

Missing A Beat

Description

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Author's Memo

Missing A Beat examines the journey of two brothers as they attempt to leave behind a past marred by domestic violence but are presented with a choice that threatens the sibling bonds that have been their life raft.

The story is fiction. But some of its events are from real life, drawn from lived experience leavened with the observations, knowledge and shared emotions of the lives of family, friends and even strangers.

It is also informed by my experiences as a journalist covering cases of domestic violence including in depth interviews with survivors. As Missing A Beat took form, it challenged me to examine my own responses to this issue and how they evolved, culminating in a greater appreciation of the need to expose this societal disease to the disinfectant of sunlight. It is a goal of this story to encourage, if even in a small way, recognition of the need for education and safe pathways for victims to break the cycle of violence before it can manifest in other, uncontrolled environments, perpetuating its toxic legacy.

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Violence begets violence; it's a truism as old as humanity itself. The abuser bestows wounds not just upon their direct victims but, sometimes, on generations to come. Victims can never be truly free of

those wounds but how can they achieve futures of their own choosing, free of the imposition of the dark order of others? For some, it can be dedication to a calling, a craft, a hobby, a passion; in this case music. And to another person. Although the siblings' devotion to each other has evolved through the warped perspective of a vicious childhood, it is kneaded with that most foundational quality of humanity: love.

I deliberately portrayed the narrator as an unlikeable character. His seeming indifference to his mother's plight is at first shocking. This paints the superficial effects of the dysfunction that has been marred his childhood. It is natural to seek a scapegoat and those closest to hand usually are the targets, no matter how illogical that decision is. But if the reader can bear to stick with him, a deeper, more nuanced, explanation of the maternal relationship emerges; while there maybe residual disgust at his actions, there may also be understanding and perhaps, even forgiveness..

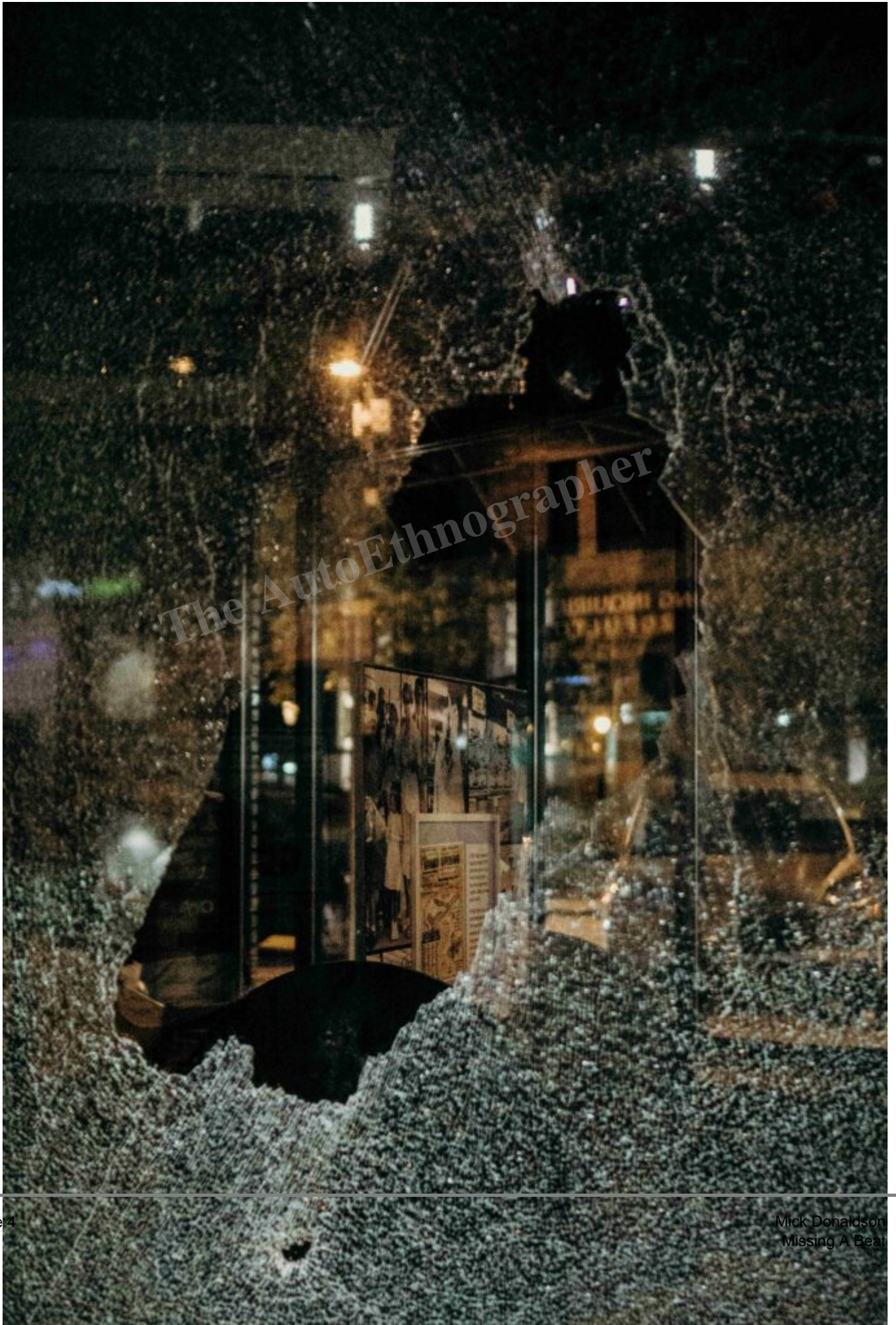
'Missing A Beat examines the journey of two brothers as they attempt to leave behind a past marred by domestic violence...

