

PIT STOP

A “Mockstars” short story

by Christopher Russell

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1.

My grip tightens around the door handle, knuckles whitening. Road signs fly past, raindrops quiver on the windows.

I think I can hear the roof rattling.

‘Uh, Tony ...?’

Tony shifts up a gear and drums a rhythm on the steering wheel. He hasn’t heard me.

‘... So the gig finishes,’ he’s saying, ‘and there’s a taxi rank outside the club, but I’ve already spent most of my fee on Dirty Bananas so I decide to walk home, over the golf course.’ He laughs to himself. ‘I’ve bought a doner kebab with my last quid, and I’m crossing the fourteenth hole when I fancy a little nap, y’know, take the edge off the booze. But it’s mid-January and it is *brass monkeys* out there, so I think, hello ... this kebab is warmer than a new-born babe, so I slip it inside my shirt like a meaty hot water bottle. Lovely.’

He switches lanes.

‘Problem is, next thing I know, I’m waking up in a bunker at six in the morning, shivering, with the ruddy thing stuck to my chest hair. The smell! And that, gents, was the day I became a vegetarian.’

Tony reaches into a pocket in his combat trousers and slides out a tofu Cornish pasty. He clamps it to the steering wheel, tears it open and takes a generous bite.

The roof is still rattling.

‘Tony,’ I say again, slightly louder, ‘do you think you should maybe slo—’

‘What happened to it?’ asks George from the back seat. Tony frowns at him in the rear-view mirror.

‘To what?’ he says, with his mouth full.

‘The kebab.’

Tony chews for a moment, then swallows.

‘You’re asking me what happened to a kebab I bought in 1987?’

‘Yeah,’ says George. ‘You got me all invested in it.’

‘I don’t know, mate. I lobbed it in a shrub. Probably got eaten by a squirrel.’

George shakes his head.

‘That is truly heartbreaking.’

‘Uh, chaps ...’ I glance at the speedometer. Seventy-eight miles an hour.

‘Does anyone else feel we should maybe ... slow down a bit?’

The growl of the engine intensifies. I think Tony might be speeding up.

‘Can do,’ he says, waving his pasty at me, ‘but then we’re running pretty late, and I know that sort of thing tends to give you the squits, so I’m doing what I do best here and getting us to the gig on time.’

He flashes me a smile. I check the time on the dashboard and a bristly heat flushes my neck.

‘Right. Fair point. Just ... no crashing, please. No twisted, burning wreckage, if at all possible.’

‘Roger that.’ He winks at me, then turns back to the road. ‘Woo! Five gigs in one day, eh? This’ll be a record, even for me.’

Five shows in less than seven hours. When we agreed to this, it seemed like a good idea, but now, as the clock ticks down, I’m beginning to wonder — do we have the stamina? I sometimes need a little lie down after emptying the dishwasher.

‘I hate to interrupt,’ says John, calmly, from the back seat, ‘but should we be worried about ... that?’

John is pointing out the rear windscreen at a mess of debris scattered across the motorway. Long plastic rods, coiled cables. Sheets of paper fluttering and pirouetting in the cool Spring air.

Tony tuts loudly.

‘Some massive twerp hasn’t strapped their load down properly.’

‘Um, guys ...’ John has closed his Kierkegaard textbook, which almost never happens. A knot hardens in my stomach. ‘I think that massive twerp is us.’

‘Holy bastards alive!’ yells Tony, his eyes suddenly wide with alarm. ‘The roof box has opened.’

Swerving across lanes, Tony weaves between vehicles, causing enraged tooting from every direction. I grab the door handle again, bracing myself for the impact of steel on steel. Tyres squeal against tarmac; equipment clatters above our heads.

This is it. This is how we’re all going to die.

‘Hard shoulder!’ calls George.

‘I’m on it!’ shouts Tony, his jaw set as he steers through the speeding traffic. I watch with a sick, scraping feeling in my gut as more coiled leads tumble from the roof box and splat on to the road, cars swerving to avoid them. Then, as the back of a bus looms, enormous, in the front windscreen, we lurch to the left and there’s a

clunk, a swooshing sound and the skin-tightening sight of my keyboard sliding past the window and landing with a thud on the asphalt.

My mouth hangs open.

‘Oh, dear God ...’

As Tony guides us on to the hard shoulder and slows to a stop, I peer through the side window at a convoy of motorcycles weaving their way around my beloved instrument. I press a sweaty palm to my forehead.

‘What are we going to do?’

We are standing outside the car now, in front of a steep grass verge, assessing the damage. Who on earth do you call in a situation like this? The fire brigade? The Queen? Bear Grylls?

‘Not much we can do,’ says Tony, with a sniff. ‘That gear’s all history, I’m afraid. Hasta la vista.’

I wave a frantic hand at the road.

‘But my keyboard’s out there. We’re screwed without it.’

‘A conundrum,’ muses Tony, taking another bite from his pasty. George plants his hands on his hips.

‘I reckon you should go out there and get it.’

I glare at him.

‘What?’

‘It’ll only take a few seconds.’

‘A few— ...? What if a car comes?’

‘Just hop out the way.’

‘Hop? I’m not a cricket.’ I drag a hand through my hair. ‘Anyway, why does it have to be me? It wasn’t my job to lock the roof box.’

‘Well, for a start, it’s a keyboard. And as we’ve established, everyone hates keyboard players. No offence.’

‘No offence,’ echoes Tony.

‘And secondly,’ continues George, ‘when you think about it, it *has* to be you.’

‘Why?’

George gestures at his face.

‘I can’t do it, I’m a precious flower.’

‘Well, what about ...’ I look around. ‘What about John?’

‘Johnny is a *philosopher*. The answers to some of mankind’s greatest questions are probably swimming around inside his head at this very moment.’

John furrows his brow. I take another panicked glance at my keyboard as it lies, exposed, on the road.

I turn to Tony.

‘Tony,’ I plead, my arms outstretched, ‘you have to help me. You’ve got balls of steel. *Please.*’

Tony sighs, deeply, and points the stub of his pasty at me.

‘There are many, many things I would do for you, Chris, but walking out into speeding traffic to save a knock-off keyboard is not one of them.’

