingers and nails were in pretty good shape. You couldn't say that about his brain. You couldn't say much about that. He looked where he was pointed. He walked where he was led. He didn't say anything, ever. I never heard him make a sound with his mouth. The contradiction was striking to me, this wizened old fellow you knew was a shell.

The studio was in need of repair. It was obviously something Roy found on the cheap, a place I'd never even heard of on the far side of town, by the stadium. Joey Anthony had gotten there first and was waiting on the sidewalk in front of the low cement structure. Next door was a check cashing place, which should tell you enough about the location. It was shabby. Some derelicts were passed out on the step in front of the Noodle Hut on the other side of the unlabeled door that turned out to be the studio.

My dad had driven us over. I keep saying 'us' because of course it wasn't just me. Bobby had insisted on joining us. I suppose that it couldn't be helped. He was "one of the family now", as my mom always said about whichever stray was taking up space and eating the food in our house. He was also "with the band", according to him, the band which was him and myself. He was "practically buddies" with Mario Flambeau since they'd "played together" already that day at the church. Those were his words, of course, picked out of the torrent of words which had flowed from his trap ever since he found out the big plan.

"It's going to be great", he assured me. "You and me and Mario and what's his name? That drummer. Bobby and the Bedouins big time! Woo hoo! We'll do some of our songs. He'll like that. I already know which one we'll do first. We'll do 'Stoplight', right? What do you think?"

If he had really been asking me, I would have said hell why not? 'Stoplight' was good enough, and in many ways it was appropriate. It was a typical Bobby song. Driving and repetitive, it had a lot of C chords, a pounding beat that turned out to be right in line with Joey Anthony's tendencies, and lyrics that were nothing but Bobby:

When you wake up you'll be somewhere else
"where am i this time?"
see no footprints
see no tracks
wake up to the facts.

where have i been?
what have i done?
saw it coming,
didn't see it come.

when you wake up you'll be someone else

"who am i this time?"
got no memory
got no face
gone without a trace.

where have i been?
what have i done?
saw it coming,
didn't see it come.

when you wake up it'll be something else
"what is it this time?"
say you're sorry
say you'll pay
wake up someday.

where have i been?
what have i done?
saw it coming,
didn't see it come.

Stoplight!

We did play that song the first day. Some of us even had our hopes up for awhile. Even me, because I hit it off musically with Joey Anthony from the start. He was actually a damn fine drummer and the energy he gave off from his kit was beautiful to me. We had warmed up, getting used to our surroundings, with Roy controlling the sound board after placing Mario on a comfortable chair and balancing a guitar on his lap. Mario stayed put and occasionally fingered a string. Joey Anthony got himself situated and arranged things the way that he liked them. I had brought my own bass and just plugged it in, it was fine. Bobby was strutting around with a mike and a headset, making what he thought were professional noises.

"Can I have some more of myself in the headphones?" he shouted at Roy, who maybe ignored him. Roy wasn't expecting a singer, but my dad had explained about Bobby, and probably asked Roy to humor him, give him a chance. Bobby was Bobby on fire from the start, roaming all over the room, pecking into every little thing, jabbering up a storm. Joey Anthony was laughing at him.

"Guy's got some overcharged batteries", he shouted at me and I nodded and shrugged with a smile. Bobby wasn't paying attention.

"It's like a palace of fine arts", he was saying. "The majesty, your majesty, we are pleased to present. Over here on my right, the infamous Mario Flambeau, what a trip. Are you with us doctor? After all, it's only a dream, am I right? We will sail to the sun and then home again. What do you say, Monsignor?"

"All right everybody", Roy announced from his perch. "Time is money and money is time. Let's see what we got. How do you want to go about this. Pablo?"

He asked me, but it was Bobby who leaped to the front of the room shouting "Stoplight, Stoplight, Stoplight, Stoplight", until I nodded and started off into the bass line. Joey Anthony picked it up right away and I have to say that he had the thing pegged from the start. I hadn't realized before then that the song had actual potential. Maybe that was true of more of Bobby's songs, I was thinking, as Bobby himself joined in on the vocals.

An amazing thing happened just then. Whatever it was I will never know, but something in Mario kicked in and he played. He didn't play what we were playing, it's true. It had nothing to do with the song, but it fit. It was weird. Only his fingers were moving, like a manikin robot, he played and when Roy turned it up it got better. The louder it was, the better it sounded. There was wind in the noise, like a storm. There was thunder and lightning, tornadoes and rain. He was howling. Joey Anthony was banging and I was pouring it out and Bobby was all over the place, dancing and twitching and singing his song. On the soundboard, Roy was just beaming. Even my dad later said it was "vintage".

Chapter Fourteen

We ended up playing three of Bobby's songs that first session, and while the energy was tremendous, there were things that were missing, and things there were way too much of. I can tell you exactly what all those things were.

For one, Bobby refused to play the guitar, but just sang. Joey Anthony thought there was something missing from the first and told us that.

"Isn't there supposed to be another guitar part or keyboards, or something?" he wondered.

My dad volunteered the information that Bobby usually played the guitar on that song, so Joey Anthony told him to play one.

"There's guitars over there", he gestured to a corner of the room. "Come on, do your thing".

"We already have a guitar player", was Bobby's response. In fact, Mario had not stopped playing, even though the rest of us had. He was off in some different universe entirely. That was just the way it was with him. Once he was plugged in and turned on he stayed that way until someone eventually pulled the plug. Roy was understandably nervous about doing that. He worried that Mario might not start up again later, and so he kept him turned on, and let him play. Meanwhile, Joey Anthony was getting a little upset.

"The song needs a fucking rhythm guitar", he said, "that's your job", he said to Bobby, who was still pacing around the room, less jittery but still twitching like the scarecrow in *The Wizard of Oz*.

"I'm the lead singer", he proclaimed, and to prove it he sang as in a Broadway musical, "I'm the singer, and I sing!", holding that last note as he imitated jumping rope around the room.

