

Half My Life

Let's cut the introductions. You are the same faceless, nameless masses I've been talking to like this—well, not quite like I'm about to—half my life. And I would rather be anonymous, though I doubt it's possible. Somehow it will get out and I'll lie to cover my ass like always, but no one will believe me. About time people saw what a fraud I am. Only a delusional fucking knob could believe a person my age in my industry could be as innocent as I seem.

If you've turned on a radio in the last ten years, you'd probably know my name if you heard it. You've probably got some friend who had a huge crush on me and some other friend who thinks I'm the biggest cock sucker. Maybe I'm being pretentious. I feel a bit pretentious, to be honest, writing this assuming that anyone cares. So why? To break your preconceived notions and humanize myself—but I know if my name was all over this it would be blown off as some cry-wolf P.R. stunt. I don't want to subject myself to a backlash of questions and flack. I just want you to *know*.

I'm not as I seem. But know this too: I'm not the complete opposite. I don't have a ton of horror stories about sex and drugs and scuffles. Just a normal amount. This is one thing I learned very young, fuckin' when my former classmates were learning cursive: rich or poor, people are people. I've known people at both extremes. They're no different except some smell worse, and not always the poor—millionaires smell like whatever CK says will get them maximum ass.

That's the kind of thing I can't say publicly: parts of this business I hate. I knew a guy—big independent film director, if you can believe it—used to drop more on cocaine per month than your average Yank makes in a year. I think. What's it, like thirty grand? How should I know?

I'm straying from anything you can relate to. I digress.

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Once upon a time, I was a little boy, with a mom. Pretty familiar territory? Did you ever sing and dance around when a familiar song came on the radio? That's exactly how this started. She caught me in the act one day when I was supposed to be cleaning my room. I thought I'd be in trouble so I shut up quick, but she just looked at me with a weird glint in her eye, backed out of my room and shut the door. I was six years old. From then on I didn't get to go to the babysitter's house after school anymore. I went to voice lessons, dance lessons, guitar and piano lessons. I had great fun, despite being one of the only boys.

Maybe you already can't relate. Maybe you already think this is awful. But look at it this way: did you play hockey as a kid? take swimming lessons? finger-paint? My mother had just gotten me involved in a hobby. So I hadn't chosen it—how many little kids get a choice? You played hockey because your dad played, you wore his old skates. You were in Brownies because so was your mom's friend's daughter and you'd have someone to play with there. Your parents don't explicitly ask you when you're six what you want to do. They just want you to grow and learn and make friends and be out of their hair sometimes, even if that means paying membership dues. So, I give my mother the benefit of the doubt at this point. She might not have been evil yet. But if not from the very beginning, I don't know when it consumed her. Maybe she didn't either. All I know is the next five years are a blur of missing school, riding around in the SUV to audition after audition. Half the time—more than half the time—I didn't even know what I was trying out for, a film or a play or a commercial or what, a movie about dragons or an ad for some tooth-rotting sugary cereal? Here's your lyrics sheet, the tune goes like this: da-na-na, da-da-da da da. . . . Be sure and nail that trill in the sixth bar. Wow 'em, sweetie. Mwah. No call back. My mother never lost hope. It was madness.

It was after one day I broke down. I was eleven years old. It looked like we'd be in line all day. It was cold and dark and kids were everywhere, shuffling boots in the snow, snotty noses smudging

makeup. It was seven a.m. The studio didn't open till eight. School would start in an hour and a half. I should have been in bed. I'd been dreaming sweetly when my mother roused me. Suddenly she was yelling. I'd wet my bed again. I was too fucking old for this shit. She dragged me out of bed by my elbows, ripped the sheets from the bed, slammed them in a ball on the floor. No time now to clean them. They'd just have to wait till we got back, hope they didn't stain. The car ride passed in silence. Something felt different about this time I'd wet the bed. Greasier.

My voice cracked during the audition. My mother sighed and pressed her thumbs into her eyes. She glared at me. I apologized to the judges for wasting their time and hurried away, beginning to cry. They called later that afternoon. My mother accepted on my behalf. There was a meeting, talk I didn't understand, paperwork. Europe? Canada? International market? I'd joined a pop group. I never went back to school.

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I feel compelled to explain my bed-wetting. Before this incident, I hadn't done it in months. Usually I only did it when I was nervous about school, once or twice a month max. In this way too, my most recent accident was different. I had been thinking about Daphne Arbourne.

