

FAME by David Bowie and John Lennon

(from Mix Tape: Music Memoirs by Ruben Carbajal)

When I was eight years old, David Bowie's *Fame* scared the living shit out of me. The song's creepy, strung-out funky desperation was something that tapped in perhaps, to the anxiety that existed on the periphery of my childhood. The adult world, namely my parents and their troubled lives, was a shadowed reality I was only half-aware of. When Bowie and Lennon go from falsetto, to that inhuman bass, a part of me still gets edgy, and my heart beats a little faster. I can't help thinking of a man falling or being pulled into an abyss, torn asunder by his own terror.

My Uncle Jessie used to baby-sit me around this time. He was sixteen. The year was 1977. He had a girlfriend, and one night he wanted desperately to see her. We talked man-to-man.

"Are you my pal?"

"Yeah."

"We're *bros*."

"Uh-huh."

"Blood **brothers**, right?"

"I guess."

"I think we should make it official."

"What do you mean?"

"Blood brothers never tell on each other, they got each other's back, for *life*. They fight for each other to the *end*. Do you want to be my blood brother?"

"Okay."

"Well, first, we have to get a knife and cut ourselves on the finger and press our blood together. That seals the deal."

"Uh...can we be blood brothers without cutting?"

He paused. I could feel my heart thumping against my chest. I wanted nothing to do with a knife. The idea of cutting myself made me more than a little sick to my stomach.

He took a deep, thoughtful breath. "We'll shake on it. Like men."

“Okay.”

We shook hands. He squeezed hard. It hurt, but I pretended it didn't. He looked me square in the eye.

“Let's go.”

“Where?”

“To meet my girlfriend. Tell you what--I'll take you any place you want to go, if we can go to my girlfriend's house after.”

“Um, okay.”

“But you can't tell ANYONE where we went. Blood Brothers keep secrets **forever.**”

“Oh.”

“So, where do you want to go?”

The nightlife choices for a sixteen-year-old kid in Racine, Wisconsin were pretty limited. For an eight-year-old, they were nonexistent. Yet, a bold choice left my lips before I even knew I had spoken, as if some part of me had been waiting for this moment for a long time.

“Pinball Alley.”

Uncle Jessie raised an eyebrow. The fact that my choice had impressed him was very satisfying.

Pinball Alley was my forbidden paradise. It was my hometown's only arcade; a seedy hole-in-the-wall located in what was considered to be an undesirable, if not dangerous part of town. I had been there once with my father, and had the time of my life. The place was crowded with Pinball Machines, this being those ancient days before the video game revolution. The Alley had a game where you used a crane to scoop up junked matchbox cars into a crate. A quarter for a five minute blue-collar employment fantasy, one, I imagine, a lot of the thuggish patrons aspired to. When I got home, I recounted the adventure to my mother, who nearly blew a gasket. I was never to be taken to such a place again.

It was dark outside, and I was excited, but also a little anxious. It was clear that we were breaking a multitude of rules.

“Remember, this is our secret. You can never tell anyone where we went, okay? Blood brothers take their secrets to the *grave.*”

Right at that moment, those opening chords that I so wholly dreaded, blared out of the car speakers. That loping, foreboding bass line. The mercurial, confused guitar. Bowie's opening salvo, a delivery that starts in panic,

"Fame: makes a man, takes him *over*..."

My heart was lurching up towards my throat. The combination of our covert operation, the flirtation with a blood ceremony, and now...*that song*. I knew instinctively that I should avoid calling in my blood brother favors too soon or too flippantly, still, I couldn't help myself, I was gripped with a desperate fear.

"Anything?" I asked.

"Yes, anything at all."

"Could you start by changing the station?"

He smiled, and calmly switched off the radio. Immediately, a wave of relief.

That night, I stood on a milk crate, and played pinball to my hearts content. I was acutely aware that my appearance here was a novelty. A small group gathered around me; delinquent teenagers with greasy hair and sleeveless t-shirts. Arm and arm with thin but tough girlfriends, all feathered hair and lip gloss. They commented on the english I exacted on my flippers— I tried to ignore them, concentrating my energies on frowning to neutralize a smile.

Later that evening, we winded up in Jesse's girlfriend's cement-block basement bedroom. I remember a black light poster of a unicorn, and a large nylon Union Jack wall hanging. They lit up a bong and made out in a corner, behind a curtain. My blood brother had put Zeppelin II on the stereo, to keep me occupied, and set a certain mood. The smoke crept in the air, the atmosphere charged and exotic. It felt like a little bit of the veil of adulthood had been lifted for me. It was captivating and a bit frightening, but nothing compared to that Bowie song.