

Good Enough to Play at Stevie's

A Short Story by

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It isn't a knock so much as a thump. I guess that's what happens when your 14-year-old nephew knocks on the door of your apartment with a junior drum kit rather than a fist. I guess when you've just hauled a junior drum kit across Manhattan on the subway, you're fresh out of both energy and hands. I guess you knock with what you've got.

I look at Tim and he looks at me. I pause the TV program.

"Expecting anyone?" he asks.

"Blissfully, no."

"Want me to get it, Brian?"

"I'll go."

We've been sitting on the couch watching an episode of Downton Abbey that

we carefully—no, lovingly—DVR-ed. We have popcorn. We have wine. We have a passel of gleeful anticipation that probably does not bode well for our level of domesticity. It flits through my mind that our friends with wild oats still to sow are shaking their heads about us, somewhere, in this very moment.

We had managed to watch a whole two minutes of our precious program when the drum kit knocked.

I sigh. Rise. Open the door.

In the hall stands the aforementioned drum kit. At first I can't identify it as such, because it's all broken down and packed up in black nylon carry bags with shoulder straps. Junior or not, it's a lot to carry.

Among these Stonehenge-like ruins stands my monstrous nephew, Chucky. The Druid.

I don't yet imagine he's brought his drum kit across town. People rarely imagine such things until the bags unzip and they actually see the drums with their own eyes. I assume he thinks he's moving in. Which is wrong on just so many levels.

Meanwhile I suppose I'm only staring. And not much else.

"Aren't you going to ask me to come in?" Chucky asks.

"I was just pondering that."

"What did you decide?"

"I landed on no."

I haven't talked to him in three delightful years. I haven't seen him since Uncle Mo's funeral two years ago. He's changed. He's outgrown the Goth phase. Now he's going with a look that almost passes for hygiene.

"We're related," he says.

"Yeah. I have to admit that much. Regretfully, of course."

"It's important."

"Does Patty know you're here?"

Patty is my monstrous older sister. Who, among other monstrous transgressions against me, brought the monstrous Chucky into my life. And into the world.

"No. And you can't tell her."

"Go home, Chucky."

"It's Charley," he says. "I go by Charley now. Look. I know we didn't always get along..."

"Oh, you mean the fact that you used to call me Uncle Faggot? Is that what you're referring to?"

"Okay, well... that wasn't cool."

"You think?"

"But you locked me in an entertainment center. So shouldn't we be even?"

"No. Because I locked you in an entertainment center for calling me Uncle Faggot. Before that I was minding my own business. Doing you no harm."

"Still. If I forgive you, you should forgive me."

"I have a funny feeling you're only offering to forgive me because you want something."

Tim appears at my shoulder.

"Oh," he says. "It's Chucky. That's interesting."

“Yes,” I say. “Like the ancient Chinese curse. ‘May you live in interesting times.’ He goes by Charley now.”

“Well, that’s an improvement,” Tim says.

“I’m not so sure,” I say.

“I mean, Chucky being an evil, murderous doll from an old horror movie and all.”

“Right,” I say. “That’s what I mean, too. It’s like peeling the warning label off a bottle of cyanide.”

Meanwhile Chucky is only staring at the hall carpet. Which is a bad sign. He should be verbally returning fire. He definitely wants something.

“So, what are we doing?” Tim asks. “Looks like Charley is moving in.”

“I need a place to practice my drums,” Chucky says.

“Oh, I can recommend several,” I say. “None of them are here.”

“The tenants’ association would have our throats,” Tim adds.

“Can I at least come in?”

Tim says, “Sure,” and I say, “No,” at exactly the same moment.

They cancel each other out and somehow I lose.

Chucky and the drum kit come in.

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“You’re still not answering the basic question,” I say. Again. “Why here?”

Chucky only shrugs and digs his hand into our bowl of popcorn. Uninvited. I make a mental note to throw out the leftovers and burn the wooden bowl.

