

Friday Night

The lights are out and I'm shoulder to shoulder with so many bodies, bodies dressed in ripped jeans and dark shirts, twisted logos and names screaming from chests, proclaiming their allegiance to this band or that ideology. I sway back and forth, crouching low so I'm not pushed headfirst into the wall of instruments before me.

Everyone is talking, talking hurriedly and in loud voices that reverberate off of the walls and burrow into my ears, which are already buzzing and ringing from the avalanche of noise that shook the basement only minutes before, when the first band wrapped up.

Someone hands me a can of beer and I crack it open, sucking the foam off of the rim before it spills onto my shoes, onto the floor, a hazard in the cramped space, just one more thing to knock me down and get me trampled. I sip and I pass the can to my right, into the waiting fingers of another, who does the same, tilting back and letting the warm piss-taste of alcohol slide down their throats. It's pointless to achieve any sort of plateau, the alcohol knocked out in waves of blood and sweat and piss and spit by the end of the thirty minute set, but we try, we try, and for a few moments, I can feel it building in my veins, and my vision seizes up and the room gets smaller, if only for a short while. A light above flicks on, staining our faces orange, the spotlight focusing on the one with the mic cable wrapped around his fingers, beads of sweat already forming on his brow.

A mustached boy, not much older than myself, possibly younger, sits in front of the drumkit, guitar in hand. He begins strumming out a chord or three, weaving them together into a song, his voice piping up above the words being spoken behind, but still faint, faint, too quiet to be heard, and we at the front let out a collective "Shhhhh" and

the noise behind us continues, so we do it again and again, and then we start singing along, singing the words we know, that we've been singing since the first day we sat in front of the record player and put needle to vinyl:

Nights spent drinking all the worry from my head, and days spent wandering and wishing I was dead. If only I could muster the words out of my mouth, I would sing, oh I would sing, I'd take the next train out. 'Cause I've been hoping, I've been praying there's some god, so when I die, I'm saved and found and I'm not lost, 'cause all he's done for me is take away the ones I love.

One final note rings out from a guitar, hitting the room like a ton of bricks, and everyone is suddenly quiet, and the acoustic guitar and the boy get up and disappear behind the walls of speaker cabinets and the man with the microphone around his fingers takes center-stage again, and we know that it's our time. The first electric chord rings out and a collective deep breath is drawn in and pushed out with enough force to propel a hot air balloon into the sky.

Another chord is struck and the band kicks into song one, turning the calm crowd into a tsunami of thrusting fists and moving lips.

It had been a long, long week. I had been sick with bronchitis, or so webMD told me, but I was still dragging myself to work and school, trying to wrap my head around the simple tasks I had to complete, despite the aching in my chest and the wheezing cough I couldn't hold back, still working hard because of what the weekend would bring. My

phone had been buzzing every five minutes since early Monday morning, the messages from different people but always the same.

Friday. Friday!

So stoked for the weekend. I miss you.

I'm pumped for sure.

March 26th = prelude.

Release.

Defeater was going to play at the Metal Frat on March 26th, 2010. We had been hyped on the band since they released their first record, *Travels*, in 2008 and all we talked about was seeing the band live, in the flesh, in a basement, somewhere in the Midwest. As long as we had cars and friends, we would tough four or five hour drives to spend three or four hours with great bands, only to make the drive home that same night. The band was one of those bands that you hear and everything just clicks. Their releases were storylines, the latest of which was an EP that detailed an African-American man's involvement into World War II and the post-war injustices he had to struggle against just to survive.

The Metal Frat was a Sigma Phi frathouse in Ann Arbor, Michigan. Shows were always on Friday nights and were, for the most part, free, although they charged us five bucks that night, cash that would have mattered when we were kids, but was now chump change, something that could be thrown away on an extra value meal. I was relieved to give it to people that lived on the road, that spent their nights on living room floors and their days in vans with bad upholstery, instead of spending it on greasy fast

food, something I was trying to ween myself off of, opting for home-cooked meals, the staple of adults everywhere.

