

iPods and Heroin

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It was Monday, and my best friend has just asked me to sleep with his wife. See how she handles that sort of thing. Their relationship had been deteriorating for some time now, and he knows I haven't been with a woman in over three years. His suggestion unnerves me. It is as if my life is destined to change either by chance, or the sheer, unnatural impetus of my friend's will.

He's been knockin', he won't leave me alone. I have just figured out how to download music to the portable, yet powerful handheld device. They really are a marvel. My sad and massive collection of compact discs perches on the shelf, defenseless against the marching on of technology. For a kid of the nineteen-eighties, it is a difficult thing to imagine that this small, sleekly designed credit card sized contraption will now carry every song I have ever loved. My first song heard live, in there. The song in the background of my first kiss, in there. The song I heard right after my father died, in there. They are all in there, every last one of them, and I am still awed by the massive power and control that this new technology possesses over a very important and pervasive aspect of my life. It is now also quite fashionable. But I am still unable to simply disregard the sappy, romantic notions I still hold. I am having a difficult time rationalizing this change in ethics. I feel like that man on the Elliott Smith self-titled cover, falling, falling into an amoral abyss, refuting all I have come to love, respect and admire. The iPod sure is nice and light, though.

I decide to have a small breakfast at a local restaurant, the kind of place that has sticky coffee to go with sticky tables. I am futzing around with the iPod a bit. The rubber

outer membrane is slightly discolored either from some spilled maple syrup, or very old eggs. A pleasant looking waitress stops at the table. She is maybe twenty.

“Nice iPod. Aren’t those things cool?” Being merely thirty years old myself, I am not completely lost in the jargon.

“They sure are.” My comment shoots out as unctuously as the amber liquid in the finger-splotched cruet. I am getting old, aren’t I? She serves a cool smirk and continues with her tireless duties. The thirty year old remains at his table with his puerile trinket, somewhat self-consciously. Why can’t I connect anymore?

Now sated, newspaper in hand, I am ready for another productive and meaningful day. I still feel uneasy not having some sort of job on a bright spring morning. I have been working at a public high school for four years, and am still unaccustomed to the week-long breaks during spring, when all others work. I feel as if these people look down upon me, as some jobless flibbertigibbet who still wears Vans tennis shoes. So many of these trivial things.

Roger phones. He wants to know if I have considered his offer to defile his connubial union. I tell him I am still coming to terms with the request, that it is something new, out of the blue that I have not had time to assimilate into my private ethos. He asks me what *assimilate* means. He wants to know if I’ll join him later for some drinks, and a look at the new SUV/minivan (I think he throws the SUV part in there just to save a little face) he has bought. I can see the two of us, ties loosened, Roger’s loafer raised and resting on the front tire as he sips his beer and tells me about how Connie doesn’t seem to want to have sex much anymore, and that when she does, she doesn’t make any noises or give him blowjobs. I’m there in my hirsute jacket, itching to not be part of the conversation. Roger

has the inkling of a new career in balding. He wears slippers on the weekends. I shudder. Loud Reed howls in my ears as the iPod takes me away from the devastating *daymare*.

Roger and I went to the same college. We went to the same high school. We went to the same middle school. As a matter of fact, I have known Roger ever since I can remember. Roger was the guy in college that could drink the most beer, do the most drugs, and sleep with the most women. I tagged along like a cuttlefish, occasionally feeding off of the scraps as he tore into his hedonistic lifestyle. His nickname back then was The Shark, not only because of his voracious appetite for “ass” as he used to say, but also for his cunning ability to hunt down his prey. He was a predator of the highest order, and at the center of most party circles. Both of us never joined a fraternity. We didn’t need to. Roger was a living party himself. Now Roger was balding and purchasing family-sized utility vehicles. And for what? Did The Shark plan on taking his family (he does have a daughter, age four) to the beach? Camping? To Grandma’s? This is the same guy that wants me to despoil his wife, to have and to hold, and all of that other draconian haberdashery. *Pigs in Zen, Pigs in Zen!*

Roger had married Connie right after college. They dated back then, as much as The Shark would permit himself to be with one girl at a time, usually a week or two, then they would break-up for awhile. I, on the other hand, was pretty lonesome in college. I had a “carry-over” girlfriend from high school that immediately did not work out. I changed to her dissatisfaction and that was that. I was unable to merge myself with the turbulence of post-high school sexuality. It came so easily for most. Go to party. Get drunk. Go home with anything. Fuck. Repeat each weekend. I was the schmuck that would meet a pretty girl, pique her interest only to douse the flames of passion with sentimental and trite notions of fidelity, connectivity. I would usually end the evening watching the same girl stumble off

in the arms of some brute, as I shuffled home to smoke cigarettes and listen to John Coltrane. It was a happy misery, though. I think about how I used to believe that they were the best times of my life, to take every advantage, *carpe diem!* and all of that nonsense. To be honest, they were not. I hated my life as a college student, but only came to that realization several years after, when I began teaching and seeing things that were completely hidden before. Those things were somewhere between the tires of a minivan, and the empty beer bottles of a college apartment coffee table.

