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Angry, Young, and Poor

For a car load of unemployed punk kids with a pack of cigarettes, Hound Dogs Pizza was a sanctuary. Every Saturday night my friends Andy, Fahad, Sam, and I would speed through dirty downtown Columbus to satisfy that intense craving for a greasy slice of pizza and Camel cigarettes. Honestly, I hate pizza. I think I'm the only American that doesn't even *like* pizza. But on Saturday nights, despite being a chick, I was one of the guys and I loved it. I loved being part of the loud, gritty punk music that blared through an urbanized pizza parlor. I loved the second-hand smoke that floated around me in that place. I loved the Ramones.

Andy drove. He was jabbering on about meaningless political issues and his slim chances at getting with slutty Columbus girls. Andy was always talking, and by this time, his voice seemed to loudly whir around other conversation. Fahad, always being the stubborn asshole that he is, rode shotgun. Fahad, wearing that same blue Dickies tweed jacket. It was all pinned up in Ramones flare and the thing hadn't been washed in a year. I could smell his body odor seeping through his sweaty jacket. It was summer. I didn't know if I should've thanked or cursed God for that wind blowing through the window, smacking me in the face. It almost made me choke. I chose to curse God. But first, I prayed for us to pass a sewer just to let another smell into the car to prevent my nose from rotting off. Amen.

I sat next to Sam. Sam Muhammed was my best friend. He influenced me to think the way

I thought. He inspired me to live the way I lived. He was Sensei and I was Young Grasshopper. Sam pulled me through my depression and hatred of life everyday at 15. I had some extra meat on my bones and my lack of self-esteem defeated my every attempt of grasping the motivation to stay alive. Sam's solution to this was to "just eat a bunch of apples" so my metabolism would skyrocket. I would gaze out my bedroom window, smoking my dad's Marlboro Reds cigarette butts, trying to find an answer to my depression. Sam answered my many midnight phone calls. And while I sucked back snot and after my incessant whines and sobs, he told me I should just stop stalking my ex-boyfriend's blog. But this night, my problems were already in history books. I sat next to Sam.

When I sat next to Sam this night, I was his wingman. We were on the big silver screen. The smell of popcorn, the sound of squeaking seats, whispers, and the feeling of all-around apprehension filled the air. The lights dimmed. The screen cracked and flickered. Show time. So there we were. We were in our F-14 Tomcat: I was Goose and he was Maverick. If he told me to dive, I'd dive. All we needed was our bomber jackets and we were ready to fly. On this night, as we were blazing through city streets and cutting through the air, I felt the need---the need for pizza.

And so we sped into the dark back parking lot of Hound Dogs, all four windows down, screeching, "Sheena is a punk rocker noooooowww!" and flicked our cigarettes onto the asphalt. Andy hit the brakes and turned off the car. We slipped out of our seats and the *SLAM!* of our doors echoed and cracked off of the surrounding brick building walls. We stomped up the barely-there cement "steps", which were actually just a few crumbling cinder blocks, one Chuck Taylor after another. This was our turf.

This part of Columbus, The Short North, was where the "alternative" kids would hang out.

It was a trash can overflowing with Columbus' waste. The cavities of Ohio. The tattooed, pierced up, slam-dancing jerks that thought they were something else because they listened to crappy speed-metal. Throwing around their fists with Xs on them marked by a big, black Sharpie, they thought owned the music scene. Those guys were mostly the arrogant straight-edge kids that epitomized glam and edgy fashion. They'd rip your jaw off with the heels of their ugly black boots if a cloud of cigarette smoke got anywhere near their turned up noses. Then there were the pathetic, spoiled goth kids who called themselves vampires and "cried tears of a newborn's blood" but really just hated their parents and had nowhere else to go to smoke their clove cigarettes. And I detested those whiney, heart-broken, pseudo-intellectual emo kids. Their Saturday nights usually consisted of sitting in basements, pontificating to each other about art, bitching about mainstream music, trying to fill their empty lives through meaningless discussion. They all littered The Short North. That's why we went to Hound Dogs: It was our break from those pitiful trends. Hound Dogs was the only place in The Short North where we could bask in our own emptiness and anger. And we did it better with Joey Ramone on our side.

As I thanked Andy for opening the 90-pound door for us, I noticed that he was looking past me, his face like he just got decked in the cheek. I twisted around to see a woman standing to the left side of the porch, staring at us. Her face was leathery like an old pigskin and her black eyes sank deeply into her head. Whiskey dripped from the corners of her sagging mouth. She could've been mistaken for a basset hound. A moth-eaten, old coat draped over her skeleton. The dusty old waste-bin held an unlit cigarette loosely between two white knuckles, and a bottle of Jack drooped from her floppy coat pocket. Even in the dim light, I could see her musty smell steam from her oil rags. If her cigarette were lit, it'd be detonation T-Minus zero.

