

MIGHTY PUP

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THE ANSWERING MACHINE is on the blink, but I've got the door to the booth open, so I hear the phone. I figure it is probably Dave, stuck someplace, needing a ride home. Since he dried out, he has occasional moments when he seizes up, like an engine with no oil. The last time was two weeks ago, when he got off the train at Fourth Avenue, then couldn't get himself to leave the station.

"Nick and Dave's," I say, hating the name, which still sounds to me like a pizza parlor. "What?"

"Nick? It's Betsy."

She's been gone six years, but her tone of voice is like she calls all the time.

"Is Dave around?"

"Nope," I say. "Where are you?"

"Right here, in Brooklyn. I moved back. I got my own place, and I'm taking acting classes."

I can see it. She's tall, and if she's kept her looks, she'll probably have a shot at commercials or something.

"He's probably at the Sham," she says.

"Maybe."

"I'll go look for him. Buy him a drink."

"He only drinks sodas these days," I inform her. "Coca-cola, mostly."

"Dave?"

"He just goes down for company." The Shamrock is the last real bar in the neighborhood—the only one left that hasn't installed ferns and a CD player. Older guys go there, and the softball teams. Sometimes a young couple will stroll in and have a beer, but it's only comfortable if you know everyone, and have known them all your life. Dave has his own booth, and a special set of darts they keep for him in the register. Sometimes, if they're short handed, he'll even tend a little bar.

There is a long silence at the other end, and in it I imagine a whole scenario for Betsy—a place on the beach, shiny cars, palm trees.

“How’s business?” she asks, finally.

“O.K.,” I say. “Listen, Betsy, I’m in the middle of something, and it’s kind of late.”

After I hang up, I take a bite from a cold slice of Sicilian I picked up on my midnight break, wash it down with room temperature coffee and go back into the booth. It’s peaceful inside, all the equipment on and silent, the tiny lights looking out on me from everywhere like red, green, and blue eyes. The big eight-track, the half-inch Otari for mixdown, 16 channels with knobs that go on forever. A momentary shudder in the power source has left the digital readout on the clock flashing in distress, but it doesn’t matter. In the studio, time takes on different proportions, expanding and contracting in relation to your state of mind. Lately I’ve begun to feel like one of those sleep-deprivation experiments. Sunlight, when I find myself in it, always seems a little strange, like it shouldn’t really be happening.

On one of our control sheets I print Dave a note, then take it to the office where he’ll be sure to find it. We’re on the top floor. There’s a kindergarten in the basement, church offices on the first, and Dave lives on the second. Our studio is rent-free—barter for his caretaking the building. We insulated nearly two feet thick so there wouldn’t be a noise problem.

At the front gate, I see him coming down the street, hands sunk deep in his pockets, his pace slow and steady. He looks like he ought to have a can to kick, eyes focused down on the sidewalk. I slip out quickly and go the opposite direction.

Lunchtime the next day, Dave’s eating a meatball sandwich, and I notice tiny flecks of red on the appointment book, which is to one side of him, so I move it.

“What did Betsy want?” I ask.

“She needs a loft for her apartment,” he says through a mouthful. Dave is a good carpenter. He built the studio, really, though I was there to hammer nails and haul lumber. Since we got it finished, he’s been obviously bored. Taking another bite from the sandwich, he uses one finger to reposition a meatball that is trying to escape from the far end.

“She going to pay you?”

He nods. “I’m going over there to take a look in a few minutes.”

He has already been making sketches. In front of him there is a sheet of paper with some rough outlines penciled on it.

“You’ve got Neon Maniacs at four,” I say, flipping through the book.

“Just a rehearsal. I told them I’d roll some tape. Cover for me, would you?”

"All right, but I've got Motion Sickness again after dinner, so they can't run overtime."

Our deal is that we each bring in our own business, engineer our own sessions. But I'm always having to do final mixes for him, or run off copies he forgot to make, and it worries me. His whole life, he's never stuck with anything long. He had three or four bands himself that all fell apart. Simple lack of interest.

He smiles and gets up. "Thanks, bro." He slips on his leather jacket and heads out.

I collect his garbage off the desk, crunch the foil up into a ball, slipping it inside the paper bag, and drop it in the trash.

For about a month when he was sixteen and I was twelve, Dave changed his name to Ian. It was Betsy who suggested it. He was in an English rock phase, and played in a Yes copy band. I was in training for a position with the New York Jets; I high-stepped through the park afternoons, dodged imaginary tacklers, swung by my arms from playground equipment with the idea that stretching might somehow make me taller. I could do seventy pushups. I didn't think much of my brother, or the miniature domino he wore dangling from one ear.

