

As Long As There's Music – the new Boonhill Village Yarn from Rae Toonery

We are not the 'died-too-young', the 'tragically talented', the 'bright-futured'. There is no mystique about us; only a mild contempt for our need for attention. We will not be crashing and burning anytime soon. We may envy the conviction of the 27 Club, but we are unable to dispense with hope once and for all. We are not 'brave' enough to complete what society once deemed 'the coward's way out'.

Some of us are haunted by our own mediocrity.

Some of us just long for our layers to be peeled away – to be seen.

Some of us cannot escape our past.

Some of us can see no future.

We're dying to talk; please hear us.

Chapter 1

I shouldn't have come. I should have gone straight to Qweenie's to lick my wounds.

The four of us are sitting around 'our' table in the Knitters. Even though the pub is practically empty and we could have our pick of spots, we're still positioned in between the toilets and the back door. So there's the usual lingering aroma of pissinfectant and bins. As usual they've all got carver chairs, but I'm perched on a stool. One of the low ones that looks like it had its legs sawn off. Like a sorry metaphor of its occupant: if ever there was a woman of stunted ambition, it's me. I've managed to peel the first layer off my Marston's Pedigree beer mat and this is the first thing that's gone my way all day.

"Jessie Buckley has to play me," Bex says, holding up an image off Google. She puts the phone next to her own face, so that we can see the uncanny likeness. Last week it was Daisy Ridley and the week before that it was Florence Pugh.

"Don't you think Olly Alexander would be perfect as moi?" Anton asks.

"Too predictable." Debz rolls her eyes. No mean feat under the weight of all the tarmac she plasters round them. "You know neither of them has any actual punk credentials. What about the Aquadolls?"

Anton slurps noisily on his mango and apple juice. "Are you part of their marketing team or what? What about the mainstream appeal? We have to sell this to a studio, remember."

“OK. Maybe a little obscure. The Derry Girls then.” Debz folds her arms across her Aquadolls t-shirt.

“About as punk as Little Mix,” Bex sneers. As though any of this is any less feasible than punk aliens abducting us and whisking us off to their punk alien planet where we’ll be made punk alien Goddesses. As though we won’t be having this exact same debate tomorrow, next week, next month, next year. As in who should play us in the music bio-pic of our non-existent career. We’re not even a proper band: we have no instruments, no talent, no name and no gigs booked. This is just the germ of an idea. There’s no script. None of us has a clue how to write a script. It’s just something we’d all watch if it ever got made. Which it won’t.

They all turn to me, as if my silence might signify some new development. “Does it really matter? In the grand scheme of things?” I ask, shaking my head. And I stand up so forcefully I knock my bar stool into the path of an oncoming waitress. Maybe sawn-off barstools should come with a warning. A loaded tray of sharing platter nibbles is launched into the air, raining down onto neighbouring tables. Anton cheers as he pops a free chicken wing into his mouth; Debz isn’t so lucky.

“What the actual fuck, man?” She’d just replenished her pint and is now covered in half of it. “Don’t think about it without replacing this,” she holds up the offending article, daring me to leave.

“No, no,” the poor waitress protests, “I’ll sort that. Please, it’s my first night. I don’t want to—”

“Woah there,” Anton swipes the glass from her, “not so fast. Waste not, want not.” He fishes the Mozzarella stick out, swallows in it one and washes it down with the greasy lager.

This is just so typical. I can’t even storm off properly. I start to sob.

“I’m so sorry,” the waitress is hell bent on taking the blame, but I’m having none of it.

“No, “ I blurt, “it’s all my fault. I can’t do anything right. I’m supposed to be a punk and I can’t even give you lot the two fingers you deserve. And you do deserve it, you know? When do you ever ask each other how things are? For all you know I might be homeless. I might be dying of some incurable disease. I might have lost my job.”

“I’m not sure not working in the warehouse at Tesco really would be such a disaster, you know?” Bex suggests.

“Yeah, no, she’s right there,” Anton agrees. “You hate that job.”

“Yeah, bad example,” Debz is wiping down her biker jacket with paper towels provided by the waitress, who suddenly seems more interested in our little domestic than making a good impression on her new boss. “And when do you ever ask us how we are?”

“Yeah, when do you-“ fucking Anton.

“Can’t you ever say anything original?” I ask. “You know what a punk band doesn’t need? A fucking parrot.” I say, immediately regretting it. Why be mean to him? He’s the minority here. It was such a cheap shot. “I’m sorry,” I say, “I didn’t mean that.”