I suppose by now you might be wondering about my father. There isn't much to say. He was never a part of my life. He'd been abusive to my mother and she'd fled one night with nothing but us two kids and her wallet. I was nearly two, my sister was just a baby. We lived in a transition house for several weeks until my mother landed a receptionist job in Shreveport, eighty miles away. We bussed there and boarded temporarily with an acquaintance of my mother's before settling in the two-bedroom house I grew up in. Of course, I didn't know until Gramp told me years later. Back then all my mother said was, "Daddy needs to be alone for awhile." Soon I couldn't really remember him, so it didn't break me up much. How cliché is my life, right? But that's what I'm trying to prove. I had a normal life. I *have* a normal life. You knew plenty of kids in situations like this.

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I soon met the other group members. The plan: we'd quickly record a single, do a photo shoot, and this stuff would be shopped around by the higher-ups while we recorded the album. There were studios all over the state, but we wouldn't be setting foot in any of them. Not even on the continent. Instead, we'd be flying to Sweden to work with an established, rock-solid production team. We'd be there for two months, a week off in between. Sweden! I'd never even been to the east coast of America. I'd never flown. I was excited and a little nervous.

The others were all significantly older than me, the youngest by four years. Well, a four-year age difference isn't significant in your thirties, but it is when that's a third of your life. No two of us were the same age. This was intentional, to attract fans of a wide age-range demographic. The next youngest guy, "Jord"—I hate to give corny fake names, but these guys will come up a lot—was in tenth grade. He had a tutor, and he and I each had appointed "guardians." The rest were eighteen and older. Initially this made me nervous. To me, these guys were big kids, adults, all grown up. They'd sneer at me in the hallways in school. They wouldn't want anything to do with me, a little fucking bed-wetting cry-baby. I wondered if they knew about my audition. But there was no animosity between us, just distance. They'd all met before. I'd been last on board. They all hit it off immediately, I just tagged along. They were physically fit and well-groomed. The soles were peeling from my battered sneakers. I never felt more eleven.

Till again at our album release party. Our manager presented a case of cigars like they were top-secret contraband. "Hoooooo!" whooped "Luke," our eldest member. "Looks like Cubans!"

"The *finest*," our manager grinned lecherously. Luke accepted one. Then "Ollie," second oldest.

Then “Mick,” third oldest. Then Jord. Not a flicker of hesitation showed in my manager's eyes as he offered me one. Pressure. I took it. What else could I do? Didn't want to be rude. We weren't going to smoke them right *now*, were we?

“Let's light these babies up!” cheered Mick, sweeping an arm around Jord and steering him toward the patio doors.

I hung back, playing with the cigar in my fingers. I'd never held such a thing before.

“John,” a female voice—my guardian—addressed my manager, coldly but trying to sound sweet. She pulled him to the side. I overheard, staring down at my feet. I was inexplicably nervous. She wondered whether my smoking was irresponsible. It could affect my vocals, she said. They talked lowly for a moment, then she touched his arm, smiled at me and walked off. John smiled at me too.

We made our way out to the broad patio. I wanted to see the view of the city but we were scolded not to approach the rail. Jord lit my cigar. I took a deep breath, then held my lips around it and sucked in a bit of the smoke. The taste was so acrid. My mouth flooded with saliva and stupidly I gulped. Wouldn't make it anywhere else. I ran for the rail and threw up on Stockholm. John swore. Far below, a flock of cameras focused on me. “Bring him down!” he snapped at my companions before bolting inside.

I was half-carried between Mick and Luke. Jord came running back with paper towels and a cup of ice. “Here, suck on this,” he encouraged me, holding a cube to my lips. I obeyed, embarrassed and tearing up like at my audition. Jord smoothed back my hair and dried my eyes with the paper towel. “Now just keep your mouth shut,” he advised. Best damn advice I've ever gotten.

John called the cops to come give me a breathalyser right in front of the press. He told them I was having an allergic reaction and paid them all handsomely not to report on the story. They didn't that I know of.

Some guardian, right? But my smoking wasn't illegal. She wasn't paid to care for my well-being, just my voice and my reputation. Her job wasn't to be my mother. I wondered what my mother would have done.

