Scar Tissue

Anthony Kiedis

with Larry Sloman

1.

"Me, I'm from Michigan"

I'd been shooting coke for three days straight with my Mexican drug dealer, Mario, when I remembered the Arizona show. By then, my band, the Red Hot Chili Peppers, had one album out, and we were about to go to Michigan to record our second album, but first, Lindy, our manager, had booked us a gig in a steakhouse disco in Arizona. The promoter was a fan of ours and he was going to pay us more than we were worth and we all needed the money, so we agreed to play.

Except I was a wreck. I usually was whenever I went downtown and hooked up with Mario. Mario was an amazing character. He was a slender, wiry, and wily Mexican who looked like a slightly larger, stronger version of Gandhi. He wore big glasses, so he didn't look vicious or imposing, but whenever we shot coke or heroin, he'd make his confessions: "I had to hurt somebody. I'm an enforcer for the Mexican mafia. I get these calls and don't even want to know the details, I just do my job, put the person out of commission and get paid." You never knew if anything he said was true.

Mario lived in an old, eight-story brick tenement downtown, sharing his squalid apartment with his ancient mother, who would sit in the corner of this itty-bitty living room, silently watching Mexican soap operas. Every now and then, there'd be outbursts of bickering in Spanish, and I'd ask him if we should be doing drugs there—he had a giant pile of drugs and syringes and spoons and tourniquets right on the kitchen table. "Don't worry. She can't see or hear, she doesn't know what we're doing," he'd reassure me. So I'd shoot speedballs with granny in the next room.

Mario wasn't actually a retail drug dealer, he was a conduit to the wholesalers, so you'd get incredible bang for your buck, but then you'd have to share your drugs with him. Which we were doing that day in his tiny kitchen. Mario's brother had just gotten out of prison and he was right there with us, sitting on the floor and screaming each time that he tried and failed to find a working vein in his leg. It was

the first time that I'd ever seen someone who had run out of useful real estate in his arms and was reduced to poking a leg to fix.

We kept this up for days, even panhandling at one point to get some more money for coke. But now it was four-thirty in the morning and I realized we had to play that night. "Okay, time to buy some dope, because I need to drive to Arizona today and I don't feel so good," I decided.

So Mario and I got into my cheesy little hunk-of-junk green Studebaker Lark and drove to a scarier, deeper, darker, less friendly part of the downtown ghetto than we were already in, a street that you just didn't even want to be on, except the prices here were the best. We parked and then walked a few blocks until we got to a run-down old building.

"Trust me, you don't want to go in," Mario told me. "Anything can happen inside there and it's not going to be good, so just give me the money and I'll get the stuff."

Part of me was going, "Jesus Christ, I don't want to get ripped off right now. He hasn't done it before, but I wouldn't put anything past him." But the other, larger part of me just wanted that heroin, so I pulled out the last $40 that I had stashed away and gave it to him and he disappeared into the building.

I'd been up shooting coke for so many days straight that I was hallucinating, in a strange limbo between consciousness and sleep. All I could think was that I really needed him to come out of that building with my drugs. I took off my prized possession, my vintage leather jacket. Years earlier, Flea and I had spent all our money on these matching leather jackets, and this jacket had become like a house to me. It stored my money and my keys and, in a little nifty secret pocket, my syringes.

Now I was so wasted and chilly that I just sat down on the curb and draped my jacket over my chest and shoulders as if it were a blanket.

"Come on, Mario. Come on. You've got to come down now," I chanted my mantra. I envisioned him leaving that building with a dramatically different pep in his step, going from the slumping, downtrodden guy to the skipping, whistle-while-you-work, let's-go-shoot-up guy.

I had just closed my eyes for an instant when I sensed a shadow coming over me. I looked over my shoulder and saw a hulking, big, dirty, crazy-looking Mexican Indian coming at me with a huge, industrial-sized pair of cut-your-head-off giant scissors. He was in mid-stab, so I arched my back as forward as I could to get away from his thrust. But suddenly a skinny, little jack-o'-lantern Mexican bastard jumped in front of me, holding a menacing-looking switchblade.

