

J O E S I X P A C K

BOYZ II GIRLZ

**“The Making of The Ballroom Brats”
Story & Illustrations by Joe Six-Pack
A Tales of Transformation Story**



2012 Digital Edition

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THE MAKING OF THE BALLROOM BRATS

Kevin was just trying to deflate, to put the world into a box, shove it away and let it lay in the basement to collect dust for all eternity. However, today, the world refused to be contained for Kevin. Even after a long, long, long afternoon, evening and night of listening to the most minute of customer complaints about the food at Burger Boom, his current employer, Kevin was still neck deep in the effluence of his life.

There might have been the wrong selection of food delivered to a customer, the food might not have been prepared to the customer's expectation, the price may not have matched the preconceived notion a customer had placed on the value of the food, and some customers just liked to have someone to argue with. Whatever the circumstance, Kevin had dealt with it in his own idiomatic style, with the zeal and energy he was well regarded for, and assuaged the customers in every case.

Still! This was not enough for the world, for it demanded even further of Kevin, draining his cell phone of power, changing his work schedule at the last minute, and making sure it was going to rain for his long walk home at midnight.

Now, here in the secluded break facilities of Burger Boom, conveniently located between the dumpster and the cyclone fencing of the parking lot, he was being asked to sacrifice even more of his precious life essence.

"Did you see where dey want us to jingle?" José Alavedros, the dishwasher, asked, in his slightly-off English.

Kevin smirked to himself, amused at his co-worker's take. "You mean they want us to *make* a jingle," he corrected.

"Yes," José replied.

José was referring to the newest flyer posted on the wall, amongst the state wage poster, the federal disclaimers and ten years' worth of previous company flyers. It was an employee contest for the next jingle to be used in the company's advertising. In a not-at-all cynical attempt to avoid hiring proper musicians and writers, employees were encouraged to write and submit a 5-second jingle to bring honor and glory to their franchised locale. Kevin's shift manager had interpreted the term 'encourage' to mean 'do it or get fired.'

Which now meant that he was on the line to do this. His initial scheme was to make a dramatic reading of the ingredients of a ketchup packet aloud and record it as an MP3. Of course, this would not bring honor and glory to Burger

Boom #3182, so his shift manager rejected it. Kevin was told he needed to make a 'serious' submission or he could start a 'serious' job search.

"You know how to do dis?" José asked. He was a man in his mid-to-late-20's, with a good attitude, and was sending his paychecks home to Mexico. He wasn't afraid of work and he always wanted to do things right. He was also very reserved and quiet most of the time. That, to Kevin, seemed the limit and breadth of his personality. No chitchat, no hobbies, no affectations. Just work. Nothing about José suggested in the slightest way that he was going to be able to manage his way through writing and recording a peppy jingle. This was obviously weighing on his mind.

"Not really," Kevin replied, in all honesty. "I can't even sing." The reason José was even asking Kevin is because it was a well-known fact around the restaurant that Kevin did play some guitar. Kevin it kind of saw it coming, as his ability to play seemed to make him a marked man for this contest.

"My cousin has bass guitar," José said. "In my garage. I try play it. Not good."

"Yeah," Kevin said, unable to really go anywhere with José's comment. "We should team up. I can't sing, and you can't play. What can stop us?"

Checking his dead phone, Kevin couldn't tell what time it was, so he decided to not risk trouble, and headed back into the restaurant. As he glanced at a clock, he noted he still had seven minutes left on his break.

"You back from break? Great. Take register,"



his shift manager said. That effectively destroyed his hopes of reclaiming the 7 minutes. Not wanting an argument, he did what he was told. After two minutes of nothing happening, his shift manager made a repeat trip to the counter. “Why are you at register?” he asked. “Work the window.”

“Gabe!” Kevin barked at the manager, frustrated.

“What?” Gabe snapped back.

His manager’s reply was far more heated than anticipated. One more word was going to detonate an explosion of anger. Now faced with starting a war with his short-tempered manager, or finding a way out, Kevin opted for the way out. “I was wondering about the jingle thing.”

Kevin studied Gabe’s expression to make sure he was calming down. He seemed to be, so he made up a nonsense question to keep things civil. “Is there any rule against teaming up?” He didn’t get an immediate reply so he clarified. “Instead of every person submitting their own?”

Gabe had a baffled expression on his face. “I don’t know! I guess, maybe, sure!” He then turned away in a flamboyant hands-out gesture to tend to his more imperative burger-management duties.

Crisis averted, Kevin relaxed and let out a deep breath. He would last another day at Burger Boom. Hooray.



Soaked, Kevin arrived back at his apartment after his long trudge home. He checked the clock, which read a harsh 1:04 in the AM. The sting was made even worse by he knowledge that he was back on shift in eight hours for the Burger Boom Breakfast Menu shift. He hated the breakfast menu. 16 ways to arrange eggs and ham on buns.

He peeled the yellow work vest off of him and slung it over the back of a chair. Kevin made his way to the fridge, which was filled with oil-stained paper sacks from Burger Boom, his abandoned meals from days and weeks past. He grabbed the first thing that didn’t have the Burger Boom logo, a bottle of olives, and started popping them into his mouth. Kevin only had a few minutes before he was going to fall into bed, so he was eating fairly quickly.

The door to his roommate’s room opened up, and Diedrick, Kevin’s roommate for the past year, stuck his groggy head out.

“Oh, it’s you,” he said, with a sneer. “I thought it was someone breaking in,” he added, with an air of disappointment to his voice. The implication was that he would have preferred the presence of an angry, thieving stranger in his apartment threatening to do him bodily harm than to know it was just Kevin.

Kevin didn’t blame him.

Diedrick heaved his heavy body back into his room and shut the door, leaving Kevin alone with his thoughts. Those thoughts were a swirling maelstrom of anger and anguish, feeling both hatred for being so powerless about his job, and anguish that he was in real danger of sleeping through his alarm and losing the very same job he hated. His tired and weary mind just seemed to be stuck churning those thoughts around again and again, even has Kevin desperately wanted to think about something else for these few fleeting minutes on non-work time.

It was useless. He turned on the TV, but he couldn't pay any attention. He tried to listen to some music but it was just noise. Finally, he set his head down on his pillow, but all he could think about was how miserable he was.

Three hours later, he finally was able to slip away into sleep.



Kevin had to run most of the last half-mile to get to the restaurant on time, so he started his day off with sweat and exhaustion. Two hours into his five hour shift and he had not yet been able to catch his breath or stop perspiring. It was a good thing the overpowering scent of microwaved bacon was stronger than his B.O. He had been placed on the line that morning, with the job of working the clamshell grill, or "the clam" as the employees called it. It gave off enough heat to make sure Kevin would not get a moment of relief until he could take a break.

"Hey, Gabe! How about a break?" He asked the shift manager.

"Sounds like a good idea. I'll be back in fifteen," Gabe said, loosening his rayon tie. "Shelley, you're in charge."

"Asshole," Kevin mumbled to himself.

As soon as Gabe was out of earshot, Carl, who was working the register, turned around. "I heard you got Gabe to cut us a break, dude," he said to Kevin.

Kevin didn't quite get what this Carl guy was on about. Carl was kind of a spaced-out character anyway, who had a nice smile but didn't really seem to be dialed into reality most of the time. Kevin's first instinct was to assume that this was one of those moments.

"The contest thing!" Carl said, trying to clarify himself. That didn't do the job, so he started over. "You got Gabe to let us team up on the jingle!"

That did seem to make some sense, so Kevin conceded, and began having a conversation with Carl. "Yeah, sure. I guess."

"That is awesome!" Carl said, with a generous grin, accentuated by his beard. "So who are you working with? José, right?"

"I... didn't know I was..." Kevin said.

"Me!" José said, raising his hand. "We do. We work. Us." José was in the back mopping up the spill of a 20-pound bag of liquid egg scramble mix. It was clear to Kevin that José had been talking, and talking to Carl.

Carl paused to think. "Did he say how many people it could be?"

Kevin shrugged. "I didn't get that kind of..."

"All right! I'm on board!" Carl gleefully declared. "You, me, José. We're a group! Yeah! Awesome!" He clapped his hands and raised them in the air in triumph. Then, he returned his attention to the register where six people were waiting impatiently.

There was every reason for Kevin to object to Carl inviting himself onto this team, which he didn't know was a team, but trying to bicker over the heat lamps seemed to be the wrong place to make his point. So he would wait. He would wait until twenty minutes were left in his shift, when Gabe finally released him to have his fifteen minute break. Then he'd come back to work for five more minutes before going home.

"Gabe is management material, no doubt about it," Kevin said to himself, out back of the restaurant. "Master of logistics." Now that some serious personal time was just a few minutes away, Kevin was making plans. Would he go home and sleep? Or maybe he would go home and sleep. His next shift was tomorrow night, so he had a glorious 22 hours of freedom, and he was determined to savor every moment. He checked his now-charged phone and saw he had seventeen messages, all from his girlfriend.

A little part of him died. He knew what this meant. With no choice but to stick his neck into the guillotine, Kevin hit reply. "Hey, Paula. It's Kevin," he said.

"Finally. Do you know how many messages I've left you? Why don't you respond?" She sniped.

"I was working," Kevin replied.

"Call me on your break."

"They didn't let me have one until now."

"You should tell them to give you a break when you want it! It's the law! Don't let them push you around. You need to stand up for yourself, for once." His girlfriend's voice was like a buzz saw to his brain. He and Paula had been going out for almost a year, and what was once sweet and fun was now sour and dull. Her conversations with him had turned from sexy invitations for mischief into... "We're going to shopping for Melanie's baby shower, and no, you don't have a choice. I'm picking you up and we're going to the mall."

There was some moment in the past few months where things turned. He no longer looked forward to hearing Paula's voice, it's tone had become more and more irritating to him. Now, the hair on the back of his neck stood up when-

ever he heard her speak. He had even begun to avoid looking her in the eyes, knowing he was tired of seeing that gaze from those soulless glassy blue orbs stare through him. Not only was the romance gone from the relationship, he was very sure that the relationship was gone from their relationship. They were just two people who had little to no interest in each other. It was going to end in screaming rage or marriage.

"I'm off in fifteen minutes," Kevin said, in a hope that it was too soon and she might let him off the hook. "So..."

Paula didn't waver. "I'll be there in 45 minutes. I don't know, find something to do for a half hour and I'll pick you up."

Great. He got to hang around work for an extra half hour. Fantastic. "Yeah, I guess."

"And wash your hands! I don't want grease all over my dashboard," Paula added, before hanging up.

Kevin put the phone away and walked over to the dumpster. He chose a good spot and kicked it, making a loud, somewhat satisfying noise.

After his shift was over, and he had washed his hands, Kevin sat on the curb just close enough to Burger Boom to be seen by his girlfriend. He would have rather been a million miles away, but he was still close enough to hear the crackle of the drive-thru speaker. He would have played a game on his phone had he been wealthy enough to afford a phone that played games, so instead he was just scuffling his feet in the gravel and dust that had gathered at the side of the road.

