



# ONE BAR AT A TIME

A musician's reflections  
from 11 weeks at sea

Kyle Bronsdon

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# One Bar at a Time

[12.21.2014](#)

## 2nd day, 2nd cruise

I emerge for the 2nd time today, at 3pm, and the sun is brighter. It feels good, and it smells like the sea. It doesn't always. Or maybe you just get used to it and it has to smell extra salty to notice. Light and air, you notice, are essential, more than in living on land. I first started thinking about that when I read a book of Springsteen's collected interviews. He talks about songwriting as mining, and it made me think about the tools you need for that. Light and air. And a pickaxe.

We'll see if I continue this journal, inspired by another book I just finished, Willie Nelson's *Roll Me Up and Smoke Me When I Die*. It's been a long time since I've kept anything like one.

I had to think to remember what it was I was so angry about on my last contract. It was that no one had ever told me that I was supposed to do a name that tune game half an hour into my set on the first night of the cruise. I don't even care now. I always forget until like 40 minutes in, and at least half the time the crowd says they'd rather just hear me play.

Last night it was a message from the music director that the bar manager complained that I was "taking breaks at weird times". That I should wait until people have gone into the comedy show, I guess to pick up people in line? I've been doing this gig for almost 5 years, I think I know when it's a good time for a break. Anyway, like last time, I'm reminded of the zen parable of the zookeeper.

The monkeys went crazy one day because they wanted to be fed twice in the morning and once in the afternoon instead of once in the morning and twice in the afternoon, like the zookeeper had always done. They were rattling the cages and flinging excrement and doing all the things monkeys do when they're pissed off. So the zookeeper started feeding them twice in the morning and once in the afternoon. It's the same amount of food, what difference does it make?

So if the bar manager wants me to walk a dozen guests buying drinks instead of 10 or 15 minutes before or later, when there are half a dozen fewer of them, what difference does it make? They'll be back, or they won't, and they have 6 more nights to buy drinks in whatever

bar, and some of them will be in mine every night, and many of them won't.

I just don't care to be a monkey rattling the cage for attention. This must be the only job on earth where it's considered a reasonable criticism to say "he sings and plays great, BUT..."

Haters gonna hate. What difference do they make to the people whose faces light up if I just look at them funny? They don't care when I smoke.

## **11:30pm**

Fed the monkeys lunch. Crowd 100% better than last night, and almost indistinguishable from last week's 2nd night. But they aren't tipping as well. What am I doing differently? Not a thing. I play every request I know with as much energy and soul I'm capable of.

My drum teacher, Tom Tedrahn, taught me a lot more than the rudiments of percussion, he taught me the rudiments of professionalism. His method of dealing with leaders who asked for stupid things was to play the part exactly the same and, afterwards, ask the guy if that was more like what he wanted.

Works every time.

## **12.22.2014**

What kind of sick fuck listens to "Open Arms" first thing in the morning? Oh, thank God, he's changed his mind. Almost as nice as this warm sun and perfect breeze in Costa Maya. Fine weather for a lifeboat drill. I've stood for an hour baking, and I've motored around in a cloudy mist. That was actually kinda fun, piloting a rescue boat around the bay in Roatan, one of the final requirements to earn my certification in survival at sea.

Where the hell is everybody? This thing was supposed to start 5 minutes ago. Crew preparing the boats, a handful of cooks with their lifejackets, and not an officer to be seen. You never hear about these things in time to plan to get some sleep. There's a note on the door when I get back to the cabin after work. So I just get in bed and hope I'll drift off quickly. Not so much, last night.

No doubt, there are crew who have no time to wind down after their even later shift, leaving even less time to sleep. It's hard to complain when you work less than a thousand co-workers. Okay,

I've been waiting for 15 minutes, where the hell is everybody? OK, here comes a white uniform. Or not. Ugh.

I'm great at coming up with titles, and I just thought of one: *One Bar at a Time*. It's the advice one of my greatest teachers gave me. Malcolm Chisholm, recording legend. He was showing us how to wire a patchbay. There were, I dunno, 48 solder points? 96? made my eyes cross! I told him maybe drums was more my thing, and he said the patchbay was just like music, "you just take it one bar at a time."

Safety officer: "why you are here?" they're Italian. "boat drill, " I say. "didn't you hear the announcement? Three."

### **1:46pm**

Now I'm reading Malcolm Gladwell's *Outliers*, the part where he talks about cultures of honor, and it reminded me of a magician I worked with on my first ship, the Oceanbreeze. He had an unbelievably pretentious act that started out with him wearing a Phantom of the Opera type mask and, at the end of the first trick before he took it off, asked the audience "any questions?"

I would have asked, before doing the trick, "Is there anyone in the audience who has never seen a magic show before? Because this old floating ball illusion will blow your mind!"

Anyway, later in the act he sets up a trick by saying "people ask me all the time..." I don't remember what. I'd taken to being the MC for the showband from behind the drum set and one night after the magician had already done that show, I introduced some tune by saying "people ask us all the time..."

There was a very thin curtain separating the bandstand from backstage, and the incensed magician's voice snarled from right behind me, sputtering "where do you get off?! (asshole!)" after the set, he explained to me with his widest polished smile that it wasn't professional. The smile added "no hard feelings, ASSHOLE."

It turned out he was an even better illusionist when it came to the magic of faith. He had a little cult of crew he led in bible study. We got about 20 seconds into a philosophical discussion in the hall or something before he explained that I had to understand the context – his context, I'm guessing – before I could discuss Christianity. I declined his warm invitation to hear the context.

Typical.

**2:30pm**

There are a few things I like about this gig in spite of myself. Two of them are these evilly delicious Guy Fee-airy branded cheeseburgers. Gawd they're tasty. Carnival and Guy, fuck you. Regardless, I will never, ever refer to you as Guy Fee-eddy. YUM these things are good. Okay, how about "the douche formerly known as Guy Fee-airy"? That's much kinder than anything I'd call George Lopez. The comedy club next to the piano bar is branded with his name. These are the conditions I have to work under.

And this is why I think a minority of guests really, really appreciate me.

See, Carnival is branded as "the Fun Ships". Some nights I like to discuss that with the guests in the piano bar. "you can't throw a rock around here without hitting something fun," I tell them. "there's karaoke and trivia and comedians and production shows, and maybe sometimes you just need to get away from all that. That's what I'm here for. An alternative to all this damn fun. So here's a song by Warren Zevon about an undead soldier of fortune bent on revenge for his assassination by the CIA."

**12.26.2014**

Thank God, Christmas is over. I have the same fight with myself every contract: I could double or triple my salary if I just completely changed my personality and did the dog and pony show. Get some shakers and tambourines and a basketball hoop over a big tipjar and learn hundreds of terrible songs and wear goofy costumes and shit.

Every contract I resolve to just decide once and for all to let that go, or just do it. But there are plenty of piano bar entertainers with the company who do this so much worse, and they keep their jobs. There are a good bunch that make double and triple their salary, too, and seem to really enjoy the gig.

And there are that handful of guests that become friends and fans because I'm different.

Sometimes I fantasize that some connected music business person will have been talked into coming on a Carnival cruise for some reason and be one of the people that get me. Wouldn't that be a success story? Then all the musicians would be working for nothing on ships like they do in clubs now, to have that chance at a break

because Kyle Bronsdon was discovered in a cruise ship piano bar.

I'm on a Malcom Gladwell kick, finished *Outliers* and almost through *David and Goliath*. He always has at least one or two gems I hold fast to. This time around, it's the 10,000 hours. Supposedly the theoretical time to mastery. 4 hours a night 6 nights a week for 3 months is around 300 of those hours. And plenty of time during the day to knock off some of those hours toward mastering songwriting, too.

I don't like the way this entry is going, it's the kind of self-indulgent crap that's going to make me want to dump the whole idea of keeping a journal when I read it back.

Well, easy solution: I just won't read it!

### **3:40am**

My cabin is in between the two other soloists. The starboard guy has been partying his brains out for almost 12 hours! I heard him and a bunch of people going nuts over there around back on board time and figured "ah, I had some pretty fun days in Cozumel. He'll be quiet tonight, haha." now I think his contract must be over when we get to Miami the day after tomorrow.

It's not like I have to get up and do anything in the morning. And he's been nothing but conscientious since I've been here.

And I may be feeling a bit more forgiving since reading this latest chapter of *David and Goliath* - sorry, I don't mean to turn this into a book report - I think one thing I enjoy about Gladwell is that he never fails to leave me feeling vindicated.

Chapter 8 tells the stories of Wilma Derksen and Mike Reynolds. Reynolds spearheaded the 3 strikes law after his daughter was pointlessly murdered. Wilma forgave the monster who sodomized her daughter and left her to freeze to death. Reynolds is obsessed to this day, and 3 strikes ruined more lives than it saved.

Gladwell doesn't preach about it. He never does. He does the opposite. He painstakingly conducts fascinating research. And once again, he has shined a spotlight on something that's been gnawing at me for years and illustrated it in a way I find almost physically relieving after impotently ranting about it once in a while all that time. It's so frustrating to be so much smarter than everyone else and being unable to articulate it!

The inverted-U curve Gladwell explores, where things gets better, level out, and then get worse, this is what I've seen with DUI laws spearheaded by people like Reynolds. Before you start in with the tragic anecdote about a life cut short by a drunk driver, let me tell you about the guy I hit. He's driving a new car my insurance paid for. 7 of the last days I would have had with my wife before taking off to write rambling journal entries for 3 months, I spent in the Pima County jail with, among other men, a dude with CRIPS etched in his FACE in alienation green.

Unlike me, I think that guy probably had a speeding ticket or something on his record.

Those seven days gave me all the proof I should ever need of how "disagreeable" I am on the Five Factor Model inventory.

## **8:20am**

Finished that book at 6am and went to sleep, then woke up about an hour ago and couldn't sleep. But it feels like I had about an hour's sleep. Really tired. Had breakfast and pocketed four hard boiled eggs. That was a popular snack to take back to the dorm after breakfast in jail, if you could snag a couple extra. Maybe that's why I couldn't sleep, I'm still processing the jail time. It truly was one of the most profound experiences of my life. I designed a tattoo using the classic hand-less clock jailhouse image at some point last night around when I told you about it.

It took me a good while to process my father's death. Then boom, it pretty much happened almost all at once after watching *Total Recall* followed by *Jacob's Ladder*.

In a related vein, I think I just put together that Bud was Bill's brother in *Kill Bill*. Yeah. Sometimes movies take me a while to process, too. I was thinking about the engraving on the Hanzo sword, "To Bud, the only man I ever loved." cause I was thinking about tweeting that to Louis C.K., who has a doppelganger aboard this week in the piano bar. Nice guy. The double, I mean. Never met Louis.

Clearly, another attempt at sleep is a good idea.

## **12.27.2014**

### **1:06am**

One problem with being a patient person, which I think I am, is that your mood can seem to spin 180 degrees in a minute. Probably because you've been putting up with shit for hours. Some cruises, I just can't fucking wait for these people to get the fuck out. Cheap, demanding, amateur drunks.

I'm gonna eat one of those hard boiled eggs. Right now. Hold on.

Okay. I ate two. I woulda had three, but that just seemed excessive, so I had a pear. Feel a little bit better. Maybe a little drinkie poo? I bought a bottle of Jim Beam at the gift shop. They didn't have Jameson. The crew discount is pretty sweet. I try to avoid spending money on booze here because, although my discount in the bar is good too, I can often get away without buying any for myself. And sometimes I just get so sick of the people, I know it's not gonna help and I just don't drink.

See, this entry is irritating me again. Back in a bit if a couple fingers of whiskey will wind me down.

Nope, not happening. I must be getting old if hard boiled eggs make me feel better than booze. I ate the other two eggs I had, and I could eat another two. A sip of whiskey didn't taste good tonight. I have to wear the red shirt of shame tomorrow.

It's a sort of football jersey with "Just Ask" on it. I don't really mind helping guests find their way as they board, but the shirt has no business on a 45 year old piano player. I used to find it more humiliating. Now it's just irritating, especially when they give me the embark to 1:30pm shift.

Again, y'know, feed the damn monkeys twice in the morning to keep the shit-flinging to a minimum.