The older sibling, Billy, has become the subject of the narrator's idolatory. Billy is the first person the narrator sees attempting to break the shackles of the domestic violence cycle and thus assumes the aura of a supranatural being in the tiny, tightly corralled existence that is the boy's life. Billy though is tainted spiritually, emotionally and physically, characteristics that are lost in the early shine of his heroism. There can be a fine line between the heroic and the hateful.

The story also attempts to show how blurred the lines between good and evil can become; how justice can be defined not by altruistic standards but on which side of the fence you stand; whether there is an innate force for good in all of us that can be accessed when all hope is gone; and why some choose altruism over narcissism. It gives the reader the opportunity to view the unlikeable generously, even with kindness, as they attempt to forge a new path through hardship most will never be forced to endure; perhaps, through the portrayal of the extremes of the siblings' upbringing, the reader can discern a common thread of humanity, and not view the other, in whatever manifestation, as a species set apart, unworthy twice-over of love and compassion.

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By Amber Kipp for Unsplash

(Writer's note: This story contains depictions of domestic violence)

I watched mum's tooth fly across the kitchen. We all did, with interest, because it's not something you see every day. It seemed to be in suspended animation, twirling but hanging in the air, as if the combined power of four people's stares could hold it, like some sort of power ray that villains issued from their fingertips in sci-fi movies. The spell was soon broken by the sound of the tooth clattering on the tarnished steel of the sink top, like a dentist had just extracted it and dropped it into the metal tray held by an assistant, except it was no dentist it was dad, an ex-boxer.

'I watched mum's tooth fly across the kitchen. We all did, with interest, because it's not something you see every day.'

The extraction had come courtesy of an uppercut landed just as mum began doubling over from the effects of an orthodox straight left, straight right. Those combinations were delivered clinically with perfect timing, maximum impact for minimum effort. No wonder they call it the sweet science.

A cleanly knocked out tooth causes surprisingly little pain in the heat of the moment and even less blood. We could see it was a front tooth, because mum's mouth was agape, like when someone's been told they've got cancer or their kid's down at the police station. But mum was no sook, she sucked it up and tried to regather her composure, standing tall and ready for the next flurry. Because there was always another flurry whenever she was still on her feet. She'd never give him the satisfaction of cowering. There was a lot to admire about her.

