

NEVER FADE AWAY

THE KURT COBAIN STORY

DAVE THOMPSON



“Thank you all from the pit of my burning, nauseous stomach for your letters and concerns during the last years.”

—Kurt Cobain April, 1994

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St. Martin's Paperbacks

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1

The first reports were vague, a dull rumor which percolated out into post-rush hour Seattle traffic. The body of a young man, an apparent suicide, had just been discovered in the Seattle home of Kurt Cobain.

The cause of death seemed to have been a shotgun blast to the head; initial reports suggested that the body had lain there for at least a day before it was discovered by a visiting electrician; and there was the distinct possibility that the body, clad in jeans, a long-sleeved shirt and black sneakers, was Cobain's. That, in a nutshell, was what the city had to go on.

But in many ways, it was enough. The body was discovered at 8:40 A.M.; fifty minutes later, local radio station KXRX was broadcasting the news. By 10 A.M., it seemed as though every phone in the city was ringing, as disbelieving fans called their friends to check their ears. Have you heard? Is it true? What else do you know? Then, once it was certain that nobody knew more than anyone else, people fell back on the radio and their wits. It was going to be a very long day.

The drama which shattered Seattle out of its early morning stupor formally hit the headlines on April 8th, 1994. But in painful actuality, it had been unfolding a month by then, ever since Kurt Cobain ingested a theoretically lethal combination of champagne and the drug Riapnol, then collapsed on an Italian hotel room floor.

For a few moments then, too, a good proportion of the western world held its breath, and by the time CNN announced, erroneously of course, that the singer had died, people were already expecting the worst.

The first statements from Nirvana's management, Gold Mountain, were frustratingly vague. The *Seattle Times* simply quoted Gold Mountain spokeswoman Janet Billig's explanation that Kurt had been prescribed pain killers after Nirvana's recently completed European tour, for the stomach pains which had plagued him most of his life. A combination of these drugs and alcohol then produced what she called "complications".

A more thorough, if still incomplete, explanation was released later in the day: "Kurt Cobain slipped into a coma at 6 A.M. European Standard Time . . . The coma was induced by a combination of the flu and fatigue, on top of prescription painkillers and champagne. While Cobain has now awoken, he shows significant signs, said his doctors." Billig later added, "the vital signs came back and he's opened his eyes. I don't know if he's talking lucidly, but he's moving his hands. His wife—singer Courtney Love—and daughter [18-month-old Frances Bean] are with him."

Still, there were gaps in the story, gaps which a number of reporters felt might be filled in Seattle. An "insider [at *People*] contacted The Rocket, the city's own private music paper, and informed them that 'editors were already marking off the turf.'if he dies, it's the cover, if he remains in a coma it's three pages, if he's up and walking soon, it's half a page.'"'"

Kurt was still unconscious when the conversation took place—it's "nice", the *Rocket*'s John Renton deadpanned, "to know how the press sets its standards of integrity, isn't it?"

But that sense of cynicism affected a lot of people, this time, as well. Another false alarm; we've heard it all before.

Because Cobain was known to have had a heroin problem, reporters and fans from around the world assumed a heroin overdose was being covered up, rather than investigating what turned out to have been a suicide attempt.

Later it was clear that Rome really had been just a reprieve—and an unintentional reprieve at that. Kurt had meant to kill himself on that occasion, too, as the note he reportedly left for Courtney proved.

Returning home to Seattle from his Italian misadventure, Kurt lost very little time in finding his way back into the city's narcotic underbelly. It is not, after all, as though he had far to look.

Heroin in Seattle, says Courtney, is "like apples in the orchard. It's falling off the ... trees." Amazed by the ease with which the drug could be purchased around the city, she continued, "The Seattle police won't do anything about it. I asked them, 'don't you get embarrassed when you (hear) that Seattle is famous for grunge, cappuccino and heroin?'"

Chris Novoselic, Nirvana's six foot seven inch bass player, was quick to hit back—Kurt had been Courtney's husband, but he had been his friend as well, and he was convinced that the drug was only part of the story, and an insignificant fraction at that.

"Just blaming [Kurt's death] on smack is stupid. People have been taking smack for a hundred years. You can get [it] in any town. [And] smack was just a small part of his life." No, he did not have any answers yet ... but neither did anybody else.

Or maybe they did. Seattle might once have been voted America's most liveable city, but in the popular mind, it's also the most die-able. Two of America's most notorious serial murderers, Ted Bundy and the Green River Killer, operated in the immediate vicinity, but even before them, Seattle was known for its darkness, a dense spiritual darkness which enveloped all that it touched. Was it mere coincidence that when director David Lynch conceived the cult TV series *Twin Peaks*, it was the Northwest in which he chose to house its demented denizens?

Or that when the rock'n'roll tourist arrives in town for the first time, it's Death, not Life, which will haunt his itinerary. It matters not that the city has a tenacious grip on America's rock'n'roll sensibilities. Seattle has little to show for its efforts, nevertheless.

True, there is the Sub Pop shop, a few doors down from the Moore Theater, where you can purchase souvenirs of the label that shaped a nation's taste and sold a million boots for Doc Martin; and the Edgewater Inn, where Led Zeppelin allegedly entertained a redhead with a sand shark; and Sand Point Way, where sculptor Doug Hollis' Sound Garden stands howling to the winds.

But there is no Whiskey a-Go-Go, with three decades of history; no CBGBs, the birthplace of Punk rock; no Route 66 or 128. In other words, while Seattle bristles with rock'n'roll footnotes, there are very few firm chapter headings. What it does have are final paragraphs.

In Renton, to the south of the city limits, Greenwood Memorial Park houses the mortal remains of Jimi Hendrix, the guitarist who changed the face of modern rock'n'roll. On First Avenue, downtown, a wall outside the Vogue has been given over to graffiti and the soul of Andrew Wood, the voice of Mother Love Bone.

Stefanie Sargent, guitarist with 7 Year Bitch, died in Seattle in 1992; so did the Gits' Mia Zapata, savagely murdered just twelve short months later. The darkness which inspired *Twin Peaks*, which still permeates the Pacific Northwest that even local residents, who should be used to it, have reluctantly adopted the phrase "Northwest noir"; that darkness has a special attraction for rock'n'roll, and though those deaths are totally unconnected, they are united in the psyche of the city.

And now there's another site to add to the tour books, set back from the street and shrouded in greenery, a low wall topped by impenetrable bushes, isolated in the way that only a million-dollar home can be. 171 Lake Washington Boulevard, which the Cobains bought four months earlier, and where he ended his life.

Kurt made no secret about his use of drugs, although friends insisted that he was off them as often as on, and even smack was medicinal, rather than fun. In his battle against those chronic stomach agonies, heroin was the only drug he knew of which not only alleviated the physical pain, but also

blotted out the mental anguish he suffered.

Over the years, the term “reluctant superstar” has been so overdone, that today, it’s all but meaningless. All one needs to do, it seems, is curse out a few photographers, then turn up late for an interview, and suddenly it’s being splashed everywhere. It’s become particularly popular in the last decade or so, all the more so because show-business has been desperately trying to demystify itself for just as long.

“Stars” are no longer untouchable deities, abseiling down the face of Mount Olympus to bestow their blessings on a meek and servile public. These days, they’re folk just like you and me, with problems and toothaches like us, and the superstar excesses which we once endured, the drink and drugs and the multiple marriages, are not excesses any longer. These days, they’re weaknesses, and instead of swooning at our idols’ feet, today we’re expected to pat them on the head. Like, “it must be so tough for you, and I should be so unlucky,” because really, idols should not be demystified; they should be left in sacred sanctuaries to sparkle and to shine.

Tabloid sales might disagree, but the psychology behind them sure doesn’t. People *need* celebrities who they can look up to, and though they voraciously devour their problems, it’s *because* they’re celebrities, that those problems matter. Dust the stardust from the superstars and what have you got? Mrs. Higgins down the road, complaining of her bunions; Mr. Potter at the bus stop, groaning when it rains. Remember when your parents would say, as you played the latest Sex Pistols record, “They don’t write them like they used to do?” Give it another couple of years, then look at the bands whose music your kids are listening to. “They don’t *make* them like they used to do, either.”

