

“Clark”

Jimmy Stanley

Again, Clark returned to his bedroom, to his desk and its chair, hoping a reset on sitting in this room might be just the catalyst he'd been missing. Nobody writes when they're uncomfortable, or distracted by that discomfort.

But even as Clark's butt settled into the stretchy black fabric and his spine caught against the back, and he stretched and closed his eyes, he knew it wasn't his approach to sitting that was causing him to come up empty.

He'd heard somewhere that Aaron Sorkin would take a shower every time he got stuck. Clark, standing in the shower, steam swallowing up his breathable air, tried to let the hot water cleanse the sticky frustration from his skin. The shower head discharged water like a firehose onto his squeezed shut eyelids, and a gradient of black to white and everything in between played in his head like sunlight dancing on a sandbar. And he stood there and kept his eyes closed, his eyelids a screen, knowing this would be what he'd like to write about, having no way there, already knowing this was really nothing. So many ideas don't hold water. Even the ones born in it.

He grabbed his sole towel from the rack, soaking wet from his previous four showers, and considered something else about Aaron Sorkin — that he'd said he never could have written *The West Wing* without cocaine. Clark gave a *duh* kind of sigh, acknowledging showering as a writer's block eradication method had always been naive. *Of course it's drugs.*

Before he knew what he was doing, he was looking at his old dealer's contact on his phone. But Clark wasn't trying to write *The West Wing*... he wasn't even trying to write a page. All he had to do was complete one verse. And it was already halfway done! But the other half had proven to be an interminable, unconquerable, menacing mountain that left him wanting to drive his fist through a wall.

He'd been at it all morning, and the showers had left his skin itchy and raw, and the three cups of coffee had left him irritable and wired. The neverending symphony of taxi horns and construction noise and dogs barking and delivery guys yelling and ambulance sirens and airplanes humming and helicopters chopping and trucks backing up and beeping wasn't helping. He'd started immediately after waking up — he'd found a quote from Jennifer Egan, author of *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, on Goodreads, where she shared that she always wrote in the morning. It was when her thoughts were the least crowded. But Clark's thoughts were clouded with love, disappointment, and an overall fog that threatened to siphon off any word he could

think of before he even had the chance to bring pen to paper. This cloud hung over him while he slept, and came down to meet him the moment he opened his eyes. And now he'd been at it for over an hour, and all he had to show for it was one nebulous blob of erase marks where the line would go.

It hadn't always been like this for him. He remembered, with envy, the manner in which music once came to him. Then, he had time to live a full life outside of this, and then, when he was ready, it was almost as easy as walking to the front door and bringing in the music like a package left on the step. Like another person had gone through the trouble of thinking it through and leaving it there for him, fully formed. Still, you never can predict what might arrive at your doorstep, and so it was never *easy* — it wasn't supposed to be — even then, he'd experience a soaring elation when he made something actually good. *You always know when it's actually good.* But he had a hard time believing it had ever been this much of a struggle. Nowadays, the good still came to him, but it was embedded in these intimidating tidal waves of inspiration, the good a school of tadpoles to be individually plucked out of the chaos by hand. He'd sit at his desk and try to sort through it, and when the week or month was over, he'd have a few new songs to record before the next wave struck.

But the last was four months ago. He could remember it clearly. As they often do, it came and conquered every aspect of his life, all-encompassing, turning everything into one big felicitous dream. Words came easier, and he was productive, and he had the energy to go out and see his friends and answer phone calls and participate. It was snowing the last time he wrote a good song — the only snowfall of the year in New York.

Before he knew what was happening, he was out in the hot spring morning, feeling tears well up in his eyes. He didn't let them fall. He wasn't even sure what he was sad about. He thought about the thousands of voice memos sitting in his phone in his pocket, like a universe of starting points, a warehouse of portals leading nowhere. Doors too heavy to open. He thought about the fact that most people he had or would ever meet would never even think to try to write a song. He wondered if it'd be so bad if he went on like he'd never tried. Back to a simple existence as someone that wasn't burdened with this. The disconcerting truth was that nobody would ever know what an acquiescence that would be to him, because at that moment, it was all for him, to prove something to himself.

Clark thought about how music was like sex — an expert few movements from your partner (any force, seemingly out of nowhere) and you're in it, stimulation in tandem,

call-and-response. Those initial few notes, measures, moments, that started this journey may be long in the rearview, but the inspiration lives on and carries you through to the end. An electrical spark in a closed circuit system. And only when that golden sliver grays does the thing, as a whole, like an apple rotting from the core, give. Clark thought about it like this; you can't have sex without excitement, and you can't have excitement without sustained arousal. Arousal is to sex what inspiration is to writing. The main difference is that, in writing music, your partner is conjured entirely by yourself, so you only get what you put in. Getting the ball rolling is sometimes the problem, but clearing the path is another discussion.

But then Clark also considered that there were many, many more sexual situations that he hadn't even considered. Some that don't involve a man at all, or a woman, or *either*. He wondered if the fact that he hadn't even considered this made him part of the *problem* but concluded not, since he had, eventually, gotten there on his own.

All this meditating on sex in public was dangerous. Life, being a punishingly long string of unforgettable moments, whether or not you want to remember them, had a way of regularly calling up the most abject experiences. Admonitions sing louder than triumphs.

Then Clark was sitting criss-cross-applesauce on the rug in the front of his seventh grade social studies classroom. Ms. Castle was giving some sort of presentation — on what, he didn't know... details like that don't usually surface in these types of memories, and didn't here — and Clark, the hooligan that he was and would continue to be long after, was making a face or whispering or whatever it may have been that had caused Ms. Castle to stop her presentation, "for the last time," and direct Clark to move to the other side of the semi-circle of students. A very simple approach to this situation *normally* would have been for Clark to have stood up and walked in front of (or through) his classmates to the other side of the semi-circle and sat down. But he couldn't, because he was in the midst of experiencing a random, pubescent erection. He tried to convince Ms. Castle he would stop, but she wasn't having it. So he stood up, hunched over, and ran all the way to the back of the room, around the desks, taking his time so as to obfuscate his embarrassing, momentary misfortune, and then back up to the front until he had finally reached the other side of the semi-circle; his journey brought him only about seven feet from where he'd started. The thought was that, instead of standing up straight and humiliating himself, doing this would make it a joke — wasting the teacher's time, and confounding his classmates all at once. Obviously, it wasn't funny, and he felt everyone's eyes on him as he finally sat down, face flushed.