"If you're not working here, don't loiter!" Gabe shouted from the drive-thru window.

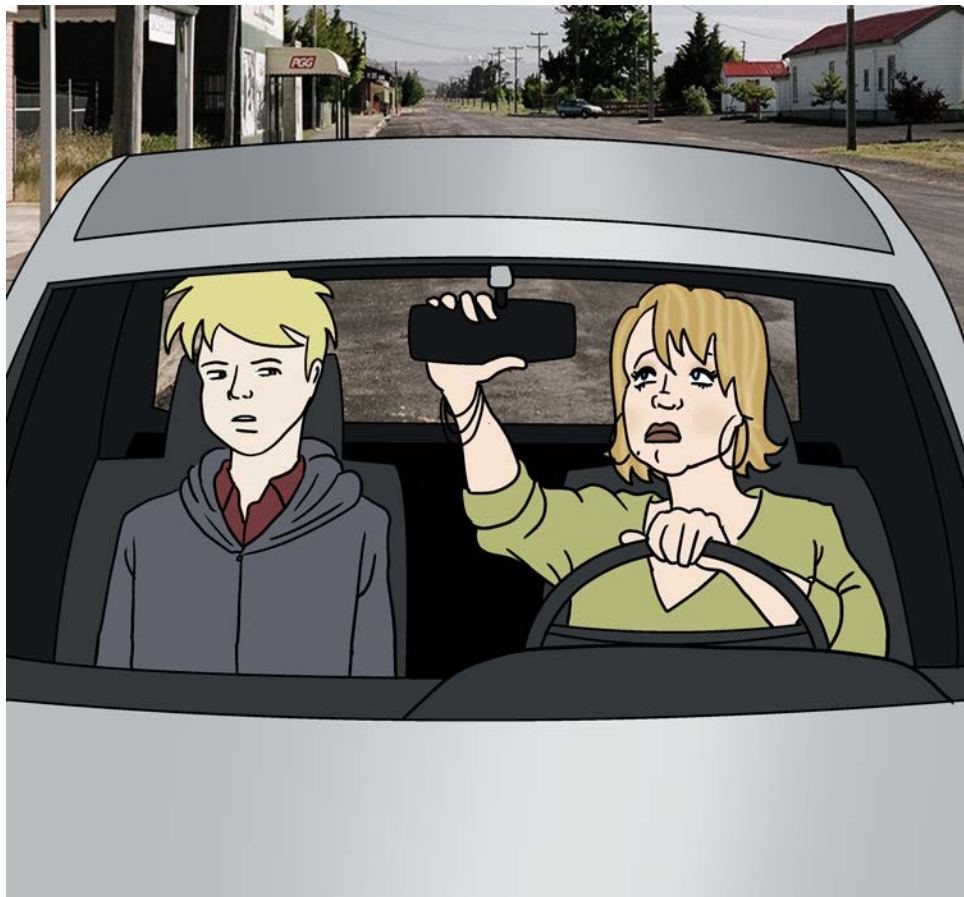
In daring defiance of his manager, Kevin pretended not to hear him. Instead, he just kept scuffling the gravel. Besides, he wasn't technically on Burger Boom property. He was at least an inch away.

"Hey, I told José we'd come by tomorrow morning," said a voice. Kevin had to look up and see who was talking to him. It was Carl, who was leaving at the end of his shift. He was dressed in Birkenstocks, brown torn cords and a beanie that looked like it had been made entirely of yarn and incompetence.

"What? Why?" Kevin rightly asked.

"To do the thing," Carl said. Kevin's rapid blinking signaled he hadn't understood. Carl was clearly used to this sort of reaction to the things he said. "The jingle. We'll do the jingle."

Now able to comprehend, Kevin replied with, "Oh." He had not invited them, and he was pretty sure he hadn't consented to even be a part of this jingle thing. He had to reset the situation before it went any further. "Listen, Carl, I didn't exactly say that..."



Hhhhhrrrronnnnk! Paula had pulled up nearby and was demanding attention with her car horn, even though she was just five feet away. Hhhhhrrrronnnnk Hhhhhrrrronnnnk! She pushed open the passenger side door for even faster recognition of her demand for Kevin's immediate presence.

"I'll give you a call," Kevin said, just as Paula fired off two more horn hits. He slid into the car and closed the door.

"You didn't wash your hands," she said.

"Yes I did," Kevin replied.

"You didn't do a very good job of it," she said, and stepped on the gas. "You're contributing 20 bucks for the gift. Do you have it or do I need to lend it to you – again?"

Kevin sighed and buckled in. He was in for a bumpy ride.



The day spent with Paula was every bit as excruciating as he knew it was going to be. The quest for the baby shower gift quickly turned into a Don Quixote odyssey. Paula was hell-bent on getting a diaper bag, and not just any diaper bag, but one particular diaper bag. Store #1 was sold out. A trip across town to another mall and store #2 revealed that they had something similar but slightly different, which wasn't good enough for Paula. They recommended she check with store #3, which didn't even carry diaper bags. Then she called around to three more stores that were also fresh out of this particular diaper bag. That wasn't what she wanted to hear, so of course she had to personally visit those same three stores to check for herself.

Finally, six hours later, Paula ordered it online. She needed expedited shipping, which cost Kevin an additional 6 dollars and a promise to be home tomorrow to receive the shipment. Paula, with the verbal skill of a diplomat trying to instigate global thermonuclear conflict, explained that she had a life, and was therefore too busy to receive it at her place.

So, at nine, after Kevin cooked her a nice intimate dinner – because he didn't do enough cooking in his job. Paula consumed her pasta without comment, finished her wine, blew out the romantic candle, and left. After all, she said, it had been a long day and was just so *incredibly* exhausted.

Kevin totaled everything up after she left. Eight hours doing what Paula wanted, wasting his time off. Twenty-six dollars poorer for some crap gift for someone he didn't even know. Another 20 bucks spent on dinner. Now he was confined to the apartment until the delivery guy showed the next day. For a glorious finish, and sticking the landing, he then got the royal brush-off.

"Jackpot," Kevin said to himself, sarcastically. He decided to get up from the couch and clean the dishes before Diedrick had a chance to whine about it. His roommate was out for the evening, working at the gaming shop, "Ye Olde Dragon's Tale." It was a suitably squalid store for a suitably squalid guy. After twenty minutes of scrubbing tomato sauce off plastic, Kevin returned to the couch, only to find Diedrick, obviously back from work, sprawled out and taking the only two good seats in front of the big screen.

"Greeting and salutations," Diedrick said, flamboyantly gesturing his arm in the air. "I doth return to thy humble abode."

"Got off early?" Kevin asked rhetorically.

"As it so happens, we had a power outage, so we closed," the chubby 25-year old said. "And lo, the Gods had spoken."

Having just met his limit of coping with Diedrick, and fulfilled his daily intake of lame fantasy dialect, it was off to his room for Kevin. "Huh," he said as he left, letting the conversation die the death it deserved.

Once he closed the door to his room, it was time to try once again to tear the world from his mind, like he was ripping off a tenacious octopus that had en-



gulfed his skull in its' cuppy tentacles. He jumped on his computer and surfed around for a while, going nowhere and doing nothing in particular.

It was the best he had felt in two days.



In the morning, Kevin got up slightly early. He reasoned that if he were to wait until his usual time to get showered, he'd be in the possible window of deliveries. He also needed to make sure he was free of real distraction, because he knew from experience that the delivery guy would just pop on the "missed you" note if Kevin wasn't able to respond in 0.1 seconds after the ring of the door. At about nine o'clock, after Dedrick had left for work, Kevin sat poised and ready to leap into action at the merest hint of a bell noise.

So when the bell rang at 10:30, Kevin leapt from his couch with a mighty flash and opened the front door of his apartment in olympic record time. So he was

more than a little disappointed to be greeted not by some guy in a polo shirt and shorts, but by three guys he worked with.

It was José, Carl and Ray. It slowly dawned on him as to why they were here. That goddamn jingle. He wanted to slap himself on the forehead and draw his hand slowly down his face, much like one would see in a Three Stooges movie. He felt that stupid. He hadn't made the call to stop this from happening and now he had no idea what to do.

"Hey, dude!" Carl said, ingratiating himself immediately. "I brought the rest of the group!"

"It's not a group," Kevin stated for the record.

José was there, carrying the bass guitar he had previously been talking about, and Carl was toting what looked like a kid's toy. It resembled a mini keyboard glued onto a horn.

"What?" Kevin said, pointing to it.



“Melodica,” Carl said. “It’s a real instrument. I got it at the dollar store on the way over.”

Kevin gave him some well-deserved sarcasm. “All real instruments are made out of blue plastic.” Carl didn’t respond.

Kevin turned his attention to the third member of the pack. His name was Ray Willis, who also worked at Burger Boom, usually doing short mid-day shifts. He hadn’t worked with Ray very often, and only had some vague impressions of him. He seemed to be a follower more than an individual, and kept his statements short and to the point.

The most important thing to Kevin, though, was why he was here. “Hi, Ray. I didn’t know you were coming,” Kevin said, making sure everyone knew he was uninformed about his presence.

“Oh yeah,” Carl said, as if he was just remembering this for the very first time. “I invited Ray along to join us. He’s cool.”

“Well, if he’s cool, then by all means. Join us.” Kevin closed the door as they came inside.

“Hey, he had a microphone,” Carl explained. “I figured we’d need one, right?”

Kevin had to admit that it was a valid reason. “But no one else is coming, right?”

“Nah, it’s just us!” Carl said. “The Burger Boom Four!”

“Catchy,” Ray said.

“No it’s not,” Kevin quickly retorted. “So I guess everyone should get a seat. I’ll grab my laptop and guitar.”

Kevin foraged around to set up his guitar and amplifier. He had to dig through some piles of tangled old cords to find the right ones, while his three guests got more and more bored. Finally, he found everything he needed. Then he focused on his laptop. After a few minutes of fiddling, Kevin had connected Ray’s microphone to his PC, and got some recording software running. It took some doing, as he wasn’t exactly an IT wizard, getting the drivers to recognize the mic and then getting the software to recognize the driver. He was pushing the limits of his technical skill, and when he was done, let out a deep breath of relief and brought it all back into the living room.

“Hey, while you were setting stuff up, somebody left this on your door,” Carl said.

Kevin was handed a “missed you” delivery note. He wanted to scream.

Doing his best to control himself, he took several deep breaths. “Okay, so does anyone have any jingle ideas?” He said.

Kevin looked at Ray, who looked at José, who looked at Carl. Carl shrugged. This was off to a great start.