I made an instantaneous decision that I wasn't going to take it in the back from the big guy; I'd rather take my chances with the scarecrow killer in front of me. This was all happening so fast, but when you're faced with your own death, you go into that slow motion mode where you get the courtesy of the universe expanding time for you. So I jumped up and, with my leather jacket in front of me, charged the skinny

guy. I pushed the jacket onto him and smothered his stab, then dropped it and ran out of there like a Roman candle.

I ran and I ran and I didn't stop until I got to where my car was parked, but then I realized that I didn't have the keys. I had no keys, no jacket, no money, no syringes, and worst of all, no drugs. And Mario was not the kind of guy to come looking for me. So I walked back to his house, but nada. Now the sun had come up and we were supposed to leave for Arizona in an hour. I went to a pay phone and found some change and called Lindy.

"Lindy, I'm down on Seventh and Alvarado and I haven't been asleep for a while and my car is here but I have no keys. Can you pick me up on the way to Arizona?"

He was used to these Anthony distress calls, so an hour later, there was our blue van pulling up to the corner, packed with our equipment and the other guys. And one deranged, sad, torn-up, filthy passenger climbed aboard. I immediately got the cold shoulder from the rest of the band, so I just lay down lengthwise under the bench seats, rested my head in the center column between the two front seats, and passed out. Hours later, I woke up drenched in sweat because I was lying on top of the engine and it was at least 115 degrees out. But I felt great. And Flea and I split a tab of LSD and we rocked out that steakhouse.

Most people probably view the act of conception as merely a biological function. But it seems clear to me that on some level, spirits choose their parents, because these potential parents possess certain traits and values that the soon-to-be child needs to assimilate during his or her lifetime. So twenty-three years before I'd wind up on the corner of Seventh and Alvarado, I recognized John Michael Kiedis and Peggy Nobel as two beautiful but troubled people who would be the perfect parents for me. My father's eccentricity and creativity and anti-establishment attitude, coupled with my mother's all-encompassing love and warmth and hardworking consistency, were the optimal balance of traits for me. So, whether through my own volition or not, I was conceived on February 3, 1962, on a horribly cold and snowy night in a tiny house on top of a hill in Grand Rapids, Michigan.

Actually, both of my parents were rebels, each in his or her own way. My dad's family had migrated to Michigan from Lithuania in the early 1900s. Anton Kiedis, my great-grandfather, was a short, stocky, gruff guy who ruled his household with an iron fist. In 1914, my granddad John Alden Kiedis was born, the last of five children. The family then relocated to Grand Rapids, where John went to high school and excelled in track. As a teen, he was an aspiring Bing Crosby–like crooner, and an excellent amateur short story writer. Growing up in the Kiedis household meant that my granddad couldn't drink, smoke cigarettes, or swear. He never had a problem conforming to that strict lifestyle.

Eventually, he met a beautiful woman named Molly Vandenveen, whose heritage was a pastiche of English, Irish, French, and Dutch (and, as we've recently discovered, some Mohican blood, which explains my interest in Native American

culture and my identification with Mother Earth). My dad, John Michael Kiedis, was born in Grand Rapids in 1939. Four years later, my grandparents divorced, and my dad went to live with his father, who worked in a factory that produced tanks for the war effort.

After a few years, my granddad remarried, and my dad and his sister had a more conventional home life. But John Alden's tyranny was too much for my dad to bear. Dad had to work in the family businesses (a gas station and then a drive-in burger joint), he couldn't play with his friends, he couldn't stay up late, he couldn't even think of drinking or smoking cigarettes. On top of that, his stepmom, Eileen, was a devout Dutch Reform Christian who made him go to church five times during the week and three times on Sunday, experiences that later embittered him toward organized religion.

By the time he was fourteen, he had run away from home, jumping a bus to Milwaukee, where he spent most of his time sneaking into movies and drinking free beer in the breweries. After a while, he returned to Grand Rapids and entered high school, where he met Scott St. John, a handsome, rakish, ne'er-do-well who introduced my father to a life of petty crime. Hearing the stories of their exploits was always depressing to me, because they were so unsuccessful. One time they went to a nearby beach, stripped down to their boxer shorts in an attempt to blend in, and then stole someone's unattended wallet. But there was at least one witness to the crime, so there was an immediate APB on the beach for two guys in boxer shorts. They got nabbed and had to spend the whole summer in jail.