“Oh no,” he argues, “there’s nothing like a drink to bring out the truth,” he motions to his bottle, “which is precisely why I’m t-total.”

“Wait, what?” I’m about to point out that I’ve barely touched my cider when Bex cuts in, “so you’re like lying then? Like all the fucking time? That argument does not stand up dude.”

“Yeah, if this was the Lamest Arguer Olympics, you two would be neck-and-neck right now,” Debz sneers.

Honestly, even when I’m having a breakdown I can’t hold the room. I should have known better than to think that drowning my sorrows with these three would lighten my mood. Debz and Bex have got their whole Siamese Pins thing going on (the mobile body piercing dream job that comes in second after sit-com writers.) And their ‘edgy’ names, of course. I can never really belong because I refuse to spike my name with an ‘x’ or ‘z’. I’ve told them, I don’t have an issue with my identity: it’s my life I need to change. I’m Trace, not Traz or Trax. Anton only hangs out with us for the aesthetic contrast; like standing a brand new Ken Fashionista in front of a shelf of charity shop dolls. I try to leave, but the waitress steps in.

“You guys,” she points at me like I can’t see.

“Hey, I’m right here,” I remind her.

“Sorry.”

‘Well your ‘sorries’ are wearing thin’, is what I want to tell her, but Debz beats me to it.

“How many more times?” She asks. “Look, this is private. Waitresses bring the food. If you wanna provide a counselling service, you best ask your boss for an upgrade to barmaid.”

“Hey!” Great. Now she’s rattled Anton’s cage. “What’s with all the gendered language? I’m pretty sure they’re all just bar staff now.”

“With all due respect,” Debz sighs, “this is the Knitters’ Rest, Boonhill, not Proud Cabaret, Brighton.”

“Yeah, come on Anton, now’s not the time,” Bex agrees, turning to me, “are you actually OK?”

Finally.

“Obviously she’s not OK, is she?” Debz gives him an underlined glare.

“Yeah, look at her. I mean, did you even change from work?” He looks me up and down. Anton is the best dressed punk ever. Imagine if Esquire did a punk themed issue, Anton could be the cover star. He’s perfecting this look that is about to go viral any day now: calls it peacock-punk. We don’t have the heart to tell him the New Romantics beat him by like four decades.

“What are you on about? She always looks a mess. It’s like, her thing. Like, sticking it to the man. Refusing to buy into the whole commodified consumerist image bullshit.” Bex throws me a smile. Like this is a compliment.

I’ve heard enough. “Stop.” They all look at me like I just developed Nazi sympathizing Tourette’s or something. “Do I get a say in this? As in, if I’m OK or not OK?”

“Of course you do,” the waitress strokes my arm. It’s getting creepy now. She looks at me like she knows it. She crossed a line. “You know what? I’m just gonna see if the chef needs me.” She slinks off.

“Chef?” Anton snorts. “That’s stretching it.”

“Well, you weren’t complaining when you chowed down on that free lager infused Mozza stick,” Debz drums the table and Bex hits an invisible hi-hat. A regular Poehler and Fey moment.

“Well, glad you find it all so funny.” I tell them. Like a parent who just got home from a double shift to find the kids running amok after raiding the ‘secret’ stash of sugary junk. The three of them assume a suitable hangdog demeanor.

“You wanna talk about it?” Anton asks.

“It’s probably easier to just show you.” I head towards the doors and they follow.

So now we’re out in the car park, staring through the windows of possibly the least punk rock car ever: an orange Fiat Panda. “Isn’t this Mal’s car?” Anton again.

He’s right. It is my ex’s car. Now home to my entire life. Debz clocks my Bad Brains Live at CBGB’s and my ‘Killed By Death’ collection; I strategically placed my depleted punk collection on top of anything ‘not cannon’. There’s more than a glint of envy in her eye. She spins around. “Is Mal making you sell your soul? I mean, what’s left of it, after Anna?”

“Mal got himself an upgrade,” I explain. Seems he wasn’t looking for a soulmate after all. Seems all that bollocks about our shared trauma helping us to heal each other didn’t quite cut it. Seems what he actually needed all along was a fake-tanned, golden-haired, iron-torsoed, Colgate-smiling Adonis. Who knew?

“What?” Anton cannot conceal his excitement. He does a little clap. I silently remind myself that his loyalty is at least equal to his shallowness.

“Yeah, you were right.” I don’t let him get in a ‘told you so’. “You kept saying there was something off about all the time he was spending down the gym. And now he’s shacked up with Adam the lifeguard. He’s nineteen! And they’re on the gram already.”