“You don’t know why here?”

Another shrug.

“You have no friends?”

“Yeah. I have friends. But there’s stuff I can’t talk to them about. They wouldn’t understand.”

“Oh,” I say. “Oh. You came here to talk. Not to practice.”

Then I realize I’m not any clearer, mentally. My train of thought tangles back on itself and jumps the tracks.

“Both,” he says.

“Chucky...”

“Charley.”

“Whatever. Whoever you are. We never talk. We never have.”

Silence.

“Is this about your mother?”

“No. Well. Kind of. She won’t let me practice my drums. I mean, she does, but only twenty minutes a day. She says anything more than that gives her migraines. But I’m in this band now. And we might have a chance to play a real gig for a change. And she won’t let me practice.”

“Okay. Maybe I’m making sense of this now. You came here because you want to talk to somebody else who hates your mother. No, that can’t be it. Everybody hates Patty.”

“Hey,” he says. “She’s still my mom.”

“Sorry.”

A long silence. Tim emerges from the kitchen with a second batch of popcorn.

Probably for us, not the kid. Probably Tim's highly refined and socially acceptable version of throwing out the leftovers and burning the wooden bowl.

I stare at my nephew for a moment, who stares down at our Persian rug and says nothing. His eyebrows have gotten heavy and bushy, and he looks as though he could almost grow a wispy beard. He's clearly trying to be a man, but only partially succeeding. It strikes me that he isn't a monstrous little boy anymore. Now he's a monstrous young adult.

"I repeat my question," I say. "Why here?"

"It's just so important." The slight whine in his voice bumps him back down to little boy. "We might get to play at Stevie's. If we can really get our act polished up by then. And I know everybody thinks we're not good enough. And maybe even especially that I'm not good enough. 'Cause I'm the youngest. But I could be, if I could practice. You know. Really practice."

"What's Stevie's?" I ask. Figuring I'll regret it.

"It's a... you know. Night spot."

"Like a bar?"

"Yeah. Sort of."

"You're fourteen, Chucky."

"Charley. And I know how old I am. Stevie's is a chicken coop. They don't serve booze."

I look at Tim and he looks at me. I raise one eyebrow. He sees my eyebrow and raises me a forehead wrinkle.

"What?" Chucky asks, watching our faces.

Where to begin, where to begin.

“First of all,” I say, “that’s an expression from the seventies. Even *I’m* too young to use that expression.”

“It’s coming back,” Chucky says. “It’s retro.”

“Second of all, you still have to be eighteen to get into a place like that.”

“They won’t card the band. The lead singer is eighteen. The other guys all have fake IDs.”

“Third of all, and here’s where it really gets good.... unless the expression has radically changed over the years, that’s a night spot where young *gay* men hang out.”

Silence. For the longest time.

Then Chucky says, “I know.”

“So let me get this straight. You want to practice your drums here for hours on end so you’ll be good enough to go play a gig at a barless gay bar.”

“Right,” Chucky says.

“Sure,” I say under my breath. “Just an average Friday night.”

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I start in on my third glass of wine—defensive drinking—while listening to Tim do a much better job than I ever did of talking to my monstrous nephew.

“So, how do the other guys in the band feel about the fact that Stevie’s is a gay place?”

“They don’t really care. A gig is a gig. They actually pay.”

“Are any of the guys in the band gay?”

“No. Well. Maybe. One guy, Carl. Maybe. I don’t know. I don’t know how you

just ask a thing like that straight out.”

“Would you care if he was?”

“Yes!” Chucky says. Immediately and enthusiastically.

Nothing ever really changes. Or so I think.

“Why would it affect you?”

“I didn’t mean that the way you thought I did,” Chucky says, going sulky and staring at the rug again.

Tim only waits. At first it seems his patience will not pay off.

“How does it affect you if he’s gay?” Tim asks again, when he’s clearly out of patience.