He had thought about that many times over the years, insignificant as it may seem, because retrospectively, Clark had blamed this moment for initiating him into a lifelong

commitment to this shrewd existence he still found himself in up to this moment, intended to circumvent any possibility that he would ever be put in that sort of unwinnable situation ever again. And yet here he was, meandering through Central Park, with the same tent positioning itself in his trousers like all those years ago. He thought about Ben Stiller in *Flirting with Disaster*, returning from an adulterous hallway encounter with Tea Leoni to his marital bed with Patricia Arquette, trying to avoid questioning and embarrassment about his own erection by facing away from her. But now the whole world was around Clark, and he couldn't just turn around. He looked around, and sure enough, people filled every nook of his peripheral. He reached down and tucked up in one fell swoop with the surety of a practiced veteran and kept walking.

Despite the fact that there were people surrounding Clark in every imaginable direction, he felt invisible, wondering how it was that he could just reach into his pants and reposition himself and meet no resistance. It was like the songwriting — a battle that mattered only to him. And he began to wonder if things that only mattered to him mattered at all.

He wasn't quite sure where he was walking to, only that going back home meant facing more frustration or admitting defeat. Staying on the move was the only sure way of prolonging the debacle. He didn't want to face these big questions that had already diluted the day's optimism. He didn't want to think about the fact that nobody would care if he quit writing music — even if it was true, why would it matter? It didn't mean it would remain true. Maybe if a fifteen year old Bob Dylan had forfeited after his formative songwriting endeavors nobody would've noticed, but the following generations would've *felt* the phantom void left by its absence, and they'd never have the luxury of placing a finger on what they were lacking.

It occurred to Clark that, perhaps, these questions he found himself asking might have something to do with his recent lack of production. Because for all the value in questioning the world around you, sometimes the best way to get a move on was to stop asking *why* and just do the thing. Maybe these worries about his own ability and importance would simply *vanish*, as suddenly and jarringly as they'd appeared. Then he could go back to just playing guitar and surprising himself like he used to. Maybe the questioning itself was the issue.

His walks were a desultory reprieve, Clark knowing himself well enough to know that if he were at his desk at this very moment, he wouldn't be able to resist the urge to label himself a failure and a has-been, had he ever been anything. These walks ameliorated him in context to the world around him.

But he'd already gone far and was, still, no closer to feeling inspired. The rest of that verse wasn't going to find its impetus in the *Unfortunate Adventures of BonerBoy*. No matter — Clark also knew that he was more than the songs he wrote. He had friends, a life, a revered and historic city to explore aimlessly. He approached the *Alice in Wonderland* statue near the sailboat pond and wondered why *they* thought to even make it, wondering who *they* were and also not caring enough to even skim the plaque that was right there, surely holding the answers to this pressing inquiry.

*They* were a societal force that Clark would never feel a part of. Why did *they* think *Toy Story* needed a fourth and, inevitably, a fifth movie? *They* should really reopen the stretch of the East River Esplanade that goes from 71st Street to 59th. *They* really need to make more subway lines that traverse Brooklyn vertically. *They* need to place (and enforce) a detrimental fine for gratuitous honking. When *they* switched everything to duo-authentication, life got a whole lot harder.

*They* made decisions, seemingly in some secret penthouse where only *they* could go, unaccountably and anonymously.

Clark was finally back in familiar territory by the time the sun was going down. Sometimes, on these frustration walks, he would find himself *very* far away from home — the financial district, or the other side of the Brooklyn Bridge, and once even in some Long Island town outskirting Queens. He would open his already open eyes and wonder why his body wanted so badly to get away from anything and everything that reminded him of his own life, like even the cells that composed him didn't want to associate themselves with the Eeyore he'd become.

Every inch closer Clark got to his building, he got closer to his desk with that song he hadn't finished, and he knew there would be no sleep tonight without *some* progress.

Being pulled out of the immediate struggle, one can spectate art from a far, to see it for what it really is — a series of decisions within a medium, leading to a final piece of work. Good art feels inevitable yet surprising, and as a result, equal parts enticing and engaging and satisfying. Each new movement of the music is like another bite of a delicious sandwich, where not all the ingredients are homogenous throughout. They don't need to be; it's the variety of each bite that makes you want to get another two weeks later. And yet, while each bite is different, they still *feel* like part of the same thing. Far be it to describe eating a sandwich as a *thrill*, but that's the feeling nevertheless.

But it also requires the ability to see the bigger picture. Waking up in this moment, following muscle-memory through the corridors of the Upper East Side, one must be able to zoom out mentally and see themselves for what they are — a speck traveling north on a thin vertical island, east of a giant park that is a thin vertical sliver within that vertical island, surrounded by water, with New Jersey to the west and the south and Long Island to the east, Westchester County and Connecticut to the northeast, and so on and so on. The artist can wow their audience when they view life from that kind of angle, because even though they may tell the majority of their story in the small scale nitty-gritty minutiae, what they can see from the dot's limited and intimate perspective, the minute they zoom out and go macro, the audience will perk up in their chair. Nobody, in that moment, questions who is in charge.

Clark reached his block, his building facade looming large like an approaching storm. He was so distracted — traumatic childhood boners, songwriting and why he wasn't good at it, *them* — that he had hardly even noticed he'd approached home.

He wove through the creative jetsam strewn across his room, past the mattress on the floor and the towels and baseball caps and old letters and photographs covering the ground, and sat at his desk on the chair he'd found on the street with the stretchy fabric.

And he looked down at the E flats and the puns and metaphors that made up his choruses, identical except for slightly tweaked verb tenses, and faced reality as he saw it. That this moment was already in the past. He missed his chance to cauterize this as something finished when he chose to go for a walk. Regardless of whatever lines he tried to tack on to the end of the verse he hadn't finished, it would be just that — an afterthought, an attempt to close a container of creative expression from a different moment. Like trying to finish a painting eighty years after you started it, only now you're blind, and can only faintly imagine what it felt like to see. It would stick out like teeth in a cheekless mouth. The golden sliver had grayed. The spark in the closed circuit had died. The apple had rotted from the inside. The collective glare of his classmates burned on his skin. The cloud closed in.

Clark had always been nostalgic. Childhood photos littered his walls like a shrine to himself — he had friends, but he preferred a group picture of his first grade friend group be on his desk rather than his current one. Nothing made him sadder than forgetting; what was the point of doing anything if everyone else was just going to pretend like it never happened? People were weird that way, not wanting to remember, and apparently he was *weird* for feeling otherwise.

