

THE HUNGRY GODS

go on tour

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A NOVELLA

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CHAPTER ONE

The Turn

Nobody told me they were gods. In fairness, nobody tells you anything in this job that isn't a load time or a door split, and both of those were wrong too. The load time was seven; the venue didn't open till eight. The split was sixty-forty in our favour, which turned out to mean sixty-forty in the promoter's favour, because the promoter was doing the sums and the promoter was a man named Baz who counted like weather.

The agency had said *difficult*. That's the whole brief you ever get. Difficult covers a multitude — divas, drunks, a bassist who won't fly, a drummer with a court order about being within fifty metres of the other drummer. So when they said difficult I heard *manageable, for money*, and I took the tour, and I drove the van to a room above a pub in a town I'd rather not name in case they read this, and I met the band.

There were seven of them. That was the first thing that was wrong, because the deal sheet said four.

* * *

I want to be clear about my competence, because a lot of what follows makes me sound like I wasn't paying attention, and I was paying attention. I have loaded in worse. I once got a man's grandmother's ashes through Swiss customs as a *stage prop* because the paperwork said cabaret. I am not somebody who is easily surprised by talent,

and everything the seven of them did that night I filed, correctly and at speed, under *artistic temperament*, which is the largest folder in the industry and the reason the industry exists.

So. Seven.

The tall one wanted to know where he'd be standing, and when I showed him the stage — a stage being generous; it was two pallets and a rumour — he said it wasn't high enough, and I said it was the only high there was, and he looked at the ceiling of a function room above a pub as though he'd expected sky. He wanted his name biggest. There was no poster. He wanted it biggest anyway, ready, for when there was.

One of them had already found the amps and was inside them. Not metaphorically. He had the back off a combo that wasn't his, and he was doing something to the guts of it with his thumbs, and when I said that's Baz's house amp, mate, he said *it was wired by someone who hated it*, which — fine, probably, it's a pub — and by soundcheck that amp sounded like the throat of God and never sounded that good again after they left, which Baz mentioned. Repeatedly. In the review he left of us, which venues can do now, apparently.

Another kept trying to teach me a chant. Four notes, up and back down, and she was small and friendly and relentless about it — *the kind everyone knows by the second time*, she said, and she was right, I've still got it, I had it in the van at four in the morning three weeks later going round the M6 and I hated her for it a bit. She wanted everyone to have a nice time. She said that like it was a genre.

The volume worried one of them sick. He'd found the decibel app on his phone and kept holding it up like a man checking for rain, and he wanted to know whether the people at the front had *consented to this*, and whether the door price was fair to those who couldn't afford it, and whether we oughtn't to let people in free and see how we felt, and I said we'd all feel bankrupt, and he wrote that down. Not to argue. He seemed to think I'd said something true and sad.

Over by the door, one of them stood with his coat still on, having already decided this wasn't it. You get them. He said this room was fine *for now*, and that the real thing — he said *the real thing* the way you'd say a person's name — was somewhere else, further in, and

he'd know it when he heard it, and until then this would do. He asked me twice if I'd ever heard anything that made the rest of music sound like a rehearsal. I said the ferry alarm on a night crossing. He wrote *that* down. Him and the apologist, between them, they were going through a notebook a night.

The last of them I clocked saw everything and enjoyed none of it. He was the quietest, and it took me half the night to work out he was quiet the way a man is quiet when he's already heard how the argument ends. He looked at the room — the fire exit that was chained, the girl at the front who'd come alone, the beer lines that hadn't been cleaned since the coronation — and he looked like he could hear all of it at once and would have paid, personally, out of his own pocket, for one thing in that room to be simple. I made a note to keep him away from front of house. I don't know why. It was the soundest note I made all night and I couldn't tell you my reasons.

And there was the seventh, and the seventh was in charge, and the seventh was the problem, and the seventh was the reason it worked.

The only other soul up there who wasn't one of them was the monitor engineer, and he'd come with the gig the way the fixtures do — near-deaf, decades of it, mixing with the side of his face. He didn't introduce himself. He set his wedges and waited, the way men wait who've been on every stage since before stages had power.

Then I went to plug the band in. The seventh's amp had no lead. None — not a trailing one, not a borrowed one, nothing running from the back of it to anything on this earth — and it was already humming, warm, on, the way an amp hums when it's plugged in, which it wasn't. I stood there a second. Then I wrote *sort backline* on the back of my hand and opened the room, because there's always a reason — somebody's nicked the lead, the ring main's daisy-chained — and if I stopped for every amp in this trade that was on when it had no business being on, I'd never have opened a door in my life.

* * *

I asked for the rider.

Every band has a rider. It's how you know them. You can read a band off their rider like a palm — the ones who ask for *humus* and mean hummus and the ones who ask for a case of Red Stripe and a *quiet room*, and the sad specific ones, the *one (1) clean towel, black*, that tell you somebody in the band is having a year. The rider is where they tell you, under cover of catering, who they think they are.

I asked the seventh for the rider and the seventh said they didn't want anything.

I've had bands want the moon. I once sourced a specific brand of Japanese throat sweet at 2 a.m. in Carlisle. I have never, before or since, had a band want *nothing*, and I want to tell you it relaxed me and it did the opposite. Baz felt it too. Baz came and found me by the fire door. *What do they want*, he said, low. Nothing, I told him. *Nobody wants nothing*, he came back, and he was right, and we stood there, two professionals, more frightened of a blank rider than we'd ever been of a full one. A band that wants nothing hasn't told you who they are. A band that wants nothing is deciding.

* * *

Then there was the matter of the name, and the name is why I'm writing any of this down, because the name is the one thing from that night I still have to look at, physically, every load-in of my life since.

They couldn't agree what they were called. They couldn't agree what they *were*, which I'd assumed was the same argument and learned, that night, was two arguments stacked in a coat.

The tall one wanted COLOSSUS. He wanted it in a font you could read from a motorway. The friendly one wanted *Us*, or *Everyone*, or *The Good Times*, something you could shout back. The one in the doorway said any name was a cage and the only honest name was the next one. The apologist suggested *The Maybes*, then apologised for suggesting anything. The one with his hands in the amp said the name didn't matter as long as the thing worked; call it a hammer, he said, nobody names a hammer, and a hammer's never let anybody

down. The quiet one who saw everything said one word, once, so quietly I only got it later, in the van, when it was too late to ask him what he'd meant, and I'll come back to that.

And the seventh — the one in charge — wanted a different name every night. Not as a bit. As a principle. The seventh believed, with the whole force of whatever the seventh was, that the second you knew what you were called you were finished, that a name is a form and a form is a fence and a fence is for animals you've stopped respecting. The seventh wanted to walk on stage as one thing and off it as another and never once let the audience get comfortable, and I have to tell you that from a *ticketing* perspective this is a nightmare, you cannot sell tickets to a band that won't hold still long enough to be a noun, but from every other perspective I have ever had it was the truest thing anyone said all night.

None of which put a name on the case.

Because here's the thing nobody puts in the film. It was ten to eight, and the manifest needed a name, and the van needed a name on the case so the case got in the right van, and the door list needed a name so the girl at the front had something to have paid to see, and none of the seven were going to give me one because giving me one meant *becoming* one, and I had a room to open.

So I did what tour managers have done since the first idiot with a lute got a slot. Baz kept shouting through the door, *what time's your turn on, what time's the turn*, the turn being what you call the act when you can't be bothered to learn the act, and I had a marker in my hand, and I wrote TURN on the flight case in letters four inches high so the boys downstairs could read it off a moving trolley, and I opened the room.

That's the name. That's how it's decided. Not in a summit. Not by a god. By a woman with a Sharpie and a deadline, borrowing a word off a promoter who wanted us gone. THE TURN. It's still on the case. It's under everything now — under all the names that came after, and there were a lot, and I crossed each one out and wrote the new one over it, and the case has got so many dead names on it that it looks like a headstone that couldn't make its mind up. But if you get down with a torch and read the bottom layer, the first one, the one

The Turn

all the others are trying to cover, it says TURN, in my handwriting, and I have thought more than once that it was the only honest name they ever had and I gave it to them by accident to save nine minutes.

* * *

The set, if you can call it that.

There was no setlist. I asked. The seventh looked at me the way you'd look at a waiter who'd asked which end of the meal you wanted first. They played what came. The first song was four seconds long. I'm not exaggerating for effect; I've been counting songs off a stage for eleven years and I can tell you it was four seconds, a shout and a crash and done, and it had a title — the friendly one told me after, proudly — a title of eleven words, longer than the song, a whole sentence of a name on four seconds of noise. The next song was forty minutes. The same forty minutes, I want to be clear, was not planned to be forty minutes; it was planned to be over, several times, and each time it was about to end the seventh wouldn't let it, would drag it back into itself, because ending is a form too, ending is the biggest fence of all, and the band went with it because the band always went with the seventh, that was the physics of the band.

My job, at the end of a song, is to bring the lights up so the next thing can start. My other job, at the end of a set, is to get the power down so the room can go home. Both of those jobs assume the band wants to stop, and I stood at the side with my hand on the trip switch waiting for a gap that the seventh had personally decided would never come. The trip wouldn't have helped. The seventh's amp still ran off no lead I could find, roaring off nothing, and I understood I was managing weather.

I want to describe the noise but I don't have it. It was bad. I mean it was *bad*. It was chaos — seven people who couldn't agree on a name refusing to agree on a key, the tall one playing everything an octave lower than everyone else to be *bigger*, the apologist playing quieter and quieter to be *fairer*, the one in the doorway not really playing at all, listening past the room for a better room, and over all of it the seventh, thrashing the whole mess forward on pure refusal.

And the crowd loved it. There were maybe thirty of them by then, and they'd never heard anything so completely uninterested in whether they were there, and there is nothing a crowd loves like a thing that doesn't need them.

And then, for about eleven seconds, it wasn't bad.

* * *

I've thought about how to write this part without making it more than it was, because it wasn't more than it was, it was eleven seconds, and I'm crew, I don't do the transcendent, I do the get-out.

