The First Two Pages: "Randy Scouse Git" by Holly West

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An Essay by Holly West

I'm not here to write something that will convince you there is any heavy, deep meaning behind my story, "Randy Scouse Git." Simply put, it is absurd, vulgar, and a whole lot of fun. It is also among the best short stories I've ever written.

My pitch: Agatha Christie meets *This is Spinal Tap*.

This wasn't what I'd imagined when I originally chose the song. My first round of brainstorming resulted in a down-and-out PI named Randy Git, whose family name, Gittenberg, was shortened when his great-grandfather arrived at Ellis Island. My next idea was to set the story in a *Great British Baking Show*-type universe, in which randy scouse git is the name of a Liverpudlian tart the contestants are tasked with making. For whatever reason, I couldn't make these ideas work—or, perhaps, more accurately, something inside of me *resisted* seeing them through to the end.

For inspiration, I turned to the song itself. Mickey Dolenz wrote it after touring England and saw an episode of the British television comedy *Till Death Do Us Part* (the show was the basis of *All in the Family* in the U.S.) in which the term 'randy Scouse git' is used. During the same trip, the Beatles—the four kings of

EMI referenced in the song—threw a party for the Monkees at the Speakeasy nightclub in London.

From here, it wasn't a huge leap to imagine Randy Scouse Git as the name of a band, and once I hit upon the idea, I ran with it. Research involved watching *This is Spinal Tap* (of course) and *Withnail and I*—I'd seen them both a few times, but I wanted a refresher on the tones and sensibilities (or lack thereof) on display in these films. I pictured Randy Scouse Git as a glam rock band, so I made a playlist including artists like T-Rex, Roxy Music, David Bowie, and Slade. I watched a few interviews with T-Rex's Marc Bolan, who loosely inspired Judah's character. It's worth noting that Randy Scouse Git's final form is more '80s hair band than glam rock, but these things evolve, as every writer knows.

The story's premise is that Randy Scouse Git is three months late finishing the songs for their new album and the record company is threatening to cancel their contract if they're not in the studio in two weeks. In desperation, they let a house in the English countryside where they will have the peace and quiet to finish the record—if they don't end up killing each other first.

As this was to be a locked-room mystery, it was important to introduce the modest English manor where the story is set early:

> Selena Fontaine parked at Holland House and clambered out of her hired car. Dressed in a white blazer, yellow dress, and wedge-heeled shoes, her blonde hair undone and blowing in the breeze, she resembled a carefree lass in a shampoo commercial. All daisies and

> sunshine—certainly not the overwrought businesswoman she truly was.
>
> She'd found the crumbling Victorian when Randy Scouse Git, the band she managed, decided to hole up in the country to write songs for their new album. It wasn't particularly grand, but it was large enough to accommodate the band's four members, and remote enough that neighbors wouldn't be troubled by the noise.

We soon learn that the band is on the verge of breaking up, something Selena is determined to stop from happening. From the beginning, it's clear she's lost her patience and her respect for the band's members, even though she'd been married to one and is currently having an affair with another.

> The band's co-founders, Judah Lee and Simon Seymour, had been sparring since they arrived, prompted by Judah's indignation about a write-up in *Rock Scene's* latest issue dismissing their work as "glorified drivel for horny adolescents." With hits like "G-Spot Boogie," "Knob Jockey," and "Pull My Finger," Selena hardly disagreed, but Judah wasn't having it.

I'm the first to admit that these song titles are over the top. That's the whole point. It's the first real clue that this story is satire, setting the reader up for what's to come.

Going on:

> Selena was in love with Judah, but that was irrelevant. Her career was more important than any man. So, when Judah decided he wanted to stay in Yorkshire to write a rock opera, she nipped *that* plan in the bud. Now, she needed to whip the rest of these wankers into shape so they could all move forward.

That last paragraph didn't appear in the story I sent to my editors, Lawrence Allan and Michelle Kubitz. But based on their wise feedback, I added it to

introduce a little bit of mystery up front. Selena, more dedicated to her work than to her lovers, nipped Judah's plan in the bud. But what, exactly, does she mean by that?

As Selena explores Holland House, she finds evidence that Randy Scouse Git is still not taking their job seriously, despite their careers being at stake. The door is unlocked, the band's members are still in bed, and the drawing room is in shambles.

