



## I

*Roo Kickkick had been living in the town of Barguss, on Blank Street, less than two months before someone picked a fight with him and broke his face wide open. They curbed him. If you don't know, that's when someone opens your mouth and puts it on a curb then kicks the back of your head so hard with their boot heel that the cheek skin around your mouth tears like wet toilet paper and all your teeth come out on the cement like your pocket just ripped and you dropped all your loose change in a clump, except it's got blood all over it and you aren't so sure you want to pick it up. The person who did this to him was . . .*

*Raoul de los Dios, who had six fingers on his right hand and so he had to flip people off with his ring finger cuz the middle finger wasn't the middle finger on his right hand. He didn't care about 'nothing or nobody', that's what he always said. Some people say they saw him pick up each one of Roo Kickkick's teeth and put them in his pocket. One girl who had dirty sex once with Raoul swears that she saw Roo Kickkick's bicuspids and molars hanging on a cord around his enormous naked neck. But Roo Kickkick wasn't the first person Raoul de los Dios beat up. That person was . . .*

*Thorpe Thorpe. He had an electric/acoustic band called Autistik/Artistik, formerly named Historico Future Co., and*

*he played harp/banjo/two-string bass and gutbucket. He wrote most of the lyrics in his basement that he sublet from his older brother. There was no heating in it and sometimes he got hypothermia so he wrote a song about it called 'The Angel of Death'. He looked like a young Salvador Dalí minus the moustache and he kinda resented that we always told him so. The other half of the duo was . . .*

*Theed Teldut, who had originally named the band 6T, which stood for Tee Tee Ta Tee Two Too, but no one ever seemed to get it, so they dropped it. He played the 808, a Dappa<sup>®</sup> drum machine, Neolix<sup>®</sup> Super Jam 550 portable guitar/keyboard and the maracas. Their best song, the one that everyone sang along to at their concerts, was 'Jacques Derrida, You Arsehole, I Love You' complete with British spelling cuz Theed had gotten to go to London for six days and five nights when he won a summer trip once and picked the spelling up somehow. Since then, Autistik/Artistik had achieved a certain cult status in Barguss and we knew that when . . .*

*Florence Mink went to one of their shows. She was born to be a star and everybody knew it. One day, she wore spoons in her hair, at the ends of her pigtails, and everyone thought it was so cool. It was then that we knew she could get away with anything. She even sang the chorus to 'J.D.Y.A.I.L.Y.' as it is known among the groupies – 'Deconstruct the difference / between you and me / and you and you and me / Monsieur bourgeois munificence' – while standing next to her boyfriend . . .*

*Monroe Mister Promised To. He was the kid of the guy that practically owned all of Barguss (car washes and strip malls and ice cream stands) and he always looked bored. He was captain of the ball team and a male model and he had lots of money and so people pretended not to notice when he was so mean to Florence and sometimes people even thought she liked it. Then everything changed.*

*That's the day the blimp came. That's when this starts.*

### **Roo Kickkick & the Big Bad Blimp**

For a year, Roo Kickkick had been healing. Not just physically, but emotionally and spiritually. At least, that's what his therapist told him. And now he had great nice big scars that made him look about like the biggest smiler in all of Barguss. Sometimes people would go and do silly things to make him smile just to see his face crinkle around his prosthetic teeth.

They were beautiful those teeth, so much better than real: white and strong, not discolored in the least. He could eat nuts or steak or even motor oil if he wanted and it didn't matter, not a single stain. 'Beautiful technology,' he would call them, and smile big and sometimes the girls with the matching jackets who hung out on Gee Street would get that kind of attracted/pitying look in their eyes and everyone knew that Roo Kickkick did all right with the ladies cuz he was a survivor.