Kevin was literally yanked off the line and dropped into the manager's office. It wasn't the first time this had happened to him. The first time, a customer had registered a complaint about the shabby way he had refunded her money back. The second time he was accused of stealing food but was quickly cleared when the general manager got fired for filling his sedan full of frozen french fries one night. This was the third time, and by now he wasn't so much as frightened as he was annoyed.

Things took a turn for the serious when the door opened, and it wasn't Gabe or the general manager who came in, but Bert Greenway. Bert was the owner of thirty seven restaurants, including this Burger Boom. Kevin had seen him exactly once, when he flew through on a five-minute inspection last year, but recognized him from the portrait that hung in the hallway.

"Kevin Plough," Bert said, correctly identifying his guest. He extended his hand for a shake. "Good to meet'cha, boy!"

"G... Good to meet you," Kevin replied, stammering through his shock.

Bert was still vigorously shaking Kevin's hand. "Fantastic work, fantastic. Absolutely wonderful."

"Thanks," Kevin said. "Uh... Thanks."

"You don't know what I'm talkin' about, do ya?" Bert said, perceptively.

"Working the clam?"

"Nobody told ya?" Bert turned his head to frown at Gabe, who looked a bit squeamish. Then he turned back to Kevin, with a big smile. "You won!"

Looking up at the idiotically happy faces of the owner, Gabe the shift manager and the restaurant manager, Kevin had a distinct feeling he was about to be eaten for dinner. Nervously, Kevin just started to try and match the eerily happy moods of the people who were staring at him. "H... Ha... Ha! Yeah! I won!"

"Oh fer... For pete's sake, the contest!" Bert seemed to realize he had to slow it down. "The jingle contest!"

"What about it?"

"You won! You won the jingle contest!"

"Jingle contest?" To defend Kevin, it had been twelve weeks since it had happened. It was perfectly understandable that he'd have forgotten all about it by now. He had to search his memory to recall what the jingle contest was all about. Finally, when it did come through, the moment of realization came across his eyes. The mandatory Burger Boom jingle contest – he did remember

something about it. But what he remembered was how awful the thing they recorded was. There should've been no possibility of winning the contest.

The only realistic explanation of how he could have won the contest was that there were no other entires whatsoever. Possibly there weren't any entries that were in English, maybe none performed by humans, or maybe all others had been lost in a wormhole. There just should have been no possible way in this reality, on this Earth, in this timeline, that his entry could have possibly won the jingle contest.

"Once again, my heartiest congratulations and a big thank-you. This is a big deal for my franchises. A big deal." Bert just beamed with pride. A savvier man would have realized he could have asked for any favor from Bert right now, and might have granted it. However, Kevin's brain was still assembling the pieces, and being the honest person he was, he had to come clean about it.

"Well you know, to be honest, it wasn't just me." Kevin said, trying not to break the spell. "It was also José. And Carl, and what's that guys name... Ray. We all were in on it. We all worked on it. We all recorded on it. It wasn't just me."

That seemed to please Bert even more. "A Burger Boom team effort! Fantastic!" Bert turned to an assistant and said, "Give me my laptop. I want to hear it one more time." Bert took the laptop, opened it up and started to fiddle with it. "I was listening to this all the way over here. I love it."

Kevin, still fighting with his memory, didn't quite remember exactly what they had produced. There had been a lot of bickering amongst the four, a lot of bad ideas, and a whole lot of truly bad instrument playing. He could remember playing guitar, and he thought maybe that Ray was banging on a coffee can, but the rest was very, very vague in his mind. They had produced about six different candidates to submit, all equally incompetent, and he didn't really remember exactly which one they had chosen. Probably the worst one.

Finally Bert seemed to have found what he was looking for. "Here we go."

"If you've got a craving, and your stomach's got room, haul your hunger on down to Burger Boom."

Kevin was mortified. Had they really recorded that? How humiliating. That night, so many weeks ago, after a lot of cringing attempts, they finally settled on Kevin doing the vocals. It wasn't really singing, so much as it was a low-intensity scream. He plucked a few strings to match the notes he was "singing," as José and Carl did the same. He wasn't even sure Ray did anything at all.

Bert played it again.

"If you've got a craving, and your stomach's got room, haul your hunger on down to Burger Boom."

Kevin felt like such a tool. It may have been the most degrading moment in his life. Or, considering his life seemed to be chock full of degrading moments, in the top 40. The most humiliating part might have been that, now having heard the jingle for the first time in a while, it no longer seemed as bad and messy as he remembered. Sure the performance was horrible but, in fact it was something that might actually, truly work. How had he stooped so low as to write a stupid commercial jingle? And done a decent job at it?

“Ha! I love that!” Bert was truly enthusiastic. “So here’s the deal, what corporate wants to do was to find you guys a proper studio record the jingle all you know, fancy like.” He turned back to look over his shoulder. “What’s your name again, glasses?”

Gabe, the only one wearing glasses, pointed to himself. “Me? My name is Gabe, Sir. I was...”

Bert cut him off. “Great, you’re in charge of this. Managing this project. Drop whatever else you got going on. This is your new top priority. Got that?”

“Uh, but what about my...” Quickly realizing he was testing everyone’s patience, Gabe halted mid-sentence. “Yes sir. I got it.”

“Fantastic! Tommy,” Bert was now looking at the restaurant’s general manager, “hire some new guys. These guys, Kevin, glasses, and the other three, they’re doing this now. I want them thinking about about the jingle. Nothing else. They’re not working on the line anymore, not working at the store, it’s got to be nothing but music for them.”

Tom Sanford, the restaurant’s general manager, nodded. “You got it!”

Kevin wasn’t so sure that by winning the contest he had just made a huge mistake.



“Okay, okay, okay. Let’s just stop it there.” The producer wiped imaginary sweat from his brow and started rubbing his temples. He was trying to get a decent vocal out of Kevin.

Kevin, Carl, José, and Ray had all been in the studio now for over a day. You would think that recording a five-second jingle would be a fairly easy task, but these boys were trying to turn that notion on its head. The past day had been absolutely miserable. No one could play, no one could sing, and the producer was slowly, gradually, becoming suicidal. By now, the regret he had for taking this job was being worn on his face.

“Let’s just take a... Break of some sort.” The producer said. It was the eighth time he had proposed such a break, despite no previous break having solved any previous problems.

That didn't really seem to matter to most of the group. Carl and Ray were more than happy to just remain on the couch in the lounge where they were quietly dozing off. José seemed to be somewhat irritated by the break, but only because hanging around in a studio all day conflicted with his notion of what hard work was. He would've been much more comfortable picking something up, cleaning something, or just moving something heavy. Sitting around in the studio waiting for something to happen, and being bitterly disappointed, was not his idea of a good time.

Of course Kevin was irritated, because he'd been trying to play guitar and trying to sing all day, and being reminded how truly horrible he was at both. He was a little bit better playing guitar, his real love, but his singing was truly horrible. The trouble was is that there was no way out of it. The corporate suits had wanted his voice on the record. He didn't have a choice. The producer didn't have a choice.

The explanation was, that for legal reasons, he had to be on the recording. Once corporate people start talking about 'legal reasons,' they might as well be delivering stone tablets to Moses. So this was the situation: they were trying to record something professional with amateurs and it sounded like it. At this point, the producer only had one real escape. Procrastination.

"Say, Kevin, I have an idea. I know this lady who has an office downtown. Now I don't want you to take this the wrong way, but she's a professional singer. She teaches. She could help you in trying to sing." Honestly, the producer didn't believe that Kevin had any sort of a chance of ever learning to sing even if he were practicing for the next five hundred years. "Why not give her a call. Sooner rather than later. In fact let's do it right now. We'll set up an appointment for later today."

Kevin wasn't at all offended, in fact he was looking forward to it. Anything at all to get out of this horrible chamber of nightmares. Recording had just reminded him how awful he was and he was very eager to get as far away from it as he could, even if it was just for a few hours.



Sure enough, the appointment was easy to make. The instructor was not overburdened with clients, and would do just about anything at anytime for any promise of money. So Kevin took a ride out to their office building and rode up to the 14th floor. The building was a little confusing, and it took a minute or two to figure out exactly where he was supposed to go, and when he did figure it out, he was wrong.

"Is this the Singing Sensation Voice Training Institute?" Kevin asked as he stuck his head in an office door.

"Not really, this is Dr. Price's office," the attractive young woman sitting inside said. "He's a psychiatrist. Kind of."

"Oh." Kevin was disappointed that the pretty woman wasn't a vocal trainer. He could get really into singing if that were the case. Really, really, *really* into it.

"Why don't you come in for a second though? I have a directory somewhere. Maybe we can find it on there."

You didn't have to ask Kevin twice, he was all in.

"I wonder where I put that, now." The woman got up from her chair and bent over to search through some drawers, and in the process displayed a tantalizing *derrière* in Kevin's direction. "So tell me, are you learning to sing? Or are you a professional?"

"I guess I'm learning?" Kevin said, his eyes transfixed on the woman's backside. "I just accidentally started this group and I guess I need to sing now."

"You accidentally started a band?"

"It's kind of hard to explain," Kevin said, sounding a little dejected.

"You sound kind of down about it. I would think you would be happy having started a band and doing some recording. A lot of people want to do that sort of thing."

"So would I, but it's all kind of out of my control. I didn't want to really start a group, I thought that maybe someday I would, but not like this."

"When's your appointment?" The woman asked. "Do you have a few minutes?"

"Sure, I guess. I was coming in a little early."

"Why don't you talk to Dr. Price? He can help with lots of things like this."

"Did you say he was a psychiatrist?"

"Kind of."

"I don't think that I really need psychotherapy."

"No silly! It's not like that. He does so much more than just analyze you, he... Well, maybe I should let you talk to him yourself. Then you'll have a better idea."

"I don't have any money..."

"I wouldn't do that. I think he could just help you out a little bit. Just a friendly chat. So tell me about the rest of this group of yours. Are they all as cute as you?"

With those words, Kevin was a goner. In just a few seconds, the woman was ushering him into Dr. Price's office. "I'll stay if you want me to," she offered, noting Kevin's hesitation.

"I wouldn't want to put you to any trouble..."



“No trouble.” She sat down gracefully in the farthest seat. That was when Kevin finally was able to rip his eyes off of her and noticed the old man sitting behind the desk – presumably Dr. Price.

The doctor was seated at his desk in the direct center of it. His hands were folded just below his chin in a kind of contemplative mock prayer. The classic psychiatrist look. He even was bald and had glasses. You got your money’s worth with Dr. Price. He looked like a real psychologist. “Welcome... Is it Kevin?”

“Yes sir.”

“We’ll have none of that. Just call me Dr. Price.” The old man unfolded his hands and placed them on his desk. “Now tell me what’s it like, being you, Kevin. You look a little tired.”



When Kevin returned to the studio later that night, his skills were markedly improved. He could sing a note, hold it, and it was within a few semitones or an octave of where he intended to be. That was close enough. Using modern studio technology, anyone who's voice didn't cause the listeners ears to bleed could sound like a real singer. Or at least, an American Idol semi-finalist.