It was in the forty-minute one, deep in, past the point where it should have died. Everything they were fighting about happened to line up. The tall one's low end and the friendly one's four little notes and the apologist's near-silence and the amp that had been wired by someone who hated it and was now singing — all of it, by accident, for no reason, with nobody steering, fell into the same thing at the same time, and the same thing was a chord, an actual chord, the kind you could put a name to, and the room stopped.

Not the band. The *room*. Thirty-odd people and a chained fire door and a girl who'd come on her own, all of them still, the way a room goes still when something walks in that nobody sent for. It wasn't the seventh. I need that on the record. The seventh didn't do it; the seventh's whole religion was *against* it; that chord was the one thing in the room the seventh hadn't chosen and couldn't take credit for and — I watched his face — didn't want. It arrived through them. Not from them. There's a difference and I felt it in my back teeth and I've got no theology to hang it on, I've got a marker pen and a trip switch, but something was in the room for eleven seconds that none of the seven was, and all seven of them were suddenly, briefly, playing *toward* it, like men who'd heard their name called in a crowd.

And then the seventh killed it. On purpose. You could see the decision. Because the chord was a form, and a form is a fence, and the seventh would rather have chaos he'd chosen than a heaven he hadn't, and he dragged the whole thing sideways back into noise,

and it was gone, and the room breathed out and started drinking again, and I took my hand off the trip switch because I understood that this band would end when it decided to and not when the power did — and never mind that one of the amps had been running the whole night off nothing at all.

The monitor engineer leaned over as it all came apart and said the only thing anybody said to me all night that I've kept on purpose. He said, *That's the one you can't put on the desk*. And he went back to his faders. I've thought about that more than I've thought about most things people have said to me on purpose.

* * *

They got a review. Baz's revenge notwithstanding, some kid with a blog had been at the front — she was the one who'd come alone — and she wrote three hundred words that used the word *incandescent* and the word *unrepeatable*, and she was right about the second one, they never played that set again, they couldn't, they didn't believe in again. But it sold the next room out, and the next room booked us on the strength of the sold-out one, and that's a career, that's the whole trick, one room lying to the next room about how full it's going to be until one of them tells the truth.

We loaded out at two. I put the case in the van, TURN-side up, still wet where I'd gone over the marker to be sure. The seventh helped me lift it, which surprised me, gods not being known for the get-out, and as we slid it in he read his own name off the side — the name I'd given them, the name off Baz's impatience — and he didn't cross it out. I'd expected him to. He was the one who hated names. He looked at TURN in my handwriting and he almost smiled and he said, *We'll change it tomorrow*, and I said, *I know*, and we did, we changed it about forty times over what came after, and every single time I crossed out the old one and wrote the new one and every single time the old one showed through a bit, the way pencil does, the way a room does after everyone's gone home.

The van smelled of the room — stale beer, someone's dry ice, the particular damp of a place that's never once been warm. I got in.

The Turn

I put my hands on the wheel. The friendly one's four notes were already going round in my head, up and back down, and out past the ring road the quiet one who saw everything was asleep against the window with his mouth open like anybody, like a person, and I remembered he'd said one word, back in the naming argument, one word so quiet I'd lost it, and I only got it then, doing sixty past a retail park in the dark, what he'd said the band should be called.

He'd said *Listen*.

Not as a name. As an instruction. And I couldn't tell, then or now, whether he'd been suggesting it, or telling me to.

CHAPTER TWO

The Reverend

A guitar weighs about three and a half kilos. The one the Hand built weighed thirty-eight, and I know that the way you know things in this job, which is with your spine, on a staircase, in a town I've been meaning to leave for nineteen years.

So we're clear about who's talking. I carry. That's the job and the whole of the job. Pam manages, which means she stands where the trouble is and makes it somebody's fault in an orderly way; the near-deaf fella does monitors; and I carry, up ramps, down ramps, through fire doors that open the wrong way because a man in an office decided fire ran left to right. The three of us — Pam, me, the monitor fella — were the fixed points. The band could be seven or a different seven or call itself something new by Friday; the crew was the part that didn't change, and the part nobody writes on the case. I've carried gear for people you've heard of and people you were glad to forget. I don't listen to the bands. You'd be amazed how little of the music reaches the man holding the amp. I've done whole tours and couldn't hum you a note. That's not a complaint. A note never helped me up a staircase.

They'd got good since the pub. That's the first thing I'll say about the Hand, because it's the true thing and the rest is just weight. When I first strapped their cases they were a bin fire with opinions — Pam's story, the pub, the four-second song, I wasn't on it, I came after the review, when there was money to pay a man to lift. By the time I turned up they'd been taken in hand. Literally. There was one of

them, and everyone called him the Hand, and he'd got hold of the band the way you'd get hold of a warped door — planed it, squared it, hung it right. They were tight now. In tune. You could set a watch by the drums, and I know drummers, I've buried two.

The case still said TURN under everything. You could read it if you got down with the torch, which I did once, waiting, because waiting is also the job. Over the top of TURN there'd been a slew of names, each one crossed out and the next one wrote over it, so the case looked like a thing that had been to a lot of funerals and couldn't settle on the wording. That week it said something the tall one wanted, all capitals, biblical. I didn't learn it. You don't learn the name. Pam told me that on day one — *don't bother, it won't survive the week* — and Pam was right, Pam's always right, it's her worst quality.

* * *

The Hand built things. That was his whole way of being in the world; he made. Give him six hours and a problem and he'd hand you back a solution so well-made it was rude. He built the amps up from nothing. He rewound pickups by hand in the back of the van doing seventy. He filed his own frets. Once I handed him a neck that had snapped clean at the headstock — kindling, I'd have said, bin it — and carried the case up, and by the time I came back down it was whole and strung and in tune, and I put that down to having been longer on the stairs than I thought, because the alternative isn't a thing they pay me to consider. He'd sit with a guitar for six hours over a thing you couldn't hear — I couldn't, and I'm the one who has to lift it, I've earned an opinion on it — and he'd get the tone to where he wanted and it was, I'll grant him, beautiful. Beautiful the way a made thing is. The way a good staircase is, if you've carried enough of them to love one.

And it did nothing. That's the chapter, if you want it in one. He made everything perfect and it did nothing, and he couldn't work out why, and he spent the whole leg trying to source the missing thing like it was a part he could order.

The blues. That's what they were doing that season — the case said something biblical but the *sound* said blues, roots, the old stuff, twelve bars and a bent note and a man telling you his woman's gone. The Hand had studied it. Course he had. He'd studied it the way he studied everything, all the way down, and he could tell you which year which man recorded which take in which back room in which state, and he could play all of it, note for note, cleaner than the men who'd made it. Which was the trouble. It took me a while to see that, feeling not being my department.

He came to me about it. That was the low point, or the true point, they're usually the same door.

"You've had a hard life," he said. Not unkind. He said it like a compliment, or a spec.

"I've had a normal one," I said. "It just went on a while."

He wanted to know about it. The worst of it. He had a little recorder and a notebook — him and the apologetic one, the one who worries, they went through notebooks like other bands go through picks — and he wanted the worst thing that had ever happened to me, *for tone*, he said, so he could get it into the setup, into the wood, into the bend. He thought grief was a material — that if he could find where it was kept, he could machine a bit off and fit it. He'd already gone round the rest of them. He'd gone round the crowd. He'd stopped an old boy in a car park outside Hull and asked him, straight out, kind as anything, to describe the day his wife died, *for the tone*, and the old boy told him, because people will tell the Hand anything, he's got that face, and the Hand wrote it all down and got nothing, because you can write down the day a man's wife died and what you've got is a date. Not the wound. The report of the wound. And you can build a guitar that sounds exactly like heartbreak and it'll move no one, because it's telling you about heartbreak the way a plaque tells you about a battle.

I didn't give him mine. He asked twice, kind both times, and I said the strap wanted shortening, and he shortened it, because he couldn't help fixing a real problem when one was offered, and that was the end of that.

The Reverend

* * *

The guitar. The thirty-eight-kilo one. I have to tell you where it came from because it's the whole joke and it's on him.

He'd decided the wood was the problem. If grief was a material, you sourced it, and where do you source two hundred years of the worst days of people's lives? A church. He got the timber off a chapel they were pulling down out past the ring road — a pew, a whole pew, black with age and sit-shine, that had held up the back ends of every grieving parishioner since Waterloo. Weddings, aye, but mostly the other thing. Mostly funerals, mostly Tuesdays, mostly the ordinary unbearable. He believed the grief had gone into the wood like resin. He built a resonator out of it — a great heavy roundback brute with a steel cone. He set it up over six hours in a car park, and when he struck it it rang like a bell in an empty house, and he closed his eyes. It was, I'll be fair, the best-sounding thing I ever had to carry.

I carried it up two flights that night in a venue with no lift and a manager who *did not care*, and somewhere on the second flight, with it cutting into my bad shoulder and its holy weight trying to take me back down to the first, I named it. You do that with a case you hate. You give it a name so you've got something to swear at that's got a face. I called it the Reverend, on account of it came from a church and it was going to be the death of me, and by the time I got it to the stage the whole crew were calling it the Reverend, and Pam heard it, and Pam had the marker, Pam always has the marker, and she crossed out the biblical thing and wrote THE REVEREND on the case in letters you could read off a moving trolley, and that was them. That was their name that leg. A roadie swore at a guitar on a staircase and the swear went on the poster. That's how it's done. That's always how it's done. None of them can name themselves, that's the thing nobody tells you about that lot — they can make anything, want anything, break anything, but they cannot say what they are, and so it falls to whoever's got the marker and a van to fill.

* * *

The gig was flawless and dead.

I know dead. You don't need the ear for dead; you need the till. I can read a room off the bar takings and the smoking door, and I'll take my numbers over anybody's soul. They played it perfect. Every bend in the right place, the Reverend ringing like judgment, the drums you could set a watch by. And the crowd stood there polite as a waiting room. Three songs in they started drifting to the smoking door in twos, and the bar went quiet — which is the worst sound there is, a quiet bar. It means nobody's celebrating and nobody's drowning. It means nobody's *feeling* the requisite anything to need a drink about it. The worried one clocked it and started apologising to individual audience members. The friendly little one tried to get a singalong going in the middle of a song about a man in prison, which — no. The tall one played louder to fix it, which is the tall one's answer to everything, and it doesn't fix anything, it just makes the nothing bigger.