But Chucky isn’t talking anymore. Minutes go by. Literally, minutes.

*For a kid who came to talk, I think, my nephew isn’t feeling particularly verbal.*

Then I make the mistake of looking into the kid’s eyes. Or maybe it isn’t a mistake, I don’t know. I see something there I recognize. Something all too familiar. That sickening mixture of fear and self-defense. Shaken, not stirred. With a twist of shame.

I move in closer. Sit on the couch right across from him.

“Chucky,” I say.

“Charley.”

“Right. Charley. Sorry. Look at me.” For a split second, he does. “Are you coming out to us?”

He looks away again. Fast.

“No,” he says. “Well. Maybe. Depends on what you mean by coming out. If you



mean like this is who I am now and I don't care if everybody knows it, then no. I'm not. If you mean like maybe I thought you guys would understand even though I don't trust anybody else to..."

"You're in the band because you want to impress Carl," I say.

He nods limply, looking like he might be about to cry.

"And if you play Stevie's you figure you'll find out where he's coming from without having to go out on a limb and ask him."

He snuffles. Wipes his nose on his sleeve. Scratch what I said about hygiene.

"Pretty much," he practically whispers.

"Oh, my God."

"I thought you'd know how I feel."

"I do know how you feel," I say. "I know exactly how you feel. That's what I was just oh-my-God-ing about."

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"How much do you relate to that poor kid with every bone in your body?" Tim asks. Quietly.

We're in the kitchen, huddled over the counter together. Now and then I look into the living room at Charley. He's finishing up the second batch of popcorn. He hit play on the Downton Abbey recording and he's watching it without us. If he lets go with a spoiler I'll have to kill him.

"Painfully so," I say. "But I'm not feeling it in my bones. This is in my stomach and gut. I feel like I'm almost maybe inclined to throw up. And somehow I never realized until just now that I felt this way every day from middle school through

high school. Remember that last Thanksgiving we spent with Uncle Mo?"

"Vividly," he says.

"Remember we thought my Uncle Mo was possibly coming out to us, but in a very obtuse way? But it turned out to just be about the art. It was his art he was saying he'd had to bury, so I should, too."

"Yeah. What about it?"

"As unlikely as it was that my Uncle Mo would come out to us... I honestly think it feels more likely than this."

"You're discounting the 'methinks thou doth protest too much' school of figuring these things out."

"We have to talk my sister into letting him play," I whisper to Tim. Still not wanting the kid to overhear.

"But we can't let her know why it's important," Tim says.

"No, definitely not. He confided in us. That's sacred. Wait. How long has he been here?"

"Almost half an hour."

"Oh, God."

I think that's more or less my theme for the evening.

I'm pretty sure Tim asks me more than once what the trouble is. But I'm off in my own little world. I'm having a PTSD flashback. Like a combat veteran on the 4<sup>th</sup> of July. I feel myself curl over my own gut in self-protection.

"Brian, what?"

"My sister is going to kill me. She has no idea where he is. If she finds out he's

here and we didn't tell her... she'll kill me."

"Brian. Get a hold of yourself. I thought you'd been standing up to her for years."

"Yes. And no. I'm having this really visceral flashback to when I was a kid and she'd literally catch me and beat me black and blue."

"What did your parents do?"

"They told us to work it out. They said I'd get bigger than her and I could hold my own. Then when I got bigger they said I couldn't hit a girl. I have to call her and tell her he's here. I mean, seriously, Tim. All childhood trauma aside. Her son is a missing person. She probably has no idea where he is. We know. We have to call her and tell her he's okay."

We must hear the tiniest noise or see a flash of motion, because we both look around. Chucky—I mean Charley—is standing in the kitchen doorway, his eyes deep and sad. Like a real, non-monstrous human person.

"Please don't call her," he says. "*Please?*"

And that, I believe, is more or less the textbook definition of being between a rock and a hard place.

