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Broken heroes

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FLORIDA INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY

Miami, Florida

BROKEN HEROES

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

in

CREATIVE WRITING

by

Michael Creeden

2006

To: Interim Dean Mark Szuchman
College of Arts and Sciences

This thesis, written by Michael Creeden, and entitled Broken Heroes, having been approved in respect to style and intellectual content, is referred to you for judgment.

We have read this thesis and recommend that it be approved.

Bruce Harvey

Les Standiford

Lynne Barrett, Major Professor

Date of Defense: February 23, 2006

The thesis of Michael Creeden is approved.

Interim Dean Mark Szuchman
College of Arts and Sciences

Interim Dean Stephan L. Mintz
University Graduate School

Florida International University, 2006

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Each member has provided me with the best inspiration of all: the excellence of their own work.

I have immensely enjoyed my coursework in the Creative Writing program. I feel that my writing has improved considerably during my course of study.

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

BROKEN HEROES

by

Michael Creeden

Florida International University, 2006

Miami, Florida

Professor Lynne Barrett, Major Professor

BROKEN HEROES is a mystery novel set in the modern day Southern California rock music scene. The protagonist is Declan St. James, 35, an alcoholic ex-musician and frustrated music journalist who, with friend and former bandmate, Stevie Richards, investigates the mysterious death of mentor Art Schulman. The search ultimately leads them to PowerTrash, a cult favorite band which, years earlier, suffered a mysterious death of its own. The novel is told in Declan's first-person voice looking back on these events. Like A.S. Byatt's *Possession*, the book uses the study of artists and their work to connect past and present storylines and ultimately rewrite history. And like Erskine Childers's classic spy novel, *The Riddle of the Sands*, the novel employs an amateur detective called to action for his special skills.

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The highway's jammed with broken heroes

On a last chance power drive

Everybody's out on the run tonight

But there's no place left to hide

- BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN, "Born to Run"

DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to the late Art Schulman—friend, mentor, rock and roll philosopher, and road manager extraordinaire. In the time I knew him, and especially in the aftermath of his senseless murder, Art taught me more about rock and roll, life, and most of all, *sacrifice* than I could have learned in ten lifetimes. I hope that by writing this, my first book, I can do some small honor to his memory.

Rock on buddy. Wherever you are.

- Declan St. James, Los Angeles April 2006

Part One

Art

CHAPTER 1: THE SELL OUT

The last time I saw Art Schulman alive, I was high. It was noontime, a Thursday in late February. I was writing, trying to complete an article on the concert I'd attended the night before. Jason Everhard had just broken solo from Snapshot, a boy band that had outlived its fifteen minutes. Jason was on his first solo tour, and the show teemed with young women and drugs. The music, of course, was horrible. It was beyond horrible, but it wasn't my job to say that. It was, in fact, my job to say the opposite. People liked Jason. I was behind on my quota to *Rolling Stone*, but there I was struggling to write a four hundred word show review, pumped up with three pull quotes from fans.

Fortunately for my deadline, I'd picked up enough coke the night before to keep me going for as long as I needed. Which could be three days. I was burned out. Even the things you love can turn into just a job, if you do them badly enough.

I stared out the window for inspiration. The window, the only one in my studio, looked out onto Genesee Avenue, between Hollywood and Sunset. There was nothing outside but the street cleaner. My building was filled with poor Hollywood wannabes, low-end druggies, a couple of hookers. I figured I should move. I could have afforded a better apartment--maybe not in Los Feliz or Silver Lake, but a better building in my own neighborhood. I think I was still trying to persuade myself that I hadn't completely sold out yet. There was that, and the lower rent left me with more recreation dollars. I'd been clean for a couple of years, but had fallen off the wagon a few months before. OK, I'm lying—it had been a year since I'd strung together any decent time. In the past few months, though, my habits had gotten worse. I'd always been a beer and Jack Daniel's

guy in my playing days, but now I was regularly getting into the coke and—it was embarrassing to admit—ecstasy. At thirty-five, I was a little too old for rolling and sucking lollipops.

This was what I was thinking about when Art called.

CHAPTER 2: ART

“Deke baby.” Twenty years out of New York hadn’t made a dent in his accent. What’s going on?”

“Why do you always have to call me that?”

“Because you love it.”

My real name’s Declan. My father was second generation Irish, a truck driver who loved Yeats and Ireland. So he named me Declan. I’d always liked the name, as it made me feel a part of the great Irish tradition of drunken geniuses. But Art always found a way to cut me down to size: from bard to hillbilly in one syllable.

