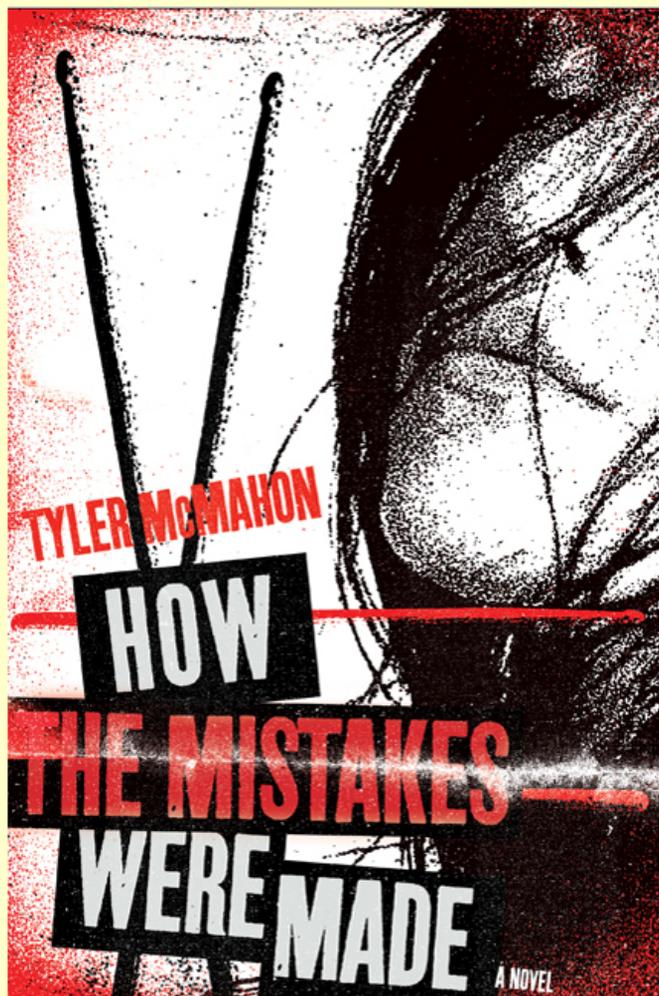


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# ONE

I don't mind the hate. It doesn't bother me anymore. There was a time when I was adored by the same brain-dead sheep who despise me now. I don't miss that. Behind every dead rock god, there's always some uppity female scapegoat. Why shouldn't it be me? The public eye sees only love or hate. Fans aren't capable of anything in between. So let them hate me; I can handle that. The part I can't abide is having my own history ripped right out from under me, my life rewritten by magazines. It's true that I've made mistakes. But it's also true that I made the Mistakes.

All the quickie-biographers and poseur journalists say I stumbled across those two boys in some basement in the mountains somewhere, already playing amazing music—that my eyes turned to dollar signs and all that was left to do was shove them into a recording studio and a stadium. That's not how it happened.

The first time I heard Sean and Nathan play, there was an elk heart bouncing on the floor. The beer-soaked attic of a venue would've never met fire codes in any state besides Montana. The first of the two local bands on the undercard called themselves Venison in Unison, and ran everything through distortion pedals, even the drums and vocals,

resulting in a slush of chords and screams that was little more than a soundtrack for the mosh pit. Their lead singer sang draped in a fleshy vest fashioned from a deer's rib cage. Meat was their thing. At the height of the set, they tossed the elk heart into the pit, where the kids kicked it around like a half-deflated soccer ball. Everyone thought this was awesome.

It was August 1990. Fires raged through the surrounding forests. Walking around town earlier in the day, my eyes stung. The air in the valley was dense and gray, the sun a dim glow through the smoke.

After the first band, I went to the bar. The place served only Pabst Blue Ribbon and Jägermeister, both from a tap. I ordered one of each. Above the stage, a skylight had been painted over. Little streaks of smoky night sky came in through scratches in the black paint. As I walked back to my table, one kid pointed at me and whispered to his friend.

