

This Is A Warning

by David Martin

Walking home, carrying his guitar case, Jed felt the sums of his life adding up to dangerously high numbers, the deadly inertia of vaguely comfortable apathy swallowing his time.

His moment would soon be fading. Because, like many young men before him, Jed was seduced by the myths and legends of rock'n'roll at an early age, and however much he tried to convince himself that music was something he did for a laugh and to meet girls, even now, when he'd been bandless for about 18 months, he still couldn't shake it. Without it, he was just another guy with an entirely pointless job in a quietly decaying town.

He'd spent years playing in one band or another, watching each evolve and collapse according to some secret mutant DNA script, from his teenage days of after-school jamming sessions, the ineptness of the cacophony barely registering in the liberating power of making it, the endless horizons opened up by that unformed racket.

Years of pub, club and college gigs, shoving amps into rusty hatchbacks in the pouring rain, the cast changing, but the stories all variations on a theme; the beery camaraderie, the bitter ego clashes; the shining highs when nothing else in the world mattered, and the grim lows when reality came crashing back in all its grey, costly mundanity. Unexpected praise from strangers and the crushing defeat of polite applause from a largely-empty room. The inescapable laws of never, ever making money, and forever being reminded of being on the bottom rung. And even worse, however well things went, the inescapable feeling that this bunch of random lads with guitars were far from being the kind of band who made people like Jed spend their lives wanting to be in bands.

Jed was looking for the voice. He had the music, he knew he had, stuff he'd squirreled away over the years, most of which he'd never even shown to whatever band he'd been in, fearing the lumpen reality they'd make of them.

But he'd never met anyone with the voice he could hear in his head inhabiting the ghostly chords and harmonies of his secret music, the spark that would bring his sketchy compositions to life, and give words to the truths at the heart of them. In his room late at night, he strummed the secret shapes as quietly as he could on his acoustic guitar, the air barely reverberating in the sound-box, images unfolding in his mind.

The music was the hidden parts of him, his unvoiced thoughts, brightest and darkest moments made sound, but always lacking the voice to bring it to life, to take it from behind a door of a room in a shared old terraced house and stamp it on the world. His moment was passing and he knew however much he played his music to himself late at night, soon it'd wither and die.

Home, on a street where drifts of litter and leaves silted up the front gates, Jed stowed his guitar in the corner of his room and thought about the evening ahead. He'd taken to scouring the city on his own, these last few months, visiting anywhere where musicians could be found, with a growing quiet desperation at the back of his mind, from pub backroom folk sessions, to bands rattling the windows of live music bars populated by distressingly youthful students and depressingly awful people with ironic hair and glasses. Looking for the voice, feeling stabs of dreadful jealousy at the musicians up there doing it like he used to.

Before long he was out again, heading into town, feeling decidedly anachronistic with his overly-long hair and very overly-long coat, among the Friday night boys and girls heading for the bars.

Halfway down the grand old Georgian walk, with its permanent crawl of traffic, someone called his name.

Rob and Dan were two old school friends of Jed's, who, the town centre being below a certain critical mass, he inevitably ran into regularly, if with decreasing frequency as time moved on. Both had been in Jed's last band-but-two, bass and drums respectively. Neither of them an awful egoistical tosser like some of the musos he'd dealt with, the band had just died of natural causes as interest

waned. The town was becoming populated by my ex-bandmates, he thought. Some people have a group of friends where they've all slept together in every combination. I've got friends who've all had to sit through the same drum sound checks.

The Red Lion commanded a main junction, and outside Jed could see the steady townwards flow of people, neon shirts and the kind of dresses you could surely die of exposure in, even though the autumn night was mild. The pub was full of the harsh chemistry of cigarette smoke, and an edge of violence to the laughter and talk.

They'd got a table by the window, Jed's scouting expedition put off for another night. Rob was married now, to Jenny, a girl from their old school. Jed hadn't seen her for a few years. Rob and Dan both worked in an office block by the station, and had been out since they left work a few hours earlier, their ties loosened schoolboy-fashion. Dan still lived with his parents in a village just outside the ring road, and occasionally talked about going to teach English abroad.

They were pacing themselves well for a Friday night session, already well down the road to being cheerfully pissed. Jed was working hard to catch up. They'd been over all the old names from school, updating all the histories, measuring their lives against each other. Now, they were onto their gigging misadventures in the last band Jed had been in with them.

"Do you remember that guy who looked like the bloke from Judas Priest, only in a wheelchair? Like a heavy metal Phoenix Nights? Full leathers and all, parked at the front of the stage giving us the devil horns every time we finished a song? There was only him and the sound engineer in the whole damn place. And what was that place called? Fucking dive wasn't it?"