And there was one of them, the quiet one, the one who sees the lot — he'd known. I watched him. He'd known before the first note, he'd had the look of a man watching a match he's already read the score of, and I clocked, not for the first time, that whatever's wrong with that one is that he can't not know, and it costs him, you can see it cost him, all night, every night, the knowing.

The Hand couldn't understand it. That was the thing that got me, that nearly made me feel something, professional hazard. He stood there mid-set with the best instrument in England in his hands, a thing he'd built out of two centuries of other people's worst Tuesdays, and it was perfect, and it wasn't working, and he had the face of a man who's done everything right and been left anyway, which — funny old world — is the exact face the blues is about, and he was wearing it and couldn't play it. The one true blues expression in the building and it was on the man who couldn't get the sound.

* * *

Then the Reverend broke.

I'd have told him. Old wood, hot lights, a steel cone under tension — I could've told him that pew had spent two hundred years in a cold church and you don't take a thing that's been cold that long and put it under stage lights and lean on it. It's physics. It's the same as a staircase. Everything's the same as a staircase if you carry long enough. Third song of the second half the neck went — not snapped, worse, it *shifted*, the whole thing warped a quarter-turn in his hands with a sound like a boat complaining, and every string on it went sideways at once into something that was not a chord, that was not in any year he'd studied, that was just wrong, bent, sick, a fistful of notes falling downstairs.

And the room stopped.

Same as the pub, Pam says, though I wasn't there for the pub. The bar went stiller than dead-still, still like held, and the ones at the smoking door came back in, and the old feeling I don't deal in came up off the floor of the place like damp, because the perfect thing had broken and in the break something got in. It wasn't the Hand. He'll tell you himself now, he tells everyone, it wasn't him — he didn't bend that note, the wood did, the failure did, two hundred cold years did, it came *through* the thing going wrong and not from anything he built, and for about a bar and a half the Reverend sounded like every funeral it had ever sat through, all at once, because it had finally done the one thing he couldn't make it do. It had been broken. Live. In front of everyone.

The near-deaf fella leaned over — he mixes with the side of his face, he's been on stages since before they had power, and he doesn't say much and it's worth waiting for — and he watched the Hand stood there in the wreck of his perfect guitar with the whole room finally leaning toward him, and he said, "Nothing in tune ever hurt anybody." And he pushed a fader up to catch the ruin of it before it died, because that at least you can do, you can catch it, you just can't build it.

* * *

Load-out was two hours because everything's two hours and the Reverend was a coffin again by then, dead weight, its one true note spent. The Hand carried the other end, which he never did, and we took it down the two flights between us in the dark and neither of us said anything because there wasn't the breath.

At the van he asked me to play it.

Not for tone. He'd given up on tone, I think, that night — you could see something had gone out of him and something else had come in through the same hole, which is the only way anything gets into a sealed box, and people are sealed boxes, that lot most of all. You have to stove them in first. He just asked. He'd worked out, being a maker, that I was the one broken thing in his outfit he hadn't built and couldn't — that I'd come pre-wounded, off the shelf, provenance and all. And I said no. And he waited, the way Pam waits, and I put my bad shoulder against the van and I played it. One phrase. Badly. I used to, is all I'll say about that; there was a going-to-be, once, before the carrying, and it's nobody's and it's not for tone. I played one broken phrase on a broken guitar in a car park and the Hand went very still, stiller than I've seen a made thing go, and he didn't write it down.

Then I put the Reverend in the van, THE REVEREND-side up, over the biblical thing, over TURN, over all of it, and I did up the straps, and we drove.

I'll not pretend it changed me. I carry. But I'll say this the once and then I'm back to kilos: he can build anything, that Hand, anything you can name — and the one thing worth having in that whole van was the thing that had been dropped, and cracked, and carried anyway. He knew it too. That's why he stopped building for a bit. You can hear it on the next lot of recordings if you know to listen. There's a mistake left in. He left a mistake in on purpose, which for him was the same as a man learning to weep.

CHAPTER THREE

The Red

The human body takes about a hundred and twenty decibels before sound stops being sound and starts being weather. A hundred and thirty is damage. The tall one wanted a hundred and forty — sustained, and down at a frequency you don't so much hear as inherit — and he wanted it nightly, and the entire content of my job was to give him the feeling of that while quietly declining to kill the audience. That is front of house. You stand at a little desk out in the dark in the middle of the crowd, the last mortal between the god and the people, and your weapon is a fader, and some nights it is not enough weapon.

I came in when they went to sheds. I wasn't there for the pub, or the toilet circuit, or the guitar that only worked when it broke — I've heard the stories, everyone's heard the stories. I got the call when they jumped from clubs to arenas in about the time it takes most bands to change a set of strings, which should have told me something. Nobody rises like that. I looked at the routing — ten-thousand-seaters, then twenties, then a stadium with a roof that opened — and I assumed cooked books or a cult, and I took it anyway, because the money was arena money and I have a mortgage and, as it turns out, a hearing-aid fund to think of.

Four of us stayed the same while the production swelled around us like a tumour with a lighting budget. Pam ran the whole circus, still with her marker. There was a roadie who'd been carrying their cases since before my time and spoke mostly in kilos. There was a

near-deaf old boy on monitors who had somehow ended up doing in-ears for a stadium, which is like putting a blind man on the follow-spot, except it worked, it always worked. And me. Everyone else — the riggers, the pyro crew, the truck drivers, the man whose entire job was the tall one's throne — everyone else was new, and temporary, and slightly frightened.

Because there was a throne.

* * *

I'm told that back in the pubs he'd wanted his name biggest with no poster to put it on. Now there was a poster. The poster was a video wall the size of a semi-detached house, and his name went across it in letters you could read from a passing plane, and it still wasn't enough. He told me so. He told everyone so. He wanted it bigger than the building. He wanted it where the building had been.

He wanted the low end "like the voice of creation." He said that more than once, and never as a joke. He wanted to be felt in the chest, in the back teeth, in the bowels — and there's a story everyone in my trade has heard, the brown note, the mythical sub-frequency that's meant to loosen a grown man's insides where he stands. I've never met it. I don't believe in it. He asked me for it by name. He wanted the note that empties a room from the inside, and I told him the PA didn't go that low, and he took that the way a king takes the word *no* — as a clerical error he'd be looking into.

So every night, the same war. He'd come off and want to know where his bottom end had gone, and I'd tell him it was right there on the meters, pinned, in the red — that was my phrase for him, all tour, *you're in the red, you live in the red, you'd move house to the red if I let you* — and he'd say it wasn't enough. And every night I'd nudge the subs up a hair for his ego and pull them down a hair for the coroner, and we called that art.

The thing that saves you is the limiter. It's a ceiling. Past a set level it clamps down so that nothing leaving the PA can hurt what it lands on. The Hand had built our rig and set that limiter himself, to a number, and then — this is the Hand, this is the whole of the Hand

— he'd left it one deliberate hair generous. One planned thread of danger in an otherwise perfect system. I'm told he'd started leaving a mistake in on purpose somewhere back down the line, and never stopped. The tall one had been trying to get that number raised since the first soundcheck. I said no. Pam said no. The Hand said nothing, which from the Hand is also no.

* * *

Second show, soundcheck. I've got his channel up and dialled, and he steps back off the mic to shout something at the drummer — right off it, a clear yard — and his voice doesn't drop. Not a decibel. Full and forward in the mains like the capsule was still under his chin.

I muted his channel. Still there. I pulled his fader all the way to the floor. Still there, filling a ten-thousand-seat shed off a dead channel.

So I did what you do, which is assume a fault, because a fault is a thing you can fix and the other thing isn't. I hunted it. Twenty minutes — re-patched, swapped to the spare desk, checked for an open RF leg, a rogue ambient mic, a gate stuck wide, walked the deck with a sniffer — and found nothing, because there was nothing. I wrote *ghost in vocal bus — monitor RF?* in my show notes and got on with my life, because every front-of-house engineer's desk is haunted. Ask any of us. We'll all tell you the same. It is the one superstition the trade allows itself, and I'll be honest with you, it is easier to believe in a haunted desk than in the man it would make him if the desk were clean.

* * *

You catch things from the tower whether you look or not. A show is four hours of small jobs with a god problem threaded through, and the god problems come and find you at the desk.

The one who was always half into his coat turned up during a line check, while I was ringing the last howl out of a wedge, and stood watching the empty seats fill. "None of this is it," he said. I told him

it was the biggest show in the country. “I know,” he said, like that was the sad part, and drifted off before I had the wedge flat. I filed him under *singers*.

Another one I only ever clocked by his boredom. He hated the arena for the opposite reason — all on rails, timecoded, pyro on a click, the same to the frame every night, not a gap anywhere to break open — and through the show he’d stand just off the wing doing nothing, a man built for weather made to run to a timetable. I never once had trouble with his channel. That was the trouble, I think. He’d have loved some trouble.

The worried one brought me his phone during a changeover, which is the worst possible moment, and showed me what the tickets had gone for — the dynamic pricing, the fees, the good seats gone to touts and the touts gone to the moon. Grey with it, he asked whether I thought the kid in the back row’s mum knew what she’d paid for the view. I told him the mix was the only thing I could fix from where I stood, and put his low-cut back in, and he wrote something down while I worked.

And the quiet one came up the tower stairs before the last show, while I was zeroing the desk, and gave me a number — the exact level, to the decibel, at which the rig would let go that night, and the minute past eleven it would go. I laughed, because you cannot predict a failure to the decibel, and I wrote it on the back of my hand to prove him wrong later. I never got the chance. He was right. He is always right; that is his entire curse, and I’ll come to it.

* * *

Last night of the tour. Stadium, roof open, a warm night, sixty-two thousand paid.

