

The Kurt Shirt

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The heavy 13-year-old with the long-sleeved *Misfits* t-shirt on his eggplant-shaped body leaned over Johnny's desk and told Johnny his Nirvana t-shirt was gnarly. 'I believe Kurt would approve,' Sage said. His belly moved as he chuckled.

Johnny hadn't had any interest the last two mufti days when he'd experimented with Mötley Crüe and WWF t-shirts. Today he'd experimented with a black band t-shirt with a yellow smiley face turned wobbly on drugs, its eyes dead crosses, a shirt apparently belonging to some band called Nirvana, a shirt he could never show his parents.

'Thanks, man. You're Sage, eh man. Did you choose your own name, honest?'

‘Yeah man. It’s more than a name, though. It’s a state of mind.’ Sage pulled a chair under his fat arse, put his feet up on another chair and leaned back against the wall, facing out the same way as Johnny. He’d seen Carson, the coolest kid in school, sit in the same arrogant, cool way Sage was sitting.

Sage stayed down the back, talked music with Johnny all period and completed the 10 quiz questions easily, especially the three questions about rivers in China, seeing as his dad was from there. Sage said his dad was a douchebag, some kind of travelling music promoter who lived in hotels.

‘My dad’s *stronzo di merda*,’ Sage said, snorting at his own joke. ‘That’s Italian, dude.’

‘Did your dad actually go to Italy? Did he teach you that?’

He shook his head. ‘The Reverend Maynard taught me, dude. You know? Maynard James Keenan? From Tool?’

Johnny needed to be informed about Tool, and if one was talking Tool, one had to discuss Peach and Dream Theater in the same breath, and of course Rage Against the Machine, plus Helmet, and he was definitely uninformed about the origins of the anarchy symbol Sage kept scribbling. As they were packing up, Johnny said to his new friend, ‘How come it says ‘Melvins’ on your folder, man?’

‘Melvin was gonna be my stage name, man, ’cause Melvins were one of Kurt’s influences, and ... ’ Sage rolled his eyes and snorted. ‘What kind of a nerfherder doesn’t know about Melvins. You’ll totally have to come over to my place.’

Sage told his mum to drive them to King’s Emporium, which had second hand clothing and bric a brac and rows and rows of CDs, records and even tapes, plus hundreds of music t-shirts hanging from racks. The shadowy rear of the store, lit by two naked bulbs, was crammed with music and listening posts and stools and a cabinet full of KISS keyrings and

Ramones patches. Johnny pulled out a few CDs which he thought had cool covers, and Sage either said, 'Wayyy gay, man,' if the CD wasn't worth getting, or 'Criminally under-appreciated' if he approved.

Sage's mum trailed him with an armload of school shorts, keeping the four metres away that her son had instructed. Johnny admired her denim jeans and flip flops and faded blonde hair. She had a touch of real rock n roll to her and seemed poor and unambitious. She tousled Johnny's hair and said, 'It's so good he's got a boy to play with.'

Johnny focused hard as Sage taught him what was cool – stuff from the 70s could be cool, and definitely early 90s Seattle rock, but nothing from the 80s was acceptable, pretty much. Sage lugged 16 vinyl records under his thick arms including *Marquee Moon* by Television and *Fear of Music* by Talking Heads, until he started sweating and let Johnny carry some. Johnny squinted, trying to work out how such a big dude could be so unfit. He realised he'd never seen Sage kick a ball or swing a bat. Sage was just a cool dude that finished his tests early and read *Rolling Stone* magazines while Johnny tried to remember what SOHCAHTOA stood for.

'I probly can't even get these anyway,' Sage complained, resting his records on his belly. He tossed his head toward his mum. 'Bitch won't raise my allowance.'

Allowance. Sage had chosen to use a far-cooler American word than pocket money. The most American thing Sage liked was this band called R.E.M., this band with mysterious letters and a singer with a thick American accent like on *60 Minutes*. R.E.M.'s first album, *Murmur*, was a seminal moment in rock history and a total must-have on vinyl, Sage explained, flipping through the R records. He'd pay anything if he could find *Murmur* as an LP. Sage put a chunky, black-haired arm on Johnny's shoulder and leaned close. His breath smelled like

the exotic Japanese crackers he always had on him. ‘Vinyl’s the only way to truly listen to music.’