The album was first released in Europe, where it took off like a shot on the coattails of our production team's fame. We toured the continent for eight months, living in hotels. Jord and I shared rooms, our guardians always in the room next door. One night after a show he brought in a girl and they went into the bathroom. The shower ran for a long time and I heard them laughing and talking as I fell asleep. Immediately after our wake-up call Jord told me he'd lost his virginity.

John had this “great idea” after seeing our album in a music store's 'Dance' section: Choreography. Said it would be sexy. All the guys were on board, even Mick who still had some trouble with the knee he blew out in football the year before. We rented gyms and dance halls and rec centres and church basements here and there and worked out routines with industry pros John recruited. We previewed bits at shows as we completed them. We'd debut them all on the North American tour. I didn't feel sexy, I felt sweaty and clumsy and dumb.

I'd always meant to write about every place we went on that first European tour. My mind was blown by it all: big-city lights, historical landmarks, strange languages, exotic foods, foreign monies, metric measurements, time differences. But I never made the time and all the memories blurred. Just living it seemed easier, less effort.

We got a break before the Canadian album release and tour.

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My house looks completely different. New siding on the outside. Air conditioning. New fridge in the kitchen, upright freezer, built-in crushed ice dispenser. New stove, digital, internal burners. Hardwood in the living room. New La-Z-Boy, couch reupholstered? new couch? Picture windows. My mother hints that I'm getting too old to share a room with my sister. If she had been my brother? My mother

talking, had been thinking of putting in a pool but decided to wait till after the move. Wouldn't want to raise the neighbourhood's property values too much, and she laughs. Move? On her new digital camera she shows me the photos she took while touring the property. Old, Victorian, restored. 2,000 square feet on eight acres, wrought-iron front gate. Did you get a raise, Mom? Yep, quite a promotion. That glint in her eye. Where are my sister's toys? Where is my sister? Oh, your sister's down at Rena's, dance class till six. It's 3:15. My mother's not at work.

I'm bored at home. It's an hour till school's out, then I'll call Brian and Tim, see if they want to go shoot some hoops. 4:30, I call them both. Neither home yet, but soon Brian calls me back. "Where you been, man?" he cries. I'm uncertain of his tone. I'd thought I'd be bursting to talk about it all but suddenly it pulled me down. "Just, away," I said. "Naw, I know where you been," he says. He sounds weird. I get a chill down my spine. "Everyone knows. We seen your pictures on the Internet."

I ask if he wants to go play basketball. He perks up. He'll meet me there after dinner. My mother makes a stir-fry. I clear my plate quickly and excuse myself. She drops me at the court on her way to pick up Caitlin, though I could have walked, or biked. Suddenly I wish I had biked. I haven't in so long.

Brian's already there. Sees me get out of the SUV and his eyes darken. "Look, man, I'm'a be honest with you," he says, not meeting my gaze. Bouncing the ball absently between his feet. "A lot of people are pretty pissed at you."

My heart sinks. I've been living in hotels for almost a year but didn't feel homeless till now.

Brian tells me they don't think it's fair, they think I'm stuck-up, and I'm a faggot. "Why didn't you call or nothin'?" I said management pays our hotel bills and I didn't want to rack it up on long-distance calls. But it's kind of a lie. I just never took the time.

Tim never called me back. Next time I went home I didn't call anyone. I laid around the house and missed my group-mates.

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I was sad in the calm after the European tour. It had been so amazing I felt like the future could never measure up. There was Canada to look forward to, but I expected it to be much like the States. We wouldn't be there as long: a three-month blitz, New Year's Eve in Ottawa, then home until our American debut in May. I dreaded the extended break, now that apparently I didn't have any friends and my home was just another hotel. I thought of asking to stay with Jord but didn't want to impose. Maybe these guys just wanted to get away from each other for awhile. I should have been excited to see my family and my home town again, but I was just strangely nervous, like starting at a new school.