## **12.28.2014**

The first Carnival ship I worked, as a drummer in the showband, was the Holiday. It's since been retired. Honestly, it should have been retired then. What a dump. To be fair, my outlook was pretty dark then. Drank a LOT. Case in point:

I was in the crew bar one night and told some chick she was really pretty. That's already out of character for me, but even more so was emphasizing that observation by petting her hair. I remember her taking it quite gracefully. Not so much the guy she was with the next night when I was equally smashed. I was actually my way back to the cabin, and the guy said, "HEY! You really disrespected her last

night!”

“I DID???” I was sincerely surprised. “Yeah!” he snarled. I made her a sincere apology, assuring her that, if I’d offended her, it was the last thing I’d intended to do. She very gracefully accepted it in a way that seemed to me to say “you really didn’t disrespect me all that much.”

I was halfway down the stairs by the time I’d processed the whole thing. I turned around and went straight back up to the bar. “again, I am sincerely sorry if I offended you in any way, “ I told her. All smiles, and Shark Eyes, as I came to call him, gave a satisfied nod with his jaw set. “you, on the other hand, “ addressing him matter-of-factly, “can go fuck yourself.”

I executed the Drunk’s Pirouette as he shot off his seat. As if they were waiting for it, a number of hands held him back. Thanks, whoever you were. I’m sure that would not have ended well, and I suppose I’d have deserved it.

He wasn’t interested in my attempt at an apology the next day.

## **12.29.2014**

Something I like about my professional history is that I’ve been able to follow both lineages, those people call classical training and self-taught. I still feel some degree of shame at my piano playing because I look at it from the viewpoint of my training and experience as a drummer. But I take pride in both and I hold some hope that the battle I’ve fought with the piano will someday result in something that can be called a style, from either view.

The biggest decision I made, about the same time that I started retraining myself at the piano, was to focus on moving people emotionally rather than achieving technical mastery. There are very, very few musicians I would call true masters. Errol Garner is one. His chops are unequaled, and his music is loaded with feeling. In contrast, I used to practically worship Chick Corea, but he always left me feeling like I should just quit. I’ll never be half as good as Errol either, but he makes me smile. Like Louis Armstrong, another true master.

There are, of course, special cases like Thelonious Monk. Did you know he went to JULIARD? Clearly, he knew the gymnastics. But as the old joke about reading music goes, not enough to hurt his playing. I know people who can identify instrumentalists as easily as everybody else can identify a singer. I can tell Monk and Elvin

Jones and that's about it. If it sounds like Monk, but with modern production, I know it's Harry Connick, Jr. Duke has a percussive, minimalist style similar to Monk.

The ultimate goal is to figure out how to get your hands to make the instrument create the sounds you imagine. I always encourage people who say "I wish I could play piano" when they listen to me play. If I can do it, anybody can. And like them, I bet if I could get in a time machine and play for myself 20 years ago, I bet I'd be ecstatic. The 25-year-old me, I mean.

The ultimate goal is to make the sounds and write the words you want to hear. And share. At this point in my life, I feel more like a mad scientist than a struggling artist. Part of that decision of focus that I made came out of busting my ass for 20 years and failing to earn a living. Then I got serious about songwriting because I figured "if it's a lottery either way, I might as well go for the biggest possible jackpot."

like getting married at 36, there was terrible and unavoidable lost time I'll never get back, and I've never been happier.

## [12.30.2014](#)

Day off. I'm not sure what classes I neglected to take in college, but they were probably with Bill Russo and Carol Loverde. I remember Carol making me a deal: she said "you came in here [from NIU, where I'd acquired vast volumes of knowledge, had a great time, and flunked out] way ahead of everybody else, so I'm grading you based on that," and that I deserved a D by that standard, but she'd give me the C I needed to take the next level of classes if I promised to ramp it up there. I made that promise and failed to keep it. She kept her word.

Anyway, I think those classes must have had something to do with harmony. *Cape Fear* was on the other night, and I remembered watching it with Joe Adamik, my roommate at the time. He analyzed the theme for me, effortlessly and a bit annoyed that I didn't already know that basic level of harmonic theory. There's not much to it, it's not a whole lot deeper than the *Jaws* theme, but it was educational nonetheless. Probably Joe took the equivalent classes at Roosevelt.

I got to thinking about all this from learning Aerosmith's "Dream On" today. The harmony has similarities, actually, to *Cape Fear*! I couldn't tell you exactly, it's like melodic minor or harmonic minor or something. The dominant has a flatted 9th. it makes me smile,

hearing harmony and making sense of it, knowing that my ear has grown more sophisticated, finding that my fingers know the voicing from years of playing fakebooks, and keenly feeling the wistful yet bemused irony that I should have learned this shit decades ago.

“Harmony and Ear Training”, I think that was the class.

### 1.3.2015

I used to go crazy for magic and novelty shops when I was a kid. They had one at the Great America theme park. I saved up my allowance with a discipline I'd never achieved before to buy a rubber chicken there. Saturday night horror movie host and one of my heroes, Son of Svengoolie, that was his iconic symbol. He was regularly pelted with dozens of rubber chickens when he was getting in his coffin, which was adorned with the motif. I ramped it up even more later and saved a FORTUNE of \$25 to buy a kickass werewolf mask. I was crazy for monsters, too. I read everything about them, with some emphasis on the makeup effects like featured in Fangoria magazine.

My buddy Steve and I made a short movie with my dad's super 8 camera, a spoof of *Dragonslayer* we called *Chickenslayer*. The rubber chicken inspired it. And we were into Dungeons and Dragons.

I got to thinking about all this because my thing to do on home port day in Miami is get gnocchi with pesto at this Italian place and right around the corner is a novelty shop. There's a rubber unicorn mask in the window. It's ridiculous. I love it.

I'm gonna go buy that mask.

### 1.4.2014

[I blew it and re-read this entry and did do a bit of editing like I'm trying not to do because it's gonna be the death of the whole project for me. But I did, and I guess it's not yet. Still, I'm using the word “project” loosely. Anyway, I'm trying to hold to the concept I've heard attributed to the Egyptians that I adore while finding elusive to accept in my life, “a beautiful thing is never perfect.” I bet Willie Nelson didn't have this problem while he was writing *Roll Me Up and Smoke Me When I Die*.]

This gig has a way of killing the music. There's a Facebook group called “Dark Showband Musicians” with a significant following, if

that gives you an idea. I am, of course, no longer a showband musician. I'm the piano bar guy.

I bought that mask, and I'm just effervescent with my plan to wear it at some point. That's the mood I came back to the ship with. I enthusiastically edited my "tasting menu", as I call the sample song list I made of my own accord over a year ago, have used on 3 different vessels, and continue to tweak and perfect because for some reason I still give a damn.

It's very easy to stop caring. I never, ever phone it in. have I mentioned that? I take immense pride in that because it's really all I have. If you're a fan, please stop yourself now – I'm speaking technically, like I do remember writing about before – as a trained professional, I'm simply more qualified than you to judge. Just grant me that, ok? That's fair, isn't it? And the fact is, I really am a pretty weak piano player. You don't have to try and convince me to believe any differently. That said, the never phoning it in thing is what you hear as a fan and I am deeply grateful to care as much as I do because you respond to that. As a fan, I mean. If you're not a fan, go fuck yourself. KIDDING. Hey, there's no accounting for taste.

So I email the song list to the Music Director to print some copies of the updated version for me. It's the only way to do this sort of thing unless I haul my own printer here. And it costs me 8.8 cents a minute. That saves me 1.2 cents a minute because I buy 450 minutes at a time. This is for dialup speed Internet. Flash drive? Nope. Because that's how viruses are spread, and the company has made such an effort to offer the very best possible internet service to its employees and guests, that we just can't take a chance of compromising that.

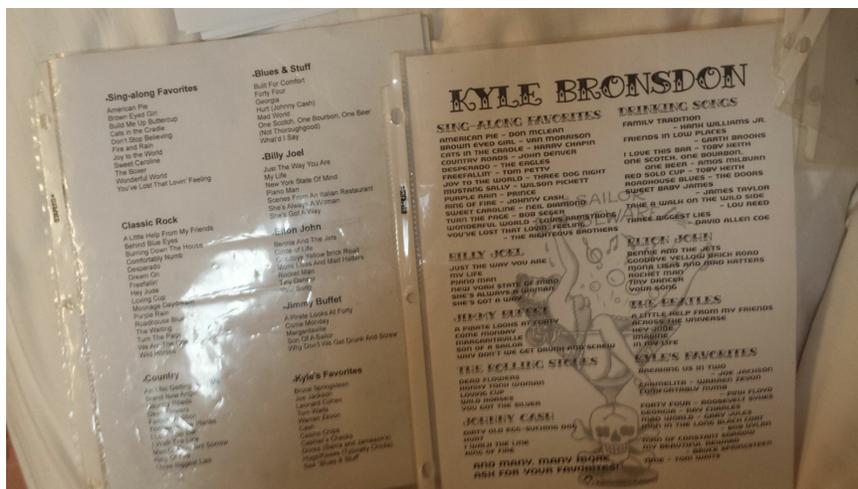
Yeesh, the sarcasm there made me uncomfortable myself [it gets worse], I apologize. Moving on.

He can't print the list for me because it depicts "a girl in a martini glass", as he very accurately described the watermark image behind the "Queen Rosie" retro tat style typeface text. It's a classic nautical tattoo design by the great Sailor Jerry, probably 70 years old. "Sailor Beware", it says. Beware of booze and gambling and fully dressed girls, it illustrates. Anyway, you see his work constantly, it's enjoying a well-deserved renaissance now that tattoos are not associated solely with criminals and sailors but increasingly with the teenage daughters of the Carnival guests begging them to reconsider or at least wait a couple years for the love of God it'll break your father's heart.

The fact that it has my Facebook address on it and that it mentions tipping are two other reasons it will need to be approved by the office. MD suspects, and is probably right, that it won't be. Maybe it's a cultural thing, he's Polish, doesn't get the American sailor tattoo thing, although he "appreciates my style". So did the other three MDs I've worked with, who this guy suggests were "maybe not paying attention".

This is one reason I rarely talk to Carnival "team members" anymore.

Since I designed the list, I've thought it looked more professional and fun (as in Carnival Funships ((tm), probably)) than the songs listed on a plain white background in Helvetica that I'm using as of today, and more useful to guests than not having one at all like a lot of piano bar entertainers. Never got a comment remotely suggesting it offended anyone. Maybe once a contract some ink fan excitedly asks "is that Sailor Jerry?!"



I put the boring-ass lists out and won hearts and minds anyway. You're welcome, Carnival. Let me know if you want me to take "Why Don't We Get Drunk And Screw" off the list.

I'm sure as hell not using the company-approved list that gives the impression I think Tonight's Gonna Be Good Night.

That was a big hit.

Remember?



## 1.6.2015

The soup in the mess at dinner the other night was gumbo. The menu described it as “ubiquitous gumbo”. But I’ve NEVER SEEN IT BEFORE. Also, they have special theme meals sometimes, and there’s an Indian one coming up that will apparently feature cow’s foot soup. That’s wrong for so many reasons.

## 1.7.2015

I have about 50 unfinished songs. Half that really, if you don’t count titles as works in progress. I’ve completed, recorded and released about that many, and I like about half a dozen of those. At some point I just got sick of looking at all those less than stellar songs, so I resolved to just write good ones.

The challenge is that it’s not just about work. I do try to tinker more, but you know what Yoda says about trying. In the end, though, you just have to wait. I look at these songs and titles, I look for one to spark something in my head or, better, my heart. I wrote the first 4 or 5 lines of “Pharaoh’s Horses” over the course of an entire contract, months, completely in my head, a few minutes at a time as I was having a smoke before the gig. After I got home, I’d prepared the rest of that album to record, arranged for the players and the studio and, the day before we went in, I looked at those lines. I’d written them down by then. All the rest of the words, the melody, all the music poured out in a couple hours.

I’ve found practice to be like this. You work on stuff, scales or whatever, for hours and hours, for days and weeks, and you get sick of it because nothing seems to happen. Then quite literally overnight

it's all there under your fingers, weeks or months after you pretty much forgot about it. Nobody knows. All they hear is what's there now. They don't see the crafting of the props or the dressing room, all they see is a guy release a flock of live doves from thin air.

The illusion metaphor is imperfect. Making music is actually real magic. Alchemy, maybe.

Also, a bunch of doves is a “duple” or “flight”. Not a flock.