“What are you doing, Deke?”

“Just grinding off the sharp edges of my soul.”

“Huh?”

I told him about the article.

“Oh, sorry about that. Christ, what a drag. That’s too much like working. But listen Declan, I have a great idea for you, something that will reawaken your faith in rock and roll.”

“Art, I’m busy. I’m on deadline.”

“No problem. We’ll go out to the desert, Joshua Tree. It’ll be a collaboration across the decades. This is going to blow your mind. We’ll go out for a couple of days, talk to some people, set it up—you’ll prolly be back by Saturday. Sunday the latest.”

“Art, no. I can’t. I have a deadline.”

“I’ll be right over.”

He’d been in the business for over thirty years, managing bands. Art started in New York, where he grew up. He was in on the ground floor of punk, worked with all the early bands: the Ramones, Television, Patty Smith, Talking Heads. Art was one of the six people in the room at the Ramones first gig at CBGB’s in ’73. He worked with the Ramones from seventy-four to eighty. Then, as punk and New Wave began to soften, to morph into less daring forms of musical expression, Art went west, to L.A., where a big obnoxious metal revival was taking place in the clubs along Sunset Boulevard. He worked with a handful of bands on that scene, most notably Hanoi Rocks, a band that combined the preening, Aqua Net look of the hair bands with a bit of punk credibility. Then he moved onto the roots bands, like X and The Blasters. Sometime in the late 80s, the lifestyle got the best of him. He had a simultaneous heart attack and stroke and quit everything—drinking, drugs, music, even his beloved In-N-Out burgers. He went into semi-retirement. But after a few years, the old jones kicked in. He started hanging out on the scene again. He worked with a few up and coming bands, mostly as a cheerleader and informal sobriety counselor. His ideal client at that time was a third rate band with a first rate drug habit. Bigger bands were too far gone. Plus, although he never told me, I think Art was afraid he might get sucked in again. With smaller bands, though, Art felt like he could make a difference, focus the guys back onto the music. See how far he could take them. That’s how he met me and Stevie. The Stale Mates were a third-rate band with a first rate substance problem. Me.

While I waited for Art, I freshened up my Irish coffee. I would deal with Art more smoothly if I kept a little buzz going.

Then he was pounding at the door. I took a hit of coke straight out of the vial and then shoved it into my desk drawer. I wiped my nose, took a sip of Irish coffee and walked to the door.

“Easy,” I called. The wood was flimsy. I thought it would splinter under the force of his beefy knuckles.

“Open up, Lester Bangs, have I got a story for you.” Art was already sucking up to me. Bangs was my hero: a rock critic who lived and died like a rock star.

“Come on, Art. The fortress is not as secure as it once was.”

I opened the door and there he was. His Ashkenazi nose was softened somewhat by a new nose ring, a little diamond stud in his left nostril. But he still wore the uniform which probably hadn't changed much since the 80s. Baggy, well-worn Levis, pulled down low to accommodate his growing paunch, black Converse high tops, and an old rock t-shirt. Today's offering was the Ramones. The shirt could have been bought in 1977. The old Marine Corps insignia was cracked and faded; the fabric had gone from its original black to gun metal gray.

He stared into my eyes for a minute. He'd tried for years when he was working with my band to get me straight. It looked like he hadn't given up yet. “Are you all right?”

“Yeah,” I said. “I've just been up a while.” I jerked my thumb over my shoulder toward the computer. “Deadline.”

He nodded, then stepped into the room. I didn't offer much in the way of accommodations. Basically, it was my futon, which was currently still down in the bed

position, my rickety desk and chair, a small two-seat high top cocktail table, and a beanbag chair.

Art looked around the room. “Wow, you’ve really done...absolutely *nothing* with the place since I saw it last.” Then his eyes fixed on the one new addition: a 3’x5’ poster of Iggy Pop, covered in glitter and sweat, doing a backbend into the mic stand. Art nodded. “OK, that’s new. I like it. But the rest of this shit...” He made a little disgusted wave of the hand then walked over and flopped into the bean bag chair. Art was a big guy—over six feet, about two hundred thirty pounds—and the bag nearly disappeared under his bulk. He looked around the room, probably for drugs or booze. I’d thought I’d hidden everything.