"What the fuck", Joey Anthony spat, disgusted. I wanted to tell him that I could take care of it, and signed to my dad, who translated.

"Pablo's going to double up on the bass to capture the rhythm lines as well", he told everyone. Roy was just fine with that, and Joey Anthony shrugged and said we'd give it a try. So we did. We did 'Stoplight' again and this time I was playing a bit out of my mind, I had to admit. I had thought about playing that way for some time, but never had really attempted it. I was playing almost two lines at once. Fortunately the bass line itself could be simplified, reduced to some very short elements, which I did. As for the rhythm guitar part, I used my ring finger and thumbs on both hands to do both. It went okay if I say so myself.

Joey Anthony and I were in sync once again. Mario continued his rant or whatever you call it. Bobby went into his thing, being the singer and hogging the stage with his mugging and prancing and various antics. I was concentrating pretty hard so I wasn't paying too much attention. I didn't even notice that Roy was recording this time.

We finished the song and some of us were satisfied, at least to some extent. The thing there was too much of was of course the guitar. Mario's. It was a novelty at first, the way he was playing, but after about ten minutes he went into a kind of a loop, not repeating exactly but closely enough so you'd notice. He'd run out of ideas. He'd done all his bit. We had heard the whole thing and what sounded astounding at first became more annoying the more that we heard it.

Roy rushed us through another two songs. These were Bobby songs also, and like Mario's bit, were pretty much similar to the one we had already done. On the plus side, it was easy to do them. On the negative side, it was boring. I already knew these songs too well, having been forced to repeat them downstairs in my room every night for the previous three weeks. Joey Anthony tried to put variations into what he was playing, but the pattern on Bobby's typical vocals, the repetitive themes and lines, the growing monotony of Mario's genius, all led to exhaustion by the end of the set.

Exhaustion, at least, for me and for Roy and for Joey Anthony too. After we finished the third song for the third time - which meant after eight or nine takes in all - he set down his drum sticks, stood up, and walked out of the room, down the hall and into the street. I could tell he was tense. In between each take he'd become more and more agitated, frustrated with the constant Bobby patter, the incessant Mario feedback, the sameness of the songs and the closeness of the room. I found him outside with a cigarette.

"The fuck", he grunted as I joined him. "I mean, what the fuck?". He laughed.

"At first I just thought the guy was an Artist, with a capital A, you know what I mean? I figured, hey, if he's not saying hello it's because he's a star."

I just shook my head. Nobody had told him about Mario, I guess.

"But come on, the guy's totally fucked up, am I right?", he asked, and I nodded.

"And what's with the clown?", he added, referring to Bobby. Again my answer was a shrug.

"You know this guy?", he asked. I shrugged again, shook my head. I didn't have my whiteboard, and Joey Anthony didn't know signing.

"Fucking clown", he repeated. "Is he Irish? Do you know? I got a feeling he is. Would explain it. What the fuck? Plays the guitar and won't play. The songs need guitar. They need something for sure. I know that you tried, and I like what you did, but still, you know what I mean?"

I nodded again. I did know, and I agreed.

"Maybe that Roy guy'll find someone else". He sighed, took a drag and paused for a moment.

"Eh", he decided, "the whole thing's a joke. Tell you what, Pablo. I'm gone. Out of here. It was nice playing with you. Let's do it again, some other time. Just you and me. Okay?"

I nodded and we shook hands. He threw his butt on the street and stomped on it with relish. Then with a wave of his hand he headed off down the street. My dad came out then to call us back in, but I showed him Joey Anthony walking away and gestured with a finger slash across my throat that that was it. Show over. Time to go home. My dad was relieved. He'd had more than enough for one day.

We went back inside to explain it to Roy, then we gathered our stuff and went home. Roy finally unplugged Mario as we were just leaving and the noise he was making switched off, just like that. I glanced back and saw his fingers were no longer moving. Mario hadn't budged the whole time. I wondered what Roy was going to do next with the man, but as far as I was concerned, it was over. Over and done with for good.

Once again, I was wrong.

Chapter Fifteen

The situation at home got worse, and I didn't know what I could do about it. Bobby was always there, and now he was more intense and excited than ever. He kept expecting that Roy would be calling us with another recording appointment. In the meantime, he was writing new songs, none of which were any good. If anything, he became more and more incoherent, if that was even possible. He was convinced we were hitting the jackpot, going to be stars, drive around in big limousines and have endless supplies of women and money. I started going to work even earlier, and coming home later, shadowing my dad pretty much. I even tried sneaking in through the back yard, but Bobby could tell I was home instantly. I tried suggesting things he could do to help himself pass the time, places he could that were anywhere else but my home.

My mom was no help at all. She had talked with my dad and with me about Mario and Roy, and had gotten a sense of the picture. She'd taken her knowledge straight to the church, causing even more trouble

for everyone. Laura was righteously pissed. Roy had no business sneaking Mario out of his "wellness location" and marching him all around town. She went straight to the police to obtain a restraining order against him, but apparently that didn't get far. The judicial system found nothing wrong with a musician being escorted to play music. No harm was being done, they decided, and in fact no one could prove that Mario was even aware of the tumult around him. The halfway house people couldn't stand guard all day long. Laura had no legal authority. Mario was a free man and if Roy Everson, after all a respected and well-known producer, took the time to befriend and accompany Mario, wasn't that all for the good if not bad?

Laura had to admit that Mario looked and smelled better. She just felt he was being used and that it was wrong. She was right. He was and it was. At the time, though, we all thought, even my mom, that Laura was getting carried away. The practice was a one time event, and if Roy had big dreams he was only deluding himself. Anyone with half a brain could recognize someone with none. Mom also was useless with Bobby. She thought he was "making great progress", even though he was doing nothing and going nowhere. I really don't know what she was thinking. I tried to explain how he was annoying the heck out of me, driving me crazy in fact. All I wanted was to be left alone, and it wasn't possible for me in that house. I was seriously thinking of leaving.