Kurt Cobain certainly wasn’t “made like they used to” be made, although on paper, he had all the hallmarks. In the brief three years since Nirvana exploded out of nowhere (in the wider sense of nowhere, although they’d already been together for five years by then), Cobain has been compared most, if not all, of Rock’s greatest stars.

John Lennon? Who else wrote such achingly personal songs?

Elvis Presley? Who else had so electrifying an effect on an apparently moribund market?

Johnny Rotten? Ditto, but with an extra, in-built, marketable cuddliness. You might impale yourself on those piercing blue eyes, but when you got up close, and listened to that low, warm, voice, one moment so serious, the next, breaking out with an infectious half-giggle, it was impossible to walk away from Kurt Cobain not believing that you’d just met your very best friend. So what if the next time, he ignored you? That first time was yours, and no one could take it away from you.

Then, when the news came of his death, it hit you even harder, because you’d never be able to repeat that moment, not even in your own mind, because even your dreams are haunted by the details the tabloids forgot to put in, like the mess that the shotgun must have made of his head, and the state of his mind as he did it. A reluctant superstar? At times, Kurt Cobain was a reluctant human being. His fame was simply the arsenic-tainted icing on a very rotten cake.

In the note he left alongside his body, Kurt confessed “I haven’t felt the excitement of ... creating music along with really writing something for so many years now.” His enthusiasm came in spurts—the week before Nirvana played their first show in three months at the 1992 New Music Seminar in New York, Kurt could scarcely control his excitement at the prospect of putting together a short acoustic set. He’d got the songs, and they weren’t all screaming Punk Rock. “I think people will be surprised.”

Instead, they were horrified. Four songs tacked to the end of a blistering show in a sweat-drenched Roseland, and the crowd was booing like it was Dylan at Newport. “Play some rock’n’roll!” Late mobs were more restrained, and by the time Nirvana treated MTV to an hour of the stuff, people were actually suggesting that the next Nirvana album should follow the pattern unerringly. But by then, maybe, Kurt had already lost interest. He was a rock’n’roller now. Would he ever be allowed to

become something else? Not in this lifetime.

Hopelessly adrift within the demands of his own career, Kurt was reaching out, but no one could quite grasp him. In early March, as he prepared for the final concerts of his life, Kurt telephoned his cousin, Art Cobain, from Germany. No real reason, just to chat. But there was one thing he said which stuck with Art. "He said he was getting really fed up with his way of life," Art told *People* magazine. And that phrase again, "he really seemed to be reaching out." Unfortunately, the only solace Art could give, was to invite Kurt to a forthcoming Cobain family reunion. He hadn't seen his cousin since childhood—he would never see him again.

Kurt's final words, the last things he would ever write in his neat, but childlike scrawl, were addressed to his family, but aimed at the world.

"Sometimes I feel I should have a punch-in clock before I walk out on stage," Kurt wrote. He pleaded that he had done "everything in my power to appreciate it,

... but it's not enough." Then Kurt confessed that he was "too sensitive," because he needed "to be slightly numb in order to regain the enthusiasm I once had as a child"

And the worst crime he could think of would be "to put people off by faking it, by pretending ... am having 100% fun."

To which his wife, Courtney Love, her voice shattered by emotion, but still intent on delivering her message to the thousands of fans gathered at a memorial service in Seattle, responded, "No Kurt, the worst crime I can think of is for you to just continue being a rock star when you fucking hate it. Just fucking stop!"

That was the message behind the meeting of friends, family and bandmates which Courtney convened within weeks of the couple's arrival back in Seattle, and just days after Kurt barricaded himself into a bathroom at the couple's Seattle home, threatening to kill himself, and this time, he got it right. He had a gun with him.

Courtney flew to the phone and called 911, but by the time the police arrived, the crisis had apparently already been averted. Kurt was still in the bathroom, but he was adamant that he wasn't suicidal—he was just hiding from his wife.

The police were convinced, after questioning Courtney, but they did not leave empty-handed—they also gathered up a .38 caliber Taurus revolver; a .380 Taurus handgun; a Beretta .380 semi-automatic handgun; and a Colt AR-15 semi-automatic rifle. Several of the guns had only just been returned to the Cobains following an altercation the previous summer—a remarkable arsenal for a man who had gone on record time and again expressing his dislike of firearms.

"I don't believe in them," he told *Alternative Press* in 1991, "but ... I still think people have a right to own them." Journalist Susan Rees reported that "guns are mentioned in at least three songs [*Smells Like Teen Spirit* and *Nevermind*]."

That was Friday, March 18th; that weekend, Courtney and Nirvana bassist Chris Novoselic led the delegation of friends and family who intended confronting Kurt over his continued drug use—and delivering the simple message, shape up or ship out. As Tammi Blevins, a Gold Mountain spokeswoman, explained, "people close to him definitely did not want him on drugs."

Steve Chatoff, head of the Steps chemical dependency and mental health facility north of L.A., who intended to moderate the Intervention—if everything had gone according to plan, Chatoff would have returned to California with Kurt by his side. But it didn't. Someone reportedly warned Kurt what was going on, and that particular meeting was cancelled.

"There was no sense in my going after that," Chatoff told reporters. "You ... need the element of surprise, to break through denial." And as another family friend told the L.A. *Times*' Robert Hilburn, "Kurt is so much in denial about a drug problem that it's unbelievable."

The Intervention went ahead regardless, a week later at Kurt and Courtney's home in Seattle.

exclusive Madrona district. It was strictly informal, simply a gathering of the ten or so people who cared most about Kurt, who just wanted to sit down with him for a while and talk ... Courtney and Chris; Danny Goldberg, now head of Atlantic Records; Pat Smear, the guitarist who had been working with Nirvana on and off since the previous fall; Dylan Carlson, one of Kurt's closest friends

"I told him, 'you've got to be a good daddy,'" Courtney said afterwards. "'We've got to be good parents.'"

But Kurt wasn't interested. He would sit there for a while, quiet and seemingly acquiescent, his gaze passing from faces to his feet, but he didn't give a damn, not even when he heard that Good Mountain had added their weight to the warning, reportedly by informing him that he would be dropped from their roster if he didn't clean up. Instead, he told Smear that they had work to do, and went down to the basement to rehearse a new song.

Courtney left Seattle on March 25th, and checked into the Peninsula Hotel in Beverley Hills, her base while she was in Los Angeles promoting her own band, Hole's, new album release, the now ironically titled *Live Through This*.

The group had long since out-lived the once constant suggestions that Hole's own success was built around Courtney's husband, as opposed to her talent. Although they now shared both a record label (Geffen) and management company, Hole had consistently delivered the goods, first on 1991's *Pretty on the Inside*, on Caroline Records, which predates her relationship with Kurt, then touring with the Lemonheads to almost unbelievable acclaim, and finally serving up an album which, under almost any other circumstances, would have been instantly adjudged a classic.

As it was, it came close ... like *Spin* magazine said when it profiled Love in the issue which had just hit the news stands when Kurt's death was announced, "junkie, star-fucker, gold-digger, Courtney Love took the blows, but through it all she did it her way. Now, with 1994's best album, Courtney has justified our love."

Even as she ironed out the last details of the release campaign, however; as she readied for the onslaught which inevitably awaited her in London, Hole's next port of call, Courtney's mind was elsewhere. She had left Kurt behind in Seattle, not out of choice, but out of necessity. He could be as stubborn as a mule when his mind was set on something, and all she could hope to do, all anybody could ever do, was simply try to wear his resistance down. Now she was calling him every day, asking him to join her and maybe check out a rehab clinic she'd heard wonderful things about, the Exodus Recovery Center in Marina Del Rey.

Finally, Kurt gave in. He'd be down, he said, on March 28th, and he'd swing by the clinic and see what was happening. Courtney told a friend a few days later, "I was so proud of him."

The day before he left for L.A., Kurt apparently posted a lengthy message on the Internet computer network. It was mostly inconsequential ("so this is the Information Highway our illustrious VP has been jawing to the nation about?"), but did include a few tidbits about his plans for Nirvana's future—a "revamped" version of the last album's "Penny Royal Tea" which was planned for imminent release as a single; the "calmer, moodier" album they'd start work on in the fall.