### **3:28pm**

I think the very best music, technically speaking, is deceptively simple. I guess you could say that about anything once you know it. “English is easy, I've spoken it all my life!” But I mean the best stuff, Ray Charles for example, I'm like “Fuck, this is all triads!” once I manage to get my fingers to get the damn sounds outta the damn piano. Then what I want to do is look at my fingers on the keyboard so hard that I can somehow see how the mind behind the invention worked, to get the bigger picture so I can speak the language fluently instead of being a parrot.

I don't think I ever last long with that, though. I just play the lick over and over and love that I'm making the sounds. 99% of my “practice” is attempting to pull that shit off in an actual performance. Kinda like learning a language by going to a foreign country with a phrase dictionary and a basic understanding of pronunciation and grammar and trying to communicate.

They give the French a hard time about being assholes, but I bet they're like the Italians. I went to Italy once, and I was in a restaurant in Venice with my Italian dictionary, and you wouldn't believe how sweet they were. I had like half a dozen people embracing me in their presence, I am confident, just because I was trying so hard to order a bottle of wine. It was called “nero”, the style. Black wine. But it was a deep, beautiful indigo. Never seen it since, but I highly recommend it if you can find it.

Anyway, I think most people listen to music the same way. They just want to see you try, and even a child can hear if you mean it. Nobody sits down to a performance hoping it'll suck, so you're already halfway there. They want you to succeed in making beautiful sounds. And a beautiful thing is never perfect.

**1.10.2015**

Gonna miss a good few people that leave tomorrow morning. Was it me? That's always the question. All I can do is get a good meal and the ground under my feet in Miami and find it in me to give the next group the most I can. Booze helps almost every time, but it can also deliver diminishing returns. Smoking on deck right now, some chick I don't recognize just came out, "you're the piano guy right? Heard you you tonight, " and something positive I think but she kept walking. Crew is all loaded out here after crew bar closes, especially on the last night of the cruise. I try to avoid it.

## **1.11.2015**

When I was 19 or 20, I think it was, I took this job working for a bandleader who specialized in Jewish music. I'd drive my van over to his house in Skokie, load up his drums and PA, take them over to his gig, set it all up, and then go change into my tux. I'd stand behind him, take his sticks and sit at the kit, continuing to play the song literally as he got up to go work the crowd. Like, he'd walk out on the dance floor and show them how to do the twist. One of his sidemen explained the hora to me, "it's like a polka, but relentless."

One night we were on a break and the band's regular sax player, a guy probably 40 years older than me, asked me why I was doing the gig. Because I wanted to be a player, I told him. "well, if you were gonna be doing it, you'd be doing it by now, " he said, "unless you're some kind of prodigy. Are you a prodigy?"

I admitted I was not a prodigy, but that I had to try. "sure, " he offered magnanimously, "get it out of your system."

I've had a few moments like this in my life and, when I recall them, I see Steve McQueen as Papillion floating on his back in the ocean on his raft of coconuts or whatever.

"I'm still here you bastards!"

## **1.12.2015**

I haven't thought about the Bronsdon family garden in a long time. I don't know what sparked the memory. I was immersed in reading *The Paleolithic Origins of Human Burial*, so...digging? Anyway, yeah, we had a garden when I was growing up, pretty lush for some years. I remember pumpkins at Halloween, watermelon in the summer, zucchini that made for ages of zucchini bread, cucumbers, rhubarb, even corn. Long after my parents lost interest in it, that rhubarb kept going. My mom kept making rhubarb pies and stuff

until after I left for college.

It spanned the entire width of the backyard, at the very back, at the foot a hill under the road to the community college. I wanna say that road was dirt, the area was new suburban at the time, but that sounds impossible now. Thinking about it makes me happy, it's a whole piece of my childhood almost, tons of memories of hiding in the corn and sitting in the dirt and eating fresh berries and stuff. The whole yard, really, fireflies on summer nights. We had an archery set and I remember letting arrows fly over the entire backyard, past the road into a field. If you tried that now you'd probably kill someone on the jogging track. I had a recurring dream for a while that there was an Indian tribe out there with teepees and smoke signals and everything. They'd see me, and shoot me with an arrow, and I'd wake up. There was a super creepy swamp in the middle of that field, next to a lake, I loved to poke around. Wow, a dozen memories come back to me thinking about that lake and swamp.

Chicago winters are brutal, I remember walking the dog in that field with my mom and crying from the wind like knives on my cheeks, and another winter when she warned me not to walk on the ice on that lake and I did anyway and turned around lifting my arms to show her "see?" as I broke through into the water up to my waist, and the blizzard of... '76? '79? I tunneled through the snow on the side of our garage and had a brilliant moment of terror getting buried and jumped off the SECOND STORY of my buddy's house. But we're taking about the garden.

It's a poignant symbol, that garden. We'd started letting it go, only growing a few things, it was getting weedy, when I was I guess around 10. I remember being at the foot of the hill at the back edge, and my friend and I had found a frog. He was like a prisoner being interrogated or something (the frog, not my friend), I'd dug a hole and buried him. But he wouldn't talk. So I took one of those arrows in my fist and plunged it through the soil, making my friend cry out. When I dug him out, sure enough, he was impaled (the frog, not my friend). I got a good look at that frog gulping its last breaths, his fat sides heaving and pumping blood from its belly.

I understand this is how some boys learn an indefinable lesson of manhood, and to this day I've never so much as held a loaded gun.

**1.18.2015**

Good lord, how did six days go by? One of those weeks, I guess. Pleased with the piano bar, more than ever, but it wouldn't be a

Carnival contract if there weren't issues. Remember that drill I showed up for? The note on the door? The music director is great with notes. I've never worked with another who delivered the weekly schedule every week. It's unnecessary, but saves me a trip downstairs to check the board. There was another drill this last week, and no note, so aha! Not gonna fall for that one again.

MD calls the next day asking why I wasn't there. He uses the same phrase he did with the song list, "come on, man" - you remember the list with the girl in the martini glass? I don't think I mentioned the SKULL in the design, he'd made a point of that as well. I digress.

His tone escalates until he accuses me of lying to him about the drill. He's running out of patience with me, why have I not given him a new list (because I'm using the one he printed for me and insisted I use)? I see red. "HEY you don't have to talk to me like that, I'm starting to take this personally, " I manage to choke out over my rage.

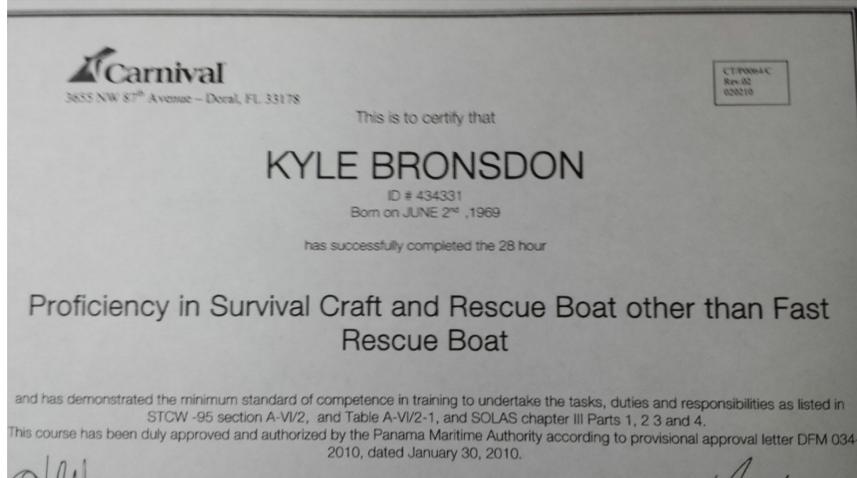
"You can take it anyway you want."

"HOW ELSE AM I SUPPOSED TO TAKE IT?"

I managed to stop shaking before my set that night, and the next day we had the Big Serious Meeting with the cruise director and safety officer and HR woman and I signed my writeup and readily admitted I'd fucked it up, I should have just put on some pants and dragged myself out of bed and checked to see if I was actually supposed to be there. I apologized to all of them for making them have to take time out of their day because of my stupidity. I made a point of showing them the little flashlight I carry on a lanyard, given to me by the deck officer on the Legend who taught a six week survival craft course, for being one of three people in a class of over 40 to score 100% on the written exam. "Does that sound to you like someone who doesn't care about safety?"

HR and the safety officer were all respect and smiles and already moving on to more important responsibilities of their day.

You'd be surprised how much stress can build up in just a few weeks, cruising to exotic Caribbean ports of call.



## 1.19.2015

It's hot, the first day of this contract like it. The sun is blazing over Cozumel, and just enough of a breeze to cool the sweat. I'm happy for the guests, most of them are coming from the Midwest this time of year, and they're happy when it's half this nice.

Since my last contract I've been watching them build a new wing on the pier, it's an impressive operation. Now all they need is a place that serves good Mexican food. To be fair, I haven't explored, but should I have to scour one of the most popular vacation spots in the country to find salsa and guacamole as good or better than my gringo wife and I make at home? It's amazing and sad, I've watched many of these ports homogenize since my first contract in the late 90s.

There's a bar here that was opened by two crew, a real success story and romance. They met on a ship, fell in love, saved their paychecks, and bought this place right on the water in Cozumel. It's almost a speakeasy mini resort, you kind of have to know about it, and it's a cab ride from the pier. The menu items are named for crew positions, like "The Cruise Director" and "The AV Tech ('I'll just drink my lunch today')". There's a beautiful pool with a swim up bar, and a block of rough cement steps into the ocean. The first time I waded in down those steps, I realized "oh DUH, those aquarium fish are actually real animals!" it wasn't the first time I saw tropical fish in their natural habitat, a hundred little living rainbow jewels darting all around you like phosphores, but you forget these things. How do you forget these things?

There are three colors of the sea. From the beach outward, they go: turquoise, jade, cobalt.

Last night was “Elegant Night”. I can see them in the Carnival boardroom, the marketing team, ““Formal Night’ doesn’t sound fun!” That’s Something else I’ve watched transform, and the single key to the company’s massive success, accessible and casual cruising. It’s a floating theme park now, really. Anyway, there was an elegant blonde woman in a sparkling blue dress at the piano bar.

This is the kind of woman you look for at a craps table, throwing the dice over and over, and the table is packed and everybody is cheering and shouting. This is called a “hot roll”, and you edge your way in and put your chips on 6 and/or 8. the other way to play is “on the dark side”, where you find a full table with the opposite vibe, a big grey cloud over it with everybody grumbling, and place your bet on the Don’t Pass line. You profit from their pain and get outta there before they’re all glaring at you. I’ve never lost at craps playing one of these two ways. A trombone player I worked with taught me. It looks like a complicated game, but that’s all to distract you from winning.

I mentioned all this over the mic, adding “doesn’t she look like Laura Dern?” she totally looked like Laura Dern. She doesn’t know who that is. “she’s a beautiful movie star, “ I explain. Later, I’m coming back from having a smoke and run into her just outside the bar. “thank you so much, “ she gushes, “can I give you a hug?” positively radiant, she was. All because I thought she looked great and said so. It was so incredibly easy to do, I made her whole night in probably 90 seconds and maybe even made a fan for life. I could do this all the time, but you forget these things.

How do you forget these things?

## **1.22.2015**

I think I know where that week went now, the same way the last couple days slipped away. I read my brains out here. I just finished Bob Dylan’s *Chronicles*. I’m left feeling like I did reading the collected interviews of Springsteen, and even Tom Waits. It just seems like those guys were born serious. I was born blonde.

### **2:35pm**

Before I met my wife, I learned that chicks who refer to themselves as “a handful” or take pride in being a self-described “bitch” are really saying “I have a monolithic double standard of respect”. Sometimes I’ll get a group in the piano bar who think they’re really fun and wild, and I suppose they are, but they’re utterly blind to the

possibility that some of the other guests might want a more classic, old school piano bar experience. That's one of the biggest challenges of this gig, making schizophrenic leaps of performance attitude.

I see people enter the room, take one look at a bar full of drunks acting out all the lines of "Sweet Caroline" (e.g., reaching out and touching each other), and walk right back out. I would be one of these people, myself. But it works the other way too. One difference is that the party people tend to have the patience of a five-year-old and tip like a car stereo salesman in a strip club. They buy buckets of bud light and drink fast. The other people buy pricey whiskeys and glasses of shiraz, leave a twenty when they leave, and would stay all night, every night, if they didn't have the other people screaming in their ear and falling off the seat next to them.