One night I even did leave. Marshall took pity on me and let me stay at his place. His wife Mandy was nice and made up the couch in the living room. His twin eight year old daughters, Alice and Elise (seriously, it was only a matter of pronunciation to tell them apart) kept me up playing monopoly till midnight. I had told my dad where I was and he promised he wouldn't tell Bobby. Thank God for that. Apparently, Bobby was panicked when I didn't come home, and kept marching around the house, looking for me under the tables and couches, calling my name and begging me to come out of hiding. My mom got the picture that night. Bobby would not stop rushing around, and was giving her no "peace and quiet".

She told me later that he moved every piece of furniture in the house several times, even turning the chairs upside down, as if he would find me that way. Now you remember that I'm a large guy. I couldn't hide behind an industrial freezer! Bobby had these ideas, you see, and once they got stuck in his head they wouldn't come out. That night he decided that I had turned into a moth, so he needed to keep all the lights on. Moths are attracted to light as you know. It made logical sense if you were insane.

In the morning at work my dad told me that mom had enough, that she was going to finally do something about Bobby. As bad luck would have it, right after he said that, and I was feeling the sort of relief that you feel when you finally know that a nightmare is over, a new song started playing on KKAS. A "hot" new song, said Hot Rod Shimley. Guaranteed to mess you up and blow your mind.

It messed me up all right, and it did blow my mind. It was our song. It was 'Stoplight', and it didn't sound bad!

Chapter Sixteen

"Holy shit!" shouted Joey Anthony Francesco, as he barreled through the door with his hand truck loaded with a shipment of assorted packages. He joined our little congregation at the front counter, where my dad

and Marshall and I were standing, stupefied, listening to the waning moments of the track. Hot Rod Shimley followed up, in his best morning deejay voice and his typical greeting,

"Yo fellow magnetoids, what do you say? That was Mario Flambeau, yes, THE Mario Flambeau of The Flaming Pigs renown, with his newest song, hey, his FIRST new song in more than twenty years. It's called 'Stoplight' and I want to hear what you think. Give us a call at 772-KKAS! I think it's pretty something myself. I want YOU to fill in the blank!"

He moved on to another more typical song in his rotation, while the four of us exchanged stupid grins and couldn't think of anything to say for a moment. Then suddenly my dad unexpectedly burst out laughing.

"At least he didn't drag you guys into it!"

"Hey, what do you mean?", Joey Anthony asked. "I thought that sounded all right. Especially the bass and the drums", he added, winking at me.

"I'll go along with that", Marshall said, "but I'd say ONLY the bass and the drums. My god, who was that singing? Was that your Bobby?"

I shrugged and signed, "he's not MY Bobby", and my dad laughed again.

"That's our Bobby all right. Haven't I heard enough of it already? But what I'm laughing at is the whole "Mario Flambeau" thing. The man's a vegetable. I hate to say that about anyone, but in this case it's just true."

"Weird ass sounding guitar noise", Marshall nodded.

"I don't think it's even what he was playing when we recorded that", Joey Anthony added. "I think Roy just mixed and matched. Hard to tell for sure, though. Noise is noise and that's pretty much all I was hearing from that side of the room!"

We talked a little more about it, then got on with the rest of our day. Joey Anthony and I agreed once more to find some time to get together and jam. I did enjoy the way he played, and we did sound pretty good together. I was still happy that mom had finally come around on getting rid of Bobby, and the excitement of hearing our little tune on the radio kept me smiling all morning. I figured that would be that. We wouldn't be hearing any more about it, and with any luck, Bobby would never even hear about it. My dad and I had made a deal not to bring it up until he was out of the house for sure.

Those plans all came to nothing, though. Roy Everson dropped by with the bad news around about lunchtime. According to his source, none other than Hot Rod Shimley, who'd done him the favor of spinning the disk in the first place, we had a genuine phenomenal hit song on our hands. It had to be a fluke of nature, one of those inexplicable twists of fate. The machinery of popularity is mysterious and wild. If you throw a thousand weird things at a wall, one of them will stick, or I mean something like that. According to Roy, the calls came pouring into the station immediately. Everyone wanted to hear the

Mario Flambeau resurrection. In truth, if it hadn't been for that name, none of it would have ever happened. He may have been a vegetable, but he was a famous one, perhaps the most famous legume of his time, and in the same inexorable fashion that the rich get richer, the famous beget more fame.

We were all completely surprised. Roy told us it was just the beginning, that who knows? Anything could happen! He couldn't stick around, just dropped by to tell us the news. He had arrangements to make, appointments to keep. He'd keep us filled in, just stay tuned! With that he was out of the store, leaving myself and my dad in a state of bewilderment. I had the strangest mix of good and bad feelings. I knew that my mom would be thinking that my "ship" had finally "come in". I already knew what my dad thought, that this was a fluke and I think he was nervous. He was a practical man who did not like surprises. He liked to make plans and then have those plans turn out just as he'd planned them to. This had the feeling of being out of control. And speaking of out of control, what about Bobby O'Bannon?

It turned out there could be no hiding of the fact from him anyway. He had heard the song on the radio just as we did. We had turned it off in the store, in favor of some classic Russian folk dance interpretations, but he was at home, glued to KKAS until finally he couldn't take it anymore and got his ass out of the house and somehow made it down to the store. He came rushing in and found me in the store room sorting sheet music.

"Pablo, dude! Bro! Did you hear? Do you know? We're number one with a bullet, man. Number fucking one!"

I nodded and tried to appear as cool as I could.