The throne rose. The riser rose. There was a wind machine on him for a song with no wind in it. He did the thing where he holds the mic out and lets the crowd sing his line back and cups his ear like he can’t hear them — sixty-two thousand of them — and it is the oldest trick in the building and it works every single time, because people want to be a choir more than they want almost anything. And

on the big notes the whole floor moved — not dancing, a lean, the front third of a stadium swaying together like a field taking wind — and I watched it the way you're trained to, on the pit cameras, counting it as a crush risk and calling it to the barrier team, because a crowd that moves as one body is a safety matter and not, whatever it looks like from the desk, a religious one. For two hours it was, I'll grant him, magnificent. The whole cathedral of it was working.

But it was working the way pyro works. On spectacle. On scale. I've mixed enough of these to know the difference between a room that's roaring and a room that's moved, and this was roaring — a stadium doing precisely what stadiums are built to do — and somewhere under all of it the thing I'd heard about, the thing that happened once in a pub above thirty people, the one nobody could put on the desk, simply wasn't in the building. We were selling them the size of the feeling instead of the feeling. Nobody minded. You don't go to a stadium to be moved. You go to be enormous for a night, and we made them enormous, and the tall one stood at the top of it with his name in letters you could read from a plane and had never been happier or further from the point.

Then the last song. The big one. The key change coming — the one that lifts a semitone for the final chorus so the whole place leaves the ground — and just before it he turned round to my tower. Sixty thousand people between us and he found me in the dark the way he always could. And for once I got a clean read of his face, and the thing on it wasn't triumph. It was fear. Plain, childish fear — the fear of a man with sixty-two thousand souls in front of him who is not, for one second, sure it is enough, has ever been enough, could ever be built high enough to be enough. Then he gave me the sign for *more*. More bottom. More everything. The voice of creation, now, tonight, all of it.

I shook my head. We were already in the red, already a hair off the Hand's ceiling.

And he did the thing kings do. He didn't argue. He reached past me. I don't know how — there were sixty thousand people and a hundred yards between his hand and my desk — but the limiter went. That one deliberate hair of danger the Hand had left in the

world: he found it, and he leaned on it, and for about a second and a half I heard exactly what he'd been asking for all tour. The actual voice of creation. A low end like the floor of the world coming up through the soles of everyone's feet.

And then the whole PA went into protect and died.

* * *

All of it. Every box in the air, both hangs, the subs, the lot — a hundred and forty grand of amplification deciding, all at once, that it would sooner save itself than deliver what it was being asked to deliver. Exactly as the Hand had built it to decide. Protect mode. Little amber lights, a stadium's worth of them, blinking the same word up into the dark: PROTECT, PROTECT, PROTECT. And then dead air, total, the largest silence I have ever stood inside. Sixty-two thousand people and a god and a wind machine and not one working watt.

And they kept singing.

They'd been mid-chorus when it died, and they just — kept going. Sixty thousand people carrying the song on nothing but sixty thousand throats, up and over the key change, unamplified, ragged and vast and dead in time, filling a stadium that my entire industry exists to fill and doing it with none of us. None of my boxes. None of his throne. None of the machine. It came up off them like heat off a road, and I have mixed the biggest rooms in this country and I have never once heard anything the size of that, and it was the only sound all tour that came through nothing I owned. No fader touched it. It arrived in the exact hole his hunger had just blown in the show. You could not have built it. I had a hundred and forty grand of *built* and it was dark. You could only get out of its way.

The near-deaf fella had come out front for the end — he does that, mixes his monitors by feel and comes out to watch the last song — and he stood next to me in all that dead-desk quiet with sixty thousand voices going up through it, and he didn't reach for anything, because there was nothing to reach for. After a while he

said, “No one ever mixed that, Leah.” That was all. It was the truest post-show report I got the whole tour.

* * *

Here is what I want on the record, because the tall one tells it differently in every interview he’s given since.

He did not stand in that silence and learn one thing. I watched his face on the house screen — his own screen, his name behind his head in letters from a plane — and he heard sixty thousand people sing his song with the entire apparatus of his grandeur switched stone dead. And he did not understand, not for a second, that it only happened *because* he’d gone silent. That the thing he’d been chasing at a hundred and forty decibels had been waiting the whole tour for him to shut up and let a gap open. He heard them singing and he lifted both arms and wept, and it was worship, and he took every ounce of it as his own. “They don’t even need the speakers,” he said to me after, shining, enormous. “For me.” *For me.*

I didn’t correct him. You don’t correct a god, and besides, a hundred and forty grand of my rig was in protect and I had a coroner’s worth of reasons to be glad of it. And there’s a part I don’t say out loud: he would have blown that ceiling every night for the rest of his life to feel that again — and it will never come again on purpose. We’ve all tried. You cannot schedule it.

We changed the amps overnight — flew a spare rig in off a festival, the Hand up a scaffold till dawn resetting his ceiling one deliberate hair generous again, saying nothing, which is his yes and his no both. And somewhere in the small hours Pam came round with the marker, because the leg was over and the case wanted its next name, and she crossed out the biblical thing he’d had up in lights. “What are we this time, Leah,” she said, marker poised. My ears were ringing at a frequency I’d be explaining to a doctor within the week. I said the only thing in my head, which was the place they’d lived the whole tour. “The Red,” I said. “They live in the red.” And she wrote THE RED on the case in four-inch letters over the top of everything — over the biblical thing, over all the dead names. The pulled amps

were still stacked in the wing behind her, dead but not dark, every one of them ticking over that same amber PROTECT, and in that light, low on the case and under all the crossings-out, I could read the bottom layer. It just said TURN, in handwriting that wasn't mine. The first name they ever had, and the only one none of them chose.

The one in the coat found me while I was casing my headphones. He'd watched the whole thing from the wing — the death, the singing, the gap — and he had a look I didn't care for. A lit-up look. The look of a man who has finally heard the thing in the next room. "You saw it," he said. "None of it mattered. The lights. The rig. His name. They sang it with all of it switched off." I said the rig mattered a great deal to my mortgage. He wasn't listening. "So what's it *for*," he said, not really to me, "if the real thing needs none of it," and he walked off into the load-out with that in his teeth. I want it noted that I heard the next six months of everybody's life get decided in that sentence, and I said nothing, because it wasn't my desk to run, and because he was right, which is the very worst way for a bad idea to start.

I ordered new amps in the morning. The big man did three encores in his head for a month. And that is front of house: you stand in the dark between the god and the people with your hand on the one thing that can hurt them, and once a tour, if you're unlucky, you find out it was never the thing that mattered — and then you flightcase it and send the invoice, because the god wants it bigger tomorrow, and the god is the one who signs the cheque.

CHAPTER FOUR

Deadstock

Merch is the only place the band ever actually meets anyone. Everywhere else there's a barrier, a laminate, eight feet of stage, and a security bloke called Kev; at my table there's eighteen inches of trestle and a card reader, and across it, all night, one at a time, comes the entire human race, wanting a medium. That is the job. You are the last human being the band brushes up against before it goes back to the bus and calls itself an artist. You sell a person a piece of belonging for twenty-five quid, you get their name wrong on the way out, and they love you for it.

I don't see the shows, by the way. Merch works the show; I'm at the table while the music's on, which means I have never once watched this band play and I know them entirely through the people who've just watched them play, secondhand, over a card reader, which — it turns out — is the truest angle on them there is. I heard what happened at the stadium the way I hear everything. From the punters. The PA died and sixty thousand of them sang it home, and it was the best thing that ever happened to them and it put precisely nobody in a shirt, and both of those facts are the whole of this chapter.

Because something got into the one in the coat that night.

* * *

You can read a crowd off the sizes. A good night cleans you out of mediums and larges and leaves you a sad little Stonehenge of XS

and 4XL — the two ends of the species nobody cuts a decent shirt for. By the end of this leg I had every size of everything, in towers, in perpetuity, and nobody wanted any of it, and nobody wanted any of it because by the end of this leg you could not have told them, at gunpoint, what band it was for.

It started the night the big tour ended. He came off the road with a look, and the look said *we've been doing it wrong, all of it, the whole apparatus — I have heard the real thing now and it needs none of this*. Where a normal frontman has that thought in the shower and lets it go, this one had the authority of a small god and a band that followed him the way iron filings follow the magnet. So we didn't let it go. We chased it. For nine months. Into the ground.

First it was unplugged. Fine — strip it back, acoustic, honest; the fans can survive unplugged, unplugged still has the songs in it. Then unplugged came to mean no hits, only the new stuff, the searching stuff. Then the searching stuff went modal, which is a word I learned that tour and wish I hadn't. Then he took the whole band to a riad in Marrakesh for a month to find “the real thing,” and they came back with field recordings, and I am not being unkind when I tell you there was a track that was a door. Then it was drones. Then it was one note held under a poem. Then — this is the point at which I began drinking at the settle — he decided melody itself was a compromise, a trick played on the ear, and the true music was the thing *before* music, the ur-sound, before rhythm, before the fall, and he pointed a band that had filled a stadium directly at silence. And he called that forward.

The low point I actually watched — I don't see the shows, but a festival you see, because the merch tent faces the field — was a main-stage slot they'd been handed on the strength of the stadium year. Forty thousand people in the afternoon sun, there for the hits. He opened with the door. Twenty minutes of the door, the Marrakesh door, a recording of a hinge. From the tent you could watch the field turn like a tide going out — forty thousand people drifting off to the stages that still had choruses — and he played the ur-sound, serenely, to the stragglers too polite or too far back to know they were allowed to leave.

* * *

You cannot sell merch for that. I mean this as a technical fact, not a whinge. Merch needs three things: a name, a look, and a thing people already love that they can wear to prove they were there. The one in the coat was personally at war with all three.

The name changed so often Pam had stopped printing anything and just wrote it on the case in marker; a band you can't name is a band I can't screen. The look was "no look" — raw canvas, unbranded, undyed, a tote the colour of a paper bag with nothing whatsoever on it, eighteen quid, and I sold four, all four to the same man, who I'm fairly sure was researching a documentary. And the thing people loved — the hit, the one the whole world could sing — he'd retired as a lie. So there I stood, night after night, behind a trestle of expensive nothing, handing the venue its twenty-five percent cut of expensive nothing, which is a mathematics I would rather not have learned.

