

SHAKIN' CRUSADE

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The Famous Shakes made their first big comeback, late in July of '89, three months after Denny Gale had run away to Los Angeles to become a heavy metal drummer. Hearing the Shakes interviewed on the radio, Denny resisted the urge for all of two minutes before he called his mother.

“Denny?” she asked.

“Yeah, Mom.”

The DJ had cut in. “This is your son, Dorothy? He lives in Los Angeles? And he’s a RBQ listener?”

“Seems so,” Dorothy said.

Denny could hear the reticence in his mother’s voice. Uncertain trail, unknown territory.

“I’ll bet you’re pretty jazzed to hear your Mom on the radio,” the DJ had said, filling the dead air. “What do you want to say to her?”

“Has she got the god damn six hundred bucks she stole from me?”

Years later, he would come across a web site which provided a sound clip of that show, along with other outtakes from such luminaries as Casey Kasem and Earl Weaver as they cursed their way into a pissant kind of fame.

Before that first comeback, Denny had never known his Mom had ever played in a band, let alone one as narrowly regarded as The Famous Shakes.

Back in May of that year, three days before he was supposed to graduate from high school in Poison, Montana, Denny had packed up a

rucksack with clothes, a copy of Ayn Rand’s *Atlas Shrugged*, his drumsticks, and his pawnshop guitar. He had been saving cash and growing his hair since his freshman year of high school, ready to get to LA, where he would form a band like Motley Cruë. Or maybe a band that hit it harder than Metallica or Megadeath. His own band, Gale Force, had just broken up because the lead singer wanted to rename the band “Poisoner”, and play only covers of Poison songs.

(“It’ll be great! We’ll be the best Poison cover band in Poison, Montana.”)

It took a week, and a threat involving duct tape and a pipe cutter, for Denny to pry out the singer’s real reason. Playing faster and thicker speed metal might impress the guys, but girls came to shows with love songs and ballads sung by sensitive singers, even ones with weak chins and thinning hair.

So, LA. Los Angeles in 1989 was like Mecca and Medina for metalheads. Denny had only waited this long to begin his pilgrimage because he thought Gale Force might re-group, and go to LA together. Plus, his Mom had demanded he pose in the class picture.

His minimal packing done, Denny had gone out to the shed to dig out his savings account -- only to find it gone. The coffee can was still there, but the cash - the six hundred bucks that would fund his rise to stardom - had gone Houdini.

So he went to track down his mother. Her shift cleaning rooms at the Scobey Motor Lodge ended at 3 P.M., so he knew she would be at her church of choice: the Funis Hair Tavern. Originally conceived as the “Fun

Is Here’ Tavern” by Johnny Bark, the owner/bartender, an illiterate (but inexpensive) neon sign maker had accidentally re-christened it. Johnny was too cheap to pay for another sign.

Dorothy was drinking her usual - crème de menthe shots with a beer chaser. Oly-Gold always, in the can, poured into a frosty mug.

“Why’d you take my money?” Denny asked his Mom.

“I don’t want you to leave,” Dorothy had said, sipping from her glass. “You still think you’re going to be in some big rock band, that’s your whole plan. Your stupid plan. So you aren’t ready to go anywhere.”

“The *fuck* I’m not!” Denny had shouted, and the argument was over. Dorothy Gale claimed to all her friends at the Funis Hair Tavern that she was the most lenient mother in all of Poison, maybe all of northeast Montana. But she would not tolerate cursing or foul language of any kind. When anyone used that kind of language around her, she refused to speak to them until they made amends. A simple “heck” or “dang” might be excused after a quick apology, with punishment expanding exponentially after that. The previous summer, Denny had called Dorothy’s *boyfriend-du-June* a “lying shitstick”, and Dorothy hadn’t spoken a single word to her son until he had re-tarred the driveway over the Fourth of July weekend.

So that was that. Dorothy had stolen Denny’s travel fund.

It wasn’t that Dorothy Gale was a bad mother. Not a good one, either. Denny’s one fond memory of Dorothy Gale was of her playing music for him when he was a toddler. But when he got old enough to talk, he discovered that his mother didn’t have much to say in return. She went to work, made beds and mopped floors, had a drink or two, then came home,

ate with her son, watched some TV or read, then went to bed. What was there to say about that?

In Advanced Sophomore English, Denny’s teacher, a cranky old bastard, had forced the whole class to read the Odyssey. The only thing Denny remembered was the teacher pointing out, right near the end of the poem, after the suitors had been killed, and Odysseus was reunited with his wife and son after more than a decade gone, he smiled. For the first and only time in the entire poem, the wily Greek smiled, a holy smile.

Denny tasted his mother’s smiles as the same rare fruit. Anger was more common, but not by much. Mostly, Dorothy Gale specialized in frowns. Her cold stare was world class, one that a Spanish inquisitor would have approved for use in scourging heretics and unbelievers.

One accidental fuck, and his travel fund, was gone, baby, gone. What would Jesus do? What would Tommy Lee do?

An hour later, Denny had crowbar’d open the locker of the varsity middle linebacker for the Poison High School Cowboys. The linebacker in question had bragged in public about driving over to Scobey to meet with a Sioux drug dealer named Potsy. For a wonder, it turned out the linebacker wasn’t lying. Denny left the steroids, but took all the other drugs.

That May of ’89, Poison, Montana had been in the middle of a year-long pot drought, the worst northern Montana teenagers had ever seen. So news of a fresh supply spread like Christianity through Rome. Denny moved dime bag after dime bag, until he had made back his travel money and more in only three hours. After that. Denny cut the dime bags with oregano and green tea, and still sold all his remaining stock in another hour

and a half, until all he had left was one small bag full of crumbs and seeds. At which point, a consortium of desperate freshmen showed up.

Denny had stuffed a one hitter with a minimal amount of pot and a bunch of seed pods. “You hear that popping sound?” he demanded after snapping closed his zippo. “That’s because of all the extra THC.”