On his dresser was a framed portrait of himself with his high school sweetheart, at prom. Photobooth strips of the two hung on the wall, as well as a collage of family Christmas cards, sticky notes from friends, a poem a friend had written him, and endless tchotchkes and ticket stubs and restaurant menus (from college, of course, not from Manhattan).

Clogging his vision was a new batch of tears — slower, fuller than the ones from that morning, as these weren't tears of frustration or anger, these were tears of surrender.

The lyrics, already quasi-inscrutable in Clark's primitive chicken scratch, became hieroglyphics once his melancholia rained down on them. They might as well already be erased... forgotten. Clark cut off a piece of tape and stuck the song to the wall, relegating it to a special status of remembrance, being that it would be the last one he'd ever write.

*In memoriam: the nail in the coffin of a dream surrendered*, he wrote melodramatically on the wet paper.

The bassey thump of club music in Clark's ear gave him the impression of being underwater. So he swam between friends and strangers, drunk enough to confuse the new faces with being equally comraderant as those of his actual friends.

He sauntered from friend to stranger-friend, explaining his current situation. He said things like *the towel is in the hamper, so to speak*, and *it sucks because I'm not really good at anything else*. Those who knew him feigned expressions of disappointment, but knew Clark had said things like this before, and it had never been true.

He sat at the bar with his face screwed up in a hurricane of noble forlorn, sipping a Heinekin like a baby bottle. Clark spotted a pretty brunette as she squeezed her way through the crowd toward him, and mentally prepared an opening line. She sat and gave him a look like *why so sad?*

"The tragedy of alcohol, beyond destroying families and making people unhealthy and hungover, is that its use as the *elixir of forgetting* is a lie."

"How do you mean?" she replied.

"Well, I don't drink very much, but I had to tonight because I wanted to forget my day. More like my last few months. But here I sit, away from my friends that I came here with, stewing in the misery of a forfeit, and I can only summate that this feeling I'm feeling is being exacerbated... not soothed... by the fact that I'm drunk."

"I'm Cassidy," said Cassidy after a pause of thoughtful, exploratory eye contact and with the hint of a smile. "And you're... a really young English professor?" she ribbed.

"You know it doesn't really matter. I won't remember this," he articulated without the faintest hint of trouble.

"Well you sound pretty lucid," she said.

"Thanks," he replied, pleased with himself.

"Where are your friends?" she asked.

Clark pointed vaguely toward his friends. They were scattered about, but a main group of them were dancing near the bar — about a half dozen guys with a couple of girls, all visibly drunk and having a good time. Every so often, they glanced over toward Clark. They'd taken notice of his current interaction.

"I'm an outcast," he complained.

"Why?" she asked.

"There's a lot of reasons, but I think it's mainly because I'm the type of person who would prefer to take as long as possible sitting over here by myself rather than over there with them." He stole a deep breath and a wistful look in a direction that seemingly took him out of this bar.

"You're not alone, and that doesn't make you an outcast," she said.

"And where are your friends?" he asked, suddenly interested.

She pointed to Clark's group.

They'd already been out of the club for at least thirty minutes, but Clark's body was only just beginning to take notice. The fresh air finally made its way into his bloodstream and he was able to start thinking a little clearer.

"You saved me from an intense day of being hungover... now it might be semi-bearable," he admitted.

"I'm glad," she said, authenticating it with a smile as she looked down.

He had no idea what time it was. Only that the moon had met Avenue A with vertical perfection, and that Tompkins Square Park felt like Central Park when drunk. He broke off from Cassidy and ran into it, greeting homeless people on benches and making airplane noises as he jetted around.

Suddenly, Cassidy was there at his side, grabbing his hand and pulling him to a stop. She wasn't angry, just piqued.

"What are you doing?" she asked brightly.

Clark looked up and around at the canopy of trees covering them like it was a revelation. He made a childish *whoa* kind of sound, like he was being submerged into an ocean of wildlife while on psychedelics.



“Just enjoying nature,” he said assuringly as he stepped over the fence from the path and onto a flowerbed.

“You’re trampling all the flowers!” Cassidy yelled in disbelief.

He tiptoed around the flowers, clearly feeling guilty, but still flattening more in the process. When he was out of the flowers and into the weeds, he sat down and patted a hand into the patch of thicket right next to him.

“Come, sit. It makes a great seat,” he said. “Ergonomically impressive.”

Cassidy obliged, lowering until she had assumed an elbows-on-knees pose.

“You have quite the lexicon,” she said.

“I have no idea what that means,” he replied.

“Funny,” she said.

“I like your voice, it’s sweet and innocent like chocolate milk,” he said, looking directly at her to see her reaction.

“Thanks,” she said through a chuckle, blushing, taken off guard.

They had sat gazing off at where the stars should be for an indeterminate amount of time, Clark wondering what they might look like removed from New York’s formidable blanket of ambient light.

“So what is this forfeit you’re running from?” Cassidy asked like she’d been holding it in.

He met her gaze like he was disappointed she’d brought it up.

“Writer’s block,” he said heavily. Hope ran into her expression.

“Well that’s not that big of a deal. It happens, right?” she said.

He sighed. “I was kind of hoping not to think about this tonight,” he said. Then he got up, and Cassidy instinctually lagged behind, a little burned by the reticence of his response. He turned around.

“Are you coming?”

Clark came to in a blizzard of songbirds and sunshine, like Earth was knocking at his door. His view was foggy, precise, and pressing for a moment, like he was looking at his room through a pinhole. Details came flooding back to him in a deluge and he shifted to look at the other side of the bed, which was empty.

He hopped out of bed as a jackhammer began buzzing on the street below, and noticed his lyric book, in which Cassidy had placed the song he’d hung on the wall back into its embrace, along with a note.

*Saw your forfeit on the wall. I took it down because it's pretty good. I think the only block is your inability to be proud of what you've already done.*

The date at the top of the song was underlined, as were a few lines of lyric.

*I'm tired of hearing the same old speech, how we'll get together  
When the time is right and the stars align  
And your jeans go down by a couple sizes  
I won't sit around counting sheep  
But I'm around when you drop that greed.*

The whole thing was then led by an arrowed line to the inquisition, *who is he writing about?* In Cassidy's brilliantly geometric calligraphy, along with her decision to refer to Clark as "he" and not "you", it almost looked like annotations in a textbook.

Clark then wondered why Cassidy had left in the first place? Hadn't they had a really good time together? He felt hot jealousy and disappointment. Embarrassment really, and he wasn't quite sure at what in particular. These things came much later along in the mating process for most people, but all it really took for Clark was a connection (real or imagined) and a subsequent disconnect (also, real or imagined). He had no problem recognizing it in himself. He saw it as a curse, making life in general more difficult for him than it was for other people. However, it also paid creative dividends, leading to some of his best work, both linguistic and musical, so he accepted this fate with ambivalence.