* * *

The little friendly one fought him on it, and I loved the little friendly one, because she used to come and work my table between sets — actually work it, hand people their change, learn a name and keep it. She kept saying the same thing all tour, bewildered, like it was obvious: *but people want to sing. That's not a sin. Letting them sing isn't selling out, it's the whole point, it's the door open.* And the one in the coat would look at her like she'd proposed they do covers, and the friendly one would go quiet and come and stand at my table, where the people were. She had a song, the friendly one. Her song — the one people already knew by heart, the one with the four notes that go up and come back down, that you've got by the second chorus. And that tour they retired it. Purified it out. Too easy. Too singable. Too loved. I watched her take it and fold it away in a pocket, and I thought, that's a mistake that is going to want paying for.

The tall one — the stadium one, the one who'd had the throne — could not cope with the yurts. And there were yurts. We played a "gathering" in a field in Wales to two hundred people sitting cross-

legged on the ground, and there is nowhere to be the biggest thing in the room when the room is a field, and he stood there radiating a grandeur with nothing to land on, like a lighthouse at noon. He came to my table and asked, very quietly, whether we had any of the old shirts left. His shirts. With his face on. We had boxes. He bought one off me at full price, out of his own pocket, and wore it under his coat, and I have never sold anything sadder in my life.

The one they call the Hand kept out of it and filed his frets. Him I understood. He'd learned something once, up the line — I only had it secondhand, something about a guitar — about the difference between the real thing and a flawless copy of the real thing, and I think he'd worked out years before what the one in the coat was only now burning a career down to discover: that you cannot source it. You cannot forage authenticity in a riad. It is not a material. He'd already paid for that lesson, so he sat at the side and let the man pay for it too, the expensive way.

* * *

Here's a thing I only mention because it happened more than once and I've given up explaining it. Twice that tour I sold a shirt, looked up, and watched the one in the coat walk out the front doors into the car park — while he was on the stage, a hundred feet the other way, singing. I don't mean I thought I saw it. I clocked him going, coat and all, out into the dark; I clocked him also up on the boards; and my hands kept giving change, because that is what my hands do. I put it down to the merch light, which is the worst light in any building, engineered so you can't tell a fifty from a fiver or one man from another, and to the fact that by then half the crowd dressed like him anyway. But I'll be straight with you. I think he was always leaving. I think that was the truest thing about him — a part of him already out the door toward the next room, the realer one — and once or twice the tour just let me see both halves at once.

And yet, for a man who was always leaving, he spent a strange amount of time at my table. Not buying — gods don't buy — just standing at the edge of it, in the eighteen inches where the band

meets the species, watching me sell people their little proofs that they'd been there. He'd watch a girl hold a plain tote to her chest like it meant something, and something would sharpen in him — not fondness, nothing so warm as that; more the look you'd give a thing you meant to have, if only you could get it away from all the people pawing at it. He was hunting the real thing at the one table in the building where it actually lived, and he couldn't take it, because it had strangers' hands all over it and a price on it and a cut going to the venue. He wanted it *clean*. He wanted it without us.

* * *

The people were not gentle about the whole business. If you want to know when a band's in trouble, don't read the press, work my table.

A man drove up from Plymouth — four hours each way, he told me, he'd proposed to his wife at their gig in '19 to *the song, the song*, and he'd brought her, they'd got a sitter — and he stood at my table afterward with a face like a collapsing shed and asked me, very politely, which one that had been, because he hadn't recognised a single number all night, and was there at least a shirt with the old one on it. There wasn't. I gave him a raw canvas tote for free and he looked at it like a summons. People asked me for refunds at the merch table, which is like asking the hot-dog man to reverse the football. People asked where “the shirt with the thing on it” was — *the thing*, they'd say, *you know, the thing* — and I did know, I knew exactly, and I could not sell it to them because the thing had been officially declared a lie. And a woman cried real tears onto my card reader because they'd stopped playing the one that got her through her divorce, and I comped her a tote and thought: this is the sound of a god purifying his way out of every heart in the building, one at a time, and calling it growth.

There was one, though, who never complained, and I've thought about her more than all the rest. A woman who'd been coming since before I started — always on her own, always down the front, one of the very first to ever clock this lot, I'm told, back when they were a rumour above a pub. She came to every leg and bought one thing,

one, whatever the daftest item was, and she came to the pure-phase shows too, the drones and the doors, and sat through them down the front on her own, and paid up after without a word about the old songs. I asked her once why she kept turning out for a band that had stopped playing anything a person could love. She said she wasn't coming for the songs. She was coming for *them*. I didn't know what to do with that then. I do now, and it isn't comforting.

* * *

The last night of the pure phase — you never know it's the last — we played a deconsecrated church to forty people. Forty, in a room built for a thousand. The set was a drone and a poem and a long silence the one in the coat considered his finest work to date, and half of them left at the interval, which shouldn't be possible in a church; there's an etiquette, and they broke it.

I was packing the whole untroubled table back into its boxes — I'd sold, that night, one badge — when I heard it through the door. Out in the churchyard. A busker. Some kid with an acoustic and a case open for coins, playing the hit. *Their* hit. The retired one, the lie, the one the man from Plymouth drove eight hours round-trip for — played badly, and out around him in the dark, sitting on the gravestones, was a crowd. Our crowd. The forty and the fled, every human who'd walked out of the pure thing, clustered in the cold round a stranger playing the song we'd thrown away, and singing it, all of them, up and back down, the way you have it by the second chorus.

I'm the merch girl, so I'll say it plainly: it was the realest thing I heard in nine months of clever men chasing the real thing. Nobody screened it. Nobody named it. Nobody took a cut. It came up off them in a churchyard around the one song a god had binned for being too easy to love.

And the one in the coat was standing in the church door, watching. He'd heard it too. He watched forty people he'd spent nine months purifying give themselves, whole and free, to a busker and a discarded chorus, and for once in his life he was completely still

— because he'd found it. It was right there. It had been right there the whole time, on the far side of every door he'd walked through looking for it, and it had strangers' hands all over it and coins in a guitar case and not one clean thing about it. I watched him find the thing he'd chased around the world and understand, in the same second, that his chasing was the exact reason it was out there in the cold and not in here with him. He didn't take credit for that one. He couldn't. It had nothing to do with him, which was the whole of what it was.

The busker's case had more in it than my till. I counted both. That's the job.

* * *

Pam found me at the load-out with the marker, because the leg was ending — you feel it end, like weather turning — and I was the only crew still upright at three in the morning, and she asked what we were calling them now. I looked at my towers of unsellable honest nothing, every size of everything, forever. “Deadstock,” I said. “It's all deadstock.” And she wrote DEADSTOCK on the case, over THE RED, over the biblical thing, over the whole graveyard of crossed-out names — and right at the bottom, where the cardboard's gone soft as cloth, you can still make out the first one. TURN. If you know to look, which by then I did. The only name they ever got that somebody handed them for free, meaning nothing by it, just to get the van loaded. Same as everything real on that entire tour. Given for free. Meant nothing by it. Out in the churchyard with the coins.

We came off the pure phase not long after. You can't eat authenticity; even a god has a booking agent, and the booking agent had gone the colour of the totes. The little friendly one still had a song folded in her pocket that people could sing, and all of a sudden everybody was very interested in it — but that's the next chapter, and not mine.

Me, I kept the totes. I've still got some — raw canvas, undyed, the colour of a paper bag, nothing on them at all. It turns out the one thing you cannot sell a human being is a piece of belonging with the belonging left off. I can do you a very good price.

CHAPTER FIVE

Home

Nothing is true at three in the morning on the motorway except the next sixty yards of it. That's the job. Everything else — the gig, the row in the dressing room, the god having a crisis about melody in the middle of row two — all of it goes soft and stupid the moment the last service station drops behind you, and then it's just you and the cats' eyes and seven of them asleep in the back like none of it ever happened.

I've driven this band since it was a band. I've driven every version of them there's been, and there have been a few, and I'll tell you the thing nobody up front ever believes: they're all the same asleep. Doesn't matter what they were on the stage — the wild one, the grand one, the one in the coat looking for the real thing. At three in the morning they're just cargo that breathes, and I get them home. I've been getting them home for years. It's the one thing about them that's never changed, and it turns out it's the one thing this chapter's about, so bear with me.

One of them always rode up front. The friendly one. The little one who worked the merch table and learned your name and kept it. The others slept, or sulked, or sat in the dark being profound at each other; she sat up front and kept me company on the graveyard shift and asked after my kids and — this is the part — remembered the answers, which is more than my kids do. If you ever wanted to know which of them was the human one, it was the one who'd sit in a cold cab at four in the morning so the driver had somebody to talk to. I

never had to explain that to anyone who'd met her. I've never once managed to explain it to anyone who hadn't.

* * *

They'd nearly finished themselves off chasing the real thing. You'll have heard; everyone's heard. They came off that broke and strange, and the thing that saved them was the exact thing they'd spent a year being too clever for.

Her song. The friendly one's. The one with the four notes that go up and come back down, the kind you've got by the second time — the kind that had been trying to get out of her since the first pub above the first pool table. She'd been carrying it folded up in a pocket for months while the others purified, waiting, the way she waited for everything, patient as a dog by a door. And when they got desperate enough, they finally let her open the pocket, and it was a smash. Course it was. It was a smash the way water's wet.

I felt it before anyone told me, because you feel a comeback through the steering wheel. A year of pulling into car parks with more empty spaces than cars, and then one night you turn in and there's a queue out the door and round the bins, and a lad on the roundabout selling bootleg shirts of a band that had been too broke to print any of its own. And you think: oh. They're back. Her four notes did that. I parked us in full car parks all that summer.

Now, I've heard clever people say that song is *simple* like it's a wound they're describing, and I'd like my say, because I'm the man who had it in his head for a year and I have earned an opinion. Simple is the hardest thing there is. Any fool can do complicated — complicated is just simple that hasn't finished thinking. To write four notes that a hundred thousand strangers will sing back at you unbidden, in tune, some of them in a language they don't even speak, first time, no rehearsal — that is not *less* than a year of drones and doors, whatever they told themselves. I have driven a great many clever songs to a great many empty rooms. Hers filled them. You do the sums.