I clamp both hands on top of my head. Everyone is looking at me.

‘No. No, I’m sorry. Never gonna happen.’ I gesture at my slender frame. ‘I weigh less than a pencil, I’d snap in half!’

‘Come on, mate,’ says Tony, patting me on the shoulder. ‘Get out there in the fast lane. Live on the edge.’

‘I think you might be confusing me with Evil Knievel.’

‘Good point,’ says George, leaning over to Tony. ‘I mean, Christoph’s idea of living on the edge is going on a mini-break without a hairdryer.’

‘So we’re just going to leave it out there to die, are we?’ I snap, my voice fraying at the edges. John and George stare at the ground. Tony claps his hands together.

‘Ah, well. S’only a keyboard.’

‘But we’re a keyboard-led band!’

‘Not anymore,’ mutters John.

‘Look,’ I say, rounding on them, ‘I’m glad you all think this is funny, but we’ve got five gigs to do today and we can’t play them without a keyboard, so someone is going to have to get out there and—’

SmackackackaCRACKKKacrackacrackkkkk-kk-kkkk-k-k.

Kack.

Ack.

That, in case it was unclear, was the sound of a third-hand, semi-weighted, seventy-three-note stage piano being splintered into a thousand tiny plastic shards by an articulated lorry. The sound of my livelihood being obliterated. The sound of the wanton annihilation of my dreams; the shattering of my small, sad little life beneath the hot, relentless wheels of industry.

My breathing is loud, very loud, inside my head. Nobody speaks. In the distance, as it rumbles away, the lorry lets out a long, angry klaxon, like a cantankerous whale.

George is walking towards me, his face solemn. He embraces me, gently, and whispers in my ear.

‘I’m really sorry you had to see that.’

'This is bad,' I say, breaking away from him, my head starting to swim. Trying not to look at the plasticky carnage strewn across the motorway, I whip my phone from my pocket. 'This is so very, very bad. I need to call the organiser.'

As it stands, we're due at the first gig in less than an hour, with all of our instruments intact. And unless some Biblical-grade miracle occurs between now and then, that is not going to happen.

I study my phone. No signal.

'Anyone have reception?'

The others inspect their screens. One by one, they shake their heads.

'I bet they'll have a phone in that Little Chef.'

George is pointing at a squat, grubby-looking building across the road. The sign above the door reads *Adult Pit Stop*.

'George, that's not a Little Chef, that's a sex shop.'

He squints at the sign.

'Oh, yeah.' He shrugs. 'Maybe we should go in anyway, stock up on butt plugs.'

Dropping back against the grassy verge, I press the heels of my palms into my eyes and let out a slow, sad moan. Another car horn punctures the air, and someone shouts abuse at us through a passing window.

'Right, come on. We can't just stand around here staring at our winkies all day,' says Tony, rummaging in his pocket. He lobbs the car keys at John, who catches them with a clink. 'Johnny, you stay with the car; Chris and George, you toddle off to the sex house and I'll join you in three.' He starts undoing his fly. 'I'm gonna take a slash behind this tree.'

'Do you think crabs have nightmares?' George is saying, conversationally, as we cross the foot-bridge to the erotic service station.

'What?'

'I was watching David Attenborough last night, and he said they reckon cuttlefish can dream now, so I thought, what about crabs? They look kind of freaked out, don't they?'

'I ... don't know,' I say, peering over the railings at the carnage below. A lonely sprinkling of piano keys litters the central reservation. 'Can we talk about this later?'

'Okey-dokey,' says George, ruffling my hair. I brush him off.

'Afternoon, fellas.'

A tall, wiry man greets us from behind the counter as we step into the drab, breeze-block surroundings of the Adult Pit Stop. Metal shelving units display a combination of fluorescent toys, furry handcuffs and pornography, and in one

terrifying corner, a small platoon of silicone sex dolls stand to attention in neat rows, like very surprised, very naked soldiers.

There is only one other customer in the store, skulking around by the magazine rack. Sporting cracked spectacles and a crumpled grey suit, he looks like the kind of man you'd find sitting on a night-bus with an empty polystyrene burger box, several hours after the bus has reached its destination.

'Whoa, love eggs!' exclaims George, stopping by a bargain bucket full of oval-shaped sex aids. He plucks out three of them and starts to juggle.

'George,' I hiss, stealing a look at the shopkeeper, who is smiling pleasantly at us. '*Stop that.*'

George lets the eggs drop back into his hands, but one slips through his fingers and wobbles across the prickly brown carpet, coming to rest against the toes of the night-bus man. The man looks up from his magazine, pale face stricken.

George darts over to pick it up.

'Soz,' he says, cheerfully. 'Dropped my sex egg.'

The man clutches the magazine to his chest, watching George as he strolls back to the bucket and drops the eggs in.

We head for the counter.

'Ello,' says the shopkeeper, cheerfully, as we approach the till. He has long, dark hair, flecked with grey and tied back in a ponytail, and the hint of a tattoo is visible beneath his shirt collar. He's surprisingly well-dressed for a porn-monger, but has the slightest air of Nightclub Weirdo about him. 'How can I help you, gentlemen?'

I look over his shoulder at the wall-mounted telephone.

'Any chance we could use your phone?'

He makes a pained expression.

'Sorry, pal. Phone's for customers only.'

I am not your 'pal'. We are not nipping out for a pint after this, or going paint-balling.

'It's kind of an emergency,' I say, glancing at the clock behind his head.

'House rules, I'm afraid.' He raises his eyebrows. 'But, hey, if you buy something, phone's all yours.'

Next to me, George picks up what looks like a penis enlarger, pumps the mechanism a few times, chuckles, then puts it back down.

'Jeez. OK.' I conduct a cursory scan of the store. What not-at-all-sexual thing might a sex shop sell? I scratch my head. 'Do you have any underpants?'

'We do sell pants,' says the shopkeeper, pointing across the room. 'Course, they're either crotchless, buttless or novelty G-string.'

I'm not buying crotchless pants, for heaven's sake. I'm a keyboard player, not a Latvian rent boy.

'Uh, Christ, no.' I think about my ailing bank account. 'What's the cheapest thing in here?'

'These are on offer at the moment.'