Johnny had spotted in the M section of records a 12 inch LP which read, ‘Clean Edit *Murmur* – R.E.M. For Promotional Purposes Only’. He took the record to the giant 13-year-old who had backed his scrawny mum against the wall of the changing rooms and was cursing at her.

‘I found you this, man. I think it was in the wrong place.’

Sage’s mum scowled at the \$29 price tag. ‘It’s practically 30 bucks, and you, my friend, have five.’

‘Shut up, bitch. I’m thinking.’

Johnny, who hadn’t been to the movies in months because his usual friends felt like old clothes, pulled out his *Ghostbusters* wallet. It had six tens from six movies he’d told his dad he’d been to. He’d been thinking about buying his own tent and getting good at camping alone to earn his Independence badge, but this was a tonnes better idea. He hated to see forces pulling Sage down.

‘I’ll cover you, man.’

Sage looked down from his mountain as he shook Johnny’s hand. ‘You have no idea how much this is worth, man.’

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On Saturdays and Sundays, Johnny got a lift to his usual friends’ houses, waved his mum’s car away, then sprinted to the alleyway and cut over towards Sage’s place.

Sage lived at 60 Lisbon Street in a plain white weatherboard house with a sad garden and a fence missing some pickets. The verandah had a lot of paint flaking away, and inside some of the wallpaper was torn, but his bedroom was like a church, covered in posters of Bob and Lou and Jimi and Reverend Maynard. Sage showed him how to play chess

and skateboard and how to slash the knees of his jeans. They had their first sleepover and stayed awake all night. Sage's mum dropped Johnny home on Sunday at lunchtime and he collapsed on the couch, barely even watching TV, just replaying in his head how Sage had read excerpts from *High Fidelity* while Johnny lay on his belly, head in his hands. No one had read anything to Johnny since he was, like, five. They had their second sleepover and Sage made Johnny stay perfectly still while he put on this Nirvana album with a baby chasing money through a pool and Sage shouted the song titles at Johnny then paused each song midway to explain the significance of certain lyrics. The songs were all screaming and loud guitars and words celebrating sex and rednecks. When 'Something in the Way' finished, Sage finally explained that Kurt lived under a bridge eating fish. Kurt made being an outcast beautiful, Sage explained.

They ate American pizza and watched American movies and sipped Pepsi and ate Twinkies. Johnny was allowed to see Sage's guitar in its case. Its strings seemed stiff and likely to cut his fingers. Sage played a couple of songs that sounded vaguely like 'Smoke On the Water' and that Nirvana song and Johnny tapped his foot to the rhythm.

'The fuck are you doing?' Sage frowned, nodding until his long hair began flapping about. 'Tapping's gay. Mosh, dude, like this.'

'You were saying that guy from R.E.M.'s gay. I thought gay was good?'

'I didn't mean gay like that, I just mean, like, tapping just *is* gay, man. Unless it's ironic.'

'What's ironic?'

Sage stopped moshing and rested his hands on his belly and patiently explained. Sage was the dad around here. 'Ironic's when you do something, or say something, but you don't mean it.' He talked about an Alanis Morissette song

called 'Ironic' which didn't have many examples of irony in it, and how that meant the song itself was ironic and deeply complex. He talked about Alanis' guest vocals on some album by Tricky, who was from a band called Massive Attack, who frequently collaborated with Portishead, who were admired by Nirvana, who had a singer called Kurt who considered the Melvins and the Pixies the greatest artists ever.

'Everything comes full-circle to Nirvana, man,' Sage explained. 'I mean, the musical legend who overdoses on heroin at 27? It's ALL ABOUT the 27 Club, man. You die at 27, it's like epically significant. You make it to the 27 Club, you're the centre of everything that matters. That's me in the future, man.'

'What does Nirvana mean?'

Sage scratched beneath his glasses, took a deep breath, poured a fistful of M&Ms into his mouth. 'From what I've read, heroin leads a person to enlightenment. I mean, that's gotta be why Kurt named the band Nirvana, it has to be. He was like a Nostradamus or something. I have this theory, you know? I'm gonna write about it for *Rolling Stone*. Maybe.' He pushed his glasses back where they were. 'Or I could blog. You got a blog? I got a blog, man. You should read it.'