* * *

They hated it, naturally. Not at first — at first they were too relieved to be solvent to be snobs about it. But once the money was in and the rooms were full again, they started to resent the thing that had done it, the way a man resents the friend who once saw him cry.

The tall one could not stand that his years of grandeur had been beaten flat by four notes a child could hum. The one in the coat, who'd gone all the way to Marrakesh for the real thing, now had to stand on a stage every night and watch the real thing turn out to be a chorus he'd decided was beneath him. And the wild one, the one who lives to break whatever's nailed down, could not bear playing the same beloved shape night after night — a hook being the one fence he can't kick over, because the crowd is standing on the other side of it holding it up.

Only the maker didn't sneer. He'd produced the thing, and produced it beautifully, and he'd learned years back — the hard way, I gather, something to do with a guitar — the difference between clever and true. He knew a true one when he'd built it, and he sat at the side and let the others be embarrassed.

* * *

The night I knew it had properly got away from them, I was driving. Of course I was. Everything that has ever mattered to me happened between two junctions with no one there to tell.

Half three, maybe. The back full of sleeping gods. The friendly one up front, not sleeping — she never really slept, I put that down to some people not needing much, the way you do. I had the radio low, and the song came on. Their song. Hers. And I reached to turn it up for her, and I realised I'd switched the radio off a junction back. Off. The knob. And it was still playing.

I said something about the Bluetooth — the phone must've stayed paired, it does that, hangs on after you'd swear it's dropped — and she smiled and didn't argue, and we sat and listened to a song come out of a dead radio at three in the morning at seventy miles an hour.

And somewhere out in that dark, other people were hearing the same thing in their own cars and their own kitchens and singing it, strangers, thousands of them, and it belonged to them now. All of them. It had got clean out of the band and gone to live in the whole country.

And the friendly one, listening to her own song leave her forever, was the happiest I ever saw any of them. Because that was the point. She hadn't wanted to keep it. She'd wanted to give it away so completely that it stopped being hers — and it had, and she'd got the one thing none of the others ever managed, not the grand one, not the pure one. She wanted the people to have it. Now they had it. And she sat in my cold cab glowing like someone who'd finally posted a letter she'd been carrying her whole life.

* * *

But you cannot stand still in that band. That is the one law. The second a thing works they have to leave it; they are constitutionally incapable of arriving anywhere.

The next pivot was already loading up. The worried one had started writing something with a conscience on it, something that would cost them the radio and half the rooms, and the coat one was all for it — anything to get clear of the chorus that had saved them. And they came to the friendly one and told her, kindly, that it was time to move on from the song.

She said no. Quietly, the way she did everything. She wouldn't. She couldn't for the life of her see why you'd walk away from the one thing that had actually reached a single human being. To her, moving on from a song that people loved wasn't growth — it was the only real sellout there was. Not the doing of the pop. The leaving of the people who'd turned up for it. So they moved on, and she didn't, and that was that.

They left her behind. Not cruelly — worse than cruelly. Kindly. The way you leave a coat you've grown out of on a good hanger in case someone smaller comes along. They went off to be serious, and she stayed with the song, and inside a year the strangest thing

had happened to her, the thing this whole chapter has been driving toward: she'd become a tribute act to her own band. The same band was up the motorway reinventing itself for the broadsheets — six of them, where there'd been seven — and there she was, back down the toilet circuit in the small rooms, playing the hit to the people who still wanted it, giving them the four notes, watching them sing it back, happy as anything — left behind, and not minding, or minding in a way she would never once make you carry. The only tribute act in history fronted by an original member. She didn't even change the name.

* * *

The night the comeback leg ended — the last night before they turned serious and left him — I was getting them home, and I said the thing I always say, because it was late and I was empty and it's the truest sentence I own. *Right. Let's get them home.*

Pam had the marker out for the next name. She heard me. And she wrote HOME on the case in four-inch letters, over DEADSTOCK, over THE RED, over the whole graveyard of it, down to the soft worn bit at the bottom where you can still read TURN if you know it's there, which by now we all did. Everyone said it was a stupid name. It was. You cannot put HOME on a T-shirt; Marnie told me so, at length, with figures. But it was the last name they carried while she was still one of them, and I am not sorry it was mine, and I am not sorry it was that word.

I still drive. Different lot now — the serious lot, the ones the critics have finally decided to respect. They're up the back most nights being important, and nobody rides up front, and it is a quieter cab, and I'll be straight with you, it is a worse one.

And the thing is, her song won't leave. Years on. I'll be doing seventy past some retail park at three in the morning with a load of important sleeping gods behind me, and it'll come up out of nothing — the four notes, up and back down — and I'll catch myself humming it, the way the first tour manager did in the first van, the way half the country still does at bus stops without noticing they've begun.

Home

She got what she wanted. It got out. It went and lived in everybody, in the drivers and the divorced and the ones who can't sleep, in all of us doing our own graveyard shifts, and it is still out here keeping us company on the long dark stretch between the services, which is the only stretch there ever really is.

Worst name they ever had, HOME. Best song, though. I'd have driven a lot further for that song.

I did. I do.

CHAPTER SIX

The Settle

You learn a band the way you learn a leak — not from anyone telling you, but from watching where the damp comes through. I've been reading this lot off the damp for years, and this time it came through in the accounts.

I'd been off them a while. You rotate; everyone rotates, it's how you stay sane and, in my case, married. I'd done other tours, easier ones, tours where the band wanted cocaine and a curfew like good Christians. But they called me back for this leg, because this leg needed a tour manager who could do sums and grief at the same time, and that, for my sins, is the whole of my CV.

They'd changed again, of course. They'd done their grand phase and their pure phase and their lovely doomed pop phase, and they'd lost the little friendly one somewhere back down the motorway — left her up the road playing her one good song to people who still wanted it, which is the single worst thing I know about them and I know a lot of things about them. And what was left had turned to the worried one, the way people at a funeral turn to the quietest man in the room because at least he won't lie to them.

* * *

The worried one had decided, after everything, that the only honest music left was music that told the truth about the world. And the world, he'd noticed, was on fire.

He wrote a protest song. I want to be fair to it: every single word was true. That was the trouble. It was so true it couldn't move. He couldn't write a chorus, you see, because a chorus asks a room to agree on one thing and shout it, and he could not in conscience ask four thousand people to shout a claim that hadn't been properly qualified — and everything, when you qualify it properly, stops being shoutable. So the song had no chorus. It had footnotes. It had a middle eight that was mostly caveats. I stood at the back one night and watched four thousand people try to raise a fist to a song that kept saying *on the other hand*, and you cannot raise a fist on the other hand. The fist won't do it. The fist is a simple animal.

He couldn't do a setlist, either. A setlist is a hierarchy — this song matters more than that one, this one opens, this one is the peak — and he couldn't in conscience rank them, couldn't stand to say one deserved the good slot over another. He wanted them played in an order that implied no judgment, which is not an order. That's a pile. So I built the setlists myself, off a spreadsheet, in the van while he slept, and told him the running order had been “arrived at ethically.” He thanked me with tears standing in his eyes, and I have never in my life felt worse about a spreadsheet.

Then he wanted to give the money back. All of it. He'd worked out the ticketing — the surge pricing, the fees, the touts gone to the moon — and he was right, it was a moral emergency, and he'd stand over the settle sheet going grey. And I'd explain, gently, the way you would to a child or a saint, that a two-hundred-person crew has two hundred mortgages stacked up behind it, and the lighting lad's kid needs braces whether or not the ticket price is a sin. Being good, it turns out, has overheads. He could not stand that. He wanted a clean conscience, and I kept handing him a P&L, which is the least clean document there is.

He audited the merch. Marnie's blank totes turned out to be the most ethical thing we sold, which delighted her and no one else. He audited the shirt cotton and the bus diesel and the flights, and every audit came back with the same answer, which is that the only truly ethical tour is the one that doesn't happen. He could not quite reach that conclusion. I made sure of it. That was my job too.

* * *

Here is the thing nobody said, so I'll say it. He could have written a chorus if the little friendly one had still been in the band. That was what the friendly one had been *for* — she took the true, difficult thing and found the four notes in it that let a room carry it together. But they'd left her forty miles and one bad decision back up the road, and now here was the worried one trying to tell the truth to a room with nobody left to make the truth singable. Neither of them would say so. Gods don't do the get-out, and they don't do the phone call either.

The tall one wanted the protest grand — a proper anthem, fists, a stadium overcoming something at a hundred and forty decibels — and the worried one wouldn't let anyone overcome anything without a footnote, and they fought about it in a way that was really an argument over whether goodness is loud or quiet, and I sold neither of them the answer, because I haven't got it.

And the quiet one, the one who sees everything, was getting worse. I'd known him longest as the saddest of them, and now he was barely in the room at all. He'd sit in the production office doing nothing, and if you watched him a while you understood he was doing the thing they all do, only more so — receiving it. All of it. Every ticket price and every mortgage and every person in the building quietly sweating toward their own death, taken in without fatigue, the way they take everything, the way the drain takes the rain. It wasn't tiring him. That was the trouble, if it was trouble. There's no bottom to what a god like that can be made to receive, no floor under it, and he'd found the no-floor and was quietly going down through where the floor should have been. I made a note. I didn't know what the note was for. I made it anyway. You'll see why it mattered.

* * *

The benefit was his idea, and it was going to lose money, and I let it, because there are some things you simply let a man have.

A hall — a real one, a community hall with a serving hatch and a tea urn, for a cause that doesn't matter to this story except that it was real, and it was local, and the people it was for were in the room. He'd waived everything: free door, no fee, the band paying its own costs for the privilege. I counted heads for the fire officer and got a number the hall could not legally hold. I counted again and got a bigger one. Then I did what everyone does, which is write down the legal capacity and put the clipboard away, because the alternative is a conversation with a man in a hi-vis, and besides, nobody was crushed, there was somehow room — there's always room, that turned out to be rather the point of the evening.