"They keep saying it's Mario Flambeau", he went on. "But it's Bobby and the Bedouins, You and I know that! Roy knows it too. How many times did I tell him? That's my song, bro, it's mine! I wrote it, not Mario Flambeau! Only thing Mario Flambeau did was sit there and make some kind of noise with his fingers. Did you hear that guitar? Fucking weird. Fucking trippy. He sounded like shit! It's the rest of us, man, it's the band, it's the bedouins, that's what it's about. You and me and that drummer man, what was his name? WE made that song. It's OUR song. Number one, man, numero uno, and not no Mario Flambeau. We've got to be talking to Roy, get it straight. I called up the radio and told the guy there. He said he'd forward the message to Hot Rod himself! Mario Flambeau!", he spat, "what's up with that?"

There was no getting a word in. I thought about blowing my whistle, holding up the Stop sign, but settled on trying to ignore him and got back to work. He didn't notice, just kept talking and followed me around the store as I did this and that, trying to keep busy, trying to shake him. Eventually he decided to go down to the radio station in person, talk to Hot Rod in person, let him know his mistake. It wasn't no Mario Flambeau. It was Bobby and the Bedouins. He just had to set them straight.

Chapter Seventeen

My dad wasn't the only one who liked to make plans. Roy Everson also had a plan, and he was going to see it through no matter what. He had already been called before a community panel to explain his "intentions" towards Mario Flambeau. Laura Napoli had not given up her defense of her client, and kept

pressing authorities to look into the matter. From what I was told, Roy was slick on his feet and made a good case. He was even commended by the panel for his efforts to bathe and transport the legend around town. They were inspired by the story of his successful musical comeback and came close to awarding Roy legal custody of the man. This was more than he wanted, however, and managed to slip out from under that particular obligation. Mario was to remain in the halfway house, but Roy was granted unlimited visitation and extraction rights.

Roy also had another custody issue, this one involving Bobby O'Bannon. Bobby had gone down to the radio station, just like he said he would, and attempted to get a word into Hot Rod, like he said he would, but he failed at that, which was not too surprising. According to the story in the newspaper, the reason given for his arrest was "disturbance of the peace" and "disorderly conduct". The details we learned from Roy and from Bobby were more graphic, involving a fire extinguisher, a hammer, several smashed windows, graffiti spray-painted at random, a lot of obscenities yelled, and some minor injuries sustained by receptionists and security guards. Bobby also obtained numerous cuts and abrasions. The only reason that Roy bailed him out was his plan, his grand plan, which he communicated to us at our house when he brought Bobby "home" late that night.

We'd been asleep after spending a pleasant, quiet evening without him. None of us was happy to be roused out of our beds by the loud knocking at the front door. We were even less happy to see Roy and Bobby. Roy looked weary and cranky. Bobby was his usual self, bouncing around with a grin on his face, bobbing and weaving and chattering non-stop like a blue jay at dawn.

"I told them", he said, "They'd best get it right. Now they know. Even Roy told them too".

Roy shook himself and sat down on the living room couch, accepting a glass of cold water from my mom. He explained about jail and the mess Bobby caused. None of us were especially surprised. My mom looked concerned - her stray was in trouble - but my dad only wanted to know why he'd bothered, why he'd gotten him out, and why, of all things, he had brought him back here.

"We don't want any trouble", he told Roy.

"I understand", Roy replied. "He told me he lived here."

"He did", said my dad, "until now. We've got a sort of parole system here. Once you violate, you evacuate. Right, Maria?"

"He's right", my mom said to Roy. "Bobby knows that's the rules."

I had my hopes up there for a second. My mom was actually going to stick to our agreement, even though you could tell she didn't want to. Always the helpless in trouble got her sympathies going. If she hadn't been mad about the previous night, there was no way she would have gone even that far. As it was, she didn't stick long.

"The thing is", Roy said, "I can't leave him alone. Not when we have the big show coming up."

"What big show?" asked my dad, looking over at me. I shook my head. I had no idea.

"The Waterfront Festival", Roy replied. "It's coming up in only two weeks. I got them to put in Mario, I mean Bobby and the Bedouins", he added, after a wary glance in Bobby's direction.

"Yes!", Bobby pumped his fists and exclaimed. "Waterfront. Waterfront. Here we come", he chanted. "Bobby and the Bedouins, got them on the run."

"Of course", Roy hastened to add, "They insisted on putting Mario Flambeau on the flyers and the ads. I already explained it to Bobby. It's just marketing. After that we'll see, I mean, we'll go forward from there."

"You said they'd announce us the right way", Bobby interjected and Roy nodded wearily and said

"Yes, that's right". We could tell what was "right" was that he'd said that, not that that was what was going to happen. I already didn't like the sound of it. Then my mom made it worse.

"Well, if it's only two weeks", she spoke up, before my dad could say anything. "I think we can manage it."

"Maria!", my dad scowled, but she scowled right back and as usual, she won without saying another word. Nobody asked me, of course. I wondered who she thought was going to be doing the "managing". Bobby was already talking up another storm.

"Roy says we get to do five or six songs, depending, right Roy? So we already have three that we did in the studio. And they're going to release another, right Roy? 'Anything You Say', is that right? right, Roy?"

Roy was getting up to leave, and nodded but didn't promise anything out loud.

"So the only thing is", Bobby continued. "to decide on the other three songs. Or the two. In any case, the other new songs. And then get together with Mario and that drummer. What was his name?"

"Joey Anthony", my father put in, and turning to Roy he asked if he had checked with him. Roy said not yet but he would.

"Well, two weeks then", my dad said, and turning to Bobby he warned him. "Two weeks and you're out. You understand? And no more getting arrested!"

Bobby just smiled and danced away to his bedroom as we all stumbled to ours.

