

Love Song

‘This is not a love song.’

A collective murmur spreads through the crowd.

‘This is not a song for you.’

The murmur turns to laughter, and the girl in the red cowboy boots begins to play.

I stand in the shadows, providing the bassline, while she sings about coulda-beens and not-enoughs and never-quiters. The whole audience falls in love with her, of course, as she sings her not-quite-love-song. I fall a little in love with her, too. I’m in love with a version of her, anyway. Hers are not the first red boots I’ve seen.

Tonight is the beginning of a month-long tour that will zigzag across these fair isles. I’m the bass guitarist for this slip of a girl who is playing the support slot. I’ve been parachuted in after her old bass player left in a hurry. I feel tired already. Tired and exhilarated. When my old friend Larry called me up, offering me this gig, I told him no. Definitely no. Too damn old for this.

‘We both know it’s a yes. Rehearsals are next week,’ Larry said and banged down the phone.

In truth, I’m grateful for the job; grateful to be recommended. I know it won’t happen forever. When they stop thinking of me, will I stop existing? What does a man who’s lived his life on the road have when the road disappears?

‘Been at this long?’ she asks me, later that night.

‘I guess so.’

Backstage, we sit and drink, me and the girl in the red boots.

‘You ever play with Juliet Stringer?’ she asks.

Sandalwood-scented perfume wafts through my memory. *Jules*. I remember the roll of her laughter, which came out low and dirty.

‘Maybe,’ I say.

‘She’s my mother.’

I’m startled, but I try not to show it. Can Jules really be old enough to have a daughter like her? I can’t tell age anymore, but I’d judge the girl in the red boots to be about 25.

She takes a swig of whiskey and continues:

‘Everyone says I’m the spit of her. Maybe I am. Wanderlust in my veins. Folk music in my bones.’ She shakes her head. ‘Sometimes I wanna drain my blood, carve out my bones, and see what else there is.’

We lapse into silence and listen to the stamping of feet, the roar of applause. The noise is muffled as it drifts through the walls to the backstage rooms. We both wish the crowd had produced that kind of noise for us, but it’s the main act they’re stamping and roaring for. A young upstart on the folk circuit. Chiselled jaw and boyish charm. He is less talented than she is, but he has a *look*, a swagger, and, as a result, he has a following. She’s just hoping to ride his coattails.

‘You think it’s better to play dive bars in front of five people who actually want to see you—or play for a thousand who came to see someone else?’ she asks.

‘Never could figure that out,’ I say.

The next day, the young upstart introduces himself. He tells me his name is Garth or Heath. Something like that. I make a note not to remember it.

‘Pleased to meetcha,’ he says. ‘Big fan.’

He claps my hand into a handshake and smiles at me, trapping me in his gaze. He's American, of course. With an American smile. Big, pearly-white American teeth. American charm and American hair.

(‘What’s American hair?’ the girl asks me later, when I share this observation with her.

‘You know. Thick. Wavy. Shiny. Presidential hair. Hair that lies.’

‘He *does* have American hair,’ she says, delighted. ‘What an absolute *git*.’)

GarthorHeath tells me again what a big fan he is of mine. I think it’s bullshit, until he begins reeling off the names of my songs.

‘You must be one of the two people who bought the album, then,’ I say.

‘Are you kidding? It’s a classic.’

It’s true, there was once a time when I had swagger out of proportion with my talent. When I had a following. Then, of course, the album didn’t sell, the label lost interest, and my following moved on.

‘We should do a duet one of these nights,’ says GarthorHeath. ‘I’d love to play “Red Boots, White Veil” with you. That’s a great song.’

Just like that, my tired old heart makes a twang like an elastic band. Maybe I could ride GarthorHeath’s coattails, too. One hit song is all it takes to make it. Maybe it could still happen for me.

This wild, misplaced optimism lasts for perhaps two seconds. Then I come back to reality. I know my place. I’m not the star; I’m just a stop-gap, drifting from band to band. I play bass when they need me and move on when they don’t.

We travel from Bath to Oxford to Birmingham. We take a lurch into Norfolk, then double back on ourselves. We skirt London like a matador courting a bull. Colchester. Dover.

Brighton. Finally, we hit London itself, for three dizzy nights. Then, just like that, we're out into the countryside again, barrelling along B-roads. The big smoke recedes in our minds, taking on the quality of a hallucination.

The tour manager writes up a sign for the dressing room every night. *You are in Derby!* It feels the same as Dover, but I guess I'll take his word for it.

In Derby, I catch a whiff of it. On a service station forecourt, the beam of headlights catches the two of them momentarily. In this spotlight, I think I see him lean in to steal a kiss.

In Sheffield, I notice the red boots are missing. She performs on stage barefoot, like she just stumbled out of bed.

In Leeds, she changes her patter. *This is not a love song*, she says. *But this is a song just for you*. She emphasises the word *you* and laughs. Over the nights that follow, her laughter takes on a slow quality; low and dirty, it rolls out of her with ease.

'Somethin' goin' on with the two of you, huh?' I ask.

Support act over, the two us, me and the girl in the red boots, loiter at the back of the venue. GarthorHeath takes the stage and the teenage girls packed against the barrier shriek at the sight of him.

'No,' she says, and I hear the yes hiding inside it.

GarthorHeath launches into his first number and the noise drowns out any further conversation.