My brother Billy though was the one. I was always felt safe when he was around, even when we were little kids and couldn't do much. He was only a year older than me. But he was always the Batman to my Robin even when we were older and it really shouldn't have mattered. Whenever I looked at him, tall, taller than me, square shouldered, narrow hipped, jet black hair worn down to his shoulders, I couldn't hide a proud smile, even now, it's the same. I took after mum tallish, slenderish, blondish, square cut but I had fast hands, that's what Billy said. Fast hands made up for a lot, he said, ain't nothing harder than fightin' someone with fast hands. He was the one who suddenly didn't feel hungry when sometimes we only had one sandwich between us at school.

'But mum was no sook, she sucked it up and tried to regather her composure, standing tall and ready for the next flurry.'

Just eat the fuckin' thing, he'd say, rolling his eyes, but he wouldn't speak to me for the rest of the day, sometimes not the next either. And he was crazy brave. The kids at school soon learned to leave him — and me — alone. When he was in Year 10 he took on a year 12 prick who was extorting lunch money from the junior kids. It was in the common room when we were all jammed in there on a wet, miserable afternoon and Billy told the kid to leave us alone, and the kid stood there laughing, saying what are you going to do about it?

And Billy stood up, gathering the chair underneath him in his hands, swinging it in one perfect, justice-infused parabola, holding it there at its peak for a moment, like he was making his mind up, you could see the bully's expression, which looked like the frozen smile on the scary Luna Park clown's face. But then it vanished beneath a swirl of timber and metal and sinewy teenager arms as Billy brought the chair down on him like he was just whacking a redback with a rolled up newspaper.

' She'd never give him the satisfaction of cowering. There was a lot to admire about her.

Billy went away for a while after that and it was a weird, out-of-kilter time of my life because it was just me and mum and dad for the first time I could ever remember. It was mostly okay until Friday nights when dad would come home drunk. I'd hide in my room, wondering what Billy'd do, then realising I could never do what he did anyway, I'd turn my head to the wall and cry, without making a noise, because crying always made dad worse. I'd read which I found hard by myself because I always read aloud so Billy could listen. He was whip smart, fixing all the neighbourhood's cars from the time he was 14, just have to listen to a motor and would pull out a spanner and a screwdriver and have it running sweet-as in a few minutes.

Or he'd look at a mass of wires in a broken amp and know straight away which went where and why, without a diagram or anything. Or whenever I was feeling poorly and in my quiet space, he'd know just the right thing to say, like I was the reason he kept his heart beating. Billy couldn't read but he could recite a story word for word after I'd read it to him. Once he recited the whole of Catcher In The Rye on a road trip to Melbourne. That was his favourite story. It's not too bad when the sun's out, but the sun only comes out when it feels like coming out, he'd quote, whenever shit was going down.

'Dad worked in a high pressure job, mum said, in a real estate company downtown. He had a lot of people to control but he must have done alright.

Sometimes Dad would come home smiling with little presents like a comic book for us and weâ??d sit around the living room like families Iâ??d seen on TV. Go on love, heâ??d say, all gentle-like with a smile that made you wonder whether all the other stuff came from, sit down and play the pee-anee. Mumâ??d play the piano and Billy and I would use the saucepans and wooden spoons as drums and dad would sing, he could sing, really good.

So could mum and when they went off together, well, they should have been on stage. Their favourite was Al Jolsonâ??s I Want A Girl. I still have their old LP with that song on it. Billy canâ??t stand it he just tightens up and turns away so I donâ??t get it out that much but it keeps going around in my head, all the time. It never, ever stops.

Dad worked in a high pressure job, mum said, in a real estate company downtown. He had a lot of people to control but he must have done alright and he was always winning awards, always looked smart, had the confident walk, not a dickhead swagger but the sort that made you think there was something else under there, like heâ??d look at you in the eye, eyeball to eyeball thatâ??s such a shock because people never do it, really, just think about, how long has it been, has it ever really happened, that someone drilled into your eyeballs with theirs and held it as long as they wanted, not just a quick look but really held it, their shoulders squaring up to yours, millimetre by millimetre.

