

THE ROAD TO FLUFFER

by

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I was the lone face on an empty street. I circled the block twice before I found the door I was seeking. Without a visible address, the beige metal door stuck in the wall like a blank placeholder along the cracked sidewalks and pitted brick buildings of Old Town Saginaw, nestled between a pub and tattoo shop, and only entered by those who knew to be there.

I parked my rusty Buick curbside and approached. Although someone was supposed to be manning the door to let me inside, no one was seen. I first knocked with slight reservation, my knuckles casting a hollow sound on the metal that called for more attention than I wanted. There was no response, save for a trio of crows startled out of a nearby dumpster, scraps of stale food clutched in their beaks. They circled overhead, surveying the scene below with beady eyes.

Instead of standing around like a tourist without a map, I tried the knob. It turned without resistance.

After stepping into the darkness ahead, a light clicked on from a bare bulb attached to a motion sensor, illuminating the flanking cracked walls and a passage of worn wooden stairs leading upward beyond the light's reach. I climbed halfway up before the bulb clicked off, returning me to darkness. I paused, waiting for the light to return, but nothing happened. I felt as though I was in suspended animation, adrift in an abyss. I dug into my pocket and pulled out my phone, using its faint blue glow to assist with the climb to the second floor.

I arrived in an L-shaped hallway, the walls lined every five feet or so with thick wooden doors, most of them padlocked tight. I swung my phone left and right, trying to gain some bearings like a spelunker exploring a dark, narrow cave. Muffled voices carried from around a corner and I followed them to the

right, coming to a door covered in glossy bumper stickers and faded spray paint, its padlock open and hanging limply from the door's latch. A crack of light shined under the door, casting a glow across the silver reflective threads on my ratty running shoes.

As I raised my fist to knock on the door, a guitar's distorted A-chord struck the silence like thunder, the player's three fingers all jammed onto the second fret in a salute. Then a *chunk-chunk-chunk* riff of the E-string's bottom end rattled the walls. My knocking evaporated into the dead wood. A bass guitar sounded with clear, deep tones that caused a thin crackle to erupt on the snare drum, as the springs vibrated across the drum head with a metallic buzz.

I waited until there was a brief lapse in the noise before trying to knock a second time. A man with a shaved head answered, wearing jeans and no shirt, a gleaming smile panned across his stubbly jaws. He was lean and muscular, with tan skin sporting colorful tattoos of various quality and taste. He hopped from one foot to the other as energy raced through his frame like a Tesla coil. Or maybe he had to piss; I couldn't tell.

He switched a lit cigarette from his right hand to his left to shake mine with a firm grip. "Hey! You're Dave, right? From *Rock Weekly*?" His voice was gravelly from smoking and screaming, sweetened with an upper Midwestern twang.

"Darrell, actually. Darrell Steiner."

"Cool. I'm Chester, the singer for this here musical combo. Come on in." He opened the door wider.

I entered the large room, its high ceiling supported with heavy wooden beams. The last of the day's sun shone through three tall, narrow windows facing the street. A thin fog of cigarette smoke wafted above us in astral layers. I looked at the walls while Chester followed behind, as though guiding a museum tour of the band decorations and artifacts I passed.

Half of a wall was dedicated to airbrushed centerfolds ripped from magazines.

"Your groupies?" I asked.

Chester howled so loudly with laughter, I thought he was going to punctuate it with a slap to his knee like a bumpkin. "Hell, yeah, man. We love women. We wanna make music that

strippers can do their thing to. You know..." He began gyrating his hips while beat-boxing slow and funky, dry-humping the stale air through faded denim jeans, a beer bottle plucked from the top of a nearby amplifier clenched in fist. "Let's just say it's always a pleasure to hear our music in the strip clubs."

I was then introduced to the three other members of Numb Skull. Brian, the guitarist, was lanky and had long dirty-blond hair that obscured his face whenever he looked down, which was most of the time. He sat in a nearby chair and threaded a new string onto a glossy black guitar. His mop nodded to me as I passed while he continued his delicate task, his tongue placed firmly between lips in concentration.

Anton had a shiny bald head and dark-brown goatee. He wore a Black Flag t-shirt and brown leather wristbands around both wrists. His steely gaze brought to mind the evil intensity of Ming the Merciless, though he was quick with a wide white smile when jokes were tossed around. Numb Skull's bio claimed that Anton had founded Numb Skull with Chester, acting as the cautious, grounded yin to Chester's capricious yang. The two were the backbone of the band and would likely see Numb Skull through to the bitter end. Their easy collaboration had bonded them as brothers and as a consequence, they fought constantly.

