

merry christmas from the family

I'll bring the smokes and I'll bring the wine, and we'll harbor up safe tonight;

Black cats and babies go to Heaven....

And everywhere you go you leave something beautiful behind

Everywhere you go you leave something beautiful behind....

-- Twilighter, "Black Cats and Babies" (2002)

The same year the Beatles released Sergeant Pepper, a motel was built not far from Chapel Hill. It lay in a grove of pines near where Highway 70 passed under Interstate 85: two wings of ten rooms each, at right angles, with the office and manager's quarters at the center. A gravel drive in front surrounded a lawn with a small swimming pool and a fire pit. A path behind the office led down to the banks of the Eno River. The motel stayed in business for several decades (longer than the Beatles were together, in fact), but despite the efforts of several successive owners it never made enough to pay back its mortgages, and finally closed. Until recently, though, people still lived there.

Its motel life was uneventful. No rock stars overdosed there; no desperate criminals were cornered in its nondescript rooms; no one saw God, the Devil or the ghost of Elvis in the neutral patterns of its carpeting. Long after it closed, however, things happened there which shook up the whole community: a fatal accident, a failed suicide, and murder. Certain things, once thought long-lost, were found.

Andy always had a party in the dead week between Christmas and New Year's: no longer one of his big ex-motel blowouts, but small and quiet, a hangout place for anybody stuck in town over the holidays. This night would see, at the most, three dozen guests. Some had come early, lingered a while, and moved on; others had promised to arrive late. Sally was splitting a second shift at the hospital and said she'd roll in about ten-thirty. Right now a small core were gathered comfortably in the former lobby, with its dusty bachelor-pad atmosphere of

stale cigarettes, stale beer, air freshener and leftovers. At one end the old gas stove on the fake fieldstone hearth made a faint hollow roar, a yellow-orange glow flickering behind its front panel. There was beer in the fridge; and the big plastic bong with the “Just Say No” sticker on its chimney sat on the coffee table, next to an ashtray, matches, and a bag of pale green bud. MTV was showing retrospectives of dinosaur-old bands. “Dear God, is that Dee Snider?” Dorcas suddenly said, pointing at the TV. (It was indeed.)

She and John Overstead were on one sofa, he with his arm round her shoulder. They didn’t go out as much now that they were married – “we’re quite Domesticated,” John liked to explain, “complete with suburban ranch house and all” – but the first North Carolina party John attended, after moving down from Ohio, had been one of Andy’s “holiday between,” so he’d made a tradition of it. Rick Yost was on the opposite sofa with his current girlfriend Eviva Raikes. She was wearing “Ricky-the-Stole,” her favorite thrift-store find: an actual mink stole, over eighty years old, from long before the days of political correctness and animal rights, the head still attached and the mouth worked into a clasp so that it could drape, tail between teeth, elegantly over a lady’s shoulders. She was eagerly talking music with Brendan and Karl, rhythm guitarist and bassist of Calisteo, on tour and between shows – the Tabu last night, the Wherehouse in Winston-Salem tomorrow – and staying in Andy’s ex-motel rooms. (Andy had a standing offer of crash space to any band that played the Tabu.) Their drummer Nick was slouched down in another armchair near the warmth of the stove, his knit cap pulled low on his forehead, a wavery wasted smile below. His fingers had earlier been drumming out complex rhythms on the chair arm, but were now still. Billy Heffernan leaned against the counter, his palms down against its ledge, as though ready at any moment to push him into motion.

Andy as always was spread out in his preferred spot, his “throne,” a huge ultra-deluxe Barcalounger. It had sat in the exact same place longer than any of them could remember, ever since he’d brought it back in triumph from a yard sale in Caswell County. It had holders for cups (or beer cans) and pouches for remotes, cigarettes and magazines (or stash, rolling papers and lighter). Buttons in the right arm reclined the back and raised the footrest; or rather, would do so if he got around to fixing the motors. It was upholstered in deep maroon velour, now worn bare in spots and patched in others, and spotted with cigarette burns and bongwater spills.

Andy grinned up at Billy, indicating Nick’s inert form. “Remember how Chuck used to do that?”

Billy grinned back. “Yeah.”

“Who?” John inquired. “Or as the grammatical owl would say, ‘Whom?’”

“Chuck McDonough. Used to go to grad school here. One of Dr. Dave’s students. When was that?” Andy asked Billy, who shrugged. “*Loved* live music. Loved the Tabu. He’d come to my parties and pass out in that chair. But earlier he’d be singing Bugs Bunny songs and stuff!”

“We both did,” Billy smiled.

John nodded. “A man of taste and discernment.”

Rick interrupted them. He’d been watching with some suspicion Eviva’s absorption with the band guys. “Andy, man, tell them how you got this place. You know he owns it.”

