

INCOMPLETE

AN NOVEL

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NOT-SO-SILENT LIBRARIAN BOOKS

PROLOGUE

“Sail On, Sailor”



The dusty CD bins at used record stores are filled with the ghosts of one-hit wonders.

As anyone who has watched VHI’s *Behind the Music* can attest, the music industry is a fickle mistress, a siren luring you into her trap with temptations of fame and fortune. However, like the sailors in Greek myths, countless bands meet their doom when the shifting tides lead them not to everlasting treasure – but to a shipwreck.

I was once one of these musical sailors, though I was forced off the vessel before the band met its inevitable demise. Just as things were starting to gain momentum, as the ship was heading towards that mythical island oasis, populated by unfathomable beauty and riches... I quit.

But this isn’t so much the story of a band as it is a tale about sailing those turbulent tides and treading water in the years after. Self-absorbed and egocentric as that might sound, it’s true: what you’re reading isn’t a rock star’s autobiography as much as it is a memoir by a pop music has-been. I promise that I will tell you all about my personal history in due time, but (more importantly) I’m going to present you with an atypical tale.

This, dear reader, is something different.

This is the story of a song.

Now, as you’re holding this stack of several hundred pages in your hands, you obviously recognize that this tale stretches beyond the confines of a three-and-a-half-minute pop song; as with everything else in life, there is always a backstory, an event, and an aftermath that’s much bigger and broader than the original piece of music that I wrote two decades ago. Additionally, there’s a whole cast of characters – probably not unlike people you’ve known in your own life. This is a story about my father and my wife and my daughter and my students and the members of the band that I used to be in.

And, yes, it’s about the Beach Boys.

You don't know me, but I'm the guy who wrote Call Field's "Incomplete (Just Like Your Smile)," a song that peaked at Billboard's #19 spot for three short weeks in the summer of 2000. Although the name might not ring a bell, the melody probably sounds familiar: as soon as anyone starts singing the chorus ("I get *lost sometimes...*"), it tends to spark a personal recollection – perhaps lounging by the lake at summer camp or driving three hundred miles on a college road trip or hitting blackjack three times straight at a table in Vegas on your 21st birthday. In some crazy, metaphysical way, I was there with you – or, at the very least, my song was.

My band's last album, the only one we ever professionally recorded, earned pretty good reviews: *Rolling Stone* magazine called my songwriting "exemplary" and *Alternative Press* said that the world should "expect big things from this ex-punk quartet."

But those days are far behind me now.

When I think about my tenure in Call Field, it feels like another lifetime, like watching a made-for-TV movie from the comfort of your living room couch. The world is full of bands and singers and songwriters who have had a hit song on the radio... but what happens to those musicians when the spotlight fades and the fickle fan base dwindles?

I'll tell you what I did.

I became a high school English teacher.

There are actually a few of us now who have traded our guitars for podiums: Peter Tork from the Monkees, Blake Schwarzenbach from Jawbreaker, John Hampson from Nine Days, Eric Axelson from The Dismemberment Plan, Frank Koroshec from The Autumns – and yours truly, Brian Richard Smith.

Where do all the rock stars go when the lights die out? They grow up, they get jobs, and they try to live normal lives in the aftermath of a truly surreal experience. In my case, I traded an enthusiastic audience of admiring music fans for a tolerant audience of captive high school students. However, I can honestly say that I am happier now than I ever was thumping the strings of a bass guitar on a darkened stage. It's hard to believe, but it's true: high school teachers live more spiritually fulfilling lives than mid-level, major-label musicians.

Plus, the paychecks are more consistent.

While public school teachers are not paid as much as legendary rock stars, we earn a decent middle-class salary. More importantly, though, it's what we *do* with our lives that makes the job so rewarding. My entire existence these days is dedicated to helping young men and women and non-binary folks follow their passions. I already had my chance to dream the impossible dream, like Don Quixote charging at windmills; unfortunately, I got knocked off my horse before I actually battled any dragons. But none of

that matters anymore. My life now is in service of others. And I wouldn't want it any other way.

The tricky part is when the past comes back to haunt you. The Byrds' "So You Want to Be a Rock 'n' Roll Star" provides a pretty concise outline for how to pursue a career in music: you buy an instrument, spend countless hours practicing and refining your craft, then let the good times roll. However, Roger McGuinn and company never prepared a follow-up song about the aftermath of fame. [Side-note: I doubt that a tune entitled "So You Used to Be a Rock 'n' Roll Star" would have been a smash success. Just an observation.]

So, what do you do when the past and present meet head-on? Suddenly, your worlds have collided, and you're faced with a difficult choice. Do you maintain your sense of normalcy with your safe, secure, and comfortable life? Or do you embrace the punk-rock unpredictability that comes with the career of a professional musician?

But I'm getting ahead of myself. All you really need to know right now is that I'm a semi-typical, white-collar suburbanite with a regular job. The rest will be revealed shortly. You might have heard some rumors about what happened to our band, about why I left and how things fell apart. I'm here to set the record straight.

Let me leave you with one final thought before we start. What I believe is this: like the beating organ in Edgar Allan Poe's "Tell-Tale Heart," rock 'n' roll will haunt you until the day you die. It just sounds more like a metronome than a heartbeat.