They watched *Sid and Nancy*, and Sage monologued for two hours on whether Courtney had really killed Kurt, till the strip of yellow light at the bottom of his mum's bedroom door went black. She was asleep. The boys were free.

When *Letterman* finished, they lay on the lounge floor in their sleeping bags. No one said anything. Crickets chirped. Sage's hand spidered across the floor and crept into Johnny's sleeping bag. Johnny's diddle was alert and ready. Sage squeezed and moved his grip up and down for a few minutes before Johnny's knees spasmed and he lost control and gasped. Johnny lay there panting, then moved close and tried to kiss Sage. 'Don't be gay,' Sage said, and rolled away.

They made all the kids go to boxing practice in the gym. It was okay – just another sport for Johnny to easily pass, like the Swimlympics, the soccer, the long jump. In boxing, Johnny was far better at avoiding blows than punching himself. He had too much awe for other boys to hit them, but of course he wouldn't let anyone strike him. Johnny had an aura that needed to be clean and perfect and free of blemishes. He only threw punches when the opponent had irritated him then shown his weakness. He even ducked Carson's punches for three rounds, which was amazing considering how vicious Carson was that time he'd beaten that retarded Ethiopian kid in the toilets till the kid cried 'cause the kid had called Carson a faggot. Stomping on a kid's ears because they called you a fag was like a new realm of behaviour, to Johnny, like hammering a flag into the soil of another country. He almost understood why all those rappers hated fags. There was something wise in it, something divine. If he could just get to know Carson better he could figure it out.

Carson seemed always in Johnny's peripheral vision this year. He paid especially close attention when Carson had fights with people, not that many people went through with the fights, cause of Carson's dad being a gangsta and all that. Johnny worried Carson might try fight Sage someday, which would be kind of sacrilegious and wrong, like fighting a priest. Carson was brutal and exciting. Carson drove a convertible and smoked cigarettes and something called 'pot' and etched 187 on a teacher's car with a nail. Carson listened to Two Pack, an artist Sage had never once talked about. Sage hardly talked about black people at all, unless they were super-ancient, like Lead Belly and Robert Johnson.

Kids still invited Johnny to pool parties, where there would be balloons and piñatas and fizzy drink and Johnny said

he was sick every time. He was through with playing in shallow water.

The only class Sage and Johnny didn't share was Art. Johnny was disappointed to learn through reports from other kids that Sage didn't sit by himself in Art with his coloured pencils designing album covers for The Murmur Project. Apparently Sage instead sat in the International Zone. He'd speak Italian with these exchange students, Lina and Mónica and Carmela, girls so 10-out-of-10 that all the domestic girls hated them, and Sage and the Tens would talk about bands that this country was too unhip to play on the radio yet, like Interpol and Mr Bungle. Racing up behind his friend in the art block corridor, Johnny asked Sage why Sage never spoke Italian to him and Sage just rolled his eyes and asked the Tens to excuse him for a while. Sage waited til the Italian Tens were a few metres away and looked over his shoulder before he spoke. 'You gotta know the language to learn who's up and coming. Like the Brussels club scene? THAT'S what's hot. I mean the Belgians have been into Sigur Rós for, like, years. This country's like total harsh realm, man. We're 20 years behind Berlin. Germany reached nirvana a long time ago, man.'

Johnny's family paid for him to go on a sports camp, and Sage was off sick for a few days, and Johnny and Sage had their first week apart. Then, Sage did something remarkable in the Creative Corner segment of assembly. He didn't even warn Johnny. Creative Corner was usually some girl playing the bagpipes or some kid from Tonga doing a tribal dance, but when the curtains parted, Sage was sitting on a teacher's chair with his guitar on his lap. The guitar was plugged into an amplifier. Johnny's heart stopped. Someone switched the projector on. It painted the wall behind him with a giant Project Murmur logo, which looked pretty much like Pink Floyd's *The Wall*. Beside him was a black box, almost as tall as

him. It had to be an amp, that Easter Island-ish monolith seen in the background of Sage's *London Calling* poster. Sage stood up, shunted the microphone towards him, and stroked his long black hair until it concealed his face. He strummed the high strings of his guitar and a PLING erupted from the speakers at the rear of the hall. All of a sudden, Johnny needed to piss badly.