There were times when I liked to see these small-town punk enclaves. It used to make me proud, like my teenage years weren't all a waste. But this particular night, it put me into a foul mood. I sat by myself and smoked, picking my feet up whenever the heart bounced too close. The rest of the Cooler Heads—the band I was on tour with—ate dinner somewhere downtown. They were a hipper-than-thou bunch of college kids from Seattle who sang poppy odes to their own record collections. I'd excused myself to come straight to the venue. Even so many years later, I still followed some of Anthony's rules, like never missing the opening act.

There was nothing remarkable about Sean and Nathan when they climbed onstage. Wearing faded T-shirts and threadbare jeans, they carried instrument cases and a grocery bag full of cords and pedals.

Nathan lowered the microphone stand, then set about plugging in gear. Sean held a hand up to shield his eyes from the overhead lights.

The singer from the previous band sat down behind the drum set, also of the previous band. On the floor, the elk heart lay still. They tuned up and nobody paid much mind.

Nathan laid a list of songs down on the floor of the stage, then whispered last-minute comments into the ears of his bandmates. He wore his blond hair in a sort of disheveled bowl cut, not unlike one of the Beatles. Back then, his face was clean-shaven. I remember thinking that he had good posture. To start off their set, he strummed the bass line with a pick. The drummer dropped in after a bar but was terribly off-rhythm. Nathan turned and nodded his head along with the down-beat until the guy got it.

Their sound cracked open once Sean came in. His tone was nothing special—a cheap Stratocaster knockoff, a half-open Cry Baby, some kind of fuzzbox—but he had this pins-and-needles style that was impossible to ignore. It made my skin crawl. Kids in the crowd shivered during certain lines. The taller of the two, Sean slumped his shoulders and stared down at his strings. That bush of dark hair already covered part of his pale face. Half the time, his back was turned toward the crowd.

Their final tune—something like an Irish drinking song sped up—brought out the best in them. Nathan did a call-and-response thing, and the boys from the first band shouted along. Behind the microphone, his face clenched tight, eyes retreated farther into his skull. He might have been singing to a million people, for how serious he took it.

Sean, on the other hand, didn't seem to know or care that he was onstage. While his sidelong lines wove in and out of the melody, he looked curious—more than anything else—like he was surprised at the sounds coming from the speakers.

They didn't sound great that night. The mix was bad; the drummer was off. Nathan's microphone was too quiet to hear the words. Still, they had something that a lot of bands didn't. There was drama in their music, a critical tension between order and chaos. Much later,

I would understand that Nathan tried his hardest to hold the songs together, while Sean did everything he could to pull them apart.

The rest of the Cooler Heads showed up as Nathan and Sean finished. Jack, our front man, was red faced and smiley from booze. The other two girls, Claire and Kristina, giggled at something he'd said. I didn't look forward to our set.

As their bassist, my job was easy: Stand there playing simple lines and looking aloof. Jack twirled around in his ridiculous dances. I watched him perform, the way he raised his eyebrows up and pointed into the crowd. It struck me that night as phony to the point of terrifying.

Something came over me as we started our final song. I found a pick in my pocket and turned up the gain on my amp. Instead of plucking, I strummed the bass as Nathan had an hour earlier, playing it double time. Claire didn't miss a beat on the drums. Kristina caught up a couple bars later. Jack glared at me. I leaned forward and hid my face in my hair. Eventually, he sang without enthusiasm.

I drank more Jägermeisters while waiting for the van to load. By the time the boys approached me, I felt well buzzed.

"Are you Laura, from SCC?" Nathan did the talking while Sean stood silent by his side.

In the middle of lighting a cigarette, I nodded my head to confirm what he already knew.

"We"—he pointed back and forth between himself and Sean with his thumb—"we're huge fans."

"You guys sounded good tonight." Smoke came out my mouth along with the words. "If you ditch that drummer and get serious, you two could be onto something."

“You think?” Nathan said.

“Wouldn’t say it if I didn’t.”

He let out a breathless half laugh.

“But ditch that drummer,” I said.

Nathan and Sean exchanged glances and smiled, communicating in that nonverbal language of theirs that I’d become familiar with over time, but never quite fluent in. I took another drag from my cigarette and looked around the room, wondering where my band members were off to. Half our gear still lay on one side of the stage. The singer from the venison band, Sean and Nathan’s drummer, picked the elk heart up off the floor.