Word from the girls was that he was 'tender'. 'Tender in the bedroom,' they would say and giggle and each one would know what the others were talking about and sometimes they would put their hands in their pockets and look down at the cracking sidewalk cement or caress each other's cheeks in imitation and close their eyes and maybe even sigh if none of us guys were around the Taco Coleslaw Hamburger Hot Dog Apple. That was the name of the restaurant at the end of Gee Street where we all used to hang out. It was a building built like a food container, all boxy and even had a painted red catsup stain on it. Not like Roo's teeth at all. But we had the sinking feeling that he was just biding his time with the other girls cuz he really had a hard pining for Miss Florence Mink.

This was certainly not good cuz she was with Monroe Mister

Promised To and we all tried to tell him that, but he just kinda smiled and got a look in his eye that no one could hurt him worse than he had been hurt before and we really wanted to believe him but we knew Monroe Mister would run him over with his car sixteen times and then call the police and not even get charged cuz his dad had an affair with the chief of police on the side.

So we tried to tell him that there was something broken inside Florence for her to want to be with someone like Monroe Mister. That she had always gotten everything she ever wanted and that a person like that doesn't know pain and had missed out on some growing up experiences cuz she was like a living shortcut but he wouldn't listen.

He'd just sit on that bench outside the Taco Coleslaw Hamburger Hot Dog Apple and look out into the road that went east/west through Barguss and divided the poor side from the rich side and we were all on the poor side. Then he'd look up at the tree that dumped shade all over us at the noon hour and smile and his scars touched the edges of his eyes and his cheeks got really wrinkled so that he looked super old.

Well, that was the day that Thed wandered by and reminded us about the concert going on that evening, as if we even needed to be reminded about the biggest city celebration since the state centennial sixteen years previous. It was outdoors at the Big Barguss Blimp Ceremony that the city hall had planned in the memorial park (which was kinda funny cuz no one we knew ever remembered what we were supposed to remember the memorial park was made to honor in the first place) and even though none of the older folks liked Autistik/Artistik, they were our only real band and they actually made a CD once in California and all the kids in Barguss bought it and played it out their car windows so loud it rattled their speakers like a little kid banging on kitchen pots. The blimp was meant to increase tourism funds so the city hall was paying them to play

by dropping all the noise complaints logged against them from their time spent practicing at Thed's mom's house. So it was like they were playing for free but they weren't cuz they owed Barguss something around eight hundred dollars for being so loud so consistently.

Thorpe Thorpe wasn't too far behind Thed and he was dragging StaceyLeene behind him and she was on roller skates on account of the fact that all waitresses that worked at the Taco Coleslaw Hamburger Hot Dog Apple had to wear them while working cuz it was their trademark. It wasn't long before someone piped up and called StaceyLeene his 'Gala' and she just blushed but he got all mad at the overt Dalí reference but made us promise to be at the ceremony that night cuz they had a big surprise planned. So it was decided quickly, out in front of the stained building shaped like a food box, under a tree, with cars going by, that we'd all go.

Of course, at that point, nobody but nobody knew that Raoul de los Dios had broken out of the city lock-up by stabbing the guard with an ink pen and stealing his keys. Everybody forgot exactly what Raoul was in there for, whether it was gross bodily harm or drunken assault, but the information surprised none of us. They say he stole a car right there near the jail and drove straight across town to rob the jewelry store owned by Agghe Raine, who once flew to Africa for free cuz he gave a stewardess a ring and even though they weren't engaged she said they were and so he didn't have to pay cuz he was 'family'.

Well, Raoul stomped Agghe pretty good and left him there on the brown tiled floor of his own store and he bled to death cuz nobody came and when we found out about it later that afternoon we all said that finally, finally when they caught up with that filthy psychopath Raoul he would go away and never come back. We didn't care how it happened so long as

he never came back, but it was still mighty unsettling cuz Raoul was all of a sudden on the lam and free to hurt whoever he wanted.

Meanwhile, across town, Monroe Mister pulled up in front of the beauty salon with his blue car, the really fast one, and left it running outside when he went in to pick up Florence but she was chatting and so he crossed his arms and leaned against the doorjamb. The only chair occupied in the whole place and Florence was sitting in it, talking about shopping and lung health with Doctor Nancy, who had given up a lucrative gynecological practice to pursue her first love: beauty improvement. They finished their conversation in between admiring sidelong looks at Monroe Mister lingering in a shaft of sunlight that he had purposely positioned himself in, still with his sunglasses on even though he was sorta indoors.