The drummer, Jimmy, was the youngest, demonstrated by a baby face with high cheeks that begged to be pinched by a fawning old lady. Jimmy was charismatic but lacked Chester's cartoony captivation. He smiled as he patiently assembled his massive drum kit, one piece at a time. He gave off the energy of a teenager who had just gotten through a tavern door with a fake ID. And maybe he did, being a hazy shade of twenty.

"This is the guy who's following us around for *Rock Weekly*," said Chester, propping me up like a display.

I nodded as I met each of them, keeping the polite distance of a new acquaintance. I'd seen most of this before. They were cookie-cutter musicians, each a distinct archetype that begged for originality but really screamed a desire for acceptance. Structured day jobs didn't cater to their freewheeling needs. The rigors of academia required stumbling through too many fifty-cent words. Their lack of discipline would have them fleeing from army boot camp like escaping convicts. Up to this point in

their lives, they had stuck with the path of least resistance, drifting towards a complacent compromise with life's challenges, yet determined to stick with their dreams as they cultivated their image as carefully as a princess in her boudoir.

Neither large or small labels had shown much interest in Numb Skull, but there was a new game in town: corporate sponsorship and their music label imprints. The company that made the adult energy drink, Fluffer ("It Keeps You Up"), was developing new artists for their burgeoning record label, Fluffer Records. They underwrote tours, funded recording time, and invited their artists to play at an annual festival, The Fluffer Fest. Fluffer became such a threat to the competitive status quo that major labels would prevent their own artists from performing at the festival from time to time, hurting themselves and their artists in the process. Large shows like the Fluffer Fest brought people to the bands, giving them more exposure than they would get anywhere else, even under the guidance of more professional, established outfits.

Fluffer had somehow discovered Numb Skull lurking in the dark recesses of the internet and wanted to hear more. The Vice President of Midwest Music Operations for Fluffer Records had sent the band a letter on thick bond paper to invite them to play the next festival and discuss Numb Skull becoming one of Fluffer's bands. In response, Chester cobbled together a small tour around the festival for Numb Skull and prepared to stir up some dust.

As they strapped on their gear and began to tune up, I sat in an open lounge a few feet away, with fake wooden chairs stripped from a doctor's waiting room and a coffee table stacked high with dog-eared *Playboys* and tattoo magazines taken from the shop a floor below.

Instead of perusing the pages of silicone-queens, I watched a daddy longlegs hobble across the thick, white carpet turned grey with cigarette ash. As they tossed around ideas for the tour's set list, I kept myself occupied by reading some letters taped to the wall nearby: official Numb Skull correspondence. The first was a gushing letter from a fan in Kentucky, who wrote in rough longhand that he had "never heard nothing so awesome before," humbly asking if they would play at his wedding "if it's

cool with my fiancé.” The second was cut out of the letters section of *People* magazine, complaining to the surely-baffled editor of their lack of heavy metal coverage in *People’s* music section. Respectfully submitted, Chester Drawers of Numb Skull.

Long before I came to Numb Skull’s practice space, I figured this was my last writing assignment for *Rock Weekly*. I was ten years too late in finding another career that lasted as long but I’d spent much of that time running on faith, hoping the right opportunity would appear like Marley’s ghost, pointing me in the right direction. As it turned out, most of these opportunities had already presented themselves while I was busy touring with musicians who thought the dark, smelly dives they played in towns like Gary and Columbus were the beginnings of an upward trajectory to Madison Square Garden. But most of those people were out of the scene now, working at mundane, backbreaking industrial jobs or sitting in classrooms learning new skills with kids old enough to be their own.

Some diehards stuck with their love of music, ending up in morale-sapping local cover bands that paid a couple hundred dollars over the course of a weekend, which barely covered the bar tab. I felt like kin toward this last group, those weekend warriors who played their favorite songs over and over because they just liked to play out. Here I was, trying to come up with fresh adjectives to describe music I’d heard over and over throughout my career, as though a thousand typing musical monkeys were all coming up with derivatives of *Hamlet, the Rock Opera*, declining in quality with each successive generation. I liked to think I had more integrity than that. More imagination, less of an inclination to leech ideas as though life is one big copy machine running low on toner. Instead, I found myself stuck in a declining Rust Belt Podunk with a group of paper dolls cut from dull scissors, having to sell the dream to young consumers who still believed all the rock and roll posturing was the real deal. And I had come to a time when propagating this myth over the years began to make me feel like my own worst enemy, shoveling shit like any two-bit blogger or even worse, a corporate stooge.