"A little instruction really helps," the producer said.

"Yeah, she was pretty good, but I had even more help." Kevin was unusually upbeat. "I met this psychiatrist..."

"Splendid, splendid. Whatever it takes." The producer was not interested in any further explanation. He had what he needed, and it was time to move on. Now he would record the music from the other members of the band, and then quietly hide those recordings and insert his own instrumentation so it didn't sound like an ungodly mess.

So it was finally time for Kevin to take his own seat in the lounge, and get a little bit of rest.

"Hey, that actually sounded halfway decent," Carl said. "I didn't think you had it in you."

Kevin looked at him warily, not expecting the insult he just received.

Carl nudged Kevin playfully. "Just foolin' with you man. So what were the lessons like?"

"They were okay. Pretty basic stuff, I guess." Kevin relaxed further into the sofa. "But what was even better, was Dr. Price."

"Who's that?" Carl asked.

"He's this therapist guy. I accidentally found him when I was looking for the singing school."

"So he helped you?"

"Yeah. He got me to finally learn how to relax. I guess things of been kind of out of control in my life lately. He really helped me with that. I normally wouldn't say such a thing about a therapist, because I think they're all kind of flakes, but he did actually help me."

"There is no greater puzzle to solve in the great majesty of the universe then the great mystery of your own life," Carl said, adding, "dude."

After being blessed with such asinine advice, it gave Kevin no greater thrill to tell Carl, "I think they want to in the studio now."

"Time for me to do my thing," Carl said, flexing his fingers. He grabbed his toy keyboard clarinet and headed for the studio.

As Carl left, José returned, having just made his contribution to this musical masterpiece. He landed in the sofa as if he had just dropped from 10,000 feet.

He then exhaled dramatically. "I don't get it. Why can't we all play at once? Then we be done. I go back to work."

"Relax José," said Kevin, "you're getting paid, there's nothing to worry about. Just take it easy."

"No. No, this no good. I like to work. I can no do dis. I just want to do some't-ing. I feel like I just go crazy."

"Yeah, I kinda know how you feel," Kevin said. "Hey, you know who might help? I met this doctor guy earlier today. He helped me."

"A doctor? I dunno. I don't like doctors." José looked nervous. "I don't trust doctors."

"He's not that kind of doctor. He's actually really good. Why don't we go see him tomorrow."

"It's not going to cost me?"

"No way, he's just helping us out. You in?"

"If you say he okay, then he okay. I trust you."



The next morning, it was all four members of the so-called group that showed up at Dr. Price's office. Kevin's persistent lobbying for this trip seemed to have won over the boys. José had come just to get out the studio, Carl had come because it was free, and Ray had come because everybody else was going.

"Dr. Price will be with you guys in just a sec," said the very sexy receptionist. "So this is the whole group, huh? Four little cutie-cutes."

"I'm ready for the next appointment, Ellie," said the doctor on the intercom.

"So who wants to go first?" Ellie asked. "How about you, handsome?"

"Me?" Replied Ray.

"Yes, you! Go right in. The doctor's waiting for you."

Ray, looking vastly uncomfortable at going into the office, and even more uncomfortable doing anything alone, approached the door and touched the handle as if it were a live wire. He gave everyone a last look and then headed inside.

"So we're all going to get a one-on-one?" Asked Carl.

"Yes! Isn't the doctor so lucky?" Said Ellie.

The three remaining boys subtly squirmed in their seats, somewhat uncomfortable with the increasingly obvious overtones of Ellie's language. After all, none could be called 'experienced' in the field of flirting. They all had had a relationship or two in their life, at some point, but that was the product of their

usual mating rituals: awkwardness, desperation, and settling for the first thing that smiled at you.

Fortunately, after that, Ellie kept to herself. She seemed to be busy scribbling down some notes on a legal pad, which left the three boys free from her attentions. Although, that did not stop them from ogling her at every opportunity. She was probably the best looking thing any of them had seen live and in person, without paying a two drink minimum.

About 30 minutes later, Ray finally emerged from the office. He held something in his hands that everyone was sure he hadn't gone in with. It was then time for José to make his trip inside, and although he was as tentative as you might expect, at least he wasn't as skittish as Ray.

"Hand this paper to the doctor, won't you?" Ellie asked. She handed José a folded piece of legal paper.

No sooner had José gone inside then Kevin's phone rang. After checking the phone number, and seeing that it wasn't his girlfriend, he seemed okay with picking it up. It was good old shift manager Gabe.

"Where are you guys?" Gabe yelled. "We need you back here at the studio!"

"I thought we were done. At least I hope so."

"You were, but now you're not. That stupid producer's got himself fired. I don't know what he did, but the company just canned his ass."

"Really?" Kevin said. "Wow."

"Yeah, and he took all the recordings with him. Now we need to start over!"

"Oh you gotta be kidding me!" Kevin sighed. "Okay, fine. We'll be there in an hour or so." He hung up before Gabe could answer, knowing Gabe would not be happy with what he just said.

"What was that all about?" Asked Carl.

"Yeah, what was that all about?" Ray echoed.

Kevin explained the situation to them. They all groaned, but Kevin knew that finishing the project meant being done with the project. There was no sense being a baby about it, he reasoned.

"I guess you got a point there," said Carl.

"I don't like it," said Ray, in an unusual display of opinion.

"We've just got to make the best of it," was all Kevin could say.

"Whatever," was Ray's reply. "Hey! Shake my hand!" he offered his hand to Carl.

Without thinking, which was something Carl was good at, he shook Ray's hand. He was rewarded by a loud buzzing sound and Carl snapped his hand back as if it'd just been bitten by a cobra.

“What’s the deal, bro?” Carl snapped.

Ray held up the underside of his palm. “Joy buzzer!” Ray laughed. “You should’ve seen the look on your face! Priceless!”

“Where did you get that?” Carl asked.

“Did the doctor give you that?” Kevin asked. He thought it might be the item Ray carried out from his trip to the office.

“None of your business.” Ray replied. He pulled off the buzzer from his hand and stuck it in his pocket. “You guys are suckers.”

A few minutes later when José exited from the office, he too, held an item. “You next,” he said looking at Carl.

“Okay. Just don’t shake hands with Ray, if you know what’s good for you.”

“Spoil my fun,” Ray said. Kevin couldn’t help but note how out of character Ray was suddenly behaving. But he didn’t know Ray that well, so maybe he was just showing a part of his personality he hadn’t shown before.

“Oh could you give this to the doctor?” Ellie said, thrusting another piece of legal paper at Carl.

“Yeah, sure.” The paper was all folded up so Carl couldn’t read it.

Kevin didn’t think it was very professional of the receptionist to be passing notes to the doctor. If they had been in high school, she would’ve been brought up for detention. Maybe there was more to the relationship than just professionalism? Although Kevin couldn’t see such a pretty young woman as Ellie having anything to do with the old and cerebral doctor.

José sat down, taking Carl’s spot. Kevin noticed he that he was also carrying a small object in his hands, just like Ray was. “What’s that?” Kevin asked.

“I don’ know, he just give it to me when finished. I don’t know what it for. Is it a gift? Do I need to pay for dis? What do I do with it? I don’ know.” José held it up for both of them to see. It was a small porcelain cup with a union jack flag on the side. “I guess I could use it,” José said, “but it no good for beer.”

“It’s a teacup,” Kevin said. “You know, tea? The British drink a lot of tea.”

“Is it valuable? Could I sell it?” José asked.

“No, I don’t think so. There are tons of teacups out there.” Kevin shrugged. “Who knows why he did that. I’m sure we’ll find out, though.”

After informing José of the new recording session, the three waited for the last appointment, which was for Kevin. He too carried in a note from Ellen as he went to the office. He also saw that Carl was carrying something small in his hands as well. It looked like an iPod.

Well, at least one of them got a cool gift, Kevin thought to himself. He sat down in the chair opposite Dr. Price desk and handed him the note. Dr. Price

spent a good two minutes carefully reading the note, and once he was done he place to decide and directors attention straight in between Kevin's eyes.

"Very well done Kevin," the doctor said calmly. "You were very persuasive. All your friends came."

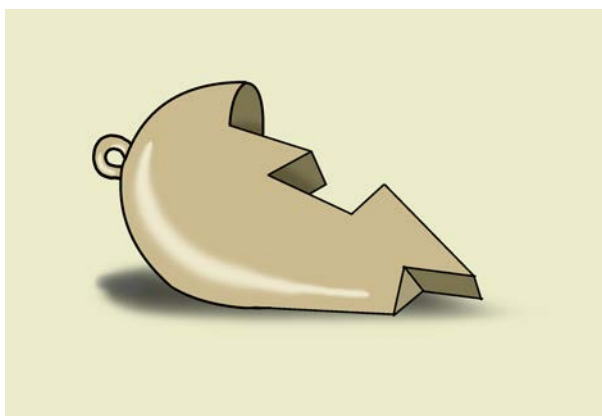
"Well I wouldn't call them my friends, they're just people that I work with, and kind of accidentally..."

"Sleep, Kevin. Sleep," said the doctor.

That's the last thing Kevin remembered.



The next thing Kevin could recall, he was sitting on a bus heading back to the studio. Carl, Ray, and José were also with him. All of them were clutching the small objects they had been given by the doctor. Sure enough, Kevin looked down on his lap, where he was holding something. On closer inspection, it turned out to be



a small piece of metal. It was oddly shaped, a bulge of metal that looked like it had been broken. It also had a small eyelet on it, which made him think it was some sort of pendant or something. Plus it was plated in gold, or something that looked a lot like gold.

For some reason, he kept turning and turning it in his hands, even though he wanted to just put it in his pocket and forget about it.

The bus arrived in the studio's neighborhood, and all four got off. They said nothing, keeping silent. Once they were inside the studio, they met the new producer, who seemed to be a bit more even-keeled than the last guy.

All four recorded their parts, without any real difficulty. The recording session went much smoother this time. In fact, they were done in just a matter of a couple of hours. Maybe it was because they had already done it once, so doing it the second time made it much easier.

Kevin though, suspected that visiting Dr. Price had given each member a new-found sense of confidence. After all, that was the whole reason to bring the boys to see the doctor. He was pretty pleased with himself.

With the dirty work done, Kevin phoned up his girlfriend to see if he could get a ride home. The other three also left.

“So, do I have a famous rockstar as a boyfriend?” Asked Paula.

“Nah. I’m just plain old Kevin.”

“Good. I hate rock.” Paula punched a button on the car radio. “Give me some Nicki Minaj any day over that crap.” The car was filled with the electronic zippy sounds of the latest pop hit.

Kevin squinted a bit, barely able to tolerate the sound of the pounding beat and synthetic noise. He wanted to turn it down or turn it off, but he knew better than to cross Paula for any reason.