Maybe it's just a matter of taste. Some people like to drive fast and listen to rap. I just wish they could enjoy it without the subwoofers. I'm convinced this is the biggest problem facing the world right now, the decline of etiquette. The price of a more casual world. That, and the deregulation and corporate consolidation of media. But I've come to think the latter is dependant on the former. Greed is rude.

## 1.25.2015

Imagine a room full of pink furniture. To the height of wainscoting, the walls are covered with fingerpainting in the tiny strokes of a five year old hand. It's impossible to tell what material the floor is made of because it's a virtual sandbox of stuffed animals, costume jewelry, bubble wrap, accessories from Barbie's Dream House. A plush, oversized chair (pink) serves as a table, because the tables are all covered with Legos and paper-mâché, for a miniature tea set and a frosted layer cake (pink) topped with candles. It's not a birthday cake. A potbelly pig swims through the sea of toys.

Suddenly, the room is pitched into darkness as the electric company shuts off service. Light flickers from the rhinestones in a tiara, reflecting the candles in the cake as they are lit. Diane is in the bedroom unconscious from fatigue and disgust.

This is what I think might happen if I had a daughter.

I don't buy it when people say they love kids or animals, because some kids and animals are awful. Generally, though, I simply adore girls and I always have. I was the only boy in school who didn't

carry a can of girlspray. If you aren't familiar with the product, it's like a cross between insect repellent and Lysol. Comes in an invisible can. We had to learn square dancing in gym, and the boys would rather dance with each other than touch a girl. Not me. The irony is that this was a major factor in labeling me "gay". A couple of my best friends were girls. Which I guess is, especially if you factor in my involvement with the arts, a little gay.

That followed me well into my 20s, that label. I was playing with "Cadillac" Dave in Chicago with this guitar player Sonny Carter, old school guy from Mississippi. One of my great teachers, I learned everything from the Chicago blues backbeat (slamming, drum corp volume rimshots) to how to gut and fry catfish from Sonny. I didn't have a girlfriend the whole time I worked with him, and I listened to Debussy and expressed my feelings, so he finally asked Dave if I was gay. I forgot what Dave later told me his answer was. Something like "I don't think so."

Dave and I went to high school together, he knew I'd had girlfriends, and I do recall him saying he'd shared that disclaimer with Sonny. I just remembered one night in my van, maybe, after a night of drinking, it was me, Dave, and this chick I did end up dating, not long after Dave had moved into the city. He later confided that he was pretending to be passed out in the back while I was doing dirty things with her and, apparently, talking even dirtier things.

You don't see gay guys playing blues. Classic rock, even metal, yes. Chicago blues, at least, is a very hetero style. Dave and Sonny were classic tough guys. Also, Sonny was black. Only a very tough dude, an idiot, or a crazy white person would drive down to 43rd and Martin Luther King to jam at the Checkerboard. Led Zeppelin historically did, and were arguably at least managed by a tough, crazy white idiot. So did Dave, with me in the passenger seat. Because, as much as I love the blues, Dave breathed, ate, and slept it, and he still does.

There was a place just around the corner that had the best food, I've never had better hot links to this day. One night, I had to have me some of those hot links, and I'd barely left my seat before there were several black hands on my arms insisting they go get them for me. And they did. And they were awesome, the hot links and the people at the Checkerboard. One of the warmest musical environments I've ever had the pleasure of playing in. you just had to get across the street from the parking lot accompanied by a six foot bad ass like Dave.

A treasure of an experience. Thanks, Dave. They can never take that

away from us, nor all the special tender moments we shared alone together late into the small hours, night after sweaty night.

Oh, and sorry for all the nights you got me so wasted that I pissed myself on your couch.

## 1.26.2015

One thing I'm grateful to my parents for is that they left me alone a good lot of the time while I was growing up. Since both my sisters were older and out of the house, I became my own best friend and this became the foundation for a sort of independence that I value. I like a generous portion of solitude. This called for some adjustments when I started going to school.

The morning of my first day of school was pretty traumatic. I was crying and clinging to my mother and being her to go with me as she dressed me and got me out to the bus, which was patiently waiting at the end of the driveway. I saw my buddies from the neighborhood all smiles as I boarded and sheepishly pulled myself together. I don't remember much else about that day until lunchtime.

In kindergarten, my mother picked me up at lunchtime. I don't remember anyone explaining this fundamental difference to me that day, but it was all pretty overwhelming. So when my mother didn't show up after I waited outside for a while, I just started walking. Just mapped it, exactly a mile and a half, but I probably shaved off a little by cutting through the field by that swamp. I remember being very nonchalant about it, I've always been a good walker.

I'd fixed myself a bowl of cereal or something and was watching TV when my mother came home with my sister. "KYLE!" she exclaims as my sister breaks into hysterics. Mom drove me back and the principal was very cool and escorted me to class.

You know that scene in A Christmas Story where Ralphie loses the lug nuts when his dad is changing the tire and goes "Fffffuuuuuddggge"? Does that happen to every kid? It happened to me. My buddy and I were on the swing set – Jesus, did I live the quintessential white middle class suburban childhood or what? - in the backyard, and my mother came out to tell us that something was on tv, Willie Wonka I think. "FUCK I wanted to see that!" she and my buddy both, their jaws dropped. "IIII meannn, gosh I'm disappointed that we missed that." she let it go.

If you leave that road behind the house past where it curved to the college, there was a pretty massive collection of railroad ties I think

they were. Smelled like tar. Also rusty iron joists and rebar and stuff like that, probably leftover construction materials from the college. We called it “the wood pile” and played on it all the time. My mother would take me there until I was old enough to go on my own. To climb all over railroad ties and rusty metal. She actually made a couple collages with some of the more interesting looking metal parts. That might have been her suburban Midwest adaptation of beach combing, her favorite thing to do when we visited where she and my father grew up in the Pacific Northwest.

She made a number of driftwood collages and my dad would make her little apothecary type framed shelves that she’d arrange shells in and he’d cover with glass. These were hung on the wood paneling in the living room with nautical themed stuff and a big map of Puget Sound. On that map, there’s a little inlet, I forget the name, Kyle Something. That’s what a kyle is, an inlet to the sea. I was named after my grandfather on my mother’s side, William Kyle.

For some years, we visited Seattle every summer, it felt like. We stayed in little weathered cottages on the sound. Something I feel like I need to do again someday is go clamdigging. One of my fondest memories is of digging for clams. You’d tromp around on the sand when the tide was out, until a little geyser shot up. That’s a clam sinking in for safety. Then you fall to your knees and scoop in as deep as you can so, if you’re quick enough, you can cut him off. Otherwise you have to keep digging to catch him. Mostly they were little steamers or fat geoducks – pronounced “gooey duck” - but I remember finding my first razor clam.

Razor clams are long and thin, they look a lot like a folded straight razor. But also, the open edges of their shell on the short ends where their foot comes out are razor sharp, which I discovered when I shoved my little hands into the sand after one and gashed my thumb open. It was a pretty good cut, lots of blood. Another mild horror was this crab. There were lots of little crabs, I liked to chase them around and poke at them. But this one, I was poking at him, and there was a big bleached out claw from another crab on the sand. I mean, this old claw was bigger than this little guy’s whole body. He PICKED IT UP and gave me a hard pinch. It hurt, but I think it was more just shocking. I was astounded.

Just once, we had a genuine clambake. Hot rocks in a trench in the beach layered with seaweed and clams and corn on the cob and stuff. You bury it up and it all steams and God that is good eating. Another summer it was just my mother and me, and there were Indians casting nets for salmon way up the beach from our cottage. We’d watched them and then waded in to help them pull the net back

in. I can feel the coarse rope chafing my hands against the weight of dozens of fish. I'm fishing with INDIANS. After we got the net ashore, they took out all the big ones. My mother asked what they were gonna do with all the other ones, and they told her they'd just throw them back. She asked if we could have them. So they strung like 3 dozen through the gills for us, these small salmon, at least 16 inches to two feet long each. Why did they do this? We couldn't have been much help with the net, a waif of a white woman and her child.

Anyway, my mother and I struggled with this giant necklace of flapping fins for maybe 20 feet before we realized there was no way we could drag it back to our place. It weighed a ton. So she came up with the idea to pull it into the water, and we swam it back along the shoreline. The memory makes me smile, she tended to play the ditsy housewife but she was no dummy, my mother.

So we get the salmon back to the beach by the cottage, unstringing them, and carry them back pretty much one at a time. Then I found something to do inside, reading or something, and when I came out it was dark. My mother is half in shadow, silhouetted with the security lights on the side of the house. Her arms and hands are covered in dark blood and gore. She's gutted all three dozen fish. Maybe more, I think I'm being conservative. She packed them in the freezer, gave shitloads away, and we ate fresher salmon than I will probably ever eat again until we were sick of it.

My dad used to annoy waiters by asking if the fish on the menu was fresh. They'd say yes and he'd make them clarify "fresh or fresh frozen?" he worked for his father on a fishing boat until he was old enough to get another job so he didn't have to try and talk to girls while reeking of fish stank. His father's father was also a commercial fisherman. I forget if it was him or one more generation back, but they had radio on the Zarembo II. We had a model of that boat on the built in bookshelf in the living room. Dunno what happened to the first Zarembo, but my (great?) grandfather radioed in one day from sea to report they had a full load and were coming in.

They were never heard from again.

Not one of the crew returned alive or dead. No wreckage was ever recovered. I never knew my grandparents on my father's side, and that's heading towards the 19th century. My great grandfather couldn't have had radio. This might have been one of the things they used to promise they'd tell me about when I was older. I should have made them write all those damn things down.

Pretty far out that I ended up working at sea, isn't it?

## 1.29.2014

I'm looking at chalk-colored clouds and the gray sky and the sea is like slate. We've had rain, and the deck hands have been through with their squeegees and mops. I came out here around 4am for a smoke to find a guy nearly hysterical. I never talked to him, dunno what his gig was. He'd run into some drunk, abusive fuck of a passenger and was unable or unwilling to disengage before wishing the bitch a good cruise. I didn't say a word, he was inconsolable and spouting through a haze of rage, injustice, and despair as much to the bulkhead as to me and another guy who happened to be out here. Because he'll be going home when we get to Miami. Two days at sea until then, he'll have to relive the event, alternately punishing himself for his big mouth and impotently wishing he'd smashed the douchebag in his. He'll suffer this, and a security officer outside his cabin door.

Once in a while you'll hear a report or statistical study about passengers being raped or something, how most of the crime on cruise ships are perpetrated by the crew. But the company sails on. Rumor abounds, I once heard about a guy who got busted for dealing heroin on board, not because they found the shit during a cabin inspection or something but because he beat the fuck outta somebody for not paying him. It's possible. There are close to a thousand crew on this ship alone. A tiny fraction of them are the totally unarmed security. The company has no conscience to shoulder any risk, and a vacationer is under no obligation to share a shadow of the infinite respect they're entitled to for \$395.

one reason I don't make more tips is because I rarely mention them anymore. On my first contract, I developed this bit where I invited guests to imagine they tipped me \$5 for a request and if they would expect me to get around to playing it before an untipped request (or "suggestion", as we call it in the biz). over the next couple months, I gave up trying to figure out how no less than three people imagined me saying "if you aren't going to tip, GET OUT." I abandoned the anecdote, but people still badmouth me on Facebook 10 to 1 over guests from the same cruise who friend me. The complainers lament the loss of their favorite piano bar entertainers in the same breath, utterly nonplussed that anyone would ever leave them after all the good times, determined to make sure everybody lets the company know how they feel.

The story that never gets covered is the crew's. I guess it doesn't

sell advertising or magazines to invite middle America to look in the mirror. The customer is always right. Guest services have shared stories with me, passengers will say anything for a credit on their bar tab. One guy actually complained about the “serial killer shit” his room steward left on his bed. A folded towel animal. It wasn’t specified if it was the elephant or the bunny. I wonder how many 20 year old Indonesian girls have been raped trying to clean a cabin, or how many professionals were terminated without hesitation or inquiry for verbally defending themselves against weekend tyrants in flip flops.

One more, in any case, wiped away like chalk from slate, swabbed off like water on the deck.

## 2.1.2015

They were in the hall, one of the band guys and his buddy, a doll of a girl. Asked me if I’d ever seen the door indicator yellow. “it’s like it’s locked,” he said. Cabin steward’s card doesn’t work either. Still waiting for assistance when I got back from a smoke. I get a bad feeling.

Voices raise in alarm out there in the hall. Then the clear, focused Indian accent of a security officer, “We have a team member not responding.”