‘He was always winning awards, always looked smart, had the confident walk, not a dickhead swagger but the sort that made you think there was something else under there, like heâ??d look at you in the eye...

Imperceptible but real before you know it, and anyone dumb enough to hold that look back, well heâ??d just whisper to them, donâ??t let fear stand in your way, and that was nearly always enough. But sometimes heâ??d come home after work and just lie on the couch, in his suit and tie, staring at the ceiling. He do that for hours. You couldnâ??t talk to him or make a noise. Mum would send us outside to play. Things are changing all the time, itâ??s hard to keep up, heâ??d complain to mum. Bloody bludgers, think they know everything. Lost Simon today, after all Iâ??ve taught him. Couldnâ??t believe it heâ??s gone to Rogersons, didnâ??t say a word to me. You wouldnâ??t do that to me, would you love? I wouldnâ??t feel whole without you. Itâ??d be the end of everything.

I look at mum now, put on weight, no wonder sitting around all day. She doesnâ??t look back at me. Sheâ??s looking out the window. I squeeze her hand. But she doesnâ??t look at me. Thereâ??s always the faint smell of piss about her these days. It doesnâ??t worry me. I owe her that much.

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well heâ??d just whisper to them, donâ??t let fear stand in your way, and that was nearly always enough.

We nearly died the night we met JayDee. Me and Billy, weâ??d been playing at the Royal Mail, him on the drums with the trick kicker he invented all by himself, me on the acoustic Gibson and singing, just for beers and tips, we always made good money but the air was crazy that night. There were flicks of heads and stares and guttural noises all mixed up in the hot air and there was broken glass crunchy underfoot and there was no balance, between the beers and the movement in the bar. It was all too fast, conversations were cut short that should have ambled along, even though they were about nothing. Hands were raised that normally wouldnâ??t be.

Maybe it was the heat. It was in the pub, just as sure and as solid and as visible and reckless as any of us. It was like one of those annoying mates who punched you hard in the bicep or put you in a headlock whenever you caught up, just pulling back from a fullscale fight, looking for your breaking point, draining then recharging, all the time, in a teasing cycle, your blood thinned and ran harder, everything worked harder, heart, lungs, sweat glands, squint muscles. Some people said they didnâ??t mind the heat. Liars. They didnâ??t have any choice. Had to work out in it, had to stay in it and had to sleep in it. Everyone minded the heat.

'But sometimes heâ??d come home after work and just lie on the couch, in his suit and tie, staring at the ceiling. He do that for hours. You couldnâ??t talk to him or make a noise. Mum would send us outside to play.

We leaned on the bar in a break and just took in the sights. We werenâ??t pissed but we werenâ??t sober, it was always like that when we played. It was Friday and that was good, not much work to do, just playinâ?? at night, neither of us worked much on Fridays. Everything got funny on Friday, time skipped by. There was a point in the day that if you walked out of the pub the heat-light would blind you and you would reel from the shock and feel helpless and hopeless and it made you think youâ??d seen all life had to offer and it wasnâ??t much, then at another point, much later, when there was darkness outside and you could see only bright shiny things, this didnâ??t happen so it was better to stay until much later.

Weâ??d played our last set and Billy was speaking to a girl, even though I could only see her back she oozed special. JayDeeâ??s uncle played in NeverCeded, the first of the indigenous rock bands to make it big when getting on stage in front of drunk white people when you were black and proud was still pretty combustible. They talked together in that real polite way when people were interested, really interested, in one another, listening carefully, not checking out anyone else, exaggerated, nervous laughter. I smiled because I loved the way people loved Billy. Once a girl asked me to join in with her and Billy, he didnâ??t mind of course but I only did it that once because it didnâ??t feel right, when you

love something so much you don't wanna share it.

'Things are changing all the time, it's hard to keep up, he'd complain to mum.