Tour romances. They never last. I've seen them before. They hit like lightning on an electrical wire. Burn to the end of the wire and then *zzht*, over.

I ask her about it again a few days later and she relents:

‘It’s just a tour thing. Nothing serious. He’s too much like you – he’ll never leave the road. Maybe I’m too much like you, too.’

She doesn’t mean to sting me with her comment – it’s only the God’s honest truth – but I feel it prickle against the skin of my neck anyway.

‘You know what happened to my bass player?’ she continues, oblivious. ‘The one you replaced? She quit to go work in an office.’

‘So?’

She snorts. ‘I’m never gonna do that.’

‘What happens when you get married?’

‘Never gonna get married,’ she says, with a certainty gifted only to 25-year-olds. ‘Don’t believe in love stories.’

The tour grinds on and I watch her love story play out before my eyes. That first night, in Bath, I noticed a hardness to her as she stood in her red boots. Since then, it has melted away. She’s loose-limbed and quick to smile. Her eyes gleam now; enchanted. Onstage, she sings with a new abandon, filling every word with emotion. She closes her eyes and sways, his invisible arms holding her tight.

Backstage, after the show, I find her hunched over in a corner. Writing, writing, writing. She writes pages and pages of lyrics, humming melodies and trying to pin them to the page.

‘These suck... they all suck,’ she says with a laugh. ‘There’s no new way to talk about love. Nothing new to say.’

She keeps writing anyway.

When she's not writing, she's with him. They stand hip to thigh, his arm around her, her fingers twined through his. They've given up the pretence of secrecy. They are proudly tangled up now.

'I listened to "Red Boots, White Veil" today,' she tells me. 'I love it. I'm obsessed. I can't believe I never knew how talented you are.'

'I'm telling you, man,' GarthorHeath says to me. 'We gotta play it together onstage. You say the word, I'll set it up.'

Wild optimism still whispers in my mind: *one hit song is all it takes to make it.*

I was 25 when I wrote 'Red Boots, White Veil'. Just another kid finding new words to talk about love. I'm not even sure I know how to sing it anymore.

Tour romances. They never last. I'd almost been convinced that they'd prove me wrong, and then they go and prove me right.

A few more days pass, the end of the tour looms, and *zzht*, it's over.

There's a bruise on her cheekbone. Her eyes still gleam, but I spy tears in them now. She brushes the tears away and strides out on stage, her guitar her weapon.

'This is not a love song,' she says, a low hiss in her voice. 'This is definitely not a song for you.'

She's always drinking, but tonight she's *drunk*. Mad and sad and *drunk*.

'You're really telling me you never got married?' she says, accusatory.

'I guess not.'

'Never had kids?'

'I guess not.'

This aggravates her:

‘What’s that mean? You did or you didn’t? Or you never stuck around to find out?’

‘I didn’t.’

‘Men always say it like they’re sure. My dad musta been *sure* he wasn’t my father.

Heath is *sure*—’

She breaks off, into a cry that sounds like a scream. Without even thinking about it, I tuck her up into a hug. Her shoulder hooks over mine and she *heaves*, her chest trying to squeeze out its wounded heart.

I was 25 when I met Juliet Stringer, the original girl in the red boots. Sandalwood perfume. Low and dirty laughter. A girl I might’ve married if I hadn’t already been married to the road.

‘I knew your mother,’ I say. ‘If that’s what you’re asking. I did know her. I maybe even loved her... If you were my child, I woulda stuck around.’

She pulls away, sniffing. With her makeup rubbed off, she looks twelve years old.

‘I’m sorry...’ she mutters. ‘It’s just a crazy week... I never really thought...’

‘Forget it.’

‘I wish I could,’ she says with a heavy sigh. Her voice is low, unsteady, as she continues talking:

‘I had an affair once. Older man. Just a tour romance, but it felt real. One day, he says to me, *you’re just the spit of Jules.*’

She sucks in a breath like she’s been physically winded.

‘It fucked me up,’ she says at last. ‘It still fucks me up. Half my DNA is out there floating around and I don’t even know him. Coulda met him, coulda fucked him, and I wouldn’t even know.’

‘Jules never told you who your father was?’

‘She always said she was married to the road and the road gave her me. That means it was someone bad. Someone she wanted to forget. I know the feeling.’

I walk into the dressing room (*You are in Edinburgh!*) and GarthorHeath is sitting there, strumming his guitar. He’s playing ‘Red Boots, White Veil’.

‘Last night of the tour, man,’ he says, looking up at me. ‘Let’s play this one together. And, hey, I talked to my manager. He reckons we should do it in the studio, too. Put it on my new record.’

Without even thinking about it, I take aim and punch him in the face.

Let him play the last show with a shiner. Let him know that, despite his adoring fans, at least one person has the measure of him.

There will be no support act tonight. Also, in case the obvious needs stating, I will not be recording my love song with guy who doesn’t know what love is.

The two of us, me and the girl in the red boots, hire a car. We pack up our instruments and drive into the night. I’m not her father, but I can be her friend.

Maybe, like her mother, the road has given her a baby. Maybe, like her former bass player, she’ll quit and go work in an office. Maybe, like me, she’ll spend her life playing dive bars for half a dozen people.

One thing’s for sure, though. Her life will be a love song, after all – just as mine has been. The two of us, me and the girl in the red boots, we’re both irretrievably in love with the road. Wanderlust in our veins. Folk music in our bones.