"Ian?" I said when he told me. "You've got to be kidding."

"Don't mess with me, Nick-wit," he said. "There's nothing wrong with having a stage name."

"Of course not," said Betsy. They were sitting on the stoop together outside the deli her father owned, before he died. She had new glasses on—round ones that made her look considerably older. I was filled with contempt. Two seriously misled people—it seemed to me they deserved each other.

"Sure," I said. "Ian. Right."

Betsy stuck her tongue out at me, managing somehow to look good doing it. Shaking my head, I turned around and fell right over my bicycle. There was no graceful way out—I was tangled in the thing, and my knee stung where I'd skinned it.

"You're fooling yourselves," I said loudly at the sidewalk, ignoring their laughter. It seemed the worst thing I could come up with. But I couldn't hurt them, and I knew it. They traveled in their own little world, and though I could peer in from outside, I could never really enter.

Dave's session turns out to be five neighborhood kids who've just smoked a bunch of dope—their eyes are closed up tight as newborn pups, and they reek like a Rastafarian picnic. They don't even bother to tune, just plug in and start banging away. The singer is making it up as he goes along. He runs his fingers violently through his hair when he's not shouting at the mike, a gesture that isn't for anyone's

benefit I can see, except maybe mine, since the rest of the band are staring in different directions. The drummer watches a blank spot on the wall, the guitarist seems to be counting the eyelets on his boots. The endings of their songs take longer than the songs themselves.

I make the mistake of offering to let them hear the tape, and have to watch as they listen to every nuance. Finally, against my better judgment, I leave them alone in the booth. It's just a simple stereo recording—two ambient mics hung in the room, taped onto a sixty-minute cassette—but they listen to it like it was a sermon.

One of these days some local group will walk in here and be really hot. They'll need good production, and I'll be available. It happens. There are springboards into the business.

For rehearsals we charge twenty, and Neon Maniacs pay me with a ten, eight ones, and a handful of change I don't bother to count. I let them go, wait about two minutes so I won't run into them, then lock up and hurry to the corner for a sandwich and soda. I have about ten minutes before the next session.

Poison Witness are commercial hard rockers, very serious about what they do, aiming for the jugular vein of the spandex and leather market. It was Dave who started calling them Motion Sickness, but the fact is that they're good. Their guitar player, Marty Buckness, is a tall, handsome kid from the neighborhood who's cut from just the right mold, and knows it. Teased hair, sculpted face with high cheekbones, prominent jaw, and a mouth that would look almost feminine, if it wasn't twisted, just slightly, by a scar on one side. I wonder sometimes if he gave it to himself. He knows lots of tricks—two-handed tapping style, super-fast pick technique. His drummer and bass player are a little sloppy, and the drummer shouldn't be singing, but Marty has real potential.

They arrive while I'm still eating my sandwich, and Betsy is with them.

"Hey, Nick," she says. She's wearing a v-neck t-shirt and lycra stretch pants that hug her long legs like twin blue snakeskins. Spike heels. Her face has aged a bit, but when she smiles it's as though something lifts and she's the same weird, skinny girl who sold me my kiss, in the back of her dad's store, surrounded by cases of canned goods. It lasted about ten seconds, cost me two bucks, and tasted of mint from the gum she constantly chewed.

She perches on the desk and takes a cigarette from her bag, her breasts clearly visible as she digs for a lighter.

"You guys know each other?" asks Marty.

"We grew up together," says Betsy, lighting up. "I can smoke, can't I?"

I get the ashtray out of the drawer.

"Nick's brother is the one who's going to build me the loft."

Marty nods, but he doesn't file it anywhere. Marty is only interested in things that apply directly to Marty.

She excuses herself to go to the bathroom, and Marty grabs a handful of my potato chips.

"Met her at the Sham last night," he says, by way of explanation.

"Nice kid."

During the session she sits quietly behind me in the booth, sipping at a can of soda. I can see her reflection in the glass, legs folded, the image transparent, superimposed over Marty and the band. Finally, she leans forward and pokes the back of my neck.

"You're not saying anything. You might at least make small talk. Hi, Betsy. How are you Betsy? What's new with you?"

I bring down the monitors and turn. "Did you see Dave?"

She nods. "He was by this afternoon to take measurements. My place is really tiny, but high ceilings. It's going to be nice. He's designed a desk and bookshelves right into it, and a little stepladder, and I've got a futon for on top." Her eyes focus on Marty.

"Good looking guy," I say.

She shrugs. "Kinda dumb, if you ask me."

The drummer has turned the beat around accidentally—he's playing the one where the two should be. I have to stop the tape and call in the bad news. Behind me, Betsy crosses her legs the other way.