The man turns and gestures at a congregation of eye-wateringly girthy dildos, huddled together by the till. He leans forward slightly.

'Seventy per cent off,' he says, tapping the tops of the shiny black boxes. 'You won't find a better deal than that *anywhere* on the A1M.'

Oh, really? Because I could've sworn Marks & Spencer were doing two-for-one on rubber fists.

'Seventy per cent?' repeats George, resting an arm on my shoulder. 'That is an amazing deal.'

'Exactly,' says the man, beaming at him.

'For pity's s—... OK, have it your way.' I reach into my back pocket for my wallet. 'I will purchase one of your gigantic dildos, if that's what it takes.'

'Nice one,' says the shopkeeper, clasping his hands together. 'You won't regret it.'

I'm fairly certain I will, but that's by-the-by.

'Which one, Christoph?'

George is scrutinising the obscene packaging. I glare at him.

'What do you mean, which one?'

He glances up. 'Which one do you like?'

'*Like*? Have you lost your mind?'

'There's an impressive range here, old sport. May as well get it right.'

'I don't care. Any one.'

George taps a finger against his chin.

'Which one best suits our needs?'

'We don't have any needs!'

'How about this bad boy?' he says, picking up one of the boxes and pushing it towards my face. I step back, palms held high.

'I don't want to look at it. Let's just buy it so I can use the phone.'

'I think you should say its name.'

I skim the writing on the front.

'I don't want to.'

'I agree with your pal here,' says the shopkeeper, nodding at George. 'How do I know which one you want to buy if you don't say the name?'

Gritting my teeth, I open my wallet, slide out my credit card and press it on the counter.

‘Fine. Have it your way. Please may I purchase’ — I close my eyes — ‘this extra-durable, super-textured, “Mr Veiny” monster love toy.’

A snigger from George.

‘Outstanding choice,’ says the shopkeeper, as if I had any choice in the matter. He plucks up my credit card.

‘Biscuit!’

We spin round to find Tony standing in the shop doorway, waving in our direction. He strides towards us.

‘Biscuit!’ he shouts again, speeding up into a jog.

‘Could you stop yelling “biscuit”, please?’ I hiss at him, as he passes. ‘It’s making me anxious.’

Tony ignores me, choosing instead to lean over the counter and embrace the ponytailed shopkeeper, who slaps him heartily on the back.

That’s right, Tony is hugging the porn man. They are having a hug.

Today is really beginning to test my patience.

‘Biscuit!’ repeats Tony, shaking his head in disbelief. ‘How the devil are you?’

Of course his name is Biscuit. What else would it be?

‘Tony, Tony, Tony. This is unbelievable.’

Yes, it is. It is indeed. Of all the roadside smut emporiums in all of England, we walk into yours.

‘Such a small world,’ continues Biscuit, slotting my card into the payment machine and tapping the screen with his fingernail. ‘So what brings you to the Adult Pit Stop?’

Tony rubs the back of his neck. ‘Bit of a weird one, actually.’

‘That’s what they all say.’

‘Ha! Yeah. See, my friend here—’

Tony turns towards me, spotting the enormous boxed phallus in my hand. He cocks an eyebrow.

‘You sly little saucepot.’

‘Oh, wait. No. I *had* to—’

‘Anyway, my friend Chris here, when he’s not ... buying massive rubber dicks, is the keyboard player in my new band, The Lightyears.’

Biscuit’s face opens into a wide smile.

‘Musicians!’ he says, delighted. ‘My kind of people.’

‘George, Chris, Biscuit. Biscuit, Chris, George.’

Somebody please just kill me.

‘Yeeeeeah,’ continues Tony, plonking an elbow on the till and disturbing a small wicker basket full of anal beads. ‘Back in the Nineties, Biscuit and I had some crazy times touring Uzbekistan with, erm ... ah, rats. What were they called? Fourteen-piece outfit. Hardcore gypsy bebop.’

‘Ping Pong Crumpet and The Magic Trumpets.’

‘That’s it!’ exclaims Tony, laughing. ‘Great days. You still playing?’

Biscuit tears my receipt from the card machine.

‘Oh, I dabble,’ he says, handing it to me, along with my card. ‘But to be honest, there’s way more money in rubberised gimp masks, so—’

‘Hey ...’ Tony wags a finger at his former touring buddy. ‘You don’t happen to have any old keyboards kicking around, do you? We’ve got five gigs today and ours is out of action.’

‘Uh, yeah,’ says Biscuit, caressing his stubble. ‘I’ve got one in the attic, I think. Haven’t used it in years, but I’m sure it still works.’

George turns to me, palms open.

‘Ask, Christoph, and ye shall receive. Jesus said that.’

If there is a god, which obviously there isn’t, then he’ll be busy saving disenfranchised children from starvation, not personal shopping for keyboard players in motorway sex dungeons.

‘Tell you what,’ says Biscuit, swiping the telephone from its dock, ‘I’ll get the wife to watch the till for a bit, then we can nip back to my place, dig out the ol’ magic keys and I’ll show you the ropes. Sound good?’

‘Pukka,’ replies Tony, looking immensely pleased with himself. I point at the phone.

‘Could I make a call when you’re done, then, uh ... Biscuit? It really is quite urgent.’

Biscuit parks the receiver between his shoulder and ear.

‘You just bought a foot-long wanger off me, pal,’ he says, dialling. ‘You can do what the hell you want.’

While Biscuit engages in a murmured disagreement with his wife, I glance around the shop, clenching and unclenching my fists. The place is eerily still. Tony is standing in front of a carousel of strap-ons, idly spinning them round and humming a tune. The night-bus man has shuffled off somewhere, presumably to quietly touch himself in a corner.

George sidles into my line of sight.

‘You seem tense, buddy. Know what you need?’

‘Not to be in here anymore?’

He produces a small, square box from behind his back.

‘Stressticles.’ Inside the box, an alarmingly realistic latex scrotum sits on a small cardboard plinth. ‘Any time you get a bit worked up, just give ‘em a squeeze. Kind of like therapy, but with a nut-sack.’

Biscuit hangs up the call. His cheeks are a little flushed.

‘Well, she’s not happy about it, but then I wasn’t happy when she ploughed that Brazilian pizza delivery boy, and you don’t hear me complaining about *that*, do you?’

