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You Ain't Supposed to Die on a Saturday Night

By Jonathan Gensler

Everyone in the scene has some kind of death wish, don’t they? A fantasy, a nightmare. Doesn’t matter what it is, though—they never think it’s *really* going to happen to them*.*

I should at least give them a chance to leave. To save themselves.

But I can’t.

I love them too much.

I am tethered to the crowd. To their screaming, hypnotic adoration.

“We’re Down the Shore! Thank you for being here! See you after a short break!” I look over at Sticky Ricky Germain and motion to the back right of the stage. Is that stage right? Who the fuck cares? This is rock and roll. This is smashed-up guitars, groupies and blowjobs, popping needles under the boardwalk. This is *The* motherfucking *Paramount*.

The lights go down, and the chanting only grows more intense.

Damian runs up, rubs my shoulders. “Damn good job out there tonight, Johnny. I toldja da fans’ve been waiting, hungry. Dey need *you* just much as you need dem.” I stop and turn to him as he continues, “It’s magic, I tell yah.”

My body grows rigid. “We can’t play it. We *won’t* play it.” Adrenaline is coursing through my veins, and I don’t want to stop and focus on the little man in front of me. Short curly hair, so dark and shiny it’s just a mess of red under the exit sign above.

“We’ll talk. Get a drink.” He calls over his shoulder: “Hey! Somebody get Johnny Fire a whiskey!”

Sticky sloughs off on my right, down the stage stairs to the green room. He tosses his Strat to a tech wearing jeans and a random band’s black t-shirt. “New strings,” he says. “Five minutes.” He glances back at me and disappears behind the door.

Bones hops down from his drum stand, bare chested and all lean muscle, no tattoos. “Man, it feels great to be back here. Don’t it, Johnny?” He slaps me on the shoulder and follows Sticky.

Damian grabs my elbow again. “You gonna be alright, Johnny? It’s been six months, but still. You doin’ da right thing. If we’d waited much longer, I don’t know if da fans woulda still been here.”

He’s wrong about that. If anything, their passion would’ve only gotten stronger if we’d waited. Otherwise he has the truth of it. *I* needed tonight. I *need* tonight. But the fans? I know why they’re here. And I don’t know if I can give it to them: what *they* crave, what *they* need.

Chuck is last off the stage. He places his bass on its stand with reverence.

“Someone can get dat for you, Chucky,” Damian says.

His hard-edged baritone replies, “It’s just Chuck. And the rule hasn’t changed—no one touches that piece but me. Got it?”

Chuck’s bass had belonged to his father and grandfather, and, at least according to Chuck himself, has been on stage with John Lee Hooker, Elvis Presley, Johnny Cash, and even the Boss himself, right here in this theater.

No one touches it.

Chuck lays his mitt on my neck. “Come on down, Jon. We all need to talk about the next set.”

He’s right.

Glancing up to the rear exit, the one that heads straight out to the street, I see a shadow move just out of sight, into the darkness. I hear the rattling and feel the pull. Cold metal on my wrists, on my ankles, around my neck. My body shivers, and the house lights go on. The crowd quiets their chant as they go refill their beers, take a piss, check their phones.

I know what they’re doing. Checking to see what everyone else is saying about the set-list.

*Are they going to play it?*

*Of course they are.*

*It’s the reason we’re all here!*

I step down the stairs to the green room, with a final glance to the exit, and wonder. *Is it too late for me to leave?*

#

Six months earlier, I stood in the same spot. Well, I wasn’t standing. I was running. And it wasn’t the Paramount. It was the Mother Church, the Ryman, Nashville. Finally kicking off the tour not a mile from the Music Row studio where we’d practically lived for six weeks recording the album.

But the door was the same. It always is. It sits there, exit light glowing, taunting me. *Are you good enough to stay and play?*

Either way, it’s all chains. Every decision—a link. Hammered into shape over white hot coals: the searing moments, desires, the songs, addictions, failures, broken promises, broken lives. All fuel for the fire that forges the worst of us into the bindings that control us. Control me, anyway.

We’d been in the middle of the song. Sticky about to drop into his solo. Bones tapping out the undercurrent, and Chuck frozen in time, hitting the bass-line. The crowd alive, chanting the chorus.

***You ain’t supposed to die on a Saturday night.***

***You ain’t supposed to die on a Saturday night.***

***You ain’t supposed to die—***

Flashing lights strobed in the arched stained-glass behind the balcony.