Feeling that familiar romantic discontent, he suddenly wasn't too concerned with the fact that Cassidy had left; what he was concerned with was *writing about* Cassidy leaving. He excavated his guitar from its case in the closet and sang the song, all the way through, until the verse prior to the final chorus, which needed just a few more lines.

Clark thought about how melodramatic he had been; a few lines was nothing, especially within the right context. The real issue wasn't finding the right words or cadence or rhyme-scheme or chord progression, it was getting the ball rolling and then clearing the path. And in this particular song, it was the fact that his ex-girlfriend (who the song was of course really about) had led him astray so many times to the point where he had actually had run out of things to say about it that had led to the cessation of the rolling of the ball.

He saw his way forward taking two distinct paths.

- a) The overwhelming magnitude of neglect his ex had treated him with had led to him writing about her endlessly, which ate his creative energy until he had no

ideas left, leading his final sentiment in the song being that he was unable to finish the sentiment of the song.

- i) This was meta, and meta is good. However, to really be meta, it would need to sound like the verse actually dies within itself, like a thought dying.
  - ii) Making a verse sound like it “dies” was entirely cerebral and theoretical and he couldn’t begin to imagine how he’d record that, or tell his mixer how to make it a reality. Accomplishing this would be an unprecedented undertaking.
  - iii) Was it *too* meta? Was the appeal that it would *sound* like he had stopped writing after getting setback with the previous line, and had gone through enormous struggle to get to this one? Was that even appealing?
- b) Suddenly, Clark would have a new girl (Cassidy), and that would make him able to finish the verse triumphantly by forgetting about his Ex and the implosion of their relationship.
- i) This was trite — it’s almost too easy, and you’ve heard it before.
  - ii) It is what actually happened, and honesty is often the best policy when writing semi-autobiographical lyrics.
  - iii) Was it a stretch of reality? He’d spent one solitary night hanging out with this girl, it wasn’t like they’d fallen in love. Plus, she’d left without a word.
  - iv) This would require a retooling of the final chorus.

And then, suddenly, a third path emerged in front of Clark.

- c) A new girl (Cassidy) enters the picture, and Clark falls for her immediately, only for that one night to be their only night together. The song takes the stance that Clark’s failed romantic aspirations are all doomed from the start, because of the perspective he’s unwittingly acquired as a result of his relationship with Ex.
- i) This was pessimistic.
  - ii) It was a lot to articulate in the allotted two-to-four lines he had remaining.
  - iii) It hadn’t happened yet.

Clark did not adore option C because, while he was writing a song and not his future, the lines of art and life have a way of blurring. It was like his feelings were the ocean, and what ended up in his work was a tide pool sitting inland up on the beach — too small of a sample size to represent the ecosystem at large, but not inauthentic in any way. He was scared that writing a conclusion would influence the events he would subsequently live through; unintentional

manifestation; tide pool water backsliding into the ocean, opposite from how the system was meant to work.

Ultimately, options B and C were both dependent on the outcomes of real events that had yet to occur. Option A was the *songwritery* way forward, but it was a dismissal of a whole newly-minted aspect of the true journey of writing the song. It was really just a creative way of quitting.

And here comes the real conundrum, he thought: it didn't matter if he *saw* different ways forward, it mattered that he *forged* one. Because the series of tasteful decisions that lead to a resulting piece of art results in nothing if that series of decisions stalls at any point along the way.

Clark tried to take a few deep breaths. Three deep breaths is a powerful respite in a tumultuous existence, a particularly underrated path due to the fact that many seem to underestimate its efficacy.

Three deep breaths slowed the boat from a bustle to a glide, reverse thrusters working with more efficiency exponentially, with every passing nanosecond, and Clark felt like the pressure in his head and heart were finally getting a much needed vacation. The first breath was brief and vain, but the second found its way to the vestibule of progress, and by the third, time unfurled to a near-infinity the way a laptop may only be 15 inches tall but is also connected to satellites neighboring the moon and fiber optic cables spanning the Atlantic, Pacific, and beyond. He opened his eyes and his room was calm for a moment. Gradually at first, and then precipitously, his quiet slipped out of his grasp and fell down from its holy perch into a deafening coliseum of tar pitted self-doubt. He put his hands up to his temples as if they'd even had enough time to begin throbbing, but it was really just noise in a chamber of sanctity. He couldn't have that, for the whole point was to keep this *one thing* he did clean. But there seemed to be no way around it. Overwhelmed by options, discombobulated beyond that which he deemed manageable, he admitted, finally, that maybe he really was done writing music.

*No*, he thought desperately and dramatically as the damp towel rubbed his dry skin for the third time, *that's not it*. He noticed the rawness of his skin, its uncharacteristically rosy tint. His desperate bid to write these few lines of a song was literally causing him to shed months of his life away. It was too poetic to appreciate — *cruel*, he thought, was a better word. He was only willing to entertain poetry if poetry would be willing to entertain him.

He sat down once more at his desk and, as he did, a screw in one of the wheels of his scavenged-sidewalk chair came loose, and Clark went tumbling down to the ground. He was no

bumbling idiot, but the fall came unexpectedly and, thus, was far from graceful. His phone, which was in his hand, slammed into the hardwood floor of his fifth storey apartment's bedroom, along with every exposed flat end and pointy edge of his body. His survival instinct somehow had the wherewithal to keep his head from slamming temple-side into the ground, but the rest of him crashed thunderously and painfully like a gong.

He writhed on the floor in unfathomable fury and frustration. *How does a good day turn so bad, so quickly?* He pounded his fist into the ground in release. Thirty seconds passed until a knock at the door broke his quiet. Clark slowly gathered himself, humiliated despite the lack of an audience.

"Hey... we just heard, like, a thud come from up here and wanted to make sure everything was okay..." said the downstairs neighbor whose name he couldn't remember. She was a few years older than Clark, and they had gone to the same college, but they didn't really know each other other than an initial greeting when Clark had moved in a year prior.

"I fell," he said.

"You fell?" she stammered. "Well are you okay?"

Clark nodded, jaded from the whole thing. He shut the door.