The fact of the matter was that I was there because I needed this gig. At home, both my marriage and appliances were malfunctioning and I needed some stability before my wife, Amy, could lay claim to everything not tied down. Amy thought a rock tour was an excuse for me to fornicate in a whole host of hedonistic ways, as though I had the willpower of a zombie trying to quit brains. She would not listen to reason and as a result, there would not be any. She'd been clear that this was the last straw for her. If I were to be forgiven for the camel's back, it would also have to extend to the bundles of straw before that, in a time machine of regret: birthdays and anniversaries of apologetic long distance calls and day-late deliveries from online shopping; the irregular, dissonant voicemails made from inside raucous tour buses and outside blaring bars. It was all part of the dust I left on her love that I never bothered to stir.

As soon as we learned that *Rock Weekly* was turning into a product more like *Rock Monthly, Inc.* once purchased by an international publisher, Amy and I both knew my goose was cooked. I wouldn't get lost in the shuffle like a drone because I was already on the target list. The corporate environment called for fresh-faced yes-men from private school on the new masthead, eager to work late nights for beer and Chinese take-out. With the swiftness of a signature, I'd become as obsolete as the writing software I used on the road. Like Chester and Anton, one of the few options I had was to see this gig through to the other side.

With a Ramones-like "1, 2, 3, 4!" the band lurched to life as though someone put a quarter in a jukebox at a deranged Chuck E. Cheese. The songs embraced the tried-and-true characteristics found in rock music: volume, attitude, and semi-comprehensible lyrics about restraining orders. But the music rang hollow to my jaded ears. There was no imaginative introspection of a Bob Dylan (asking for a miracle, I knew), no addicted mischief of a Johnny Thunders, or even the technical virtuosity demanded by the discriminating heavy metal fan;

Numb Skull just pummeled cacophony through the air, threatening to lift the room off like a rocket from a launch pad.

I took some notes as they played, even managing to make a list of items I needed to take with me on the road. The band stopped between songs and Chester would look my way for a reaction, of which I could only nod and smile, as more of a gesture of goodwill than a sign my face had just melted from their sonic brilliance. It had been years since I'd been able to fake enthusiasm of that magnitude in order to pacify an artist's ego. If they managed to come out of the other side owning something besides boxes of unsold t-shirts and promo CDs, they were lucky. The music industry could be an ungainly machine, not unlike the faux-wooden console televisions of yore: a monolith of entertainment steadfast against the wall, daring you to try and move it to the curb before trash day.

Halfway through Numb Skull's rehearsal, there was a brisk knock at the door and a gaggle of girlfriends entered the practice room, smelling of cigarette smoke and sweet citrus. They were clean and shiny, like cars just off the assembly line, moving in a unit towards the lounge area. Their skin was pale and smooth, not yet burdened with the wear and tear from several decades of life. They ignored me while I looked warily at their tattoos of bloody butterflies and ripped baby dolls. The alpha girl, with sleek, raven black hair, walked over and sifted through a nearby ashtray, plucking out a marijuana roach with thin, red fingernails. I gazed at their emotionless faces not with desire but a strange, paternal feeling that made me wonder if their parents knew where they were.

Chester and Anton discussed key changes during a smoke break, leaving the girls to their own devices as they attempted to get stoned. Anton wrote in a wrinkled, spiral-bound notebook, his other hand holding his head as though decrypting a complicated cipher.

"Dude," exclaimed Chester, "if we keep all the songs in D, it'll be as heavy as fuck! They'll think we're nuts!"

With a nod from Anton, it was decided to tune down the songs on the set list to D. But after an hour, I was tired of the aural assault and prepared to meet them at the bus the next morning. I bid my farewell, nodded to the group of apathetic

young women flocked in the lounge, and made it outside without the hall light turning off to again leave me in grimy darkness.

Joining up with a band at the beginning of a tour required a different approach for members of the media. Many times, bands looking for increased exposure preferred to work through any kinks in their live act before inviting outside scrutiny. Not in Numb Skull's case, especially in this era of citizen journalism, when short, pixelated videos of bad gigs were uploaded to the internet within minutes. It wasn't because Numb Skull lacked management (which was true), but that the tour was short and Fluffer's shadow of influence loomed so large that Numb Skull felt they didn't have time to spend on grooming their sound. After all, someone at Fluffer liked what they'd heard, right? For good or ill, their road show would have to hone itself like a blade on the grindstone. After the tour, their representatives at Fluffer would want new dates booked for an expanded tour, open for a band with more recognition in larger venues, arrange some recording time, or, most likely, convince the band to "woodshed" until they either improved or wilted like an abandoned houseplant. But their naivety would not allow such concerns into the band's consciousness. These short-term thinkers viewed the handful of shows as a victory lap around the crowded regional rock music scene.