He grabs a leather jacket off a nearby hook, shoves his arms through the sleeves and snatches up his car keys.

I’ve got a very bad feeling about this.

2.

I am standing at the bottom of a rickety-looking stepladder, foot on the first rung, staring into a dark and dusty attic. George is clomping around above our heads, chattering at Biscuit, while John leans against the bannister, reading.

‘Tony ...?’ I say, quietly. Tony is standing beside me, drumming an absent rhythm on his chest.

‘Yip.’

‘You know that dildo?’

He stops drumming.

‘The twelve-incher?’

‘Uh, yeah. The twelve-incher.’ I clear my throat. ‘You know I didn’t buy that ... for me, right?’

Tony’s face is poker-straight.

‘Listen, mate. I’m an open-minded bloke. What you get up to behind closed doors—’

‘Get your bums in the attic, Lightyears!’ George has popped his head out through the ceiling hatch. ‘You need to check this out right now, Christoph. Biscuit has something *wicked safe* to show you.’

Oh, God. What has he got up there, in his creepy little attic? Medieval sex swing? Dead body? Wheelbarrow full of turds?

‘You don’t see many of these around anymore,’ Biscuit is saying, grandly, as I emerge into the attic. He and George are standing in a corner of the cramped space, obscuring whatever it is that you don’t see many of anymore, George cooing in appreciation. I clamber off the ladder and rise to my full height, bumping my head on a wooden beam, while Tony and John bring up the rear. Once all five of us are huddled together in the room, Biscuit steps backwards to reveal the prize ... and the prize is a keytar.

Or, in layman’s terms: a keyboard that you strap over your shoulder, like a guitar. It is very red, and very Eighties.

‘BEHOLD,’ exclaims George, spreading his arms wide.

‘Gordon Bennett,’ adds Tony.

‘That is definitely a ... keytar,’ concludes John.

Biscuit grins at me.

‘What do you reckon? Pretty sexy, right?’

Under normal circumstances, I wouldn’t trust the sexiness barometer of a man who flogs disembodied ball-bags for a living, but he has a point.

‘It’s ... amazing,’ I say, stunned, as Biscuit plucks it off the stand. He straps it on and points it in our direction, like a flamboyant rifle.

‘Museum piece, this one. Worth a pretty penny.’ He pats a nearby metal box, which is perched on a stand and covered in confusing-looking knobs and dials.

‘Just hook it up to this sound module, and away you go. Synth-mania.’

I pass an eye over the dials, my forehead creasing.

‘It’s just ... I’m a pianist, Biscuit. I don’t know anything about synths.’ I glance around the room. ‘You don’t have a stage piano I could borrow, do you?’

‘Sorry, pal. I used to have tons of keyboards, but I sold them all to Daftwerk.’

‘Daftwerk?’ repeats Tony, with a laugh.

‘Art-pop tribute band. Songs of Kraftwerk, outfits of Daft Punk. Works better than you’d think.’ He leans over and fiddles with a knob on the module. ‘Anyway, there are tons of piano sounds in here, if that’s your jam. You’ll just have to play your parts with one hand.’

He winks at me, lifts the keytar off his shoulders and passes it over. Gingerly, I loop the strap over my head and let the instrument hang against my body. Circling a hand around the plastic neck, I run a finger over the buttons, trying to imagine myself onstage.

George folds his arms.

‘You are going to look like *such* a bad-ass playing this.’

Am I though? *Am I?*

‘It’s a statement, I’ll give you that,’ muses Tony. ‘But I feel like you’re not ... standing properly.’

‘Tony’s right,’ agrees George. ‘Spread your legs. Own the stage.’

Looking down, I realise that George is gesturing at me with the dildo. *The dildo*. I let go of the keytar.

‘George, why did you bring that thing in here?’

He waves it at me.

‘Come on, it’s funny! I thought it could be our new mascot. Plus, it might come in useful.’

‘For what, exactly?’

He pokes out his bottom lip.

‘I don’t know. Pointing at things, plugging large holes—’

‘Right. Give it here.’

‘Say its name.’

I sigh, heavily.

‘Mr Veiny. Give me Mr Veiny.’ He hands me the dildo and I scan the room, locating the keytar’s carry case. Kneeling down, I tear open the velcro side pouch and shove the obscene object inside, hiding it amongst the cables. ‘I don’t want to hear any more about it, OK?’

George gives me two thumbs-up.

‘Look,’ I say, turning back to Biscuit, ‘I’ll admit, this thing is pretty cool, but don’t I just look like a bit of a ... twit?’

Biscuit thinks for a moment, then clicks his fingers.

‘Hang on, I’ve got an idea. Back in two.’

He darts across the room and scurries down the ladder, leaving the rest of us waiting in silence, pondering the keytar. John blows air out through his lips.

‘So this guy’s an old friend of yours, Tony?’

‘Yup.’

‘Do we want to know how he got his nickname?’ I ask. Tony shakes his head.

‘Not a nickname.’

I side-eye him.

‘That’s his *actual name*?’

‘Uh-huh.’

‘As in: “I christen this child, Biscuit Johnson” ...?’

Tony wanders across the attic, ducking beneath the beams, to inspect a faded poster on the wall. It reads ‘Aphex Twin: COME TO DADDY’.

‘No surname,’ he replies. ‘Just Biscuit.’

‘You can’t not have a surname,’ I scoff, as Tony runs a finger over the poster, leaving a long, clean swipe in the dust.

‘No, seriously.’ He wipes his finger on his trousers. ‘His parents were proper Sixties hippies, they cleaned out the chemical toilets at Woodstock. His dad saw Ravi Shankar taking a wazz.’

‘Here we go, lads ...’ Biscuit has reappeared through the ceiling hatch. ‘This’ll change everything.’

He dumps an ancient-looking cardboard box on the floor and slides it towards me. The box is overflowing with the kind of clothes you’d find in your crazy aunt’s dressing-up box: hippyish scarves, chunky leather belts, colourful bandanas.

‘What you need,’ continues Biscuit, straining as he heaves himself to his feet, ‘is more of an edge. In your look, y’know. A bit of *danger*.’

Danger? Who does he think I am, Magnum P.I.?

