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The Face of God and the Setting Sun

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THE FACE OF GOD AND THE SETTING SUN

Robby had gone to St. Brigid's every Sunday as a boy. When he was young, the pomp seemed larger than life. The dancing candles had hypnotized him and yellow-red costumes and props appeared ancient and glorious. Now, as he stared at the ceiling of his hotel room in Hollywood, he tried to remember the sermons. He tried to remember what the Bible had said about being saved. But through the fire in his blood and the thickening fog in his head, all he remembered was the Face of God.

"Seek the Lord and his strength, seek his face continually," the priest had said.

Robby sat in the pews with his chin touching his chest, only lifting it when his mother jabbed him with her elbow. The air was heavy and hot with the combined breathing and boredom of the congregation; but for a second, Robby forgot about his boredom and sat up, imagining what the face of God must look like.

In high school, Robby realized how he could save himself. He found the albums and the drugs and the booze and grew to love them all. After spending a winter cleaning drain pipes and shoveling driveways, he bought his first guitar. Robby couldn't remember more than one passage of the Bible; but he recalled every word, every note and every song he played, in all the afternoons he killed jamming in Zack's garage.

The first time they had played together was in a crumbling auditorium at a broken down high school. Robby and his friend Zack had taken the gig for twenty bucks and free sandwiches, but the drummer they usually used got lost on the way. So they settled for a skinny, scared looking kid with wild eyes named Tommy as a stand in. That night, in front of a few bored kids, the other bands, and some parents, they finally found "It." What came next was clear in their heads. They didn't need a crystal ball. They saw the demo and the contract and the record. They saw themselves almost running Tommy's car into a stoplight when they first heard their song on the radio. They saw the fast life and the money and the women. But they didn't; they couldn't see what was waiting for them when they finally found what they were looking for. No one ever knows the price of realizing their dreams.

Robby had been wearing the same faded jeans and beat up leather jacket since they left Chicago a week ago. The opening act was already on stage when Robby and the band got to the backstage lot of the Hollywood Bowl. The letters on the side of the bus matched the ones on the marquee.

"There are already 20,000 people out there. Jesus Christ, can you believe that?" Zack said as he pulled the case with his bass guitar over his shoulders. The usual, lighthearted grin was gone from his face, replaced with hard determination.

But his shaking hands betrayed him. His blood was a cocktail of adrenaline and cocaine.

Tommy stepped out of the bus next and held his elbows. He was tall and gangly with curtains of brown hair hiding a bewildered face. His shy demeanor and thin frame hid a man who beat the drums like he hated them. Like a demon.

"This is huge," was all Tommy could manage to squeak out.

The audience was rowdy and bored after a mediocre performance from the opening band. They restlessly shifted in the aisles and chanted for the show to begin. They'd been told their whole lives to find something real to believe in, to give up on the music, that their religion was blasphemous and their gods false. But there would always be those who weren't satisfied by the old traditions and ceremonies, and they came to cathedrals and temples with no crosses on the roof or stars over the door. And that's why thousands came to The Bowl that night. They came to see the face of God.

When the band took the stage, Robby couldn't breathe. All he could feel was his heart trying to fly out of his chest. He looked back at Tommy and Zack, who were staring with glazed eyes and loose jaws at the sea of people before them. For a seeming eternity, he didn't move, didn't think. He just closed his eyes and soaked in the energy of the crowd. It calmed him like no pill could ever hope to, and a smile

finally broke through. Then he touched his guitar.

When the show was over, there was no applause. The silence was unbroken as the band left the stage and the audience shuffled towards the exit. No one talked about what they had heard and felt. But they all knew nothing would be the same. They would spend the rest of their lives trying to feel like that again, knowing they never would.

The doctors said it was the heroin in his bloodstream. They said it was the Jack Daniels and Valium.

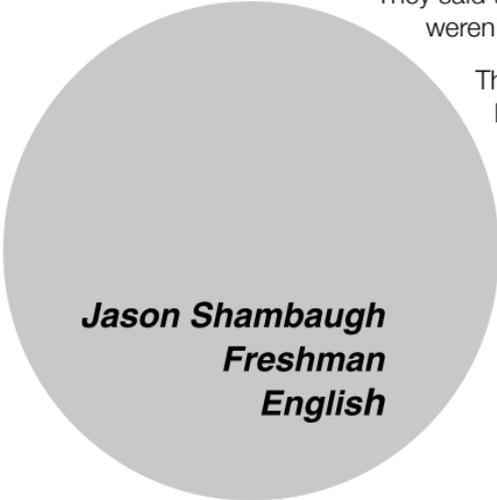
They said the combination seized his muscles and stopped his heart, but they weren't even close.

They said he had enough chemicals in his system to overdose twice. But the chemicals didn't kill him. It was the sound. It was the perfection. They say he got to reach up and touch heaven that night. They say he stopped the world; and after that, there is nothing else.

Because nothing can stay that perfect.

Because no one gets to see the face of God without falling.

Because what happens then?



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