



COMMERCE ST



The Punks

By Drew Crossover

I'm sure it was a beautiful sunset. Only a paper-thin portion of it glowed warmly between the black monolithic skyscrapers surrounding me, its peach and tangerine slivers of light pointing up to heaven. I hoped that my wife and grandkids were outside enjoying the remains of the day. Sure, I'd be seeing them soon since it only takes me 15 minutes to get home, but dusk and chilly nights appear quickly this time of year, sending everyone inside for a hot dinner as soon as the first stars come out.

I listened to the clicking of my wingtips on the sidewalk. The echoes rebounded from behind me, and I noticed the time between my steps and the echoes increase as I put distance between myself and my firm's high-rise. Normally, on this downtown sidewalk, my ears would be flooded with idling engines, jackhammers, power-washers, car horns, and the random bits of one side of a stranger's cell-phone conversation. In this week between Christmas and New Year's, though, I'm it. Just me and my shoes. I like it this way.



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The other partners harass me for working while they're spending three weeks with their extended families in Steamboat or the Keys. I assume that some of them want me to go on vacation to assuage their guilt. A few years ago, they stopped asking how I'd spent my time while they were away. I'd happily show them the motions I'd drafted, the new clients I'd brought in, or cases I'd researched. Then I'd inquire about their vacations and they'd mutter something about "good to see the kids" and go chain themselves to their desks for the next few months.

It's not that I don't take vacations; Marie and I travel regularly. It's just that when the other 299 attorneys at our firm are gone, I get more work done in a day than I usually get done in a week. All of the work I do when the building's empty allows me to take more time off in the spring and summer, which is when I'd rather be traveling anyway. The only incentive for me to take time off in the winter would be to make the other partners feel more comfortable when they return, but if they choose to feel bad because I worked while they played, that's their business.

As I approached Commerce Street, which I needed to cross, the little white walking man turned into a flashing red hand with a timer counting down from 10. In my younger days, this would have been my signal to start running, but after last year's knee surgery, those days are gone.

The red hand stopped flashing and shined sternly. The few cars that had been stopped on Commerce crept forward as their light turned green, with none of their drivers seeming to be in much of a hurry to get anywhere. To my right, I heard a vehicle pull up next to me and stop. I started nodding my head and tapping my feet in time to the furious drum beats and distorted guitars blasting out of the windows. After a couple of seconds, I recognized the song and smiled broadly.

"Suburban Death!" I said excitedly. I hadn't heard that song in 25 years! It was by Buzzkill, an Orange County punk band from the late 1970s, off their third album, *No Flags, No Borders*. Track number six, if I recall correctly. The record came out in 1978 on double-vinyl.

I was there the following year when Buzzkill opened for the Sex Pistols at Bob Wills' Playhouse down by the river. That was the show where Sid Vicious, drunk and withdrawing from heroin, played half the set with his bass unplugged, threw up on a woman in the front row, and punched a fan in the parking lot. The band was forbidden from playing in Texas again until the late 1990s, after Sid had been dead for years and new shock-and-horror acts like Marilyn Manson were making the late 1970s punks seem as dangerous as a Beatles cover band.

I glanced to my right and was surprised to see a brand-new, smart-looking, BMW coupe. Things sure have changed in the last, God, 33 years? Really? Has it been that long? If any of us disillusioned punks had owned such a gaudy status symbol as a BMW, we certainly would have been shunned, if not worse. We believed that the pursuit of money and material possessions impoverished the soul and contributed to worldwide decay through the exploitation of people and natural resources. It was

easy to say that back when we were young and naïve, but we still have yet to be proven wrong.

My curiosity was piqued, so I sneakily stole a glance at the driver. As surprised as I was to see a BMW playing Buzzkill, I was doubly surprised to see one of our first-year associates driving it. Ben Something. Good kid, hard worker, from what I hear. I think he's in Commercial Construction. His suit and tie led me to believe that I hadn't been the only one at the office that day and that made me happy.

Johnny Kill started singing the first verse of "Suburban Death." Ben sang along, word for word. I did, too: "Cookie-cutter houses/mile after mile/manicured lawns/adults with no style."

I was a victim of white-flight in the late 1960s, when desegregation caused my parents to move us from the city to the suburbs, and I remember this lyric resonating with me when I heard it for the first time. The never-ending, treeless neighborhoods, the lack of anything interesting within walking distance, the expectation to look and act like everyone else, the stifling of creativity and originality — that's where I spent my teens, and I hated it.

As the second line started, Ben looked to his left and met my eyes. Immediately, the happiness on his face vanished and he turned back around and turned off the music. I knew what was going through his mind: "Oh God, that's one of the partners. Did he see me? Of course he saw me. Does he know who I am? I hope not. Come on light, turn green, turn green, turn green."

