

DROWNING, by M.V.P.

by James Y. Lee

CHARACTERS:

- **The Band:**
 - **HENRY MICHAELS.** 24, male. The lead vocalist and bassist of M.V.P. "*Chloe Dancer / Crown of Thorns*," "*Nutshell*."
 - **MARGARET PETERS.** 25, female. The lead guitarist of M.V.P. "*Doll Parts*," "*Rearviewmirror*."
 - **SAM VICTOR.** 23, male. The drummer of M.V.P. "*Jeremy*," "*Marigold*."
- **The Manager:**
 - **SHERRY BOOTH.** 31, female. M.V.P.'s manager. "*He's My Thing*," "*Celebrity Skin*."
- **The Journalist:**
 - **TONY KOVACS.** 29, male. A Rolling Stone journalist. "*In Bloom*."

SETTING:

- Predominantly: Shoreline, Washington — Robert Lang Studios.
- Tour and performance locations are marked accordingly.

NOTES:

- A compiled group of the band's musical equipment — various guitars, a drum set, amps, and other necessary accessories — are the only essential elements of the set. **All locations should revolve around this equipment.**
- Underlined dialogue indicates lyrics to be sung.
- A slash (/) denotes an interruption, where the next action or line of dialogue interrupts where the slash is in the previous line.

“I watched Nirvana’s set; I went out on the side of the stage, and there were thousands of people. They were just *on it*, man. *In Utero* had been out not that long, and I was just knocked out by how tight they were...

“I go backstage at the end of the set. [...] There are a couple of guys in suits — the full-on Geffen fuckin’ army... and Kurt’s in the middle of the whole crowd, wearing one of those striped shirts. He walks by and notices me... and he said some cosmic brotherhood of rock thing. I didn’t fully understand it myself at the time.

“A few months later, I bumped into Charles Peterson, a friend of Kurt’s. He gave me Kurt’s phone number and said, ‘Hey, Kurt said he saw you. He said it was really cool. He said you should call him sometime, go up to his house and chill out.’

“‘Yeah, neat.’

“... Two weeks later, three weeks later, I was laying in bed with a broken jaw and arm. Bicycle accident. [...] Val, my girlfriend at the time, called me from work and said, “Turn on the radio! Turn on the radio! They found Kurt dead.’

“‘Kurt Cobain?’

“‘Turn on the radio!’

“And that’s that.”

— John Bigley, quoted from Mark Yarm’s *Everybody Loves Our Town: An Oral History of Grunge*

PROLOGUE: December 1992 — Salem, Oregon — Drowning Tour

Noise.

The sight of a payphone outside of a small rock venue. The door is open. Lights are down on the center of the stage, and all the equipment inside it.

From inside; the raucous sound of a disoriented audience.

High-pitched feedback from monitors leaks through.

The broken-off neck of a bass guitar lies on the ground inside.

We hear some voices trying to cut through the noise:

MARGARET (from off)

Henry!

You're okay, baby. You're okay! Look at me!

A man from inside — HENRY — is sobbing from the distance.

While this chaos unfolds, TONY emerges from the door and approaches the payphone outside.

For a moment, he takes notes of various sights inside the venue, paying close attention to the conversation inside.

SAM (from off)

What's going on, man? You gotta say something! / Tell us!

MARGARET (from off)

It's okay! It's okay, come on... come on, just...

Sherry! SHERRY, HELP US!

Footsteps from inside. Tony still eavesdrops. Then:

SHERRY (from off)

Okay. Okay. C'mon. We gotta get him out of here.

The voices from inside exit to somewhere else.

Tony then grabs the payphone. He dials. He waits.

TONY

Come on... come on. Pick up...

Someone does.

TONY (overwhelmed, excited)

Okay.

Amazing. Hey, Steve?

...

Hey, man. It's Tony. This is real. Whatever these guys are, they've —

Sorry, yeah. Salem, man! M.V.P.'s tour!

...

Yeah, because something crazy just happened here.

...

Henry Michaels? The front man? Went completely nuts. Absolutely ballistic.

Attacked the tech table with a bass guitar in front of an overstuffed house.

...

It's crazy right now.

People just jumping over each other. Broken equipment absolutely everywhere.

I think they've just left to wherever they're staying for the night. I need to—

...

Steve, it's not enough that these guys are exploding onto the charts. We need to start seeing if they can live up to all that now. Because things are *tense* right now. And it's *insane*.

I've heard about twenty different things from people on this tour about what's been happening behind the scenes. Rumors and whispers and actually confirmed stories.

Henry Michaels probably has enough going on to fill at least three full pages. This is cover-story material.

...

I'm gonna talk to the band soon. Yeah.

I'm gonna hear from them directly in detail. See what their deal is.

But this doesn't happen, man. Bands like this don't get this big. And they have the actual chops for it. They sound *good*. They can melt people's faces off. *And* they're on the ropes. I could —

We could be documenting a *completely* new paradigm for rock music right now and what it means for the people making it happen. If we're right—

...

No, I'm not hurt, I'm okay. I said I'm okay!

I'm gonna check in at some point soon, once the tour ends. I have a feeling they're not gonna let me into their business right now.

...

You will not regret this, Steve.

You will *not* regret this!

He kisses the receiver of the phone, and briefly regrets it.

TONY

Okay! Okay. I'll see you soon.

Tony reenters the venue and exits. The cacophony sustains itself for a bit, and then diminishes.

Lights up on the equipment on the center of the stage. We get a clearer view of the broken bass guitar neck, just lying there, a visible wound.

MARGARET enters. She picks up the neck, sighs, and then puts it away.