"If you're expecting the same verse-chorus-verse ... you have but two choices. Don't buy the new album ... or get used to the fact that the band is changing. Longevity, folks."

He made only one reference to his recent personal crises. "I'm still a little freaked over the Roman thing, and need some time to rest and get over it. You'd think they could make a good milkshake, but no."

It wasn't only Kurt's health which concerned Courtney, however, even though that in itself would have been enough. The couple were still reeling from their 18-month-old encounter with the California child welfare authorities, swinging into action following a *Vanity Fair* article which claimed that Courtney maintained her own heroin habit while she was pregnant with her daughter.

Frances Bean.

The crisis was averted, but it was still raised in conversation—even *Spin* brought it up when they talked earlier in the year.

“So, what about the actual charges?” writer Dennis Cooper asked.

“Innocent,” Love replied. “Isn’t that obvious?” Almost precisely one year before, on March 23rd 1993, having spent the past three months submitting to regular urine tests and check-ups from social workers, the Cobains were informed that the authorities would be taking no further interest in Frances.

But as Courtney was well aware, it wasn’t just her conduct during her pregnancy which had come under the microscope. It was her future behavior as well, and not only her’s, but Kurt’s too. Among the threats which she hurled at her husband as she begged him to check into rehab, was the knowledge of what could happen should his true state ever become public knowledge. “If we lose Frances . . .

Once Kurt was in the Center, everyone breathed a huge sigh of relief. He was going to be okay. Two days later, Courtney’s whole world came crashing down again.

The time Kurt Cobain spent in rehab remains undocumented—hardly surprisingly, of course. More than a week after he “jumped the fence” as Courtney put it, the Daniel Freeman Hospital, to which the Exodus center is affiliated, had still to confirm that he was even a patient.

But whatever happened, whatever treatment was meted out to Cobain, it doesn’t seem to have made much difference. Kurt appeared to have vanished into thin air. Even Courtney was left in the dark. I didn’t know where he was. He never, ever disappeared like that. He always called me.”

Instead, she was left with the memory of his last phone call, shortly before he vanished. “No matter what happens, I want you to know you made a really good record.”

She asked him what he meant—what was likely to happen? But he wouldn’t say. “Just remember, no matter what happens, I love you.”

On Sunday, April 3rd, according to a source close to the band, Courtney and Geffen arranged for private detectives to be hired, to trace Kurt. It was their belief that he would probably head back to Seattle.

Kurt was, in fact, already there. He arrived on Wednesday, March 30th, the same day he left the rehab facility, and contacted his old friend Dylan Carlson, guitarist with Olympia’s band Earth, and the best man at Kurt and Courtney’s marriage two years before. Kurt asked Dylan if he would go with him to buy a shotgun. “He said he wanted [it] for protection,” Dylan explained later, which seemed reasonable enough.

So did Kurt’s request that Dylan make the actual purchase. He was worried, Dylan said, that if he bought it in his own name, the police would simply come around and confiscate it. He and the Seattle Police Department had quite a history in that respect, as Dylan himself knew—the Taurus .380 which had been taken away just a couple of weeks before, had been registered in Carlson’s name. It was also one of the guns which had been temporarily impounded the previous June.

The pair set off for Stan Baker’s Gun Shop, on Lake City Way NE—Baker later remembered wondering “what the hell are those kids going to do with that shotgun? It’s not hunting season.” But it was not his concern, either. Dylan purchased the weapon, a 61b Remington Model 11 20-gauge shotgun, and the two left the store. Dylan later asked Kurt if he wanted him to keep the rifle at his condo. Kurt told him no. That day was to be their last meeting.

Where Kurt went from there may never be known for certain. Later on Wednesday, he was in downtown gunshop buying a second box of shells. He did spend at least one night at a property he and Courtney had bought the previous year, a little north of Carnation, a township 40 miles northeast of Seattle. Courtney would tell Seattle’s Post *Intelligencer* newspaper that it looked as though he’d had company, as well. Balled up by a fireplace, in the still-unfinished two story house which the couple were building, lay a blue sleeping bag which she had never seen before. A nearby ashtray overflowed

with cigarette butts—some, she recognized as Kurt's brand, but as for the others, she'd not seen them before either.

On Monday, the day after the private detectives were taken on, Courtney was interviewed by the *L.A. Times'* Robert Hilburn. She spoke of the horror of finding Kurt spread out on the floor in Rome blue and still. "I don't ever want to see him ... like that again. I thought I went through a lot of hard times over the years, but [that was] the hardest."

It was the last scheduled interview she would do. The following afternoon, callers were informed by the hotel switchboard that her room was not accepting any calls whatsoever. An interview with the *Seattle Rocket* was cancelled without warning, although Hole guitarist Eric Erlandson explained simply that Courtney was feeling unwell. He promised that he would try to reschedule the telephone interview for later that evening. He didn't.

In fact, Courtney probably wasn't even at the hotel. Instead, she was combing the streets of L.A. searching for her husband.

Back home, Cobain's mother, Wendy O'Connor, was instituting a search of her own, filing missing person's report with the Seattle police department on Monday. Word had reached her that her son had bought a shotgun; in the report, she described him as armed, and possibly suicidal. But somewhat mysteriously, he was *not* considered dangerous.

Back in L.A., Courtney was voicing similar anxieties. "I'm really afraid for him right now," she told a friend.

In the days that followed, the Seattle police department paid several visits to the Cobains' Madrona home. There was no sign of life. They would also check out the address on Seattle's Capitol Hill, where O'Connor claimed her son bought his drugs. Again, however, there was nothing.

Courtney remained in L.A., wrestling now with both her own conscience and the calm advice of friends. Every instinct in her body was screaming she should return to Seattle to join the search for Kurt. But other people, she admitted later, counselled her simply to sit tight.

They knew as well as she did how volatile Kurt could be when he wanted, how he would so often do one thing when he was asked to do another. The last thing anybody needed was for him to storm off in a fit of contrariness and maybe do something stupid. "I listened to too many people," Courtney confesses. "I'm only going to listen to my gut for the rest of my life."

At the time, however, the advice seemed sensible. The private detectives had apparently made some headway in their search for Kurt—contact had been made, but Kurt refused to be taken back to L.A. Instead, he turned and fled.

He remained in sight, though, and while the idea of physically harnessing Kurt was reluctantly dropped from the gameplan, according to a source, a friend was directed to keep tabs on him.

Also on Monday, a music industry insider is said to have run into Kurt, and pleaded with him to check into a local rehab center. Cobain refused. Other sources claimed to have seen him out in search of drug dealers.

There was even a rumor, reported one week later in the *L.A. Times*, that he actually telephoned a friend to say he'd bought a shotgun. What he needed to know now was, what was the best way to shoot yourself in the head? The friend's response does not appear to have been recorded.

By Tuesday, tension within the Nirvana camp was palpable, although the precise state of affairs remained a closely guarded secret—a decision which may or may not have been wise. It is easy to say that the knowledge that he was the subject of a major private manhunt might simply have driven Kurt further underground. But it is also possible that the more people who searched for him, the more chance there was that someone might find him.

Instead, the only news which had leaked out concerned the aftermath of the unsuccessful intervention. Rumors spread first that Gold Mountain had indeed dropped the band from its book-

then that Nirvana had just broken up—both possibilities which were only reinforced two days later when it was announced that contrary to previously published information, Nirvana would not be headlining this summer's Lollapalooza tour.

The reason given was Kurt's health problems, although the break-up was just as plausible particularly—as a few people immediately began speculating—when one considered the apparent ease with which Nirvana had just backed down for the first time from the creative control they had insisted upon when they signed with Geffen.

Although their last album, the six month old *In Utero*, had already sold over two million copies there were no doubts that it had still to reach its full potential audience. The hoped for reason? The reluctance on the part of so-called rack jobber distributors, to place it into certain “middle America discount chains” on account of its cover art.

A report in the CD newsletter *Ice* announced that a small section of the album's original cover—depicting one of Kurt's own fetus and womb-strewn art works—had been enlarged (the section showed no fetuses) “to serve as the entire back cover ... [in addition] the song title ‘Rape Me’ has been changed to read ‘Waif Me’.”