Nils Bjurkman had just, *finally*, experienced a breakthrough when his friend Anders invited him to a last-minute album release party in the West Village. Nils had spent nearly the entire day submerged in the wet worry of finishing a song he'd been commissioned to write for the closing credits of an adult animated comedy being produced for Netflix. The first half of the day was dotted scarcely with breaths of fresh air, fresh air being the discovery of little lines and licks that collected at an insufferably glacial pace. Each time he wrote one, it felt like he'd broken the surface, managing to pull in a breath and keep himself alive just a little longer. Eventually, his body of work took a sturdy enough shape where he was able to float, but that didn't happen until late afternoon.

He'd studied songwriting and music theory at The Juilliard School in the Upper West Side, a long way from Stockholm. Over those four years, he learned to channel his homesickness into his music. Twenty years later, he still cashed in on the same trick, even though he'd had more than enough time to grow comfortable in his new home. The same sadness and isolation, although now distant in the past, remained accessible.

While he was studying music in America, some of his more artistic childhood friends had participated in the blossoming film scene back in Sweden. Over the years, an increasing number of them had made their way across the Atlantic — some to Los Angeles, and some to

New York. Pushing forty-five, Bjurkman found himself a member of a strong network of transplanted Swedish artists who all kept one another on retainer, collaborating on projects and commissioning one another whenever possible. In other words, they kept each other employed.

The payoff of this great migration played out in slow motion — at first, it was on each of them to make a name for themselves, so as to accumulate enough clout to even be able to cash in on. Between 2003 and 2015, they went from a loosely connected team of old friends in the same city to industry mainstays, collaborating on big budgeted features and high concept television. Nils was lucky in that he had been one of the first to arrive, and thus, was an instrumental contributor to the laying of the groundwork. It wasn't until 2016 that their years of endless and tireless work paid off, as they all bounced from one successful venture to the next. Nils had a shelf full of Emmys, Oscars and GRAMMYs in his home studio as a result.

Nils played back what he had made and felt confident in the product. He saved his progress, hoping nothing would stand out to him too negatively when he listened to it again the following day, and went into the shower.

Nils closed his eyes and let the warm water lull him back home, giving him a scattershot collage of the quiet and blue beauty of his home country. There, the presence of light was less punctuated — he still squinted his eyes everytime he went outside in America.

He took good care of himself, rather out of necessity, as he had never felt the things inside that made him feel like he'd found "the one." He remained in shape, well dressed, and maintained a healthy sex life. He thought it humorous that men in America seemed so terrified of giving off an air of effete that they seldom experimented with anything: interests, fashion, creativity. Sometimes he'd dress himself in the most ostentatious articles of clothing he could find in his wardrobe just because he knew, when he'd be mingling at a function like the one he was going to that night, that the men around him would simultaneously want to be him and despise him for having the courage. That there was some obstacle in their brain stymying them from realizing the fact that nothing was stopping them from being whatever they wanted to be except for their own backwards interpretation of manhood.

Bjurkman hopped off the 1 train at Christopher Street and walked a few minutes south until he found Anders on Bleecker Street outside the club with a small group of mutual friends.

"Welcome, welcome, brother!" said Anders, as the rest of the group broke off into a circle to continue their seemingly passionate discussion. Anders was in a sleek, navy suit, his blonde hair slicked effortlessly back into immovable perfection. He looked like a sculpture.

"Happy Friday, brother! Were you waiting for me?" asked Nils.

“Nope. We just got here. We’re getting a little naughty before we go in.” With a diabolical look plastered all over his face, he reached into his jacket pocket and slowly revealed a little baggy. “I’ve got something for you,” he said tauntingly.

Nils’ heart dropped a little bit. Anders was the embodiment of *work hard play hard*. He was something of a creative headhunter, and a pivotal reason for the continued proliferation of the Stockholm scene’s success in New York. As an executive producer, he had the power to tap his friends for work on his seemingly endless string of projects. But part of this deal was entertaining him in his desire to party — if he *had something for you*, you did it, no questions asked. If you didn’t, well... Nils could practically see the Oscar on his shelf, pristine and monumental, fading away like a dream in the morning.

Anders had excavated a small, blue pill from the bag, and held it out in the palm of his hand.

“What is it?” asked Nils.

“Molly. Best money can buy. I tested it, don’t worry. It’s safe... everyone is participating,” said Anders, as he motioned to the group, who responded with a few dodgy smiles and a *whoop whoop*.

Time slowed down for Nils. He’d become more disciplined in his consumption of hedonistic substances since his twenties and thirties. Aside from the occasional acid trip, or the rare night where he drank too much, he usually veered clear of anything extreme. He thought about his handful of negative experiences as he realized he didn’t have much of a choice. His friend, whose abuse of power was pretty mild when he considered the fact that it more or less summated in him trying to facilitate a fun evening with his friends, was smiling at him, obviously excited for what came next. Nils threw the pill onto his tongue and washed it down with the mystery liquid in the flask one of their friends handed him.

To Nils, it felt like the entire New York creative scene had somehow been tipped off to this party. In fact, his greatest competitor in the film scoring and songwriting sector, James Aeken, was the first person he ran into. Aeken had swept jobs from under Bjurkman’s feet like they had been dirty laundry on his bedroom floor. They exchanged a few perfunctory words of greeting as Bjurkman thought bitterly about the fact that Aeken didn’t know how to read sheet music.

Whenever Anders invited Nils somewhere, Nils prepared himself for a bonafide networking event masquerading as a party. At some point, he had gone to his last *party* in New York, those memories a wake of sloppy joy in his past, as he pushed full-steam ahead toward

*events*. This was no different. These almost reminded him of his graduate showcase at Julliard, which had been a who's who of connected industry people that could make or break him at a moment's notice. The formal attire worn at these functions were really only out of decorum — everyone there knew it might as well be a tribal, naked, bitter fight to the death. This was the main reason Nils felt annoyed at the fact that Anders always tried to turn it into a legitimate *let's do drugs and get shitfaced* rager. Nils, unlike Anders, didn't feel any mental relief from having the reins of his brain handed over to some third party substance. If anything, it led him down an avenue of terror. Someone comfortable in their position, like Anders, didn't feel the pressure of these pissing contests the way Bjurkman did. And now, as the molly was revealing itself to him and slowly taking the reins, Nils had to work twice as hard to be diplomatic in his approach to these people.

Bjurkman first looked out at the sea of suits and dresses and decided it would be best to just find someone familiar to start talking to and mingle from there. The event was somewhere between a rave and a wedding — people were dressed to the nines, there was a giant cake in the middle of the room (who knows why), the venue was gorgeous, cavernous, and filled with pillars, and yet it was dark and they were packed in like sardines.