An iPod would not have greatly changed my college experience. It hasn't changed my life really all that much today. It is an added thought, a new source of stimuli. My CDs are still there, on my shelf. Their artwork is beautiful. That much has stayed the same. Commercialism is an opiate.

That's where I drew some blood, under the bridge downtown. Roger's office is near the center of the financial district, just on the other side of the brown, urban waterway. It is a faceless and nameless corporation that loans or steals money. I am not entirely sure what Roger's position within the company is. Neither is he. He grabs his coat and we head to a large, loud, themed restaurant that caters mostly to the suit and tie types, or tourists. It is an eatery with table tents, gaudy uniforms, and acne-faced, chain smoking college undergrads. It is soulless. Roger and I have a couple of beers and some fried concoction the bartender recommends. I cannot make out the music on the sound system.

"So, have you given it any more thought? I mean with Connie and all?" I nod no. "I know it seems weird, you know, you knowing her and stuff, I mean god, you went to the funeral, uh, I mean wedding and all."

Roger's face is starting to crease around his eyes and mouth. For the first time since I can remember, I notice he is aging. I want to reach out to Roger, to heal his furrows, stop

the march of his hairline. I want to cancel the fear I see in his eyes. He is human, a sack full of guts and oily skin. He is despicable to me. I pull the linen napkin to my face. I am sweating, nauseous. I retch a little into the napkin. My back and armpits ooze adrenaline sweat. I swoon. I head to the restroom to splash some cool water on my face. I do not fit in here. I want to bash the small window in the men's room with the wastebasket, crawl through the small opening and escape. I don't want Roger to ask me to fuck his wife anymore. I don't want to see him begging and pathetic. I don't want to see myself, like him. Out of pity I return to the bar.

“What was that man? Can't handle the booze anymore?” In fact, I can't. I used to think that the most important thing in life was how much booze a person could handle. I idolized Bukowski and emulated him. I drank, fought and well, sometimes fucked like him. I am tired of the hangovers now. I pay my taxes. I bathe. I rarely drink alcohol anymore.

I tell him no, that I just haven't been feeling that well lately. It was probably a little bit of the flu I was battling. I would be fine. A thirty-year-old man sits in the bar next to his lifelong friend and feels utterly lost. How can you feel lost in your own world, in your own neighborhood, with a man you have known your whole life? It seems pretty easy now that he thinks about it. He has been lost for a long time.

Roger is going on and on about Connie's good qualities, her not yet too soft ass, decent breasts, pretty face. He rants about how he will be out of town for a week next month, and this is when it would be a good time for me to do the deed, you know, jump start his marriage. He is telling me that it is just what the doctor ordered, a little spice in the casserole so to speak, that his marriage has needed for the last two or three fucking years. I am so tired of listening to him. The whole time he is speaking, he slugs massive amounts of beer. He becomes bleary-eyed. All of those years in college, staying up until four to finish a

keg of beer, drinking the dregs of a liter of Jack Daniels because that is what we did back then, have turned Roger into an early-adult alcoholic. His diatribe has hit its groove now, wildly gesticulating, spitting occasionally without noticing that the spittle hits the tip of my nose. He does not notice. I haven't said more than three sentences since we arrived there, and that was one hour ago. What I really want to do is punch Roger as hard as I can, to feel the framing of his face cave like a ripe piece of fruit. I then want to bash his forehead into the metal bar that runs the length of the bar, two maybe three times. I am sweating, fidgeting and on the precipice of committing a felony. But I don't, and Roger pays the bill this time, telling me he will call, because an offer like this doesn't come by too often, you bet your ass. My unfinished beer sits atop the shiny bar.

The lunch with Roger does not put me in very high spirits. I have been forced into agreeing to dinner that night with Roger and Connie. I am not looking forward to the meal. I decide to head west, to the beach, to get some thinking done. One of the reasons I had chosen my university was the proximity to the coast. It has always been like a lifeline for me. In about 25 minutes, I am there. The nice part about the beach in the area where I live is that it has a very accessible walking path near the sand. Joggers, cyclists, stay-at-home-moms, NBA stars and the occasional homeless person are all common sights, blending in a rhythmic orchestra of movement, sound and congestion. I take out the trusty iPod and am ready for what comes out of the "Classical" file: Berlioz. He is perfect for walking.