With every note Sage played, Project Murmur became more real, and no one yelled out any disses. KRN, BRM-BLIM-BL, KRN, BRM-BLIM-BL, KRN, BRM-BLIM-whumwhumwhum.

Then: Sage had a voice. 'I'm so happy / 'cause today I found my friends / they're in my head.' The song gripped people with its harsh, stark sarcasm, its simple, repeating melody, but most of all, because when it hit the chorus, Sage stood up and screamed, 'YEAH YEAH! YEAAA! YEAAA! YEAAA! YEAAA! YEAAA! YEAAA!' and his bulk thundered inside his flannel shirt.

The school had never seen anything like it. Sage's guitar strokes had torn holes the curtain of reality and let something else in. For a week, Sage was getting stroked and hi-fived and getting his hair brushed on the bleachers by homegirls while he read aloud passages from *The Art of War*. Sage was lending people his Nirvana and Soundgarden and Mudhoney CDs and people were asking him to sign the discs, as if Sage were the performer. Whenever Sage was in the art corridor it was always too crowded with admirers for Johnny to approach him. Johnny even spotted Carson inviting Sage into the front seat of his convertible, and Sage giving his mum the finger as she hovered in the car park. People started listening to The Hives, The Strokes, The Killers, whatever bands had The in their title. Two weeks passed with Sage and his guitar case getting rides home with Carson, then three.

When school let out on the last mufti day of the year, Johnny stood on the edge of the parking lot in his ripped jeans and Kurt shirt and watched Carson and Sage doing a bro handshake and approaching Carson's convertible.

'Don't let him sleep over at your place,' Johnny said casually as they passed, shifting his schoolbag from shoulder to shoulder so it would cover his Kurt shirt up. He may as well dump the stupid shirt on Sage's lawn if Sage was too popular these days to message him back. Stupid faggot.

Sage said he had to grab some books from the library and shambled away.

Carson froze. He looked disgusted. 'You telling me what to do, son?'

'This guy here, he tried to touch my cock, one time, when we were sleeping over.' Johnny started walking across the carpark. He couldn't wait to burn his Kurt shirt when he got home. It'd gotten contaminated that night he'd pulled it over his head and it had fallen into Sage's sleeping bag. He never should've taken it off. He never should've found out what it felt like to have a chest against his, pressed so tightly they could feel each other's hearts thudding. 'Just thought I'd give you a heads-up.'

'Wait up.' Carson pointed him toward the car. 'Hop in. Tell me what the fuck I need to know.'

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Johnny got a ride home in Carson's convertible that day, and the next, and the rest of the month. Being invited into Carson's car was easier if Johnny had an excuse to get in. Johnny always had a new piece of intel on Sage. It was amazing how much there was to hate.

Summer ruffled their hair and cooked their skin. They wore sunglasses indoors. Johnny forced his voice to go deeper

to match Carson's. He copied Carson's walk, too, and Carson's gold chain and the way he always put cold drinks in a brown paper bag so he could pretend he was sipping a forty, and the way Carson seemed impatient about everything. Hating everything beneath you was a quick way to rise up. Within the month Johnny was using cool words with more confidence, and pashing Carson's sister, sometimes, and also Dipika, who was Carson's girlfriend. Carson said it was all good. Bros before hoes, Carson said.

Carson drove with his shirt off whenever he could. Johnny rode in the passenger seat and wondered about the Thug Life tattoo Carson's dad had etched across his son's hard, scrawny stomach. When he picked up a CD case from under the seat and saw a picture of 2Pac, it was obvious where Carson's shaved head and spackle of moustache came from. There was time for just one or two songs on the drive home and Carson put on 'Dear Mama' song in the car most days. The girls sang along as 2Pac rapped about protecting his mother. Johnny found it uncomfortable, playing one song over and over, especially one about pride in loving your mama. He couldn't believe he'd ever admired Sage for dissing his mum, or let Sage make him think it was normal to lie on the carpet, pressing heavy headphones against your ears, listening to a single boring unending Radiohead album for an hour.

Sage was a ghost, now. Sage seemed to hide all day and emerge when the bell rang and hop in his mum's car silently. The car would sag and kids would throw acorns at it and Carson would yell 'FAAAGGOT' and 'GAAAYSIAN' in front of a hundred kids.