“Dad gave it to me!” Andy beamed and spread his arms, taking in the room. “His company fronted the money to build it. But they kept going bankrupt, because –“ he gestured again – “well, look; it’s too small. Twenty rooms? You can’t make a profit on twenty rooms.”

“Yeah you could,” Billy said. “Rent it as rehearsal space.”

“He already does, for free,” Rick replied. “You let me and Mickey Hill jam out here all the time. If he starts charging people’ll say fuck it. Did you call Mickey and tell him to come out? I hope he does. He needs to do some more Buckhorn Boogie shows.”

“So, like, you kind of inherited it?” Eviva asked Andy.

“Inherited? - Oh yeah. No. Damn! – lost my thought.” He tilted his beer and found it empty. “Hef, you wanna get me another Busch?” Billy sprang to his feet. Andy held the empty can up. “Anybody? Beer?” Nick stirred to half-life and raised a hand. Andy paused.

“Inheriting the motel,” Dorcas prompted.

“Yeah, yeah. They kept going bankrupt and the property’d kick back to Dad ‘cause he held the loan. The last owners skipped out on him; and about that time I was wanting to move out to the country, and I told him ‘Let me stay there and I’ll fix it up.’ Because they’d left it a wreck. Then after he died Ed and me each got half the estate, so I kept it.”

“That’s awesome,” Eviva said. “I wish somebody’d leave me a bar.”

John put the bong down and remarked, “I knew a girl in college who was set to inherit some money, and her stepdad tried to have her framed for murder so he’d get it instead.”

“Are you serious??” Eviva was appalled. “Did they stop him?”

John leaned back to reminisce in stoned comfort. “Trudy Horvath. She and I were both

in architecture school at Kent. She was a couple of years behind me. Yes, they did catch him; this friend of hers, Penny Froward, who was visiting, figured it all out. She was determined to help Tru so she questioned everybody and talked to the police, and figured it out. Tru's stepdad and step-uncle, I guess is the term, had lost a lot of money in a bad investment, South American oil stocks but the country had a revolution; money they'd snuck out of their jobs by sketchy accounting. Then her step-uncle shot her stepdad, and of course they caught him. He went away for a Long Time."

"Was she a journalist or something?"

"No; She went back to Rockville and became a lawyer. Specializing in wills, in fact, last I heard. Rockville, Maryland. I always remember that because of the REM song. *Don't Go Back to Rockville.*"

"If we're nice to him he won't sing it," said Dorcas, matter-of-fact. "So the moral of the story is —"

"The moral is, when I'm stoned I become a Digressosaurus."

"Who're you gonna leave the place to?" Billy asked Andy.

Andy shrugged and laughed. "Damned if I know. You think I got shit to leave anybody?" He picked up the bong.

"It's a good thing I don't try to code while stoned," John speculated.

"You got this place," Billy insisted. "Who'll you leave it to?"

"Everybody's got something to leave," Eviva said.

"My dad's giving me his '73 Charger," said Karl.

"That thing is *sweet*," Brendan added. "Fuck, man, he should give it to you now, not make you wait 'til he's dead."

"I leave my kit," Nick drawled.

"But all your porn, that's going with you," Brendan shot back. Nick raised his beer in silent agreement.

"The moral is, be careful what you ask for in peoples' wills," John concluded.

"You gotta make a will," Billy persisted.

Rick cut in. "He's right, you should. If you die and you don't have one the government takes all your stuff."

MTV had switched to a panel discussion on The Year In Music News. One notable item

was the death of rap artist C-Mac, from hereditary heart problems amplified by years of hard partying. He'd been extremely and diversely successful, with two platinum albums, a Grammy nomination, clothing, shoe and jewelry lines, and a record label (Grievous Wrekkids). Through some grievous oversight on the part of his staff, however, he had died without a valid will. His ex-wife, girlfriend, manager and parents were now squaring off for a nasty fight over custody of his assets. "Case in point," John remarked.

There was a clip from C-Mac's breakout hit, "Kut Awff." "Look at that," Karl said. "He's got so much bling on him he can't hardly move. That's what killed him."

"That's all his assets right there," Brendan agreed.

"Ohh, and it's got the same kind of women in it," Eviva sighed, in exasperation and sorrow. "Every rap video always has the same kind. They've all got these huge –" she gestured at her bosom – "like, *everything*s, and they're always in thongs doing stripper dances."

"It's what guys want to see," Rick said.

"Not because it's sexist – I mean, like, yeah, it *is*, but – it's, like, so *unimaginative*. They've been doing rap videos for years and years and years – can't they think of something new?"

"When you've got that much bling you don't have to think," Brendan said.

"*It was just one of those blings,*" John sang in a light frivolous tenor. "*Just one of those crazy blings; One of those bells that now and then rings...*" Dorcas rolled her eyes, but was smiling.