Radio chatter. A high repetitive gasping, like a girl hyperventilating. Medical emergency code over the speakers, and the cabin number.

Quiet rapid movement.

Silence.

Voices again, serious and staccato.

I need to eat but I’m not hungry. You know it’s what it sounds like. Locked door. We have a team member not responding. The gasping again at some point, this is happening right now, are you fucking kidding me?

A woman counting “4, 5, 6, 7, GO.” security again, “call 911.” more voices join the counting. I’m leaning my forehead against the artificial wood paneling of my cabin door looking out the peephole, I can’t see around the corner. The counting again. And again. Jesus.

I have to work in an hour and a half. I have one more hard boiled egg I could eat. I’ve only had a pear and a banana all day, I have to

eat something. I can't bring myself to interrupt the operation, not even risk drawing a glance. The counting again. I've watched the forward video camera image fade with the sun on my tv. And the counting again. Jesus fucking Christ.

Silence.

I roll the egg on the wall, peel it, salt it over a cloth napkin on the bed like a solemn picnic. I lean on the door again, just in time to see a red jumpsuit peer cautiously around the wall down the part of the hall I can't see. He slips back the way he came.

I sit back on my bunk until I hear voices again, closer this time. A few room stewards outside my door in the turn in the hall. The bow is scarcely a ghost in the black snow of the forward cam. The hall is clear. I step out and look down. A dozen blue scrubs around the cabin there, looking in. blue latex gloves and emergency orange velcro bags. Silent. Fuck. Fuck, fuck.

63 minutes to showtime. 62.

Dressed in the desk light. Dude's in the hall alone. He's just a kid, couldn't be 25. "this doesn't look like it... ended well," I suggest gravely. "I'm just picking up some of her stuff," he manages. I shake my head slowly a couple times and he answers with one slow turn of his head. "that's fucked up," all I can say as I turn away, then back, "that's so fucked up." his face agrees. I turn to go again.

"Have a good set, man."

I weakly spin a finger in the air. "Showtime."

**2.2.2015**

**2:17am**

Oh thank god, CNN is discussing the commercials from the Superbowl tonight. Seriously, like thank god. Exactly my speed, and TBS and AMC is junk. I think I finally understand the attraction of "Dancing with the Stars" and "Modern Family". Simple. Uncontroversial. Mindless. Forgetful. Prozac for the senses.

And the crowd was from God tonight. Friendly, undemanding, fun but relaxed. And on Superbowl night??? I was bracing myself for madness. But no. not just the seats around the piano intimate, but not standing-room-only sweltering. And not Prozac for me, they were engaged, almost mesmerized, some of them. Stayed late with them,

well after they were done tipping. They were everything I needed them to be tonight, warmth that hung on me like sunlight after coming inside, after coming back to the hall past the red sign on that door “DO NOT ENTER This is a secured area and can only be entered with authorization from the captain or staff captain.”



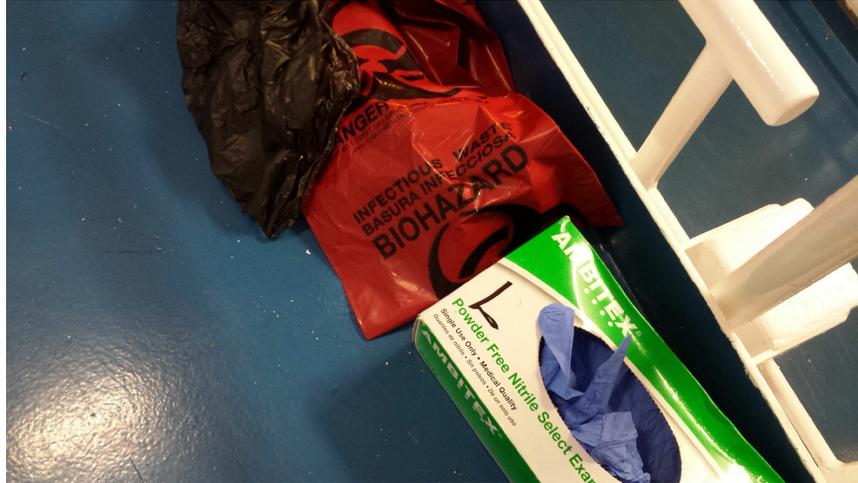
I still don't even want to write it. But what else could it be? I've never seen a sign like that on a ship. I've heard the emergency code, but you always think "oh some dumb fuck cracked his drunk head open" or maybe a moment of "Aw no, not grandma, and on vacation." you wonder, and you forget and never give it another thought.

I passed a dancer on the way back to the cabin, on deck, she was all smiles. She has a friend on the cruise who was in tonight and last night, adored me, apparently. Dancers are staff, like musicians, and young. They hang out. How could she not have heard?

It couldn't be anything else.

One more smoke outside. I've had a bite, late night meal in the mess, just made it. Strong enough to look at the red plastic bag left on the steps outside the hall next to a box of the blue latex gloves. Still sitting there on the steps 6 hours later.

“INFECTIOUS WASTE **BIOHAZARD**”



Back in the cabin. Jessica Alba and Ashton Kutcher on TBS. Perfect.

### **1:29pm**

Awoke to the cabin steward at the door. Ask him if he heard anything. "heart attack," he heard. She'd only been on for 2 weeks, he heard. His eyes widen when I remind him that the cabin was locked from the inside.

Butter chicken in the mess, one of the rare dishes I'll bother to have lunch for. Fill my french press. Pour a cup on deck, have a smoke. Hot, muggy day in Cozumel. I finished *The Grapes of Wrath* last night, what am I gonna do now?

### **6:51pm**

Note from the captain under my door after dinner: "It is worth great sadness that I must inform you of the passing of one of our team members..." She was married to a Carnival chef, had kids. Philippines. Been with the company for ten years. They're flying out three counselors tomorrow, and planning a service for Grand Cayman Thursday. Make that one counselor "from Ciminero and Associates" and two "CareTeam specialists". Slick, Carnival, and less than 24 hours to the minute she locked her door and ended her life in a shared cabin on a floating theme park.

I've heard of guests getting burials at sea. Yes, from a Carnival ship. I wonder how much the EterniSea package costs with the optional FunPod biodegradable casket. No, I just made that up. As far as I know. There's nothing too sacred to brand. They make me sick.

A few more weeks.

## 2.3.2015

**12:43am**

See, this is where thanking God starts to get creative. I still mean it, but I understand why people don't buy the god thing – it's at least 50% semantics, maybe. So, "thank God" the people tonight weren't there last night. Shit tips, ridiculous requests, on and on, busted my ass to keep 'em happy for a couple hours, then nothing to now. Well, no, not nothing. One guy, 82 he tells me. And he tells me a whole lot of not much for the next hour. And I ate it up, more or less.

He took singing lessons. Loves talking to musicians because he wanted to be one, but didn't follow his dream. Tells young people to do that. Would he trade his comfortable life? Haha, of course not. Doesn't drink, never did like it. He's a comedian too, and a poet. Even remembers some of his poetry, sounds a lot like observations of decades of a half lived 82 years. Friends go away. People think he's a recovering alcoholic, he says. He sounds like an active one. Able to listen to about 7 words at a time, and he has about three responses to any combination. I show him respect. He shows me as much as a dead soul can. He walks a lot, he's "outgoing", the old people can't keep up, the young people can't keep up. Loves talking to musicians, that was his dream. This is charming, I suppose. I show him respect because. Because there's no one here. And I enjoy it. It's like interacting with a pathetic movie.

Like talking at a pathetic movie that talks back about how it wanted to matter.

All ages and brains ask me if I'm tired of playing "Piano Man". I've been insisting for five years that it would be denying my own existence. But the song isn't about the piano player, I realize tonight. Listen to it a thousand times, sing "Play us a song! You're the piano man!"

Learn it, play it a thousand times.

Maybe I should start asking if they're tired of being sung about.

That old man has my respect for his age, and for his respect for me. But there isn't room in my heart for pity for a country of people without enough soul to even make love to a tonic and gin.

**7:11pm**

Night off. Full moon.

I took piano lessons from a neighborhood lady when I was a kid. I don't remember her name, but I can still see her conservative 60s beehive although this would be the late 70s. She was nice enough if stiff and boring, put little gold stars and fun stickers on the music after I'd learned a piece to her satisfaction. She taught me from method books at first. No scales or theory, just the notes on the page.

At some point I started bringing in stuff we had at home. Stuff like *Oklahoma* and *Paint Your Wagon* for easy piano. There was a book of rock hits like Credence, Chicago, Blood Sweat and Tears, George Harrison. I bought one called *Platinum 81*, I forget what song I got it for, but it had "Hungry Heart" and Zeppelin's "All of My Love". Sheet music sometimes, I bought "Another One Bites the Dust". One day I brought in "Stairway to Heaven".

She was clearly flustered, wouldn't teach it to me. I tried to protest but she wasn't having it, actually confiscated this sheet music a child bought with his own money, slipped it into the piano bench and shut the lid and found me something else to work on and wouldn't discuss it again. I forget her words, but I remember the gist of it.

It was because, as everybody knows, "Stairway to Heaven" is satanic.

## **2.5.2015**

I did my college internship at a recording studio. They did very well for themselves. They landed the Bulls account while I was there. Their bread and butter before that was mostly radio commercials. Sport-Mart, Empire carpet. I moved up from the cliché answering phones and making coffee to editing these ads. They were on quarter inch tape and I'd scrub the tape to find gaps to edit out for time, mark them with a grease pencil, cut them with a razor blade. Months, I was there, trading my time and labor for this priceless experience at the dawn of the digital age. I'd been grumbling with another intern about the value, someone must have got wind of it and sent one of the partners to give us what I think was supposed to be a pep talk, lest they lose their rep with the school and have to pay employees. "I'd get you on a voice-over in a heartbeat," he insisted.

When I'd put in my time, I asked the other partner for a written

recommendation. All too happy to oblige, he assured me. Reminded him about it once or twice before I left. Followed up by phone a couple times before I gave up. That guy was in a wheelchair. I'd got him from his car up to his office a hundred times.

I suppose might accuse me of being racist or something if I pointed out that both owners of the studio, like that drummer bandleader who paid me enough for gas and a 6 pack to roadie for a couple years, were Jewish. But they were also all drummers. The brotherhood. There are just a lot of Jews in the entertainment business. In any case, I understand how stereotypes get started.

### **10:52pm**

Taking a break early tonight. Passed that dude in the hall who was supposedly getting canned. This place is so weird. I gotta get outta here. And this is the shortest contract I've done. I specifically arranged to come back to the Glory because it seemed to run so smoothly last time. But like clockwork, 3 weeks to go and I'm burning out. Maybe just had a bit too much to drink last night. Or maybe I'm just tired of the gig. I miss the earth so much. I miss my wife. It's lonely out in space.

## **2.8.2015**

### **1:36am**

Finished the night, changed, had a bite, and out to have a smoke just in time to hear the girl walking behind me greet her friends, in a rich accent, with "what's up neeghers?" never seen her before, young, dark skin, but it was probably the funniest thing I've heard from crew all contract. Her friends cracked up.

### **3:23am**

Thoughts on *Dirty Harry*:

We wouldn't have heroes like this if we had any faith in justice. I love anti heroes. I also love fantasy, like LOTR, where I'm convinced that there are truly good heroes who just barely defeat evil. Batman has endless resources. But I've had some very dark hours in which I've seen the hopelessness of finding justice alone. There has to be a fellowship. Heroes that are not great warriors. Small, modest heroes. It's tough for men to admit this. So we buy guns and take karate lessons and push, hide, and bury what we're

easily capable of – not being an action hero, but turning into Travis from *Taxi Driver*.

## 1:13pm

I was falling asleep as I was writing that last entry. Now I've had a good sleep and got my coffee. Maybe I can elucidate.

It rubs me the wrong way when soldiers are called warriors. On its face, the word seems right because it's got "war" in there. But there's some subtle rhetoric going on, like using the word "folks". I'm hearing that one in politics all the time now. I guess it's supposed to harken back to the imaginary simpler time. You think dust bowl folk music and square dancing and pastoral life, salt of the earth heartland landscapes from the redwood forests to the Gulf stream waters. "citizen", on the other hand, suggests urban life and the responsibilities of a democracy. Folks generally have less education and exposure to differing views than citizens.

Warriors are individualists, which appeals to American hearts from the farmer to the shopkeeper. Gladwell points out in *Outliers* that the United States scores the highest in the world for individualism and that "Not surprisingly, the United States is also the only industrialized country in the world that does not provide its citizens with universal health care."