We were only together for six months. I’m not heartbroken. More humiliated. I mean I knew he was on the rebound from his ex, Jamie. He was violent. Mal was one of the unseen victims of domestic abuse. And if I helped in some way to get him past that, then I’m not bitter.

A rebound person is all very well if they’re a stepping-stone to the next ‘real’ thing.

The thing with a short rebound relationship is, if you’re the one who’s dumped, if you’re the stepping stone, then you don’t just end up back where you started. Oh no. The original hurt, that the rebound was supposed to cushion, just hurts twice as bad. It’s like having the scab ripped off before it’s ready. All that time I was just pretending to be over Anna. And now here I am, reliving that whole nightmare all over again.

In the beginning me and Anna, we had so much in common. Wait, no. That’s not exactly true. We had one thing in common: we both attended this local Steam Punk Festival, thinking it was something else. I just saw the word punk and assumed it would be a bunch of Pistols, Ramones and Clash tributes. Not that tribute bands were my thing per se, but what else is there to do around here of a bank holiday? Anna thought it was some fetish dating event, as

in 'steamy' punk. She was obsessed with Beth Ditto. I guess I was the closest she'd come to exploring this kink. Anyway, our eyes met across a table of pocket-watches and I was smitten.

She was older than me and desperately wanted kids. There'd been a nasty divorce when her ex husband found out she was bi. It wasn't like she was cheating on him or anything. She just casually mentioned an ex-girlfriend and he flipped. Couldn't believe that she'd stay faithful. Convinced himself that she would sooner or later stray; have to scratch that itch for lady-love. His dad was a solicitor, so he managed to get custody of their daughter.

So, she talked me into it. I put my career on hold. Well, I put the idea of starting a career on hold. And we went through years of IVF. Of course, I had to be the incubator. This is pretty perverse, but she treated me like an invalid and I lapped it up. She didn't want me to drive, didn't want me to work, if I so much as looked at my drums, she'd pat my bump and remind me of my one purpose in life. I felt spoiled. I was getting the Princess treatment. I could spend all day playing records and there was no judgement.

Then the twins were born and everything changed. It was all, "don't you think it's time you got a job"? All of a sudden I needed to pay my way. Then when I did get a job, it wasn't the 'right' kind of work.

Leigh and Leon were three when she dropped the bombshell: that she was going into business with Cheryl, the plumber who fitted our bathroom. They were calling themselves 'Mariana's Wrench'. Cheryl worked the wrench and Anna did the books and built the brand. You've probably seen their vans, with the tooled-up mermaid on the side. Anna understood the market for trusted work-women. Lots of lone females don't feel comfortable inviting strange blokes into their homes these days. You've got to hand it to her, she's a household name now.

Speaking of houses. "Where are you gonna live?" Bex drags me back to the here and now.

"Qweenie says I can have her spare room for a bit. Till I get sorted. I'd better get this lot dropped off and get the car back actually."

"It's so humiliating." Anton shakes his head. "Having to borrow your exe's car to move out. This is a real low, Trace. Even for you."

Bex digs him in the ribs. "It was good of him to loan you the car. I'm sure he's not in any great hurry. You take your time. I mean, he's got the flat, right?"

“He needs it for morning. So he can take Adam to work. His shift starts at seven.”

“You want us to come and give you a hand?” Debz asks.

“I would love to help out,” Anton assures me, “but just looking at those boxes is triggering my dust allergy. A bientot, ciao and –“ he fake sneezes his “adieu, losers!”

“It’s OK,” I let the other two off the hook. “I’d rather be on my own. No offence.”

I watch the three of them head back inside and get behind the wheel. I’ve had to pull the seat as far forward as it’ll go; it’s like I’ve gone down the park and robbed the little plastic car off some poor innocent toddler. I am a grown kid. An adult baby.

How did I ever give birth? How did I ever think I could be an actual parent? When was the last time I saw the twins? The Christmas before Covid? Actually, they just Facetimed me from whatever luxury resort they were staying at this time. Plumbing pays extremely well it seems, when you get the right angle.

Whenever I used to ask to see them, I would get the same reply: “let’s ask them, shall we?”

And they’re always too busy with swimming club or dance club or don’t want to miss a sleepover or can’t miss a weekend with Cheryl’s parents. Anna makes those competitive parents off Child Genius look like part-timers. My own kids cannot bear to spend time with me. And who can blame them? Look at the state of me. An overweight underachiever.