“So you’re going to take me to dinner. Congratulations,” Paula said with a sassy, smug smile. “How do you feel about Himalayan-French seafood? There’s a new place that just opened up. I got us reservations.”

Paul couldn’t say no, after all, he had just asked for a favor. He was well aware that her prices were steep for favors. He spent the rest of the night pretending to pay attention to what ever his girlfriend said, and agree with whatever she wanted him to agree to. In other words, a normal night out.

Kevin did, though, take a special interest in the necklace Paula wore. The thin chain around her neck was probably just thin enough to fit in the tiny eyelet found of the strange piece of metal Kevin was fiddling was in his pocket. That seem to interest him, for some reason.



Now that the recording was completed, it was back to the grindstone. Or, in Kevin’s case, the grease-stone. Back to Burger Boom. After all, Kevin needed to make a living. That was the beauty of an employee competition, since they were already on the payroll, corporate felt no need to pay anything extra for the jingle. But the boys didn’t expect anything extra anyway, that had been clear from the very beginning.

They got to keep their jobs, which was reward enough.

...In some alternate universe somewhere.

“You think you rock stars can take it easy?” Gabe asked. “You guys are really slacking off!”

Kevin’s head was throbbing, from three hours of verbal abuse from Gabe. Kevin didn’t know what Gabe’s problem was, but for some reason, he had turned up the amplification on his irritating personality tenfold.

“When that buzzer goes off on the fries, you need to be there within five seconds. You’re giving me six, seven, eight seconds! Let’s get that done, people!” Gabe was almost apoplectic. “This is not satisfactory! Let’s get this done!”

When Gabe was far enough away, Carl leaned over from the register position. “Sounds like his aura has gone way out of phase today. That dude has the worst chakra of anyone I know.”

Kevin wanted to agree with him, but he wasn’t entirely sure what Carl had just said. Kevin just nodded. As it so happened, this particular shift had all four of them working. Carl, Kevin, José and even the reclusive Ray. Kevin was working on the line, Carl at the register, José cleanup, and Ray was staring at things.

“Ray, why aren’t you doing anything?” Gabe yelled. “We’re not paying you to just space out.”

Ray didn’t respond. He just kept his back to Gabe.

“Did you we hear me?” Gabe hollered. “You need to listen to me.”

Ray then suddenly spun around. “What laid eggs up your butt?”

You could actually hear the gasp coming from the other employees.

“What did you just say?” Gabe responded. “What did you just say to me?”

Ray was assertive. He stood his ground and put his hands on his hips. “What, are you losing your hearing?”

“That’s it!” Gabe said. “You’re outta here. Take your stuff and go home. I don’t need you.”

“It’s all about you, isn’t it Gabe?” Ray said. “The world revolves around you and we are just things that get in your way.”

“Alright, that’s the way you want it?” Gabe pointed to the office. “Get in there, right now. This is harassment – you’re harassing me. And I’m going to bring you up on charges. I’m gonna fill out a harassment form!”

“Like hell you are!”

“You bet I am! You think you’re so smart? I’m not going to fire you. Once I bring you up on harassment, you forego all your benefits and back pay. You’ll get nothing, and you’ll get terminated!”

“Yeah, well I quit!”

“Same deal! No back pay, no benefits!” Gabe said, with a sneer. “And no unemployment.”

“Gabe!” Came at yell from the back of the restaurant. “In my office, now!” It was the voice of Tom, The restaurant’s general manager. Usually, he was silent. Often times, it was as if there was no general manager at Burger Boom. Tom just let Gabe do whatever the hell he wanted to. But for some reason, this time, Tom had stopped his prized pet shift manager cold.



Without another word, Gabe shuffled off to the office, where the door was closed, and the yelling began.

Needless to say, the activity in the restaurant had ground to a halt. All the employees were just standing around staring at the office, and at Ray, and the 27 or so customers waiting to place their orders were frozen still with horrified expressions on their face.

Kevin exited the kitchen and approached the front counter. He addressed the customers and said, politely, “maybe this would be a good day to explore your other dining options.”

They all agreed with him by leaving.

Carl turned to Kevin and said, “I’m on break.” He took the iPod from his pocket, put on a pair of headphones, and left.

Kevin then approached Ray, and said, “this might be a good time to get the hell out of here.”

“Don’t tell me what to do!” Ray sniped. “I’ll take the register! That’s where all the fun is!”

Kevin wanted to object, but he was not in a position to do so. He wasn’t a manager, thank God.

The muffled shouting coming from the manager's office had started to die down a small amount, but it was still a pretty fiery conversation inside. Even after two minutes, after four minutes, after ten minutes, it was still raging on.

Kevin paced around a little bit, nervous. Waiting for the door to open was kind of like waiting for a bomb to explode. He walked on over to José, and said, "having fun?"

"So much drama," José said, "they really are a bunch of immature children."

Kevin had to agree. They were acting like children. Immature was the perfect word for it. He also noted that José's English was improving.

Finally, the door opened. Gabe took three steps outside the office, and stopped still. With his head slung low and staring at the floor, he said, "Ray, I'd like to offer an apology."

"About time," Ray said. He was obviously trying to provoke another reaction.

But he didn't get one. "I think we just need to engage in some conflict resolution," Gabe said. "I know we can work as a team."

It certainly was a change of pace, to hear any sort of apology coming from Gabe's lips. He was a Rottweiler of a manager, normally. Kevin had never heard one word of reconciliation from him in the time he had worked here. He wondered what the cause of this was.

Three days later, Kevin got his answer. He, and the other three members of his little group, were called in before opening the restaurant in the morning. Tom, the general manager, told the four of them, plus Gabe, said that corporate wanted them to do their stuff again.

As he explained it, there was a convention coming up in a month for all the local franchisees around the country. The company wanted the four of them there to perform the jingle, live. Plus, as Tom explained, he was told that this was the "most important thing in the world" by Bert the owner. So, beginning immediately, they were back on jingle duty.

Kevin, José, Ray, and Carl kind of shrugged it off. Both flipping burgers and performing seemed to be about the same. Kind of dull. The only person who seemed put out by this news was Gabe.

Although Gabe had learned the hard way to keep his mouth shut.

Tom described the plan: for the next few weeks, they were going to work up an act. Performing a five second jingle didn't take up all whole lot of time, so they were going to need to come up with some other stuff to do on stage. Tom suggested maybe writing a song or two.

They had some time to work on it here, and then for the final week they would be sent to Las Vegas, where the convention was being held. Once in Vegas, they would be put up in a hotel and their expenses covered, while they put the finishing touches on the act.

Tom handed a few sheets of paper to Gabe and said, “this is what corporate wants, and you’re in charge of making sure it all happens according to plan.” Gabe took the papers like he was being handed a dead skunk.

Handshakes were exchanged, and they all left the restaurant, except for Tom. There, Gabe swiftly turned around and kicked the wall of the restaurant, angrily. The building did not collapse.

“I was happy just doing my job! Now I’m stuck with you guys!” He yelled, at no one in particular.

“We are not so happy about it either,” Ray quipped.

“I’m just a glorified babysitter!”

“What’s the glorified part?” José said. Kevin snickered.

“Oh yeah? Well, screw you guys.”

Kevin had an urge to play peacemaker. He waved off the rest of the guys and talked quietly to Gabe. “Look, if we’re stuck with each other for a while, we’ve got to start to stop bickering. It’s not productive, and we’ll just tear each other to shreds after a few days. But I know this guy who might be able to work things out between us.”



“Huzzah!” Diedrick exclaimed. “I’ve been looking for this die from Valhalla to the river Styx. These pewter ones costs a mercenaries’ ransom!”

Diedrick was on the floor, on all fours, with his nose under the couch. He held his prize, a 16-sided die, in the air for all to see. But it was just Kevin alone in the room with him.

“So Las Vegas, hmm?” Diedrick had just been told of Kevin’s upcoming trip. “Might I impose upon you for a souvenir from the Excalibur Hotel? A broadsword, maybe?”

“If we get there, sure, I suppose.” Kevin took another sip of his beer. He was finding it especially bitter. “It’s kind of a working trip, though. Haven’t you ever been to Las Vegas yourself?”

“I refuse to patronize the city since the closing of The Star Trek Experience.”

Spending his day with Diedrick in their tiny apartment was not the ideal way to pass time for Kevin. But they were still setting up a place for the ‘group’ to practice. The apartment was too small. So Gabe had to go find a suitable facility.

Until then, Kevin took it upon himself to try and write a few bits of music for any potential songs they might need. It was tough, because he needed to make the music sound safe and corporate, not the usual hard rock he preferred.

Kevin took another sip of beer, and made a face. For some reason, all the beer he had been buying lately tasted like crap. True, he didn't exactly buy the top-of-the-line stuff, but even the bargain beer he usually got didn't taste this bad... Or go through him this quickly.

Kevin got off the sofa, and headed for the bathroom. He had been in there for a few minutes when his phone rang. Diedrick, being the helpful and nosy person he was, picked the phone up and answered it for his dear roommate. After a short conversation, he hung up and went to his room to put away his newly rediscovered die.

After exiting the bathroom, Kevin checked his phone for messages. He had sworn he had heard it ring. But there was no indication of voice mail.

Diedrick returned, and noted his roommate's distaste for the beer. "Dost thou abstain from partaking in thy innkeeper's ale?"

"Yeah, this stuff taste like unfiltered ass." Kevin grabbed his wallet. "I'm going to go down to the store and get something to drink. I can't take any more of that stuff. Do you want anything?" He asked, hoping the answer would be no.

Diedrick handed him five dollars. "A modicum of beef jerky will satiate me."

Kevin took the cash and headed out the door. It was a couple blocks to the nearest store, which left him with a little time to himself, something he rarely had these days. He reflected on the fact that he was no longer really a working man. There was no regular job for him anymore. He was now a professional musician, something that he'd always wanted to do. However, he had always envisioned himself as a hard rocker, working bars, small clubs and the like.

He had always preferred his music dirty and gritty, rough around the edges. This jingle stuff was too neat and clean for him. Although, he was warming to it. Kevin popped into the store and headed towards the back where the alcohol was. He examined every brand carefully. He had bought most of them at some point in his life, and for each brand he could feel the taste on his tongue. As he went through every last brand in the store, none of them tasted good to his imagination.

"Wine cooler?" Diedrick said, looking at the purchases Kevin returned with. "That's a bit out of character for you."

"Maybe I'm a little tired of doing the same old thing." Kevin handed over the beef jerky and 29 cents change. He cracked the top of a bottle and poured it into a glass, enjoying the smell of strawberries.

"By the way, your folks called," Diedrick said, gnawing on a stalk of jerky. "They wanted you to call them back."

"Of course they did. They've got no one to nag so they phone me." He took a couple of sips of the cooler, to brace himself. Then, he brought his phone out and dialed them up.

Diedrick took the opportunity to linger in the room, so he could overhear the conversation. He opened one of the forgotten beers, and emptied it into his favorite stein. The one with the red dragon on it.