Denny handed the refilled one hitter to the freshmen and watched them suck. These were the kind of guys who would get high from smoking two Marlboro reds, so even sucking on the dregs of a one hitter would be enough, provided he primed the psychosomatic pump.

“The seeds are there at the bottom of the bag, soaking in all the THC juices. You feelin’ it?”

Both freshmen nodded their heads while trying to hold smoke in their lungs. Denny hustled them for 25 bucks for the “premium seeds”.

Briefly, as the freshman staggered away, Denny considered the possibilities of following a career path as a full-time drug dealer. It wasn’t the thought of the DEA that worried him, but what the linebacker was going to do when he found out who had stolen his stash.

All Denny had left was the pot he had kept for himself, plus the film canister full of what Denny took on faith was about two hundred dollars of pretty good crystal meth, because the linebacker had written “good meth” on the canister in bright yellow marker.

The next day, Denny came in to the school, to pose for the class picture. He had his rucksack with him, the cash as well, and planned to hike straight to the bus station from the gym bleachers where the 173

members of the Poison Graduating Class of 1989 were posing for their portrait.

After all the lining up by height, Denny was in the back row, standing next to “Fat” Phil Gundy, who played tuba in the marching band. Fat Phil worked the night shift in a convenience store, and looked like a good bet to be doing that until the 10 year class reunion, and all subsequent ones.

(Fat Phil beat the odds, though. Four months after graduation, he stuffed his garage full of carbon monoxide while he sat in his shitbox Dodge and played Boston’s first album as loud as he could. His note said, in part, “Yesterday, I sold my ten thousandth twinkie. I also figured out high school was going to be the high point of my life. And high school sucked. I stole the money for the tail pipe hose from the register, so please take \$6.87 out of my last paycheck.”)

“I heard you got stuff for sale,” Fat Phil Gundy said, loud enough to make Denny cringe.

“I already sold it,” Denny said, trying to keep his voice down.

Fat Phil looked offended. “What, you ain’t gonna sell to the fat guy? Just because I’m Fat Phil, I don’t get to get high?”

“Phil, could you shut the fuck up, please?”

“I’ll shut the fuck up when you sell me some pot.”

“I’m out of pot,” Denny said. He wasn’t going to give up his private stash.

“Horseshit!”

The photographer looked up from behind his camera, looking for who had cursed. Then, shrugging, he yelled one more time for the students to keep still, and he started the long exposure camera in its slow pan from left to right across the crowd.

“No, for real.” Denny thought about it. “I got some meth, though.”

“Really?”

“Sure. 50 bucks, if you want it.”

“Let me see,” Phil Gundy demanded, as the camera turned toward them.

If someone had looked closely at the final photo, they could have seen Denny slipping a plastic film canister filled with crystal meth to Fat Phil Gundy. Fat Phil stared at the meth until the crowd started to break up after the photo was finished.

“Are you gonna buy or not, Phil?”

“I’ve just never seen meth before. How do I know this is for real?”

“I don’t have time for this.” Denny grabbed the film canister back. He slung the rucksack, hiked up his black jeans, straightened his shirt with the Sabbath logo (he had dressed up for the bus), and walked away.

Later, after hearing about Fat Phil’s suicide note, Denny felt bad for not giving away the meth. It hadn’t cost him anything, and might have given Fat Phil Gundy something to live for.

By July, when The Famous Shakes made their first comeback, Denny made himself a list of what had happened to him since getting to LA.

Played in five different metal bands. Drummer for four, lead guitar for one.

One band stayed together for only one practice. One band met for the first practice, then broke up when the guitarist and the singer got into a cop-calling fistfight in the parking lot over the name of the band. (“Fuck” versus “The Fuckers”.) Even the two that practiced had trouble getting gigs. There were lots of clubs that would book metal bands, but the booker had to be fairly sure the whole band wouldn’t actually OD on stage.

Spent half his money. Got the rest stolen by the bass player of band #2. Got the meth stolen by the lead singer of band #4. When the meth ran out, the singer stole and pawned Denny’s guitar.

Let two different women pay his rent for the apartment he was sharing with three other guys (and unofficially with half the LA metal scene). Let four different women buy him food. Let those same women buy him all his drinks for a solid month. Caught a bad case of genital warts, fucked a girl in the kitchen of a party after he found out, then got her to pay for the clinic visit for both of them.

And he’d played a grand total of three gigs.

Denny knew he was a good drummer. He could play every Neil Peart drum solo by heart, even tapping his sticks between the stains on his filthy mattress. He could keep perfect time while drunk on tequila or beer or whiskey, or high on meth, heroin, coke, and acid. He hadn’t tried playing while ‘shrooming yet, but figured he’d be fine. He had cool moves, like flipping the sticks in the air, spinning them like Tommy Lee, and a number of others, including a move he had developed all on his own: “The Flaming Drumstick”, which required some glue, a butane lighter, and a song under two minutes. Guys on the Strip called him “Dude” and high-fived him,

women offered to eat him like a communion wafer after every live set.

What more proof of talent did anyone need?

But he just couldn’t catch a break. Not the right band, nor the right songs. No one wanted to sign any of his bands, make a record with them, let alone play them on the radio. It was so bad that Denny was considering an offer to play drums in a Doors cover band called “Unhinged”, just to see what making money for playing music would actually be like.

And then, driving to get midnight burritos in a Camaro he had borrowed from his latest ATM-girlfriend, wondering if he could get this same girl to pay for penicillin shots, he heard his Mom’s voice coming out of the radio.

And then the DJ played a song.

And Denny heard his Mom singing.

Two minutes and 28 seconds later, Denny had finished his successful search for a pay phone, and was waiting on hold.

From the Zine “John Bonham and the Mudshark Vagina”, Issue #8, 1990.

“Transcript of a KRBQ Interview with “The Famous Shakes”. July, 1989.”

DJ Mark Dark: So your Dad is who made you play? Don Gale? He’s who came up with the idea for you three sisters to form a band?