He'd somehow downed three vodka martinis since arriving about an hour prior. The first hour had been spent reconnecting with his Swedish friends, who lingered near the bar like the formal definition of a clique.

But that comfort dissipated painfully as they scattered away into their own nights, Nils included, and Bjurkman suddenly felt the headiness and intensity of the drugs and alcohol converging in his brain. He suddenly felt a strong desire to return to the solitude of his studio and the quiet comfort of composing. But an executive whose name he couldn't quite remember approached with a few acolytes and Bjurkman was launched into an evening of intense small talk loaded with double meanings.

Even at first, he was barely able to keep it together. For the most part, he wasn't there, but then whenever he'd snap back upright, it felt like he'd just come out of a washing machine and onto a swaying dock in the middle of the ocean filled with people. Somehow, his subconscious brain was able to put up a front, remaining in the conversation, barring any serious examination. But suddenly, the night turned into a series of episodes ranging between half-conscious conversations and complete black out. He grew red in the face as the hedonistic soup that was his blood threatened his ability to stand up, and it didn't help that he'd continued drinking through it all.



His jacket was nowhere to be found, and he was standing in the crowd with his tie in his hands, next to Anders. He didn't know how he'd gotten there. He noticed Anders was sweating bullets, and then he realized he was too.

He was standing in a group of peers, some of whom a distant part of his brain recognized, his arm around a beautiful woman who had her hand in his back pocket. Anders was monologuing and it was hard to tell whether or not he was making a fool of himself. Suddenly, Anders motioned toward Nils and all eyes were on him. He couldn't follow any of what Anders was saying, but clearly he was telling a story that involved him. Something about a duck. He wasn't sure if he'd actually heard the word duck or if he'd imagined it, or why he'd imagined something so random. Or why it made him so angry. Nils forced his lips to smile. He heard a voice in his head telling him to leave with this beautiful woman immediately, but then he was out again before he could act on it.

Then he was on the ground in a pool of something putrid and sandy colored — vomit. Anders lay writhing on the floor next to him. Dozens of people, some of them the peers with faces distantly recognizable to that sleeping part of Nils' brain, stood around them, enveloping them in a chrysalis of their sloppiness. Smart phones flashed brightly.

Bjurkman's legs were doing the walking for him; that, and the incredibly strong giant in the black suit guiding him roughly by the collar. He touched his face — blood. The doors opened and he's thrown on his ass. Anders lay next to him, face bloodied as well.

He was in a cell of cold metal when he came out of his unconscious state. He was still drunk and high, but less so. Sure enough, Anders was laying down next to him, for once looking more than a little less than perfect. He felt that terrible variation of tired where he was even worse off having slept through part of it, and his head spun as he readjusted his body, and the horror of his embarrassment kept him awake. *And those are just the parts I remember*, he thought shamefully. He considered every possible course of action from that point on, or at least tried to, though his mind was hardly functioning. He wondered if that was the end of his career. And he felt sorry for himself.

He was so lost in his mind that he hardly noticed the cessation of Anders' sleepy breaths. But then he felt Anders climb on top of him, and he noticed that.

"I'm going to fucking kill you," Anders wailed as he reached for Bjurkman's neck, as Bjurkman rolled off the cot just in time, landing with a thump on the concrete. He got to his feet quickly.

"Are you deranged?! You think this is *my* fault?" He retaliated. "You take everything too far, and you only get away with it because you're the big man and everybody needs you to get hired." He didn't know where the words were coming from. It wasn't a revelation, but Bjurkman realized in that moment that of course this had been the life Anders had made for himself. Being the middle man in the way of everybody else's success meant he held all the power.

Anders had always been a bully. He hit six feet somewhere around year eleven, but his misguided attempts at power long preceded that. This fact had lain dormant in Nils' brain because Anders had for so long been his friend, he had all but forgotten.

They had first met because of their parents. A dinner party with both of their families. Nils' family had just moved to Stockholm a few months prior, and after a long and boring summer, he was excited to finally (hopefully) make a friend in his new town. Anders seemed nice at first, but Nils quickly realized that his friendship was a backwards deal. It started with little things, like *hey, wouldn't it be funny if you took my mother's shoes and hid them in the closet?* It grew to *hide your dog in the pantry, no questions asked. Does your dog like snacks?* Then it was *go into my dad's wallet, take out a hundred Kronor, and put it in your dad's wallet.* As Nils obliged to each of these little requests, they grew in magnitude. And it was always punctuated by *this is the last thing, I swear!* But then he'd get another idea... or maybe he'd had it all along.

This climaxed in Anders telling Nils that he had to take the duck his parents had prepared for dinner off its platter and throw it in the trash. After a lengthy attempt to dissuade Anders, Nils was left with no choice but to do it. He closed the cabinet to the trash and rubbed grease off his hands. He went into his bedroom to change his shirt, which he'd managed to cover in grease from the duck. It was there that he heard his mother yell from downstairs.

When he got downstairs and pushed through the swinging white door into the kitchen, Anders stood innocently with his own parents, sheltered from blame. The Bjurkman's, meanwhile, stood aghast and infuriated next to the trash bin, which they'd pulled out of the cabinet. His father's face was a plum red. Mr. Bjurkman marched fervently up to him and grabbed him by the collar, and dragged him to his room. He was speechless. He gave him one long look, too close for comfort, before looking away in disgust and retreating down the stairs.

Nils didn't know what happened or how to react to it. He heard the Andersen's by the door as Mrs. Andersen could not find her shoes, and then the door shut five minutes later as the family left their house. He sat upright in his bed for an hour or more, before he felt like enough time had passed for him to go downstairs and try to explain himself.

His parents were watching the news on television in the family room, adjoining the kitchen, when he cleared his throat.

"I can explain," he started.

His father looked like he was having great difficulty letting him speak.

"Anders told me to do it. He'd been telling me to do stuff all night, and I shouldn't have listened to him. The asks just kept getting bigger and bigger. I wanted to make a friend," he said.

"This is very concerning," said his mother. "When you get older, people will try to make you do things that you shouldn't, but the stakes will be much higher than ruining a dinner party."

"The stakes were high here too," his father edited, now reduced to stoic rage. "Mr. Andersen is my boss. You embarrassed us. All of us. Just go to sleep."

Nils slunk away up to his room.

The first day of school had been the following morning. Through a sea of new, unfamiliar faces, he found his locker and put away his things. He navigated his way through the chaos to his homeroom, where he took a seat in the back of the class.

*Psst.*

Nils looked over. Anders had been sitting right next to him.

"That was fucked last night. My parents think you're crazy," he said.