"Nick, Nick, Nick," she says. "Always the perfectionist." Reaching a hand out, she musses my hair, then rubs her fingernails lightly over the nape of my neck.

At the Sham, I find Dave about to win at darts. I watch him, the intense concentration on his face, the tension in the muscles of his arm, all of them poised for this, his last shot. When he actually throws it, it's just a flick of the wrist, as if he didn't really care where it landed. It's perfect though, double threes.

"How are things in the land of loud?" he asks, walking me to the bar.

I get a beer, and another Coke for him. "I want to talk to you," I say.

"About what?"

"The studio. You're not doing enough."

"That's not true. I did some sessions last week." He's taller than I am, a fact I'm rarely conscious of, except when we're in the Sham. I hold up fingers.

"Two. I don't mean to push you or anything, but we're in business. Now I see you jumping to build this thing for Betsy."

I never talk to him about Betsy—it's a major sore spot. He's gone

out with other women since, but he never got over her. Betsy broke him. When she left, she didn't even say she was going, just got on a plane. She left instructions with her mother not to give out her new address. Something had come up, an "opportunity,"—that was all he was able to find out. When he finally did get an address out of one of her friends, it didn't help. His letters came back unanswered.

He smiles and sips from his drink. "I'm going up to her place in about a half-hour."

All I can think of is I hope he doesn't bump into Marty on his way out. "Dave, don't be stupid. The woman is basic, unadulterated trouble, and if you can't see that then someone ought to give you a stick and some dark glasses."

"What is this, a warning?"

"No, advice. You're not strong enough for her."

"Me plenty strong," he says. "Me eat red meat, much potato. Me lift-em weights." On the television over the bar, women in bikinis are running over burning coals. "California hot-foot," says Dave, pointing.

I leave my half-finished beer in front of him and walk home.

The next few days I spend almost entirely in the studio, and all I see of Dave is his occasional face at the door telling me to hang in there. I have to admit though, he looks happy. I've got my own project going, a commercial for a dog food company I'm doing on spec for a guy I know that works at an agency. He says they always need stuff like this, I could make good money. My skin feels pasty, and from all the time in the dark, I am starting to squint like a mole.

When Betsy comes by three nights later, I have just cut my finger doing a splice. She carries a six-pack in a paper bag. "Nick-wit," she says. "What a mess."

In the bathroom we run it under cold water, turning the basin rust-red. Taking a band-aid from the medicine cabinet, she wraps it around my finger.

"You work too much," she tells me. In the small room we are practically touching. She leans forward and we kiss, carefully at first. Then, in a kind of clumsy slow motion, we sink onto the narrow tile floor.

I walk Betsy home, and along the way, she tells me about her voice teacher who thinks she definitely has a Broadway sound, which may or may not be a good thing, what with the decline of the American musical. She invites me in, and there it is, in the middle of the room, nearly completed. The loft is all oak, except for the desk underneath, which is some darker wood, mahogany, I think. Each piece has been lovingly sanded, and a can of stain sits on some newspaper, waiting to

be applied. Still, there is something that isn't quite right. Empty cabinets for drawers hang under the desktop, and there is an adjoining counter area.

The apartment is only two rooms, and she's got no other furniture. Her clothes are in open suitcases. There is a package of eight-by-tens of her, ready for taking to auditions. Copies of *Backstage* and the *Voice* lie scattered on the floor.

"It doesn't look like you plan to stay," I say.

"I'm just settling in slowly. The loft is the centerpiece of the whole place. I can't do anything else until it's finished."

I touch one of the supports, realizing that this is without a doubt the best thing I've seen Dave do. But it hits me, too, what the problem is. The structure is simply too big for the space—it crowds the room.

"I'm meeting him in about an hour down at the Sham."

I don't say anything. Outside, there is some kind of accident going on. Flashing lights sweep across the walls.

"Dave and I have an understanding," she says. "It's never love after you say it isn't." She walks over to the window and looks down on the street.

I'm not sure how he found out, but when I come in the next evening, Dave's in the booth with the door locked. He's got a big bottle of Bushmills with him unopened. I tap on the glass and he looks up.

"How about letting me in?" I say.

He lights a cigarette, a move calculated to irritate me, since I don't allow smoking in the booth.

"Let's talk."

He cups a hand to one ear.

"Talk!" I shout.

Holding one finger up for me to be patient, he finds the switch on the board that allows me to hear him. His voice comes over the p.a. speakers, flat and cool.

"I'm working." Letting the switch up, he leans back and kicks up his feet.