Dorothy Gale: Yeah. He made the town hall over in Scobey --

DJ Mark Dark: That’s Scobey, Montana.

Dorothy: (pause) Right. Montana. Dad made them let us play. He was the manager, he bought all the instruments. He came up with the name. He got us mail order lessons from Minneapolis.

Donna Gale: We wrote all the songs.

Dorothy: I wrote all the songs.

(Silence.)

KRBQ: So how long did you play together before you put out your album, “All the Fish in the Sea”?

Donna: Three years. I played drums. Dina and Dorothy played guitar.

Dorothy: And I sung.

Donna: Right. She sung.

DJ: Well, it’s just an incredible album. Let’s listen to the first track, “Shakin’ Things”.

(Song, 2:28)

DJ: That was “Shakin’ Things” by The Famous Shakes. Recorded in 1969. I have two of the three sisters who made up the band on the phone right now, making their big comeback, here on KRBQ, community radio.

DJ: Dorothy and Donna Gale, that’s just an amazing song.

Donna: You’re kidding, right?

DJ: Um, no. I really like it.

Donna: God, why? My drumming is terrible. I can’t hardly listen to it.

Dorothy (shouting): He likes it! Why do you got to ask stupid questions all the time? Why do you always screw everything up?

(Silence.)

DJ: Well, I’ve heard stories about you guys -

Dorothy: What? What did you hear?

DJ: Um, that you all dropped out of high school and played music all day, every day.

Dorothy: Oh.

Donna: Well, that’s all true. After a year, Daddy took us all out of school and home schooled us. We’d wake up around 6AM, do chores, do exercises.

DJ: Exercises?

Donna: Jumping jacks, somersaults, running. Like in gym class. And Mama would do some lessons.

DJ: OK.

Donna: And then we’d play and play and play. Daddy never thought anything was good enough.

DJ: What’s the story behind the name?

Dorothy: Shakes, cause that’s what Daddy called dancing. And ‘famous’, that was --

Donna: Wishful thinking.

Dorothy: Why don’t you shut your pie hole, Donna?

DJ: OK, here’s another track from “All the Fish in the Sea”. This is “Paw Paw the Tiger”.

(Song, 2:15)

DJ: So was that about a boyfriend or something?

Dorothy: It was about my cat.

(Silence.)

DJ: We have a call. Caller, where are you calling from?

Caller: From a pay phone.

Dorothy: Denny?

Caller: Yeah, Mom.

DJ: This is your son, Dorothy? He lives in Los Angeles? And he’s a
RBQ listener?

Dorothy: Seems like.

DJ: I’ll bet you’re pretty psyched to hear your Mom on the radio.

What do you want to say to her?

Caller: Has she got my goddamn six hundred bucks she stole?

(Song, 2:36)

DJ: That was “All the Fish in the Sea” from the album of the same
name by The Famous Shakes. I have two of the original Shakes on the
phone right now, on KRBQ, community radio.

DJ: So, any chance of the band every playing together again?

Donna: No.

Dorothy: No.

DJ: So why did you stop playing together in the first place?

Dorothy: Daddy had the heart attack --

Donna: Dorothy, that’s -

Dorothy: -- and Donna ran off to get married, and Dina went with
her -

Donna: -- the whole story, and you -

Dorothy: -- and then Daddy had the other heart attack and he died.

And no one wanted to play any more after that.

Donna: That ain’t -

Dorothy: That’s what happened.

Donna: No! Dorothy Gale, you know as well as I do that Daddy was foolin’ on Dina, and she came to live with me and Jimmy.

DJ: Um -

Donna: And then the cops came, and Daddy had the heart attack, and -

Dorothy: (Unintelligible). You --!

(Song, 2:17)

DJ: That was...uh. Yeah. That was “Daddys Are Best Pals” by the Famous Shakes. Yeah.

DJ: We have to play some commercials now. Then we’re coming back with 10 in a row, including a double shot of Guns N’ Roses. KBRQ, community radio.

End Transcript.

Denny never got his six hundred dollars back.

He took the gig with the Doors cover band.

The second comeback of The Famous Shakes came 15 years later, ten days before Denny’s band Gale Force was about to sign a record deal with Gerald Pastrick’s Gunfighter Records. Pastrick was a Hollywood asshole from a long line of assholes, and he had all the vices of ego and money from his producer and agent forbears, without any of their virtues of success. Instead, Pastrick claimed he was heading up a crusade to change the landscape of music, by putting out “authentic” records, including punk,

hip-hop and country. The music was uniformly bad, but written and created by people who were seen as telling true stories.

The idea of a bluegrass record made by a 33 year old studio musician, who had a small house in Los Feliz, two growing kids, a medium-sized alimony payment, and guitar credits on no less than four top-ten pop hits in the last two years (under the name “D. Shakes”) would have been horrifying to Pastrick. But other, better, labels (like Chicago’s Bloodshot) had already passed on the album.

So for this album to ever see the light of day, to be distributed, to be public, Denny was pretending to be a longtime bar musician, living in Montana, who wrote country songs about depression on the prairie. Denny’s Aunt Donna had agreed to send all correspondence from a Post Office in Scobey. Whenever Pastrick called the cell phone Aunt Donna had bought and sent to him, Denny affected a cowboy accent that would have people in Poison shaking their heads in confusion.

During their one and only meeting in LA, Pastrick had taken one look at Denny and said, suspiciously, “You’ve got all your teeth!”

“So is this guy your only choice?” Aunt Donna had asked during one of their phone calls.

“I have some friends who might put out one of my albums.”

“So why not ask them instead of this dope?”

“Because I wouldn’t ever know if they were doing it to be nice, or because the music was good enough,” Denny said.

“Didn’t you tell me this Hollywood Cowboy has got all the musical taste of a wet fart?” Aunt Donna asked.

“Yeah. All he cares about it how ‘real’ someone is.”

“So,” Aunt Donna said, “you’re pretending to be someone you’re not so this guy will believe you’re real?”

“Yeah.”

“How long do you have to live in California before this starts making any sense?”