Wearing monkey boots instead of steel toe caps with my Tesco uniform is the closest I get to living dangerously.

When I get to Qweenie’s she’s out. She left the back door open and there’s a note for me by the kettle:

Gone to Bingo. Back late. Get yourself fed, but don’t take my last steak and kidney. There’s clean bedding on, but don’t get used to the hotel treatment!

It takes me eleven trips back and forth from the drive to the box room, traipsing round the back and scraping my knuckles on the gateposts and banister in the process. It’s not until I’m finished that I realise I could have opened the front door from inside; the spare key is right there, hanging on the little ornamental ‘Homo Sweet Homo’ plaque.

I know I should drive the car back as soon as I’m done, but instead I go straight to the fridge. I polish off half a block of Red Leicester standing in front of the microwave, watching my Lasagna slowly rotate. When I’ve eaten that and mopped up the sauce with three doorsteps of

thick sliced white, I start on the biscuits. Qweenie's diabetic, but she always keeps the tin stocked up for visitors. I alternate chocolate, cream, chocolate until I'm suitably disgusted with myself and then I polish off the wafers. All of them.

By this point I absolutely cannot face leaving the house, let alone face Mal and his Baywatch Bae. It takes all the energy I have left to roll myself upstairs to my room. After a binge session, I feel like a walking tube of shame. You know that see through tube on diet shows, that they use to show an obese participant's typical day's consumption.

I text Mal saying the move has exhausted me and asking if he'll come and fetch the car. Piling degradation upon humiliation, the pair of them use it as an excuse to burn extra calories; they run round here. He's literally bouncing on the spot when I go to the door with the keys.

"Well, better get off," he says. Adam is already belted into the passenger seat. "Take care of yourself." He motions to the corner of his mouth, which I wrongly interpret as a signal for a goodbye kiss. I'm leaning in and he stops me, a little too forcefully considering we were actually an item until twenty-four hours ago.

"You've got something..." He points to my face this time. "Ketchup, looks like."

I want to yell at him, 'OK. I ate my weight in carbs. Don't fucking judge me.' I mean, it wasn't so long ago we were feeding each other's addiction.

Instead, I just use my sleeve and thank him for picking up the car.

Back in the box room I feel entombed. My stuff seemed pretty minimal spread out in the flat. After all, I had sold off much of my vinyl collection to try and convince Anna that I was serious about being a mother. But seeing it all crammed into this tiny eight by eight space; it's clear I have to make alternative arrangements. My clothes are piled on the bed and as there's nowhere for them to go, I just lay them flat for now. I ease myself down onto the carpet, in between the bed and the wall of cardboard and plastic. Seems a fitting allegory for my life: boxed into a box room. Lying down, I stare up at the ceiling, tracing the small, hairline cracks that run from the light fitting to the corners. I imagine some heavy object in the loft space, Qweenie could be sheltering a family of refugees up there. The more I stare, the more it seems the cracks get wider, until I'm convinced the ceiling is going to come down on me any second.

And wouldn't that be a blessing. I mean who would miss me really? Whose life do I enrich with my existence? I'm just a useless lump. Taking up space. Taking up oxygen. Maybe it's time to give up. If this is as good as it gets, why go on? If I'm really honest, I think my best days are behind me; and they weren't that great. What's the point?

I imagine myself in my coffin. I close my eyes and feel myself being lowered down, into the ground. Actually, it's sort of inviting; sort of like being enveloped in a cold, cloying, earthy embrace. The death-hug begins to hum, a low and melodic drone. What is that? Sitarish guitar riff. I place one ear to the floorboards as they have inbuilt speakers. Jim Morrison's voice filters up, slightly muffled by the carpet, but distinctly him. 'The End'. A fitting start to a funeral playlist.

However vivid, the memory of music can never live up to the actual experience. And Spotify cannot hold a candle to the warm, crackle of vinyl. I hoist myself up and find my turntable.

There are times it can take hours to find just the right track that captures my mood. And there are times when I'm drawn almost magnetically to just the right sleeve. This is one of those times. The first record I pull out is perfect. And I listen to it over and over and over.

The Bad Brains, 'Don't Bother Me'.

Could have been written for this exact moment. I watch the wax disk spinning round and round and round. And there is a strange, simple comfort in this. And as I gaze and listen, I'm transported back in time. I'm probably eleven or twelve. Dad's showing off his new motorbike. The wheels go round and round and round like the record. And he helps me up behind him. And we're off; wind in our sails and nothing but open road ahead.