We were going to be in the basement, a small space not much larger than my parents' living room, although it had a bar along one wall and no furniture, meaning everything was open to *us*, the ones that would be ruling the floor. There would be no room for anyone to move: everyone would be packed into the room like sardines in a can, the only refuge being the area behind the bar, where the merch guys would fold t-shirts and drink beer, peering out at their bands.

The rubber soles of my shoes keep me from slipping to my knees. With one hand on the bass drum, the other on my thigh, I can feel the wave behind me surging, pushing, wanting to engulf the band and all of their equipment, dashing them to pieces upon the rocks. The head of the bass guitar hits me in the eye and I reel for a second, enough to get pushed back, back into the crowd, my ears ringing and my vision clouded, a quarter of it from the alcohol pumping its way out of my system, a quarter from the instrument to the face, and half of it from the energy in the room, which lights up the faces of everyone brighter than the neon signs of the liquor stores, brighter than the lamps in the windows of the frathouses that line the streets.

Momentum carries me through the crowd and I'm at the back, away from the band, but the sound is still reverberating off of the walls, hard and fast, guitars clanging and clashing like fencing sabers, the drums like hoof beats and cannons. The whole scene feels like a war, but a war you can't help but fight, a war you're glad to be a soldier in. The shoulders are tight against each other and I'm locked out, away from my

friends, away from the light, and I'm planning my way back in: do I head around the outside and slip in behind the band? Do I try to push my way through?

The decision is made for me by a guy from northern Ohio, someone I've met multiple times but whose name always eludes me. He's much larger than I am, but his smile is much, much wider, and he holds out his hands, fingers interlaced, moving them up and down, the universal symbol for "up! up! and over!"

I'm propelled upward by his grip, my hands grasping at shoulders, my feet flailing delicately, so no one ends up eating the rubber off my shoes, and I float, limbs outspread, fingers tickling my back and legs and arms and neck as he carried me forward, toward the shore. Hours bleed into years and those bleed further into history, and I feel like I'm being born on a great wave of time, suddenly linked with those that came before me, surfing on the hands of friends I've never met, brothers I've never loved, people I've known for so long but whose faces are nothing but shadows, but familiar shadows, like the ones I used to watch cross the playground in the afternoon, silhouettes of trees and birds flitting by.

And as quickly as that feeling comes to me, it leaves, and I'm tumbling over the edge, body righting itself in mid-fall, hands still grasping and letting me down slowly, gently, so my neck doesn't meet the floor.

Seconds later, I take an elbow to the ribs, and I'm crouching again, one hand on the drumkit, one hand on my knee, my throat protesting as the words surge upward, the tsunami of voices already so loud, but my voice is still heard. We're all heard.

insert song lyrics here when you figure out which ones you want to use. it might be tough to remember which the best ones are but that's okay because you just have to find out what song they played last.

My best friend Gary and I didn't have anything to do that Friday, so we packed up at ten in the morning and made the two hour drive from Grand Rapids to Ann Arbor. We hadn't made the drive in some time, making it one of the longest drives of the year. It was sunny and bright outside, but Michigan weather dictated that the last days of March *had* to be cold, had to be windy as hell, so much so that my Honda Accord had trouble staying in the middle of the lane, buffeted by gusts that rolled across the flat farmland that stretched for miles between Grand Rapids and Lansing, and Lansing and Ann Arbor. We met up with Bobby and Nate, great friends and Gary's bandmates, and while they practiced, I tried to write papers that were due, but kept getting interrupted by my own inability to focus, the antsy nature of my inner child beginning to tread water.

We spent the afternoon sitting around, playing video games, singing "Love Fool" by The Cardigans to strangers via the *revolutionary* communications network, Chatroulette, and eating, always eating.