“I’ll tell you as soon as I find out.”

Aunt Donna laughed, and then said, as she had a hundred times before. “You know, you *hated* country music when you were growing up.”

“There’s a story behind that,” Denny said. And then refused to tell Aunt Donna the story, as he had refused a hundred times before.

After three years playing with the Doors cover band, Denny had been hired to play drums on a pop record, the kind sung by an overconfident, big-titted teenager for her insecure, flat-chested sisters. While recording the first track, called “Hit Me With Your Groove Stick”, the producer had stopped to scream.

“If you want me to replace your sorry ass with a drum machine, just say the word,” the producer said.

“What do you want different?”

“It’s a love song, you fucking idiot. It’s a sexy love song. A drum machine isn’t sexy. But you ain’t either, if you don’t sex up the song. Can you love this song up?”

Denny nodded his head. It was a terrible song, and at that moment, Denny hated it more than he hated the idea of Hitler marrying Staling and

having Celine Dion for a daughter. So Denny put all that hate into the next three minutes and 35 seconds of drumming.

“Perfect!” the producer had said. Number one single, it had been. The power of hate, rhythmically driving the song up the Top 40 charts. Dance to the hate, kids!

A hit single has a strange power, so Denny got more and more drumming work, then guitar work, and finally as a songwriter. In the last 10 years, he had gotten writing credits on six Top 40 singles, on various charts. Not a single song charted any higher than #29, but that was enough to have a steady career creating marginally successful album filler.

Denny could work in almost any musical style, but there was a clause in this contract with the devil he had failed to read. His hatred for these songs made him good at making them. But after hating a type of music for work, he found himself unable to listen to that type of music ever again for pleasure. Pop songs, dance songs, metal, R&B, and almost any other style that could be heard on the radio. And many that could not, including a drumming session he had done for a top-selling polka band from South Dakota. After that job, Denny realized that if he had to be full of hate to play the cheeriest music in the known world, he had a problem.

And now he couldn’t listen to the Beer Barrel Polka anymore.

As he got more and more work playing music, there was less and less music he could hear. It was a willful deafness, with music replaced in his head by the swelling sound of mortgage payments, jazzy bank accounts, funky fashion statements, the rhythm of retirement plans, and the blues of higher tax brackets.

After co-writing a metal song so he could pay his divorce lawyer, Denny lost his ability to hear the last bit of music he enjoyed in his record collection. After signing the final divorce decree, Denny had taken his vintage collection of over 600 records, and sold them for \$50 at a used music store.

Leonard, the owner of Leonard’s Used Music, had been overcome with delight until he looked into Denny’s erinyes-ridden eyes.

“Are you all right, man?”

“Sure,” Denny said. “Fine.”

“You know these records are worth a lot more than fifty bucks, right?” Grudgingly: “Some of them are worth fifty bucks all by themselves.”

“Are you going to buy them or not?”

“Sure! Yes!”

Denny sat and lost track of time while Leonard unloaded boxes from Denny’s Audi. Finally, Leonard came over and handed Denny a receipt.

“Hey, man,” Leonard said, “I also want to give you store credit for five hundred bucks, okay?”

“Sure,” Denny said. He would never use it.

“Who should I make the store credit out to?”

Denny thought for a moment. “Fat Phil Gundy.”

Leonard wrote down the name on a card, handed it to Denny.

As Denny was getting into his car, Leonard came running out, calling to him. He scurried across the sidewalk and handed Denny a CD in a clear case, with a title scrawled on it in black marker: “Sad Songs”.

“I burned this CD a while back when I broke up with my girlfriend.
It helped some. I think you should have it, man.”

Denny shrugged and tossed the CD into his car, drove away.

An hour later, Denny parked his Audi in his garage. He turned off
the car. Closed the garage door.

No need to show off to the neighborhood.

Denny duct-taped his new hose to the exhaust pipe, then trailed the
hose through the open back window of the Audi. He got back into the
driver’s seat. He turned the key part-way, turning on the battery but not
starting the car.

Something was missing.

He thought for a while.

He thought: *I think I need a soundtrack for this.*

He noticed the “Sad Songs” CD laying on the passenger’s seat.

Right title, he thought. *Maybe this will do.*

Car still unstarted, Denny slipped the CD into the stereo.

First song: Bobby “Blue” Bland. Denny had swiped a Bobby Bland
guitar lick for a song two years before. No good.

Second song: Janis Joplin. No rock!

Third song: No Doubt. No pop!

Denny forwarded through the entire CD of 22 sad songs, finding not
a single note of music he hadn’t learned to hate.

He ejected the CD, threw it back onto the passenger’s seat.

Started the car. Lay back in his seat. Closed his eyes.

Then thought: *I don’t want to be found with this shitty CD sitting next to me.*

He rolled down the window and threw the CD out onto the garage floor.

Then thought: *Hell, that’s still too close.*

Twenty minutes later, Denny stormed into Leonard’s Used Music, flung the CD at Leonard and screamed, “This CD sucks! I can’t commit suicide to this!”

After five days, and promising to seek counseling, Denny had used Leonard, and all the store credit Leonard had given him, to put together a proper collection of songs sad enough to commit suicide to. Bluegrass like Bill Monroe. Old country, like Hank Williams, not new. Woody Guthrie.

And finally, Leonard had pulled out a mint copy of “All the Fish in the Sea”, the first and only album by The Famous Shakes.

“This is one of the saddest records I have ever heard, man,” Leonard said.

Listening to it in the store, cringing at how bad it was, Denny decided to pay Leonard the \$300 he was asking for the record.

After the disastrous KRBQ interview back in ‘89, Denny had tried to call his Mom, but Dorothy had been offended beyond all previous experience by his call-in. Both the embarrassment of the money question, and the cursing, all in one, had angered her more than her sister talking about their abusive father. Denny didn’t know what he could do to make amends. But he did get in touch with Aunt Donna.

They started out talking about playing drums. Then about his mother. How his mother had hated it when the band had broken up, had gotten pregnant with Denny soon after their father’s death.

