

MARCUS WINTHER-JOHN



16 HANGOVERS

NOVEL

# #1

## *Figure of eight*

Therapy is for lunatics and losers. That was my opinion until recently. But as I balance my guitar bag up against our therapist's bookcase, it strikes me that fate has a way of punishing that kind of cockiness. Multiple copies of *Detox Your Love* and *Partners for Life* line the shelves. We have the first appointment of the day, so I go straight in and collapse in my usual seat. The hazy contents of my head whirl into place a few seconds after my body has settled in the wicker chair. I take a swig of water and massage my temples. Last night's shots are still sloshing against my forehead from the inside.

"Hi, Marc. Welcome," the therapist says in a calm voice. She focuses on watering the last few plants on the windowsill, turns around and smiles. Her long black hair hangs untamed over a colorful, zebra-patterned blouse.

"Thanks," I answer absently and shift around in my chair. My stomach rumbles ominously. As I watch, the cactus on the desk receives the last dribble from the watering can's spout.

"Back in a minute," she sings and disappears out of the door, holding out the watering can before her like a lantern.

I take a deep breath. Cold sweat trickles down my forehead. I exhale. My taste buds are sweating an alcohol-drenched greeting from last night. My mouth starts watering. *Shit. Here it comes.* I jump up and scamper into the hallway where the therapist has just shut the washroom door behind her. My stomach starts spasming. *Not now. Not here.* A cross between a burp and a cough pushes a vulgar sound out of my mouth. I tumble back into the consultation room. My eyes dart desperately over the three wicker chairs around the table on which rests the customary Kleenex box. And on to the bookcase and under the desk I've never seen her use. No paper basket. *Can't hold it back much longer.* I pull out the desk's bottom drawer and fall to my knees. My insides contort, and I violently spew out the contents of my stomach into the drawer, like a scene from *the Exorcist*.

"Aaah," I moan and spit. A pencil floats to the surface of the drawer's sour bisque. For a moment, I stand hunched over, with a firm grip on the sides of the drawer. The clamp on my head loosens, and my stomach is calm again.

Two pieces of paper slip out of my inside pocket and glide into the pool of vomit.

*Shit.* I gingerly pluck them up between my thumb and finger and let them drip off. I pull a handful of napkins out of the family-size box on the table

and wipe some goop off the printed tickets: a weekend for two in Paris, the city of love.

The toilet flushes on the other side of the hallway. I throw the napkins into the drawer, drop the tickets, pick them up, hit my head on the edge of the table, curse, rub my head, and stuff the tickets back into the inside pocket of my leather jacket.

“Hello, Mia. Welcome,” I hear the therapist say.

I instantly recognize the click-clacking heels marching down the hall. I slowly push the drawer shut, careful not to spill anything. A vile smell assails my nostrils, forcing me to hold my breath to avoid throwing up again. With the drawer closed, I jump into my chair just as the door opens.

“Hi,” Mia halfheartedly smiles at me and settles into her usual chair. Holding a hairpin between her dark red lips, she tightens her ponytail and pours herself a cup of tea.

The therapist comes in and takes her place in the chair opposite us; then she wrinkles her nose and gets up again.

“Isn’t it a bit stuffy in here?” she asks.

I nod a bit too enthusiastically. She opens the window slightly and bends over to smell the biggest plant in the windowsill. It looks like the top of a palm tree.

“Sometimes it’s as if plants smell sour when you water them. Do you know what I mean?” she asks.

I nod again.

“Okay then,” she says and sets the timer on the table. “How’s it going?”

Mia clutches her mug with both hands and stares into it as if she has dropped something precious in the steaming herbal tea.

I glance back and forth between the two women in the room until the therapist nods at me.

“Well, I feel like my whole life is hanging by a thread,” I begin.

“Tell it to Mia,” says the therapist, nodding towards her.

I suppress a jolt of irritation, turn to Mia and continue.

“I just feel like we’re standing on the edge now. I’ve given you space, I’ve been patient for half a year. But nothing’s changed. Now we’ve tried *not* doing anything.” My hand reaches into my inside pocket and fingers the top of the paper. “Maybe it’s time to do something proactive instead? To get away for a bit?” I pull the paper towards the edge of my jacket but stop just inside the zip when the therapist gives me a compassionate look.

“Marc, imagine that you and Mia are on one of those cycle boats with two sets of pedals. For a long time, you’ve been the only one pedaling in your

relationship. Mia has got used to you doing that. So much that she's forgotten how to pedal herself."