They played the true, chorus-less songs, and it was respectful and flat, a room being lectured by people it had paid nothing to hear, and I watched the worried one dying up there inside his own scruples, unable to hand them one single thing they could hold on to —

and then an old woman by the urn started singing.

Not one of theirs. An old one. A real one — the kind that belongs to everybody and to nobody, with a call and a response built into the bones of it, because it was written by people who needed each other to get to the end of a line. And the hall took it up. All of it. The cause and the volunteers and the people the whole thing was for, and they did not need the band, they had each other and a song older than the lot of them.

And the band put their instruments down and joined in.

I'd told myself a story about that band for years, and it died in that hall, in the gentlest way a thing can die. The story was that under all of it — the grandeur, the purity, the audits — they wanted something back. That they were reaching. That somewhere in there was a loneliness the worship and the money never fed, and that if you got them small enough, quiet enough, into a room like this one, they'd finally want *in*.

They didn't. I watched the six of them fold into a room that needed no band and sing an old woman's old song with their instruments down, and there was no reaching in it anywhere. No hunger answered, because there had been no hunger there to answer. The hunger was all on our side of the trestle — the old woman's, the

volunteers', the whole hall's, mine — and they received it the way they receive everything, without fatigue, without the impatience a person would have about it, the way a river's mouth receives a river. They weren't being let in. They were being fed. And when the song ended they picked their instruments back up and were gods again, unmarked, and I finally understood the thing I'd had backwards for years: the appetite in that hall was ours. It always had been. They don't crave. They just eat.

You want to know how I'm sure. That worried one — who'd audited the diesel and grieved the ticket price and wept over my running order — has never once, in all these years, learned my name. None of the six ever has. They have got, between them, my mobile number, my inside-leg for the crew shirts, and the exact figure I will lose them if Berlin doesn't sell — but not the name. I stopped taking it personally a long time ago. I take it as data now. I am the woman who gets them solvent and gets them home and writes their name on the case when they can't manage one themselves, and not one of them could tell you what I'm called. The seventh could have. The little friendly one — the one who learned your name and kept it and asked after your kids — she had all our names. But that was the flaw, you see. That was the whole of what got her left up the road. A god that starts learning names has started wanting something back, and you cannot do that and stay what they are, so they planed her off, kindly, the way you'd sand down a burr, and the six that were left never learned mine. It isn't cruelty. Cruelty would be warmer. A name is a thing you need when you want something from a person, and they have never wanted a single thing from me, because I am not food. I'm the one who sets the table.

You cannot put that on a settle sheet either. I tried. The benefit lost four thousand pounds, and I filed it, correctly, under Loss, and the loss was the truest number I wrote all year.

* * *

At the end of the leg I did the last settle, and there was a name to write, because there is always a name to write. I stood there with the

marker — my marker; the same brand, I go through them — and I thought about what you call a band that spent a whole year trying to be good and only managed it by accident, for four minutes, in a hall, on the one night it forgot to try.

I couldn't call them anything he'd have approved of, because he'd have qualified it. So I wrote the truest word I own — the thing I do every night after everyone else has gone home. THE SETTLE. Because the settle is the one honest moment in the day: no performance, no conscience, no gods, just the door money and the costs and what is actually left when the singing stops. I wrote THE SETTLE over HOME, over DEADSTOCK, over THE RED, over the whole graveyard of them. And underneath all of it, at the very bottom, in my own handwriting from a lifetime ago, was the first one. TURN. I didn't need a torch to find it. I'm the only one who never has. I put it there.

The worried one found me while I was still doing the sums. He looked at the loss — the four grand, in red, on the sheet — and I braced for it: the guilt, the audit, the apology folded into an apology. And none of it came. He just looked at the honest red number for a long time, and he said, "That's about right, isn't it." And I said it was. And he nodded, the way a man nods when he's finally been told his sentence and found it fair.

It was the least worried I ever saw him. Turns out the thing that settled his conscience was never going to be being good; it was being told, in a number, exactly what the good had cost — and paying it, and finding that he could stand the figure. So I gave him that. He didn't know who he was thanking; he never has. I gave it him anyway. It's the one absolution I'm actually qualified to hand out. I do it in red ink, at midnight, after the singing stops, and it balances, and it is the closest thing to grace I keep in stock.

The quiet one didn't come to the settle. I looked up once and caught him in the doorway, watching the pair of us over the red number, and he had the face of a man reading the last page of something while everyone else was still enjoying the middle. I nearly called him over. I wish I had. But I had sums to finish, and he drifted off into the dark of the load-out, hearing all of it, the way he did —

and that, as it turned out, was very nearly the last of him, and it's not my chapter to tell.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Room Tone

A mix is a series of decisions about what to leave out. That is the whole secret, the thing they can't teach you because it can't be taught: you don't build a sound, you starve it. You take away everything that isn't the thing until the thing is the only thing left. A good engineer is mostly a coward with a mute button. I spent twenty years learning what to lose.

And then they handed me a record made by someone who had never once in his life been able to lose anything, and asked me to mix it. That was the last thing that band ever asked of me. I am still not finished. I never will be. You cannot subtract from a thing that is already everything.

* * *

He'd been the quiet one. The one who heard it all.

I'd met him properly at the stadium, years back — I've told this part — when he came up my tower before the last show and gave me the exact decibel the rig would die at, to the number, and the minute past eleven, and he was right, because he was always right, because he heard the whole of it coming the way the rest of us hear a car. That was the gift and it was the wound, and there was no switch on it. He heard every frequency in every room, and under the frequencies the things they were riding on — the fridge in the green room, the motorway a mile off, the blood moving in the front row,

the slow settle of the building toward the ground it would one day lie down in. He heard the death in the sound. And after enough years of hearing all of it at once he could no longer hear any one thing, the way you cannot see a face if you are shown every face there has ever been, and he stopped being able to enjoy a single note — because a note is a choice, and he had lost the ability to choose, having by then received everything.

So he made a record of everything.

That was the pitch, the one time the label asked, and after that the label stopped asking and started drafting the release. No songs on it. Songs leave things out; a song is a lie of omission, he said, a mercy, a little cupped hand held over the ear so you don't have to hear the rest — and he was past mercy. He wanted the whole signal. Every frequency the room held, and the room's own tone underneath, and beneath that the tone of the larger room the room stood in, all the way down. He recorded the air handling. He recorded the silence, which is not silence — there is no such thing; silence is only the noise you have not yet stooped to hear — and he had stooped all the way to the floor of it and found there was no floor.

* * *

The others tried to play on it. That was the last time I ever saw the six of them in one room, and it was the saddest session I ever ran, because one by one the record ate them.

The grand one laid his grandeur down, and the record received it and returned it exactly level with the air handling — because to a thing that hears everything, a stadium chord and a refrigerator are the same event — and he heard himself made equal to a fridge, and something went out of him that did not come back. The maker built beautiful parts, jointed and true, and the record took them in and did not feature them, because it featured nothing; featuring is choosing. The wild one, who had spent a lifetime trying to break that band, watched it come apart on its own and got no joy from it at all — it turned out he never wanted it broken, he wanted it breakable, which is the opposite, and the record was not breakable. The record was

already broken. It was brokenness itself, with nothing left in it for him to smash. And I don't think he ever understood the difference between his kind of breaking and the kind that mattered. Every real thing that band made had come through something breaking — the chord, the guitar, the rig, her song let go — but breaking *open*, a form giving way and letting the thing through, which is a door, not a demolition. He only ever knew the demolition. He spent a life smashing the vessels before they could crack of their own accord, and I'd wager he killed more of the real thing than he ever set loose, reaching for it with a hammer.

The one who'd chased the real thing his whole life stood in the live room and understood, finally, where the chase had always been headed. Here. To the everything. To the no-floor. And he stopped. I heard he just went still, the seeker with nothing left to seek, because the quiet one had found it, and it was a wall of received world with no door anywhere in it.

Only the worried one could sit in the room while it played, because he had already been told, in red ink, exactly what things cost, and had found he could stand the figure. Even he left before the end.

* * *

There was one who could have saved it, and she was not there.

The little friendly one — the one who left things out for a living, who took the whole roaring truth of a thing and found the four notes in it that a person could actually carry home — she was the only one of them who had ever understood that leaving things out is the kindness. Is the entire art. She was subtraction in a body. She was a mix walking around. And they had planed her off years before, at a motorway services, for the crime of wanting something back — and now here they all were, drowning in total reception, with no one left among them who knew how to lose a single thing on purpose.

I have thought, since, that they ended the band the day they left her on that forecourt, and simply didn't hear it land. Which is like them. They hear everything except the one frequency they are standing on.

* * *

The mix would not resolve.

I'll be technical about it, because technical is the only handrail I have. A mix resolves when you have taken enough away that what remains holds still. This one would not hold still. Every time I muted a thing, the thing beneath it rose, because he had recorded the thing beneath it, and beneath that was another, and there was no bottom — no noise floor, which is the level below which a recording is supposed to contain nothing, the floor of the audible, the thing every record ever cut has quietly rested on. His had none. I kept pulling faders down toward the silence at the base of it and there was no base; it only went on, quieter and deeper and more, and one very late night, alone at the desk with all of it down as far as it would go, I understood what I was listening to. I was listening to a god go down through the place where the floor should have been. Still receiving. Without fatigue. All the way down, and not turning round.

The meters didn't help. A meter is a promise — this much signal and no more — and his broke it. I'd pull every channel off the bus and the needles would sit where they sat, lit, reading a level off nothing: off muted inputs, off faders parked flat at the bottom of their travel. I stopped trusting them the way you stop trusting a clock that's right twice a day. And the faders themselves went heavy. Not in my head — I mean the last inch down into the quiet took a lean on it, something pushing up while I pushed down, and you learn in this trade that silence weighs nothing. His weighed.