Chapter Eighteen

I went to bed with only the vague idea that things had changed and I didn't know how. I was my usual short-sighted self, only concerned with my day to day operations. I was annoyed of course that Bobby was back in the house. It meant no more refuge for me in my home, at least for the foreseeable future. I had thought I was free and clear of that problem, and here it was, right back again in no time at all. The news of the "hit" didn't really hit me at all. If I'd thought of it much, I would've thought that it would be a small ride, old friends would stop by, maybe one or two people would interview us for the local trade rags, and that would be it. In a week or a month it would become an old joke, which we'd hear about once in awhile if that much. I pretty much figured it wouldn't impact me much, just being the bass player and all. It would be all about Mario, until people realized the truth of the matter. Then it would be a sad story and end. I was riding a hot streak of being very wrong, and that night I was as wrong as I could possibly be.

It was Bobby, of course. My prophecy might have come true if he hadn't gone out and done what he did. Instead, the improbable tale became a front page affair, with headlines blaring SINGER TRASHES RADIO STATION, and KKAS GETS ASS KICKED. The words 'Bobby and the Bedouins' were everywhere the next day. We woke up to the news on the radio. We grabbed the morning paper in shock. My dad was perplexed. My mom was incensed. I was confused and Bobby was completely ecstatic. I don't know how, no wait, I do know. It was Roy Everson who gave them our names. The previous night, when he'd discarded Bobby, he'd neglected to tell us about the forthcoming press. He probably knew we wouldn't approve, didn't want our names linked to a criminal matter. I tried to look at it philosophically, and signed to my dad the old saying that there is no such thing as bad publicity, and he sighed and generally agreed, but he liked everything just exactly the way it had been, and didn't really relish the challenge.

It was a challenge that day. The phone at the store rang off the proverbial hook. Every media outlet in town and from miles around was hoping for any exclusive details they could get. Reporters were lined up outside the front door when we got there to open the place. It was a most handy time to be mute. I put away my whiteboard and hid in the storeroom, leaving my dad to deal with the mess. My mom called to warn me that Bobby was heading our way, and I was sneaking out the back when I ran smack in to Joey Anthony Francesco.

"Running away?" he smiled as we physically collided. I nodded and smiled back.

"Roy called me this morning", he said. "Wants to get us all back in the studio. What do you think?"

I tried my best - without whiteboard and without his capacity to understand signing - that I thought it was a terrible idea but probably inevitable, at least for the short term. I don't know how I managed to make myself understood, but I must have done a good job, because he replied,

"I almost hate to do it myself, but you know what they say, opportunity knocks!"

That was it, the unavoidable fact. Sometimes, when your ship does come in, it comes in so fast and so directly that you cannot get out from under it. Sometimes that ship is a big one, and it runs over

everything in sight. It may be "your" ship, but it doesn't care about you. The ship is its own ship, and it's damned if it doesn't "come in".

"Might as well make the best of it", Joey Anthony said. "I mean, there's the money, for one thing. Besides", he continued, as if he needed convincing himself, "you only live once".

We understood each other, I think. It was the same way with music, when we were playing. As long as we focused on what we were doing, on what we were doing together, and ignored the rest of it, the crazy shit, the other guys, then maybe we could make something of it. I tried to express that to him, but I'm pretty sure I didn't get through. It was a complicated idea. Even writing it down would be hard. Besides, it wasn't that easy to ignore Mario and Bobby, with the one making a racket nonstop, and the other one constantly in motion and hectoring you like a yellow jacket at a barbecue picnic.

The yellow jacket found us, back there in the alley, and close behind him was Roy Everson. The only one missing was Mario Flambeau, but not to worry, said Roy, I've got it under control. He'd set up a schedule for us to rehearse. It was to be nightly from then until the Waterfront Festival. At least I won't be trapped all alone in my basement with that guy, I thought. I was looking on the bright side again. When will I ever stop doing that?

Chapter Nineteen

I'd like to report that Roy had it all figured out, that he knew how to make Mario play, that he knew how to make Mario stop, that he knew how to keep Bobby under control, that he knew which songs we should do, that he knew how to run a tight session, that he had any idea what he'd stumbled across, but I can't, because he didn't. Roy had handled musicians before. He'd been in the business forever. He had had his successes and plenty of failures, but his best days were clearly behind him. As long as it was all just a pipedream, he was fine. His idea of getting Mario out of retirement and onto the radio was a gimmicky attempt that he really didn't believe would go anywhere. He was grasping at straws, but rather than a straw he'd grabbed a hold of something more like a hurricane.

He brought in some help, which was all to his credit, professional studio guys, who did a good job of preparing equipment and managing things behind the glass. In the room, though, it was bedlam. Mario was just what he was, and it turned out it wasn't so easy. The first time, Roy merely plugged him in and off he went. Laura must have known other tricks, or had more patience, or wasn't paying through the nose by the hour, or wasn't really concerned if Mario played or did not ... in fact, all of those things turned out to be true. Laura's way with Mario was decidedly simple; whatever happened, happened. Roy's way with Mario was yelling and screaming and trying and trying. If plugging him in didn't work, which it didn't from the very next session, then he tried playing Mario's old stuff. There was one time that had an effect, but the effect wasn't what he had wanted. Instead, Mario abruptly stood up, letting the guitar fall and clatter to the floor. Roy tried various other kinds of enticements, from different musical varieties, to fruit and cheese plates, to alcoholic inducements which thank God Mario didn't notice, to making squeaky noises with rubber duckies, to showing Mario himself on TV through a live feed in to the studio. Mario was implacable. He was a ghost who wouldn't haunt, a zombie who didn't crave flesh.

Over time it occurred to Roy that it didn't much matter. We would be going on at night at the Festival. No one would see whether Mario was playing or not, and in the meantime, he could just take the tracks that he had, edit them, cycle them up, throw on some effects and move them around. It would all sound the same in the end as if Mario had really been playing. That was the easy part. The rest was another matter. Bobby never let up for an instant. The band had to be called 'Bobby and the Bedouins' and he announced it over and over again. In the real world, out in the actual world, that is what everyone called it. After the newspaper headlines and the local TV news interviews, and the trade rags came out and the people on the street talked about it, the hit and the name became completely conflated. No one mentioned Mario Flambeau without mentioning Bobby O'Bannon, and nobody mentioned Bobby O'Bannon without mentioning Bobby and the Bedouins.