It only takes five minutes to walk to the big city park from Roo Kickkick's mother's apartment. So we went fast and joked and stuff and poked Roo about Florence cuz she's 'broken on the inside' and 'too pretty to be nice' and stuff like that but he just kept walking and was real good about taking our jibes. We all refused to let Raoul's recent antics scare us into not going. Seemed like the whole town thought pretty much the same way cuz just about everyone was at the ceremony/concert when we got there.

It was really weird and none of us could remember another time when so many people were in one place around here. Since there weren't any chairs, people mostly just sat on red and white picnic blankets or old tablecloths that they had brought. Cuz of that, the crowd looked like a buncha tiny checkers games with the people as the big pieces when we came over the hill into the park. Some people even ate watermelon and spat the seeds out into other people's hair

and it was gross but people were laughing and having a good time.

Monroe Mister drove up in his car and didn't bother to open Florence's door, but we all saw pretty soon that she wasn't wearing silverware in her hair and that was kind of rough cuz some of the Gee Street Girls came with forks in their hair and they had to run home to change. So the concert started without them, right smack in the middle of our two-square-acre memorial park.

The city hall people sat at the back of the roped off crowd area, except they sat on a grandstand that had been erected just for them and 'their pampered asses', that was how Thed described it. Directly across from the grandstand was the stage and it was a makeshift type that rose about five feet off the ground and the front of it was covered with black curtain and about twenty feet above the stage was a big ladder-looking thing all parallel to the ground that held a buncha lights and sound stuff. The whole thing was set between two huge oak trees and the bigger and broader tree on the left of the stage anchored the blimp.

To see it for the first time, all pumped up and hanging there in the sky, was actually quite a sight. Easily three times as big as the stage, it hung high above and it was the nastiest mucus shade of yellow we ever saw, ever. Add to that a black circle on the nose and the words 'Big, Beautiful: Barguss!' emblazoned on the side in black block letters that made us all laugh cuz beautiful was misspelled and the blimp was basically a three-dimensional advertising billboard except bigger and a whole lot uglier. Worse cuz it seemed like such a lie. Barguss isn't big and we haven't been anywhere but Upton to compare it to, but it isn't all that beautiful either.

Well, the city hall people made a few speeches before all the lights came down, casually assuring everyone that the spelling would be fixed before the 'official launch' (which

we all thought that very night was anyway cuz all the posters said so but we never pretended to understand the city council so that was that) and just then Autistik/Artistik made a huge dramatic entrance on the stage opposite them, people barely had enough time to turn around to catch sight of Thorpe Thorpe coming up through the floor and Thed Teldut flying in on wires suspended from the ladder thing above the stage. They played twenty songs and almost everyone our age sang along and they played a few new ones and you could almost see people trying to learn the words right there.

And then, at the end of their set, came the big surprise. Thed and Thorpe jumped up simultaneously and cut the ropes to the blimp with flashing silver machetes and the crowd cheered and the city council people just about committed mass suicide right there cuz we all saw their red faces even in the half darkness and we knew they spent all of that year's budget and the next year's budget on it in the hope of attracting stupid tourists to Barguss to see a blimp. And maybe they were even worried that the blimp would get away and wherever it landed the people that found it would think we were all idiots in Barguss cuz we couldn't even spell the word beautiful right but they didn't do any of that. They just got angry and then got even.

They called the riot police, which in Barguss consisted of only the MarMartuchy family, the father and eight sons that probably tipped the scales at a ton and a quarter all together and went hairy shirtless out into the crowd but wore gas masks and carried shields and clubs and just started beating people 'til we gave up.

