

Serpentine

The mixture started to hit as Noel passed through the gate and into the park. He could feel his pulse kicking into high gear, the blood bubbling in his veins—a galloping boil that had him quickening his stride from pavement to dewy grass. That sinking sensation, like his mind had stumbled into quicksand, was coming far sooner than he'd anticipated. *Focus on summat...* The moon was white and low. Here in the park, away from the city lights, you could see the stars. They glittered like raindrops on gravel, like diamonds in sticky tar, like... Noel shook his head. *Songwriter's lot, a constant search for images and rhymes.* Oh, his head did not like the shaking. His step faltered, arms out in search of something to balance on, but there was nothing and nobody around. *Fuck, what was in that?* He let his head fall back, nostrils flaring to drink in the cold air. Maybe the slaps of November wind would keep this shite high from slipping into paranoia.

He walked on, eyes to the ground, trusting his feet to know the way—how many times had he cut through the park to see Frankie? Always him coming to her. Was this the feeling he was forever banging on about? He'd written enough songs about it, but they read like the hypothetical, abject imaginings of a lad well-practiced at selling bullshit. This was an obsession he'd failed to capture. Not a romantic longing so much as a sinister helplessness. It was an almost-violent need for the American that had him traipsing through a cold, wet, and windy park half out of his mind.

The trees closed in, pushing him back to the safety of cement. His boot caught on the Reformers' Tree. He could hardly make out the lettering in the stone, but it had to do with reform, didn't it? The stone was too bright, like it were spot lit from below. *Reform, de-form more like... Norm? Forlorn? No, no, that's stretchin' it...* Words jumped out, words he couldn't make sense of. Black l's and g's whipped out like a cat o'nine tails, begging him to have a go. His heart sent horrible vibrations down to his fingers, so he shoved his hands in his pockets. His eyes traveled up the mosaic. Black pebble branches twisted and writhed; each unfurling snapped in his head like an out-of-tune guitar string.

Onwards. His mind turned to Lolla and that fucking critic who'd blasted him, saying that, with his leather and jeans and Danny Zuko hair, he'd smirked and growled through the show like a less-hard Johnny Cash, which Noel couldn't disagree with since no one was harder than Johnny-fucking-Cash.

Let it go. Don't get angry. Keep walking.

His feet complied, taking him deeper into the park. Taller trees and thicker trunks. *Older than Odin. Odin? Loadin'* A laugh leapt out of his throat. He watched it go, that laugh, watched it multiply into a dozen squirrels and scurry up into the trees. Up, among bare, spindly branches that bent and arched and swayed like prostitutes looking to pull.

Sex, it all came back to sex. He shook his head, despite his body's protest, despite the way his eyes felt like marbles liable to fall out at any moment and go clicking and rolling into the lake. *Marble eyes.* Frankie. No marbles for her. No, hers were pyrite flecked with demon gold and always talking sex. Noel got hard just thinking about them: Frankie's eyes smiling up from beneath long, dark lashes when he ended a kiss; Frankie's eyes retreating behind fluttering lids

whenever he stroked her; Frankie's eyes looking up from between his legs. *Yes*. Those eyes were always talking sex. Noel hurried, itching to have her before the high wore off. She liked to have sex when he was high, said it lowered his inhibitions. As if he had any inhibitions left. Oh, but that feeling was coming faster now, like he was falling, rushing towards the ground at lightning speed.

Too fast, too fast. He tried to hold onto something, but there was nothing to grip. A bloke passed and Noel slammed into him. "Fuck off," the man said snatching his arm back and mock-charging him. Noel stumbled to the side, and the bloke walked on with a litany of 'fucker' and 'twat.' Sounds rained down over him: hooting owls, gossiping leaves, knocking branches. Such noise, falling on his head in pinches and scrapes that pulled at his hair and scratched at his skin.

Control, he needed control. He needed to stop taking hits from people he didn't know. He passed a thicket of trees onto an expanse of grass and gravel. He unwound his scarf, letting the air wrap an icy noose around his throat and blinked, blinked, blinked his eyes. There it was. He could make out the lake just ahead, midnight blue and glassy. And lights; there were lights as well, pulsing and pinging, their reflections stretched down across the water like a barcode. If that was the lake and not just something his mind conjured out of pity, then he was halfway there. He just needed to get to the bridge—*bridge? midge?*—there's another laugh, this one a fat, brown duck that set off on a pregnant waddle towards the water. Noel followed; he was going that way anyway. Yes, if he got to the bridge—*focus!*—and crossed it, he'd be at Kensington. Kensington meant Frankie. He'd find her, and she'd wrap her beautiful arms around him and bury him in her long, dark hair until this night was over.