The report continued, “One Geffen executive estimated that getting the album into [these] stores can add 10% to its total sales figures,” meaning “at least 200,000 units are at stake, enough to shake any artist's idealistic stance.”

But Kurt was not “any artist”, and if his stance could be described as idealistic, it was because his very nature was idealistic. That was what lay at the heart of so many of his problems, a sense, maybe even the knowledge, that all too often, the idealism which he felt simply did not translate into other peoples' worlds.

And though both Geffen and Gold Mountain moved swiftly to defuse the story (“you're really not changing ... Nirvana's artistic vision,” Janet Billig told *Ice*, “just ... some words on a piece of paper”), few observers could imagine Kurt having simply rolled over and agreed to the butchery of his muse. If nothing else, it did not fit his esprit de punk.

Of course, this may have had nothing to do with the reasons behind the sudden outburst of activity behind the scenes, behind the screens. It really was just another iron lying in the fires of speculation. But there again, so was the very idea that Nirvana were on the verge of splitting up; might even have already done so.

It was not, after all, the first time that a split had seemed imminent. As far back as 1990, Kurt had been threatening to break up the group, as former Nirvana drummer Chad Channing told Seattle journalist Jo-Ann Greene.

“When we were last in Rome together, in 1990, we had an incident ... where the band was going to break up because we were fed up [with] the way things were going. Kurt just looked at me and said ‘hey, are you still having fun?’”

Those words make for a chilling epitaph—especially after an off-the-record source confessed, that efforts to keep tabs on Kurt had been an abject failure. Three days later it was an electrician, Gary Smith, who finally found him. Are you still having fun?

Sometime on Tuesday, April 5th, Kurt headed back to Madrona, quietly letting himself into the garage house. According to the *Seattle Post Intelligencer*, he was high, riding on the combination of heroin and valium which seemed to blot out his personal pain better than anything else. The *P-I* alleged that the level of smack in his bloodstream was 1.52mg per liter. Doses one third as strong have been known to prove fatal.

The house was silent, empty, dark—it always was when Courtney and Frances were away, and he switched the television on. Then, he slipped across to the mother-in-law apartment above the garage where Michael DeWitt, Frances Bean's former nanny, had once lived.

His pen recorded his last known thoughts in red ink. “I haven’t felt the excitement of listening to, well as creating music, along with really writing something, for too many years now.” He felt tremendously guilty about that. The screaming crowds didn’t excite him, he said, as they did Freddie Mercury, who appeared to love and relish the love and adoration of the crowd. Which is something totally admire and envy, the fact that I can’t fool you, any one of you. It simply isn’t fair to you or me ...”

“There’s good in all of us, and I simply love people too much. So much that it makes me feel just too fucking sad. Sad, little, sensitive, unappreciated, Pisces, Jesus man.”

“I had a good marriage, and for that I’m grateful. But since the age of seven, I’ve become hateful toward all humans in general, only because it seems so easy for people to get along ... empathy ... Thank you all from the pit of my burning, nauseous stomach for your letters and concerns during the last years. I’m too much of an erratic, moody person, and I don’t have the passion anymore.”

Then a line from a Neil Young song came to mind, from “Hey Hey, My My” ... “it’s better to burn out than to fade away.” He wrote it down. “So remember, it’s better to burn out than fade away.”

Finally, he was done. He signed off—“Love, peace and empathy, Kurt Cobain”—and stabbed his pen through the letter, and impaled it into a planter. And then he reached for his shotgun.

2

A couple of hours southwest of Seattle, Aberdeen had very little time indeed for whatever was going on in the city. The miles which separate the two might have easily been translated into worlds, even galaxies. While Seattle grew, proudly blossoming beneath its reputation as America's most liveable city, Aberdeen clung tighter and tighter to a life which grew weaker with every passing year.

It is a logging and fishing community, ringed by the forests which years of woodcutting have finally reduced to near-nothing, fringed by an ocean which has been trawled into a desert. Trailer parks pockmark Route 12 into town, trickling slowly into fast food hell, which in turn is succeeded by the scars of recession—locked-up houses, closed-down stores, and everywhere, reminders of how precarious life in small town America can be.

House after house has the same sign in the windows, "This family is supported by timber dollars," car after car sports a bumper sticker damning the day God ever created the Spotted Owl. There is a sickening irony in the survival of one creature being dependent upon the extinction of another, but that was the reality which faced the Federal Government. When the owl won out over logging, the undertakers moved that little bit closer to Aberdeen, WA. And with good cause. As employment dipped, suicides climbed, until Grays Harbor County could boast one of the highest rates in America.

In their own way, Nirvana restored some pride to this crumbling remnant of a once-vibrant community. It doesn't matter that even on the day his death was discovered, there was little outward activity to suggest that this day was different from any other day; nor does it matter what the townsfolk's own memories of the "Cobain kid" were; still there was a sense that Nirvana had returned Aberdeen to a map which the last few years had seemed set to wipe it off of.

A couple of other bands had escaped Aberdeen before them, the Melvins and Metal Church, and both had done pretty well for themselves—Church even notched up a few hundred thousand record sales. But neither had done as well as Nirvana, neither had drawn not only reporters, but fans, by the car-load, by the bus-load, into the town to poke, gawk and chatter. Boston has its Paul Revere, Stratford has its Shakespeare. Aberdeen had Nirvana.

It did not even seem to matter that for Kurt Cobain and Chris Novoselic, the years they'd spent in Aberdeen were years they would rather forget; that they had escaped Aberdeen's cloistered, claustrophobic red-neck-ery at the first opportunity they got. In the months which followed Nirvana's initial national breakthrough, while the nation's press was beating a camera-strewn path to the heart of Aberdeen, visitors were greeted with open arms, and wide open mouths.

When Patrick MacDonald, rock critic for the *Seattle Times*, visited Aberdeen in early 1992, he was led on a grand tour of *Cobainiana*, everything from the bridge he used to sleep beneath, to the demolished amplifier he left behind when he split. Such relics had a resonance which was pure rock'n'roll. But if you really wanted to talk stock cliches, they were more a symbol of a true teenage wasteland. From where Kurt stood, even the dim lights of Olympia glowed like beacons in an endless night.

Although he was to live there for more than two-thirds of his life, Kurt Donald Cobain was not a true Aberdeen native; rather, he was born in neighboring Hoquiam, a town which arguably has even less of a past to be proud of than Aberdeen.

At least Aberdeen had a railroad, an iron route out of the glowering forests, and until a mid-1950s police crackdown finally crushed the life from the ladies, it also had brothels, upwards of fifty in the

downtown alone. A decade later, the place was clean, but its reputation lingered, not as the festering scab which some latter-day writers have termed it, but as another point of local light, something sweet and nostalgic which could still fill an empty night.

Donald Cobain and his wife, Wendy Fradenburg left Hoquiam with their six-month-old son during the summer of 1967. Kurt had been born on February 20th; three years later, he would have a sister, Kimberley, but right now, in the rented house where he spent his first months, and the mortgage-free home where his mother still lives, he was the center of the Cobain family's universe—particularly Wendy's.

To his death, Kurt remembered the amazement he felt when he learned that not every child grows up with a mother who always kissed him and hugged him goodbye when he went out to play. "There's nothing like your first-born—nothing," Wendy told journalist Michael Azerrad. "No child never even comes close to that. I was totaled out on him. My every waking hour was for him."

Kurt's mother was not alone with those feelings, however. There was something compulsive about the child, an energy, a dynamism, a sense of explosive precocity which neither she, nor anybody she knew, had ever before encountered in one so young. On at least one occasion, in conversation with his own mother, Wendy admitted that Kurt's perceptiveness almost scared her, and when the boy was excited—as he so often seemed to be—it was all she and Don could do to control him.

It was to quell this hyperactivity that the boy was prescribed ritalin, an amphetamine-based drug which has been proven an effective weapon against excessive energy in children. In Kurt's case, however, the tablets had an effect even more excessive than his "normal" behavior, frequently keeping him up and active until the small hours of the morning.