“I think it was the one and only time your mother had sex.”

“What about all her boyfriends?”

“Why do you think they always break up so fast?”

Denny learned to accept that his mother still wouldn’t talk to him. He would send money home sometimes, through Aunt Donna. A card on birthdays, and holidays. One year, he shipped a full dinner from Carson’s in Chicago, enough barbeque ribs to feed a starving army.

And he continued to listen to “All the Fish in the Sea”. It took a long time to get past the cringe reaction. All the songs sounded as if the musicians had played in separate rooms during the recording, deliberately starting on different, mutually contradictory beats. The lyrics were so simple, Hemingway simple, they made no sense.

“Best pals, they say
Daddy’s are best pal, they say
The world will never go away,
But Daddy is here to stay”

The Minneapolis Mail Order Music Lessons which had made The Famous Shakes possible had never included a session on “how to tune your instrument”. He could hear his mother and his now-in-heaven Aunt Dina forming chords, but with strings out of tune, up a half step here, down a full step there.

After a year of dedicated listening, Denny finally noticed the part where his mother cried.

In the middle of the second chorus of “Denver is a Place”, Denny heard Dorothy Gale let out a sob before she came back in on the line, “A place too nice to see”.

Aunt Donna told him, “That’s where we recorded the album, in Denver. Dorothy wrote that song the weekend we recorded all the songs. It’s the last song we did.”

“I know all that. It’s on the web site.”

“Web site?”

“Donna, The Famous Shakes have fans. There are a lot of people out there who love this record, who think it’s a masterpiece.”

“Nuts,” Donna said. Donna had listened to the record only one time all the way through, when her father had brought a box full of vinyl pressings back from Denver. She said that’s when she realized how terrible they really were.

But Denny was coming to agree, more and more, with the nuts. The album was like a movie, one by Herzog or Lynch, the kind where you have to get past the boredom and the apparent incoherence, through to a place where the boredom became interesting and the incoherence sounded like genius. And that was without being stoned, even.

If you waited for those moments of clarity, it felt like words from a burning bush.

“Donna, why did Mom cry on the recording of ‘Denver is a Place?’”

“Cry? Your mom? I don’t remember her crying.”

“I’m pretty sure. I can hear a sob on the record. With Mom, that’s like someone else’s nervous breakdown.”

Donna thought about it. “Well, she really liked Denver. She hated to leave when we stopped recording.”

And that was the first time Denny ever heard about his Mom liking something. Even her crème de menthes and Oly Gold were things she did, not things she ever appeared to like, let alone love. It made him feel closer to her, even if they weren’t actually talking.

Then, one day in June, he got a call from his Aunt Donna.

“Your Mom wants to get the band back together.”

“Aunt Donna?”

“Who the hell else would call about your Mom and her band?”

“Why is this news? Mom wanted to get the band back together since that stupid radio interview.”

“It’s news because she has an offer to play a live show.”

“You told me she gets calls like that all the time from weirdo fans. How does she know it’s serious?”

“The guy already sent a check. And it even cleared.”

“Where’s the show?”

“LA. A birthday party for some rich guy. Turns out it’s the same guy who did that interview, back in ‘89.”

“Mark Dark?” Denny asked with a raw, painful sensation in his stomach.

“Yeah, that’s the guy.”

Mark Dark had gone on to become one of the biggest producers in the LA scene after '89. He had made a name picking songs by local acts who broke big, then started working as an A&R guy for a record label, then started producing records himself. From the alternative rock congregation where he had started, he converted to the church of safe, generic dance music. By that time his picture was showing up next to movie stars in the entertainment pages.

Denny had never worked with him, but had heard through the gigging grapevine that Dark was a Bishop in the High Order of Egomaniacs. He hired and fired at will, brow-beat people about smaller royalties, and spent exponentially more on lawyers than he did on musicians.

Aunt Donna explained that Dark was turning 40, and had decided to throw a large birthday party to celebrate. He had rented out The Roxy for a Saturday night, and four live bands were already announced to play, with acrobats from the Cirque du Soleil hired to perform during all downtimes. Wolfgang Puck was supposedly handling the food. All of this was relatively normal birthday party arrangements for rich Hollywood folk. But Dark had also let it be known that he was going to bring back one of the legendary bands of all time. Rumor ran amok, but Dark had kept surprisingly quiet that he wanted to produce the first live show in thirty years by The Famous Shakes. Even so, the invite list was being touted as more exclusive than the waiting list to become a Pope.

“So,” Aunt Donna said, “you want to play drums with us?”

Denny almost hung up the phone. Because the reason he knew as much as he did about the Mark Dark Birthday Bash was because Gerald

Pastrick was one of the lucky few on the invite list. The Gunfighter owner had mentioned it over and over again in his phone calls with Denny, on the apparent assumption that even a non-toothless guitar picker from Montana would be impressed by the birthday party of a Los Angeles jackass generally unknown by anyone outside of the parochial flight patterns of LA and New York.

Pastrick and Mark Dark, nee Darkovich, had gone to high school together, as it turned out. And Pastrick was obsessed with finding out who the mystery band was. Denny really didn’t want to explain this whole mess to Aunt Donna, but he was pretty sure that Patrick would start picking apart his cowboy cover story if he saw him filling in on drums for The Shakes at one of the biggest events of the LA year.

“I thought you played drums in the Shakes.”

“You know I got the arthritis. Hitting drums hurts too much. So I’m gonna play bass. That hurts, too, except there’s only about five total bass notes in all the Shakes songs. I can handle that, as long as I chow down the aspirin. But there’s no way Dina is ever coming back, unless somehow your Mom brings her down from heaven. And even then, Dina wouldn’t want to play.”

“So Dorothy said she wanted me to play, huh?” Denny asked.

Aunt Donna hesitated. “I thought you got all right behind that a long while back.”

“I thought I did, too.” In truth, he had. Speaking to his mother indirectly through Aunt Donna and the U.S. Postal Service was a lot easier than talking to her directly had ever been.