Every time someone threw a paper aeroplane with boogers on it at Sage's hair, he would trudge out of Economics or Maths and head over to the art block and seal himself in the darkroom. He'd come out hours later, chip

crumbs on his shirt, reeking of pot smoke, clutching photographs. He painted, made collages, tinkered with images on the computer, made sculptures. Sage's shoulders got heavier and he grew a beard. He made one sculpture called Attaining Nirvana. He had smashed his guitar and glued fragments of wood and plastic and fibreglass onto an amplifier and wrapped it with guitar strings. It was tossed in a dumpster a week later. Sage turned to designing album covers. His were mostly photos of leaves and tree bark, since no human would allow the Gaysian to photograph them because the photos would end up on his gay porn website, everyone said. It was true that Sage knew how to build websites, and blog, and escape from reality into cyberspace. Some of his blogs had been reprinted in *Spin* and *NME*, the principal had told assembly. Only the Italian girls clapped.

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Carson's dad's house had huge columns over the door and wide black windows and views of everything. Carson's dad had a garage full of boats and motorcycles. He never closed the garage. Just try stealing something, go ahead. Carson's dad *wanted* people to fuck with his shit, Carson explained, so he could tie burglars up and melt their feet off with a blowtorch. The dad himself didn't say much. He was hunched over a Harley Davidson. Johnny watched a conversation zig-zag around the garage, with Carson's sister and Dipika asking Carson's dad about the bikes. Johnny stayed out of the conversation. His stomach hurt. Johnny was about to get his first tattoo. It was going to sting.

They waited for the tat and when they started to run out of conversation, Johnny updated Carson on Sage.

‘Who?’

‘The Gaysian, man, I mean bro,’ Johnny explained, sitting on a work bench. ‘I wasted two years on that guy.’

Carson silently read a text for 20 seconds, holding a Be Patient finger up, then looked up. ‘Why you so obsessed with that nigga?’

‘I just hate fags, that’s all,’ Johnny said, and put a smoke in his mouth.

‘Attaboy,’ Carson’s dad muttered, rearranging the cigarette in his mouth.

‘Shit, nigga, no one hates fags as much as this guy,’ Carson said.

‘Want a bet?’ Johnny pulled his tank top over his head. ‘Yo, sir? Let’s do this. I want the word Faggots in the middle of a circle, with a red line going through it,’ Johnny said. ‘That can be my tattoo.’

‘The bro don’t like no homo,’ Carson’s dad said, and patted the tattoo bench. ‘Pay up and we’ll get into it.’

Carson took a swig of the beer he’d taken from his dad’s fridge and swallowed it without wincing. ‘Yo, pops – do me up, too.’ Carson’s sister and her friend Dipika rolled their sleeves up. ‘Do us all up. Fagbusters, motherfucker! Fagbusters!’

In the brown light of the garage, Carson’s dad yanked the beer bottle out of Carson’s hand. ‘Don’t tell me what to do, ever.’ Then Carson’s dad went over to the wall and switched on his tattoo machine. It buzzed and rattled. It bit his skin without relent. It hurt ’cause it was permanent. The tat had to be permanent. He couldn’t let himself get all soft and sensitive again.

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Johnny and the others tiptoed along the edge of eighteen then fell in, Carson first, then Dipika and Carson’s sister, then

Johnny. They went to the casino together, got credit cards, fucked in clothing store changing rooms and gas station toilets. They bought Lotto tickets and fireworks. Carson did 200 push-ups a day. His dad said he had to join the air force.

They were excited about their Fagbusters tattoos for a couple of weeks, initially. They took a videos of gay kids around school and profiled them on the Fagbusters blog. Photos of everyone's Fagbusters tattoos made good profile pics until they replaced them with graduation photos.

Johnny's parents didn't have to nag him too much to study for his final exams. He still played soccer, scored goals, passed his exams, took photos of a bored-looking Dipika blowing him in the changing rooms at K-Mart. He would have liked to fuck a different bitch but there were no other options in his quartet. Prom night was coming up, and the two boys and two girls didn't have any options as to who they would take. They were the only people on their plateau, looking down on humanity. Messing around with any non-Fagbusters would be a step down. Stepping down was something that Sage did in the hallway, ducking into the disabled toilet to avoid Carson's posse.