"A man who fought well by himself was generally a bad soldier," Lawrence writes in *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, which I'm reading now. You would never call Dirty Harry or Batman soldiers. But they could be described as warriors. They operate outside the law when the law fails to bring justice. American hearts long for justice. Remember the original name of the war on terror? "Operation Infinite Justice". The hubris was so pungent, even the Bush administration couldn't stand the stink for long.

Soldiers follow orders. The Last Samurai defied orders to defend the emperor who gave them. I would feel better about calling American soldiers warriors and, better still, heroes if less of them had enlisted to avenge the dead of September 11th and more of them had defended the country by defying orders based on lies.

That said, an urban warrior like Dirty Harry isn't above the use of "enhanced interrogation techniques", and we cheer him on because evil is so clear. In a world of sick science and a corporately owned 4th estate, where it's more critical than ever to question the legitimacy of the information we receive, the noise and uncertainty can drive you mad. Like Travis. The last shot in that movie is the

whole thing, his fucked up glare in the rear view mirror. He's deeply unstable, and he will kill again.

And once you've lost your reason, what's to stop you from sawing off a stranger's head with a hunting knife? Or turning a passenger plane full of strangers into a missile to burn still more strangers alive? The madness turns everything into a fight for who can create the most evil, make the witnesses disappear like Tony Soprano, and rewrite their God as a demon. "an eye for an eye", you should know that (and the bible) was written in the Arabian desert if you're a Dixie Chicks CD-burning, freedom fry-eating patriot. There's a very fine but critical line between that philosophy and the superpower I most wish I had, Ghost Rider's "penance stare". Anger can be a fiery chariot, but bitterness is a ghoulish vampire.

Heroes think for themselves and speak out. Define and defend justice with reason. Create GOOD. Take one little step after another, resist losing your way in darkness, and realize that the ring of hubris always trips the villain into the fire at the moment you are about to give in. that's true faith.

## [2.9.2015](#)

Here's why "feed the monkeys": got a call from the MD, he dropped off my W4 (which I did see a note about picking up from the paymaster on the board, and has always been mailed to me) and had another instruction from the bar manager. Right, the guy whose last complaint was that I take breaks "at weird times". I'm apparently supposed to announce last call. You'd think that would be the bartender's thing, and about 20% of the ones I've worked with for Carnival have.

I wish I knew what this guy looked like so I could get a complete run down of all these things. Anyway, I haven't changed how I take a single break in my 4 hour night, so I guess the monkeys are satisfied.

## [2.10.2015](#)

**6:29pm**

Enjoying this morning's leftover coffee iced with cream on deck in the lights of San Juan. I'll have been playing for an hour when the ship leaves tonight. There's a handful of cool Chicago people been coming to the bar, so I've called for a windy city hang on Lido for after the gig. We'll see if they're still up for it after a full port day.

I miss being on land especially at night. I find city lights comforting and energizing.

**11:40pm**

Break. Smoke. Probably a “weird time”. And the moon is oozing low over the water casting a fine shine across the waves.

**2.12.2014**

At the risk of being reductionist, I’m gonna say there are three ways to deal with a troubled world: you can be an asshole and, consequently, part of the problem; you can be subhuman and just survive without rocking the boat; or you can strive to be the best person you’re capable of being. Judith “Miss Manners” Martin trims it down to the heart of etiquette (and civilization by proxy) by reminding us that responding to rudeness with rudeness is dodging our duty to one another as civilized people. It’s kind of off-topic, but I thought you might be interested in the almost magical tonic she prescribes for success in business and finding love: enthusiasm. “A look of vitality and happiness, an interest in the world and an eagerness to participate in life comprise what is called charm in the social milieu; but in the working world it is called competence.”

I find it amusing (and part of my charm) to find unique ways to respond to basic pleasantries like “how are you?” the most reliable way to come up with original material is to actually think about it for a second instead of offering one of the expected responses. But this is risky, especially if you do it habitually. For years and years I would reply to “you sounded great tonight” with something like “oh jeez, I was all over the place, I guess the second set had its moments but the rest was pretty pathetic.”

The proper reply is of course “thank you, “ but it took me years to realize that. You can still color it up real nice, as well as subtly offering a more complete answer, by adding something like “that’s very kind of you to say, “ or “I’m so glad you enjoyed it.”

Maybe part of the problem is, if you don’t feel competent, you want to at least point out that you know it. That way you aren’t incompetent AND ignorant. I’ve found that there are nights I felt like I just killed but received a lackluster response, as well as nights I felt like an ape but people gushed with praise. On the latter occasions, I end up feeling better when I trust that the listener is being sincere and was genuinely moved or at least entertained. Will you diminish their joy? Asshole. Say “thank you, “ then go home and

shed.

If I'm in a particularly businesslike mood, I'll thank them and ask what their favorite part of the show was. That's useful information if they have it. I invite useful criticism, but it's so rare. My own wife doesn't offer it out of the modesty of her impeccable taste (which is also evidence of her impeccable manners).

I say this over and over, I guess it's like a mantra to remind myself: you have to serve the music. I may feel entitled to more popularity or compensation, but nobody is entitled to inspiration. That's a gift. Every time, without exception. There's a poem by Mark Strand, "if a man lets his poems go naked, he shall fear death/if a man fears death, he shall be saved by his poems"

Every performance is a duel between the ego and the muse. Like catching a butterfly without a net, you have to be very still and wait for it to land. Also, it's a mind-reading butterfly, so you have to forget your intentions. You have to think not like a butterfly, but like an irresistible flower. Waits describes it as trying to catch a bird without killing it. Sometimes, he notes, sometimes all you end up with is a mouthful of feathers. In college I used to meditate and do yoga twice a day. Not the fruity commercialized yoga that's so popular now, like 90 proof hatha yoga straight from the sutras. I was very, very weird and only halfway in this world half the time. One morning I was walking down the sidewalk to go to class and I had the sensation of walking on air. More accurately, as if my feet were asleep, like walking on 6 inches of electricity. I realized this is exactly how enlightenment has been described, "like regular life, but 6 inches off the ground."

The moment I had that thought, I stumbled over my own feet and almost fell on my face. I giggled all the way down the block. Now I practice more of a form of karma yoga.

The point isn't to snatch the butterfly and pin it to a board (although moreso in the recording process), but let it pick up the pollen and flutter away to hopefully dust a few grains on an unsuspecting flower in the audience. That's why the ritual of practice, so you have the physical endurance to forget the mechanics and concentrate on blooming.

Sometimes I call this "method music", like an actor finding her personal feelings in the part. But there's no Stanislavsky. Just the song. Easier with a good song, so I try to write those.

I think this is part of what Waits means by saying that "you have to

work on yourself more than you work on the music, “ to enlarge your vocabulary of experience. If you push away pain and hide from darkness, who’s gonna buy it when you try to sell it? Why would they even believe you know what happiness and light look like?

That’s why the music industry is rife with anesthetics and florescents. Quick, cheap, and disposable.

And there are three ways to deal with it.

## **11:30pm**

It’s difficult when you’re in a field of dead flowers. You still have the same options. I will smoke this cigarette, go back to the piano, and continue to try to be part of the solution. And I won’t forget to put roses on your grave.

## **2.15.2015**

Hard to believe it’s been less than two months since Christmas and I mentioned jail. Wanna hear more about jail? I’ll tell you about jail.

It was a great gig. But I hadn’t eaten anything. Packed up my gear after, with a few friends all set to drive me home. It took me by such surprise, how hard the beer hit on an empty stomach. So surprising that I just went on autopilot and left for the 5 minute drive home that I’d made a dozen times before. Another part of that ritual is calling my wife to ask her if she wants me to pick her up a snack or smokes or anything. One of those friends thoughtfully took my keys and phone and money clip, but gave me back the keys to load the car. I’d forgotten that part and was leaning over looking for the phone on the passenger side floor when I hit the car stopped at the light.

The cop on the scene wouldn’t believe there wasn’t a passenger who took off. Probably because of the cracked window and blood on that side. I wasn’t much help because of the shock and horror adding to the beer. Spent next 12 hours in the concrete hall informally called the drunk tank. Miserable. After I was asked to remember my wife’s phone number (and failed) without being allowed to consult my confiscated phone, I paced the floor nonplussed with concern for her driving around trying to find me. I guess the officers frown on pacing, because I was shortly placed in a concrete bathroom with three other guys for an eternity before a different officer came in and asked if I was gonna behave now. I extended my hands helplessly, “yeah?”

“Well I don’t know, I wasn’t here, “ he says.

Thus passed 12 of the most miserable hours of my life. 12 hours of shoulda coulda woulda and self flagellation and owning it all. Thank god I didn’t hurt anybody. I’ll spare you the following months of paperwork and humiliation inconveniencing my wife and friend driving me downtown twice a week to blow into a breathalyzer. The letter of the law gave the prosecutor the option to fine me a quarter million dollars and a few years in jail. I pleaded down to a few thousand and 30 days, of which the judge could suspend all but a week.

I didn’t have so much as a speeding ticket on my record. Every person who had to deal with the dirty work expressed regret and frustration; my public defender, who referred to the prosecutor as “an animal”; the girl at the DUI screening, an addiction recovery professional who explained that the law forced her to give me 36 hours of “educational classes” (at \$25 a pop) despite her assessment that 3 were sufficient; the lady who wrote up the probationary report, who scored me at 5 on a risk scale of 40, noting that 3 was the lowest she’d seen in 30 years on the job. I saw her after my sentencing hearing, she was mortified that they gave me jail time.

They let me leave town for work, which put things off for a few more months, but finally I reported to jail. What do people with no friends or family do? Suspended license, can’t work, no money. No answers are offered to questions you don’t know to ask. It’s a recipe for creating real criminals. I completely accepted the punishment and deterring measures up to that sentencing. Then I gave up my wild hope for justice. Gladwell explores the “principal of legitimacy” from definitive criminal studies:

“...when the law is applied in the absence of legitimacy, it does not produce obedience. It produces the opposite. It leads to backlash.

[...]

The excessive use of force creates legitimacy problems, and force without legitimacy leads to defiance, not submission.”

I sat in the drunk tank again for a fairly short time before they put me in a squad car with another DUI. We drove slowly through the giant, imposing gates of the minimum security facility. The radio in the car played Mannheim Steamroller’s “Deck the Halls” as the gates drew open, like we were entering a cruel and unusual holiday kingdom.

I’d encountered some stunningly cold and hard individuals in my

journey though the system, but everybody this evening was surprisingly respectful and kind. Even the dude who had me undress, lift up my balls, and spread my ass cheeks bent over for him. Seriously, he managed to make it less humiliating than doing it for a doctor. Then the red pants and shirt. The color was explained at my next stop by the officer in the actual jail section. Red means you're still a man, and extended the same degree of respect you offer. He succeeded at being reassuring, gave us more paperwork and fed us. I don't remember what it was, something institutional, and I cleaned my plate. Fat, plastic stacking trays, if they were a pastel color instead of dead brown, you might expect to see them in a preschool.

We were issued bed rolls, then they sent the other guy to Dormitory C. but for me, after a well-concealed look of puzzlement at my file, I was escorted to my bunk in B. top bunk. It would all be so much more romantic if they put me behind bars, but it was behind clear polycarbonate or something. At the front was "the fishbowl", where they issue troublemakers gold uniforms and leave the lights on 24/7. I look around and figure out I have to make my bed before I can resign myself to laying in it. Another inmate appears, big friendly smile, introduces himself, invites me to just ask if I have any questions. I thank him sincerely, albeit grimly.

After I tuck the sheets and blanket over the thin pad with built-in "pillow", I wander out into the day room, where everybody is watching TV or making phone calls. Having memorized my wife's number now, I picked up a phone. A message asks for a code I don't know. I see a sad bookshelf against the wall. Bibles, of course, other Christian stuff and a handful of ratty Danielle Steele (yes, really) and Tom Clancy. Then I see Sartre. *The Age of Reason*. Yes, really. Perfect. It gives me something to take to my bunk and hide behind. The inmates come back to the dorm. More friendly introductions, and I'm lucky, nobody on the top bunk next to me and two of the three brothers in the dorm underneath. Sartre is my shield. Depending how I hold the book, I can invite conversation or look busy and cut it short. Each introduction includes an inquiry of my charges followed by a mystified "what'd they put you in here for?"

they mean dorm B. A is for the maximum of the minimum security risks. D are the predominantly DUIs allowed to go to their civilian jobs during the day. I don't know why I'm in B either. "criminal damage?" I offer. Possibly, it's a felony, but still it seems wrong to them. They aren't pushy, they're respectful, they leave me alone as I take a pause in the talk to lift my book. Been them and the Cos so far, I feel a refreshing emotion that's been a stranger for a long time now. Dignity.

