

The Missing Ingredient

by: Paul Heinz

I keep telling the guys the band is fine. It's *more* than fine. Aunt Sally's Nightmare is a kick-ass, high-energy power trio serving up rock anthems to entertainment-starved students in the western suburbs, but Tyler keeps insisting we need a girl singer. "Someone with some stage presence, you know? Someone to draw a bigger audience."

"And a good voice?" I add. "Did that make your list of qualifications?"

"Hey," says our drummer, Jeremy. "Either way, it would give me something to look at other than your two sorry asses." Jeremy is the prototypical drummer. Like the song says, he just wants to bang on the drums all day. As long as he's got sticks in his hands, he's happy.

Tyler stares at me through the dark hair dangling over his eyes. Hell, when I first met him freshman year at Truman High School, he was a dweeb with a crew cut, unable to look a girl in the eye, as square as a Scrabble letter. Now, just three years later, he's living the rock-and-roll dream. Why mess things up with a girl?

"Just give it a shot, Alex," he says. "If she doesn't work out we can always can her."

"So, you've got someone mind?"

"Yeah. Her name is Maureen."

I pull out my earplugs. Practice is clearly over. "Don't you know what a girl can do to a band? You ever hear of the Beatles?"

"Maureen is not Yoko Ono. She can actually sing."

"Yes," says Jeremy. "But is she hot?" He's still holding his sticks, which means he might decide to pounce on the cymbals without warning—his way of asserting an ounce of control in the band. It puts Tyler and me on constant edge.

Tyler unstraps his guitar. "Hell, I don't know. Yeah, I guess she's okay-looking. But I heard her sing at an a cappella contest in Maywood, and she was the best."

Minutes later, I leave the cramped carpet-insulated studio in Tyler's basement that we've coined the Torture Chamber and head home, assuming Tyler will eventually come to his senses. For three years now, Aunt Sally's Nightmare has been the one thing that's kept us sane throughout the daily indignities of high school. The last thing we need to do is add a girl to the mix.

But when I return the next afternoon, in front of the mike there stands a diminutive girl with long black hair and a matching black blouse and leggings that contrast sharply against her pasty white skin. As if to accentuate her pale complexion, her lips are glazed in ruby red, and matching fingernail polish completes the package, giving her a sort of half-assed gothic look.

The stillness of the room gets me right away, as Tyler, Jeremy, and Maureen (I presume) all turn in my direction.

"So, Brutus, what's shakin'?" I say to Tyler. I never agreed to this.

“Way to make Maureen feel welcome, asshole.”

“It’s *you* I’m pissed at.” I turn toward Jeremy, who’s sitting behind his drum set. “Are you cool with this?”

Before Maureen has a chance to look his way, Jeremy gives me a wide-eyed nod of approval. It doesn’t matter if she can’t sing a note; having a girl enter the Torture Chamber is a dream come true for him. The only other female who’s ever dared to enter has been Tyler’s mom, who sometimes treats us to a platter of mini ham sandwiches.

“Well, then I guess I have no choice, do I? Two against one.”

“Don’t look at it like that, man,” says Tyler. “Let’s play some music.”

Maureen and I don’t say a word to each other, and after I get my bass plugged in, Tyler, Jeremy, and I start playing a song I wrote during sophomore year called “Smash the Madness,” a driving rocker that needs a little fine-tuning. We run through it a couple of times, and pretty soon we get a good groove going. I rip through the final chorus, and Tyler ends the tune with a bit of sustained feedback that never sounds like it belongs, but whatever. It’s good. It’s always been good. Aunt Sally’s Nightmare is perfect as a trio.

At the song’s completion, Tyler nods at Maureen and says, “So, you think you could try singing that one?”

“What?” I say defiantly.

“Well, she’s gotta sing *something*, doesn’t she?”

“Um . . . no. Actually, she doesn’t.”

“Come on. Let’s just give it a try. Maureen, I think there’s a lyric sheet behind you in the . . .”

“That’s okay,” she says, grabbing the mike. “I’ve got it down.”

I roll my eyes. Sure, she’s got it down.

So we agree—me under duress—to raise the key a major third and let her give it a try. Tyler and I spend a minute figuring out the new fingering and then Jeremy counts us in.

And then something happens. The moment we kick it into gear, the whole song has a new energy to it, like we’ve been playing with an emergency brake on and now it’s been lifted, allowing us to accelerate through the song’s curves.