The house lights kicked on.

The chanting continued, unabated. I felt a cool breeze, turned to the rear, and the exit door banged wide open.

That moment crawls around in my head, down my neck and into my bones, into my clenched hands. Rainfall blowing in on the cold air. Red and blue stage lights mixing with the blinking and swirling lights outside.

“What the fuck?” Sticky, too, turned to find the source of the rush of cold.

Chuck kept hitting that bass, his eyes closed, frozen in his own memory.

A tortured jangling crush of sound yanked me toward the opening, my ankles and wrists biting with the touch of frozen iron. I couldn’t resist the urge to spring to the suddenly open doorway. Over the on-going chant from the crowd, and through the portal of the free-swinging door, I caught a glimpse outside—our tour bus sitting at a strange angle, red and blue lights flashing off the brick across the alley.

Then the twisted metal and carnage itself. A giant fucking pick-up truck had plowed into the tour bus. Was that an F-250? Who the fuck needs—and then I remembered—

“Michelle!” I screamed leaping past the police officer walking to the back exit. And as I landed at the bottom of the outside stairs, I could see Michelle’s hair splayed out on the asphalt below the bus’s bumper. Her hair matted and red; her arm in shattered angles, reaching for me.

A siren wail kicked in, time blurred, and I sat by her in an ambulance, drunk driver and wreckage left far behind. The band and the tour left in a pause that would stretch out, a chain pulled taut into infinity.

There was only Michelle and me.

You ain’t supposed to die on a Saturday night.

#

I knock back a double and lay the glass down. Sweet heat burns my chest and belly. My right hand grabs my left wrist and rubs around its girth. Despite the warmth from the alcohol, a burning-cold seeps in and spreads up my arms. “I can’t do it.”

“Johnny, my man, you *have* to do it.” Damian’s mops at his forehead with a red handkerchief. “If you aren’t then what the fuck are we even here for?”

“Man, fuck it. If Johnny says he can’t do it, maybe he’s right? We got plenty more tunes.” Sticky licks his fingers, counting off. “We played most of the first album that set. We got the new songs we can dive into, cop a couple of covers, Petty, Springsteen, crank out another forty-five, and call it a night.”

Damian throws the rag down. “This is the Paramount, fellas. We won’t get another shot at this. A band gets maybe one chance at a comeback. The fans are rabid out there. The shit has been all over the web, TikTok, Insta, a YouTube bootleg from the last show is the band’s top—”

“Stop, Damian.” I hold up my hand. “Get me another drink.” I turn to the rest of them. “He’s right. I just need another drink. I can do this. Even if it kills me.”

The other guys don’t get it. They all knew about Michelle, but the rest? I never figured it out until after.

This song is a killer.

‘Chelle didn’t get hit by a random drunk driver. That guy was stone cold sober when he plowed into the tour bus just as she was stepping down to catch the end of the show.

*Even if it kills me.* I know it might. But it’s not me I’m worried about.

#

A handful of songs later, the crowd is primed. We hold them tight in a cocoon of metal strings and heartbeat percussion. They are alive because of the music, they live through the music, and likewise, the song gains life because of them. Only them. It’s always the crowd, the anthemic prayer, the joining of one to the other, the raising of voices. Unison. Solidarity. Sacrifice.

That whole set I’d felt them goading me on, pushing me to reach deeper, pull out more of my soul and leave it bloody and raw on the stage. Every song is tattooed inside my heart.

And the one they want? That old B-side, the one song we’ve never finished live? We’re going to rip it out and give it to them.

“This next one is called…” I stop, back away from the mic stand, hands raised out like I’m some kind of messiah.

The guitar slides in, Sticky kicking it off with a power A-minor.

Chuck drops to his knees with his bass, connecting with his ghosts, channeling them into the music’s haunting underbelly.

“…Ain’t Supposed to Die on a Saturday Night!” I grab the mic, and everything came back at once.

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The first one to die was Mickey, my oldest friend. Shit, probably my ONLY friend. At least who actually knew me beyond the ripped jeans and endless bottles of mid-tier whiskey. Beyond “Johnny Fire.”

Mickey never made it to our album release party. He got shot during the afternoon sound check, right as we played this particular song in front of an audience for the very first time.