“What happened again?” Kevin asked the phone. “I told you to stop answering those emails. It’s just a scam.”

Kevin paused for a minute as he listened.

“And of course that can’t be right. You checked with them, right?” Kevin said. He listened further.

“I don’t like it. It’s a scam, I’m telling you. Next thing he’ll say is that he’s a Nigerian prince. Don’t give him any money.”

Diedrick, as one could guess, was riveted by the conversation. It appeared to him that Kevin was becoming more and more distressed by what he was hearing.

“I don’t care if he gave you a check, you know it’s going to bounce. Don’t try to cash it, it’ll just ruin your credit rating.”

Then, Diedrick noted Kevin’s eyes flash wide open.

“You did cash it? It was good? That’s not possible. You know it’s not possible.”

Kevin then paused to listen some more. This time, he didn’t talk back.

“You’ve had a lawyer look at this, right? Well, of course he says that. Have an *expensive* lawyer look at it, then. No, of course I’m happy for you! It just seems like this has to be some sort of a scam. I don’t know. So you have the cash, maybe there’s some way it gets taken back or something, I don’t know. It’s just not possible.”

Kevin listened some more. He was no longer distressed or angry, he seemed to trying cope with the message he was hearing.

“So, I guess I’m happy for you.” Kevin said, with bewilderment. “That’s the best news I’ve ever heard.” By this point, Kevin’s expression was a total distortion of his face. Every muscle in his face was either clenched or stretched out.

Diedrick thought that this was either the best news ever delivered in the history of the world, or the worst possible news. It couldn’t be in between, that was for sure. He was dying to know what it happened.

“Yeah, sure. Great. Thank you, I guess. Yes, of course I’m grateful... But... Yes, I’ll go check it out.” Kevin reached for piece of paper and a pen. “Just a second. I’ll write it down. Yeah, okay. I’ve got it. Yes. I’ll let you know how it looks.”

Kevin then hung up the phone. With a faraway look in his eyes, Kevin set the phone aside, and looked out into space.

“Well?” Diedrick asked with urgency. “What happened! Do not toy with me!”

Kevin took a moment to comport himself. “My parents just sold their ranch.”

“Sold it? Why?”

Kevin shrugged. “Someone told them there was oil under it. Vast amounts of oil. They sold it for \$386 million.”

“That can’t be real.”

“Apparently, it is. They have the cash. They have the contracts. The lawyers have checked everything out. They have \$386 million minus tax in the bank.”

“Then what were you writing down?”

“They wanted to give me a present. They bought me a mansion.” Kevin looked at the piece of paper. “This is the address.”



Kevin and Paula pulled up at the number on the sheet of paper. There was, indeed, a large mansion at this site. When Kevin went to the front door, the key he had been provided with turned the lock. This was the place, this was his new mansion.



Stepping inside, he was immediately taken by the large open indoor space. The mansion was built out of marble, with all the rooms around the sides, and in the center, a large atrium space with plants that were slightly dead.

He could not comprehend how expensive this place must’ve been. He now felt an overwhelming responsibility to make sure he didn’t touch anything. Because this couldn’t possibly be his, it was someone else’s, it was far too good for the likes of him. *If I break anything*, he thought to himself, *I won’t be able to return the house*.

If Kevin had bothered to look, he would have noted that his girlfriend Paula seemed to be losing her mind. The expression on her face was like Gollum having finally found the ring. Here it was, all the wealth she could have imagined,

and this lump of a boyfriend she had been keeping on the line was finally paying off beyond her wildest dreams – and when it came to wealth, Paula had some pretty wild dreams.

Her eyes were as big as two full moons, and were scanning the entire place left to right, top to bottom. Her hands were clenched up tightly to her chest and curled as if she wanted at any moment to just lunge out and grab something, so as to appreciate its inherent wealth. That is, if she couldn't overcome the urge to devour it and incorporate its' opulence into her very soul.

"It's ours, it's all ours!" Paula whispered to herself. "Let's get married!" She shouted at Kevin, trembling with excitement. "Right now, right now!"

Kevin was snapped back to reality by that comment. He turned to see that his girlfriend had morphed from her usual deadpan, distant, emotionless countenance, into the living incarnation of greed.

"Why don't you take a seat, honey." Kevin gently directed her to a nearby velvet love seat, disregarding the dust that had accumulated on it. She fought him, and wanted to keep her feet. She scrambled away and started running around the room like a six-year-old in a candy factory.

"All of it, it's all mine," she said repeatedly.

Kevin hadn't heard that kind of language outside of badly written movies. After a few minutes of random criss-crossing around the house, Paula eventually returned to where Kevin was standing. He had to grab her by the wrists just to get her attention. "I don't even know if this is really mine," Kevin said, "and marriage is a little bit of a rush don't you think?"

"You're seeing someone else!" Paula said, going almost banana yellow with jealousy. "Well she can't have you!"

"Calm down, for God sake!"

"Tell me you're mine! Tell me! You must tell me!" Paula was trying to think of some way to threaten Kevin into acquiescing to her wishes. "Marry me now or I won't drive you home!" She had always enjoyed having the advantage over Kevin, the natural advantage that women have over men. Now, all of the sudden, Kevin was the one with the advantage, and she was clearly unprepared for this eventuality.

"Paula, honey, why don't we drive you home, so you can relax," Kevin offered.

"This is my home!" Paula insisted. "This is my real home! I was born to live in a place like this!" She started to cry. "I knew it would happen for me someday! I just knew all the time!"

Finally, Kevin had to capitulate. "Of course, sweetie. But we have to leave now, so it can be cleaned up. So why don't I take you back to where your apartment, and we'll come back later when the place is all nice and clean."

Kevin demonstrated that need by wiping his finger along the top of the near by chest showing months and months of dust accumulation.

“Oh, okay, maybe that’s for the best.” Paula been clenched her shoulders as if she’d suddenly felt a chill. Kevin took the opportunity to wrap an arm around her shoulders and direct her back out the front door. “We can come back tomorrow, right?”

“Of course we can, sweetie. But you look like you need to get some sleep first.”

Kevin carefully placed her back in her own car in the passenger seat, and then drove her back to her apartment. He left her there, lying in her bed, still a bit moon-eyed. He then grabbed his phone once again.

“Yes, this is Kevin. Could you ask the doctor if he makes house calls? This is a little bit of an emergency.”



With his girlfriend in capable hands, Kevin decided that it was about time to share his new place with some people who weren’t going to fall to pieces upon seeing it. He invited José, Carl and Ray.

So just a few hours later, he found himself hosting an impromptu reception at his new abode. José, Carl and Ray were there by the time he had arrived from the bus stop.

Carl Declared the building “trippy” and José just let out an admiring whistle. Ray was less impressed, saying he had seen bigger mansions that were far more grand than this. Fortunately José had brought some sodas with him, so there was something to drink. Surprisingly, the large 72 inch big screen seemed to be in working order, so they sat down to watch a baseball game.

No one was quite sure how, but Gabe arrived, even though no one admitted to telling him where they all were. He was wearing a pair of black Ray-Ban sunglasses, a new affectation of hits. Apparently Dr. Price had given them to him after their session.

All he had to do was step foot inside the new place, before he declared, “and you had me running around all day trying to find a place to practice? This is perfect!”

Simultaneously, they all realized that it was true. This was a perfect place to practice. There was a large open space for them to all work, it had more amenities than any of them would ever need, and even had rooms for them stay in. It was perfect. All they had to do was freshen up the place.

“But it would take us a week to clean this whole place up. It’s huge!” Said Carl.

“Why don’t we just have Kevin hire some people to clean it up for us? And maybe do some decoration while they’re at it?” Ray said. “The place looks like it just fell out of 1985.”

Kevin balked at that. Sure he may actually own a mansion, but that didn’t mean he was rich. His parents might’ve been rich, but that didn’t mean he had a lot of money. “It’s a little expensive.”

Gabe then chimed in. “I’ll just use whatever it was that we were going to spend on getting a practice place. That should be enough.”

It was then that Kevin said something he thought he’d never ever say if he lived to be a million billion years old. “Good idea, Gabe.”

“What are we gonna call this place?” José asked.

“It looks like an old decrepit ballroom,” Ray said. “There probably a bunch of rats running around here someplace.”

“The rats ballroom,” Kevin said. “That would almost make a good band name.”



A couple of days later, the group was all set up at the new place. They had practically moved in with all of the equipment that they needed to do some work, and they had bought a little bit of food.

The decorators had just finished their work, having done a rush job. The place was now sparkling clean, and looked much better than before. The atrium now flooded the house with sunlight, making it look like a bit of man-made paradise. There were new curtains, new rugs, and new stuff all over the place. It looked far more expensive than Gabe’s budget probably would have allowed, but here it was anyway.

The very center of the mansion had been cleared out as a workspace. All four members of the ‘group’ had their own space, and spent much of the day tinkering around and working out new ideas. But that wasn’t good enough for Gabe, as he was driven to make sure this was going to be a success.

He couldn’t stop making suggestions at every turn. He pushed new song ideas, criticized old ones, and was starting to annoy everyone with his constant intervention. The music wasn’t slow enough or fast enough. The singing wasn’t good enough, the guitar playing wasn’t good enough, the base wasn’t good enough, the drums weren’t good enough and that melodica-keyboard-thing that Carl played wasn’t good enough.

“You have to take this seriously,” Gabe kept saying. “You need to be real professionals out there. And you need to look like you know what you’re doing.”

The last straw came when Gabe produced a pile of clothing. Not just any clothing, but new performing clothes for every member of the group. He called them stage outfits.

“Are you serious?” Asked José, sipping some tea. “You can’t be serious.”

Kevin went to the pile and picked up one of the items. They all seemed to be made of spandex. Glittery, shiny spandex. “This does seem a bit over-the-top.”

“It’s what people do in our business, baby,” Gabe said.

Ray walked over to check them out for himself. “I think they’re okay,” he said. “Sure they’re a little showy, but we are in show biz.”

Carl, who’d been keeping to himself, and listening to his new headphones, walked over without comment picked up something that looked like a jacket and put it right on. He then returned to where he came from, without speaking a word.

Gabe pointed to Ray and Carl. “See, they like it.”

“Yeah but we don’t,” Kevin said, referring to him and José.

“Well there’s no helping the fact that you guys are idiots,” Ray said. “You guys have screwed up everything at every point along the way. I would’ve done it totally different.”

“Like what?” José said loudly and angrily. “You think you could do this better?”

“Hey, let’s not have an argument!” Said Kevin. “Not over something so silly!”

“This isn’t silly!” Yelled Gabe.

“Everyone call me down!” Yelled Kevin. “This is getting crazy!”

“Crazy? I’ll show you crazy!” Yelled Ray. He picked up a lamp off a nearby table and threw it against the wall, causing it to break into pieces.