Maureen comes in on cue: *Riding high on the crest of a wave, heading for glory or straight for the grave . . .*

I’m not really listening. I’m concentrating on the new key, but it feels good. It feels right, and once we hit the chorus the second time, I’m finally at ease with my hand on the fretboard and almost forget that I’m hearing a girl’s voice instead of my own. Playing bass without having to sing at the same time is like releasing shackles from my hands. I play uninhibitedly, exploring phrases I would never dream of doing while singing vocals. I glance at Maureen, and her mascara-lined eyes flash at me just for a second, and her lips curl into a brief smile before she does the “Ooohh, oh oh, oooh, oh oh” part during the bridge. Her skin isn’t as pale now; she’s flushed with energy, and I can see how she could lead an audience into a fury, how—in this context—she could be considered attractive.

Sexy, even. She moves her hips ever-so-slightly and shakes her head during the pauses so that her hair swings against her cheeks. Jeremy, no doubt high on testosterone by this point, is hitting the toms with such ferocity it feels like the ceiling will collapse on top of us.

Once again, we hit the final chord of the song, but this time with purpose. With meaning. Tyler's feedback isn't added just for the hell of it. Now it's imperative. The song is *begging* for feedback. As Tyler kneels down in front of his amp to conjure up the perfect tone, Jeremy rides the cymbals a few seconds longer than usual, and Maureen, lost in the spirit of the tune, exhales an orgasmic "aaaahhhhhhhhhhh," by which point I'm so jazzed, I feel a boner coming on.

The song is over, and a deafening silence replaces what just seconds before was a wave of energy. All four of us glance back and forth between each other, waiting to see who'll say what first. Tyler clears his throat and smiles, because he knows we've just experienced something transcendental. "So, what do you think, Alex?"

"Oh . . . um . . ." The spell is broken, and I'm back in a band that minutes ago was a trio but now is a quartet, and I'm still not happy about it. And I hate how Tyler's lips have stretched into an I-told-you-so smile, but damn, Maureen was good. As understatedly as I can, I say, "Fine. That was good, Maureen. The part after the chorus, don't forget to hold the 'oooh' longer before you get to the 'oh oh.'"

"Oh," she says. "I thought it sounded better this way. Artistic license."

"Well," I half-laugh. "I *wrote* it. So, I guess you'll have to do what I say."

"Oh, God," she says, letting go of the mike. "You're not going to get all snarky, are you?"

"Get all *what*?"

Just then a mind-numbingly loud crash of two cymbals jolts my insides and shoots a rush of electricity through every nerve ending in my body.

"Jesus, Jeremy!" I yell. "What the fuck did you do that for?"

"Uh . . . I don't know. 'Cause it's fun?"

Tyler sighs. "Anyhow," he says, getting back on topic while glancing over his shoulder in case Jeremy plans on crashing his cymbals again. "The song sounded fantastic. Better than we've ever sounded before. Don't you think so, Jeremy?"

Jeremy shrugs his shoulders for my benefit, but then adds sheepishly, "Dude, it really *did* kick ass. You gotta admit."

"All I have to admit is that Yoko here wasn't invited. I didn't agree to this."

"You're getting snarky again," says Jeremy, which makes Maureen laugh, which pisses me off.

"Whether you agreed to it or not," says Tyler, "she just passed the audition. So get used to it."

So I do. We rehearse three days a week, and Maureen keeps sounding better and better. She's a natural, and when Tyler tells me that Maureen is the

missing ingredient Aunt Sally's Nightmare has been looking for, it's hard for me to disagree (though I try). Not only can she hit the notes, she knows how to get the most out of the song, at times practically making love to the mike with aching phrases, at other times thrashing at it with a venomous tongue. Each time I catch her eye, she smiles at me with that crazy red lipstick, and once in a while she playfully shakes her hips my way just to get me to grin, and if I do, she cracks up in such a forceful way, it's one of those silent laughs that fills you with anticipation until you think she might pass out before she has a chance to inhale. I have to admit, there's something about her, something alluring.

One day, during a five-minute break, I go up to Tyler's kitchen to get a drink of water, and Maureen is standing right behind me when I turn around.

"Hey there, Mr. Songwriter."

I pull out my earplugs.

"You always wear those?" she asks.

"Have you *heard* Jeremy's cymbals?"

"Yeah. Good thinking." She looks around the room. "So . . . what do you think? We're sounding pretty good, huh?"

"Yeah. Pretty good."