I stuff the paper back into my pocket.

"Mia needs to learn to connect to herself again and maybe feel the urge to pedal again. On the other hand, she might decide that it shouldn't be you and her. But you have to give her space, or you won't get anywhere. Maybe you'll get tired of waiting and decide to move on." The therapist throws a quick glance over to Mia before turning back to me. "You have choices too."

I sit up in my chair, suppressing the urge to hit the table and scream out how ridiculous this situation is. *Of course, we have choices. I chose long ago. When we got married and even more when we had the kids. But why choose to give up the most valuable thing in your life just because you have a choice? Why swap something so deep and long term for a new round on the meat market or whatever the hell Mia thinks is missing in her life. Why fuck up a lifetime achievement for that kind of relationship junk food?* I feel like jumping up, grabbing her shoulders and shaking her until the consequences of her actions break through her distant, glazed expression. I can't take much more of this emotional no man's land. But the alternative seems even worse. Couples counselling is our last chance. I take a deep breath.

"Look, *I'm* not at all in doubt of what I choose. I don't understand why we're wasting precious time questioning everything. *Now* is the time that the children still want to spend time with us. We should be enjoying our family and each other now. Sharing the adventure..."

I stare at Mia who sits motionless with crossed legs. She sniffs a couple of times and wrinkles her nose.

"Mia, what goes through your mind when you hear Marc say that?" The therapist asks.

"That it's wrong to just keep going if I can't feel our love anymore, I suppose," Mia throws me a look. "You don't deserve that either."

I sigh.

The therapist leans forward and pours a cup of herbal tea. "Tell Mia how it makes you feel when she says that she can't feel love."

"I'm just so fucking scared that—" I turn towards Mia. "—that *you* are throwing something deep and valuable into the fire in exchange for some Cosmopolitan-inspired self-realization fad, some teenage dream of a summer fling or something. I get that that you're not madly in love anymore. But I believe that love takes on a different shape in this phase of a relationship. That doesn't make it weaker. On the contrary. It's built on a foundation of 20 years of ups and downs and now we have two kids who are also a part of the

equation.” My voice breaks. “Can’t you see what you’re destroying?” I bite my lip and try to blink the tears away.

Mia takes a sip of tea. I take another round before the therapist takes over.

“Do you really think throwing yourself into somebody else’s arms will make your life better? I mean your relationship with the kids, your job, your economy, your vacations?”

Mia shrugs. None of us say anything. A bus revs up down on the street and the sound slowly fades away.

“Is there someone else?” The therapist asks.

“No,” answers Mia with a forbearing smile.

An uneasy silence follows before the therapist picks up the conversation again.

“I’ve seen many women who think that the answers are in the arms of another man. But the way forward lies within yourself. Not in a change of scenery. Because with that choice, it’s only the scenery that changes.

A breeze from the open window accentuates the rotten stench in the room. I notice the therapist discretely breathing into her hand and sniffing as Mia begins talking.

“I know that,” Mia lifts her eyebrows the way she does when she’s irritated. “I don’t think that the answer is to throw myself into the arms of someone else.” Mia looks sad for the first time. “I would just hate to lie on my deathbed and feel that I had compromised in love. That I had wasted my life.”

I interrupt her.

“Everything is a compromise, Mia. Everything is at the cost of something else. You have a wonderful family just waiting for a *go* so we can continue our life together.”

She looks into her cup again and answers:

“Well that’s why I’m here, isn’t it?” Mia looks inquisitively at the therapist. “Can you give me some tools to connect to myself?”

My hands are shaking. I look at the window. *Count to ten. One, two, three...*

Outside seagulls take off and land on the roof of H.C. Andersen Bakery. The therapist nods and starts talking.

Mia interrupts her, “I want to write this down. Do you have a pen and a piece of paper I could borrow?”

“Of course,” she answers and slowly walks over behind the desk. My mind is instantly back in the room.

“No!”

Both women look at me surprised. I smile nervously.

“Uh, Mia, why don’t you just use notes on your phone? Then you’ll always have them with you.”

“I’d prefer to write it down.”

My heart pounds. I hold my breath. The therapist reaches down and pulls out the drawer. She takes out a small notepad and rummages around with the other hand. I breathe a sigh of relief. Top drawer.

“I can never find a pen.” She closes the drawer and reaches further down.

“No, no no,” I mumble.

Mia gives me a weird look. The therapist pulls out the next drawer. Were there two or three drawers?

Puh! She exclaims with an agonized expression and turns her head away.