At least nervousness was familiar, almost comforting. I always felt nervous before a show. I still remember the way I felt before our very first. We were in Manchester. John told us to peek at the crowd before going onstage so we'd be prepared and not clam up. We looked out and I almost threw up. I couldn't see a single empty seat in the auditorium. I couldn't see the floor. All I saw was a mass of heads, necks, bodies, moving erratically like a choppy lake. I got so dizzy I sat down hard on the floor. Ollie asked if I'd been smoking again, I looked sick. Corny dig to cut the tension. I ignored him. Couldn't speak. When I did, I said a word I didn't often say, and Jord playfully covered my mouth. Didn't they feel the same? Turns out they did, they just coped better. All but Mick had experience performing for crowds, though of course none *this* big. But even Mick had felt the eyes of the masses on him—he'd been valedictorian of his graduating class, soloist in choir, and star linebacker. I'd wet my bed the night before—just pulled up the sheets and left it for housekeeping, hoping Jord didn't notice the smell. He hadn't said anything. When we took the stage, the response was a deafening chorus of piercing screams that went on and on. I soon realized we'd have to sing over it. And we have ever since. I wondered if they could even hear us. *I* could barely hear us. I think I went into shock after the show. Backstage a TV was on and everyone was changing clothes but I just sat there, blind, deaf, mute. Finally

Jord clapped my back and asked, "Hey kid, y'alright?" and I cleared my throat and croaked, "I'm thirsty." Jord brought me a can of soda, which I drank. I felt briefly relieved but soon I was crashing hard. We went back to the hotel and I blacked out on top of my bed. When I awoke, someone had taken off my sneakers and wrapped me awkwardly in the comforter I'd sprawled on. I'd had no idea how much money I had made.

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November 30 and December 1, two shows in Toronto. One at the Rogers Centre right under the C.N. Tower, one on an outdoor stage on Queen West. The street was choked with people. As the crowd multiplied and spread it and several cross-streets had to be closed. How was this happening? it finally occurred to me to wonder. We were nobodies, we'd made *one* album with just ten songs. How had we become *so* popular? I still wonder, though now I know more about the strategic marketing behind us. Back then I didn't yet realize that success wasn't necessarily exponential. I thought, if we were already this successful at the beginning of our careers, imagine in a few years! Imagine when we're old and retire! See, that's how it worked at my mother's job. The longer she was there, the more important she became, the more money she made, et cetera. As long as you kept doing the job, the rewards steadily increased.

New Year's Eve, we were interviewed and performed just after the countdown. Afterward John yelled at Jord for letting slip a mild curse on the live, uncensored program. We were professionals, we were role models, and we had an image to maintain, John said. He feared a massive backlash, but the incident didn't make news.

Our break came. We would return to Canada at the end of the year on the North American tour. I flew home to celebrate a belated Christmas with my mother and sister.

My Christmas day had felt lonely. We'd been at a ski resort in Banff, performing live via satellite to a handful of TV stations. We stayed in the lodge that night, attended the annual tree lighting, and ate free at the holiday buffet: turkey, dressing, mashed potatoes and gravy, cheesecake and all the candy canes we could eat. Free ski, snowboard and ice-skate rentals as well. Mick and Jord wanted me to skate with them, but I couldn't skate because I'd never played hockey.

Instead I went to the café in the lodge. Nine p.m., just before close. I sat at the bar. Hot chocolate, extra marshmallows. I fished for the strange two-dollar coin I'd pocketed earlier. It slipped from my fingers and clinked to the floor. I doubled over on the stool to retrieve it but a small hand scooped it up. A child, female, half my age.

"Here you go," she said earnestly, holding out the coin.

I took it. "Thank you." I turned and paid the waitress.

"You sang nice."

I turned back, stunned. I murmured, "Thank you." My first meeting with a fan one-on-one. I felt naked and awkward without the safety net of my group-mates.

"You're welcome." She smiled at me. "Merry Christmas!" she chirped.

My throat closed. I blinked.

She scampered away.

My drink was ready, steaming. Extra marshmallows. I glanced up at the waitress. The look in her eyes, kindness and pity. I couldn't take it. I looked away. I curled my hands around the cup. It stung, burning. I ignored the pain.

We'd always gone to Gram and Gramp's for Christmas dinner. I never went again. Gram died of a stroke in June, three weeks after our American debut. Gramp moved into the new house with my mother and sister. I never felt like I lived there.

The night before my birthday, I wet my bed. My mother came into my room to talk to me. She asked if there was anything I wanted to talk about. I said no. She asked if I thought I needed a doctor. I

nodded. She drove me. They said bladder infection and gave me some antibiotic. I said I'd been wetting the bed forever but they said try this first. They saw on my file that it was my birthday and gave me a lollipop. The only ones left were yellow, but I was grateful.

