

'Driving Stevie Fracasso reads as great as the fifth Replacements album sounds. A+' **Stuart Coupe**

DRIVING STEVIE FRACASSO

He's about to find everything he didn't know he was missing

BARRY
DIVOLA



'Of course this road trip comes with a top-quality mix-tape – it's by Barry Divola – but it's the layers to this story, and its humour and its heart, that make this journey irresistible.' **Nick Earls**

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Stanza

We were at a gas station just outside Philadelphia when the second tower fell. At that point I knew what was happening in New York, but to tell you the truth, it rated about third or fourth on the list of the most pressing issues in my life that day.

The guy sitting next to me in my ex-girlfriend's piece-of-shit 1985 Nissan Stanza was higher up the list. He kind of started this whole sorry tale.

His name was Stevie Fracasso.

Yes, *that* Stevie Fracasso.

And yes, if you're a music nerd of a certain age, I can answer the next two questions that popped into your head after hearing that name.

No, he didn't die onstage on Valentine's Day, 1981.

And yes, I do know what happened to him after he disappeared off the face of the earth.

Sit tight.

We Respectfully Decline First-Time Visitors

You've never heard the name Rick McLennan. Why would you?

Okay, if you're a sad, middle-aged guy who used to read certain niche music magazines out of New York in the nineties, maybe my name will be vaguely familiar, like the B-side of a single by a second-string indie band you bought a couple of decades ago and only ever played once because it was put there as a total afterthought.

That's me. I'm B-side material.

They say bad things come in threes. I'm not sure who 'they' are exactly, but I would like to meet them and shake their hand and congratulate them on being right.

And then I would like to punch them in the face. Hard. Twice.

The day everything turned to shit started with Train's 'Drops of Jupiter' and the first thing I said was 'Fuck!'

I maintain that this was a perfectly reasonable reaction.

It was my birthday. I was turning forty.

So, thinking about it, maybe bad things come in fives – Train's 'Drops of Jupiter', turning forty and the three things I'm going to tell you about if you feel like sticking around.

Turning forty was not something I was looking forward to or something I wanted to acknowledge, let alone celebrate. Up

until thirty – maybe thirty-five at a stretch if you have good hair – you can still pretend to be young. You can still behave in a vaguely adolescent manner and get away with it as long as you're not too much of a dick about it.

For the five years leading up to my big four-oh, I'd been hanging on to the shreds of my extended adolescence like a man clutching a tattered airplane seat in the middle of the Atlantic. I was afloat, but things were not looking dignified.

Not long ago, I saw a guy who must have been pushing forty riding a skateboard through Tompkins Square Park. I actually scoffed out loud in disgust. What a douche. Didn't he have any self-awareness? Couldn't he see how ridiculous he looked?

Just five minutes later, I caught a glimpse of my reflection in a store window. Messenger bag slung over one shoulder, hair shaggy, unkempt and greying at the sideburns, faded WFMU T-shirt, battered suede Converse One Stars. And here's the kicker. I was heading to the L stop on First Avenue to get a train to Williamsburg to meet—

But wait, I don't want to get into that just yet.

So, the day I turned forty, I slapped the clock-radio hard when 'Drops of Jupiter' came on. I hated Train.

And Matchbox Twenty and Sugar Ray and Lifehouse and Staind and 3 Doors Down and Crazy Town – all shockingly bad bands that were inexplicably huge and omnipresent at the time.

Grunge had begotten alternative rock which had begotten something that was the alternative to good. Bands with preening lead singers who over-emoted about nothing. Guitarists who claimed to hate eighties metal bands but sounded exactly like they used to be in eighties metal bands. Songs that were full of ridiculous brooding, terrible high school poetry and production that was the aural equivalent of a wind machine.

All these bands were slightly different from each other, but they all shared one trait: they were terrible.

The day could only get better. It didn't.

I looked at the clock-radio. It was noon. It was always noon when I looked at that clock-radio. I was not a morning person. I used to be. I used to be at my desk at 9 am without fail, even if I didn't have a deadline. I used to be ambitious. I used to be happy. At least, I think I was. It's getting harder and harder to remember now.

Jane, my girlfriend, had a morning routine that never varied. She'd be out the door at 8.15 am in her running gear. And when I say running gear, I mean an old oversized T-shirt, whatever leggings happened to be lying around and a pair of fake Nikes she'd bought from one of those cheap Chinese places on Canal Street. She was no fashion-conscious gym junkie.

She took the same route every morning – west on St Marks and down Second Avenue, along the length of Sara D Roosevelt Park below Houston, then she'd cut across to the Bowery at Hester, run through Chinatown and make a stop at City Hall Park. There, she'd buy a coffee – small, black, no sugar – and sit on a park bench for fifteen minutes to catch her breath and gather her thoughts for the day; then she'd return along the same route. Those morning runs were more for her brain than her body. She relied on them to sort out her thoughts and her life.