> Bottles and cans everywhere, dirty plates and cups, broken glass and remnants of week-old take-away. Empty bags of licorice allsorts littered the carpet. Ashtrays filled to spilling and an open drug kit on the coffee table, a baggie of white powder beside it. The rod above one of the windows was torn out of the wall as if somebody had tried to climb the curtains, and a football-sized burn mark blackened the carpet. Worse, Judah's bass drum was kicked in, and the neck was broken off her ex-husband Adrian's guitar.

There are clues here—some obvious, some not. I found that scattering clues and red herrings throughout the story was challenging, but also a lot of fun. In writing the first draft, I didn't know what these elements would be; I needed to know the story's conclusion before I could go back to add the clues and red herrings to give the reader a solid chance to solve the mystery. But one thing is clear from the passage above—something bad has happened in this room. The only question is how serious its impact will be.

From here, we begin to meet the band's members in person, starting with Simon, who is passed out on the drawing room floor. Appearance-wise, I pictured Axl Rose, in his heyday, as I wrote his character.

> A groan from behind the sofa startled her. There, she found Simon, the band's front man, nude, snoring, and spread-eagled on the floor with half a hard-on. She nudged his thigh with her toe. "Wake up, you bloody wanker!"
>
> "Oi! There's no need for violence!" Realizing it was Selena, he grinned. "Hiya, love. I was just dreaming of you. I'm up for a quick shag if you are."
>
> She smirked. "Don't look ready, mate." She gestured around the room. "What happened here?"
>
> He picked up a pair of corduroy trousers off the floor and slipped into them. "Looks to me like a bloody good time happened." He zipped up and adjusted himself. "Right, then. I'm off for a wee."

Selena wonders if she's imagining Simon's slight limp as he leaves the room, until she steps into a pool of vomit. The suggested limp adds uncertainty to the story, but she (and, hopefully, the reader) is soon distracted so that the clue might not land as hard as it might've if she'd stopped to contemplate it.

By the time Denny James, the band's keyboard player walks in, Selena's had just about enough.

> Denny came in as she was wiping her shoe with a filthy tea towel. His pretty face was spoiled by a black eye.
>
> "Does that have anything to do with this mess?" Selena asked, nodding toward Denny's injury.
>
> He patted the area around his eye and winced. "Guess things got out of hand last night."

And here, we come to the end of the first two pages, when Selena takes a deep breath to calm herself before reflecting on something her former boss once said (a statement uttered by Marc Bolan in one of the interviews I watched):

> … bands break up for three reasons: ego, money, or death. Randy Scouse Git had ego and money covered. As for death, she just needed to get through this day without murdering all of them.
>
> She didn't like the odds.

I said at the beginning of this essay that I wouldn't try to argue that "Randy Scouse Git" is anything more than a romp through the preposterous antics and foibles of a troubled rock band. But that's not quite true. That thing about bands breaking up serves as the story's theme, and hearing Marc Bolan say it in one of the interviews I watched, I discovered the story I wanted to write. The one I'd make work and see through to the end.

There is a melancholy that accompanies the mystique behind the music and musicians that resonate with us. The stars, many gone too early and in tragic ways, who never get old because they never got the chance to. The tremendous pressures of fame, the novelty of large sums of money, and the rigors of constant touring. They can and do break people. Or is it that broken people strive for these things because they haven't found meaning elsewhere? "Randy Scouse Git" is satire, but I kept the darker side of fame in my mind as I wrote it.

The story also means something to me as a writer; it's both my first locked-room and my first attempt at writing humor into a story. Beyond that, it celebrates

a culture I love, despite its immaturity and self-absorption. When I finally wrote *The End*, I'd lived with Simon, Judah, Denny, Adrian, and Mrs. Thatcher long enough that I missed them when it was over.

Perhaps I'll visit them again someday.

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Holly West (she/her) is the author of the Mistress of Fortune historical mystery series and the Anthony Award-winning editor of *Murder-A-Go-Go's: Crime Fiction Inspired by the Music of the Go-Go's* and *Killin' Time in San Diego*, the 2023 Bouchercon anthology. She's currently editing the 2027 Sisters in Crime Los Angeles anthology, *Los Angeles: Scene of the Crime*, and her most recent short story is "Randy Scouse Git," featured in *Daydream Believer: Crime Stories Inspired by the Monkees,* edited by Lawrence Allan and Michelle Kubitz (Shotgun Honey Books). Holly's life goals include petting a dog on every continent, scoring a vintage Eames lounge at the thrift store, and, eventually, retiring to a senior living community just like the one in Richard Osman's *The Thursday Murder Club*. She lives in Northern California with her husband.