On my twelfth birthday, we'd been in Sicily. We'd gone to an all-you-can-eat pasta bar and our waitress had asked in broken English if we were all brothers.

Thirteen now. Too fucking old for this bed-wetting shit.

On the drive home my mother told me my record label might also sign Cait. Apparently while I'd been gone she'd been busy in the pageant circuit. I thought of the cigar, of Jord and the girl in the bathroom. Through the window I watched my home town pass me by. I mumbled, "That's great." I felt motion sick.

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Our label chose our second single and we shot a music video for it. It consisted of clips of us playing beach volleyball intercut with footage of the song's choreography. Our swim trunks matched, all black with a stripe of colour down each leg, a different colour for each of us. Mine was green. Jord wore a ball cap sideways but none of us had shirts. I'd felt horribly shy and hid from the cameras as much as possible.

Maybe you've noticed I'm not being too detailed about my career. Well, for a few reasons. First, it's already been documented to death. If you're interested, pick up any teen magazine from the past decade, or better yet, search the Internet. Second, I shouldn't really get into that stuff if I hope to come off normal. Finally, there's my attempt to be anonymous, a flimsy excuse to hide behind. Maybe I'm really just too daunted by the task to recount it all. It's far more refreshing just to write whatever comes to mind, even if it means randomly skipping back and forth, summing up an exhilarating, indescribable eight months with one atrociously inadequate sentence. Speaking of which, how's my vocabulary? Know how I learned most of these big words? This "word of the day" e-mail I get. God bless the Internet.

I learned of Gram's death via e-mail. We'd been really busy and I didn't get to check my account till the day after the funeral. I began to get the feeling that no matter what I did, I'd always be missing out on something important. The cigar, Jord and the girl. Caitlin. I didn't call home.

One night in New York, on the North American tour, Jord invited me to chill at his cousin's apartment. Guy asked if we'd smoke a bowl. I didn't know what a bowl was but I wasn't eager to smoke again so I said no thanks. Jord followed him out to the balcony. Later, the three of us went for some fast-food and ran into some friends of the guy. We all hung out till some of them wanted to go to a movie but this girl Sangrine was tired and Jord and I couldn't stay out much later so we offered to walk her home, it was on our way. Partway Jord realized he forgot something at his cousin's, said he'd meet me back at the hotel and ran off. I kept going with Sangrine. I was quiet, tired, she talked too much, nervous? On her porch she invited me in for a bit to warm up. My hands and nose were red from the cold. I'd been trying not to sniffle. Her parents were asleep. I sat in a plaid armchair rubbing my hands together and blowing into them. She went into the kitchen to put some water on to boil, came back and just crawled in my lap. Her lips touched mine, softly. My lips tingled. From the cold? She pulled back and looked me in the eyes, hesitant. I just smiled sheepishly, so she kept on. My teeth felt huge and I felt strangely like giggling. I wondered if my breath was bad. Our kissing was sloppy, I had to fight from wiping my mouth with my sleeve. Suddenly her small fingers dipped beneath my waistband. Her skin was cold and I twitched, it tickled. The kettle whistled, she ignored it. She unbuttoned my jeans. I had on fucking Tasmanian Devil shorts but she didn't make fun. I rose up a little and she slipped them off. My chest felt tight, my heart was pounding, my guts fluttering, I was so shy but so excited. She pulled the afghan down from the back of the armchair and wrapped us in it, sat across my lap and wriggled her pants down a bit. Her warmth surrounded me. We were pretty pinned down in the chair so

we didn't move much, just kind of squirmed around for awhile. It felt so *strange* being *inside* her. After a few minutes she lifted off and wrapped her hand around me. It took me longer with her than it would have by myself. She went a little too hard but I didn't know how to correct her politely. Afterward she went to wash her hands. I felt so awkward. I considered leaving before she got back. I got dressed and did a bad job of folding the blanket back up. I heard the tap shut off and she came back smiling. My tongue felt heavy as I said I had to go, Jord would be at the hotel wondering. She just nodded. She'd probably done this before. I stood like lead. At the door she kissed me goodnight, on the cheek (what?), then the neck (oh), slipped me her number. I mumbled that I'd call, thanks this was nice, well goodnight. Soon as she closed the door I ran.