At the same time that Jack, as he was known then, and Scott were raising hell in Grand Rapids and beyond, Peggy Nobel was leading what looked like a life of conventional propriety. The youngest of a family of five, my mom was the embodiment of a midwestern sweetheart—petite, brunette, and cuter than the dickens. She was very close to her dad, who worked for Michigan Bell. She always described him as a sweetheart of a man—wonderful, loving, kind, and fun. Peggy wasn't as close to her mom, who, although brilliant and independent, followed the conventions of the day and eschewed college for life as an executive secretary, which probably made her a little bitter. And, as the rigid disciplinarian of the family, she often clashed with my mom, whose rebellious attitude took some unconventional routes. My mom was enthralled with black music, listening almost exclusively to James Brown and then Motown. She was also enthralled with the star athlete of her high school class, who just happened to be black—a pretty taboo romance for the Midwest in 1958.

Enter Jack Kiedis, freshly back in Grand Rapids from a jailhouse stay for a burglary in Ohio. His sidekick Scott was stewing in the Kent County jail for a solo caper, so my dad was on his own when he went to a party in East Grand Rapids one night in May of 1960. He was reconnoitering the talent when he looked down

a hallway and caught a glimpse of a small, dark-haired angel wearing white-fringed Indian moccasins. Smitten, he jostled people and rushed to the spot where he'd seen her, but she was gone. He spent the rest of the night trying to find her, but was content just to learn her name. A few nights later, Jack showed up on Peggy's porch,

dressed up in a sport jacket and pressed jeans, holding a huge bouquet of flowers. She agreed to a date to see a movie. Two months later, after obtaining permission from her parents, the still–seventeen-year-old Peggy married Jack, who was twenty, on the day before her parents' thirty-fifth anniversary. Scott St. John was the best man. Six weeks later, Peggy's dad died from complications of diabetes. A few weeks after that, my dad started cheating on my mom.

By the end of that year, somehow Jack convinced Peggy to let him take their brand-new blue Austin Healy and, along with his friend John Reaser, drive to Hollywood. Reaser wanted to meet Annette Funicello, my dad wanted to be discovered and become a movie star. But most of all, he didn't want to be tied down to my mom. After a few months of misadventures, the two friends settled in San Diego until Jack got word that Peggy was seeing a man who had a monkey back in Grand Rapids. Insanely jealous, he drove 100 mph without stopping and moved back in with my mom, who was just innocent friends with the primate owner. A few weeks later, convinced that he'd made a huge mistake, Jack moved back to California, and for the next year, my parents alternated between being married and being separated and between being in California and being in Michigan. One of those reconciliations led to an arduous bus ride from sunny California to freezing Michigan. The next day, I was conceived.

I was born in St. Mary's Hospital in Grand Rapids, five hours into November 1, 1962, just shy of seven and a half pounds, twenty-one inches long. I was nearly a Halloween baby, but being born on November 1 is even more special to me. In numerology, the number one is such a potent number that to have three ones all in a row is a pretty good place to start your life. My mom wanted to name me after my dad, which would have made me John Kiedis III, but my dad was leaning toward Clark Gable Kiedis or Courage Kiedis. In the end, they settled on Anthony Kiedis, which was an homage to my great-grandfather. But from the start, I was known as Tony.

I left the hospital and joined my dad, my mom, and their dog, Panzer, in their tiny new government-funded home in the country outside of Grand Rapids. But within weeks, my dad started getting wanderlust and cabin fever. In January 1963, my granddad John Kiedis decided to uproot the entire family and move to the warmer climes of Palm Beach, Florida. So he sold his business and packed up the U-Haul and took his wife and six children, plus my mom and me. I don't remember living in Florida, but my mom said it was a pleasant time, once we got out from under the yoke of the abusive patriarch of the Kiedis family. After working at a Laundromat and saving some money, my mom found a little apartment over a liquor store in West Palm Beach, and we moved in. When she got a bill for two months' rent from Grandpa Kiedis, she promptly wrote to him, "I forwarded your bill to your son. I hope you hear from him soon." Mom was working for Honeywell by then, pulling in sixty-five dollars a week, one week's worth of that going toward our rent. For another ten dollars a week, I was in day care. According to my mom, I was a very happy baby.