There was roughness in the pub and the people were caught up in it, it started, you never know how it started but it did and we wanted to protect JayDee and we whirled about and tried to hit something but nothing lined up for a bit Billy was being threatened with a knife and I tried to grab JayDee but she didn't need grabbing, she had tripped Mr Knife who was sprawled groggily on the floor so I tried to grab her again just because I could and someone was trying to pinch-close a gaping gash on their arm not us and I checked to make sure our beers weren't knocked over and took a quick sip as Billy was knocking over someone with a bar stool using just one hand like a shillelagh he was the strongest man I'd ever seen.

And I was using my fast hands and we forgot about the heat because we felt cold and suddenly balanced because this was what the night had needed a lancing and we were doing it and in the end people would be grateful then we were in the Valiant the red Valiant and we were jammed in the front bench seat with JayDee in between and the stick shift stuck up between her knees and I found it very funny and couldn't stop laughing and then neither could anyone else.

'I look at mum now, put on weight, no wonder sitting around all day. She doesn't look back at me. She's looking out the window. I squeeze her hand. But she doesn't look at me.

Billy revved hard, taking a speed hump so fast the big red car left the ground as it went over and the impact on the lowered front end nearly smashed the steering out of Billy's grip cause he was steering with just one hand elbow on the sill like he always did. The speed cleared us up and Billy pulled into a servo to get cigarettes and petrol. The street was thick with cars that night, people clogging the central parking bays. There was a hierarchy, with the late model muscle cars, tricked up V8s owned by the smug sons of the skippy mafia occupying the bays in the middle of the street, outside the Paragon, with lesser vehicles spreading out like wingmen in a fighter pilot formation.

The big red car was something different, not a V8 but classy none the less and rare, that's what Billy said. Need petrol shit this sucks it down it runs out of petrol just sittin' there when it hears me jangling the keys, the fuel needle actually falls out on the floor, that's how thirsty it is, Billy told JayDee who told him he was full of shit and Billy realised the bar was set pretty high and he'd have to try harder.

We pulled into the Caltex on the corner of the main street and Railway Parade. The parking bay was

full of tough looking cars, with grills that didn't sit quite right, different coloured doors, a dozen cars but you just knew there'd only be half a dozen working headlights between them none of the class that occupied the main street. The blast from the Valiant's hot dog exhaust instantly attracted attention, had to stuff it full of steel wool every time it needed rego.

'There's always the faint smell of piss about her these days. It doesn't worry me. I owe her that much.

JayDee hopped out and popped the petrol cap. Studiously ignoring the sly remarks, she filled the tank, impatiently pushing as the airlock choked off the fuel supply, braided henna hair slapping at her temples, neon light bouncing off her silver nose ring so it looked like a twinkling star. JayDee and Billy glided off to pay and get the cigarettes, JayDee's jeans talking, thugs, ugly dickheads, snide remarks, piss off, I yelled out the window head lolling on the door sill feeling that heat-charged courage again. A couple of the blokes who'd been in the pub tried to pull me out of the car, I collapsed on the driveway then one of them kicked in the door, adding to things.

Billy came back, ready to wade into the dudes with punches and headbutts he was fearless and strong but hopelessly outnumbered then JayDee walked up all casual, looking at them like she was window shopping, then grabbed a bowser hose and jabbed it into the back of one of the crew, who had formed a ring around Billy and me. The circle immediately lost interest in us and turned as one with a sick grin towards JayDee but she said nothing, standing their pointing the petrol nozzle at them, then slowly she reached inside her jeans pocket, pulled out a cigarette lighter and held it against the open mouth of the bowser gun, anyone wanna play flamethrowers, she smiled, so softly she must have meant it.

'...eyeball to eyeball that's such a shock because people never do it, really, just think about, how long has it been...