‘I see,’ I reply, unconvinced.

'I mean, don't take this the wrong way,' he says gesturing at me, George and John, 'but you youngsters, you're a bit ... fresh-faced, y'know? Got a harmless kind of vibe. Soft little cheeks, like puppies. Like you wouldn't be much use in a bar fight, but I'd definitely take you home to meet my grandmother.' He sniffs. 'If she wasn't dead.'

I bet his dead grandmother is somewhere in this room, stuffed, dressed in a gimp suit.

'You look like that boy band from the Nineties, wassername?' Biscuit drops down on his haunches, next to the dressing-up box. 'Hanson.'

Tony casts an eye over us, nodding.

'I see what you mean, but they're top players, take it from me. You should hear us ... we're not half-bad.'

'I don't doubt that,' replies Biscuit, chucking random T-shirts and raggedy old furs across the room. 'What kind of music is it?'

I look at George. He points back at me.

'W-well,' I begin, with a stammer, 'it's ... uh ... it's sort of uplifting, big-hearted pop, I guess? American-influenced, nice melodies, three-part harmonies. A bit like —'

'Hanson?' suggests Biscuit, sniffing an old rag. 'MMMBop-alula.' He grimaces at the rag and tosses it into a corner. 'Aha. Here's what I was looking for.'

Standing, he unfolds a large garment from the cardboard box and holds it at arm's length. It's a long, heavy coat, made from ageing suede, with a fluffy fur lining around the neck and sleeves. The leather is a patchwork of shades: black, white, gold, silver. Biscuit gives it a shake and tiny dust clouds escape into the air.

'This is perfect,' he says, running a thumb through the fur.

'Spot on,' agrees Tony. My brow crumples.

'I do think it's important we all remember that I'm not Elton John, though.'

'No more naysaying!' interrupts George, wagging a finger at me. 'Put it on.'

Shaking my head, I pass the keytar to Tony and stand with my arms spread wide. Biscuit approaches with the open coat.

'So Tony tells me you're doing five shows today,' he says, as he feeds the sleeves over my arms. 'What is it, the Met Lounge? Cherry Tree?'

I feel my cheeks colouring.

'Um, well ... not exactly.' I clear my throat. 'It's a tour of secondary schools ... for a ... charity football single.'

Biscuit pauses, his eyes narrowed. I can feel our rock 'n' roll credentials withering under the spotlight.

'Don't worry, pal,' he says, tugging at my coat sleeve. 'We've all been there.'

‘What, really?’

He nods, sagely.

‘Anderbury Athletic, 1994. Dark days. I got spat on by a PE teacher.’ He gives my shoulders a quick brush with his palms, then steps away. ‘Right, let’s have a gander.’

Tony passes my instrument back to me and I slip it on, tucking the strap beneath the mangy fur collar, which smells faintly of dog. Between the keytar and the coat, I feel roughly three stone heavier.

Nobody says anything for quite some time.

‘How do I look?’ I ask, eventually. John tilts his head.

‘Like a reluctant pimp.’

My shoulders drop.

‘Great. This’ll be fun in front of four hundred teenagers.’

‘Chill out,’ protests Biscuit, who is back on his knees, rummaging around in the box. He reappears with a purple scarf, which he threads around my neck, and a huge pair of pink sunglasses with flamingo-shaped frames. Sliding them on to my face, he leans back to admire his creation. ‘You look righteous, man. Freaky. And kids *love* freaky stuff.’

‘I don’t believe you.’

‘Listen, when those teens see you walk into their assembly hall, dressed like a shaman and carrying a keytar, they will bow down to you like a god. It’ll be the single greatest day of their lives.’

He looks me up and down, sniffs, and drags a forearm across his nose.

‘Either that, or they will fully tear you a new one.’

Hundreds of leather-shoed feet shuffle into the assembly hall, the scrapes and squeaks reverberating against the high walls. Rows and rows of plastic chairs stretch out in front of us, gradually filling with students, while we wait together on the low stage, holding our instruments close.

As they pass, students drop clandestine glances at my outfit. Behind my flamingo sunglasses, I’m doing my best to appear suave and aloof, but I know what they’re thinking. *Why is Joseph here, they’re wondering, in his technicolour dreamcoat? And when is he going to sing ‘Any Dream Will Do’?*

‘Settle down, please,’ booms the balding headteacher, from beside the stage, as the final pupils sink into their chairs. Studying his clipboard, he follows a line of text with his finger. ‘We’re very lucky to have the, uh ... the Lightning Years with us today, performing their new single, which is apparently about football.’ He gives me the nod. ‘Over to you.’

‘Good afternoon, Leighton Hill Secondary!’ I bellow, definitely too loud, into the microphone. There’s a confused silence as my voice dies away, and I glance uneasily at the rest of the band. Someone at the back coughs.

‘So, um ...’ I point my keytar at them like it’s an overpriced water pistol. ‘We’re The Lightyears, and we’re here to play our new charity football single, which is out now on iTunes. They’ve been singing this song on the terraces at Denham Lane for decades, but this our modern take on it, y’know? Fresh beats over classic lyrics.’ I throw an arm up in the air. ‘Make some noise for your local team!’

More puzzled silence. A lone teacher is clapping, but she soon stops.

‘Come on,’ I say, in the tone of a children’s TV presenter who suspects he’s about to get fired, ‘this is your local team we’re talking about. The boys in yellow and mauve. We must have *some* City fans in here ...?’

One hand goes up. I point.

‘Aha, yes!’

‘I support Man U.’

Of course you do.

‘Anyone else?’ I say, craning my neck to get a view of the older students near the back. A girl raises her hand.

‘I support Man U,’ she parrots, flatly, and a murmur of agreement trickles through the room. I massage my eyelids. I’d assumed that a charity single for the town’s only football team would be a slam dunk, but community spirit is clearly running low here at Leighton Hill.

‘Oi, mate.’

Immediately in front of me, a boy of around twelve has extended his arm. My painted-on smile is beginning to waver.

‘Yes?’

‘You look like Willy Wonka.’

A wave of laughter surges through the room, and I begin to feel very warm beneath my ridiculous garb. I tug uselessly at the fur collar. ‘Do you all support Manchester United, then?’