***A transition** — as the equipment on stage is rearranged, Marg grabs her guitar on stage. She starts playing a couple of chords, with mild distortion — the beginnings of yet another song, yet to be developed.*

As she does...

SCENE ONE: January 1993 — Shoreline, Washington — Robert Lang Studios

The musical equipment on stage is now reorganized. Henry has a new bass.

Henry, Marg, and SAM are all in the studio, not really doing anything with their instruments. Henry and Sam are either sitting down or lying on the floor — Marg, still playing, walks over to join them. They look much better off, overall.

Marg continues playing. Henry takes a drag off a cigarette, shades on, aloof. Sam doesn't do anything with his drums, instead watching Marg's playing.

Marg steps on another pedal, and the sound from her guitar starts blasting from an amp. Sam follows along with the chord patterns she's holding. Henry just stares at her, grinning. She looks at him and grins back.

Henry scooches over to Marg, leaning his head on her shoulder. He gives her his cigarette — they share it for a second as Marg plays.

And then the door to the studio opens. In steps SHERRY BOOTH, clapping her hands to get the band's attention. Marg immediately stops playing. Henry goes back to lying down on the floor.

SHERRY

Alright, boys and girl. What's goin' on?

MARGARET

Hey, Sherry. Just trying something out.

SHERRY

Sounds really good. Try not to forget it.

She sits on the floor with the rest of them.

SAM

What's up?

SHERRY

Rolling Stone. That's what's up. You know that journalist who trailed you for, like, half the tour?

MARGARET

Oh yeah, the guy who just stood around while Henry tried axing the tech guy's head off in Oregon?

SHERRY

Yes, him. Turns out his editors want him to do a longer piece on you guys. Full cover story. Not just about the tour. And he wants to interview each of you, one-on-one.

MARGARET

... Full cover story?

HENRY (somewhat amazed)

Shit.

SAM

What would it be about?

SHERRY (with emphasis)

In his words — “the life and times of M.V.P.”

MARGARET

What does that mean?

SHERRY

Exactly what you think it means. He wants to get personal.

SAM

... Oh, God. I mean, that's — that's a big deal.

SHERRY

It'll definitely get more eyes on you if it goes up.

SAM

No, I mean, obviously. Holy shit. I just feel like there's only so much we can give him. Honestly.

SHERRY

I'm not asking you to go up to this guy and try to remember everything from the second you were born. Even he wouldn't want that, that's bullshit.

MARGARET

We'd have to do this, right?

SHERRY

If you think you're gonna be smart about it. Yes. But I want it to be your call.

MARGARET

... Sure.

SAM

Wait, but, like, what would it take to be smart about it?

SHERRY

Don't give him anything you wouldn't tell anyone outside of this room.

And Henry — if we are doing this, that counts for *you* especially.

Henry looks right at Sherry.

SHERRY

You know what the rumors are. You know what you're doing to yourself.

This guy, Rolling Stone, they will take every chance they can to squeeze those rumors out of you.

If you want to do this — if you want to change what people are saying about you — you *especially* have to be careful of what you say.

Henry just nods.

SAM

How would this change any of what they're talking about, though?

MARGARET

... Because it's Rolling Stone?

I mean, a cover story's big, period. And if we don't screw it up, it'd get a target off our backs. Get us back to focusing on the music in God knows how fuckin' long.

SAM

And if that doesn't work, we'll probably never get to focus on the music again. Just saying!

SHERRY

Okay, calm down for a second.

SAM

I'm seriously worried, like — Sherry, this could go so bad. Marg, like— it's *already* going bad. I don't want this to be the worst example of that. I don't want to fuck this up with *Rolling Stone*.

MARGARET

Who's he coming to first? If we do this?

SHERRY

You. Then Sam. Then Henry.

SAM

What's he going to ask us?

SHERRY (shrugging)

I honestly could not tell you.

MARGARET

I want to know what Henry thinks.

All eyes on Henry. Beat.

He takes a drag from his cigarette.

HENRY

How much does he already know?

SHERRY

What about?

HENRY

Everyone. All our bullshit. Especially if he thinks he knows our songs that well.

SHERRY

... Listen. He probably knows a ton. But I can tell that he's in the same place I am — because neither of us know if the big rumor about you shooting up smack is true.

Right now, what matters is that it's your name. Your face. On that cover. You do what you want with it. With one exception.

The only reason why that big rumor isn't doing any major damage to your reputation is because nobody big enough has written anything yet.

SHERRY (cont'd)

If anything comes out in this story that confirms that big rumor in any way — Henry, I am *immediately* shipping your ass to rehab.

A nervous beat. Henry takes a drag from his cigarette.

SHERRY

I know we talked about the fact that we have a schedule for the new album that we did not want to disturb. But the moment I find out the rumors are true, it will overshadow that album and anything good that might come out of it, I will put everything on pause until we make it clear to the world that you have sobered up. Do we understand?

Distant nods from everyone... and eventually including Henry.

SHERRY

Now. With that in mind. Do we still want to do this?

A pensive beat.

HENRY

Fuck it. I want to do it.

MARGARET

... Yeah. I think we could get this right.

SAM

Are you sure you can do this?

HENRY

No. That's why I'm doing it.

SAM

Hoo boy.

MARGARET

Let's do it.

SAM

Fuck me.

Alright, then.

Marg stares at Sam for a second. Henry remains still. Sherry notices.

***A transition** — Henry picks up his bass. He plays something gently — not the bassline of one of his songs, but instead the bassline for Alice in Chains' "Rotten Apple."*

As the drumset is removed from the stage, and Marg reenters, Henry leaves his bass on the set of equipment, and exits.