Lights out at ten o'clock. Voices hush. There's just enough light from the fishbowl and the day room to read by, with some effort. I put down my book and let my eyes drink in the shadows on the cinderblock until I only hear the blades of a large fan stirring the air. Then I jolt awake, it's breakfast. Sartre and sleep until lunch. Sartre until dinner. In between, more brief conversation, I'm told I'll probably be given a job, the crews are on a list at the front of the dorm. My name is not on it. Sartre until lights out.

A CO wakes me in the dark. I'm on "supply crew". It's 4am. They shuffle us out, down the hall, outside to the back of a cargo van. Around the building to a loading dock. We're set to sorting filthy, reeking bedsheets, blankets, bath towels, and uniforms. Then inside to fold them as they come out of the wash. The time passes more quickly than Sartre. Break for breakfast a few hours in, and for lunch later. The other 7 and a half hours I'm on my feet and it's murder on my knees and feet and back by the time we're done. Back in the van. Back to the hall, where they issue clean uniforms but I don't know the routine. One of the brothers, alarmed on my behalf, encourages me to take the clothes, visibly relieved as I do at the last moment. One by one we're ordered into more cold concrete areas to change, this time doing the strip show for a CO who puts a sharp, mean voice in front of his disgust with himself at not finding another career. Back through the buzzing double sets of remote controlled doors to the dorm.

I'm suddenly one of them. Maybe word's got around that I got through a day of work and am not insane. I let the book down more frequently, offer more. Even joke to our corner, "I always wondered where all the brothers in Tucson were." had my neighbor rolling on his bunk holding his sides. "you ok, Kyle." then dinner. I sit off to the side of the brothers, who brightly invite me to sit closer. I smile and mutter a thanks anyway as I shove the meal down to get back my bunk and let my swelling knees recover. I take my empty tray to stack it. I'm knocking the scraps off against the rim of the garbage can when a bald head explodes in my ear, "ARE YOU WHITE? ARE YOU WHITE?!" he's a wiry, shorter dude, slightly whiter than me. Dark grey clouds crowd into the edges of my vision, as if I were fainting, but it's the opposite of fainting, my heart is pounding, my whole body is going ape preparing for destruction my mind is altogether unfamiliar with. I'm somehow aware that every inmate and officer in the day room is watching. Am I white? "I dunno, yeah?"

He takes a step back as I stack my tray and walk away deaf to his parting comment. I take to my bunk amazed that I'm able to hold *The Age of Reason* without shaking. Dinner is over, dorm B populates.

Here's the brothers with concerned smiles over the outburst. No explanations, though. I explain I was just trying to eat, not start a race riot, "I'm familiar with you guys." they like that. They offer their hands enthusiastically, "you ok wit me, Kyle."

The punk comes to bunk. He offers half an insincere apology, explaining "for your safety and mine" haha. "I dunno man, " and I don't, I have no fucking idea, "I was just trying to eat."

"Alright! Okay cool, " he says. I don't feel like it's remotely like any of those things.

I stare into the shadows long after lights out. I bolt awake to a presence. "you're on supply crew." thank god. I have breakfast and lunch in the laundry to figure out if I'm gonna be a bitch and take my place at, I guess, a white table, or start a race riot. This is minimum fucking security? White supremacists in with a first offense DUI? And now I have to face a heart check? I read about that online before I came in, I just couldn't believe it could possibly be the case in a minimum security county jail in TUCSON. But it is, apparently. See, a "heart check" is when you are challenged to show whether you're a bitch or worthy of respect, and the result determines how much abuse you'll be taking. More often than not, the check itself is violent. It all takes my mind off the frozen agony of my knees a bit.

It comes to me out of the blue back in the dorm before dinner. Pure inspiration. I simply won't eat. I won't sit with any of those subhuman racist fucks. It doesn't make me feel great, because I have no idea if a CO will push me out of the dorm, or if they'll determine me some kind of hunger strike after a couple days and incur whatever nightmare that might be. But inside, I pass my own heart check.

The brothers check on me, it's dinner time. I nod, let them go. They check back after dinner, concerned. I nonchalantly (yet sincerely) insist I'm not hungry, since not only is the food less than stellar but also "I didn't realize before they put me on supply crew that you motherfuckers are making it." they fall over themselves cackling and get down to playing Gin. Every card is accompanied by animated cracks, play by play armchair quarterbacking, good-natured insults. And it's like an angelic choir to my vindicated ears, bringing the widest, most honest smile to grace my face since I came in.

They play dominoes and chess. Big Ben, an outgoing young guy true to his name in for cooking meth (they called him Chef Boyardee on the outside) introduces me to the guy who can get whatever you need "for your race." he doesn't elaborate, but apologizes that we

weren't introduced before. That I looked "kinda crazy, with the hair and the glasses." I thank him again, hiding my confusion and my still-widening smile. On my last night, the brother I talked to the most, my neighbor, finally put all the pieces together.

They all thought I'd been in before, by the way I carried myself. So no one had bothered to explain things to me, assuming I knew. The races, organizational groups of inmates he likened to trucks in a convoy; how each one had a single driver, the head, and a guy in the passenger seat (the guy who can get things); how dinner is the one meal served in the truck. He illustrated how I'd become a "conscientious objector" without even realizing I was a Wood, a member of the white gang. He explained all this into the night after lights out, concluding with his personal expression of respect "I'd have a beer with you anytime, Kyle" as the smile stretched off my face in the dark into the heavens.

I never took dinner for the rest of my time after that first fast. And every night after, another inmate would give me an affirming nod, introduce himself, offer me a spoonful of the instant coffee that is jailhouse currency. The brothers would bring me an orange or a hard boiled egg. I've passed the heart check and a lifelong nerd has earned respect in a world where money can't buy it, on my own terms and without violence or compromise.

It still chokes me up to think about this, and I never want to forget it. It turned what could have been the lowest point of my life into one of the highest. I know what I'm made of now. I'm so grateful to be so lucky, and so proud to be so richly rewarded, to be made of that stuff.

**2.17.2015**

**8:59am**

I wake up like this half the time, wide awake in the morning after maybe 5 or 6 hours of sleep. But when I finally drift off again and get a solid 8, I have to drag my ass outta bed. Until then, I'll often turn things around in my head. This morning it's this training I remember. There's all kinds of training. I have at least 5 training certificates with Carnival. The one for survival craft alone represents 6 weeks of classes I had to take. I'm proud of that one. But pretty much all the rest is corporate bullshit. I woke up thinking about this one PowerPoint presentation.

There's a cabin steward doing his rounds, and he enters a room to

find a little girl sitting on the bed crying. He asks her if she's okay. She's upset because she can't tie her shoes and she's supposed to go have a fancy dinner in her new dress with her parents. He's helping her tie her shoes when her parents return.

This is apparently a true story, and the steward lost his job. Why? You are asked what you would think if you entered a cabin to find a man on his knees in front of your daughter on the bed, who has apparently been crying. I've been required to watch this thing repeatedly, and every time I want to stand up and say "WAIT. Just STOP. I give up, what the fuck is supposed to be so obvious here? He's eating out her 7 year old pussy? Cause everybody knows that's the first thing pedophiles do, force their victims to receive oral sex while they're both completely dressed. The parents don't recognize the guy who's been cleaning their room for a week? Where the fuck were they, anyway?"

But I don't stand up and say that, because it's primarily to emphasize to new cabin stewards the importance of leaving the door open while cleaning a room. People at the office in Miami get paid to come up with this stuff.

I met a couple just last week, fun and intelligent people who live halfway across the state from the city they want to live in because they heard about a sexual predator in this one neighborhood. I guess I'll just never understand the joys of parenthood that make it worth going stark raving mad for.

**5:38pm**

I'm reaching the end of Lawrence's journey as I look at the last days of my own pedestrian one. I have a John Muir title that will hopefully get me through the last week and the flight home. And this is a pretty nice little chunk I've written here, although it's hardly a book. Maybe I'll keep on after I sign off. On his 30th birthday, Lawrence reflected that the "temporal dignities" of becoming a general and being knighted were in his grasp, as he assisted the Camel Corp to prepare for a forced march from Bair. Later he documented it in the over 700 pages I've been wading through for the last couple weeks. On my 30th birthday, I woke up hungover on the mattress in the crack house I was renting, stood up to stretch, and pulled a muscle in my back.

**2.18.2015**

**12:39pm**

This is what I call cruising: traveling about half speed, calm water, light breeze, bathlike temperature. Earlier today I could hardly tell we were moving. The illusion is enhanced by another vessel fairly close, matching our speed. I like to imagine the officers manning the bridge are shooting the shit over the radio between the two ships.

The shuffle in the schedule was, typically, unnecessary. I love fat Tuesday probably a little more than the next guy, but I've never had a good gig for it. They had a "parade" across the Glory I had to make sure to be in the piano bar for, the final destination of the halfassed second line. I had a cruise director or two (or hotel director, or whoever makes these inconsistent decisions) who had a similar progressive party on the last night of the cruise. You'd think it would be a great opportunity to sell a few more drinks, stick a few more bodies in the piano bar, but no. and I bust it out when they've done this. I think that's a weakness. One time, a while ago on another ship, one guy, not a special night or anything, he wasn't even hanging far as I knew, he stopped by the piano to tell me that I sounded the best when I did the material I wanted to do. He was right. Of course he was. How much better would anything be if we could all make a living doing what we're best at? Not even necessarily what we love the most.

But I snagged one couple. They'll be back. Of course they will. They were given the opportunity to hear something they hadn't heard. More rarely, they were listening. Not encouraged. Also, there was a Calvinist minister, exposed when I asked if anybody knew what fat Tuesday was. And then a chick who shared that she was an Internet-ordained minister of the ULC, which I am too, as is the best man who married my wife and I.

So day off tomorrow, and I think I'll snag a couple beers while the crew bar is still open, take advantage of the early end to the night and save a few bucks.

### **1:37am**

Bought four Stellas. Probably won't finish them before they get warm. MD was drinking with the player from the suicide incident. Bright, friendly. Isn't almost everybody when they have a few? Might have stayed to have one with them but, without malice, wasn't feeling it since I still think I'm owed an apology. Just "being cooler" doesn't cut it for me anymore at 45. gosh, lovely on deck tonight.

Back to being "given the opportunity to listen to something, " I get some good ones and some not so good ones here, more than I have in years on land. Word of mouth rules, yet even devoting entire

departments (or at least the opinion of the hip looking intern) to social networking eludes reliable sales results for the media giants. You can make a ton of money that way, but you can't win hearts. There are too many ways trust can be betrayed. This is why I never want to be bigger than the number of people I can personally reach. Wait's kinda hit the sweet spot. Culty, but big enough to be sustainable. Appealing to a sort of geek elite, like selling luxury yachts.

I'm pretty sure you can target the negative tipping point of the music industry to 1996 telecom act, signed by a Democrat the right hated so much they practically framed for impeachment. Radio payola was made almost unnecessary, and definitely crowned Elliot Spitzer as well as explaining his fall soon after. Seriously, look that shit up before you make the call to the law firm advertising on late night tv that you might have some money coming from a settlement. The owners of the airwaves (you and me) got like 20 bucks each from Spitzer's case. A speeding ticket to the criminals who, the corporate-owned media all but completely ignored, SETTLED. As in didn't even go to trial. You know who covered that? Bill Moyers. PBS. You know, the broadcasters who are forced to annoy your ass with pledge drives along with NPR and not a single other on the tragically-necessary-to-reiterate publicly owned airwaves. No, I didn't get my 20 dollars either. But you can bet your ass I jumped through the hoops. I haven't decided if I found that more offensive than the few hundred bucks I got from the Bush administration to make up for the recession. My feelings are clearer about it when I consider that said recession was built on a war that, like all wars, the Constitution doesn't empower the people to declare nor deny.

Don't remember Spitzer's payola case? But you know the name, right? Because he got it on with hookers who were offered enough to break the discretion that earned them thousands of dollars in a single night. I don't remember the name of the party who brought that case, do you? I sure remember the media coverage of both cases. There was the blink you don't remember of the first, and the mild scandal CNN sucked on for a cockraising stare of a drowsy news cycle.