Several things come to mind as the Frenchman introduces his first movement of *Dream of a Witch's Sabbath* to the *Symphonie Fantastique*. I see some skaters doing tricks near a flight of stairs. They grind the noses of their boards on the handrails, kicking and spinning the decks at will. One of the kids does a 180 degree, backside heel flip, lands successfully and just continues down the pathway as if he merely put on a pair of shoes and started

walking. What surprises me is not that I know precisely the name of this trick that the young man has pulled, but the fact that I used to do it, but no longer can. I watch for a few moments longer, recognizing some of the moves, railslides, tailslides, lipslides and bluntslides. Some of the names I have forgotten. Some of the moves I have never seen. Nonetheless, my brief collision with nostalgia has made me more melancholic than my lunch with Roger. To whom am I supposed to relate anymore? The skaters would never have me. My hair is too normal, too straight. The housewives? The fact is, I feel like I have more in common with the homeless man, loading his bicycle full of aluminum cans. His face is the color of whiskey, and his beard is old and yellow. But I know that is not true either. Berlioz is now coming to the part where he envisions the witches all gathering around, chanting, menacing. The music has become cool and dark. The limitless expanse of the Pacific ocean leaves me feeling more helpless, more at sea than I have ever felt.

Even though every moral fiber in my body tells me not to, I think I will acquiesce and sleep with Connie. Maybe Roger's request is a sign, a harbinger that I am in need of change, that my life has become too ritualistic. I know it is a bad idea. I know it will only lead to trouble, for the three of us, not just me. The one thing growing up Roger and I always said to each other was that no matter what; never fuck a buddy's girlfriend, even if the two of you were totally drunk. To use the parlance of college-Roger, "It would be a righteous rat fuck, man." And this isn't his girlfriend either. This was his wife, of seven years. *The mother of his daughter!* If it is such a cut and dry scenario, where a resounding NO should ultimately prevail, why am I trying to imagine Connie naked? Why am I picturing her spread on the bed, inviting me with her wetness? Why can I imagine her short gasps of breath as she is on the verge of coming? It is all terribly wrong and I know it. Am I really going to go through with it? Where is my moral fortitude, my reverence for the established

ethic of my culture and friendship with Roger? I look down at the iPod as Berlioz's symphony crashes rather clumsily into the coda. It is a small white box, nothing more. It isn't part of me, or anything else for that matter.

I am out of breath and have to sit down at one of the concrete benches on the long strip of walkway that stretches for miles, parallel to the shore. It is peaceful here; despite the foot traffic milling to and fro, athletically clad coffee toters chatting animatedly to one another. The breeze feels good on my face. The sun radiates, reflecting off of the rippled looking glass of water. I feel a small prick in my right shoulder, like a blunt bee sting. I feel the presence, too. I tell myself not to move unexpectedly or that presence will surely make itself more prominent, in the forefront of the conversation so to speak. I can smell the mephitic, sour garbage smell of a person that has ceased caring. I can smell old booze. Probably how Roger or I smelled after one of our benders. It wasn't me this time, and I wished it were Roger.

"That's a nice walkie, there. Give it before I cut your fucking guts out." And with that utterance, the prick in the shoulder becomes more intense, more hateful. It is a man's voice.

I look down at the iPod. It had only cost a couple hundred dollars. What is it to me? I still have my CDs safely stashed at home. I unclip the white electronic device from my belt, and take the earpieces from their orifices. I turn slightly, just enough to eye my assailant as I hand him the now stolen goods. He has a very tan face, and long, nappy beard, bleached from endless hours in the sunshine. He smells like wet cabbage. As he reaches for the iPod I see several infected furuncles on the underside of the man's forearm. His face beneath the beard is taut and strained. His eyes are deeply set into the obviously nervy countenance. After he retains what he is seeking, he wheels around towards his laden

bicycle. The iPod shines brightly in his hand. It looks like the white foam sitting atop of a cappuccino. I watch as the man rides off, passing the group of skaters, around a gaggle of housewives, and through a heated game of pick-up basketball.

I head back home. I know what I must do. I open the closet containing my massive collection of compact discs. I pull out the first one I see. It is not yet dusty. It is the seminal recording of The Clash's *Sandinista!*. The artwork is not beautiful, but it offers itself to me anyway. I feel the mass of the object in my hands. I remember first hearing this album in college. Roger and I were sitting on some filthy couch, in some transient flop house excuse for a university apartment, the kind that you scramble around cleaning for hours when you know your parents are coming to visit. Roger was talking to a girl and her legs are wrapped around his, they are getting more and more intimate. I am on the edge of the couch and I am listening to "The Guns of Brixton" or some other song. I keep thinking what am I doing on this couch? The couch is dusty. It stinks. Sitting on that couch is a young man who fears, just for a fleeting moment, that when he is thirty years old he will not exist anymore. And for an even shorter instant, he can feel the world changing beneath his feet, and The Shark and his prey are obviously ensconced a mere three feet away.