"The Swan or something," laughed Dan, taking a swig from his pint.

"Tell you what though mate. It weren't as bad as that one in Middlesbrough."

"Fucking nothing is as bad as anything in Middlesbrough."

"Tell you what though, I sold my bass the other day on Ebay. Someone must have been desperate."

"Do you remember that guy at the uni when we played there? That 18-year-old student twat with the Manc accent who thought he was like Mr Big Shot promoter, because obviously him being from Manchester automatically made him on first name terms with bloody Noel Gallagher. Bet he were actually from some posh village in Cheshire."

Jed felt detached. The conversation kept sliding along its well-worn grooves, like watching a film for the hundredth time, where every line of dialogue was endlessly quotable, and keyed to a multitude of personal memories and references.

But the law of diminishing returns had gradually taken its toll, entropy sucking all the life from it. It was like a vague tangle of string that kept the three of them loosely linked together. Endlessly replaying these incidents was the only thing holding them together as time moved on in its tidal path. An eternity of bloody reminiscence about old times that were only great because you were a kid and it was all new.

I'm not even thirty and my life is becoming a BBC2 nostalgia show, thought Jed, a sick, dull anger growing inside him. Everything's in the past tense. Grooves and channels and streets and stories and songs. Sometimes you want someone to drive a bulldozer through the whole lot and start over again. But you can't escape the weight of the rubble of your past, because you *are* just the weight of the rubble of your past.

Jed made the trip to the bar, got the pints in and deposited them heavily on the table with some spillage. He visited the gents and, as he turned away from the urinal, suddenly knew he had to leave.

Making his escape, Jed, half-pissed, plunged into a *faux*-Irish boozier called Finnegans Wake, that looked as though the industrial unit in Indonesia, where it had been assembled in kit form, was the nearest it had ever come to Dublin.

It was heaving, as everywhere on this stretch was on a Friday, a hen party three deep and braying with laughter at the bar, bottles clutched like weapons. He needed to lie low in case Rob and Dan came looking, so braved the odd lewd suggestion from the decidedly

non-spring-chicken-hens long enough to get a nasty pint of Guinness in.

He worked through the crowd away from the bar, feeling as awkward as only someone on their own in a crowded pub can, when there's no place to find a space of your own. There was a side bar off the main one, and a vague ripple of applause drew him to it.

As he entered the side room, elbowing his way through in an apologetic, fight-avoiding way, he saw the words Live Music! Every Friday! chalked on a board, and realised the crowd in there were facing the same way, watching something, rather, half of them were vaguely interested, the rest talking about where else to go, and drinking up at speed.

The music started up again. Next door, the jukebox was still up full, so the guy with the guitar, sitting on a stool with a microphone stand in front of him, was only audible close up, through a tiny portable PA rig, his face partly hidden by his thick curly hair. He was accompanying himself fairly amateurishly on guitar, and then he started to sing.

Jed stood rooted. It wasn't the words, he could barely make them out in the background pub racket. It was something in the tone of the voice, the play of the melodies, the cryptic flashes of decipherable lyric that had you straining for more fragments. It was like a void opening in the sky above the houses, the way he was singing Jed's life, determinedly and quietly against the buzz of indifferent conversation, the laughter of the hens, the thud of the jukebox and the desperate air of his being totally out of place here.

"Cheer up, love," yelled someone, to a peal of laughter from her friends. But the guy was in his own world.

At the end of the song, there was an even briefer ripple of applause, dissolving swiftly into the pub background din.

The singer smiled faintly, muttered "thanks" into the microphone and got up. He went to put his guitar back in his case.

Another man, presumably the wannabe promoter who'd decided putting an acoustic showcase gig on in here on a Friday night was a

wise career move, spoke to him, his apologetic body language clearly suggesting the singer wasn't getting paid tonight.

But they were all oblivious to what had just happened; Jed's revelation. He knew instantly the singer had the voice, the one that knew and felt everything he did, and could express it just by the warmth and sadness of its tone.

It could drag Jed's music out of the bedroom and into the world. It would set it in stone and drag it into the cold light of day for people to pick apart, or ignore, or fall in love with. It could make it real.

The young man with the guitar case was getting up to leave. His eyes met Jed's as he walked away from the stool and the microphone stand.

He smiled apologetically at Jed, who was standing in his way, but Jed felt no words forming behind his lips.

He returned the young man's smile feebly, evading his eye as soon as he could, as he stepped out of the way.

The young man threaded his way out through the crowd. He was gone.

Jed finished his pint slowly. He waited for the next singer to take the microphone. He was bloody awful.

Jed put the foam-flecked glass down and stepped out into the street. He set off for home, through the maze of terraces, back to the comforting familiarity of his room and his music.