And yet, over the years, Nils somehow pushed this aside as, by fate or whatever it was, the two of them kept crossing paths. The unpleasantness associated with Anders faded to the background as the two shared some genuinely enjoyable adolescent experiences. The asks didn't ever stop, but they became less obvious that they were even asks. Like politely forcing him to do hard drugs at an industry mixer.

Nils snapped back to the present. Anders, sweaty and enraged, stood a foot away, ready to fight.

"This is just like the fucking duck," said Nils.

"The what?" Anders thought for a moment.

"You were telling the story at the party... remember the first time we met — your family came to have dinner at my house, right after we moved to Stockholm. You made me throw the duck my mom had made in the trash, as a *prank*," he replied, using finger quotes around the word prank.

"I didn't make you do shit you fucking pussy, and I didn't tell that story at the party. Is that why you fucking attacked me in front of the president of Lionsgate?" Anders spit.

"I had to do it or we wouldn't be friends, just like I had to take Molly or you wouldn't take me seriously," he replied. He'd been so wrapped up in his planned response that he'd hardly heard the second half of what Anders had said. "Wait, attacked you? What are you talking about?" His stomach dropped.

Anders laughed knowingly. The commotion had caught the attention of nearby cellmates, and now there was a *fight* chant breaking out. Neighborhood drunks and unlucky heroin addicts perked up and chided the two. Nils was infuriated, and finally decided that enough was enough.

As he lunged at Anders, the lock to the cell door clicked. Two guards rushed in and got right to work trying to neutralize the two Scandinavians, but these men were hell bent on causing one another pain. As the guards worked to hold back Nils and peel off Anders, Nils made one last-ditch attempt at the only vulnerability he had access to: the eyes. He jammed his thumb in aggressively and was able to deliver a few seconds of pain, Anders yelping out in agony, before the guards finally succeeded in detaching them. When they were finally in the aftermath, the two men heaving and boiling over, blood trickled down from Anders' eye like water from a spout.

"Bjurkman, you've been bailed out," said the guard, trying to sound authoritative through his obvious shock. And just outside the threshold of trouble, with his mouth hanging open in absolute disbelief, stood Nils' assistant, Clark.

Clark had been awoken by a 2:30 AM phone call on Saturday, and his inclination was to roll over and ignore it. But ten seconds later the phone rang again, and, aggravated and still half asleep, he swiped to answer and put the phone to his ear.

"Clark. It's Nils. I need you to bail me out of jail," said the voice that sounded like Nils but lacked his signature adroitness. It took a second before Clark shot upright.

"Wait, what?" A beat. "Of course, where?" replied Clark without thinking.

He grew alert as he leapt down the stairs of his apartment building. Nils had given him the location and the authority to use the credit card Clark always kept which was usually relegated to expenses like lunch and music equipment. It wasn't until he was at the 86th street subway station waiting for the 4 train headed downtown that it sunk in.

As a boss, Nils was highly professional, talented, *composed*... a bit vanilla. It took months for Clark to feel like the man had even noticed him in his studio every day, taking notes and moving microphone stands and getting him water and coffee and sandwiches. Clark felt almost invisible there, and yet, that felt good, like he was a good assistant/apprentice. His favorite part of the job was just listening to the man conjure music out of absolutely nothing — taking the lead from the cadence of a character's voice in the cut of a movie he was scoring, and running with it like a sporadic metronome only he could follow. The man was an absolute genius, a hero in Clark's eyes.

Over time, Nils started opening up a bit. Clark learned about his longing for Stockholm, a chronic sadness he'd grown almost numb to. Nils spoke, respectfully, of his own efforts in the dating scene in New York, offering advice. On occasion, when there was time, Nils would even ask Clark to show him the songs he'd been working on, always offering up valuable feedback. To reconcile this man of the past six months with the one standing before him — heaving from the effort of a fight... a *jail* fight... clearly strung out... bleeding... having just jammed his finger in the eye of Anders Andersen, a very powerful colleague — was a lot to ask of Clark.

As much as Clark looked up to Nils, there was something of an admonition about him, too. While he was successfully making a living writing music, the ultimate goal, he was detached. He was distant, never seeming particularly happy to be alive. It was more of an indifference than a misery, mostly likely stemming from the suppression of his own desire to go home. He had traded in comfort for success, something he was only able to do by traveling the Atlantic and working nonstop to do more than tread water. So, while he may have succeeded in the careerist sense, Nils (like Clark) was an artist, an emotional being as much as one who derives pride from clearing occupational milestones. In this way, he had failed. It was something of a dealbreaker to Clark, this obvious detachment to everything but his work. As much as he had liked Nils the more he got to know him, it was the indifference that had struck him in the beginning of their arrangement, and informed the rest of his opinion as Nils revealed more of himself. More importantly, in this moment of crisis, a clearly blacked out Nils had had nobody to turn to but his assistant.

Nils staggered next to Clark through the tight West Village streets. It was 4:30AM and there was little commotion, which was probably a good thing. Nils suit was covered in stale vomit and smelled like it. His face was puffy and bloody.

Not a word was exchanged as they traversed south down 7th Avenue toward Nils' apartment in SoHo, except for Nils vetoing Clark's suggestion of taking the subway.

"Just walk with me, please," he'd said, jaded.

Once inside, past the clearly jarred doorman who'd unsuccessfully tried to hide his horror, Nils ran a hot shower and told Clark to sleep in the guest bedroom. It had felt like an order, not an offer, so Clark obliged without rebuttal.

Clark was exhausted, and fell asleep to the light sound of the water hitting the marble, placing himself under its warm lull.

The sun was streaming in aggressively when Clark finally woke up around 10. He ventured into the kitchen to find Nils cooking something of a feast. There were eggs, bacon, buttered toast, lox, orange juice in a pitcher, and coffee.

"Good morning Clark, take a seat" said Nils, evenly. The scent of vomit was gone, as was the coagulated mixture of dried and fresh blood. His left eye was mildly swollen. So was his cheek.

"Good morning," Clark managed, uncomfortable. All Clark wanted to do was inquire about what the hell had happened the night before, but didn't want to.

They ate in silence. Nils had motioned to speak several times, but bit back his tongue. Eventually, unprovoked, Nils spoke vaguely of drugs, alcohol, and the pressure to please the industry higher ups.

Then Nils surprised him. "I can tell you've been blocked... don't ask, I know the signs. Tell me about it. After all, you sort of know my deepest secret now."

Clark remembered his recent struggle, having forgotten about it in the aftermath of the whole debacle. Nils continued.