Meanwhile, my dad was alone in his empty house in the country. Coincidentally, the wife of one of his best friends had left him, so the two buddies decided to move to

Europe. Dad just left the house with his car still in the garage, packed up his golf clubs, his typewriter, and the rest of his meager possessions, and took off for Europe on the S.S. France. After a wonderful five-day trip that included the conquest of a young French woman married to a Jersey cop, my dad and his friend Tom settled in Paris. By then, Jack had grown his hair long, and he felt simpatico with the beatniks on the Left Bank. They had a pleasant few months, writing poetry and sipping wine in smoke-filled cafés, but they ran out of money. They hitchhiked up to Germany, where they were inducted into the army to get free passage back to the States on a troopship.

They were packed in like sardines, tossed around on turbulent seas, and dodging vomit along with insults like "Hey, Jesus, get a haircut." That ride home was the worst experience of my father's life. Somehow he convinced my mother to let him move in with her again. After her mother died in a tragic car crash, we all moved back to Michigan in late 1963. By now my father was determined to follow the lead of his friend John Reaser and enroll in junior college, ace all his courses, and get a scholarship to a good university and ultimately get a good job and be in a better position to raise a family.

For the next two years, that was exactly what he did. He finished junior college and got many scholarship offers but decided to accept a scholarship from UCLA, go to film school, and realize his dream of living in Los Angeles. In July 1965, when I was three years old, we moved to California. I have some vague recollections of the first apartment that the three of us shared, but in under a year, my parents had once again split up, once again over other women. My mom and I moved into an apartment on Ohio Street, and she found a job as a secretary at a law firm. Even though she was in the straight world, she always maintained that she was a closet hippie. I do remember her taking me to Griffith Park on the weekends to a new form of social expression called Love-Ins. The verdant rolling hills were filled with little groups of people picnicking and stringing love beads and dancing. It was all very festive.

Every few weeks, my routine would be interrupted by a special treat, when my dad came to pick me up and take me on outings. We'd go to the beach and climb down on the rocks, and my dad would put his pocket comb out, and all these crabs would grab it. Then we'd catch starfish. I'd take them home and try to keep them alive in a bucket of water at my house, but they'd soon die and stink up the entire apartment.

In each of our ways, we were all prospering in California, especially my dad. He was having a creative explosion at UCLA and using me as the focal point of all of his student films. Because he was my father, he had a special way of directing me, and the films all wound up winning competitions. The first film, A Boy's Expedition, was a beautiful meditation on a two-and-a-half-year-old who rides his tricycle down the street, does a big slow-motion wipeout, and lands on a dollar bill. For the rest of the film, I go on a wild ride through downtown L.A. going to the movies, buying comic books, taking bus rides, and meeting people, thanks to that buck I found. In the end, it all turns out to be a fantasy sequence, as I pocket the bill and ride off on my tricycle.

My dad's budding career as a director got derailed in 1966, when he ran into a cute young roller-skating carhop who introduced him to pot. When I was about four, my dad and I were on one of our outings, walking down Sunset Strip, when he suddenly stopped and gently blew some pot smoke into my face. We walked a few more blocks, and I was getting more and more excited. Then I stopped and asked, "Dad, am I dreaming?"

"No, you're awake," he said.

"Okay." I shrugged and proceeded to scamper up a traffic light post like a little monkey, feeling slightly altered.

Once my dad got into pot, he started hanging out at the music clubs that were part of the new scene on Sunset Strip. Correspondingly, we saw less and less of him. Each summer my mom and I returned to Grand Rapids to see our relatives. Grandma Molly and her husband, Ted, would take me to Grand Haven Beach, and we'd have a great time. During that stay in the summer of 1967, my mom ran into Scott St. John at Grand Haven. After they spent some time together, he talked her into returning to Michigan with him, in December 1967.