Hundreds of hands shoot into the air, keen and straight, like an army of spear carriers. This includes most of the teachers.

‘What’s wrong with your local team?’ I ask, exasperated.

‘They suck balls,’ calls a lad from the back, prompting more sniggers. I aim a surprised glance at the staff, hoping for condemnation, but no one seems bothered. You couldn’t say ‘suck balls’ when I was at school, believe me. This country.

‘Oi, mate.’

My Willy Wonka friend again.

‘Yes?’

‘Why are you wearing sunglasses indoors?’

Another peel of laughter, louder this time, and I feel shame rushing to my cheeks.

‘I don’t really know,’ I reply, wearily, sliding them off. An idea flashes across my mind, and I hold the pink shades at arm’s length. ‘Tell you what ... you have them. A present from me.’

This’ll get them on my side. Teenagers can’t resist free stuff.

‘No, thanks, mate,’ he says, matter-of-factly. ‘I’ll get my head kicked in.’

‘One, two, three, four!’

With the click of his drum sticks, Tony drags us into the song and soon we’re careering through the first verse at breakneck speed, the raucous sound filling the room from floor to ceiling. George is up front, strumming his guitar and belting out the words; Tony sits at the kit, pounding rhythms; John stands beside him, quietly concentrating, fingers gliding up and down his bass guitar. Meanwhile, I am standing with my legs apart, struggling to play my piano parts one-handed, half-blinded by the flamingo shades, feeling self-conscious in my ill-fitting costume. But as I brave a look across the hall, I find the students bopping along, enjoying it, and my spirits lift. Maybe I’m not ridiculous. Maybe teenagers *are* interested in charity sports singles. Maybe rock ‘n’ roll, as promised in the Fifties, really will save us all.

After the second chorus, we merge into a guitar solo and I reach across to my sound module, flicking through to a patch entitled ‘big juicy lead’. *Perhaps this calls for a keyboard solo*, I think to myself. *Time for a little SYNTH-MANIA.*

‘Can we keep this going?’ I call to Tony, over the noise. He nods, and I point to my instrument. ‘Keytar solo?!’

Grinning, he signals to George, who fires out one last spiralling guitar note and drifts to the edge of the stage. Stepping forward, I plant a foot on the monitor and unleash a screaming, diving, razor-edged synth solo that cuts through the air like a hot knife through butter. Strutting from one side of the hall to the other, I power my fingers up and down the keys, purple scarf trailing behind me, fur coat bouncing as I head-bang and twirl, almost able to hear the young minds around me being blown, irrevocably changed for the rest of their lives, napalmed by the awesome power of The Keytar.

I am Hendrix, I am Clapton. I am the raging spirit of Jerry Lee Lewis.

Or, very possibly, I look like the world’s biggest pillock.

When the gig is over, Leighton Hill's headteacher ushers his bored-looking flock from the hall, advising them as they shamble past the stage that, before we leave, the band would be delighted to answer any questions they might have. Delighted.

Of course, no one has any questions.

Except this guy.

'Oi, mate.'

Well, if it isn't my number one fan. I clear my throat.

'H... hello there.'

'I got a question,' he says, chewing gum at me. He is flanked by a small cabal of his mates, most of whom seem to think this — a boy, talking to an adult — is the funniest thing that has ever happened in the history of the human species.

'OK ... ask away.'

I brace myself for something demeaning, like 'Can I have your mum's phone number?' or 'Are you a paedo?'. The boy wrinkles his nose.

'What's that mad guitar you're playing?'

I lift the keytar slightly.

'This is a keyboard.'

'But it's got a strap.'

Behind him, one of his mates whispers 'boobies', and they all fall about laughing. I ignore them.

'What's your name?'

'Big Lee,' says the boy, puffing his chest out. I look him up and down, which doesn't take long, because he's about two-feet tall.

'... Big Lee?'

'Yeah, Big Lee.'

More smothered laughter from his crew. I run a finger along the keytar, clicking some buttons.

'Well, Lee ... it's actually a keytar. Sort of a cross between a keyboard and a guitar.'

He bobs his chin, thoughtfully.

'Sick.'

'Any other questions?'

'Nah. Nah.' He runs a hand through his gelled hair. 'I just wanted to say that, like ... I think it's dope. Like, when you play it, you look proper dope.'

Well, I never. *Dope*. I'm pretty sure that's young person vernacular for **SPLENDID**.

'Thanks, Lee,' I say, fighting a grateful smile. 'I really appreciate that.'

'S'alright.'

A pause. I decide to push my luck.

‘Are you going to buy the single, then?’

‘Nah,’ he says, wiping his nose on his sleeve. ‘I’m saving up for “Metal Slug 3”.’

Once the Leighton Hill student body have trickled out of the assembly hall, we de-rig the stage, drink a hasty cup of tea and hit the road again, headed for school number two, then three, then four. As the hours tick by, the gigs begin to merge into one another, and we find ourselves running on auto-pilot. Bemused students, frazzled teachers, echoey assembly halls. Stale Bourbon biscuits on crumb-littered trays.

But when we arrive at the fifth and final school, simultaneously exhausted and over-caffeinated, things take an unexpected turn.

3.

‘Last show of the day, let’s make it count,’ says Tony, as he pulls into the car park, squinting through the windscreen. He leans over the steering wheel. ‘You’re sure this is the right place?’

I glance at the small cluster of buildings ahead of us. The sign reads ‘The Old School House, Est. 1984’.

‘This is it, the Old School House.’ I consult my notes. ‘It says “load in through the green door”.’

‘Green door,’ offers John, pointing across the tarmac. Tony spins the steering wheel with his palm, and stifles a yawn.

‘Hello, Wembley.’

Five minutes later, we are shuffling awkwardly into the main building through the green door, each carrying two or three heavy items of equipment. Faint classroom clatter can be heard through the walls, and at the far end of the corridor, a woman in a bright yellow jumper is hurrying towards us.

‘This place is tiny,’ says Tony, catching a drum case as it slips off his shoulder. ‘Can’t imagine we’ll shift a lot of product here.’

‘Maybe it’s a special school,’ suggests George, heaving his amp through the doorway. ‘For geniuses. Or wizards.’