Sex. And. Violence. I beg your pardon, it's "sex IS violence". Jane's Addiction, 1994. shortly thereafter, find me an artist with an honest American Dream story. Just one, a group who paid their Hamburg dues, if you still find the Beatles fable relevant today. Got it? Now go just a little deeper than the Wikipedia entry. ANYTHING after '96. I want to believe.

Halfway through the last of those four beers. Thanks for enduring the

fun. After a few Jamesons and Sierras over the short set, clearly plenty.

## **2:27pm**

I'm growing concerned that they're putting opiates in the Fee-airy burgers. It was ok when they were a guilty pleasure for my day off, but I woke up and laid there half sleep with – you know those little sorta dream loops where you're really thirsty or have to take a leak really bad? Like that, but putting bacon and ketchup on at the Fee-airy condiment bar. But then you wake up and realize you are in reality incredibly thirsty or gotta pee or, in this case, get dressed and head to Lido deck.

This is a problem with tender days, too many people stay aboard. Huge line for burgers. I can't get in line when it's like that. Not if you don't want a monkey riot on your hands. Check out the pizza stand, also jammed. Drat. Back to burgers. Line is even worse. At the end of the queue is a woman so fat she's in a wheelchair, but apparently mobile enough to stand up and get herself some soft serve. While she's in line for cheeseburgers.

What kind of public outcry do you imagine there would be if somebody made that scene into a commercial in the style of that revolting anti-smoking campaign where they exploit people with graphic tracheotomies and shit? Or put photos of cottage cheese thighs and liposuction operations on the soft serve machine like Canadian cigarette packages?

I've lost my appetite.

## **2.19.2015**

### **1:09am**

Note from the MD:

“Directly following the general boat drill tomorrow, which shall commence at approximately 9:30am and will required ALL to attend, there will be an entertainment meeting in the theatre.

The meeting will also be attended by [...] one of the entertainment supervisors, and we will discuss some new initiatives we will be focusing on, in order to improve our ratings. Unfortunately I will not be there as I have some prior family commitments.”

Goodnight.

## **9:40am**

Yeah, well I got up at 9 anyway to make the coffee I'm enjoying. It's one of the little good things I use to build the levy against all the little annoying things that can break you down here. On this contract, I've been adjusting the lights in my cabin. Just turning on different combinations, like the recessed light over the desk later in the day, along with leaving the tv on the forward cam channel. It creates an illusion of natural daylight changing and a window.

We need some of the things we hate. Two entities I have lots of issues with are Carnival and Linden Labs. The latter created the virtual world of Second Life. I'd only just got serious about switching from drums to piano when I discovered Second Life. I soon found out about streaming live music events in the world and built a venue. I think I was able to play like 5 songs. Three years later I had enough material and experience to audition for cruise work. Oh, that's another entity I hate, the agency that got me the gig.

A red flag for any business that wants your money as a musician is that they claim to be musicians themselves. It's classic marketing using logical fallacy. "I'm not just the hair club president, I'm also a client!" the thing is, you either end up with musicians working in an office instead of on a stage, or people who were never really musicians to begin with. A young musician is always advised to "have something to fall back on." what profession, outside of the arts, has to deal with this unnecessary aggravation? Who tells a kid trying to become a journeyman electrician to spend time developing his plumbing skills? The idea that music is subjective is a lie. The industry wants you to believe that to create the illusion that the vapid, flavor of the month pop star is a great talent. If you disagree, you must be too old, or not hip, or failing all that, well, there's no accounting for taste. Everybody parrots "music is a tough business, " but very few give any thought to why that's the case. They complain about the decline of music as they tune into the latest talent competition reality show. Every song download is a vote.

I'm sorry, I think I really had 2 or 3 good topics here, but just short of sleep to discuss any of them clearly. Here's another: the entertainment meeting was basically to tell the department that the ship is towards the bottom of the fleet ratings. When they invited questions, I didn't ask if two vessels have ever tied for first place or if it isn't necessary by the nature of ratings for one to be in last place or if it's possible for last place to be excellent or if it makes sense to change things that might be excellent or if they believe that they

are able to make good decisions based on data collected for a department that encompasses such dramatically different positions ranging from assistant cruise director to AV tech to dancer to piano player.

I might as well ask them how much profit is enough for the shareholders.

## **2.22.2015**

I've had a bunch of million dollar ideas. Needless to say, I haven't put any of them into action. But more importantly for our purposes here, I haven't shared any with you. Here's one I just had: Gig Crawl. If you ask any professional player what they think are the primary causes for the decline of attendance of live music performances, DUI penalties are among the top 5. so borrow the currently popular ride sharing concept and adapt it to gigs. Have a live feed and mobile app to see who's going to what club. With a fairly modest start up cost, you could make it virtually litigation proof by paying for interested drivers to install a breathalyzer ignition lock system. Music lovers could subscribe monthly to save on the per event rate. Venues would be encouraged to have live music to get designated drinkers in, a guaranteed and verifiable draw. Require them to have a minimum fair wage for the artist. Maybe even get them to contribute by paying for the musicians themselves to use the service.

No, I haven't thought it through. I'm the big picture guy.

## **8:31pm**

It just occurred to me that I'm more punk than I thought I was. And I have been for a long time. Not might be, I'm pretty sure about it. When I'm honest with myself, I think of my talents as mutt-like. Well, that's exactly what punk is. I've always fought with it, trying to better myself with technical practice and analysis and all that. That old sax player saw it. Probably all my great teachers saw it. It haunted me with my dad's criticism long after he was gone, "lazy," until I realized how hard I was working. Loverde told me once, "nobody cares about your intentions," and she made that deal with me to push me.

I discussed this, and mastery. Is Keith Richards a lesser guitar player than Pat Metheny? He's definitely more punk, by light years. The -punk in cyberpunk or steampunk is what that's all about. It's not necessarily the rebellious quality of the punk music style. It's the

jury-rigged, cobbled-together, patchwork Rube Goldberg approach. Zappa had a very punk attitude, but his method was very precise, even classical.

Gotta go play some punk piano now.

Break. Crazy good crowd. You know, they say that for a reason. That's one of the things they have the band say backstage in movies that we actually say, "great crowd". There are plenty of shitty artists, and even very good artists that have shitty nights. But you never hear about shitty crowds. Imagine trying to engage a person in conversation, and they stare at their feet, yawn, mumble things like "whatever" or give you no feedback at all. Then imagine having a hundred interactions like that. You might start to believe you're a shitty conversationalist. That would be reasonable, in fact. But did you notice the thousands of people who came by and overheard each one of those conversations and walked away awkwardly?

## **2.23.2015**

Awake to a phone call. It's the MD from my first contract. From the OFFICE. Yes, the one in Miami. I didn't believe it at first. I'm actually still not sure I believe it. It sounded like him. I liked him, even after he threw me under the bus on my performance evaluation, he was a real pro and a good communicator and sincerely helped me learn a gig I was truly not fully prepared for.

"I haven't seen your product in a while," he said, ensuring me that he wasn't picking on me. Those are the exact words he used, "seen your product". They will be rebranding the piano bar for the whole fleet. This explains the new drink menu that showed up the other week. And the crate of little toy tambourines and maracas and feather boas and star-shaped sunglasses. It's gonna be "more upbeat, more high-energy, more in-your-face," he tells me. There will be a song list of 100 titles I'll be required to know.

I tell him it's great to hear from him, glad things are going well for him. He asks if I have any questions. I don't. Because I know the answer to, just off the top of my head, "will there be a salary increase?" and "any decisions about how suspended medical insurance will go forward a year after post-Affordable-Health-Care-Act 'deliberations'?"

## **6:36pm**

Confirmation via MD note, quoting office email:

“The Piano Bar Experience:

The Piano Bar has always been a place for fun, let’s take fun to the next level!

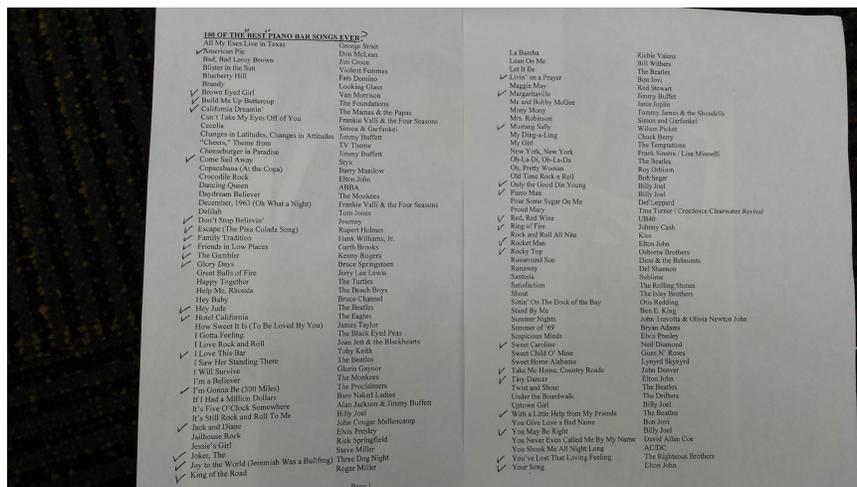
This is a quote from the Piano Bar Recipe For Fun..

‘The goal of all Piano Bars, branded or not, is to provide a high energy, fun and interactive experience for our guests to enjoy’

All Piano Bars will now have a song book. There are 100 songs in that song book and our guests are ready to sing along.

I’ve attached the list. Communicate this information to your Piano Bar entertainer. EFFECTIVE IMMEDIATELY, YOUR PIANO BAR ENTERTAINERS MUST LEARN AND PERFORM ALL OF THIS MATERIAL.

If they can’t learn this material immediately, create a successful timeline for all of this material to be performance ready. We’re talking weeks not months.”



2.25.2015

1:59am

Bartender asked me at the top of the night when I would do last call. I said, “you tell me, man, you’re the one who has to work!”

The ones who’ve asked me, that’s what I’ve always said. When they never have, like this guy, and then do, I listen. Some kind of bitch inventory or something, tonight, so “12:30?” he suggests

pathetically. Done. Late break and no one there when I get back, everybody wins. Well, except for the guests who thought the piano bar would be happening after 12:30.

I shared the office note with the Facebook Carnival piano bar entertainer group. First mistake, made it a comment on a related thread. The author, who had more input on the list than any other entertainer, clearly has some guilt and read what I wrote to help as criticism. I posted twice more to try and emphasize that I was just sharing the info we don't get any other way, only to see comments as if my info was a rumor. Finally, another guy got the ship note and confirmed, which was received as gospel.

I am clearly not one of these people. It's like I'm speaking another language. But I got it, after a few more posts. Piano bar entertainers are not musicians. They're DJs. They don't resent the playlist for its cultural poverty, they hate it because they are better qualified to decide what trash it should include. One top guy shared a story about how he came from a land piano bar career and got hassled for expecting \$20 to play Don't Stop Believing, and saying so, on his first ship contract. That's normal, apparently, in the "dueling" piano bar world.

That is BIZARRO WORLD music. These people are enemies. I want nothing more to do with them. That is why I bristle, and guests see it, when I get a request for Piano Man. I have to explain that no, I think that's a great tune! But my face clearly communicates what I wasn't even conscience of: I am NOT. I'm not.

People deserve better even if they don't know any better. And these piano bar mutants, they talk like farmers fertilizing their crops with their own excrement, inflated with pride and rage that they aren't respected more. 20 dollars for 3 minutes, 400 an hour to encourage people to worship trash, and they wonder why people have such terrible taste and why there's no good new music.

**2.27.2015**

Sign-off orientation: done.

Me and Carnival: done.

**8:33pm**

Grateful for the mild breeze and still water tonight. I smoke and reflect on all this. I don't think I'll continue keeping a journal. This

feels complete, albeit short.

**2.28.2015**

**1:25am**

Holy fuck, I just met Russell. He's been doing this gig for 13 years. Through some bizarre twist of fate, they thought it was more economical to send him here for DAYS than put him in a hotel. Charming. Didn't mention the "recipe", not because I assume he knows, but because it clearly doesn't matter. He's a piano bar guy. He's from the Philippines. Probably a rock star there, and pretty close here. We took a picture together. We realized how rare it was to have that opportunity.

What, I wonder, is my place in the world as perfect as his doing this.

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