The move wasn't all that traumatic, but Scott coming into the picture was definitely disturbing. There was nothing calming or soothing or comforting about this chaotic character. He was big and tough and swarthy and mean, with black greasy hair. I knew that he worked at a bar and that he got in a lot of fights. One time I woke up early in the morning and went into my mom's room, and he was lying on the bed. His face was just obliterated, with black eyes and a bloody nose and a split lip and cuts. Blood was everywhere. My mom was putting ice on one part of his head and cleaning up the blood off another part of his face and telling him he should probably go to the hospital. He was just being gruff and gnarly and mean. It was unsettling, knowing that my mom was in love with this guy. I knew he had been a friend to someone in the family, but I didn't realize that he was my dad's best friend.

Scott had a short fuse and a big temper, and he was physically volatile. It was the first time in my life that I had received pretty hard-core spankings. One time I decided that I didn't like the tag in the back of my favorite blue jacket because it was itchy. It was pitch black in my room, but I knew where the scissors were, so I went to cut the tag out, and I ended up cutting a huge hole in the coat. The next day Scott saw the hole, pulled down my pants, and spanked me with the back of a brush.

So it was a rough little patch there. We were living on a very poor side of Grand Rapids, and I entered a new school to finish kindergarten. Suddenly, I stopped caring about learning, and I became a little rogue. I remember walking across the schoolyard and just cursing wildly at age five, stringing together forty curse words in a row, trying to impress my new friends. A teacher overheard me and called a parent/teacher conference, and I started developing the mentality that authority figures were against me.

Another manifestation of my emotional discombobulation was the Slim Jim episode. I was with a friend of mine, and we had no money, so I stole some Slim Jims from a

candy store. The owner called my mom. I can't remember my punishment, but shoplifting Slim Jims wasn't the average thing for a six-year-old boy to do in Grand Rapids.

In June 1968, my mom married Scott St. John. I was the ring bearer, and at the reception, I got a purple Stingray bicycle as a gift, which elated me. Now I equated their marriage with a great bicycle that had training wheels.

There was a stretch around this time when I didn't see much of my father, because he had gone to London and become a hippie. But every now and then I'd get packages from England stuffed with T-shirts and love beads. He'd write me long letters and tell me about Jimi Hendrix and Led Zeppelin, and all these different bands he was seeing, and how great the English girls were. It was like my dad was on some kind of psychedelic Disneyland ride off in the world, and I was stuck in Snowy Ass, Nowheresville, U.S.A. I knew that there was this magic out there in the world, and that my father was somehow the key to it. But I also, especially in retrospect, enjoyed growing up in a calmer clime.

That summer I went out to California for a few weeks to see my dad, who had returned from London. He had an apartment on Hildale in West Hollywood, but we spent a lot of time in Topanga Canyon, where his girlfriend Connie had a house. Connie was a fantastic character with a huge shock of flowing red hair, alabaster skin, really beautiful and crazy as could be. Besides Connie, my dad's friends were all these quintessential drug-saturated hippie cowboys. There was David Weaver, a nonstop-talking huge man with shoulder-length hair, a handlebar mustache, and basic California hippie attire (not quite as stylish as my dad). He was a brutal brawler who fought like a wolverine. The last corner of my dad's triangle was Alan Bashara, a former Vietnam vet who sported a huge Afro and a big, bushy mustache. Bashara wasn't a macho, tough-guy hippie; he was more the Georgie Jessel of the group, spewing a mile-a-minute comic shtick. So with David, the cool, tough, fighting guy; my dad, the creative, intellectual, romantic guy; and Alan, the comedian, it was working for all of them, and there was no shortage of women, money, drugs, and fun. It was round-the-clock partying with these guys.

Weaver and Bashara had a house near Connie's, and they ran a rather enormous marijuana business out of Topanga Canyon. When I first got there, I didn't realize all this; all I saw was a lot of people constantly smoking pot. But then I walked into a room, and Weaver was sitting there counting stacks of money. I could tell that the vibe was very serious. I thought, "Okay, I don't even know if I want to be in this room, because they're doing math," so I went into the next room, where there was a small mountain of marijuana on top of huge tarps. Connie would constantly have to come get me and take me out to play in the canyon. It was "Don't go in that room! Don't go in this room! Keep an eye out, make sure no one's coming!" There was always the element of suspense that we were doing something we might get caught for, which would give a kid some worry, but at the same time, it's like, "Hmm, what's going on in there? Why do you guys have so much money? What are all these pretty girls doing everywhere?"