‘Hellooo, Lightyears!’

The woman in the yellow jumper greets us with a genuine smile, and I feel myself relax. She’s the first person to have got our name right all day, which makes a pleasant change from the Buzz Lightyears, the Lighthouse Family and, at perhaps our lowest point, The Lighty Ears.

‘Thank you *so* much for coming,’ she says, wide-eyed. ‘I’m Eleanor Waits, the head.’

We exchange greetings and Eleanor looks around, taking in our mountains of equipment.

‘We’ve never had *anything* like this before, it’s most exciting.’ She presses her palms together. ‘Can we fetch you a cuppa?’

‘Music to my ears,’ replies Tony. ‘Got any biscuits?’

She smiles again. ‘I’m sure I can rustle something up.’

'I'm a vegetarian,' adds Tony, very seriously, as if she was about to force-feed us venison digestives. Eleanor's eyebrows nudge upwards.

'Oh, right. Well, I wouldn't worry, I don't think we have any ... meat biscuits.'

'Can't be too careful in my line of work,' continues Tony, sucking air through his teeth. 'I remember one gig, Chorleywood '98, mix-up at a Bat Mitzvah, accidentally drank an entire pint of Bovril. So where we playing?'

'Ah, yes ...' Eleanor turns and prods open a pair of double doors, revealing a small assembly area on the other side. 'Go ahead and make yourselves at home, and we'll bring everyone in at three o'clock on the dot.'

Tony checks his watch.

'Champion.'

Twenty minutes later, after our by now well-practised routine of unzipping, uncoiling, plugging in and powering up, we are waiting in our trademark diamond shape, bathed in the quiet buzz from our amplifiers. The main door squeaks and slowly opens and a girl with a bouncy blonde bob walks in, giving us a shy smile. She looks too young to be a teacher and too old to be a student, which is confusing, but it's not the strangest thing about her. The strangest thing about her is that she's carrying a baby. And she's not alone, either, because she's followed in by a parade of girls in their early twenties, all smiling excitedly, all carrying babies.

Inside my weary brain, jigsaw pieces begin falling into place. The teeny buildings. The earnest headteacher. The clean, clinical scent in the air, which is a welcome respite from Lynx Africa, body odour and chips, but feels wrong, somehow. Deeply wrong.

And that's when the penny drops. This training camp for wizards, this mysterious institution, it's not a secondary school at all.

It's a pre-school.

'I think there's been an administrative error,' I mutter, under my breath, to no one in particular.

'Wassat?' asks George. I turn my face towards his.

'We're not ... supposed ... to be here.'

'Huh?'

'Does this look like a high school to you?'

George surveys our audience and puffs his cheeks out.

'I wouldn't worry about it,' he says, blithely. 'We'll just power through.'

One of the assistants catches my eye and I attempt a reassuring smile, but I can tell, even without a mirror, that it's a slightly manic smile, the kind that says: *You know your mother? Your elderly mother? I have her here, in this sack.*

‘We’re supposed to be a serious band,’ I continue, through my teeth. ‘It’s humiliating.’

‘What is?’ asks George. I bulge my eyes at him.

‘These are children, George. They are literal babies.’

‘You *could* think of them as babies,’ he says, slinging an arm around my shoulder, ‘or you could just think of them as squidgy little music fans, in nappies.’

‘I think that’s worse.’

As the final few assistants trickle in, each carrying a babbling infant, Eleanor gives me a perky thumbs-up from the back of the room. Returning it, I lean across to George and speak in a harsh whisper. ‘I mean, what the hell are we going to open with? The theme tune from *Sesame Street*?’

‘Come on, old fruit, there are tons of options.’ He counts on his fingers. “‘Baby I Love Your Way”, “Hit Me Baby One More Time”. “All That She Wants, is another ba—”

‘You’re not helping.’

‘Everything alright, boys?’

Tony has walked over, spinning a drum stick. George twiddles a tuning knob on his guitar.

‘Christoph’s having a meltdown about singing to toddlers.’

‘Naaah, it’s fine,’ says Tony, waving a palm at me. ‘Loads a big artists gigged to weird audiences before they were famous. Beatles did strip clubs, Johnny Cash played prisons.’

That may be true, but I bet most of those audiences could wipe their own bottoms.

‘By the way,’ continues Tony, pointing his stick at me, ‘can you switch out the lead from the back of your keytar? I’m getting some fuzz.’

‘See?’ says George, as I kneel beside my keytar case. ‘Everyone does it. Bon Jovi have played loads of kindergarten shows, probably.’ I pull open the cable pocket and root about inside. The leads are all tangled, so when I find the right one, I have to tug it free. ‘And anyway, they’re only a bunch of babies. What’s the worst that could happen?’

Yanking a fresh lead from the case, I manage to dislodge the entire contents of the pocket and, before I can stop him, Mr Veiny tumbles out and begins to roll across the gleaming laminate floor. I watch in mute terror as the hefty rubber schlong makes its slow, wobbly course across the room, finally coming to a gentle stop against the folded knee of the bob-haired teaching assistant, who is fussing with a baby in her lap. The baby blows a spit bubble, and the assistant looks up. She covers her mouth.

‘Oh my days ... is that...?’

Her eyes suddenly wide in realisation, she recoils from the mega penis, her skin blanching. The baby looks at it, quizzically, and reaches out a curious finger.

‘No!’ I bark, rushing towards them. ‘No, please don’t touch that.’

I drop down and cover the member with my hands, trying to shield the baby from, let’s face it, a lifetime of therapy. The girl watches me, stunned.

‘Wh ... what is—’

‘This is just, um ...’ I pluck Mr Veiny from the ground. ‘This is just my very massive dildo.’

I am holding it between thumb and forefinger, like it’s a particularly foul-smelling cucumber that I’ve just discovered decomposing in the fridge. The teaching assistant stares up at me, her eyes shiny with fear. I swallow, hard.

‘I am so ... *so* sorry.’

This is bad — I mean, this is *awful* — but I really feel like it wouldn’t be quite so bad if it weren’t for all the veins. OH GOD, WHY DOES IT HAVE TO BE SO VEINY?

‘I don’t understand,’ she says, breathily. ‘You ... why ...’