The group of hoods backed off and me and Billy backed off with them, not you you dickheads get in the car JayDee hissed at us and we took our cue, piling in laughing and feeling sober and scared and proud as all shit about her and we both wanted to marry her. I gunned the old car out the driveway, its low slung chassis sending a shower of sparks up as it hit the dip, accompanied by a last flurry of kicks and a hail of beer cans, it would've worked JayDee shrugged, answering our wide eyed gazes, I saw it in a movie once, been dyin' to try it. We winced as she lit up a cigarette.

JayDee had this cousin in Sydney who knew someone who managed bands and she got them to come down and listen to us one night but we didn't know it. Later on we got a call saying come up to Sydney some dude wants to hear us so we got everything into the Valiant one Friday and ended up at

the Phoenix Hotel on Parramatta Road. There was a band playing pub rock covers to a tough lookinâ?? crowd that had just got off the Harleys and we didnâ??t like our chances, a swab of the tables would turn up every substance known to man...

‘...has it ever really happened, that someone drilled into your eyeballs with theirs and held it as long as they wanted...

And a few others besides, a sign on a blackboard advertised Piss Weak Karaoke on Tuesday nights, a pregnant woman moaned quietly into her drink at the bar, as bearded good ole boys in John Deere caps and check shirts, rubbed shoulders with goths and Jim Morrison reckoned people were strange. Luckily I brought the Strat as well as the acoustic because it was a big barn, no one looked interested in music anyway. Billy set up the drum kit and I plugged in the foot bass and the Marshall it was so old we had to wait for the tubes to warm up.

Couldnâ??t see JayDee or anyone who looked the remotest bit interested but we took a chance and lit it up with our upbeat version of Sweet Home Chicago before launching into some of our own stuff. As usual I was away with the fairies once the music started, spending most of my time in another place and another time, looking at Billy or the wall anywhere but where the audience was. I didnâ??t even know we had an audience until we finished the set and saw a lot of people starinâ?? at us and then there was a lot of clapping and whooping and some glasses banging on the tables and we didnâ??t know what to do so we just packed up as quick as we could and tried to find JayDee and get the hell out of there.

‘...not just a quick look but really held it, their shoulders squaring up to yours, millimetre by millimetre.

Billy was desperate for a drink before we left so we had a beer at the bar and the barman said hey fellas really good and gave us our drinks for free, not a complete waste of time then said Billy and a few of the other drinkers nodded at us and we thought that was alright but we still wanted to get out.

JayDee finally appeared and said a bloke wanted to talk to us and we went out into the carpark because it was so noisy you couldnâ??t have a conversation the dude looked more like a businessman than a music boy, pretty old probably 40 with glasses and a brief case. I like what I heard and I want you to come back next week and talk to me about your future with a few other people, howâ??s that, he asked. What future, we said. And he said hell, your music future you have something, you know.

We didnâ??t know but said weâ??d come back down anyway if heâ??d give us the petrol money. He

laughed and peeled off five hundred bucks cash and me and Billy nearly had a heart attack, JayDee just grinned. We ended up spending all that money that night on booze and disco biscuits partying in Kings Cross but it didn't matter because Billy had lifted a couple of the bikers' wallets back at the hotel and we ended up home with cash in our pockets.

'What future, we said. And he said hell, your music future you have something, you know.'

So I went and told mum and she just sat there quiet as usual. I got angry and called her a smelly old bitch and didn't she think it was good her sons were getting a break and why didn't she say something nice and then someone walked passed the door and shot me a dirty look and I told them to get fucked too. I tried to tell her we shouldn't have taken so long to know it wasn't normal but I really knew it was my fault, not hers, not Billy's, he was the one who fought Dad and I just lay there on the floor and he had to protect me too and he got hurt and in hospital because of that.

And mum was here sitting in her piss because of me too. She just kept looking out the window. I sat back down next to her. A trolley squeaked past the door, glasses and plates rattling. Someone was mowing the lawn outside. The chair I was on gave a plastic groan as I tried to relieve the pressure on my sit bones. Then we were both staring out the window and I held her hand and it was quiet. We sat like that for hours, holding hands, until they turned the lights out.

'So I went and told mum and she just sat there quiet as usual.'