The near-deaf fella sat with me that last night, when it was the two of us and the no-floor. He'd taken his aids out — no use to him, worse than no use — and he listened to the thing with the side of his face for a long time, the man who hears least in the world attending to the one thing there was nothing in the room but. And he said, "There's meant to be a bottom to it, Leah." I said I knew. He said, "He never had one," and put his aids in his pocket, and went home. That was the wisest of it, and the last.

* * *

And then the band was simply over.

Not a row. Not a statement. They came apart the way a chord decays — you cannot name the instant it stopped, only that at some point you notice you are listening to the room. One of them was already still. One had gone equal to a fridge. One had nothing left to break. The maker packed his tools. The quiet one was somewhere under the audible and did not come up, and nobody went down after him, because you would need a floor to stand on to do that, and he had spent it, all of it, receiving.

Pam came for the name out of habit, though there was hardly a band left to hang one on. I gave her the only words for what I'd been mixing for a year — room tone, the sound of a room with nothing in it, the thing you record so you'll have some matching quiet to lay beneath your edits. Except his room tone had no quiet in it. His room tone was everything. She wrote ROOM TONE on the case over THE SETTLE, over HOME, over all of them, and it was the last name anyone ever put on that case. It sat there over the whole graveyard of names, down to the first one at the bottom — TURN, which she'd written herself a lifetime ago to save nine minutes, and which was, after all of it, still the truest, because it was the only one that had ever meant to leave.

* * *

I still have the record. Nobody has heard it. Nobody could; it is not a thing you play, it is a thing that plays you, and it does not stop, and it does not resolve, and there is no bottom to it.

Sometimes, very late, I put it up on the monitors and pull every fader down as far as it will travel, hunting the floor that is not there, and I listen to a god still receiving somewhere under the audible — without fatigue, forever, everything — and I think: that is what they were. Not what they wanted. They never wanted. Wanting was ours; we brought it to them in our hundreds of thousands and set it down at the front of the stage, and they took it in without a word of thanks and without learning one of our names, and gave us back, on the good nights, something that came through them and was never

theirs. That was the trade. It was not a fair one. I would take it again tomorrow, and so would you, and that is the part I cannot mix out.

Then I mute it. Muting is the one thing I know how to do. It is the only mercy in the building, and it was always, from the very first pub to the last dead room, the whole of the art.

The Turn

They got back together, of course. Everything gets back together; the getting-back-together is a genre now, the same as the falling-apart, and it pays better. I got the call the way I got the first one, years on and a stone heavier — a load-in time that was wrong and a split that was wronger — and I went, because a two-hundred-person crew still has two hundred mortgages behind it, and because you go.

Nobody had missed anybody. I want that on the record, because the posters said *reunited*, which implies a wanting-back, a coming-toward, and there was none. They hadn't pined in the years between. Gods don't pine; pining is a reaching, and they don't reach. They had simply gone quiet, the way a phone goes quiet — still on, still able, waiting for the appetite to come round again and dial. And it did. It always does. We dialled. The wanting was ours, same as it ever was: hundreds of thousands of us, older now, with the money we hadn't had the first time, ready to drive the four hours and pay the surge and stand in the dark and hand it all up to the front of the stage again. And they came back to receive it. Without fatigue. Without having missed a minute of us. Because that is what they are, and it is the only thing they are.

I did the case myself. There was a name to write, and for once I didn't have to think, because they had chosen — the single time in their lives they ever chose their own name, and what they chose was the first one. They went back to TURN. Down under all the dead names, my handwriting from a lifetime ago, the accident I'd scrawled

to load a van; and that was the marquee now, that was the one on the shirts Marnie would have killed to sell, THE TURN, in lights, the truest name they ever had handed back to them as though they'd meant it all along.

Five of them came. Not seven.

The quiet one never came up from wherever he had gone down to, and nobody spoke of it, and I stopped waiting. And the little friendly one wasn't there either — but hers was a different absence. Not a going-down. A going-on. She was the one who had left and meant it. The rest of them had scattered and drifted and been summoned back; she had walked off at a motorway services years before and become, as near as any of us could tell, a person. She still played, I heard. Small rooms. Her one good song, for whoever wanted it. She had wanted something back, once — and gotten it — and it had cost her the whole of her godhood, which is the most expensive thing there is, and, I think now, the only thing any of them ever actually paid for.

Of the five who did come, the wild one is the one I watched. A reunion is the most fixed thing there is — the same set to the frame, the same songs in the same order, a museum of themselves with the temperature kept just so — and there was nothing in it anywhere for him to break. It was all glass cases. He played it regardless, night after identical night, a god of chaos serving out his sentence in the one room on earth where nothing was allowed to go wrong. I think that was his particular hell. And I think by then he had lost the knack of telling it from anywhere else.

They played her song at the reunion. They had to; it was the one everyone came for. And every night the crowd sang it back — up, and back down, the four notes, a whole arena of them, giving it to the five gods on the stage the way you would give water to a stone — and the five received it, and gave back what came through them, and it was enough. It was more than enough. It was the best night of the year for every soul in that building, mine included.

And down the front, on her own, where she has stood since a room above a pub with thirty people in it a lifetime ago, was the one who always comes alone. Older than me now, which is saying

something. Still there, still at the barrier, singing the four notes back with the rest of them — for *them*, she'd tell you, not for the songs; she said as much to a merch girl once and it got passed down the line to me. I never learned her name. I don't learn them; it has never been the job. But somebody learned it. I'll come to that.

And she wasn't in it. The one who wrote it. The one who would have known every name in the front row. She was up some cold motorway in a van of her own by then, doing the one thing not one of them could do, which is to want a thing, and be wanted back, and let it change you until you are too human to be a god any more.

I did the last settle at three in the morning, alone, the way I like it. The numbers were obscene and they balanced. Over my head, on the case, the first name and the last name were finally the same name — TURN — the whole circle of it shut: a band that got its start because I couldn't be bothered to learn what to call them, and got its end without ever once learning what to call me.

Nobody told me they were gods, that first night. Nobody had to, in the end. You can tell a god by the direction of the hunger. It runs toward them, always — out of us, and up onto the stage, and into the dark where they stand and take it in without a word of thanks, all of it, every night, for free.

Except the four notes. Those, one of them gave back. Just the once. And she isn't a god any more, and I have decided that is the trade, and I think she would tell you she got it cheap.

CODA II

Small Rooms

I can tell you what it was like, being one of them, because I'm the only one who got out, and getting out is the only way you ever find where you've been.

You didn't want anything. That's the part nobody believes, and it's the whole of it. People stood in the dark in their thousands and lifted it all up to you — the wanting, the grief, the four-hour drives, the proposals, the divorces they were surviving one chorus at a time — and you took it in, all of it, the way a field takes rain, and you were not moved, because moving is a thing that happens to something with an edge, and you had no edge. You received. Without tiring. Without turning toward. You never learned their names, because a name is a handle you fit to a thing you mean to pick up again, and you were never going to pick anybody up. You gave back, on the good nights, something real — but it came through you the way rain comes through a field, and you no more made it than the field makes the rain. That was the arrangement. It is not wicked. It is only what a god is. A mouth with the manners to sing.

And then one night a driver asked me how his kids were, to fill the dark on a motorway, and I answered — and, this is the part I can't make anyone feel who hasn't had it happen, I *wanted to know*. The next time I saw him I had kept the answer. Wanting to know a stranger's children is a small thing to you, I expect. A Tuesday. To the thing I was it was a breach, the rain getting *in* instead of running through, and once it's in it doesn't leave; it spreads; it wants more

of itself. I started learning names. I started wanting the people to have the song — not to receive their wanting but to *give*, which is the opposite motion, and a god cannot make it. A god is all one direction. And the more I gave the more it cost, and the more it cost the more I had, which is the maddest sum I know and the only one that was ever true.

They didn't throw me out. I'd like that corrected, because the crew tell it kindly and kind is still wrong. Nobody planed me off. I got *heavy*. You cannot want things and keep pace with beings that don't; wanting has a weight and they had none, and one services at four in the morning I simply could not get back in the van, the way you can't get back into a coat you've grown out of. So I stood in the car park and watched the tail lights go, and I was not abandoned. I was born. It is a stupid time and a stupid place to be born, a motorway services off the M6, but nobody picks.

Now I play small rooms. Forty people, sixty on a good night, a low ceiling and a worse PA and a raffle at the interval for the local air ambulance. I play the one song — the four notes, up and back down, the one they retired for being too easy to love — and I give it away every night to whoever came, and it is the richest I have ever been, and I was, not so long ago, quite literally a god.

Ruth comes. She has come since the beginning — since a room above a pub with thirty people in it, before there was any of it, when she was the only soul who'd bought a ticket to a rumour. She came to the stadiums and stood at the barrier on her own. She came to the churches full of drones and sat through every minute of them. She fed us for thirty years, Ruth did — brought her whole wanting and set it down at the front of the stage, night after night after night — and not one of the seven of us ever learned that her name was Ruth.

I know it now. I say it to her across the card table I lose money on. I say, *hello, Ruth*, and I ask after her sister, who has not been well, and I keep what she tells me, and I watch a thing happen in her face that I spent three decades drinking the fuel of and never once gave back. She drove four hours to be received. It only ever took one of us becoming mortal to do it.

People ask me — the few who know what I was — whether I'd go back. Whether I miss it: the thousands, the reception, the never being tired.

No is the short answer. The long one is that you would not believe what that lot are like at close quarters, and I say that as one who was it. A thing that takes in the whole grief of the species without an edge is not, day to day, marvellous company. The tall one has been photographed for a magazine wearing his own merchandise. One of them flew the whole band to Morocco, came back with a recording of a door, and made us sit and hear it out — twice — and call it brave. I have sat through some long evenings since; the air-ambulance raffle can run to forty minutes on its own. But none of the bad evenings since ever once thought they were holy, and that turns out to be most of what I was after.

I have a name now. It gets cold, and I feel it. I will die, and not slowly, measured against the thing I was. And I learned the name of a woman who loves me, and I can say it back to her — which is a power the whole pantheon never once held between the seven of them.

Cheap. I got the lot of it cheap.

Go on, then. Sing the four notes. Up, and back down. You'll have it by the second time — everybody does.