‘I’ll just, uh, just pick that up and pop it in my pocket there,’ I say, dropping Mr Veiny into the side pocket of my technicolour dreamcoat. I turn back to the girl, whose face is still frozen in horror, and smile a very thin smile. ‘Do hope you enjoy the show.’

Spinning on my heel, I retreat towards the band, the chunky appendage gently banging against my thigh, and mouth ‘What now?’ at George. He lifts his guitar in the air and points to the ceiling.

‘Hello, babies!’ he exclaims, into the microphone. Several babies start crying.

‘That didn’t work,’ he informs me, as I return to his side.

‘Oh, you think?’

He pokes me on the arm.

‘Do your speech.’

‘My what?’

‘Your football team speech.’

‘What? Are you kidding? Why?’

He lifts a shoulder.

‘Some of them might want to buy the single.’

‘They can’t buy singles, George. Most of them can’t stand up yet.’

The chorus of whimpering babies is swelling by the second, and the noise is beginning to freak me out. Sucking in a deep breath, I conjure up the inane smile

I've been sporting all day, in assembly halls across the city, and turn to face our audience.

'Hello, ladies and gentlemen! We're The Lightyears, and this is your first ever rock concert. Any football fans in the house?'

'Baggun,' says one of the babies, thwacking the floor with its rattle. Across the room, another baby lets out a loud, long fart, which rises at the end, like a question. Like the baby is saying *'Why are you here, strange men? What do you want from us?'*

'So I'm guessing, I'm *guessing*,' I continue, pluckily, 'that most of you don't have iTunes accounts ... but one day you might, and when that day comes, you can bet your bottom dollar' — Where am I going with this? — 'that you'll want the greatest charity football single in the history of, er, Cambridgeshire, right there on your iPod, ready to play, next to the Black Eyed Peas and, um ... well, OK, it won't be iPods by then, it'll be holograms, or microchips in your face, but you see what I'm getting at.'

A strange pause. 'Fooob,' says a nearby baby.

'Let's hear it for your local tea—'

'Who likes "Old MacDonald Had A Farm"?''

A voice from behind. I swivel round.

'Um, Tony—'

'I saaaaid ...' Tony is standing up from his kit now, holding both sticks in the air. 'Who likes Old MacDonald, yeah? Who likes chickens and donkeys and ruddy big pigs?' A cheer from Eleanor, polite whoops from the teaching assistants. Tony spins his sticks in triumph. 'Come on, boys, let's rock this farmyard.'

Before I know it, we're stumbling through 'Old MacDonald Had A Farm', making the music up as we go, grinning like goons and clapping our hands as if this had been our plan all along. And to be fair, everyone's having a good time. The assistants are laughing and singing, the babies are giggling and drooling and waving their toys and Eleanor is bopping along at the back of the room, cheeks pink with joy. Then, as we segue into a freeform Old MacDonald jam, I find myself attempting the world's first nursery rhyme keytar solo, and between wailing synth notes, I look down at my clothes, my preposterous outfit, the fur and the leather and the cherry red keytar, and silently reflect on my life choices. When I joined a band, I wanted to be cool. I wanted to be respected and fawned over; I wanted people to think 'just where *does* his genius come from?', and 'how does someone so young demonstrate such a deep understanding of the human condition?', and 'how, at the end of the day, can we all learn to be a little bit more like him?'. That was all I

wanted. But today, as I unleash a fat Theramax lead over a song about turkeys, I find myself one balloon animal away from a career in children's entertainment.

Still ... at least everyone's forgotten about the giant todger.

'Thank you so much, gentlemen,' says Eleanor, shaking us all by the hand. Her hair is still dishevelled from dancing. 'I think that might've been our best ever assembly.'

The five of us are standing in the car park outside the Old School House, loading the final few pieces of gear into the car. I slide the keytar into the one remaining space and close the boot.

'About the incident with the ... whatsit ...'

Eleanor raises her palms.

'Consider it forgotten.'

'Honestly, that's never happened to me before. It's not even mine.' She blinks back at me. 'I mean, it *is* mine, but I've never ... used it.'

'I think what Chris is trying to say,' interrupts Tony, loudly, 'is thanks for having us. We've never done a show like it.'

'That's good to hear,' replies Eleanor, stepping towards the green door. 'And you're welcome back anytime.'

Pushing open the door, she pauses, then turns around.

'I'm buying the single when I get home, by the way. Ten copies. I think it's rather snappy.'

And with that, our miniature tour draws to a close. Five schools, countless hot beverages and nearly two thousand kids who now, for better or for worse, know one end of a keytar from the other. Looking back, we may not have raised much money for charity, but we *have* pioneered a face-melting, pop-punk version of 'Humpty Dumpty Sat On A Wall', and that's more than the Rolling Stones can say.

An hour or so later, after reuniting Biscuit with his keytar and enduring a twenty-minute anecdote about the time he and Tony headlined a steam engine festival in Uchquduq, we pile back into the car and head for home.

'I enjoyed that last gig,' says George, as we cruise down the motorway slip road. Ahead of us, the sun is beginning to fade. 'They know what they like, don't they? Babies.'

'Not sure we joined a band to play nursery rhymes, though,' I reply, from the front passenger seat. Tony switches up a gear.

'That's the music industry for you, boys. One day you're high-flying rock 'n' rollers, next you're playing "Itsy Bitsy Spider".' He reaches into the box of vegetarian scotch eggs squished between his legs. 'But when you think about it, there's always a lesson in there somewhere.'

I sit up in my seat.

‘And today’s lesson is ...?’

‘Well, I suppose it’s, uh ...’ He lobs an egg into his mouth and chews for a bit.
‘Never bring a dildo to a crèche.’

‘Can’t argue with that,’ adds John, without looking up from this book. ‘Maybe they should put it on a fridge magnet.’

Dropping back against the headrest, I rub my eyes, yearning for the comfort of my bed. My whole body aches from carrying the keytar.

‘That was one long day. Long, and very, very weird.’

Tony throws a look at me, a wry smile on his lips.

‘You’re in a rock ’n’ roll band now,’ he says, as we join the speeding traffic.
‘It’s gonna get a *hell* of a lot weirder than this.’

THE END