So we were on this stage in a basement pub in Surry Hills, it was dark and there was a light shining on us and it was weird because it was just us and may be two or three people on the other side of the light and no one else. I just had the Gibson and Billy of course on the drums that's all they wanted. And they only wanted originals. So we played, talking in music, about how the only difference between beauty and ugly is how the light shines off the surface, about how the only difference between truth and lies is how the words bounce off your own particular universe, about how the only difference between love and hate is a different path to the same destination, about how the only difference between life and death is eternity.

When we finished there was just silence. Not a cough, not a scraping of a chair, nothing. We weren't even sure anyone was still there because the stupid lights were so bright on us why did they even need lights for just this shit anyway. So we started packing up and when Billy was out at the car, a man with a five o'clock shadow and eyes that could look around corners, black suit, stove pipe pants and long, pointy shiny black shoes, came up to me.

'I got angry and called her a smelly old bitch and didn't she think it was good her sons were getting a break...

We like you, we want to talk about managing you, we've got the contacts to make things happen. Sure, I stammered, then I'll go and get Billy and we'll talk. No dude, it's just you we want. But we're a duo, you heard us, you liked us, we're a duo, Billy writes a lot of the stuff. Kid, Billy is a cripple, he only plays those damn drums with one arm, the man said.

He only plays those damn drums with one arm. I'm lying on the floor again, my arm over mum's unconscious body, Dad kicking at both of us and I know we're going to die. Billy hits Dad, hard, on the back of the head with a saucepan but all it does it make Dad madder. He keeps hitting Billy now, with the saucepan, smashing away at his arm, as if he blames the arm, as if it wasn't Billy but the arm was a separate, sentient being that wanted to hurt him. I fade into unconsciousness to the rhythmic sound of the blows, hard and mechanical on Billy's arm, Billy is on the ground, isn't making any sound.

'...and why didn't she say something nice and then someone walked passed the door and shot me a dirty look and I told them to get fucked too.

I put the Gibson in the back of the old red car and Billy, leaning against the door with a smoke in his good hand, said what happened and I said it was pretty good, some bloke came up and said we were pretty good but we have to go back home and work on a few things for a while, maybe come back and see him some other time. Billy didn't say anything, just nodded, stubbing out the cigarette with his boot.

Do you reckon we can do that Billy, go back home and work on things for a while?

Billy says yeah we can do that, go back home and work on things for a while and maybe come back, give it another shot?

Yeah, I say. Give it another shot.

Ode to Billy

(Moody lilt, Gibson J45/Fender Stratocaster, Mike Miller foot bass, Billy Hyde drums with trick kicker, Marshall Plexi 100 watter)

Careful what you wish for
You might open the wrong door
Things ainâ??t always what they seem
Stickinâ?? solid
Stickinâ?? solid to your dream

What say you, Mr Octopus
What if we donâ??t give a toss
You can laugh, we can cry
In the end itâ??s do or die

Careful what you wish for
You might open the wrong door
Things ainâ??t always what they seem
Stickinâ?? solid
Stickinâ?? solid to your dream

For what is it, what is it worth
This digging
Oâ??er hallowed turf
This loving you more than life
Why no love without the strife?

Careful what you wish for
You might open the wrong door
Things ainâ??t always what they seem
Stickinâ?? solid
Stickinâ?? solid to your dream

And then one day itâ??s time to go
Put on your best but itâ??s a no
Itâ??s only just a show for them
Go choke on your continuum

Careful what you wish for
You might open the wrong door
Things ainâ??t always what they seem
Stickinâ?? solid
Stickinâ?? solid to your dream

You can try to dance along
Seeking solace in the throng
But always you must pay the toll
For they who anchor ya damn soul

Careful what you wish for
You might open the wrong door
Things ainâ??t always what they seem

Stickinâ?? solid
Stickinâ?? solid to your dream (Repeat x 3 upbeat rising crescendo)

Yourrrr dream (fading)
Yourrr dream
Yourr dream
Dream

Credits

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