In New England Luke hooked up with an old flame. The press took pictures of them at dinner. As they left the restaurant a reporter shouted to Luke asking if she was his girlfriend. This question had come up before. We'd been told to always seem available; we could only admit to "dating" here and there. But instead of that whole spiel Luke just yelled over his shoulder, "No comment!" He'd thought it was a pretty safe alternative, but John didn't approve. They wound up in a shouting match. Another time Jord got a hickey on his throat and John flipped a lid, sicced the makeup artist on him, made him always keep it covered. I was so afraid John would find out what I'd done with Sangrine that I didn't even tell Jord, but I felt guilty because Jord had told me about his first time. After the blowout with John Luke was seething that he was a grown man and didn't need another father. I suppose it had never occurred to me to think of John as a father figure because I'd never known what a father would be like. I asked him what his dad would think and he said his dad wouldn't give a shit. "I'm his twenty-four-year-old son, not his sixteen-year-old daughter," he snapped. What difference would that make? He said men were more protective of girls. He looked at me like I was stupid and should have known that. I told him my dad was dead and his expression changed. He said "ohhhh" and then nothing. We'd never really talked. I said it was a relief that parents were more protective of their daughters. "Why's that?" he wondered. "I have a little sister," I answered. "And you want her protected?" he wanted to know, and so did I.

I slept like hell that night, gave up at quarter to six and called home. My mother answered, groggy. I asked for Cait. My mother didn't want to wake her but I insisted it was important. "Is something wrong?" she asked. I said no, it was a surprise. That got her all excited. "It's your brother," I heard her say in the background. Cait came on the line, sounding sleepy.

"Hi, Caity," I said.

"I'm tired," she said flatly, "what do you want?"

"Oh . . ." What did I want? "Nothing." I told her I couldn't sleep and felt lonely. Getting tired of the same old company and I haven't talked to you in forever. How are things at home?

"Ummmm. . . ." Several seconds. "Big," was the word she finally chose. I didn't understand. "Okay big?" I hoped. Another long pause. "Yeah," she conceded, "okay."

Well, listen, I'm coming home shortly, we'll catch up then. I hope you're around, I didn't get to see you much last time. I'll let you get back to bed if you want, hope you can get back to sleep. I'd accomplished absolutely nothing. I awaited her reaction. She was quiet. I was just about to ask jokingly if she'd gone to sleep when she said my name. Her voice low. A chill ripped through me. "Yeah?"

"Do you like your job?"

"It's . . . big, Caity," I said. "It's like any job, you can't like it all the time. And when it feels like my life sometimes, I tell myself you can't like your life all the time either."

Silence. Then, "Yeah." Emotionless. I wanted to go home.

My chance came sooner than expected. Mick began having horrible stomach pains and one night threw up blood. He was rushed in for an emergency appendectomy. We had to postpone several dates for his recovery. After visiting him post-op in the hospital, I flew home. My plane landed at midnight but Cait had come for the drive to pick me up. I gave her the gift I'd been carting around for weeks: a limited-edition Canadian Snow Bunny Barbie. God, the look in her eyes, I never felt so loved. She fell asleep on the way home, her little head against the window. I fought not to. My mother just drove. At

home—the new house—all the lights were off, Gramp was asleep. I plowed through by moonlight and memory, dropped my duffel bag next to my bed and crashed in my clothes.

In the morning, I expected a slew of questions, but my mother left me alone. I had breakfast alone, surprisingly glum. Sometimes all I wanted was to be alone but I could never manage it. Here, too, I was always wanting something I couldn't get.

After breakfast—well, it was past noon—I sat with Gramp in the living room. He lay in the leather recliner with his spine-support back rest strapped to it. He leaned over and clapped his hand on my knee and said he'd seen us on the morning show last week and we'd been very good. His wrinkled old cheeks pulled back over his juttied-out jaw, his dim eyes sparkled. He was so proud. I felt validated, but a little dejected. I wondered if he knew how hard I worked. I wondered if he would have been proud if I had done anything else. I was never stellar in school. I never got an A. My mother never stuck my homework on the fridge. Just my picture.

She knocked on my door that afternoon to invite me to Cait's pageant rehearsal. They asked her what was her life's dream. She said to be famous like her brother so she could be influential in achieving world peace. The look in her eyes, the same as when I'd given her the doll. I prayed it was acting, then prayed it wasn't. Men are more protective of girls. I never saw my sister look that way again till I visited her in rehab six years later.