Johnny sat his final exam, Accounting, staring at the Italian Tens and trying to figure out a way to get with them, but the only way to make those girls like him would be to act like Sage, learning Latin or whatever, and writing expressive opinions about the irony in the upbeat pop of Brian Wilson. Fuck that.

On prom night, teachers shook Johnny's hand and wished him luck. The teachers seemed to relish the handshake more than Johnny did. Johnny was distracted seeing Sage across the room. Sage appeared to be flaunting two Italian dates, his eyes melted with alcohol, his white shirt tails hanging sloppily over his belt. Sage hardly had any belly any more. Maybe that was why the alcohol got to him and why Sage bellowed the

national anthem sarcastically and walked past the Fagbusters' table with Tens on either side of him and muttered some joke about 'The Johnny-Carson Show.' Carson got up and hit the wall with a bottle of non-alcoholic wine. The bottle didn't smash, so Carson picked it up waggled it in front of Sage's face. Mónica knocked it out of Carson's hands and screeched at him and made scary hand gestures until he sat down. Sage had already scurried to a taxi and gone home. His mum told the Board of Trustees she was going to sue for sexual harassment and homophobic abuse. Johnny had to come into the school to pick up his leaving certificate and he saw Sage once, kneeling on the doormat in the school's reception and begging his mum not to go into the meeting with the principal.

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Carson's dad moved to Australia for some motorcycle thing and Carson moved with him instead of doing the air force cadetship, which Johnny thought was kind of weak, seeing as Carson was 20 now. Sure he was someone's son, but you could be 60 years old and still be someone's son if you thought about it. Carson wasn't even a teenager anymore. Carson's sister moved to Australia too, and with the group halved, Johnny finally had an excuse not to see Dipika. Her family expected him to marry her, and Johnny carried a knife, briefly, in case her brothers really pushed the subject. If he got rushed, no one would have his back.

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At university, most of the brothers in the commerce clique had the same haircut as Johnny and the same easy ability to impress important people. At parties, they pumped heavy R&B and hip hop through the speakers and Johnny's

quiet hopes that they would play some Pixies or Sufjan Stevens flickered down and died out. He'd thought maybe he wouldn't have to listen to rap after Carson moved away. It was sort-of okay to have thirty brothers, but sort-of annoying too. When they sauna'd together after soccer, one of them asked him why he'd got the Fagbusters tattoo on his shoulder, and he realised every guy in the sauna was listening and they'd stopped congratulating him for that epic bicycle kick that led to the pass that got the goal. Johnny put a cloth over the tattoo but they still wanted him to report.

'I dunno,' Johnny explained, eventually, standing up and tightening his towel.

'It's sooo not cool,' one of the guys said. 'Just wait till you try get laid and she sees that.'

'Hope you made the most of it, 'cause it'll probly be your last time, bro.' The boys laughed and high-fived.

Carson would've smashed these niggas, or pledged to, anyway. Johnny tried to think up a quick retort. 'It's not even real,' he mumbled, and walked out.

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The summer after he graduated, Johnny interned at Kickstarter. The brothers said it was a good way to get handshakes. Handshakes got you way farther than your CV, the brothers reckoned. His job was to monetise financial pledges to make the world a better, more tolerant place. It was sort-of cool, he liked drinking Jägerbombs with his new team but didn't like it when things got political. His office read about this gay kid at school who'd been bullied till he killed himself, and Johnny had to run to the toilets and look up Sage's fan page on Facebook. Sage was definitely still alive – he had 120,000 likes. He was one of the world's top music bloggers. Kickstarter's feature campaign pledging to eradicate

homophobic bullying from schools permanently got people buzzing in the office but Johnny felt like the oxygen was being slowly cut off.

Johnny quit without warning. He sat in his dorm room reading webpages about getting qualified as a social worker. If they put him in a school, Johnny would be just six years older than the eldest students. He could spread positive messages. He could be looked up to by the coolest boys. If some of the girls fell in love with him that would be a perk, too.

He sank all his funds into laser tattoo removal, though. It cost \$200 for an appointment alone. The first male nurse assigned to look at it snorted and said he had to go check something and left Johnny sitting on an examination table wearing only a shift. Finally they sent a female to look at him instead. She asked so many questions she had to flip the pages on her clipboard twice. Johnny didn't even know what hepatitis was or how you got such a disease.