It wasn't unusual to see some drunken old hag out mumbling around downtown Columbus streets. Sippin' back grampa's ol' cough medicine, hacking up bloody phlegm. Waiting for the next poor kid to pity her as she sticks out her bandaged, brittle hand. Begging for a little bit of change to buy a Swatch for her stupid grandkid on Christmas. How precious. I wasn't going to get trampled by this smelly lady for a couple quarters, so I disappeared through the smokey exhaust that poured through the doorway of Hound Dogs. The boys followed behind me.

We plopped down at our table, the green ripped up booth in the corner. Filled with all that smoke, the place could've been mistaken for a gas chamber. It smelled like a garlic ashtray and the music was deafening. So loud, you'd think the graffiti on the walls would bounce off and hit us on our heads. The bathrooms smelled like vomit and pepperoni. I loved it. As for menus--screw em. We wanted what we had come here for: the glorious White Cheddar Cheese Pizza. Pizza really shouldn't taste this good, especially to the only person to have ever lived that thinks of pizza to be just a big mess of grease and cheese. I was truly disgusted by any other kind of pizza but the White Cheddar Cheese Pizza from Hound Dogs---Delicious. Fantastic. It was like God wanted there to be a holy food and he created the White Cheddar Cheese Pizza. Fahad ordered it when the waitress, Gina, came by. She was all tattooed and made-up to fit the social, "fashion-core" scene. I wished I looked like Gina. Pretty and hard-looking, like I was some hot skinny broad with no problems. But she probably stripped after serving pizza at night anyway. I didn't want to live off of dirty tips.

Fahad tapped Andy's shoulder to give him the cigarette he had stolen from the roulette of packs on the table, but Andy didn't even twitch an eyelid. Instead, he stared at an engraving scratched into the splintering table in front of him. Andy's face told me it could have read, "KILL EVERYTHING. NOW." I asked him what his deal was. He calmed down enough to say,

attempting to control his shaking voice, "That old chick outside called me a Dago."

I felt hot chills flash down my arms. My stomach jolted, and I felt a steaming bubble bath violently popping in my stomach. I had a 100 degree fever. I felt like I had just dumped an entire box of Red Hots in my mouth and the heat surged throughout my veins. My teeth clenched until I felt they were about to break and shatter in my mouth. "Yeah, uhm, I think she called Sam and me niggers, too." My mouth snapped and I swallowed a molar. I didn't say anything. I *couldn't* say anything. The Ramones popped into my head--"You're a loudmouth, baby. You better shut it up. I'm gonna beat you up 'cause you're a loudmouth, babe"--I reacted.

I got up and slid off the edge of the booth and I nearly fell on my knees. I stormed past the jukebox playing Rancid's "Time Bomb" and threw open the door like I had superhuman strength. I stepped outside onto the poorly lit porch where that filthy old rat was sitting off the edge, smoking. I could see the outline of her as beaming headlights sped past. My heart stopped for five minutes and all that I could choke out was, "D-did you say something to my friends?"

I was already out of breath and my voice shook like the San Francisco Earthquake. My windpipe felt as if someone had ripped open my throat with their hands and was rattling it violently. I could hear my friends creak open the heavy door and file out to watch the show, tickets in hand. She told me no. My heart was beating so hard, it was practically slamming itself against my rib cage. It felt like popcorn kernels were popping in my chest. I didn't like that answer. Give me another one. I asked her if she had called my friends the names they claimed she had. She said no. Liar. Why wouldn't she just admit that she did? I was livid. I mentioned that I'd kick her teeth in. Right into her rotting, gaping maw. I ranted about all she amounted to "is a drunk, pathetic old woman". I told her that she was a bigot. A racist. I told her that I'd stomp her face into the curb. I

told her things I didn't even think I'd ever have the words for. She shook her gangling finger at me and squawked some drunken slurs. Her sour, burnt breath clouded the air and it became harder to breathe. I had so much adrenaline rushing through me, my voice sounded like a shaky storm of roaring buzzes and booms. With each berating line I served, she'd gobble something through that gaping cancerous hole in her throat. Just loud drunken grumbles shouting over me as I put on my big show. I could actually hear my three awed audience members saluting me. Go get the popcorn, somebody. Did I mention that I was going to kick her teeth in?