That wasn't enough for Bobby. He wanted in writing, and he wanted it in triplicate, and he wanted his name all over the contracts, and he wanted to set up bank accounts and trust funds and charities and community centers and he wanted the name plastered everywhere. He wanted signage, huge letters, suspended from bridges. He wanted customized stationery, business cards, notepads. He was mad with the idea of himself and his bedouins. In the sessions, he couldn't decide on the songs. We had the three in the can, and needed three more. It was easy enough, according to me. I suggested three more of the dozen or so that we had, and he agreed readily at first, then kept changing his mind. We finally settled on five, but the sixth one kept changing, so we had to rehearse more than ten by the end.

I guess that was not so unusual, but Roy let him, and that was driving us crazy. Roy was supposed to be in charge, but his inability to control Mario was matched only by his talent of being overwhelmed by Bobby. This led to an attempted Bobby takeover. Bobby started directing the sessions, telling the guys in the booth what to do, when to start, when to stop. At first they were happy to oblige, needing someone in charge, but it became pretty clear pretty quickly that Bobby had no idea what he was doing. I'm certain they basically ignored him after that. It was easy for them. They were in another room. Those of us who were with him had a much harder time. Each day it got worse and worse. Bobby knew that I knew the songs, we had played them so often together, and early on he trusted me and Joey Anthony because, if for no other reason, it sounded okay. Soon he wasn't so easily satisfied.

He decided to instruct me on the proper playing of the bass guitar. I could shrug this off. I was used to act like I was going along whether I was really going along or not. Then he decided to instruct Joey Anthony on how exactly he should be playing the drums. This was too much. Joey Anthony was already suspicious the first time he heard about Bobby's last name. He had asked me more than once if I thought that Bobby was Irish. Joey was pretty sure. It would explain a lot, he told me, leaving me to ponder what he could possibly mean. Bobby was as "Irish" as an Irish Wolfhound, as far as I could tell. I remember the first time that Bobby stopped everything, waving his hands in the air until he got complete silence, and then walked over to the front of Joey Anthony's drum kit and said,

"There's not enough snare".

It was a tense few moments, for those of us, unlike Mario Flambeau, who were conscious. Joey Anthony narrowed his eyes and screwed up his mouth. I was sure he was going to say something crude.

"you can go fuck your snare", he said in a whisper. It seemed that Bobby didn't hear, or didn't care to.

"I said", he repeated, more slowly and louder, as if Joey Anthony were retarded", "there ... is ... not ... enough ... snare!"

"You can go fuck your mother's snare too", Joey Anthony said.

Bobby turned around to find Roy, who had taken the opportunity to slip out of the room. This was only rehearsal date five. There were still five rehearsal dates left.

Chapter Twenty

As bad as things were inside the studio at night, they were just as weird if not more during the day at the store. Bobby had taken to hanging around daily. At first he thought he'd be besieged by legions of fans, and was merely making appearances in case his autograph was required. It wasn't. He was something of a spectacle for the curious for the first couple of days, people asking my dad "who is that?", or people saying "Isn't that him? The nutjob who went on a rampage?". My dad kept shooing him out of the store. He even tried to get me to do the 'security guard' thing about Bobby, but I reminded him about how I was supposed to "avoid confrontations" (his term). Finally my dad put his foot down and told Bobby he was not allowed in.

Bobby took it with his usual good cheer, and instead set up shop on the sidewalk next door. He brought down the folding card table and chair from his room, and put up a sign announcing his name, and declaring he was available for interviews. Every day he was asked, politely, to leave, so he made his way down the strip mall, from the Pet Food Stop on Monday, to Joy's Nail Salon Tuesday, Mary's Donut Hole Wednesday and so on. By the end of the week he'd been expelled by Murray's Cigars and Liquors so as a final resort he established himself at the curb by Venezia Boulevard. There he sat, all day long, bothered only by occasional children who skateboarded by and made fun of him with a selective vocabulary. Bobby was as impervious in his own way as Mario Flambeau. He was only more active and vocal, yet as little of reality seemed to break through.

I was getting my own share of unwelcome attention as well. You know me, and you know I don't even like being noticed, let alone noticed by people I don't even know. There weren't that many, I have to admit, but still, even the few that there were were more than enough as far as I was concerned. People I'd known once kept popping by to give me a friendly punch on the shoulder, just wanting to shake the hands of "the next big thing", they would joke. Former bandmates appeared, even some who were also going to be playing the Waterfront Festival. That was all well and good. I do like to keep in touch with old friends. I tried to stay positive, to keep in mind Joey Anthony's attitude. It was a bit of a chore but I think I was enjoying myself just a little.

The sessions, though, became more contentious. He did not seem to realize the effect he was having on Joey Anthony Francesco. I was the only outlet the poor drummer had. He took to confiding in me, inviting me out for a smoke every hour or so. There on the sidewalk I got to know a lot more about him. For instance, I found out that between the ages of six and eleven, he dreamed of becoming a ninja. This is

why, he told me, he has always had a weakness for the Japanese. I suppose he meant to congratulate me on my father's-side heritage. It wasn't anything I had anything to do with. I also discovered he had made the switch from menthols to lights only a few years earlier. He made a point of letting me know that the only two women he had ever loved were African-American. The first one turned out to be a lesbian. The second one he married, but he still thought about the first one, Ruby, from time to time. His own daughter reminded him of her more than of his wife, which he always thought was weird. I didn't ask him if his daughter was a lesbian. These were details I could live happily without.