“So what brings you to see me today?” Asked Dr. Price.

All four members of the group, plus Gabe, were seated in Dr. Price’s office.

“He started it!” Accused Ray, pointing at José.

“Right! That’s a lie, that is!” José declared.

“Now, calm down everybody,” said the doctor. “I’m sure this is something we can resolve easily. Now aren’t you all feeling a little bit tired? Maybe a little sleepy, perhaps?”



“These are awfully tight, aren’t they?” Said Kevin.

“At least they stretch,” replied José.

It was going to be the first practice with all of them in their new outfits. Carl and Ray were already waiting, and José and Kevin were just finishing up.

José had a dark blue spandex tank top, with a black pair of stretch pants. They weren’t very forgiving when it came to the body, but fortunately for José, he was in good shape. He found a jacket that fit him well enough, and used it to cover his shoulders. Kevin, however, was left with some uncomfortable choices. All that was left over was a white spandex full-body leotard, and a long pastel blue coat. He slipped into them and decided that adding a belt at the waist was the best way to keep the outfit from looking any weirder than it had to. All in



all, both men were slightly embarrassed, but not nearly as humiliated as they thought they would be.

"I guess it isn't as bad as I thought," José remarked.

"Yeah, it's not too bad." Kevin had to agree. Yes, they did book a bit less than 100% masculine, but no more different than any number of performers he'd seen on stage. Slightly ridiculous, maybe, but appropriate for their new profession.

If they were being truly honest with each other, they were all secretly enjoying the feel of the smooth, tight clothing on their bodies. Not that they would, in a million years, ever admit that.

Once they were all together, they ran through the two songs they had worked out. One fast, kicky number Kevin liked. Another was a little slower, much more like a ballad, that Ray favored.

It was also the first practice with proper instruments. Once Gabe had told corporate about the makeshift instruments the band was using, they bought a proper drum kit for Ray, a real set of keyboards for Carl, and some big amplifiers for Kevin and José.

Fortunately, everybody seemed to know what to do. Ray was a natural on the drum kit, taking to it like a fish to water. Carl had unpacked his new equipment quickly, and got it all plugged in and wired up. There must've been a hundred wires leading from the keyboards to other audio processing equipment, but he seemed to make sense of it somehow. He especially enjoyed the new giant headphones that came with the equipment, as he was rarely seen without the big cans on.

Kevin was especially fond of the new microphone he had been given. It made his voice sound much smoother than the old one they were using. That was especially helpful for the ballad. Both José and Kevin understood their new amplifiers immediately. They knew just what settings to use to get the sound they wanted. Where any of them had gotten this knowledge didn't seem to be terribly important.

Ray clicked off the beginning of the very first song, and the group dove right in. It took them a few takes to get everything synced up, but they were a natural. They played together beautifully. Say what you want about their conflicting personalities, but when he came to music, they seemed to be a perfectly matched set.

They ran through both songs several times, tweaking them a little bit every time. Eventually they had some stuff they were reasonably happy with. "So what do you think, Gabe?" Asked Kevin.

"I think it's terrific," Gabe replied with a proud smile on his face. "You're going to knock them out when we go on tour."

“On tour?” José asked. “Like a right proper band?”

“Woo-hoo! Tour!” Ray yelled in celebration.

“Wait a minute, Gabe,” Kevin asked, putting his guitar away. “What are you talking about?”

“Great news! The company wants us to do a mall mini-tour before we go to the convention, to make sure that we’ve got everything worked out.” Gabe looked very pleased with himself. “They want us to try out the act and test the jingle. They want to see how it performs out there in the public.”

“Doesn’t that seem a little crazy?” Kevin asked. “I mean we’re not really a real band!”

“Well consider yourself a real band!” Gabe said. “I even told them that name you guys decided on.”

“We decided on a name?” Ray said. “I wasn’t told! That’s not fair!”

“It was your name, Ray,” Gabe told him. “You remember, The Ballroom Brats.”

“I said there were rats in this place! That wasn’t a name!”

“Well, I really like that. I think it’s... Cute,” said José.

Kevin smiled as he looked back at Ray. “Hey, don’t complain! You got to name the band!”

“I didn’t mean to!” Ray crossed arms and pouted behind his drum kit.

Kevin and José just looked each other and smiled knowingly. They liked tweaking with Ray.

“Well, what’s done is done,” said Gabe. “Now, let’s really get practicing. We’ll be leaving in a week for five shows! And you guys need to be ready! In fact, we should probably make another couple of songs we need to do at least a half hour.”

“That’s not a couple of songs!” Said Kevin, “that’s more like five or six!”

“Then we better get working!” Said Gabe.

“I can’t just produce for five or six songs just like that!” Said Kevin, snapping his fingers. “I can’t work like that! I’ll get totally stressed out!”

“I can write them, no problem!” Said Ray. “If Kevin thinks he’s not up to the task, I know I am.”

“Now, now. Let’s not have another argument,” Kevin said. “Ray, you write those songs. I think I can handle maybe doing three or four. But I know I’m pushing it. Then, once we have them all done, we’ll see which ones are the best, and pick the ones that are going to go into the set. Sound fair?”

“Yeah, I guess so,” Ray said.

“Great!” Said Gabe. “I’ll tell you what, Dr. Price told me about a spa he’s opening up in the valley. He wanted us to check it out. Once we get the songs finished, we’ll all go down there and enjoy a few days off before we kick off the tour.”

“Sound good?” Kevin asked the members of his new band, The Ballroom Brats.

“Smashing!” Said José.

“Whatever,” said Ray.

Carl didn’t even glance their way, but gave a thumbs up.



Once again, Diedrick didn’t get an answer. He had been phoning his so-called roommate for days now. The rent was coming up, and he never needed a roommate more than he did right now. He wasn’t going to be able to cough up the \$500 that Kevin needed to pay, and hadn’t seen any sign of Kevin for weeks now.

He had but one clue – the mansion he claimed to have been gifted. It seemed very clear to him now, that the whole thing was an elaborate ruse for Kevin to get out of his apartment lease. Kevin did not seem capable of such deviousness, but Diedrick had been fooled before, by lesser foes than Kevin.

Still, if Kevin had been telling the truth, then he would be living in that mansion. Such a thing was fairly easy to check out, but Diedrick had been busy lately, what with his DMing, his job, and the tons of back episodes of “Fringe” he was catching up on.

Now though, he was left with few options. Diedrick jumped in his car, his 1978 Plymouth Monarch, and headed to the address he’d managed to get from the pad Kevin used to write his new address. It was a simple gambit – something you’d seen in a Sherlock Holmes episode. The rubbing of a piece of paper to reveal the writings of the last person to have used it. Or was that an old episode of Mrs. Columbo? He wasn’t sure.

After a quick drive across town, he arrived at the address. It certainly was an impressive estate. The mansion was huge. There seemed to be no activity outside, and it was a fairly dead street. Diedrick felt safe in using his stealthy, chubby ninja skills to run up and peek inside a window.

He could just make out what looked to be a bad knock-off rock group inside, all in horrible, gaudy spandex outfits. They were making a bit of noise, practicing the so-called “rock music” that many mistakenly enjoyed these days, in his opinion. Diedrick was about to write the whole thing off, when he suddenly realized who was singing. It was Kevin.

Dismayed that Kevin would partake in such an endeavor, Diedrick made his way back to his car. This was a very curious development, indeed. Things didn't add up. This was no simple jingle writing. Something sinister was afoot. Faced with a dilemma most puzzling, he asked himself: "What would Mrs. Columbo do?"



"Come on Kevin, would you put that bloody guitar away?" José said. "We're at a getaway spa for Christ's sake. The whole point is to relax."

"Yeah, yeah. I know. But there's still a few chords I'm not quite getting," replied Kevin. "I want these songs to be right!"

José simply got up from his bed, grabbed the guitar away from Kevin, put it in the closet and then went back to lie on the bed.

"Message received," said Kevin.

"So what do you want to do first?" José asked.

"I really wasn't paying attention when we went through the introduction. What is there to do at a spa but just lie back and relax?"

"Well, normally I wouldn't come all the way out here to relax. I can do that back at the mansion. But there's a lot to do at the spa – you can get a stone massage, a Swedish massage, a sport massage, a deep tissue massage, or a Hawaiian massage," José said. "Me, I think I'm going to get a massage."

"Sounds like a good choice. But besides massages, what else?"

"Well there's the body treatments. You can get a body mask, a body wrap, a detoxifying wrap, or an enhancement wrap."

"Did you memorize this?"

"I read the brochure every day before we got here." José stretched like a tired cat. "And there's more. Whole-face facials, facial enhancements, pedicures, manicures, foot treatments, hand treatments, and don't forget about the hair salon."

"Oh, by no means should we forget the hair salon," Kevin snarked. "Sounds like it's a long way from growing up in Mexico."

"What's that got to do with anything?" José said, before turning back over on his stomach.

Kevin wasn't sure José was just being sarcastic or grumpy. "Forget it." He was amazed a how much getting to know José had changed his opinion of him. He once regarded him as just another Latino janitor. There was so much more to him than that. He was witty, even sometime funny. He also spoke much better

English than he had given him credit for. Kevin thought that José probably spoke it better than he did.

Kevin got up and left the room. In the hallway, he bumped into Ray, who had already changed out of his clothes and into the complimentary robe and slippers of the spa.

“That was quick,” Kevin said.

“I’m not going to waste a second of this.” Ray tugged his belt a little bit tighter. “I’m going to take advantage of everything they have here. Starting with the hair salon. I want to get a good rock look.”

“Well, enjoy yourself. Have you seen Carl?”

“I lost track of him when he said he was going to go get a body mask.”

“I guess I’ll just keep looking around for him. I feel like exploring, you want to come along?”

“Nah, I want to do it by myself.”

“Suit yourself,” Kevin said, “I’ll see you guys later.” With that, Kevin was off. He wanted to do a full walk around the grounds of the spa. It was slightly isolated, surrounded by dense trees and a few miles away from any other buildings. But that’s exactly what he wanted right now, to be far away from anybody else. He started his walk by heading across the very well manicured lawns. He walked up close to the fence which contained the grounds, and looked around. There wasn’t much to see, just a lot of trees.

However, even though Kevin didn’t see much, Diedrick did. He was hiding out there amongst the trees, with a pair of binoculars tracking his former roommate. He’d been following their movements for several days now, and was more and more suspicious of what he saw.

The first thing he noticed, was that all four members were acting dramatically different then when he first met them. He remembered meeting every single one of them whenever he dropped by Burger Boom to get some free food off his roommate.

Not only had Kevin changed a bit, but the other three had changed almost beyond the point of recognition. Ray’s personality was almost the exact opposite of what it was once was. José, was about as Mexican as a Taco Bell meal. Carl had changed the most of all, no longer a hipster hippy, but an increasingly quiet and reserved introvert almost physically attached to his headphones. All of them, to a man, had also lost dramatic amounts of weight.