My breathing stops. She reaches down and fishes out an old, blackened banana skin.

“Now I get why it smelled so sour in here. I’m so sorry about that,” she disappears into the kitchen to dispose of the banana peel.

The sound of cars down in the street fill the room for a stretched minute while we sit with our eyes fixed on the carpet.

“Ta-dah,” she says on her return, waving a pen like a magic wand.

“Thanks,” Mia takes notes in her immaculate handwriting while our therapist explains with an animated empathy that makes Mia look hopelessly cold. I slouch apathetically in my chair and stare at the sky outside while the quicksand inside sucks my heart into dark uncertainty. The seagulls are still busy. All too familiar therapeutic phrases duet with their squawking.

“Negative patterns;” “*rah-rah...*”

“Infatuation and love;” “*rah-rah...*”

“Partnership or passion;” “*kraaah!*”

My gaze drifts back in and rests on the therapist’s ample bosom which jiggles from side to side when she moves in her chair. Mia’s voice ends my mind’s little detour.

“I wish I felt madly in love with Marc, but uh...”

“Under these circumstances, you can’t be sure of Marc continuing to be in love with you.” I notice the therapist look at Mia before making eye contact with me. She continues, “Maybe you’ll find someone else. Someone who’s grateful to find someone like you and who gives you what you get so little of from Mia. Maybe you’ll get tired of having such a Spartan love life?”

The professionally empathetic face turns to Mia and takes on a more confrontational tone. “How does the thought of Marc finding someone else make you feel?”

By now I have identified this as one of her strategies. She tries to provoke a reaction from Mia to push her emotional buttons. Mia forces a mechanical smile and brushes some lint off the leg of her dark pantsuit. No reaction. Again.

“Umm, I’m not sure...”

“What would you say if Marc came and said he had slept with someone?”

“Well, I guess I would understand it.”

The therapist raises the stakes, “Yes, you would understand it with your head but what do you *feel* about Marc having sex with another woman?”

A creeping uneasiness makes me shift around in my chair. Mia sits as unaffected as a mannequin doll. The contrast makes the therapist look desperate. Defeated. Mia shrugs. Her eyes glance quickly at me and then around the room until they return to the therapist who tilts her head and signals that it’s time for an answer. Another bus revs down on Strandvejen. Mia takes a deep breath and answers expressionless,

“Nothing.”

There’s a moment of silence. The therapist lifts her eyebrows and leans back in the wicker chair.

“O-kay.”

I stare dumbfounded at the side of Mia’s face. Seagulls scream. Busses speed past. And then the timer shrieks a shrill ringing through the tense dead air. I jump in my chair. We get up, gather our coats and bags and say goodbye to the therapist with the ceremonial somberness of guests at a funeral. Neither of us speaks before we reach the door at the bottom of the stairwell. I bend my knees to avoid knocking the top of my guitar against the doorframe.

“Uh, Marc, what you said about getting away for a bit...” Mia fumbles with her bicycle lock, her back turned to me. At the end of the street, the sun sparkles on the surface of the sea. “I actually think that might be a good idea.”

A smile of surprise wipes the hopelessness off my face. I pull the paper from my inside pocket and hold it before me like a teenager ready to present a rose to my first date after pressing her doorbell.

“Maybe it would help me connect to myself if I got away from everything for a few days. Me-time away from everyday life. I was thinking of Stockholm...”

Mia slowly turns around. I just manage to hide the paper behind my back. She looks into my eyes for the first time today.

“Maybe you could take the boys with you to the concerts next week with Billy? I’ll find a cheap plane ticket then.”

I force a pathetic smile and crumple up the paper behind my back.

“Yes, I guess that’s a good idea.” I crush the paper into a little ball in my fist. “We’ll get through this,” I say in a low voice, the desperation just below the surface. I take her hand. She lets hers hang flaccidly in mine.

Mia’s gaze is distant again. She mumbles an undefined monosyllable answer and changes the subject.

“You’re collecting the kids today, right?”

*Back to business.*

“Uh...”

“We have that business plan meeting at the Marienlyst conference center, so I won’t be home till late.”

“Oh yeah,” I say. *This is the first time I’ve heard about this.*

“What are you doing now?” She asks.

“Well, I’ve got rehearsal with Linda and then the studio with Billy tonight,” I answer. *I told her that this morning.*

“Couldn’t you take the boys with you tonight?”

“Ok,” I reply.

“That’ll be fun.”

“I’ll figure something out,” I say knowing that it won’t be fun.