He had been "in the service". Perhaps this is where he achieved his preference for being in uniform. I noted that he practiced in his UPS outfit, and he told me that he wore it pretty much all the time, even though he was officially not supposed to. He planned to wear it at the show, to "show the colors", as he put it. I had the feeling he would defend the company as if it were a country if need be. He had many harsh things to say about competitors such as Federal Express and DHL. There were certain words used to describe "those people", he hinted. I didn't detect any malice in Joey Anthony. He was a proud man, an idiosyncratic man, who had his definite likes and dislikes, and spent a great deal of effort preserving those lists. He also had lists of resentments from previous injuries both real and perceived. He reserved a special place in his own fantasy hell for dogs he had encountered (he was more of a "cat person", or so he said), double-parkers (who parked at their own risk on HIS route), and a list of receptionists who were not, as he put it, very receptive to his charms. Failed flirtations affected him personally, although no actual consequences were ever intended. It was part of the ritual, the performance, the routine. A UPS driver has standards to maintain.

I never got to the bottom of his Irish thing, but it was there on the surface every night. Bobby O'Bannon had joined Carrie Burns on his ledger of "Irish-ish" enemies. He "had no use" for such people. They were "drivel", "minutiae", and "pond scum". They had descended, he claimed, from the possum. He said all these things as a matter of fact, quite calmly as he puffed on his lights. Bad things would happen to those who deserved them. This was something he knew from experience, and there was no evading their fate. What others called "karma" he called "re-tribute". I think he meant "retribution", but that was the word that he used. Re-tribute. The man loved his family and talked of them often. He liked to keep his conversation balanced between love and hate. For every insult he poured on his foes, he added a blessing to those on his good side. I often felt like I should keep score, just to see how close it came out to being even.

After a five minute session of blithe random remarks, we would go back inside and continue rehearsal. Bobby would be pacing impatiently and start shouting at us as soon as we came in.

"We've only got an hour and ten minutes", he'd cry, or "We're going to do 'Bicycle Graveyard' instead!"

Joey Anthony and I would go back to our places, refreshed and calmed down, but it didn't last long. Bobby had gotten on Joey Anthony's last nerve, and it wouldn't be half of a song until his face would turn red, and he'd give me those looks, the ones that he had when he mentioned re-tribute. Most of the time he kept it all in, used the anger he felt to pound out on the kit. I could count to five inappropriate comments from Bobby for every one from the drummer, but when he lashed out, he lashed out in rage.

"Get out of my face, motherfucker", he'd bark, or "next time, one more time, I'm warning you, man".

Thankfully, Bobby would always back down. From my point of view, he was only getting carried away. He didn't mean anything by it. He certainly didn't mean the things he was saying, because Bobby knew nothing of drumming and would gladly admit it to anyone. He was caught up in the excitement. He was a man who couldn't contain. He virtually exploded with his relentless enthusiasms. I had tried to explain this to Joey Anthony more than once. He would nod vigorously each time, as if he agreed, but I don't think he ever quite got what I meant. Bobby has high on his list, and Joey Anthony was keeping a tally of his own.

Chapter Twenty One

I was nearing the end of my rope, too, and I tend to have a pretty long rope to reach. I was living under a siege of non-stop Bobby O'Bannon, from morning til night, day in and day out, Saturdays and Sundays included. He was either in my room, outside my store, in the car, or at the studio whenever I was awake. I continued to work extra long days just to get away from him, and add the rehearsals on top of that, I was exhausted, cranky, and losing it. I kept telling myself it was only X more days, and was even counting down the hours when finally "the big day" arrived. Roy had us going on stage at three o'clock sharp, playing until three thirty. My plan was to get to the Festival early, see some old friend, relax and hang out and generally have a good time as much as I could, then get up there, get it all over with, and remind my mom of her promises.

I had been begging, pleasing, cajoling, asking, threatening, you name it. It was either him or me. I just couldn't take any more, and neither could Joey Anthony Francesco. The last two rehearsals were especially tense. Joey Anthony would bristle whenever Bobby so much as looked at him. A mere glance would suffice to make him stop playing, throw down his sticks in disgust and stomp off on a cigarette break. Roy had finally worked up the nerve to have a little talk with Bobby, to get him to agree to leave us alone, but Bobby's word was like water. It easily flowed and was gone. The man just couldn't help himself. He had become so micro-controlling that the decay of the cymbal was never the proper duration. My dual bass lines were jarring to his sensitive ear, yet still he refused to pick up the guitar and play his actual part. He had become a conductor, a ringleader, a tyrant, a know-nothing expert who thought he knew all.

We barely made it through that last night. Joey Anthony had come close to threatening to kill him. I'm serious. He said as much to me outside on the sidewalk.

"If that Irish bastard looks at me one more time", he menaced. "I'm going to wring his scrawny neck with my own bare hands", and with the state of his hands I believed that he could. The man was definitely strong, and irate. I was tired of pleading with everyone, of wishing that things would be different. None of this was any of my business, I kept telling myself. I know that it was. I was part of it too. I was just wishing I wasn't.

On the morning of the Festival Bobby announced that he wanted us to wait until later to go. He didn't want to have his "system polluted" by any other band's sounds. He was in an altered condition, more hyper than I'd ever seen him. I wanted to go. My dad wanted to go, but Bobby insisted we "keep

ourselves pure", and not show up until it was time. I don't know why we always let him get his own way. It meant we were stuck with his tension all morning and well into the afternoon too. He herded us into the living room, where he forbade any kind of music at all. My dad was especially annoyed. An hour without music was hell for my dad. He literally lives for the stuff.

I wouldn't have minded some genuine peace, but Bobby didn't have that in mind. He was pacing the floors and declaring his performance intentions. He was going "to rule", "to rock", to "crack the world open". Our show was going to not only change the world, but alter reality itself, introducing new curves in the space time continuum. The flux of the universe was about to be shifted. No remnants would be left behind. He would be dragging the planet into the eleventh dimension, by the force of his will, by the strength of his character and the sound of his voice. He demonstrated for us just how it would go, with a red cape he'd found in some thrift shop sometime. He swept it around like an alien matador. That was his term. Bobby and the Bedouins were the lever of construction when it came to the new incarnation of soul.