'You'd pick it up if you swapped fluids with another male,' the nurse said. She was a Nine out of ten and she hadn't even made eye contact with Johnny yet. 'You ever swapped fluid with another male?'

'What fluid? What, blood or something?'

She gave him a straight, hard look with her green eyes. 'Or semen.'

The ink was too deep in Johnny's skin, they reported at last. We cannot undo this. Whoever had done this to Johnny was not a qualified tattooist, they said. The ink had been pushed in too deep, way under the fourth layer. It looked like a garage job, they said. Were you unconscious when they did this to you? Was this a hate crime? Do you want us to call somebody?

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The postgraduate counselling qualification was over within nine months. While he studied, he had a job going door to door apologising to customers for internet outages. They wouldn't place him in a school even for unpaid work experience. He couldn't wait to get started working properly.

After he'd paid the graduate school \$7432 in fees and sent in 120 applications for counselling-related roles for jobs as far away as Malaysia, Johnny asked for a meeting with the grad school's Chancellor of Humanities. There was a conspiracy against him, he was certain. A lawyer sat in the room with them. The Chancellor turned her computer monitor so Johnny could see the reason he would never work as a counsellor. The monitor showed a photograph of Johnny without a shirt on, standing on a table covered in beer bottles. The photo had been taken from his Facebook and posted on *GayTimes.com*. A blog had led to a Kickstarter campaign to ban the Commerce Society from campus; CommSoc had responded saying that Johnny had been kicked out long ago and CommSoc in no way tolerated homophobia.

The chancellor searched for a way to make Johnny leave. 'The Libertarians, the free speech club? They might be able to help?'

'Can't you help me get the website taken down?'

'They have the right to free speech in the same way you have the right to... your, ah, your position. Thanks for coming in.'

The Sunday papers put on the front page the same photograph of a smiling Johnny with his Kickstarter team with an inserted close-up of the Fagbusters tattoo. The story quoted his boss at Kickstarter saying Johnny was never really an employee. Everyone was terribly disappointed and stricter criteria would prevent such people being accepted in future.

Johnny stayed in his apartment for a week, reading all the stories that mentioned him, and reading online news about

himself, plus every piece of Sage's writing he could find. He had to know if Sage had mentioned him, good or bad. Sage by now was the edgiest music column in America or anywhere. They cited Sage's words in news sites across Japan and Britain and Europe, and especially Italy, where Sage was sometimes interviewed on TV. He was the edgiest spokesperson for the 18-35 demographic on his half of the globe. Mónica addressed him like an old friend. The subtitle gave his proper name, Edwin, but when she interviewed him, Mónica called him Saggio. When it was the anniversary of Kurt Cobain's death she needed his words to televise across the world, to soothe people. Wise words. Sage wisdom.

'Being unmolested, being left free to express himself without hassle was never an option afforded to Kurt,' The Sage told MTV Europe, staring through the television into Johnny's sticky eyes.

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Jono dawdled along Lisbon Street with his clipboard feeling anxious about knocking on number 60. The job paid average, normal. A little above minimum wage. The safe middle, far from the outliers.

Jono walked up the creaking steps and knocked on the door. Flakes of paint fell off. The place looked abandoned. He was glad it'd been so long. There had to be new people here now. Jono rehearsed his spiel, worried he would blurt something stupid. Hi, I'm here representing Vodafone. We understand recent lines work has interrupted the continuous flow of broadband which you value, and as such, I'm here to personally –

The man with the sleepy dugong eyes and the black beard and the Pearl Jam shirt opened the door, looked down from door step and gave a relaxed smile.

Sage's glasses were the same ones Carson had thrown mud at seven years earlier, and he still had the height, and the long straggly goatee of a monk – but Sage was skinny. His chest had collapsed on its wide frame and his nipples hung far too low. His hair looked brittle and his jaw stuck out, with no fleshy cheeks to bury it under.

Jono knocked his sunglasses down over his eyes, but it was too late.

'Oh, hey man, long time,' said Sage, taking a tired, deep breath and coughing up mucous, which he spat politely away from Jono. 'What can I do for ya?'

I came to check and see if you still hate me.

Jono took a breath and said, 'Sir, I'm here representing Vodafone. We understand recent lines work may have interrupt–'

'Oh, that's no bother, man,' Sage said, and chortled. 'So welcome to the 27 Club. Long time.'