The pull tab of Andy's beer had broken off, so he'd dug out his Swiss army knife. As he searched through its various implements he said absently "I've been thinking about doing that."

"What, dying intestate?" John asked.

"Dancing in a thong?" Dorcas suggested, causing John to stifle an explosive laugh.

"Who died on the Interstate?" Nick mumbled from the depths of his armchair.

"Start my own label, like he did." Andy nodded at the TV. "Seriously, I'm thinking about it. I want to start one."

"Who would be on it?" Eviva said, intrigued.

"You know for years I ran sound at the Tabu. We'd record the shows unless the bands specially asked us not to. And I've got a whole room full of those old tapes. Man, in fact –" he turned to John – "if you can come out here some weekend and help me go through them, and see

what I've got."

"What kind of tapes?"

"Half-inch reel to reel."

John looked troubled. "I wonder what condition they're in. Magnetic tape doesn't age well. Are they boxed up?"

"In boxes, lying flat. They're in 14, next to the practice room. I've got a bunch of other stuff stored in there but it's mostly old furniture. And I keep the blinds and curtains shut all the time, so it doesn't get too hot. But I know I've got some amazing shows in there. Like from the Squirrel Nut Zippers when they were first starting, and same with The Old Ceremony. Two Dollar Pistols. All kinds of people. I bet I got about a dozen Sinnin' Saints shows. And what I'd do is, I'd go to these bands and say 'Hey, we've got these archival recordings of your Tabu shows, and our label wants to put them out on CD. We'd do like a 60 – 40 split in your favor.'"

"What if they said 'Screw you, those are our masters, give them back?'" Brendan asked.

"Then we'd give them back. That's how Ed always did it, from the start: we'd record the shows, and if they wanted the tape they got it. The last thing I want to do is screw anybody, especially bands. I just want to get these shows out there: they're great and I want people to hear them. And I'd want as much of the money as I could to go straight to the bands."

"If any," John said. "With downloading, I don't see how any label can make money."

"We'd do downloads too. That's something else you can help me with."

"You've got them to leave too," Billy said. "All your tapes. If they're archival they're probably worth money."

"No shit," said Rick. "I bet you got a gold mine in there. I'll help you out too. Me and John'll help you go through there, anytime."

"I'm not gonna do it right away. I got construction jobs lined up for the next four months. Maybe we can launch it next fall sometime. I've still got a lot of legwork to do. Like the legal stuff, and backing. Maybe I can get Dr. Dave and *Soundcheck* to go partners."

Headlights appeared at the top of the drive, and tires purred on gravel. Andy extricated himself from his Barca-throne, preparing to greet the new arrivals. Nick had begun quietly to snore. "There's Dee Snider again," Dorcas remarked, nodding at the TV, where Snider was chatting with the members of Blue Oyster Cult. "I wonder what's in his will?"

"I want his hair extensions," John said.

Dorcas turned to look at him. “And what,” she inquired, “would you do with them?”

John was stumped. “I don’t know,” he replied with a puzzled frown.

“Ugly son of a bitch, isn’t he?” Andy said. “But he doesn’t give a fuck. He’s happy. Ugly but happy son of a bitch. That’s the way to be.”

“Macrame!” John announced. Dorcas, Billy and Eviva all stared at him. “The hair extensions,” he explained. “That’s what I’d do with them.”

There were lots of big parties there in the post-motel days. Some became annual events, with old friends driving back from as far away as Richmond or Johnson City or Myrtle Beach. A guest, wandering with drink in hand between the bonfire out front and the makeshift stages out back where local bands informally played, could meet someone they’d seen on the bus that morning, or in a class three years earlier, or from so long ago and far away that there’d be an uncertain memory-check moment before surmise could dawn into delighted recognition. “Man, is that you? It’s been ages! How the holy fuck are you?”

Fifteen years ago one such guest, drunk and stoned on one such night, had what he insisted was a really cool idea: every year the party should take a group photo of itself, all of them lined up together like on Sergeant Pepper; or like, one of those “A Day in the Life Of” books, with a bunch of pictures all taken at the same time but in different places. Because, he tried to explain, here we’ve got that same whole eclectic kind of group, from different eras and backgrounds and professions, and with all these different vectors of connectedness...Andy, equally buzzed that night, might have agreed if he’d been paying attention; but he’d been distracted by a serious problem, serious enough that at one point he and Mickey got into an argument that might’ve ended in punches if Sally hadn’t stepped in. Then the next day he learned that Chuck McDonough had had to leave town, nobody knew for how long, because his uncle had died. The photo idea was forgotten, and nothing ever came of it.

A Sergeant Pepper grouping; “A Day in the Life Of” book: what might it have shown?