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As if to prove the folly of thinking the evening couldn't take a weirder turn, I'm giving Charley a tour of the spare bedroom, which is where I make and store my art. The tour was at his request.

He's staring at a huge vertical sculpture, sanded smooth and with an angular twist. Like a stylized ocean wave standing on end.

"I like this one," he says.

I think, *I'm in The Twilight Zone.*

I say, "What do you like about it?"

"I don't know. I just like the way it makes me feel. Also I like the color."

It's a radical shade of turquoise.

He asks a question that surprises me. On entirely new and unrelated terms.

"Did you ever see Uncle Mo's paintings?"

"Yes. I did. I helped Aunt Tressa sell most of them."

"Oh. That's right. They were good."

"They were amazing."

"But I like your stuff better. His stuff was sort of... I don't know the right word. Like... old fashioned."

"Well, it was realism. It was classical."

"Right. Like I said. Old fashioned. I was just wondering... you think stuff like this runs in the family? Creative stuff? You know. Art. Music."

"That could be."

"Good. Because you're good. And Uncle Mo was good. I want to be—"

Tim sticks his head in the door.

"I realize this is going to make me very unpopular with you, Charley," he says, "but I called your mom just now and told her you were here. I tried to talk her into coming and getting you in the morning, but she wasn't having any of it. She's coming right now."

"Oh, crap," Charley says.

“I’m sorry,” Tim says, “but Brian was right. You’re a missing person and a minor and she needed to know you’re okay.”

Charley’s shoulders sag. All the air—and all the fight—drains out of him. He turns and slinks away toward the living room.

“But as to anything we’ve discussed,” Tim calls after him, “that’s just between us and it’ll stay that way.”

“Well, thanks for that, anyway,” Charley shoots over his shoulder. It sounds mildly complainy but really not sarcastic or angry. “And you can’t tell her about Stevie’s either, or she won’t let me go. She has to think I’m just practicing with the band that night.”

“Our lips are sealed,” I call in after him.

Then he’s gone.

I look at Tim and he looks at me.

“You have no idea how relieved I feel,” I say.

“Sure I do.”

“Now I won’t get killed by my sister but I also didn’t have to be the one to betray the kid.”

“I know,” Tim says.

“That’s why you did it,” I say. It isn’t a question.

“Yes. That’s why I did it.”

“Damn. Just when I think you can’t get any more perfect, you go and do a thing like this.”

Rather than basking in the compliment, Tim only says, “Let’s go see if he’s

okay.”

We find Charley in the living room unpacking and setting up his drum kit.

“What are we doing now?” I ask him.

“I just want to play for you guys. Once. Two minutes. I know the neighbors’ll complain. But two minutes.”

“Okay,” Tim says. “I’ll officially field the complaints. Two minutes.”

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Much to our astonishment, the kid is good.

Only two neighbors phone in threats. Tim tells them they can wait two minutes.

They do.

It takes the police much longer than two minutes to dispatch and show up anywhere, anyway, and they know it.

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We’re sharing a third batch of popcorn—all three of us working from the same bowl—when we hear my sister’s aggressive knock on the door. Only my sister could express furious, unflinching superiority with a knock.

“She’ll be really pissed,” Charley says.

“It’s how she’s happiest anyway,” I reply.

He snickers. It’s that wheezy little snicker I remember from Thanksgiving, three years back. The one that reminds me of the cartoon dog whose name I can’t recall. It’s nice to hear it directed at someone else for a change.

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My sister arrives preloaded, like electronics these days. Just turn it on, choose a language, and go. But in her case it's not so much an operating system with apps as voluminous anger.

She's heavier now, and her hair is frizzy. It would be terribly ignoble to admit that a small part of me finds this satisfying. So I just won't admit it.

"This is so like you, Brian," she shouts. "You just love to undermine my authority in every way you can. You always have and you've never outgrown it. And every time I'm worried—justifiably worried—about my own son, you just think it's hilarious. Aren't you ever going to get tired of doing this to me? I swear I..."