So far Diedrick had put together this much: the jingle contest had somehow triggered massive personality changes in these four people, not to mention that crazy manager guy. He had looked for other correlations, but until this moment, really hadn’t drawn a link between them and Dr. Price. But now it was

clear, they had all visited Dr. Price at some point, more than once, and now they were staying at a spa he owned.

As Kevin walked out of range of his binoculars, Diedrick decided he couldn't do much more at this distance. He would wait until nightfall, and then infiltrate the compound. For now though, he was alone. Alone in the woods, with nothing but his wits, his patience, his dogged tenacity, a Nintendo 3DS and a 2 liter of orange soda.

Kevin continued his walk around the grounds, and found a large, square, windowless building. It was in stark contrast to the rest of the spa, which was very open, airy and pleasant. All Kevin could do was wonder what went on inside the building. Maybe it was just a boiler room or for storage.

But then he saw a familiar figure being wheeled into the building. It looked a heck of a lot like Carl. It was tough to tell for sure, because he was bandaged up pretty heavily from head to toe, but he still had that whole kind of "Carl" shape to him.

By the time Kevin was able to get close enough, he'd already been wheeled inside and the doors were shut. He was curious to know if anybody had a story behind it, so he returned to the guest rooms to see if anybody knew anything.

Before he was able to get there, he bumped into none other than Dr. Price himself. "Hi doctor!"

"Why hello there, my friend," the doctor replied.

"You got quite a layout here," Kevin said. "It must've cost you insane amounts of money."

"Any expense is worth it for my patients. I trust you find your accommodations comfortable?"

"Yeah, they're great! But do you know what the story is with Carl? I saw him being pushed into that big building around back."

"Just some intense treatment for his problem skin. I believe José is up next. They're getting him ready right now," the doctor said. "I do hope you're having a nice time. Please take advantage of everything the spa has to offer. Make yourself at home. And I'll see you around."

"Sure thing, Doc."

"Wonderful, wonderful! Why don't you try the salon, it's a good place to get started."

"Which way is it?"

The doctor pointed to Kevin's left. "Just down this way."

Before long, Kevin found himself seated in the very tastefully decorated salon, and his hair enveloped in a frothy shampoo. A few seats away, he saw that Ray was also in a similar state, although his hair appeared to be rinsed out. Pre-

dictably, he seemed to making a fuss and putting all the attendants through a lot of grief. He had even used his joy buzzer trick, shaking the hands of three very startled and exasperated young hairdressers.

“Are you comfortable?” Asked the lady who was sudsing his hair. “Oh, by the way, my name is Penny.”

“Yeah. My name is Kevin.” Kevin took a moment to appreciate Penny’s beauty. “How long is this going to take?”

“Not long! With what we want to do with you, this shouldn’t take very long at all.” She evaluated Kevin’s hair by running her fingers through it, which Kevin was thoroughly enjoying.

“Well, I haven’t told you what I want yet.”

“Oh yes, by all means, tell me what you want.” Penny then produced a music player for him to listen to. “Pop these in your ears. It’s better than listening to the scissors.”

Kevin did so, and started it playing. He was little surprised when he heard what was on it. “Hey, this isn’t music. It sounds like Dr. Price’s voice.”

“That’s right!” Penny said.

Kevin yawned. “It’s funny, I always get so sleepy whenever I hear Dr. Price’s voice.”

Penny nodded. “Yeah, funny.” The next thing she did was kind of odd – instead of picking up any scissors, bottles, or doing anything to tend to Kevin’s hair, all she did was cross her arms, stand there and wait.

“Oh, you must be waiting for me to tell you what I want,” Kevin said. “I like to cut my hair about an inch above the...” Then, suddenly, Kevin’s eyes glazed over and his head fell limp.

“No, *that’s* what I was waiting for.”



José wasn’t quite sure exactly where he was. He remembered going in for a full body treatment, but now he was immersed in a strange, dark, warm liquid and his skin was itching all over. Maybe this was part of the treatment? He wasn’t sure. Looking up, he saw that a flat-screen was flashing images. It looked like it was a mixture of British TV and some documentary on black history. It was hard to focus.

“Oops, we have a blinker,” said someone out of José’s sight. He wanted to turn his head to see who was speaking, but his whole body was locked in place. A small capsule of foul-smelling mist was waved in front of José’s face. His con-

centration faded completely, and he focused back on the flat screen. For some reason, he just couldn't stop watching it.

"How about the hippie?" Another voice asked.

"He's almost done," the first voice replied.

With the last bit of free will he had, José could just see there was another person lying opposite him. It looked like Carl, but he had no beard and his hair was black. In front of him played a never-ending stream of video in a language José didn't understand.

José was overwhelmed with pain and confusion, but when he watched his video, it all went away.



Eight hours later, Kevin's eyes fluttered back to life. He looked around, and didn't see anybody, except for Ray, who was still seated in his chair. "Hello?" He called out. "Hello!"

"Oh! Oh! You're awake!" Penny said, suddenly appearing from about 10 feet away. She was eating a hamburger. "I just stepped away for a second. I was finishing up my dinner."

Kevin laughed. "It's 10 o'clock in the morning."

"No, it's 7 o'clock at night."

"Are you sure? I'm pretty sure it was only about 9:00 when I came in here," Kevin said.

"No. It's 7:00 PM," Penny said, emphatically. "7 o'clock. Think carefully. It's 7 PM."

"Seven?" Kevin thought for a second. It was hard to think. His mind was swimming with images. Images of pretty girls, beautiful faces and sexy bodies. When he tried to concentrate, those words just kept repeating in his mind. *Sexy, beautiful, pretty.*

"Um... I guess you're right." Kevin said, unable to use his mind to recall the truth. He just decided to let it go. "I must've been mistaken. It's 7 o'clock at night. How could I have been so confused?"

"It happens a lot in this job," Penny replied. "It's just a part of what we do."

"I guess it's easy just to space out when you're sitting in the chair." Kevin shrugged. "And listening to the doctor." He removed the ear buds and handed the player back to Penny.

"So you want to see what we did?" Penny grabbed the back of the chair and spun it around towards a mirror. "What do you think?"

“Oh, I like that. You made it so shiny and lustrous,” Kevin said, touching his hair carefully. “I love the texture.”

What Kevin had missed out on was the past 10 hours of work Penny and a team of assistants had done on his hair. It takes that long to chemically bond hair extensions, especially in the volume and length that were applied to Kevin’s scalp. Kevin now had light blonde hair extending from his



temples to the small of his back. It was cut kind of choppy, with bangs and gentle frizzling down the sides and back that gave it extreme volume.

It’s exactly what I wanted, Kevin thought to himself. *Sexy, beautiful, pretty.* “Well, thanks Penny!” Kevin hopped out of the chair when the cape was removed. “You do some pretty good work here.”

As he was about to leave, Kevin stopped and changed his course. He headed to where Ray was seated, and had also fallen asleep. He shook Ray’s shoulder. Ray suddenly came to life, his eyes popping open and gripping the arms of his chair, as if he had just woken from a nightmare. “Huh? What!” He shouted.

“Easy now, it’s just me.” Kevin said, calmly.

“Oh. Kevin. What are you doing here?” He asked.

“I just got my hair done. Can’t you tell?”

“If you can call that mop ‘hair.’ It looks like a haystack on your head.”

“Oh, Ray! Well, I think it’s sexy.” Kevin said, good-naturedly. “Are you ready to go? I’m starving.”

“Yeah, I must’ve forgotten to eat,” Ray said. “This day has gone by so quickly.”

“Tell me about it.” Kevin said.

Ray scratched his head, seemingly unaware or unconcerned with the fact that his hair had just been shaved off, practically. It was no more than three quar-

ters an inch in length, and gelled down flat. “I hope they have something decent to eat here.” Ray got out of the chair and dusted himself off. “Hold on, I can’t forget the wig.”

Ray walked over to the hairdresser’s counter and picked up a silvery blue, glittery tinsel wig. He carefully slid it onto his scalp. “I can’t be seen in public without my trademark, can I?”

Kevin smiled. “Heaven forbid. Oh, I know they have burgers at least, at the restaurant.”

“Yeah, you better be right. A burger sounds great right now.” Ray said, as the two left together, their hair swaying behind them.

“Beautiful,” said Kevin.



It was late by the time Kevin and Ray had finished dinner. True to Kevin’s promise, there were hamburgers on the menu, but Ray only ate about half of it, maybe a little less.

“I’ve never gone from starving to full so quickly.” Ray said.

“I know what you mean, I thought I just tear through this pasta. But I’ve only had a few bites and I’m stuck. That’s been happening to me a lot lately.” Kevin pushed away his plate, the international sign for having finished. True to form, a waiter appeared just milliseconds afterwards. Waiters are only prompt and reliable when it comes to presenting the check.

“Can I get you two anything for desert?” He asked.

“Oh no, I’m so full.” Said Ray.

Kevin agreed. "Me too."

We do have a very tasty triple chocolate cheesecake." The waiter said, gently prodding.

"Oooh... Chocolate," both Kevin and Ray said, at the same time.

The two looked at each other. "We'll split one," said Kevin.

The waiter happily sped off to go get the desert.

"Good idea," said Ray. "I'm really don't want to put any on any more weight."

"Same here. I feel just so fat lately" Kevin agreed, despite the fact that his scale had shown that he had dropped over 20 pounds in the past several weeks.

Ray, who had dropped to one hundred and 40 pounds, looked down at his skinny body. "I look like a whale."

"So where is everybody else?" Ray asked.

"I thought you said Carl was getting a skin wrap done."

"That's what he told me. Do you think it really would take this long?"

"I don't think so, but then I don't know heckuva lot about skin wraps. The doctor said that José was next, too. I wonder how long his is going to take."



When Kevin awoke the next morning, he dressed in his robe and made his way toward José's room. He knocked on the door for several minutes, but there was no answer. His curiosity was piqued, wondering what might've happened to José, so he decided to see if he couldn't figure it out.

It took him a few minutes, but eventually found the area of the spa where these wraps were done. Sure enough, there were two wrapped figures lying on chaise lounges. One he recognized as Carl, because it was wearing those headphones Carl always had on. So the other must've been José, since there weren't a lot of people here at the spa, and by process of elimination, it had to be him.

Just as Kevin got close, two attendants leaned over José's wrap, and started cutting away. José was wrapped up like a mummy, the only thing to be seen of him was the hair coming out of the top of his head, and some slits for him to breathe. Had he been like that for a whole day?

While that was happening, Kevin went to go check Carl out. He was still completely bandaged, just like José. The only difference was that even in this state, Carl had that pair of headphones on his head. Intrigued, Kevin took the headphones off and wanted to hear what Carl could possibly be listening to.

Hitting play on the iPod, he put his ear to the headphones. "This is Advanced Japanese," said the recording. "This is lesson 62."