"Ben!" I barked. His head snapped around and I felt so sorry for his frightened self.

"Uh, yes sir?" he squeaked.

"Turn it up! I love that song!"

"Excuse me?"

I crouched down as low as my hip would let me. "Buzzkill!" I yelled over his engine. " 'Suburban Death!' I haven't heard it in years! Turn it up!"

"Okay," he said emotionlessly. As he reached for the volume, I noticed that his hand was shaking. The boy obviously needed to work on his confidence. The last line of the first verse had almost ended by the time Ben turned the volume back up. All I heard Johnny Kill sing before the pre-chorus was "Need some catharsis," which made me rack my brain for what had rhymed with "catharsis" at the end of the previous line.

As the pick scrape on the lead guitar announced the chorus, I found myself gazing ahead at the skyscrapers and mixed-use lofts on the other side of Commerce with an intensity in my body and a focus in my mind that come around much less often than they used to. "Noooooooooo!" screamed Johnny Kill. "Nothing more/and nothing less!/Noooooooooo!/Nothing worse/than suburban death!"

I let the magic of a personal song that I hadn't heard in 25 years course its way through me. I felt the music dredge up long-buried memories and emotions. The pains of struggling to fit in, the frustrations of suppressing my true self, the despair over what I believed my future to hold for me — they arose from somewhere deep and made me tremble.



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I acknowledged these latent feelings from my youth and regarded them with a sense of both ownership and detachment, as though I were thumbing through old photos of myself that had been stored in the attic for two and a half decades. Was I wrong for feeling so despondent and lonely back then? No, not any more wrong than I was for wearing wide lapels, earth tones, and vests in the mid-1980s. I was just a product of my environment.

“You say that it’s heaven/I say it’s prison/You confuse living/with masochism.”

Even though I forgave myself pretty quickly for my fashion faux pas, it took years for me to forgive myself for the evil that I wrought, both inside and out, due to my desire to quell all of my emotions and find a crowd that might accept me.

In order to rebel against the forced conformity of suburban life, I did the most oxymoronic thing possible by trying to conform to the punk life. I had the black leather jacket with metal studs protruding from the shoulders. I had the Mohawk and the combat boots. I had the punk’s opinion on everything from movies to evolution to reproductive rights, after being told, of course, what it was that the punks believed. I sacrificed my own authenticity in order to belong. Stealing, squatting, sharing needles, I knew better than all of that, but it was a fair trade in my mind — community through conformity versus loneliness through authenticity.

“Look at the life/you’re told to lead/Get a career/marry and breed.”

“No way I’ll ever go that route,” I told myself back then. A wife, a mortgage, kids, and *grandkids*?! A 401(k)? Seriously? Me? When did that happen? It happened when I abandoned living for others and began living for myself. Whether I lived in the suburban community or in the punk community, I cared deeply about what everyone thought of me. I hadn’t realized that no matter where I lived, I obsessed about meeting others’ expectations and had needed their approval to give myself the most fleeting glimpse of self-respect.

“Noooooo!” I howled, with my head and chest lifted toward the darkening sky. “Nothing more/and nothing less!/Noooooo!/Nothing worse/than suburban death!”

Ben’s off-key voice caught my attention, jerking me back into reality. I saw him in his car smiling with his eyes closed, his fists pounding the steering wheel in time to the frenetic beat. I noticed that he’d opened the sunroof. The chorus was about to be repeated. I watched Ben tilt his head back, inhaling a deep breath. I did the same.

“Noooooo!” we shouted to the stars. “Nothing more/and nothing less!/Noooooo!/Nothing worse/than suburban death!”

A truck behind Ben honked its horn. I opened my eyes and saw that Ben’s light was green, and probably had been for a while. Ben’s eyes were still closed as he drummed away. I wondered where he’d gone and what was at the surface.

The truck laid on its horn, finally bringing Ben back from inside himself. He seemed disoriented until he looked to his left and saw me. He smiled sheepishly, waved meekly, and drove forward through the intersection right when the guitar solo started. As I heard the solo fade into the distance, I thought about Ben. He identified so strongly with a 30-year-old song about alienation, isolation, and depression that it startled me. I knew why it meant so much to him: He’d been through what I’d been through. Or worse yet, he was still going through it.

The little white walking man once again turned into a flashing red hand with a timer counting down from 10. I ran for it, hopping onto the sidewalk on the other side of the street with four seconds to spare. My knee burned, so I sat on a bench. I pulled my phone from my pocket and sent Ben an email, asking him to lunch. I hope he says yes.



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