The treatment was halted, and sedatives substituted for speed. Now, he slept in school. Finally, it was suggested that Kurt's parents take that most drastic step of all—remove sugar from Kurt's diet. And, his relieved parents were finally able to say, third time lucky.

This restrictive new diet quieted Kurt, but it did not slow him down. He was everywhere at once, getting into trouble whenever and wherever possible, and if he wasn't, then Boda was. Boda, Kurt would proudly explain, was his friend, an invisible ball of irrepressible energy, and it didn't matter what went wrong around the house, what latest piece of mischief could be tracked back to Kurt, Kurt always had his answer waiting on his lips. "It wasn't me who did it, it was Boda."

"It just became ridiculous," Wendy later recalled—Boda even demanded his own place setting at the meal table!

Finally, Kurt's Uncle Clark hit on a solution. A soldier, he asked Kurt if he could take Boda to Vietnam with him to keep him company. Kurt looked at his Uncle quizzically, then very seriously leaned his mother to one side.

"Boda isn't real," he whispered. "Does Clark know that?"

It is one of the greatest cliches in the annals of show-business to describe a person as a "born performer," even more so when it is applied retrospectively to the performer as a child. But Wendy insists that with Kurt, that indeed was the case, and she had seven brothers and sisters who would vouchsafe her word—to the point of actually volunteering to babysit the child, just so he could entertain them with his antics.

Barely could Kurt walk and talk, than his delighted uncles and aunts were pinpointing his bright characteristics, and having vied for the privilege of having him visit, now they sportingly argued over who he most closely resembled.

Taking it for granted that he was a talented toddler; accepting that the delight he took in music was the hallmark of a deeper ability, one could argue that when it came to plucking role models from within his immediate family, Kurt was spoiled for choice.

Everybody, it seemed, played a musical instrument of some sort—Wendy's brother Chuck even

played in a real rock'n'roll band, and made the first ever tape of Kurt Cobain singing, a song which became a chorus of "poo-poo"s, recorded when Kurt was just four. Aunt Mary was a country singer and had a recording studio in one room of her house. Wendy herself had once dreamed of becoming a drummer. And bestriding them all like a spangled colossus was their uncle, Delbert Fradenburg. Early in the 1940s, he split Aberdeen for the bright lights of L.A., changed his name to the decidedly more stylish-sounding Dale Arden, and even cut a few records. The others in the family were talents to be sure. But Uncle Delbert, he'd been a star.

If music became Kurt's first passion, by the time he hit seven, art was his second. The only problem was, although he loved to paint and draw, he never seemed to like what he'd done. When the school newspaper extended to the chubby second grader an honor which rarely went to anyone below the fifth grade, supplying a drawing for the cover one issue, Kurt's reaction was one of outrage, disgust. The picture really wasn't that good, he insisted—how could the school show him up like this?

"His attitude toward adults changed because of that," his mother later mourned. They were telling him how much they loved his art, and Kurt simply didn't believe them, couldn't believe them, because he himself "was never satisfied with it". Even at that early age, Kurt seemed wise, and with that wisdom, sensitive beyond his years.

His inquisitive eyes, already capable of piercing to the soul of whosoever he was talking with, would scan that person for signs of insincerity, a psychic radar which cornered condescension and repaid it with disdain. Wendy admits that from the moment Kurt's artistic talents were first noticed, the entire family engulfed him in supplies, until "it kind of got crammed down his throat. We . almost killed it for him."

But was it the attention which turned him away from his art, the pressures of his presupposed accomplishment? Or the knowledge, bubbling within his soul, that if he was to follow his abilities in any direction whatsoever, it was music which would make him, not art.

Even to a seven-year-old, it was impossible not to become somehow swept along by the excitement of rock'n'roll. To a seven-year-old whose own family was actively thrusting that music in his face, the impossibility was magnified manifold.

The first records Kurt ever owned were gifts from his Aunt Mary—after Great Uncle Delbert, the family's other pop superstar. Mary played guitar in a country band, regularly performed in Aberdeen bars, and once even released a record. Visiting her house as he so often did, Kurt was thrilled to hear her play it, to watch the little 45 spinning around on the player, and know that his own aunt could be heard playing on it. At seven or eight, gramophone records are still the stuff of dreams, a romantic mystery into whose secrets only the luckiest of the lucky can ever be inducted. Simply to be related to one of those people seemed a dream come true.

It was Mary who first offered Kurt guitar lessons, but although the boy appeared keen to learn, having few toys he loved more than his little plastic guitar, the rigidity of even the simplest lessons sent him hurtling, bored senseless, toward whichever distraction presented itself to him. In the end, she gave up trying, and let him simply amuse himself. And that was no problem, because he was such a happy child.

Kurt himself later agreed. Smiling at what now seemed a joyously uncomplicated memory, he remarked, "I was constantly screaming and singing. I didn't know when to quit." The other children in school even took to beating him up, simply to keep him quiet!

Aunt Mary thought about another solution, but there would be many times, maybe, when Kurt's mother and father wished that she hadn't. Anything would have been better than the damnable banjo drum she bought him.

Sliding his tiny feet into his father's tennis shoes, planting a hunting cap over his head, Kurt would strap on his treasured drum and set out around the neighborhood, banging and crashing away.

accompanying himself with Beatles songs. That was Aunt Mary's doing as well, the Beatles and the Monkees, and though Kurt still strummed his plastic guitar, and leaped around his bedroom like he seen pop stars do on television, it was the drums which fascinated him now.

Wendy encouraged him in this latest love, just as she'd encouraged his others. As Kurt entered third grade, he began taking drum lessons, then he'd go home from the after-school classes, and continue the lessons alone. Though he never would learn to read music, he swiftly discovered that his natural abilities as a musician were complimented by a talent for mimicry, too. As soon as one person in the class learned a piece of music, Kurt would be copying them, and playing it better as well.

This ideal world, the loving family, the household in which nothing seemed too much trouble, or even too expensive, came crashing down around Kurt's ears in 1975.

It was difficult to tell when things started going wrong between Don and Wendy Cobain—outwardly, despite Kurt's later condemnations ("white trash posing as middle class"), theirs' was the model of working class suburban gentility, a nice home fixed up until it dwarfed its run-down neighbors, a father whose livelihood was not rooted in wood (Don was a motor mechanic, working at the local Chevron gas station), a model mother homemaker, children who always turned out clean and clean-smelling.

But behind the facade, the foundations of marriage were rotten. Don, Wendy complained, never seemed to be home anymore—he always seemed to be off, playing sports or coaching them, then coming home exhausted and sleeping till the alarm clock announced another working day. Calm regret became bitter resentment; sometimes, Wendy would wonder whether she had ever truly loved her husband, and though they tried to keep their lives together afloat, sometime after Kurt's eighth birthday, his parents finally separated.

And a light went out in Kurt's life forever.

Divorce is traditionally among the most traumatic events a child can experience, the sundering of the principle point of stability in a young life and its sudden replacement by the twin burdens of guilt and responsibility which the child will frequently automatically shoulder; a sense that somehow, *it was all my fault*.

For Kurt, those pains were exaggerated not only by his youthful failure to understand the true reasons for the breakdown of his parents' marriage, and by the drawn-out divorce proceedings which followed, but also by his own personal failings, those which Kurt himself must have considered immense importance.

His father was an avid sportsman, and like so many dads, would have liked nothing more than to see his son follow in his footsteps. But Kurt had no interest whatsoever in sport. Was it his failure to excel... no, hang "excel"; his failure to show even the slightest glimmer of enthusiasm for batting a rock-hard ball around a field which forced his father away from the family home, and into a prefab in a trailer park in Montesano? Had the anger which would explode from his father on the occasions that Kurt did join in a team sport, only to strike out the first time he moved, had it finally got too much?

Maybe it was Kurt's refusal—again against his father's dearest wishes—to do with his right hand what came easiest with his left. Believing, rightly or wrongly, that left-handedness places a child at a disadvantage, Don worked hard to encourage Kurt to switch sides. He failed, as so many similarly inclined parents fail, because nature will seldom allow herself to be thwarted. But Kurt didn't know that. He just knew that he did things wrong. Perhaps *that* was why dad left home?