“How long *has* it been?” he asked. “Six months?” We had kept in touch periodically over the years since my band broke up. Art was a good source for industry gossip: who was getting clean, who was falling off the wagon. He looked around the apartment again, made a *tsking* sound. “When are you gonna get something worthy of journalist of your stature?”

“This keeps me humble,” I said. I held up my coffee cup. “Can I get you something to drink? I got some coffee on the burner. Just about an hour old.”

“No, Declan. Why don’t you sit down for a couple minutes and see if you can knock off that article. I want your mind totally clear when I tell you what I’ve got to tell you.”

“Fine.”

Art struggled to pull himself out of the clutches of the bag. He leaned forward, gut hanging over his belt. His thick forearms—festooned with tattoos of reptiles, Jesus, and the names of bands and women—rested on his thighs. He was an aging rock Buddha. He

wore a thick leather bracelet on his right wrist and a red-banded Mickey Mouse watch on the other. Some people tried so hard to be cool, picked out all the prefab “genuine” rock fashions on Melrose Ave. Art wore exactly what he wanted to. And he was cooler than anyone I’d ever seen.

“All right, here’s the deal. There’s this chick, right?” Art’s eyes bugged out in his typical cartoon expression of excitement. “She was around here, late eighties, early nineties.”

“Art, please. Not another comeback of some washed-out star from back in the day.” I’d been in this self-loathing mode recently: nothing that had been released in the past five, maybe ten years did anything for me. But not listening to anything contemporary just made me feel goddamn old. I didn’t want to be the crotchety old bastard who hated everything new. But I was.

“Hear me out, Deke.” He scratched the top of the Grim Reaper tattoo on his neck and ran a hand through his curly hair. It was thick, salted with gray, but he still had most of it. “You loved these guys. The stuff could be big, we could make it sound new. All we need to do is get some—”

I knew where he was going: take some old music and “update it” with dance beats or some nonsense.

“No, Art. That is not a good idea. It’s kind of pathetic, actually.”

“You have’t heard the whole thing, Deke.” He shot a glance into the kitchen. “Maybe I will have that cup of coffee.” I started to get up but he gave me the stop sign. “Sit down, I’ll get it.”

As soon as he walked in there, he turned on the faucet. Weird--the coffee wasn't that hot that it needed cooling. "This is new music, Declan. It's not redone old stuff."

God damn! I realized what he was doing. I sprung out of my chair and took four quick steps to my kitchen—just in time to see Art dumping a freshly-opened bottle of J.D. down the sink.

"What the fuck are you doing?"

I rushed in, tried to get the bottle, but he crouched over the sink like a mad scientist, dumping dumped the bottle with one hand while he held me at bay, straight-arm, with other.

"I told you: you need a clear mind to hear what I have to say."

"Fuck you. That's my booze. Leave it."

"It's gone Declan. Sit down. I want to talk to you."

"Fuck you! You come in here with your sad little ideas about reliving your glory days. There's nothing good going on today and what good you did I this business is long fucking gone. You're a washed-up, pathetic, fat old fuck."

He turned to face me. Shook his head.

"Declan, sit down."

"I'm not gonna sit down. You come in here dumping bottles like you think you're my fucking spiritual advisor or something."

"I'm sorry Declan. I'll get you another bottle." He sat back down on the bag, took a sip of coffee. "Look, I was out of line. I shouldn't have done that."

“Damn right you shouldn’t have.” I wanted to scream some more, but I was starting to realize that my reaction was probably saying some not so cool things about my state of mind.

He sat there, staring at me for a second. Then he went on. “I’ve got a good idea for you. Something to write about, something better than that.” He pointed at my computer. “But if you’re not ready for it, I’ll get it started. You can help when you feel up to it.”

Then this thought popped into my head: there was no band, there was no collaboration. The whole stank of one thing: intervention. I knew Art had done enough of them to not come alone, but maybe he figured he could pull it off with this story angle. Art was famous for doing interventions things his way. Once he holed up Stinky Waterton—this kid from Oklahoma, another unknown on the scene when we were—in a studio for three days so he could detox off heroin. Art stayed with him the whole time. To get the kid to go along with it, Art told Stinky he was going to help him record a solo record.

I figured the “collaboration across the decades” was he and I, collaborating on my sobriety. I couldn’t get the thought out of my head.

“There’s nothing good going on. The whole thing is dead.” I pointed at my computer. “It’s just this shit.” I looked at him, this fifty-five year old guy dressed like an eighteen year. I hated him for it. “Get out.”