We saw Mick on the music channel later that evening. Sitting up in bed surrounded by flowers, he thanked the fans for their undying support and said he'd be back performing in no time. He was tired but he never stopped smiling.

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Our sophomore album was released to great fanfare. It had an awkward picture inside for which we'd had to pose in tight white muscle shirts and boxer shorts. Some magazine called the album “inappropriately sexually charged” and us “jail bait,” but generally the reviews were positive. “Good club or back-seat-of-the-car music,” said one. “Catchy, if brainless,” said another. Some of the songs made me lonely and jealous. I wondered if I'd be having these experiences with girls if I had stayed in school.

Ollie had written a song for this album. Luke had written one too, but kept it secret between the five of us. It was kind of a smarmy song about being pushed around and fighting back. The lyrics were ambiguous enough but we all knew it was about John. Ollie's song was a break-up ballad about his sister's divorce.

After the release's promo blitz, during which we performed the album's first single what felt like a million times, we were off for nearly three months. One night after a movie I'd gone to alone to get out of the house for awhile, I ran into some girls from my old school. One of them, Becky, had been my reading partner in second grade. She'd been going out with Tim when I left school. Not anymore, she said quickly. He's such a loser now, never showers, all Goth, stupid lip ring. Oh, sorry, do you still hang out? I said no, it had been years. Well, they were going to grab something to eat, did I want to come? Sure, what the hell. This girl flirted with me all night. We sat together on one side of the table, the other two across from us, and every few minutes it was a hand on my arm or a poke or a push or ruffling my hair like fucking picking on her kid brother. So boyish, I loved it. Then nipping at my jaw line and her hands in my back pockets. We went to her place and made out on her bed for awhile lips bitten hands roaming bra undone but I really have to go the gate locks at twelve. Like Cinderella. I got her number and took a cab home. Felt like the driver knew what I'd been up to, what I was thinking. Finished myself off in the shower like in the hotel rooms and went to bed dizzy. Next day I called her and we went out again. We weren't long getting to having sex but I didn't have condoms so I always had to pull out. Then she went and bought some, always kept them in her purse. Late one night we had sex behind the cardboard bins out back of the mall and as I balled up the condom in Kleenex and stuffed it in a drain

grate I wondered what John would think. We carried on like this till I had to leave again. It was a long goodbye. I never felt so heartsick. I wondered if I was in love.

Our new opening act was an up-and-coming young singer from New Orleans. At our first show she introduced a song from her debut saying I'd written it. Mick looked at me, surprised; the rest were off other places. "I never," I said. The song was okay though, not one I'd be ashamed to have written. "Just trying to drum up publicity then," said Mick. "Maybe another guy, same name," I said. Mick raised his eyebrow. "Ain't too many musicians with *that* last name," he said.

Next night I watched to see if she did it again. She did, and from the screams my name drew from the crowd I almost couldn't blame her. I knew I should talk to her about it but I couldn't think of how to bring it up. I thought of telling John but he'd probably blow his top and I really didn't want to have to answer for that. I went on the Internet and looked up the song. My name in the official credits.

I found Ollie and asked how he'd submitted his song. He said he'd had to sell the publishing and distribution rights to our management, who had then "sold" us back recording and performing rights. I asked if he'd had to fill out a bunch of paperwork with signatures but he said no, not really. "I suppose my name helped," he said with a laugh. "They do want to make us seem more credible." Who what? I asked instead if he could have used a pen name, just any old name, even a real name someone might already have. He said something about it being illegal to use someone's name deliberately but not if it was just a coincidence. I wasn't as attentive as I should have been. I was kind of angry. I don't know why. Let her get famous off me, who gives a shit. But it seemed unfair.

Just as I'd thought, John wasn't long finding out. To my surprise, he congratulated me for "broadening our scope," whatever that meant. I'd been going to keep mum but Mick spoke up, "He didn't write it." John's smile dropped. He fixed me with a look of steel and asked if it was true. I mumbled "Yeah" but my deer-in-the-headlights look had already given it away, Mick said later. John nodded, said he had business to conduct and promptly excused himself. For the next little while the shows went on amid gossip of "negotiations." I was made to record a video statement and sign a transcript. Had no idea what had gone on till John announced that "the case" had "settled out of court." My name would be removed from future copies of the album and she had been ordered to cease claiming I'd written the song. To avoid bad press her management would not issue a public statement but we had received a lump sum in "damages." It had been on my mind so long I couldn't help it: "So who *actually* wrote it?"