Mia lowers her handbag jingling with keys, lipstick and make-up products into the bicycle basket. She smiles vaguely, treads on the pedals a couple of times and falls in line on Strandvejens cycle path. I throw the crumpled-up paper ball at the garbage can. It bounces on the edge and falls on the sidewalk.

## #1.2

Linda opens the door dressed in a small kimono of green silk which makes her eyes sparkle like emeralds. She resembles an antique doll with porcelain white skin with her head tilted to one side as she dabs her long wet black hair with a towel.

“Hi Marc,” she purrs, turns around and prances towards the kitchen.



A gold embroidered dragon shows its teeth on the back of the short garment that only just covers her ass. I bump my guitar against the doors and the walls in the crooked old Christianshavn apartment and squeeze myself into one of the wooden chairs in the dining area.

Coffee darling? She asks with an exaggerated *Downton-Abbey* accent and pours me a cup before I can answer. She tops it up with milk and places it in front of me donning a worried expression, "Are you ok? You look really worn out."

"I came directly from couples counselling. Eh, and I've got a bit of a hangover." I watch her bare feet treading across the dark wooden floor to the fridge. Her toenails are painted purple.

"Hangover on a Tuesday, how very rock 'n' roll. What happened last night?" She asks and puts the milk away.

I mumble disinterestedly about the Billy Peters concert for the senior club and our post show evaluation at a local bar. My eyes wander inadvertently to Linda's half-open kimono and rest upon a breast. She immediately pulls the collars together with a teasing look. She spins around demonstratively on her heels, pulling up the kimono to reveal two perfectly shaped buttocks ten inches from my nose.

Whoopsie! She shrieks coyly and looks over her shoulder pouting her lips like Marilyn Monroe.

"No! Put them away," I shout and cover my eyes. "This is not the kind of behavior the public would expect from one of Danish National TV's most popular children's-TV-hosts."

"Ha ha, so is Mia still being stingy with her pussy?"

"I've had sex twice since May! Two fucking pityfucks in half a year."

"What? Not cool." Linda shakes her head.

"Our therapist said that the initiative has to come from Mia and only when she feels the need," I add with my best therapist imitation, "You have to give her space, so our love can blossom again."

Linda makes an agonized face. "You know what I think?" Linda doesn't wait for my answer. "I just think Mia needs some *rough stuff*. She needs to be fucked into place. You know? Have her hair pulled and her ass smacked." Linda claps her hands and nods as if to confirm the accuracy of her enlightened insight. "Maybe some inspiration from my fans would be helpful?" Linda draws air quotes at the word "fans" and scrolls through her iPhone.

"Oh no, what did you get now? More dick pics?"

"No, or rather...yes, there's always sausage in the inbox but here's someone who really went that extra mile." Linda sits up on the edge of the

kitchen table, swings her long hair over her shoulder and holds her telephone solemnly in front of her, “Dear Linda Morninghair. My three-year-old daughter and I sit faithfully in front of the TV every Sunday morning,’ bla bla bla.” She scrolls down a bit and continues, “You look so innocent in your smiley-pyjamas but I know what you are. You’re a kinky little cunt.’ She lowers the telephone, looks at me and adds, “Well, I guess he’s right about that.”

I agree with a nod. She looks back at the screen of her phone, “So, here’s what he has planned for me: ‘First I’m going to rip off your pyjama top and pull off both sleeves. With one of them, I’m going to tie your hands behind your back and I’m going to stuff the other one in your mouth. When you’re down on all fours, I’ll pull down your pyjama bottoms and spank you with your *Good Morning Morning Storybook* until your butt cheeks are bright red.’”

She lowers the phone again and looks at me. “But here’s where I’m a bit confused. I’m on all fours but he’s just tied my hands behind my back. Hmm, what to do?”

Linda smiles and continues reading animatedly from the intimately detailed description of something between advanced roleplay and rape. After reading about being penetrated in every possible way, she chuckles and swings her legs back and forth against the cupboard doors.

I shake my head and ask, “So, he sits and watches you on TV with his 3-year-old daughter while he conceives these fantasies?”

“Sicko,” she giggles. But there is neither contempt nor fear in Linda’s voice. It’s more of an ill-concealed pride and a teasing tone like when the husband in an old couple is lovingly reprimanded by his wife for pinching her bum.

“Does Bubber or any of the other TV-hosts get mails like that?” I ask.

“I don’t know,” Linda laughs. “How long do you have today? It’d be great if we could run through all the songs.”