“Well, I tell you what,” Aunt Donna said, “you know your mother’s got more pride than the Pope’s got funny hats. So she’ll never admit out loud to being wrong. But how about this: I got her to agree to pay you to play with us.”

“Pay me? She doesn’t have to pay me.”

“Yeah, she does. Six hundred dollars.”

After another hour of telephonic argument, Denny got Aunt Donna to agree to his conditions. The two of them had to come out ten days before the show for practice. He was in charge of the practice sessions. And during the show, he was going to wear a disguise. Aunt Donna called back in an hour with an agreement from Dorothy Gale.

Three days later, Denny met his mother and aunt at the airport. Denny studied the two lean women as they walked off the plane. He thought they looked unique, somehow more real than the tourists and businesspeople scurrying around them. Like Norse goddesses, in sharper focus than normal people. The grey in his mother’s hair, and the black of her wardrobe made her Grim, some minor goddess of the Norse underworld. Aunt Donna, in preparation, clearly, for her first visit to Los Angeles, had gotten a good-looking haircut, but had combined it with a blonde dye job so preposterous that she was Grin, some assistant of Loki’s in charge of practical jokes. Denny had to laugh.

“You laughing at my LA hair?” Aunt Donna demanded. “I paid twenty bucks for this haircut!”

“No! It’s great! I love it! I think we may need to punk it up some, though. You know, for the show.”

Aunt Donna dug an elbow into her sister’s ribs, laughing. “*‘You know, for the show!’* Ha!” That phrase became Aunt Donna’s mantra for the remainder of the trip. Denny would suggest they get some hamburgers for lunch, and Donna would shout out, “You mean, for the show?”

Denny said, “Hi, Mom.”

Silence. A grudging nod.

Denny turned to Aunt Donna. “Mom’s still not talking to me?”

Aunt Donna shrugged. “She apologized; now I figure she thinks it’s your turn.”

Dorothy turned to Donna and said, “I never apologized for one thing, Donna Gale.” Then she walked off to the baggage area, Denny and Donna churning in her wake.

Denny tried to carry his mother’s luggage when it came down the moving track, but she silently grabbed it away from him. It amounted to one battered old suitcase and the guitar she had carried onto the plane with her. Aunt Donna, by contrast, happily handed over her electric bass and her over-stuffed backpack.

“Are you guys tired? Hungry?”

Aunt Donna said, “Yeah, I’m starving.”

Dorothy said to Aunt Donna: “We’re here to play.”

Aunt Donna talked him into stopping for hot dogs at a place where they could sit at tables outside. Aunt Donna goggled happily at the punks and the gang bangers as she stood in line, until she ordered four dogs, two for now, and “two for later”, she said to Denny with a wink, “in case the wicked witch don’t want to eat later.” Aunt Donna created a hot dog

masterpiece, a *mustard-hot sauce-onions-sauerkraut-red and green peppers-chili* dog, condiments piled so high they looked like wrecked cars stacked up at a junk yard. Donna washed it all down with a large Mr. Pibb. Dorothy carefully put down a single, protractor-straight line of mustard down the length of her dog, and then steadily chewed and drank from her paper cup of water while Donna barraged Denny with questions about Los Angeles.

Finally the weight of Dorothy’s stare got Donna and Denny back in the car and on their way to Denny’s house.

Denny parked in the driveway, and Aunt Donna asked, “Why don’t you use the garage?”

“I don’t park there.” He got out of the car, grabbed the luggage before either woman could say no, and led them into the house.

“Why don’t you park there?” Aunt Donna asked.

Denny set down the luggage, kept the instrument bags, and led them through the kitchen and into the garage. He flipped on the lights, opened the garage door.

“Because I set it up to be our practice space,” he said.

“Wow!” Aunt Donna shouted. “Is all this crap yours?”

“Some of it.”

Even Dorothy Gale seemed a bit taken aback. Denny had a lot of his own equipment, including a number of guitars and basses, effects pedals, a full drum kit. But for these practices, he had rented a full setup that replicated the one they would use at the Roxy, including tall stacks of

speakers, a professional sound board, a monitor, and a wireless setup for all equipment and headphones and microphones.

Denny took his mother’s old guitar and his aunt’s pawn shop bass out of the gig bags. “Why don’t you two look around?”

Dorothy Gale took a brief glance around, then pulled up a chair and sat, watching her son tune her guitar. Aunt Donna ran around the garage and plucked, struck, or tapped, every string, drum, and button and pedal in the whole garage. After a few minutes, she came giggling over to Denny. She was carrying a bass in the shape of a Jack Daniel’s bottle.

“Can I play this one instead?” she asked the air in the general area around Denny and Dorothy. Denny nodded and Dorothy shrugged.

Donna found where the bass mp was, plugged in and grabbed some picks out of her gig bag. She turned up the volume and started thudding out repetitive, dead simple bass notes.

Denny finished tuning the guitar. “You can grab a different guitar if you want, too.”

Dorothy took her guitar away from her son and walked over to the guitar amps, plugged in, picked a few wan notes.

Denny walked over to the drums and motioned for the two women to put on the headphones hanging from their mic stands.

“Can you hear me?” he murmured into his mic. Dorothy nodded shortly, and Aunt Donna threw a thumbs-up at him. “Great. I figured you guys would want to play the whole record in order, but it’s up to you.”

Aunt Donna looked over at Dorothy. Donna shouted into the mic, “That’s great!” Then they all rocked back as her voice came amplified into the headphones.

“Sorry,” Aunt Donna whispered. “We’ve been practicing for a while now. You just start.”

The first song from “All the Fish in the Sea” was “Shakin’ Things”, which started with two bars of a simple drum beat, the kind people have been dancing to since drums first got invented, maybe ten minutes after folks got kicked out of the Garden of Eden.

Aunt Donna came in on the bass, playing 8 notes to the beat. Aunt Donna tapped her foot hugely, and even started jumping in place a little bit.