“Come on, Deck. I’m sorry about the bottle. Maybe I got a little too evangelical there. I’ll get you another one. But if you get on this project with me, we’re going to have to control it. Deck, this thing is gonna be big.”

“Get the fuck *out!*” I screamed. “There’s no project, this is just some bullshit you used to butt into my business. You’re just a broken-down, stroked-out, fat asshole. Doing this just makes you feel good about your sorry ass. Get the fuck out.”

He stood up, walked toward me. I flinched. It shows where I was mentally that I thought Art would hit me. He could have killed me if he wanted to, but he would never. He bent down in front of me and put the cup down.

“Thanks for the coffee. I’d put it away but--I’ve done enough in your kitchen today.”

“Look, I’m sorry Art. I shouldn’t have said that.” I picked up the cup, put it on my desk. I glanced at my computer screen, at the Jason Everhard story—two hundred of the most pathetic words I’d ever written.

Art threw me a pitiful glance. “It’s OK. It’s the disease talking.” He stood there a minute, watching me, waiting for me to say something that would change his mind, or trying to change it himself. He touched me lightly on the shoulder. “Take care of yourself, Deck. When you’re ready to talk about it, you know you can call me.”

I nodded. I had no intention of calling him. ‘Talk about it’ was a euphemism for ‘clean up,’ something I was resolved more than ever not to do. I’d probably die in this room, killed by either Irish coffee and cocaine or the torment of writing articles about the likes of Jason Everhard.

Art walked slowly to the door, then stopped and pointed to my desk. “I’ll call you when I get back from Joshua Tree, OK? Let you know how things went? If you still want to be involved--”

I shrugged. “Whatever.”

Art closed the door without another word.

CHAPTER 3: THE CRIME

Almost a week later, a Tuesday. I woke up at noon, early considering the night I'd had. There'd been a party at the Chateau Marmont, a cliché of seventies rock debauchery that was making a comeback. It wasn't a record release, wasn't even an after-show party. It was, as far as I could see, an event that had been staged to demonstrate the hard-partying, hotel-room wrecking ways of The Crime, a fourth generation glam band from somewhere in the Valley.

The sun was streaming in the window. I felt lazy, lying on my futon all day, so I got up, threw on jeans and the previous night's t-shirt and walked down to Coffee Bean to get some breakfast.

The sun was warm and bright and guilt-making as I stepped out onto Hollywood Boulevard. A woman clad head to toe in powder blue spandex power-walked in time with the soundtrack on her iPod. My neighbor, a young boxer, jogged by in grey sweats, ski hat, and gloves. The kid reminded me of my Stevie. Even when we were playing regularly, Stevie had worked out obsessively, didn't drink or do drugs—it seemed he was always in training. He never identified with any movements, like the straight-edge kids, he simply said he was “training for the revolution.” Watching the boxer, and thinking about Stevie, I felt like I needed a revolution to train for. Hell, I needed something to live for.

I walked west on Hollywood and ducked down Fairfax, walking quickly, eager to get away from my fitness-obsessed neighbors.

At the corner of Sunset and Fairfax, in front of the Exxon station, was a billboard. About three stories high, the board advertised whomever the powers that be in the music industry were hyping that month. For months, it had been Coldplay, a decent if somewhat derivative Britpop band. As I stood on the corner of Fairfax and Sunset, waiting for the light to change, the poster caught my eye for the first time in months. It was different. Coldplay had been taken down and replaced with...The Crime. The hype machine ground on.

Inside the coffee shop, I bought a large coffee, a honey bun, and the *L.A Times*. I found a seat on the sun porch and scanned the headlines before I flipped inside, the Arts section. Something caught my eye immediately, a one-inch notice just below the fold:

Veteran Rock Manager Dies; OD Suspected

Art Schulman, an industry veteran who managed a variety of top-name bands over the course of his thirty-year career, was found dead last week in Joshua Tree National Park, the San Bernardino Sheriff-Coroner said. He was 55.

Art was dead. I couldn't believe it. Three days before, he'd been trying to get me to come on the trip with him, and now—he was dead? Of an overdose? It didn't make sense. Art hadn't done drugs over a decade. The article went on to say that Art's body had been found in front of Cap Rock, a Joshua Tree landmark which, thirty years previous, had been host to one of the most bizarre events in the long history of rock deaths: the cremation of Gram Parsons. A memorial was scheduled for ten A.M. on Wednesday, at the Hollywood Memorial Cemetery. Maybe I would get some answers there.