I mulled these possibilities over while visiting my brother, Bill. His apartment was a crumbling second-floor flat that could have been condemned, had local housing authorities been aware someone was living there. A couple of the windows in leaky wooden frames were broken and stuffed with blankets and sweat-stained pillows to keep out the cold. The wooden floor was sturdy but leaned at an angle enough to propel a ball across the floor and the plaster walls were cracked and broken with age and neglect. A large cable spool served as a coffee table and faded, flattened furniture sat waiting to be thrown out. He would have had a better place to live if he shackled up in Numb Skull's practice space two blocks over.

The apartment was the most-visited spot in the area, as dozens of people would visit Bill to buy marijuana he grew at a grow house nearby, bought with the help of a tanking housing market. He was too afraid to sleep there among all the criminal liability so he poured a couple of thousand dollars into security and crashed in the apartment's bedroom most nights of the week.

Against my better judgment, I sat on the couch, which forced me to lean further back than was comfortable. I set a paper shopping bag of personal items on the floor next to my feet, the handle flicking my wrist.

Bill sat in a high-backed chair that creaked threats of collapse. "I thought you were gone on tour already."

"We leave tomorrow. I need to keep some things here, if that's all right."

He nodded as he filled the bowl of a water pipe, pressing down on the weed with his dirty thumb. Then he touched the flame of a lighter to the bowl and inhaled as the room filled with the sound of bubbling. He passed it over and I took a hit.

"You can keep whatever you need to here," he said, trying to hold his breath as he talked. "I've got more space than I can use, anyway."

I returned the pipe to him and tapped the bag with my foot. "Just this here. Some important papers...financial stuff...the watch dad gave me when I turned sixteen. Nothing that anyone else would find much value in."

"It'll be safe here. I reinforced the door a few weeks ago after someone broke in while I was out of town. Took some cash and weed but I know it was some junkie I thought was my friend. Well, he was my friend before he became a junkie."

"It makes people do the stupidest things. Just to get through the day."

"But, like I said, I added a new lock. They'd have to take the whole door off if they want to get in here again."

"What makes you think they wouldn't?"

"It would make a lot of noise. The guy next door is home all the time. He's disabled, can barely make it up and down the steps. We have an agreement: I slide him some weed and he keeps his ears open." He sparked the lighter and took another hit. "So how long do you plan on being gone this time?"

“Couple of weeks. A quick tour through the Midwest. Just enough to get a few articles out of it and then back home. Amy’s having a fit. She is dead-set against me going but it’s not like I have a lot of opportunity around here. I have a feeling she’s going to give me the boot.”

He nodded, saying nothing.

There was a knock on the door. I stood up. “I’ll get it. I’ve got to get going anyway. I just wanted to drop this bag off.”

I walked toward the door and spotted a white knit cap laying flat on the spool table, among fast food wrappers, unopened mail, and stray marijuana seeds. The cap had a little white ball on top. “Is that Amy’s? She’s got one just like that.”

He gazed at the table with droopy eyes. “Uh, I don’t know. Lots of people come here, man.”

I looked around and more of Amy’s things came into view as my impaired mind managed to label more objects. “Those are her sandals, too.”

“Where?”

“There, by the closet.” I pointed to them as they sat on the floor, open and obvious.

I walked further into the room and looked toward the bedroom, its door open, displaying a large unmade bed. Both men’s and a few women’s clothes lay on the floor in small piles, designating each day of removal. I took a step toward it.

“Don’t go in there, man,” Bill said. “That’s my private space.”

I continued but stopped at the doorframe. Standing against the wall was a suitcase I recognized, its hunter green flap zipped closed. I didn’t bother to open it but instead, returned to the living room. Bill remained seated, hunched down like a wet dog.

“When were you going to tell me?” I asked.

“Tell you what?”

“You’re having an affair with my wife. All of her shit is here.”

The person at the door knocked again. I responded: “Come back later! I know you can hear what’s going on.”

“Don’t do that, man,” said Bill. “You’re driving my customers away.”

“You son of a bitch.”

Bill rose from his chair. “You’re making too big a deal out of this.”

“How do you figure?”

He’d spoken long before he had rationalized his position and remained silent.

“Of all the girls who come by your place looking to get high, you’ve got to bring my wife in. I’m surprised she would even sleep in this dump.”

“What do you want me to say? She came to me.”

“And I suppose in your mind, you had no problem with that.”

“Let’s just say I wasn’t thinking straight.”