Was it his inability to behave, as his mother later said, like the "little adult" which his father demanded? If he closed his eyes and thought real hard, Kurt could easily summon up the feelings of pain and confusion which coursed through his body every time his father called him a dummy, rapped him across the knuckles, or around the head. But he'd deserved that treatment, because he was stupid or rude, and maybe dad was gone because of that, too.

Or maybe, lastly, it was the events of Christmas, 1974, which placed the last straw on the camel creaking back. Kurt had asked for a toy gun, one which was neatly packaged in the names of Starsky and Hutch, the derring-do cops whose plain-clothes activities dominated the prime time television listings. It cost \$5, but it was worth the money—or so Kurt thought.

Wendy disagreed, and when Kurt came down on Christmas morning, and found the heavy, bulky package which lay beneath the tree, he had no idea what it could be. It didn't feel like a Starsky and Hutch gun, and as he ran his hands over the nobby, even grainy surface ... in fact it felt like ... slowly, Kurt opened the neatly wrapped gift. It was a lump of coal. That had been his mother's way of punishing him for being greedy. Maybe leaving was dad's way of doing it.

Back in his bedroom, Kurt wrote what might well be the earliest piece of his poetry still in existence today. He scrawled it on the wall:

"I hate Mom, I hate Dad

"Dad hates Mom, Mom hates Dad

"It simply makes you want to be so sad."

For the next year or so, Kurt lived on in Aberdeen with his mother and sister Kimberley. But the divorce had changed him, from the always bright, always happy child who had once so delighted his family and friends, to a withdrawn, sullen, rude little boy, who took his private rage out on whatever whoever got in his way. He locked his babysitters out of the house, and argued constantly with both his mother and her new boyfriend, who he believed was "a mean huge wife-beater." Finally, Wendy could take no more. Kurt was passed on to his father, in the trailer park in Montesano.

There, Kurt and his father worked hard, and apparently successfully, to repair the breaches which Kurt had discerned in their earlier relationship. The boy's every whim was indulged—Don bought him a motorized minibike, accompanied him camping in the vast state park which stretches up the Olympia Peninsula; took him to the long, lonely beaches which line the Pacific coast. Don even tried to take Kurt hunting, although on that occasion, Kurt's interest died once they reached the forest. Somehow, killing animals for fun just didn't seem to be any ... fun. Still, Don later said, "he had everything. He had it made."

Don was now working as a tallyman for the Mayer Brothers logging company, checking inventories. His hours were difficult—he often had to work clear through the weekend, but Kurt was always welcome to join him at the yard, to amuse himself in the warehouse, playing amidst the newly-cut wood, or sit in Don's office, making crank calls to the numbers he'd dial at random.

Then it would be out to Don's van to play 8-Track tapes on the car stereo. With the unquenchable enthusiasm of a child, he could happily listen to the same album over and over, sitting through the constant rumble of the tape machine's capstans and rollers, the thunderous clunk at the end of each tape length, until it appeared that even these extraneous noises were an integral part of the music.

His favorite album, as 1977 came to a close, was Queen's *News of the World*, with the anthem signature tune which was already swamping the sports stadia of America, "We Are The Champions". For hours in the truck, he would play it, often until the van's battery was exhausted, just sitting there punching buttons on the in-dash tape player so that the tape would return to the beginning each time and he knew every word off by heart.

Slowly, it appeared, Kurt was rehabilitating himself within at least one half of his family. Long father-son discussions helped exorcise some of the guilt he felt over his parents' divorce, as Don patiently explained that sometimes, people simply fall out of love, that it is nobody's fault and neither one's to blame. It's just that feelings they had when they were younger can change.

And there was something else which Don said, that made an impression on Kurt's slowly calmer mind. The actual conversation is forgotten, but the gist of it was, as Kurt would bitterly remember for the remainder of his life, Don said he would never remarry.

So when he turned around, in February, 1978, and did just that, Kurt was shattered—and two years of coming to terms with his new life were undone at a stroke.

Suddenly, all the old feelings of insecurity and doubt flooded back, and with them, the long-learned lessons that you could never, ever, trust an adult.

Kurt, Don, his new wife, and her two children, moved across town, away from the trailer park and into a real house. Kurt hated all of it. When his step-mother tried to work things out with him, kindly at first, but with understandable, increasing frustration, Kurt threw her concern back in her face. The three children—Kurt, his step-brother and step-sister—each had household chores designated for them. Kurt's invariably went surlily undone. He started missing school, and when Don found him part-time job bussing tables at a nearby restaurant, Kurt simply ignored it altogether.

He bullied his younger step-siblings, and when Don asked if Kurt wanted to join the family shopping at the mall, the boy would storm out of sight, down to the basement room he had taken as his own, and that just made things even worse. When the others got back, there would invariably be a bright new toy for them to play with. Kurt got nothing.

Desperately, even angrily, Don persuaded Kurt to join the school wrestling team. If that didn't curb or at least exhaust, the boy's constant aggression, what would?

Kurt hated it, but despite that, he was a useful fighter. Stocky, stubborn, and considerably stronger than his still-sensitive features would ever let on, Kurt simply lulled his opponents into a false sense of security, until the moment he pounced, and suddenly the realization would strike everyone simultaneously. The boy looked like an angel, but he fought like the devil—when he wanted to, at least.

Larry Smith, Kurt's step-uncle, recalls hearing one day that Kurt was involved in a fight with "a burly 250 lb. logger type." But "Kurt didn't even fight. He just presented the bully with the appropriate hand gesture every time he was knocked down, until the bully gave up. To top it all off, Kurt just had that usual grin on his face."

Wrestling did not curb Kurt's angry behavior. He started hankering to move back to Aberdeen, to his mother and her boyfriend, and that just pushed an even greater wedge between father and son. One a couple of years before that Kurt was complaining that he *couldn't* live with her any longer. Now, all of a sudden, she was the greatest thing in his world.

Don resisted Kurt's struggles. Desperate to bring the boy back into his household, under his, Don's own terms, the elder Cobain applied for—an end was granted—legal custody of his son. But it didn't help; if anything, it simply encouraged Kurt toward even more rebellious behavior.

Still it was ironic that when the inevitable break between father and son finally came, it was Kurt's wrestling which provoked it.

He had reached the championship stage of a school wrestling competition, and Don was as proud as any father could be. There was no doubt in his mind that Kurt would win the fight, bringing glory to himself and his family. Kurt, too, seemed confident. It wasn't until the two fighters were on the mat, on their hands and knees awaiting the referee's whistle, that maybe Don sensed that things were not going to go as planned. There was something about the way Kurt looked him straight in the eye, he smiled ... and kept smiling, even as the whistle blew, and his opponent flattened him.

"You should have seen the look on his face," Kurt told writer Michael Azerrad. "He actually walked out halfway through the match because I did it ... four times in a row." Immediately after, Kurt went to stay with an uncle and aunt for a time.

He returned to Montesano after what can best be described as a cooling off period, and immediately resumed the tentative dance with his father, courting one another's approval even as they rejected each other's values. What was sad was that most of the time, they weren't even aware they were doing it!

One classic example occurred after one of Don's friends persuaded him to join the Columbia House

record and tape club—so many albums or 8-Tracks for a penny, and thereafter, just a few more to buy at regular prices, over the next few years. Maybe the friend was already a member, chasing the Club's offer of further free records for anybody introducing new members; Don went along with the idea anyway, and it soon became obvious that Kurt was showing an interest.

But instead of sharing his son's enthusiasm, Don's interest in the Club's offers swiftly waned. He kept paying the bills, but he rarely played the records. They were just something which kept the boy quiet.

Regularly, the mailman would bring another package to the door, addressed to Don but to be opened by Kurt, and slowly the boy's interest in music began to develop way beyond the Beatles and Monkees albums which Aunt Mary had given him years before. They were simply kids' stuff, like ... like the music listened to by the others in Kurt's fourth grade class at school. When he talked about his latest acquisition, albums by Led Zeppelin, Black Sabbath or Kiss, they just yawned. That Cobain kid had always been weird—his classmates simply let him get on with it.