We get to talking, and I mention a few bands I like, and then she mentions the band Paramore, which I just happen to think kicks butt. We end up comparing our favorite albums and which shows we've gone to, and pretty soon we're sitting at the kitchen table talking about all sorts of shit, the way you should when you're bandmates. Somehow we get on the topic of drummers, and I'm reminded of a joke.

"Okay," I say. "Tell me if you've heard this one. What do you call a drummer with half a brain?"

"What?"

"Gifted."

Maureen breaks out into a soundless fit of laughter, which causes me to crack up, and pretty soon we're laughing so hard we're crying.

"Uh . . . ladies," Jeremy interrupts at the kitchen entrance. "While you two have been bashing drummers, Tyler and I were under the impression that this was a band practice. Can you get your sorry asses downstairs? Maureen, why don't you go first and I'll follow."

She gives Jeremy a sideways smile and says, "You've stared enough at my ass, thank you very much." Jeremy shrugs his shoulders and heads back downstairs, and as Maureen and I get up from the table, she says to me quietly, "You know, I have some songs . . . some things I'd like to perform with the band."

"You write?"

"Yeah. But some of them aren't finished yet. I wondered if you and I could get together and work on them."

She looks up at me with her dark eyes, and I notice now that they're different colors. Not dramatically different, but one has a little green mixed in with the brown, and as I stand there, they seem to pull me in different directions.

Part of me wants to invite her back to my house, where we'll sit in my room strumming the guitar and bouncing song ideas off each other and listening to music. And then maybe she'll say something funny and I'll say something funny, and pretty soon we'll both be laughing so hard that we'll lean on each other for support. And then without thought, she'll place those ruby-red lips of hers on mine and . . .

Impossible. Everyone knows that rule number one in a band is no relationships. Not if you want the band to last. I shake away this scenario and then get pulled in a completely different direction, where I tell Maureen that I'm the songwriter of the band and there's not enough room for two of us, and if she doesn't like it, we were fine as a trio before, and we'll be fine as a trio without her.

I walk a balance beam between the two scenes in my head, careful not to fall off either side. "I think we should wait a little longer before we start trying out new material. We've still got a lot of songs we haven't even touched yet."

She seems to accept this explanation, but a few days later in the Torture Chamber, Tyler makes an announcement. "Hey guys, Maureen and I have a new song. I mean . . . it's really *her* song, but we finished it together last night and we'd like to give it a try."

I glare at Maureen, and she signals for me to bend over so she can say something. I pull out my left earplug and bend over until her lips are practically kissing my earlobe, and a tingle of energy shivers down my neck and into my toes. Ever so quietly, she whispers, "You had your chance, Mr. Songwriter," and then steps back and smiles to the rest of the band. "Okay, boys. Let's rock."

The song is good. It's *so* good. And now I'm pissed. I'm *so* pissed. *I'm* the songwriter of the band. *I'm* the one whose songs have been carrying us for the last three years. Tyler couldn't write his way out of a picture book. Since the band's inception, he's never contributed anything except a guitar riff or two, and now suddenly he's a composer. Give me a break.

I make up an excuse to leave early and I skip the next practice. Tyler texts me: *Dude. Where the fuck have u been?* The only time I cross paths with him at school is during lunch, but I've conveniently avoided the cafeteria and gone straight to the band room all week to eat there with the brass section, and Jeremy and Maureen both go to different schools, so I'm basically just avoiding everyone, trying to figure out what to do.

In the past, whenever I've felt anxious or confused, I would write music. I'd play my bass, and from nothingness would come *something*—words and chords, meter and rhyme, as if the song had always been there, hovering before me, but simply needed a portal to enter, a pathway to transform itself into something tangible. But now when I take out my bass and start thumping, nothing comes out, and my insecurities kick in. *You're no songwriter. You haven't got what it takes. That song Maureen wrote is twice as good as anything you've come up with. You haven't written a song in months.* That last bit is true. Aunt Sally's Nightmare keeps playing tunes I wrote years ago, and my latest bout of writer's

block has reinforced something I've wondered about lately: what if living a cushy life in suburbia isn't conducive to composing great music? Whenever I read about the great songwriters of the past, so many of them have led twisted, deranged, or dangerous lives. They've all had that *something* that's driven their music: a father who died, a mother who left them, a drug addiction, a near-death experience, a wife who slept with their best friend. What do I have? A girl who started singing in my band. Not exactly going to lead to a masterpiece, is it?