It had become a ritual and I wondered if anyone else did the same. Everyone looks forward to Friday as an escape, a leisurely time spent with friends, with family, with yourself, but how many others like us, kids just waiting to beat up on each other to a dissonant soundtrack, the normally unpleasant, jarring chords tugging at the strings that hold us up on the dance floor, were sitting on their couches, playing Magic: The

Gathering and drinking Four Loko? We couldn't possibly be alone in our thoughts, in our pre-game festivities.

It reminds me of the first time I went to a punk show. My friends and I showed up to see one of our favorite bands at the time, Mustard Plug, a band that is still playing shows and touring furiously, even though the guys in the band are in their forties. We were so surprised so surprised at how many other kids were at the show. It was in Muskegon, Michigan, at the Rock Harbor Café, a movie theater they turned into a place for shows, tearing down the movie screens and setting up bands on the tiny stage.

What stuns me, even now, are the groups of kids I see at every show. Every single time, I'm blown away by how many people show up, whether it's ten people at the Division Ave. Arts Cooperative for a local artist playing an acoustic guitar, or one hundred and fifty people at the Metal Frat waiting for their favorite hardcore band to strike that first chord.

I realize that it's not the location that unites us. It doesn't matter whether we meet at an art gallery in Grand Rapids, an old movie theater in Muskegon, a basement in Indianapolis, or a frathouse in Ann Arbor: where we are doesn't define who we are. What makes us who we are is who we surround ourselves with, and if that makes us immature, then we're immature. There's nothing else to it.

The sun started to set and we walked to the venue, stopping at the corner liquor store on our way out. The only thing that's changed since I was twelve was the inclusion of alcohol. There weren't many shows where we could watch with beers in our hands, so we take advantage of it any time we can. That was part of it, too: struggling with being an adult and being a kid at the same time.

After the show, my head was hurting and my hands were bleeding, and outside the boys were wrestling. They pulled moves from the World Wrestling Federation, from the meat-headed men we looked up to as kids, reproducing their battles and dramas in the backyard or on the playground. They were filled to the brim with post-show energy, veins still pulsating with adrenaline, any signs of drunkenness or a buzz of any kind sweated out long ago.

Only minutes before, I had been Suplexed by someone much larger than me, someone that didn't agree with the established rule, *you are going to get bumped into, deal with it, don't be a jerk*. I ignored the mantra manufactured by my friends, *no babies*, and whined about my possible concussion (I am always the one that whines about nothing and then tries to brag about the cuts on my hands, like every middle school boy), while Nate stood by the wayside, nursing a nose that had been on the receiving end of Travis' *People's Elbow*, the signature move of The Rock, back before he was starring in bad movies about tooth fairies and old video game franchises.

Bobby was heaving Gary into a trashcan, a trashcan outside of a frat-house-turned-punk-venue. I'm still surprised he didn't come out with used condoms clinging to his shirt. Someone had poured a packet of Crystal Light in his hair. He was sweating fruit punch.

Nap was thumping people in the chest with the back of his hand. I turned my head away. A moment later, when I looked back, he was holding someone much smaller than him over his shoulders, looking ready to perform the *Stone Cold Stunner*, signature move of "Stone Cold" Steve Austin.

We were all drunk and wild and craving dinner, but none of us wanted the night to end, and none of us wanted to be the one to say, “Let’s pack it up, dudes, this show is over.” The person that stands up and says that is looked upon as the *parent*, the one calling the shots, resented for bringing the night to a crashing halt, resented for telling the boys “It’s time for bed, you’ve got school in the morning.” The clock struck one, and we knew it was all over, that we had to go back to being grown ups with jobs and responsibilities, but we all kept clinging, wrestling, acting like children.

“We have to leave,” I said.

With my brothers in tow, we stumbled through the streets, clinging to the people we knew, shouting and waving at those we didn’t, saying our goodbyes until the next time, when kids in northern Ohio and Indiana, from both sides of Michigan and Chicago, Illinois, would meet in some room somewhere, walls graffitied with band stickers and black Sharpie, and pretend they had never left.