Instead, Kurt turned toward another crowd entirely, junior high kids with feather cut hair and ragged rock'n'-roll T-shirts, wasters dragging their way through school *en route* to a job pumping gas and peddling burgers. Kurt adored them, Don—at the very best—tolerated them, and turned a blind eye to the increasingly bizarre-looking magazines which were suddenly being left around the house.

When Kurt was 10 years old, in 1977, he discovered the American music press, around the same time as it discovered Punk Rock—the snarling bastard mutant which had erupted from the English streets a year before, and was now embracing America's youth in the same spittle-soaked tentacles as it had grasped its own countrymen.

If Aberdeen was hardly a center of musical innovation—the single record store in town carried little more than one would expect to find in any out-of-the-way township, the *Billboard* Top 40 and the back catalog biggies—Montesano was even further from the hub. There wasn't even one record store there while the news stands catered to the commonest denominator there was—guns, hunting and baseball—and in the section labeled music, *Creem* and *Rolling Stone*.

Kurt gravitated towards *Creem*. It was a handy size to roll up in one pocket, it didn't get lost in left-wing politics, and best of all, it was littered with photographs, weird photos, wild photos, photos of people with names like Johnny Rotten and Sid Vicious, Iggy Pop and Richard Hell.

It was a little piece of New York, a tasty mouthful of London, flattened into color print and shipped right across the country to feed Kurt's fervent imagination. It didn't even matter that Kurt had never heard a Punk Rock record, that he had no idea what this new music sounded like. Just looking at the pictures, he could imagine it. It was a scream of defiance, of anger and pain, a cacophonous magick which could cure every ill.

As he entered his teens, emboldened even further by his new friends, Kurt finally embarked upon the weary nomadic course which had been threatening throughout the last few years. A succession of relatives took turns boarding him, some certainly wondering what they could have ever found so enchanting about the unruly little monster which Kurt had become. Passed between three aunts and two uncles, and on to Don's parents, the most constant feature in Kurt's life seemed to be his suitcase. His mother once claimed to have moved from Montesano to Aberdeen at least twice a year, until he was 13 and Wendy stepped back in.

She had finally broken up with the boyfriend, freed herself from the cycle of physical and mental abuse which had all but become her everyday life. But she wasn't working any longer, and she simply couldn't afford to raise a growing boy right then. Instead, she suggested he move in with Uncle Chuck, the family rock'n'roller. Kurt agreed like a shot.

Like Don, Chuck had a fabulous record collection. Unlike Don, he actually played the records, listened to them and loved them. The quest for musical knowledge which the Montesano wasters ha-

instilled into Kurt in their own drunken fashion went into overdrive.

Chuck was well aware just how prodigious a musical awareness was bursting inside his young nephew, and did his level best to encourage it. But he had learned from the family's past mistakes: Gifts to Kurt would be presented not as *fait accompli*, like the hailstorm of paint sets which pounded the six-year-old artist into disgruntled submission, but as choices. "Hey, what do you want for your birthday?" he asked, as Kurt's 14th year loomed closer and closer. "A bicycle? Or an electric guitar?"

Kurt was impressed. A choice? You mean, it didn't matter either way? He grabbed the guitar, barely serviceable used Sears model, and a battered 10 watt amplifier. Then, picking up from where Aunt Mary left off, but substituting her patient description of chords and progressions for the roaring thunder of raw Heavy Metal, Kurt asked one of Chuck's bandmates, Warren Mason, if he'd teach him to play "Back in Black"-AC/DC's howling tribute to their late vocalist, Bon Scott.

Even though he barely understood it himself, there was a primal poetry to the song, a sense that you could master its chords, you never needed any others. "I found out about power chords. With power chords, you could play just about anything."

Before long, Kurt was playing the Cars' "Best Friend's Girl" and Queen's funk heavy "Another One Bites the Dust". He had also figured out "Louie Louie", Richard Berry's garage punk anthem, a staple of every band's repertoire, it seemed since time began.

His horizons had broadened since those days he spent leafing through the Columbia House catalogues, circling the band names which sounded the wildest, just as his experiences had widened since the day when he stared at pictures of Punk Rock, and dreamed of how it must sound.

Watching *Saturday Night Live*, he'd stared in amazement at the musical guests who rolled through the studios. When the Athens, GA, art-quintet B52s appeared, performing "Rock Lobster" in mid-1980, he may have squirmed at their quaintness, but he fell in love with their spirit, and went head-over-heels at the sight of vocalist Fred Schneider's shoes, checkerboard Vans which were simply spotless. The next day, Kurt patiently painted black and white squares on his sneakers.

But the B52s were simply the tip of the iceberg. Across America, infiltrating even into the backwater boondocks of wildest Washington State, the Punk bands who had mutated into the New Wave were now turning up everywhere. Kurt heard the Ramones, and was heartbroken when he discovered that they had once played Aberdeen, four leather-clad New Yorkers whose songs were played faster than bassist Dee Dee could count them in, jack-hammering through their teenage anthems before a half-empty room of increasingly agitated drunk loggers. Kurt remembered the date—March 5th, 1977, the day Punk Rock came to Aberdeen, then turned right around and left it again. Privately, he made a vow to himself—the next time Punk showed its face on those streets, he'd be there to make sure it stayed.

The Clash had a new album out, a fat triple album they called *Sandinista*. Kurt bought it because the Clash ... they were there at the beginning, with the Pistols on tour, and the first night of the Roxbury bellowing napalm and slogans and mantras to a future which had once been unimaginable ... "no Elvis, Beatles or the Rolling Stones". Back home, flushed, excited, he dropped the album onto his turntable ... and it could have been Uncle Chuck, it could have been Aunt Mary. It could have been anyone, but it wasn't Punk. Or at least, it wasn't the Punk he heard in his head.

Fourteen years old, with an electric guitar, a repertoire which grew around the blistered remnants of FM radio classics, Kurt figured that if Punk wouldn't come to him, he'd go to it. "Three chords and a lot of screaming", that's all it took, and upstairs in his bedroom he would cauterize the walls with his noise, his tiny, tinny amplifier shaking its guts out while Kurt thrashed his guitar, wrestling it, wringing its scrawny fretboard neck. "It was definitely a good release."

3

That was the first thing Kurt Cobain ever wanted to be as a child, then—a rock star. He thought about running for President, but “that was a stupid idea.” He’d much rather be a rock star.

That idea lasted until he was eight or nine, and he saw the stuntman, Evel Knievel, on television. The guy was fearless. Revving up his motorbike, already precariously balanced on a narrow plank roadway, many feet up in the air, Knievel would launch himself skyward, man and machine in anti-gravity free-fall, over the rows of parked school buses, cars and lorries, whatever lay in his way. Then, effortlessly, faultlessly, he would touch down on the far side of the gulf, on another narrow plank, and he’d cruise calmly back to earth, smiling quietly to himself as though he couldn’t understand the fuss. Heck, don’t people do this all the time?

Kurt didn’t know, but he thought that they should ... he thought that he should. In the woods around his home, he would arrange obstacle courses that he would have to negotiate, and he was obstinate enough that no number of bruises, cuts, scrapes and pains could deter him. One day, he wrestled his bicycle onto a low roof, climbed aboard and sailed into the garden. Another time, he threw all his bedding onto the deck below his bedroom window, then leaped into it from the first floor. He wondered how it would feel to explode, so he taped firecrackers to a sheet of metal, then taped that onto his chest. The ensuing explosion almost deafened him, but he lived. Yeah, he wanted to be a stuntman.

Now, with Punk Rock coursing through his veins, howling in his head, he was back to being a rock star again, but a Punk Rock star, and he knew just the people to help him do it.

Back living with Don, Kurt had patiently submitted to his father’s demands that he join the Ball Ruth League baseball team. It seemed a total waste of time—Kurt loathed the game, found it futile and boring, and on the occasions when he was called to bat, it was the easiest thing in the world to swing his stick around incompetently, and wait till he struck out. Then it was back to the bench, and more time to talk music with Matt Lukin.

Lukin was a rarity at Montesano High, a person with whom Kurt clicked almost as soon as they met in electronics class. He was into Kiss and Cheap Trick, bands which may have defied Kurt’s taste in Punk, but had a certain snottiness anyway. Kiss were still wearing make-up in those days, firing breathing drag which might have been corny, may have been shtick, but was a lot more exciting than most of what was going on then.