So everyone sat down and put their hands up, nice like. Except it was then that we saw Raoul de los Dios was on the blimp, just behind the nose and he must have been hiding cuz no one knew what madness he was up to. He was kinda far away up in the air and waving his arms around as the blimp drifted but there was the cut bit of rope hanging down

from it and we all held our breaths when Roo Kickkick looked Florence Mink square in her pigtails from across the checkerboard crowd and jumped on that old rope.

People turned more lights on the sky and we all saw Roo climb up to try to help Raoul down, to try to get him to safety, though none of us knew why cuz we all would have thrown our shoes at him 'til he fell off and died but Roo was so nice and trying to be good in front of all those people and then we figured it was cuz he wanted Florence to like him.

And then everybody was quiet and just staring up at the night sky, all the stage lights were on the blimp that floated weird cuz it was kind of strung up in the other tree across the stage and looked like it was trying to break free and even the MarMartuchys stopped and then Thorpe Thorpe and Thed Teldut emerged from their hiding hole in the stage and started playing music. Nice and slow and scoring the action, all impromptu.

Roo had a rope around his waist and he was trying to reach Raoul de los Dios who was hanging off the edge cuz he had slipped and when that happened, Thed Teldut did this echoey breakbeat on his Dappa<sup>©</sup> and the crowd clapped and stuff and none of us could tell if it was cuz Raoul might fall on his immense head or cuz Thed was a musical genius.

But the blimp swung around, right over the crowd, pushed from a breeze like, and the crowd 'oooooooooooohed' and we thought we heard Roo screaming something heroic like, 'grab my hand,' cuz he was leaning over the side and trying to grab Raoul. But then de los Dios's grip slipped and he fell head first right into the crowd and by some lucky twist, his skull crushed Monroe Mister Promised To's skull and none of us believed in fate or 'kharma kharma kharma / now bring me the women of your sangha', as Thorpe Thorpe was screeching into the mic just after it happened cuz the music hadn't stopped.

## *After That*

We believed in just desserts though and later that summer we all had to endure a march in a parade honoring Monroe Mister Promised To. It was organized by his dad and we went but we all made bad remarks cuz, after he died, it all came out that Monroe Mister used to beat Florence and he was the one who had at least suggested that Raoul de los Dios curb Roo Kickkick cuz he was a rival and so there was even a nice song played at the funeral called 'Sugar Dog Monroe' and Thed sang the vocals and Old Man Promised To just stood there all dignified with a tear in his eye but he didn't know that it was ironical and we were making fun of his worthless son and we were glad he was gone.

They made a big movie about it, the blimp and everything, two years later, all Hollywood and stuff and some new kid played Roo Kickkick but his scar make-up was really bad and the only thing that saved it for us was that Roo Kickkick was given a credit as an advisor on the film, Florence Mink played herself, and Autistik/Artistik got to do the score. It didn't make much money at the box office (not in America anyway) but it did make a lot in Barguss. It ran for three years in our local theater and a coupla times people actually dressed up like people we knew in the movie and we always thought that was kinda strange.

Roo Kickkick and Florence Mink, well, they kinda got . . . actually, it's really complicated and sorta hard to sum up right here so maybe it isn't so good to tell you about any of that just yet.

As for Raoul, he died, that you already know. We still make jokes though that his extra finger didn't make his grip any better and sure as heck didn't save him from falling.

Thorpe Thorpe moved to Hollywood and lived the high life for a while before embarking on a new Autistik/Artistik album and the subsequent North American and World tour.

The Teldut did much the same as Thorpe. They were inseparable for the longest time.

Under pressure from Old Man Promised To, the town council erected a monument to Monroe Mister in the park where he died but we all used to spit on it when we passed by, and every so often someone would throw a bag of flaming poo at it, cuz we never liked him and he didn't deserve a statue. It sure was a good thing when it disappeared.

Plenty of tourists came to Barguss anyway though, on account of that movie. It was called *Roo Kickkick & the Big Bad Blimp* and we'd still be watching it right now if the print didn't get too hot one night in the projector and get blamed for burning the theater down, but that's a whole different kinda story.