Looking at Dave through the glass, I recognize the same red-eyed glare our dad gets when he's drinking—like coals simmering inside his head. The old man nearly choked laughing when he heard we were going into business together. My mother thought it was a great idea, but he just pronounced us fools.

"Two things you should never do," he said. "Go on a date with your sister, and go into business with your brother. You're bound to be disappointed."

This goes on for a while, the two of us ignoring each other. I start pulling some duct tape off the carpet and balling it up in my hand. At

one point Dave throws the switch and the speakers come alive, hissing, waiting, and I think he's going to say something. But he just shuts them off again.

After a while he picks up a reel of tape and puts it on the machine, but doesn't switch on the mains, so I can't hear. He's wearing headphones, and I can see him chuckling to himself. I'm wondering whether it isn't time to give up and let the sonofabitch stew on his own. Going to the window, I tap on the glass. He doesn't hear me, only puts his feet up on the board, laughing harder. I knock again.

Still grinning, he rewinds and puts the speakers on. This is what comes out:

Full of meat, mmmm, Mighty Pup!,
An eatin' treat, they'll eat . . . it . . . up!

The voice is mine—there are four renditions of the jingle, each a little different from the last, the accompaniment a simple drum machine beat overlaid with synch chords, bass, and some happy dog woofs I lifted off a sound effects album. There's no reason for it, but still, I feel violated, as if my jingle were a diary entry, or a confessional poem.

In the booth, Dave has got both hands on the machine now, rocking the reels back and forth so that one syllable is repeated backwards and forwards, over and over, a kind of Disco effect, probably damaging the motor. Without even thinking what I'm doing, I really hit the window. I hit it so hard even I am surprised, and the thick, stiff glass gives way, disintegrating around my fist.

Dave gets a roll of paper toweling to blot the blood that seeps from the side of my hand, and insists on walking me to the hospital, though I tell him I'm not sure it's serious.

"Mighty Pup?" he asks.

"I'm sorry," I say. "I don't know what happened."

"No need for that," he says.

We walk together over to Mercy Hospital. At the E-R he waits the whole time, even though public places, and hospitals in particular, make him nervous. A month in detox will do that.

All they do is bandage the hand. When the nurse asks me the cause of injury, for their records, I tell her self-inflicted.

"Come on," she says, smiling. "Why would someone do a thing like this to themselves?"

Dave spends most of the weekend in Times Square, seeing movies, eating hamburgers, and playing video games. It's his way of relaxing. Monday morning he comes in and begins fixing the window in the booth. He starts talking about building a platform too, for the drums,

but then he drifts into a whole thing about the cost of lumber, and I can see it's just talk.

Neither of us mention Betsy. The fact that she doesn't seem to be around makes it easier, but it's still this big, unspoken thing between us. I start to think about maybe buying Dave's half of the business and moving the whole operation to my basement.

A couple days later, I find out from Marty that Betsy has gone back to the West coast. Apparently, she got a call about a possible small part in a film.

"Very strange chick," he says. "You know what she did? She hung my guitar off the fire escape. Really. So I go out to get it, wearing only my underwear, and she shuts the window behind me. I guess she thought it was funny or something. Twenty minutes she kept me out there."

I picture Marty pleading with Betsy to get back in.

"Strange sense of humor, that girl," he says.

A card comes in the mail, addressed to me and Dave. "Greetings From L.A.," it says. The picture is modern, but staged to look early sixties, three women in identical polka-dot bikinis, seated on a beach blanket, wearing straw hats and rhinestone sunglasses. The other side says only, "Dear guys, I miss you both. Take care, Betsy." I leave the card out on the desk for Dave, but he doesn't touch it, so it sits for days, gradually getting covered up by other papers, until all that shows is a strip of impossibly blue sky poking out between the phone and ConEd bills.

Not long after, I'm walking along the sidewalk outside of her building, and I see a pile of wood out by the curb. A small, dark man is bringing more down, and I stop him to ask about it.

"The old tenant," he says. "She build a bed into the wall. No good for rent apartment again." He looks at me, calculating my interest, then shrugs. "You want," he says. "Take."

And I do. I gather as much of the heavy wood as I can carry, cradle it against my chest and walk back toward the studio. The oak is smooth and cool, though there are gouges and bent nails in places where it was ripped apart. I have to make a few trips to get it all. The work is tiring, but it's a nice day, and I'm glad to be outside in the air for a change. Picking up the two-by-fours one at a time, I position my hands carefully, taking care so they won't get cut. When I get it all back to the studio, what I have is a great, disorderly pile. I sit down on the carpet, cross my legs, and watch it for a while, trying to figure out what it looks like, or what, with a little imagination, it might become.