Even better, though, Lukin was in a rock band, and not an all-adults bar band like Chuck and Warren Mason, but a savage, blazing brat band, turning out covers of old Who and Hendrix, but impaling them on an enthusiasm which the original songwriters would have scarcely remembered. They were called the Melvins.

One evening, Kurt dropped by one of their rehearsals, the first real rock band he had ever seen in person. It was before he met Lukin; Kurt went along at the invitation of a friend of a friend of the Melvins’ first drummer, Mike Dillard. He wasn’t even in ninth grade yet, either, but he was horribly embarrassingly drunk on wine.

He told the band they were wonderful about a million times, and was thrown out of the room to return. As he climbed down from the attic where the Melvins rehearsed, he lost his footing and slipped. His first rock’n’-roll show, and if he’d not been so drunk, it would have hurt like hell.

The Melvins were fronted by Buzz Osbourne, a few years Kurt’s senior, and already an imposin-

sight. Like Kurt, he didn't so much play his guitar as manhandle it, thumping out his riffs, but skewing them slightly into something all his own. And already, he had shown that Montesano was not the be-all and end-all of his universe.

Osbourne had been to Seattle a few times, to see other bands or to gig with his own; to Kurt, this was the peak of achievement, and the older boy—he wasn't a Montesano schoolkid, he was a guru.

Osbourne met Cobain's adulation with friendship. That unfortunate evening in the attic aside, there was something innately fascinating about the unruly boy with the wild hair and piercing eyes. "When I first met Kurt Cobain, he looked like a teenage runaway," Osbourne said years later. Then, reflecting on the image which by then was stapled all across the country—"come to think of it, he still does."

Watching Kurt in class, Osbourne would also watch the trail of graffiti'd devastation which the boy left behind him, carving the Sex Pistols' logo into every available surface. One day, Buzz arrived at school with a Sex Pistols photo book—"Kurt, you can borrow this, if you like!" Osbourne could have disappeared the very next day, and he would still have been Kurt's friend for life. As it was, Osbourne had a few more treats up his sleeve.

In terms of his musical education, Osbourne wasn't that different from Kurt Cobain. He was brought up on a diet of '70s metal—"Aerosmith, Ted Nugent, things like that," only for Punk to wipe the slate clean in much the same way as it affected any "reasonably aware, reasonably curious, 14-15-year-old.

"I bought the Sex Pistols album (*Never Mind the Bollocks, Here's the Sex Pistols*) out of curiosity to find out what people who looked like [they did] could sound like."

It was "the energy and the aggression" which affected him most, the amphetamine roar of the guitars which introduce "Anarchy in the U.K.", the stumbling sub-Stooges motif of "Submission", the blatant moron chanting of "I'm A Lazy Sod (17)" and "Pretty Vacant". The music seemed "so uncontrolled, but [it had] such a tight musical focus. It was so different from anything I had ever heard before.

"Then I met someone who had [a collection of] British Punk records—the Vibrators, 99 Buzzcocks, stuff I'd never heard of." It was that which allowed him to sort out "in my own mind, the stuff I wanted to live with—and the stuff I could live without. That collection was my education", and that was what he would be sharing with Kurt.

Up late playing records, Buzz would make cassettes for Kurt to listen to, Southern California hardcore bands like Flipper, MDC, Black Flag, the Circle Jerks, purveyors of a music whose reputations were so wild, whose audiences were so violent, that the Huntington Beach police department actually started classifying some punk bands as gangs, and their fans as gang members. During the periodic clampdowns on the public show of gang colors, you could get run in as easily for wearing a punk-rock T-shirt as you could for sporting a Bloods or Crips leather.

He and Kurt started going to shows together; the first one Kurt remembered was Vancouver's D.O.A., the missing link—as their own geography demanded—between L.A. hardcore and Anglo-East Coast snottiness. The second was Black Flag. Tickets for the show at the Mountaineers Club on Seattle's 3rd Ave cost \$12, and Kurt sold his entire record collection, every last Foreigner, Kiss and Pat Benatar album he owned, simply for one night of frenzied noise and vicious slam dancing.

But it was worth it. After hearing Black Flag in full spiteful flight, vocalist Henry Rollins confronting his audience with the worst fears that their parents could dream of, who could ever go back to the sanitized bleating of Journey and Co.? The next day, sometime around the middle of August, 1984, Kurt spiked his hair "and started spray-painting people's cars. I claimed I would forever be a Punk!"

"Punk Rock is about total rejects," says Mudhoney's Steve Turner. "If you see a bunch of guys on the stage that look like 'rock' people, you say 'oh, a rock band.' It's far scarier to see total freaks up there."

there going AAAAAARRRRUUUUGGGHHH!"

It was the AAAAAARRRRUUUUGGGHHH! which most appealed to Kurt, the primal therapy of society's disenfranchised disgorging itself through one throat-scorching yell. He had already learned about power chords; now Kurt was discovering power screams. Out fishing with his step-uncle Larry one day, Kurt didn't dip his rod in the water the whole time he lay by the river. He just leaned back on the bank and screamed. When Larry came over and asked what was wrong, Kurt simply smiled and said "Nothing. I'm just strengthening my vocal chords."

Now Kurt was telling told Osbourne that he was thinking of starting a Punk Rock band, that it was going to be the best fucking Punk Rock band in the world. Osbourne was in no doubt that he could do it. The question was, did he really *want* to?

"I couldn't relate to people at all," Kurt later imparted. "So I basically hung out by myself all the time, and played guitar."

He enjoyed his self-imposed confinement, particularly when whichever relation he was living with respected, or at least accepted, that the strange boy upstairs was never going to snap out of it and start behaving normally. When Kurt did appear downstairs, it was generally either to grab something out of the fridge, or be on his way out with his friends. Clearly he was unhappy, but what could they do? What could *he* do?

The previous May, Kurt's mother had remarried. Pat O'Connor was a hard drinking longshoreman, and when Kurt first asked if he could come back to live in the house he'd grown up in, her first response was to tell him there was simply no way that could happen. It took Kurt "months" to change her mind, staying on the telephone for as long as he could, crying, pleading, begging. Finally, Wendy relented, but for both Kurt and his mother, their reunion was to remain a double-edged sword.

For Kurt, the hardest thing was to see the way Pat treated his mother. In one oft-related incident, O'Connor stayed out all night long, finally arriving home at 7 A.M., roaring drunk from the arms of another woman. Wendy bit her tongue and left for work as usual, but there was no escape. "Hey! Where was Pat last night?" A couple of O'Connor's drinking buddies were hanging around the department store, and the leer in the voice made it plain that they knew the answer just as well as she did.

Wendy called a friend, and the pair went out and got drunk. Then she stormed home.

Pat was downstairs with Kurt and Kimberley as Wendy walked into the house, went to the closet and pulled out one of her husband's guns, threatening to shoot him. She wrestled with the weapon, trying to figure out how to load it; when she realized that she couldn't, she simply gathered up every gun in the house—and there was a lot of them, Pat was a keen hunter and collector; had Kim collected together all the ammunition she could find, and they dumped the whole lot in the Wishkah River.

Watching from his bedroom window, Kurt's mind was already ticking over, how to turn this latest domestic crisis to his own, personal advantage. Some people reckon the story starts edging into apocryphy here, but that doesn't really matter. Kurt told it like it was true.

The moment the coast was clear, he rounded up a couple of neighborhood kids, handed them a few bucks, and told them to dredge the river for weapons. Then, once they'd collected as many as they could, he hauled the whole lot downtown and sold them.

A guy in town had an amplifier for sale. Kurt bought the amp, then suggested that the two of them head out and get some pot. Only Kurt didn't have any more money, on account of having just bought the amp, but the seller was feeling particularly flush, and told him not to worry. The way Kurt told the tale, the guy blew his entire wad on pot, and not only did Kurt get a new amplifier, he also got stoned in the process.

For a long time, Kurt had amazed his friends by *not* indulging in the vices which made Aberdeen seem at least vaguely tolerable. He was already suffering from many of the ailments which would conspire to make his adulthood so painful—the bronchitis which had dogged him since he was

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