Right around the word "I" she notices my time out signal. I'm making a "T" with my two hands, which I wouldn't even know was a time out signal if I didn't watch football every Thanksgiving with my father and Tim.

"What does that mean, Brian? Is that some sort of obscene gesture?"

"It means time out," Tim interjects.

A beautiful silence falls.

"Here's the thing," I say. "I didn't invite him here. I didn't know he was coming. He just showed up at my door."

More silence. I'm trying to think if my sister has ever been speechless before. I think I would remember a thing like that.

"And we called you," I add.

"*He* called me!" she shouts. She points viciously at Tim. The way witnesses do when the prosecuting attorney asks if they sees the guilty party in the courtroom.

"Does it really matter which one of us calls you?"

The conversation sags. That's the thing about a conversation with my sister. Or just about any member of my family. Take the anger out of it, it has nowhere to go. It's like a balloon when you let go of the stem. A bunch of wild motion and then nothing. There's just no life left after that.

"Hey, Patty," I say. "Come on into my little art room with me. We need to have a talk."

I shoot Charley a reassuring glance and a sly wink. So he won't asphyxiate waiting to see what kind of talk I had in mind.

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"The kid needs to practice," I say. "It means a lot to him."

"Why was he even here? Why did he come *here* of all places?"

"Focus, Sis. He needs to play. Don't you remember when you were that age? When something is that important it just feels like you'll die without it."

"I mean, you two don't have the best history."

I take a break for a full face palm. This is not the first time my sister and I have carried on two entirely separate conversations at once. But I'm thinking how nice it would be if this were the last.

"Patty. You're not listening to me."

"You're not listening to me, either, Brian. Answer the question. Why did he come here?"

"I asked him that. Multiple times. I never got a straight answer." I'm careful not to smile at my own little coded pun. "Now back to his practicing. He's really good on the drums. You know that, right?"



“No, I don’t. I’m not even sure there is such a thing as good at the drums. If you’re good at the guitar or the piano you get music. This is just pounding. It gives me a headache. Besides. I don’t think I want him to be a drummer.”

“Oh, Patty. Please. You honestly think what you want him to be is going to make a difference to him? That never worked when Mom and Dad tried it on us.”

“It never worked on *you*,” she says, spitting out the word “you” like a bad experiment at an hors d’oeuvre table.

“Oh, come on. Like they approved of *anything* you did?”

That shuts her up.

“Have you tried soundproofing a room?” I ask her.

“No.”

“*Would* you try it?”

“Um. Yeah. I guess so. I don’t know. Those soundproof tiles cost money.”

“I’ll pay for them.”

“The hell you will! I can take care of my own son.” She moves through the art room doorway. Back to the living room. “Come on, Chucky,” she says. “We’re going.”

“Charley!” he shoots back at her. As if from a real gun. “Charley, Charley, Charley! I’m only going home if you call me Charley. And if I can play the drums.”

By now I’m in the living room with them. Watching them stare each other down.

“She’s going to soundproof a room for you,” I say.

No reply.

So I add, “Aren’t you, Sis?”

A long silence. Filled with needles and icepicks and razor blades and switchblade knives. The whole world seems to revolve—teetering some—around this silence.

“Yes. I’m going to soundproof a room for you. Charley.”

Charley pumps one fist in the air.

I feel his victory as if it were my own.

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When his drums are packed, he runs and gives Tim a hug. We all ignore the fact that my sister can’t close her silent but gaping mouth.

Then he runs at me and throws his arms around me.

“You have our number if you ever need to talk, right?”

He nods into my chest.

Then, just as he’s running out the door, I say, “Hey. Charley.”

“Yeah, Uncle Brian?”

“You’re good enough.”

It’s a statement that could work on any number of different levels.

I leave him to take his pick.