'Sir, recent lines work has interrupted the continuous flow of –'

'Dude, chill.' Sage patted his shoulder. His hand had no heft to it anymore. His 13-year-old self could've kicked his 27 self's arse. Sage had carpeted his house with records. There was a chandelier of CDs, record covers stapled to the wall, and huge posters of Jimi Hendrix. There wasn't a single curtain open inside the house. The light was brown. 'Come in. I wanna show you something. Mum died, like, ages ago. Lucky the school paid her arse all that compensation.' He laughed. 'I should really repay the bank.'

'Sir – I mean, man: I'm like epic-sorry. Seriously.'

'What, sorry about dear mama?' He extended his arms and fingers like winter branches sticking stiffly out of the side of a tree. 'Fuck that bitch. Got the estate all to myself. Here, have a seat.' The thing-to-sit-on in front of Sage's computer wasn't a chair. It was a plywood crate, which Sage presumably

kept LPs in. The room stank of burned chemicals. 'I wanted to email you this, but your address kept bouncing for some reason, plus I couldn't find you on Facebook.'

'I don't go by Johnny anymore, I changed my whole... never mind.' Stench wafted up from Sage's shoulders and Jono saw some tiny scabs on the back of Sage's hand.

'Here. On Amazon. Check this out. Type in 12 inch LP Clean Edit *Murmur* R.E.M.. Just do it.'

'Look, sir, I've just gotta apologise for the interruption to your broadband and then I'd best be – '

Sage wasn't even looking at him. Sage seemed to enjoy somebody to share the glow of his monitor with. 'Internet's fine, pssht. Gotta expect the worst from internet service providers. I got a new super-router to jump the signal. See? See how much that fuckin *Murmur* record's going for these days, Johnny?'

'Clearly your internet's not fine, because this isn't displaying right. Lookie – says a hundred grand. I think it's got too many... Oh. Oh damn.'

'Too many zeroes?'

Jono looked into Sage's eyes, searching for some kind of set-up. He found excitement and deranged lust.

Sage took his hand off his mouse, revolved and folded his arms on what used to be a belly. On the edge of the messy computer desk, Jono could see a dinner plate with bloody clods of cotton wool, three needles, two lighters and a blackened tea spoon. He supposed Sage's thinking was muddled.

'This is where you do all your blogs and reviews and stuff?'

'This is where the magic happens. Hey – you heard of The Money? They've asked me to design their album cover.'

'The Money? I mean, of course. Hell yeah. Uh... congratulations. Didn't they score a Grammy?'

Sage handed over a prototype album cover with a grainy, retro-looking photo of Johnny showing off his tattoo.

‘Jesus... you want my permission to, what, this is gonna be The Money’s album cover? This picture? Of the tat?’

‘It’s ironic, right?’ Sage said. ‘You’ll be famous in artistic circles as the man with the ironic tattoo. Irony’s big these days, man. You could be a trendsetter. I’ll tell people you were way ahead of the curve, heh heh. Right?’ Sage swivelled around in his chair, fetched the plate of needles and swivelled back. ‘Anyway, help a brother out. Tie us off if you can.’

‘Eh?’

‘Tie my arm off.’

‘I don’t understand this.’

‘In which case, I shall explain. I believe it was Mr Scott Weiland of a little band known as the Stone Temple Pilots – and of late, the reprehensible so-called supergroup Velvet Revolver – who said the opioid family brings a sense of enlightenment, a golden glow from one’s fingers all the way to one’s stomach. “Like a drop of water rejoining the ocean,” he once told an Italian journalist friend of mine. I have to say: I concur.’ Sage grabbed a black t-shirt and tossed it in Jono’s lap. The shirt showed a yellow smiley face turned wobbly on drugs, its eyes dead crosses. ‘Make yourself useful and tie me off, eh?’

‘Sage, what the FUCK, man! Why are you doing this, man?’

Sage smiled so broadly Jono could see his yellow teeth. He focused his pink eyes on his old friend. ‘Wrap it around the bicep there. That’s it. Just stick ‘er in aaand reee-lease.’ Sage’s eyelids were melting with delirium. He slid down his computer chair, poised to fall off onto the mess of clothes and magazines on the floor. With his eyes closed, he looked exactly like the Buddha. ‘Seriously, man, I’m so happy you’re here.’