Back to the apartment by 9.15 am, shower, dress and out the door by 9.45 to take the short walk get to work by 10. She was like clockwork. Barring torrential rain or snowfalls, she never missed a day.

I even knew what she listened to on those runs. Old mixtapes in a Walkman. Yes, she had a Discman and she owned CDs. But on those runs she liked to listen to cassettes. It was one of the things I really liked about her from the start. She'd pick one at random from the kitchen drawer where she filed them, then head out the door, pressing play without knowing exactly what she was going to hear.

I used to love the idea of her sitting on a bench in the park halfway through her run in the middle of the Financial District, feet tapping along to The Replacements or the Pixies

or Hüsker Dü, sipping coffee and making her plans while the suited worker ants of New York business streamed around her, rushing to get to their glass towers and spreadsheets.

Jane thought I got up at 10 am. The reason she thought this was because I told her I got up at 10 am.

I lied. I'd been lying to Jane quite a bit over the last couple of years. I'm not proud of this. It's just what happened. You start off being painfully honest with each other, you tell each other everything and you share all your hopes and dreams, and then slowly the infatuation wears off and the animal attraction fades and you settle into a routine and the two of you become like a pair of well-worn boots that have lost their lustre but you can't quite bear to throw away. And before you know it, you've been together seven years.

That's the story of Jane and me.

The night of my birthday, she took me out for dinner to one of my favourite places in the entire city, Vlautin's on the Lower East Side. Ronny Vlautin, who owned the place and was its only chef, was a big man. His magnificent girth was no doubt the result of sampling every item on his menu, which covered two sides of an A3-sized laminated card in small, single-spaced type. There were something like 750 dishes on there, and he could make every one of them on demand from his closet-sized kitchen out the back.

I'd been regularly going to Vlautin's for close to a decade, and I'd never once heard Ronny tell a customer that something was off the menu. The guy was a magician.

He did, however, have rules. Strict rules.

No parties of more than four. He was adamant about this. I once asked him why and he let out a weary sigh and gave me a look like I'd just asked him to do my taxes.

'What can I tell you?' he said. 'I just don't trust groups.'

In some kind of inverted form of snobbery, he also turned away men in suits and ties and anyone carrying a laptop bag.

‘We’re closed!’ he’d yell at them before they’d even made it inside, despite the fact people were quite obviously sitting in the place, ordering and eating.

If any of them managed to get in before he had a chance to close the door in their faces, he would shout, ‘Ichigensan okotowari!’

The sight of a large white man from Queens roaring in Japanese would always mystify them, but it was invariably successful in getting them off his premises. For a long time I thought it was just some nonsense phrase he was yelling, but one afternoon he explained that he’d seen the words on signs out the front of restaurants he’d visited in Tokyo in the seventies.

‘The loose translation is “We respectfully decline first-time visitors”,’ he told me. ‘So basically it’s saying, “I don’t know you, I don’t need you, so get the fuck off my property.” The Japs are always so polite when they’re telling someone to get fucked. Except for Pearl Harbor, of course.’

Ronny’s final rule was this: you weren’t allowed to order a dish that someone else on your table was ordering. Sometimes a hapless first-timer, stymied by the sheer scale of what was on offer on the menu, would become frozen in a state of indecision, and in a panic they would utter those dreaded words ‘I’ll just have what she’s having’.

This would enrage Ronny. If he was in a good mood, he’d say, ‘No duplications. Decision time. Twenty seconds.’

If he was in a bad mood, he’d simply yell, ‘Out! Out!’

I loved Vlautin’s and I loved Ronny. It was my kind of place, and we regulars felt like we had membership to a club that only admitted people who didn’t piss off Ronny too much. It was a privilege to be counted among that number.

The night of my birthday, I ordered one of my old favourites – Pete’s Priapic Pork Peanut Penne. Ronny was unorthodox in both his cooking and naming methods. That dish was named after a writer from *The New Yorker* who was

a regular customer. Pete had always wanted to write a story about Ronny, but after years of countless failed attempts to get him to talk, he finally gave up.

‘What do I need publicity for?’ Ronny asked him. ‘Besides, I got nothing to say. I cook, you eat, you pay. End of story. Go find something interesting to write about, for Christ’s sake. Isn’t there a war on somewhere?’

Ronny actually liked Pete, so imagine how he spoke to people he had no time for.

So, I ordered Pete’s Priapic Pork Peanut Penne, Jane ordered Funky Chunky Chow Mein Soup and Filthy Rice, and later, on the walk home, on First Avenue somewhere between East 5th and 6th Streets, she broke up with me.

Jane always had great timing.

We’d been together seven years. It took about seven seconds to bring it to an end.

‘I think we need to talk,’ she said.

Nothing good ever comes after those six words.