“No kidding,” I replied. “You haven’t been thinking straight for a long time, Bill.”

I turned the locks on the door and opened it. The customer had taken my advice and I entered an empty hallway. “I’m not sure what to do about this, so I’m just going to go.” I closed the door, leaving the bag I’d brought behind, mixing my personalty with theirs in a trinity of malfunctioning matrimony.

The next morning, I found energetic musicians heaving their gear into a large white van with what could only be considered to be aplomb, during a time of day when they would normally still be in bed, avoiding daylight like malignant spirits. But there were sleepy smiles all around and Chester, in true cheerleader fashion, stuck his grinning mug into everyone’s personal space, his enthusiasm diffusing any nervousness about the trip ahead. “All right!” was his catchphrase, his mantra, something to say when there were no words for the frisson of rock and roll. Chester doled out an “All right!” for each of us, as though he was a military General with a limited vocabulary raining orders down the chain of command.

I walked up to Chester, who was pushing on the side of the van in an obnoxious attempt to get it to rock. His black Harley-Davidson baseball cap fell off during the struggle and he swung an arm down and snatched it from the street.

“Is there any room for me in there?” I asked, nodding to the van.

He finished a long drag on his cigarette and exhaled a cloud of smoke into the gray morning sky. “Of *course*, man. How the fuck are we supposed to get publicity if we boot you out of our van? The rental guy said it seats twelve so there should be plenty of room. I even did the math. All right!”

“It might fit twelve if you’re smuggling people across the border.” I peeked through the van’s side window at the piles of duffel bags taking up the last two rows of seats. “Should I just rent a car and meet you there?”

Chester wrapped his arm around the back of my neck, his hand gripping a beer bottle that draped over my shoulder, almost penetrating my shirt pocket. “Rent a car? And miss the excitement? Listen, it’s a new van, I know. Our old Misery Machine took a final shit on us a couple of months ago. It was a perfect ride for us. We could fit all of our gear - drums, heads, PA, you name it - and it would just barely fit, but we got it all in there. Packing for us was very Zen-like.”

Anton came around to the rear of the van carrying a stuffed duffel bag to add to the pile. “Yeah, *be the luggage*.”

“But with this new van,” Chester continued, “we need this trailer for everything we need. That, plus you, equals tight quarters, but we’re gonna do it, so hang on to your nuts. All right!”

I’d traveled in varying levels of luxury over the years, with bigger bands and their respective budgets, but I was not adverse to more modest travel with Numb Skull, where I would most likely have to find something to lean against in order to sleep. It would not be the first time I’d wake with my cheek against a cold window, a line of drool descending from my mouth like a spider strand, but its welcome wore thin as I grew older and more accustomed to the creature comforts of home. At least we would have motel rooms during the Numb Skull tour. Even a thin bedroll on a motel room floor was better than sleeping in a van, whether or not it was moving down a bumpy highway or sitting in a dim parking lot.

I handed my bag to Ritchie, Brian’s perpetually-stoned brother and Numb Skull’s driver, guitar tech, stagehand, security,

and anything else that needed attending. He lacked the organizational skills (and the stomach) to manage the band but was invaluable for fixing most technical problems they faced, particularly with moody equipment. Brian and Ritchie looked like twins, though they were born a few years apart. They were rarely found without each other, having grown a tight bond while living with their single mother. While Brian preferred to cloak his face from the world with long hair, Ritchie kept his in a tight ponytail that rarely strayed from its straddle atop his spinal column.

“Thanks, Brian...er, Ritchie,” I said as he stuffed my bag with the others under the last two seats of the van. “Sorry about that.”

Ritchie smiled. “Don’t worry about it. Happens all the time.”

“At first, the only way I could tell you two apart was by your hair.”

“We used to wear it the same, all long and shit. Then I burned some of it while smoking weed and since then, I keep it under control.”

“Smelled *nasty*,” said Brian. “No amount of incense would cover it up.”

“When I got my hair cut afterwards, I had a mullet for a while...until it grew out. Took a bunch of pictures of it for the website. The sides of my head were cold all the time.”

Anton walked to the back and attached a strong metal padlock onto the trailer doors, jerking the lock down twice to make sure it was secure. He nodded to Chester, who waved his tattooed arm around his head as though swinging an invisible lasso, exclaiming for all to hear: “Let’s get this show on the road! Lock and load, all right!”

And with that rallying cry, we stuffed ourselves in the van and pulled away from Numb Skull’s practice space, headquarters, and everything familiar to them. Almost immediately, I was handed a cold beer from a centrally-placed cooler. I checked my watch; it was nine a.m.