Knees and palms to gravel. “I’m freeeee to get me some satisfaction!”

Butterflies and bellbottoms, bubbles and balaclavas. It was *The Stones in the Park*, 1969, Jagger kicking about in a white frock. *Stand... No, no, just crawl a bit, that’s fine.* “I’m freeeee...” He was off key, but then so was Jagger most of the time. The gravel jumped and flashed with a chorus of “You Can’t Always Get What You Want,” but they didn’t even sing that.

Besides, he *did* get what he wanted, because he worked hard and he was also really fucking lucky. He had fame, fortune, fun. *Aye, tremendous fun, I can see*—that was Mum’s rolling r’s and heavy l’s mocking the erosion of his accent—*crawlin’ about on the floor like that.* She was always telling him to slow down, to not get caught up in things too much. And Frankie; he had Frankie too. Oh, Mum wouldn’t like her, with her dark and wild ways. But they’d never meet, seeing as he and Frankie were just fucking around and all. She did mention the 27-Club every now and then, Frankie did, mentioned it like it were something Noel should be wary of. Especially when he’d had a string of wild nights, when days would blend and buckle, he’d hear her saying he had too many songs left to go that soon, to settle down a bit. Presumably she’d stop when his next birthday rolled around. *If it comes ‘round.*

He skirted the car park, clambering up to the bridge. The gallery was up in lights; reds and oranges, whites and greens invaded his eyeballs, squeezing till he had to cover them. The traffic roared through his crowded mind. Multi-coloured squiggles danced against his eyelids. *And cold hopes swarm like many-coloured worms in our living clay.* Was that how it went? *No, makes no sense.* He risked a peek through his fingers. *Glass! Many-coloured glass! That’s it...* Noel rocked his shoulders, fighting mounting anxiety, and struggled to remember more of the poem. It was there, it was there, it had to be. He knew the lines by heart. It was in his head, the

words slithering about like some great python of letters. But it was too fast, slipping through the cracks in his mind, just out of reach. An absurd desolation descended on him, tears sprang up and over his eyelids, and his shoulders were shaking more than rocking now.

“Tis we—” *Oh, fuck.* Jagger stood at his side, facing the opposite direction, his curtained-bob hair and white, dandy shirt fluttering in the wind. The tears multiplied, blurring the vision, as those grouper lips continued, “—who lost in stormy visions, keep with phantoms an unprofitable strife.” *Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.* Jagger paused, eyes fixed on the gravel and grass they’d left behind, like he were trying to remember the rest. Noel shut his eyes up tight—against the warnings and the vision and the terror. “And in mad trance—” *Oh, God.* His heart was going to explode. “—strike with our spirit’s knife invulnerable—” *You’re not invulnerable though, are you? “—nothings.”*

Running now. Ignore the stabbing lights and flashing cars. Race across the bridge. The stumpy columns wobbled and reached for him with toothy tentacles. The wind whipped harder, threatening to blow him off and into the inky water where swans would throttle him with their long necks and herons would pluck out his eyes for a late-night snack. *No, no, no!* Cars rattling his bones, a clanging in his ears. The panic came then, thick and heavy, moving like icy sludge through his veins, pushing against the thumping walls of his heart. He was going to die here. On this cold night, in this fucking park, he was gonna die. *Here I come, Amy. We’ll have ourselves a jam, Jimi.* A cackle pushed up and out of his throat and flopped dead to the ground. Noel trampled it. *Run!* Car lights punctured his eyes like rapiers. They were bleeding, cold and salty, pouring down his face. *Run!* Why hadn’t he got a fucking taxi? Frankie drifted across his mind.

Was he in love with her? Was that why he saw her? Could obsession eventually turn to love?

He'd never sung about that. Never so much as contemplated it.

Hands grabbed him, brought him to a stop; beautiful arms kept him upright. "Noel, what are you doing?" Pyrite eyes, narrow with worry. Long fingers in his hair, slowing his pulse. "I said I would come to you..." Noel collapsed against her, but she was strong enough to hold him up. Face in long, tangled hair. "Baby, what is it? What'd you take?"

He might've vomited on her. Noel couldn't remember, and Frankie never said.

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