Dorothy Gale played the first guitar chord.

Then she yanked off her guitar and threw it at her son.

Denny ducked away in time, and the guitar knocked over two toms, crashed a cymbal onto the floor, and ended up resting on Denny’s hip.

“What was that?” Dorothy Gale screamed.

Denny jumped up and stared at his Mom in shock, but Aunt Donna didn’t look the slightest bit surprised.

“What?” Denny asked. “What’s the problem?”

“I thought you *tuned* this thing!”

“I did. It sounds just like on the record.”

Dorothy Gale stared at him in blind bewilderment. Then she pulled off her headphones, turned, and stalked out of the garage.

“You dummy,” Aunt Donna said, fondly.

“What the hell did I do this time?”

Aunt Donna set down her Jack Daniel’s bass and her headphones, pulled up a chair.

“You had us sounding just like the record.”

“Yeah! Isn’t that the idea?”

Aunt Donna rolled her eyes. “Denny, I swear, I love you like my own son, but sometimes you are thicker than a pine plank. Your Mom wrote and recorded those songs over thirty years ago. Your Mom ain’t a home schooled teenager with a nut for a Daddy anymore. We weren’t allowed to listen to the radio or watch TV in our house.”

“I know all that.”

Aunt Donna sighed. “She owns a radio and a TV now, stupid. She knows what good songs sound like. For about fifteen years after we made that record, all people did was laugh at it. Laugh! And your Mom knew exactly why.”

“Yeah, but people love that album now.”

“They don’t love it, they just laugh at it different.”

Denny thought about it. “And then I tune her guitar to sound just like the album.”

“Right. Like you were laughing at her, too.”

“Damn it.”

Aunt Donna said, “Better go track her down and apologize. You got any beer?”

Denny went running after his Mom, eventually found her ten blocks away staring into the brightly-lit windows of a doughnut shop, where a TV was showing a Dodgers-Cubs game. He walked up slow, stood next to her. Cleared his throat.

“You know,” Denny said, “when I first started listening to that album, I had no idea how your guitar was tuned. I just couldn’t figure it out. But you know, I’m a pretty good guitar player. I know a little bit about music. You know how long it took me to figure out the tuning on ‘Shakin’ Things’? A year.”

In the doughnut shop, the Cubs scored two runs on a bases loaded double into the gap in left-center. After an inning or so, Denny went in and got two cups of coffee. A chocolate doughnut for him, a jelly for his mom.

“This was after I got divorced,” he continued. “So I didn’t work on it every night. I had to visit my kids during the day. Had to work. Some nights, I just needed to turn off my brain. Sometimes TV. Sometimes whiskey. But I kept going back to it. Change one string here, one string there. And finally, I could play the whole song, all the way through, with your crazy tuning.”

Then he shut up.

After the doughnuts were gone, and the coffee was turning lukewarm, and the Cubs had a four run lead going into the bottom of the seventh, Dorothy Gale turned to her son and said, “Why would you do a stupid thing like that?”

“You weren’t talking to me, so I figured listening to you was the next best thing.”

“Hmm.”

Denny drank some coffee, watched some baseball. “I can tune your guitar right. I have other guitars.”

“I know how to tune my own guitar. And we’ll play all the songs right. Like we’re a real band, not some freak show.”

“OK.”

For the next ten days, The Famous Shakes got into shape. The songs off “All the Fish in the Sea” turned into the peppy dance songs, or the sad rock ballads, or the mid-tempo wailers they’d always wanted to be. The only song Dorothy completely refused to do was “Daddys Are Best Pals”. By the end of the ten days, they sounded like a band. Not a great band, not even a very good one. Listenable. Adequate. The bass and guitar were on the beat, were playing all the right chords. The singer remembered all the words, and sang them in the right places. Denny even started singing harmonies with his Mom, whenever she thought it sounded good.

Around the fifth day of practice, Denny started enjoying himself. He started messing around the beat, to make thing interesting. Threw in drum fills he hadn’t used in years. He knew he had to back off when his Mom turned and glared at him. He knew he was in good shape when Aunt Donna grinned, giggled, or even cheered. “That’s some good drumming! You! For the show!”

The day of the show, Denny borrowed a van from a friend and packed up all the equipment. Then he and the other Shakes went shopping for a stage wardrobe, though Dorothy refused to wear anything else besides

her jeans and a white t-shirt. But Denny talked her into buying a new pair of tennis shoes.

Denny decided to dye his hair the same color as Aunt Donna’s. The hairdresser asked him four times if he was sure, but Denny just laughed. While they were at the salon, Donna got talked into a Joan Jett haircut. At a nearby clothes shop, she also found a pair of blue camouflage pants, and a pink blouse. Denny just shrugged and paid the bill.

Denny found some leather pants for himself, and a faded AC/DC concert tour t-shirt. He figured that if he added some colored sunglasses, there was no way Gerald Pastrick would recognize him behind the drum kit on stage.

And then, before they knew it, they were at The Roxy. They had been given instructions about where to go to unload. It was still fairly early in the day, but there was already a crowd forming outside, people who wanted to know who the secret band was. Packs of people came up and, assuming The Shakes were production assistants, asked if they knew anything about the secret band.

When Denny unloaded the final drum, as the door was about to close, he saw Leonard, of Leonard’s Used Music out on the sidewalk. He shouted for him to come over. Leonard, startled, complied.

“Do I know you, man?”

“Maybe you do,” Denny said. “Who cares? Do you want to know who the secret band is?”

Leonard electrified. “Yeah, man!”

Denny looked back and forth, furtively. He leaned in close to Leonard, and whispered: “The Famous Shakes.”

The door closed on Leonard’s gob smacked expression.

Setup time came and went. The Shakes went out to the bar to get a drinks. The bartender almost refused to serve Dorothy a crème-de-menthe and a beer chaser, but quailed under her glare. Denny nursed his beer and watched while guests filed in the front door, their expectant looks already amazed by the tables full of food, the acrobats, the neon art, the fire-dancers, and the pounding sound system.