I didn’t hear about it until after the show. He got jacked during some small-time drug deal gone bad. His sister told me he wasn’t even carrying. Don’t know if it’s true, but she said so.

Listen, “Saturday Night” wasn’t supposed to be a hit. It’s a sappy, sometimes warm-up song that barely made it as a B-side. We didn’t include it in our set-list and didn’t play it again for two months.

The next one was a hell of a lot closer to home.

My dad wasn’t around when I grew up and I didn’t have any sibs.

All I had was Mom, and she’d been there every step of the way. Smoking, eating cheap shitty food, drinking too much, sure. But she was there. And for too long, no one else was.

The next time we played “Saturday Night,” it was once again a warm-up sound check.

My aunt had to tell me about it after the show. Brain embolism.

Mom dropped like a stone under the blue midafternoon New Jersey sky. Rare, sure. And almost impossible to survive. When the Reaper comes for you, sometimes he’s listening to rock and roll, live from a warehouse show in Brooklyn.

Michelle helped me through that one. And hell, I needed it. She helped bury it all in the past, keep on moving forward. I didn’t even think about the timing of Mom’s death and what we were playing.

Not until after The Ryman.

Not until a group of uber-fans put their theory about the song online, on some sub-Reddit about rock and roll and the devil. They knew. Somehow, they knew.

That’s when it clicked.

Maybe they were right. Every time we’d played this song live, someone close to me bit it.

And now I don’t have anyone left.

#

The concert hall at The Paramount in Asbury Park, New Jersey was quiet and still before the show. I sat with my feet dangling off the stage, house lights off, the smell of old beer and dry, rotten cigarette smoke seeping out of the bones of the place. But you could hear the waves crashing on the shoreline just beyond the back wall. With the rear doors open, their rolling thunder would spill in and fill the room.

If you listened closely enough, you might hear the echoes of all the greats who’ve played there. From rock and roll legends all the way back to the old time Gospel choirs from the thirties.

You’d feel the vibrations ripple up and down your spine.

You’d know what they expect of you. All those ghosts, voices reverberating in the memory of the stage, pulling you forward. Out of the past, out of the memories of those who’ve died so that this song could live. This magic bit of music.

I had nothing left. No one else. Just the music.

And the music rips me back to the present, to the mass of flesh in front of me, the monster with two thousand arms raised in agony and raised in joy. A single voice, shouting over the waves, screaming over the roar that haunts each and every one there on the floor.

*You ain’t supposed to die on a Saturday night.* I barely whisper it into the mic over the rest of the band as everything fades but a bright white spot in front of me.

The crowd flows up and around me as I lunge off the stage into their waiting arms. Lights flash above me, red and white and green and blue.

A sharp pain tears down my left side.

A snap bursts in both my ears.

It’s me, or them.

Still, I sing, clutching the microphone, my only tether to life.

The crowd chants, their arms hold me high.

I see her.

I flow over the roiling ocean.

I see them all.

I love them all.

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I loved them all.

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This is everything, melding together into an overpowering sense of pure love. For the crowd, for their adoration, for their secrets. And I know it: there’s a bill coming due. I float over the mass of fans and all I can see is the shape waiting in the back of the hall.

They thrust me back on stage for the final verse, and this is it. The moment I need to decide. My wrist and ankles are in shock with the sudden iciness of cold metal. I pull my hands back and away from the invisible chains, and what had been emptiness and insubstantial pulls taught.

The lights dim. A spotlight on me, center stage, as I sing the final words, yanking my hands back away from the crowd, pulling the doors shut, cinching them closed and locked, tying them to my performance and to their fate. A bluish green glow flows up the back wall as the stage lights above me erupt with sparks and go out for good.

And then keep sparking. Was it old faulty electrical wiring, a rushed job on a renovation, or something else?

Doesn’t matter.

You know how it turns out. The sparks hit the exposed wood beams in the wings of the stage. The doors hold fast while the flames spread. I sing until after the band behind me stops playing and joins the crowd in their frantic screams.

An hour later, they find my body, the only one still alive among the charred ruins and smoke. Bodies, char, and ash, but of Damian, not a trace.

It’s the fucking song.

It’s the price we pay.

Still, we gotta play. You people need it, demand it—our blood on the stage.

I know it and you know it.

This hurt is gonna hurt, regardless.

You’re never gonna forget me, or this moment.

So, let’s rock.

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