I finally decide I have to confront Tyler before the next scheduled rehearsal. Talk it out. Clear the air. I'm not giving up singing *and* songwriting to satisfy Maureen. We've got to have some sort of arrangement. I park my beat-up Civic on the street, and just as I start up Tyler's driveway, I see Maureen. As usual, she's dressed in her gothic black, only this time her lips are the color of actual lips and she doesn't have mascara caked on her eyelashes. She looks . . . less hot, somehow, but at the same time, prettier.

"Hey," I say.

"Hey yourself. Surprised to see you here. Where've you been?"

"Nowhere. I guess I just needed to think things through."

"Made any decisions yet?"

This seems like a strange question, but it gets me thinking, and it keeps me thinking as she says, "We need to talk," and leads me to a stone wall that borders a little garden off to the side of Tyler's garage. She scoots onto the wall, and when I sit down beside her and look into her differently hued eyes, I realize what's been keeping me from rehearsal this week: I want two things that are diametrically opposed to each other. I can have one, but not the other.

"So, we were wondering," she says. "*I* was wondering. Are you really still in the band?"

"Well . . . yeah, but . . ."

She looks down. "Why do you hate me?"

"I don't hate you."

"So, you, what?" She faces me. "Tolerate me? Like me? What?"

I say it out loud for the first time, as much an admission to myself as to her, "I like you. I more than like you."

"You do?" Her lips curve into a smile, and it's so much more beautiful without all that red gunk in the way.

"Yeah."

She places a hand on my thigh and leans in close. "So tell me more."

I sigh. "The truth is, you're a great singer and you like the same music that I like and you're fun and . . ." I study her face, and her soft white cheeks no longer seem pasty to me. They're more like exquisitely carved ivory. ". . . and beautiful."

"Really?"

"Yeah. Look, the truth is, if you and I had just met? If we weren't in the band together and we'd met at a party or at school or whatever . . ."

"Yeah?"

“I think I would fall for you in a second.”

She comes in closer now, like at the last rehearsal when she whispered into my ear, so close that the electrons between our cheeks are pushed from their orbits. My neck starts to tingle again. She lowers her voice both in tone and in volume. “And if you fell for me . . . what would you do then?”

The tingle works its way down my sides, though my gut and to my groin. My voice lowers to match hers. “I’d . . . tell you how much I want you.”

Her whisper is so soft now, so close, I can taste it. “And how much do you want me?”

I answer by placing my hands on her sides, and I’m sure I feel her quiver.

“So you’re telling me,” her lips brush against my cheek, “that as long as we’re in the band together, we can’t do anything. But if we aren’t, then you’d be open to taking this further?”

“Yes,” I hear myself say, but I’m no longer in control. It’s as if a screenwriter up in the sky is writing my dialogue for me.

“Well, since you haven’t been to practice in a week,” she whispers, “you could technically say you’re not really in the band. Which means we’re no longer bandmates. Which means . . .”

“What?”

She places a hand on the fold of my jeans. “We can take this further. Right now. Tell me, Alex. Do you want to take this further?”

“Yes, I . . .”

She places her lips on mine, cutting me off, and then says between kisses, “So let’s just confirm this, since I know you’re a man of principle. You and I can start something special?”

She kisses me again.

“Yes.”

“But only if you’re not in the band?”

She licks my ear.

“Yes.”

“And right now we’re starting something, aren’t we?”

She rubs my jeans.

“Yes.” By now my insides are so ready for action, I’m about to explode.

“Yes. I’m out. I’m out of the band. You’re amazing and I want you.”

She leans back abruptly, stands up, and says in her regular voice, “Good. That’s what I was hoping. See you around, Alex.” She struts down the walkway, past the garage, and into Tyler’s house, and I’m left sitting there with an imaginary dunce cap on my head.

Yes, I’m aware that you can come up with many different words to describe me. Sucker. Gullible. Dumbass. Dimwitted. Shortsighted. Foolish. You could call me all those things and more. Guilty as charged.

But I’ll tell you why I’m smiling as I drive home. I now have that *something*, the missing ingredient I’ve been searching for, the theme that’s going to drive my artistic endeavors going forward for years to come. This might be

enough for two, three . . . hell, maybe *four* albums of heartbreaking, angst-driven, mind-blowing anthems that'll move millions to rock-and-roll euphoria. Maureen, you have become my target. My muse. My nemesis. My inspiration. My meaning. I will spill my guts and compose song after song about you. I don't need to lose a parent or take drugs or attempt suicide, because now, like all the greats before me, I have the necessary tools for a successful rock-and-roll career: heartache and anger.

My masterpiece is calling.

Thank you, Maureen.

Thank you.