We tried hard not to laugh, my father and I. We sat on the couch and just watch this guy blaze. It was like our very own lunatic sitcom. Mom was feeding us veggies and fruit, keeping herself busy out in the kitchen. Whenever she entered the room she made faces which had us in stitches. She made signs to me affirming her intention to boot the guy out of the house that same night. I was relieved about that. I had only one worry; Joey Anthony. At one point I got out my whiteboard. I believe it was the very first time I deliberately communicated that way with him. Until that moment it had always been gestures and hand movements. He had never paid much attention to those anyway, but this was important. I had one thing to tell him. Only one thing and I needed him to know that I meant it. I wrote this down on the board and presented it to him until he acknowledged it directly:

LEAVE JOEY ANTHONY ALONE

He promised he would. I didn't believe him, but I felt that at least I had done what I could. I was washing my hands, so to speak, of the problem.

We had to listen to his bombast all the way to the Festival too. Imagine a family held hostage by a talking machine and that's us. We listened to him while we drove in the car. We listened to him while we waited to park. We listened to him while we walked to the stage. We finally arrived at two forty five. The rest of the group was already there.

Chapter Twenty Two

Mario Flambeau looked pretty sharp, in a brand new clean outfit, a bath and a shave. He stood looking wherever Roy pointed him, which backstage was directly at me. I think it was the first time he had ever been aimed in my direction, and I was surprised by the warmth that seemed to glow in his eyes. I tried to glow back. I was thinking my most positive thoughts. Joey Anthony was ready, intense. I could see his hands itching to bang on the drums. Bobby was still prancing and jerking around, directing his chatter at Roy for a change. It was almost our time.

"It's the end of the world, man", Bobby said, "get ready for the lightning and thunder! Next thing you know it will be a new world."

Really, I'd been listening to this crap for hours already. All I wanted was for it to stop.

The band on before us was finished. It would be a rapid change - we were to use the same mikes and equipment. There was no need to tear down or set anything up. Roy had my bass. He had Mario's guitar. He had the sound system ready to pipe in canned Mario in case it was needed. We all had our fingers crossed that it wouldn't be. The roadies were quick to get it all ready, and Hot Rod Shimley was there to emcee. He made a big deal out of Mario Flambeau, saying his name over and over again. Once or twice he made mention of Bobby and the Bees. I'm sure he got it wrong on purpose. He was probably sick and tired of having to give any attention to a guy who had come and waged war on his station.

The reference to 'Bobby and the Bees' made Bobby so mad. He abruptly dropped his talk about changing the world and adopted a new tone of "making them pay", and "showing them up". He got so twitchy and fidgety I thought he was going to explode. He was running in place, pumping fists in the air, when Hot Rod finally got around to presenting, without further ado, Mario Flambeau and the Bedouins.

We came walking out to modest applause. Roy led Mario to the far side of the stage, strapped the guitar around his neck, and plugged it in. Joey Anthony got himself seated and started right off with the kick drum, the intro to Stoplight. I followed on the second count and we were right there, him and me. For the next twenty seconds we played that same riff, waiting for Bobby to come out and join us. When he did, it was only because Roy was physically pushing him. All of a sudden, the bravado was gone. I could tell by the look on his face, he was petrified.

He was literally petrified, in fact. He was comatose, frozen, unmoving. He stood in the front of the set where Roy pushed him, and didn't do anything else. Joey Anthony and I were still playing. Mario was not, and Bobby wasn't singing. The crowd was beginning to get restless.

"Sing, motherfucker!", Joey Anthony hissed, "sing or I'll come down God help me".

Bobby paid no attention. I'm pretty sure he didn't even hear him. My worst fear was about to come true. After another twenty seconds and several more warnings, Joey Anthony stopped playing, leapt off his stool, and ran to the front of the stage. He spun Bobby around and, grabbing him by the shirt, started shaking him and yelling in his face.

"Sing, motherfucker! I will fucking kill you, you turd, piece of shit! God damn it, sing! I'll beat your fucking brains out, I will!"

I was pretty certain he meant it. I was the only one playing now. The audience was hushed. It was weird. I knew that I had to do something, but what? I was supposed to avoid confrontations. That was the thought that popped into my mind, and the next thing I knew I'd put my whistle in my mouth and I blew it as hard as I could.

Three things happened.

One, Joey Anthony stopped, and looked over at me. I was frantically shaking my head. He let go of Bobby's shirt.

Two, Bobby came alive all at once, and ran as fast as he could down the steps off the stage, and took off into the audience.

Three, Mario Flambeau started playing guitar, and not only playing guitar, but in a whole different way, like he never had done in all of the time we had known him. He was playing along with my bass line. It sounded fantastic. The man was really an artist. Joey Anthony hurried back to his kit and the three of us jammed as if we'd been playing together forever. It was really amazing.

We quickly gave up on the song we had started, and just moved along into uncharted waters. I would lead for a section, then Joey Anthony changed it. Mario would start a new riff and the two of us picked up on that. We had a massive rhythm going at one point and the crowd were all clapping and shouting along. I lost track of time. We all did. Roy and the other promoters just let us go on for awhile, but finally made us aware that we had to shut down. We brought it down easy, Joey Anthony and I, as if we had planned it that way. Once we stopped playing, the only sound left was Mario's guitar.

I unstrapped my guitar, handed it to someone, and walked over to disconnect Mario. Somebody else was already there. It was Laura. She unplugged him, and led him gently away.

Well, we haven't hooked up with Mario since, but Joey Anthony and I are planning a reunion of sorts, one without Bobby O'Bannon, whom no one has seen since that day. We might visit St. Catherine's Church, and ask Laura to let us sit in. It might be fun, it might not, but I'm certain it's bound to be different.