John looked at me funny. Kindness and pity. Didn't say anything, just stiffly gave me a paper from his briefcase. A photocopy of a contract. Proof of sale. My mother.

* * *

I didn't know how to feel. I felt like I should have felt more. But I almost wasn't surprised. Felt like I'd just seen the end of a movie I'd predicted at the start.

The guys were sympathetic. It was coming up on Christmas. Jord invited me to his place but I said I'd go home, I had to. He said he understood. I wondered if Becky would still be around. Hadn't called her in weeks, hadn't made the time. The old story. Everything got away from me for its own sake, and I let it.

I e-mailed my mother my arrival date and time. No response. She didn't come to the airport. I called home. No answer. On her way? I waited. Hours. Finally I took a cab to the house. Gate locked. Eight p.m. House for sale.

I walked to Becky's. She opened the door. Shock. No anger, thank God. Kindness and pity. She'd known, of course. But how to tell me? I had no number and I hadn't called. Home alone, she said, come in. She put some water on to boil and I wondered what we'd be doing when it did. This: we sat on the couch, she touched my arm, asked if I was okay and I broke down crying like I hadn't in years. The kettle screamed but silently she stayed and cared for me. She held me and held me together. There was

none of me left to take.

I slept in her arms that night, on that couch. In the morning I felt her carefully rise, heard her pad away. Toilet flushed. Then her voice and a man's in the distance. He was calm but stern. "Inappropriate." She was defensive. "He just found out last night. *He* doesn't even know where they went." I held my eyes shut but couldn't sleep anymore. I lay awkwardly on the couch and waited for the fight to be over. Her yelling. Door slam. His slippers scuffing toward me. I rubbed my eyes, tried to collect myself quick. He said my name. Kindness and pity. He said he was sorry but he thought I'd better go. Said he'd call a cab for me. Her bedroom blind was drawn as it pulled away. "Where to?" cabbie asked. Where the hell to? Airport, I guess. Ticket to New York City, waited six hours for my flight. Christmas in a strange church and New Year's in Times Square. Rest of the time in a high-rise hotel, housekeeping, jacuzzi tub, home sweet home. No one I knew. Didn't smile, didn't cry.

Soon anonymous messages began appearing on our website about me being so "heartless" as to "sue my own mother" who'd "given me the gift of life" and "gotten me my start in the business." All posted from the same I.P. address, which our webmaster banned from the site. But the messages were popping up on other sites as well. Our lawyer drew up an official demand to cease and desist and John hired a P.I. to hunt down my mother and serve her the papers. In a few weeks she stopped—but not because of the papers. She'd attempted suicide and been admitted to a rigorous facility for mental patients. She couldn't even take a piss without supervision. Justice.

I was asked by the facility, the one time I made myself call, if I would mind not calling again till further notice please. Till she was more stable, they didn't feel that contact with me would benefit her health. I was dead to her. My income paid the bill.

* * *

This was reported in a small town rag with a source at the hospital and some radio station called us during a Webcast to ask me about it. My mind went blank. As a matter of confidentiality, John had been sure it wouldn't get out. I wondered what he would want me to say. Was "No comment" safe? No, he said it was too secretive, too ambiguous, a sly "Maybe." The press assumed the worst if you said it, you were just egging them on. Mick was looking at me worriedly and I could just tell Luke was dying to jump in with a change of subject to spare me the embarrassment. After fighting with John he looked out for us like that. I closed my eyes and thought, God damn what should I say, what would John want, what would my mother want, what would bring Gramp pride and Caity comfort, and what did I want to say? And I remember it word for word because the sound byte followed me forever. It became my official statement and the last remark I'd ever make on the matter. And writing it out I'm blowing my cover if I haven't already but I don't care anymore. This was my turn to be honest and open and I have. You don't have to believe me or take me seriously. And I know I'll get the interview questions and the flack but I'll deal. Just hope I haven't got the others in too much trouble.

"My mother is sick," I confirmed. "You know, she's a human being and she's faced a lot of pressures in her life and she just hasn't stood up to them well. That can happen to a person, you can start out strong but end up weak, or you can start out weak and end up strong."