“I remember the first time I heard your records,” Nathan said.

“I think that guy’s going to take the heart home with him,” I said.

“Back then, did you know what a great band SCC was, how important you all would become?” Nathan asked.

“I used to believe that what we were doing was important. Sometimes I still do. Most times I think that band could’ve been a hobo pissing in the woods for all anybody cares, in the bigger picture.”

The vocalist/drummer walked by and pushed the elk heart into Nathan’s chest. Nathan put his hands around it, still looking at me. It was as big as a grapefruit, colored in the dull whites and deep reds of raw meat. Dust and hair from the floor clung to every side. The severed tubes at the top looked like they must be part of some machine, not possibly an animal.

Nathan caught me staring. “Do you want to hold it?” He extended it out toward me.

I took the heart from him with both hands. It was cold. The grit from the floor felt oddly more alive than the actual flesh. I held it right-side up with one hand and lifted it to my eye level.

“I never held a heart in the palm of my hand before,” I said.

Nathan nudged Sean and the two of them smiled, pleased by my reaction.

“Does he talk?” I looked at Sean. He slouched farther forward, as if trying to make himself a few inches shorter. A couple brown curls crept down his forehead.

“Once, I went camping with my family.” Sean’s eyes darted around as he spoke. “My grandfather brought one of those along. He cut it into strips and cooked it like kebabs over the fire. It’s good.”

“Would you sign this?” Nathan held out an old SCC seven-inch and a felt-tip marker.

I took them from him. The cover of the record was a black-and-white drawing I’d done a long time ago. It showed a small figure crouching in the corner of an empty room, his head cast down in his hands as though crying. The threatening shadow of another figure stretched along one of the walls. *SECOND CLASS CITIZENS* read the blocky script. There was a chance that I’d glued that sleeve together and put the record in myself.

“If you guys ever come to Seattle, or if you get serious and want to go full-time, give me a call. I could help you out.” I wrote my phone number on the white space of the wall in the drawing, but didn’t sign my name.

## PHILADELPHIA: AUGUST 1984

This is how you make mistakes. This is how you hurt people that you care about. It's not hard to confuse love and hate. There are good reasons to fear adoration, to suspect anyone who would put you up on a pedestal, be it a screaming fan or a selfless lover. It's not sick. It could happen to you. Here's how it works.

For the first couple hours, try to call your parents from the hospital. No answer. After that, give up. The long night passes there at the side of the bed, the air going in and out of Anthony's lungs via a plastic hose, machines beeping and ticking, late-night traffic outside. Every so often, a pair of headlights sweeps through the room and circles the ceiling. The hospital staff performs tests—pricking him with pins like a voodoo doll, hitting his bones with a rubber mallet. They speak in a lingo you don't understand. In the end, there's nothing they can do.

The band stops by in the morning. Hank hands you a wad of bills, everything you made last night. Stare at the currency as if it's from a foreign country. Billy asks if you want a ride home. You think he must be joking.

“No violence.” Hank shakes his head back and forth as he looks down at Anthony. “I told him that shit would never work.”

That’s when you see just how bad this part will be.

“It’s kind of ironic, right?” Hank flips the curtain of hair out of his eyes. “I mean, that is irony, isn’t it? I’m not trying to be a dick or anything. But I think that’s, like, the definition of the word.”

Billy punches him in the shoulder.

“Would you two please leave?” You’ve been waiting all night for something that is not coming. From now on, and for the first time, you’ll have to cope with this world all by yourself.

Neither boy looks back as they walk away.

Out of habit, you turn to the body in the bed, the one who always knew what to say or do when you were at a loss. You are eighteen years old, and have never been without your big brother. Watch those two boys disappear down the hall of the hospital. Memorize the image of their backs and heads getting smaller. Machines tick and beep along with your brother’s mechanized breath in a sort of unbearable music. Promise yourself that you will not forget this. You will not forget those boys, or the fans, and where they all are while their hero lies motionless in a hospital bed, with tubes down his throat and pins in his toes.



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