Around 7:30, Mark Dark came out on stage, and introduced a DJ, then primed the crowd pump. “We got a lot of great bands ready to play for you tonight. For my birthday!” Mark Dark shouted. The crowd shouted back, a bit logy and listless from all the food and drink.

“I can’t hear you!”

Understanding their role in Dark aggrandizement tonight, the crowd made sure he could hear the second shout.

“That’s more like it.” Dark looked around the crowd, a satisfied smirk on his face. “A lot of great bands. Right. But the first band, coming up at 8 on the dot, is an incredible surprise. I guarantee people will be talking about this show, years from now! But for now, it’s still a secret.”

The crowd moaned, obligingly.

“That’s our cue,” Denny said, and The Shakes wandered backstage. They were in the prep room, chatting nervously, when a young woman came in the room. She was smiling in the way that devils smile after you sign the contract.

“I’m Mark’s assistant. He wanted me to thank you guys for playing tonight.”

“Sure,” Denny said, appointing himself the spokesperson for the group. There was something about this woman’s teeth he didn’t trust.

“And as a thank you, Mark prepared a huge surprise for you,” the Assistant said. “He had these clothes prepared especially for the show. He feels it would make the comeback complete.” The Assistant handed over three dry cleaning hangers, covered in plastic. She smiled; a feral smile, a smile that said, “Just try to say no. I love it when they try.”

Dorothy walked over and ripped the plastic off one of the groups of clothes. It was a simple brown dress, with a white blouse to go underneath. Dorothy looked up at the Assistant.

“That’s right. These clothes look just like the clothes you wore on the cover of your ‘All the Tea in China’ album. Obviously, since we can’t see your feet in the cover photo, Mark decided it was okay if you just wore whatever shoes you wanted.”

Denny started to say a sentence beginning with “fuck” and ending with “off”, but Dorothy overrode him.

“That’ll be fine, dear.” Dorothy guided the Assistant, who looked a bit disappointed at the lack of resistance, to the door. “We’d better get changed, then.”

Aunt Donna said, “You know. For the show.”

Dorothy closed the door and said, “Stupid woman.” Then she went back to her chair and quietly played chords and sang to herself.

Aunt Donna pulled out a pack of cigarettes, and her zippo lighter. After lighting the cigarette, she gathered up sheets of paper from around the room and twisted them into crumpled tubes.

At 7:55 P.M., The Famous Shakes walked out to where the Barracuda was standing, just off stage. She stared at them, angrily, opened her mouth to order them back downstairs to change clothes.

Aunt Donna said, “What do you think will make your boss angrier. The fact we lit fire to the clothes you gave us? Or having to wait for his birthday show to start?”

The Assistant ran away, snarling into her headset for fire extinguishers.

At exactly 8:00 P.M., Mark Dark got back on stage, and waved for silence. He announced: “Even though their first album came out in 1969, I heard it for myself in 1985. I thought it was the most amazing music I had ever heard. Better than the Velvet Underground, better than “Exile on Main Street”, better than “Let It Be”, either by the Beatles or the Replacements. And later, when I was a DJ, I went on a crusade to introduce this band to a wider audience. I even interviewed them, and it still stands as one of the most famous interviews ever conducted with a rock band. And now, the band you’ve all been wondering about. Ladies and gentlemen: The Famous Shakes!”

The crowd, most of whom had never heard of the Shakes, thundered applause for Mark Dark, now 40 years old, as Denny, Donna and Dorothy walked out on stage.

Dorothy looked out at the crowd. “Thanks for having us,” she said.

After over thirty years of expectation, after ten days of practice, The Famous Shakes were now as good a band as they would ever be. If you heard them play at The Funis Hair Tavern in Poison, Montana, you would think they were passable. A little bit sloppy, but having a good enough time. You might think to yourself, “They should play some good covers, instead of all those originals.” But if they played a cover, you would think about how much more you liked the original version. You wouldn’t remember a single note, but you wouldn’t mind the time spent.

Twenty-eight minutes and 8 songs later, The Famous Shakes finished their second comeback. Dorothy Gale looked out at the crowd as it offered up puzzled, vaguely puzzled applause. “Thanks for having us,” she said.

The acrobats and the fire-dancers and the DJ sprang out to fill the silence with excitement.

While the Shakes were standing silently and waiting for the adrenaline to wear off, Mark Dark stormed backstage, a passel of friends and hangers-on behind him. Gerald Pastrick was one of the main people egging Dark on.

“That’s not what I paid to hear!” Mark Dark shouted. “I paid to hear you play just like on your album. Not some fucking garage band!”

Dorothy stared silently at Mark Dark, who continued raving. Aunt Donna lit a cigarette and settled in. Denny started laughing.

Unfortunately, that brought Denny to Gerald Pastrick’s attention. “Hey, I know you! You’re that cowboy guy!”

“Right,” Denny said. “The one with all his teeth.”

“Gerry, shut up,” Mark Dark said.

“No, Mark! I’m putting out this guy’s record! Who the hell is he?”

“Who the hell cares?”

“I care,” Dorothy Gale said. “This is my son. He’s a musician here in Los Angeles, and a good one, though he makes some bad music.”

“He’s not from Montana?” Pastrick shouted.

“What about my birthday?” Mark Dark shouted.

“Bad music?” Denny asked his Mom. “You’ve heard my music?”

Dorothy said, “It’s all over the radio, isn’t it?”

Pastrick had thought about it, and was starting to get excited.

“He’s the son of one of The Famous Shakes? I’m putting out a record by the drummer for The Famous Shakes?”

Dorothy said to Denny: “Donna played me some of this country music of yours.”

“What did you think?” Denny asked.

“It’s amazing!” Pastrick said.

“It’s not very good,” Dorothy said.

Denny smiled.

“But you sound like you’re having a good time.” Dorothy turned to Gerald Pastrick and Mark Dark. “Fuck off, you morons.”

Dorothy Gale turned back to her son, and smiled a holy smile.