Sam told me we had to get in the car. Not yet! This was my big finish! There was no turning back now, my cannon had already been lit. I snorted hard, lunged forward, and I spit on her. *BOOM!* Sam jerked me back and sternly whispered, "Emily, we need to go. Now." I was shoved into the car as I flipped her off. Andy turned the key and I lit a cigarette. I felt invigorated. I felt like justice had just been served. Give me my badge, I was the new sheriff in town. I was filled with pride and vigor. I felt like Russell Crowe in *Gladiator*. I had never confronted anyone before. I did it for my friends by scaring the life out of that old broad. After this night, I wanted them to remember a true friend who would do anything for them.

On the way to our friend Dan's apartment, I heard about "how awesome" I was and that they just saw "the most amazing thing of our lives." I should've won a trophy. World's Best Bad-ass: Emily Christman. Fahad flipped the car light on so he could find his Misfits hat. I told him, "Right here, between me and Sam." He turned around to grab it and looked up at me and said, "Hey, wait. Did you miss?" pointing at my shirt. I looked down at my favorite Ramones t-shirt and saw white, bubbling spit rolling down the silk screen. Oh yeah, gabba, gabba, hey.

We arrived at Dan's hole-in-the-wall and once he opened the door, we began to tell him the

story of my grand triumph. As he sat back down in his greasy, old Lay-Z-Boy, dust and mold puffed out in a large cloud and he started apathetically strumming an acoustic. After all the gasps and oh-my-gods, Dan stopped playing his guitar and looked at us with big, blue eyes. Dan, cigarette dangling from his lips, said, "Let's go get her." Well, all right, I get an encore. Strike up the band, John Williams.

We crammed into Andy's Impala. Me, Dan, Fahad, Sam, and Andy all headed downtown and back to Hound Dogs. I was ready for some action. We checked the same dark back parking lot. She wasn't there. We looked up and down the porch. Nope. We searched inside. She wasn't there, either. Frustrated, we drove up and down High Street hunting for this old stumbling waste pile to rip apart. We searched for about a half an hour and then finally gave up. We got nothing. As Andy was tackling a turn-about, I heard Fahad from the front seat say, "I guess you ran her off!" and turned around and looked right at me, waiting for a response. Instead, I stared at his pin on his Dickies jacket. The pin read, "Punk's Not DEAD!" I panned down to another pin below it that read, "K-k-k-k-killin' the Poor!" in this ugly scribbled font. Given no response, Fahad turned back around laughing maniacally. Like an angry tidal wave, freezing wind whipped me in the face and snapped me out of it. My heart stopped banging inside of my chest and plunged like a falling elevator until it smacked the pit of my stomach. My score dropped to zero. Snake eyes. I looked at my shirt and saw that the spit had dried. Curtain call, spotlight, applause.

We listened to Dan's Ramones mix CD on the drive back to my house where I was dropped off. We slapped some fives and I was thanked for "a fun night". Wait. Thanked? A fun night? Thanked for a fun night of spitting on an old lady? And telling her I was going to shove her Jack Daniels' down her throat for supposedly calling my friends names? I was upset that someone

had insulted my friends but I was the fool. I had just become a big star and it was already opening night but I didn't want that kind of spotlight. I had just impressed my friends by embarrassing myself and threatening an old, alcoholic woman. I felt sick when I thought about it. I was just this angsty teen; this angry, bitter joke. Instead of a hero, I dressed myself as a clown. What a laugh. Take my name out of the credits, I want out.

The truth is, I hate punk music. The day that I woke up and realized that it's just a bunch of whiney jerks flipping off corporate America, obnoxiously banging their fists on their old Fender Strats, I felt like I had seen the stairway to heaven. I found that studded belts and a couple of marked up, torn sneakers need not apply to prove my status as just a cool kid. I didn't need to showcase a newly purchased, dumb Operation Ivy vinyl just to use it as a megaphone to scream, "I'm punk rock! I rebel...and stuff!" I wasn't Joey Ramone. I wasn't Johnny Rotten. I wasn't Henry Rollins or Sid Vicious. I was empty. My heart was crushed, I whined and cried, and I naively hated my parents. A meaningless life was filled with smoke, grease, and spit. I had a big red stamp on my forehead marked VOID. I was just as worthless as the Short North trends I hated. Anyone that coins the phrase "punk's not dead" is ignorant. Punk IS dead. By falsifying yourself with a bunch of eyeliner and a bag full of defiance and arrogance, you'll never know what you are until you drop the facade and wake up. I still burp and I still smoke and I still get pissed off if someone calls my friends names. The only difference is, I don't owe anybody a show. I don't owe them anything. It's my movie. Roll the credits.