"So, something you loved is now torturing you, and that makes you feel like you lost some sort of magic you used to find without even looking for it. My advice -- stop looking for it. Take a break. It'll come back, it always does. Trying to write music without that magic, that inspiration, will always make you miserable."

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Months later, Clark still tried not to think about it. He'd been walking down the street in his mind, a place all his own, when he realized that he'd spent the prior ten minutes editing lyrics in his head to that consequential song from months before. His mind was full of splotchy erase marks and, still, not quite clean.

The apprenticeship with Nils Bjurkman never quite panned out the way Clark had hoped. Despite occasional moments of camaraderie, of shared artistry, their relationship never quite transcended into anything resembling a friendship. Following Nils' eventual full confession to Clark of the embarrassing events that transpired on the fateful night of the arrest, Clark had developed a certain feeling of hope that, at the time, he'd only just previously experienced, on his night out with Cassidy.

Three months prior, it had been the feeling of hope itself that made Clark hopeless, having felt it so many times before that he was comfortable with the near-certainty that it would let him down. But as Clark walked down the street, had this thought occurred to him then, it would no longer carry an unbearable weight. Clark had become ever so slightly different in the three months following his mental breakdown, a breakdown of which he wasn't even aware of until after the fact. It had taken the utter collapse of his boss' career, actually, to snap him out of it like a cold shower; or at least it had begun the process. Not that Nils' irresponsible behavior was anything at all like Clark's manic writer's block-fueled collapse, but sometimes a nearby crisis can be just the thing to sweep someone out from under their own.

Yes, following Nils' honest divulgence, he soon wore signs of embarrassment and regret in his voice and in his expressions whenever around Clark. Clark was quick to notice this. Still, Nils kept Clark around as they finished the slate of work that had been lined-up before the incident. All of it from connections either directly or indirectly related to Anders. There was still the closing theme to the animated Netflix comedy, as well as a few commercials, a package based on a different composer's main title theme for a first-person shooter video game, and a theme song for a Nickelodeon sitcom. It sounded like a lot, but this was really only about a month of work, and as the Nickelodeon deadline crept closer and Nils had still failed to book anything following it, Clark felt an imminent end.

Clark did not regret his time with Nils whatsoever... if anything, it had been a godsend. Nils' own failures had worked to lift him out of an all-encompassing mental crisis. But more

important than anything was that one piece of advice. It'll come back. It always does. Stop looking. The answer Clark had known the whole time, but needed permission to actually do.

He'd found a job as a barista in the Upper West Side, in a cozy little cafe on Amsterdam in the 70s where his regular customers were practically fossils. He walked through the park to get to work — sometimes he'd go on a morning run. He hung out with his friends. He lived.

He asked Cassidy on a date a week after the incident with Nils. They cooked pasta and, afterward, she made him sing her the song she'd annotated. Their romance lasted two months.

Until one day, without realizing he was breaking his fast, he burst onto the page. The kind of bursting where nothing could stop him. The kind of event like a wildfire, or an ice age, or any shift in ecological normalcy — that it happens every so often, despite the fact that, before humanity, nobody was there to force it. That it happened anyway, just like all sorts of things happen. That it was always going to happen, that everything that happens is and was and always will happen, no matter what. And there was an ambivalence to it as well, but if Clark hadn't cared so much, then he wouldn't have been so overcome with relief that he was moved to tears when he wrote the title of his first good song in seven and a half months at the top of the page. And before the moment broke, before he thought about the next one, he smiled to himself, and it had all been worth it.

### Nineteen years later

The rain had stopped pounding the tent set up outside the bar, and now the band's dulcet pop-rock was the only soothing constant. Co-workers and family members and friends-of-a-friend expressed their bodies with rigid, reserved movements that did little more than exemplify for the outside eye what it looks like when people who spend 60 hours a week in an office try to have fun.

The lead singer shifted his attention from power chords back to the microphone, as his lips grazed the cold microphone and amplified his voice to the suburban white-collar crowd. The band had a large tapestry hung up behind their ensemble, *The Small Peters*, painted in extravagant and grave Celtic font. It gave Clark a chuckle every time he looked up at it, how this group of 20-somethings named after micropenises were playing Sex Pistols and Dead Kennedys at the corporate picnic of his New York consulting firm.

He felt caught between the pull of his former life and his current self, an unbreakable wall of affectations composed over the course of many years with a steadfast dedication toward



survival. Whenever he found himself in a position like this, where he was faced with something that reminded him of who he used to be, he'd look at that embodiment of himself (in this case, the lead singer) and find it impossible to let his gaze linger, like this real person could be nothing more than a vestige to him and only him.

It was too raw to allow his mind to truly wander, so he rarely did. It made him uncomfortable and panicky to regard the ambitious young musician who roamed New York City looking for meaning, for a life in the arts, but who only found the scrutinizing reflection of himself grasping at straws. It made him sink into jealousy and regret, like catching a glimpse or even a detail of the life of a former love, when he thought about what might have happened if he hadn't given up.

Clark's source of comfort stemmed exclusively from his two children, who were dancing ravenously and obliviously to the cynical punk music of the 1970s, and his wife, who was standing right next to him, conversing with his summer intern, though Clark hadn't paid any attention to a word they were saying. His family was the only thing that grounded his regret. The only destination in the original plan that he had ever managed to get to.

But the power chords and the one-five-fours of "Anarchy in the U.K." stirred something in him, and he struggled to maintain his composure. He fantasized walking up to the stage and commanding the microphone — singing the words he knew. Really, he wanted to be twenty-five again and have one more chance at overcoming the formidable brick wall he'd relinquished his dreams at.

The Small Peters weren't even that good. They were playing what could only be described as the most default punk music in the pantheon. If Clark weren't so transfixed by the hope on their faces, like the cream at the top of a glass of unhomogenized milk, he'd share his derision with those around him. But that hope was a memory playing out in front of him, and it was too pure to laugh at. Clark felt sorry for them, which annoyed him, because really he was just feeling sorry for himself. And he'd chosen this. And he wanted to rip himself out of this conversation where he only laughed when he sensed he should and agreed when he thought the dynamic called for him to, but he wasn't really listening anyway, and march up to that stage and buy the four guys beers and ask them what their dreams were. He wanted to tell them that they were here, playing music for a bunch of pompous old rich people, himself somehow one of them, and they were going to be somewhere even better if they never gave up. And the music thumped on like a heartbeat, keeping him alive, and Clark churned in his turmoil, and when he let the lead singer's gaze *finally* meet his eyes, it all came crashing down like in a shower he'd taken years ago.