“Which ones do you want to play at the showcase?” I ask. Ever since she invited a couple of music biz people to a small duo concert at a café in the hip Vesterbro area of Copenhagen, she has consistently called the concert a showcase and expects me to do the same.

“Well, definitely ‘Greener Grass’ and then I thought maybe ‘Lovers Are Losers’.”

“Cool, I could play some slide in ‘Greener Grass’ if you play some campfire acoustic there?”

“Hell yeah!” She shouts excitedly.

I feel dizzy. “Can I have a banana? I think I forgot to eat today.” Black dots perforate my vision.

“Yes, of course.” Linda puts her hand on my forehead with a worried look.

“Jesus, Marc, you’re sweating. You need to get blood to your brain,” she forces my head down towards my knees.

Once again, I watch her feet walk to the fridge and hear the sound of cracking eggs. My ears are ringing.

“Doctor Linda to the rescue.” She makes siren sounds and declares with her best, serious medical voice, “I prescribe omelet. It stabilizes the blood sugar and there’s lots of protein and B-vitamins to reduce stress.” Her purple painted toes wiggle up and down while she whisks the eggs. The black dots disappear. Linda continues, “They’ve found that the cholesterol from eggs isn’t that bad after all. It actually enhances the effect of antioxidants. So, I’ll chuck some veggies in there too. Linda hums an indeterminable melody while she violently rummages through the refrigerator’s bottom drawer.”

My dizziness subsides. I straighten myself up in the chair and take a swig of coffee.

“What about that guy, eh... Was he called Nikolai?” I ask addressing the dragon on her back again.

“Married,” she sings sarcastically and starts chopping the vegetables aggressively. She spins around and looks at me, waving the big knife dangerously in the air. “But he decided not to tell me before we had fucked a couple of times.”

I grunt despondently. Linda turns around and continues chopping at a more moderate level.

“But tonight, I’ve got a date with a real businessman. I guess I’ve got to mix it up. Maybe these musician guys aren’t right for me. There’s always something missing. Or they’re taken.”

“Since when has that been a problem?” I ask. But instead of a quick comeback, Linda answers solemnly, “You and Mia may have issues, but you are so lucky. I can’t even imagine how it must be to be with the same person for 20 years. Do you still have butterflies when you see her?” Linda pours a pile of chopped vegetables into the runny mixture in the pan.

“Yes, but not in a good way recently. She says that she can’t feel herself or me and that she feels unfulfilled.”

“She’s just having a midlife crisis. Nearly every woman I know seems to go into some kind of panic mode around their 40s. We think that we can be cool, sexy femme fatales, perfect mothers, biodynamic-athletes and strong,

faithful wives. But you can't. So, we end up doing ridiculous, self-destructive things. But I'm sure you'll get through it. Think of all those years full of love. You don't just forget that from one day to the next."

I shrug and slurp my coffee. It's cold. I put the cup back on the table and say, "Lately I've been thinking about it a lot and I think that love is more of an idea than a feeling. Feelings are fleeting. They come and go. You can feel something strongly and then it fades, and you feel something else."

Linda turns around and sits at the counter again gazing at the floor.

I continue. "But love can also be a thought and the more you think that thought, the more you talk about it, the bigger it gets. But if you move your focus to other thoughts then it shrinks and fades..." I look out the window where the afternoon sun is fighting a losing battle against a silver autumn sky. "I'm afraid," I add softly.

The only sound is the sputtering of the omelet in the kitchen until Linda says, "Love is a flower that needs to be nurtured with thoughts and attention. I'm not sure whether that's really beautiful or really sad. But it's definitely deep shit. I'm going to put it in a song lyric."

"And I'll play some teary-eyed guitar to it," I say and smile awkwardly.

"Yes, some Fuzzfinger anno 95-guitar that hurts so good." She writhes so that the last part of the sentence takes on a sexual connotation.

"Yeah, yeah," I answer slightly irritated as the small muscles in my right eyelid twitch in spasms.

"Why do you always get so grumpy when somebody mentions Fuzzfinger? You were a guitar hero, a part of Danish music history."

"Exactly! I *was*. We *were*," I answer.

Linda rolls her eyes and suddenly remembers the omelet and she saves it at the last minute. Finally, she slaps it down on a plate on the table in front of me. I stare at the plate with a frightened expression.

"What's the matter now?" Linda asks exasperated.

"Eh, mushrooms."

Linda makes eye contact, "Face your fear, baby." She winks and repeats slowly, "*Face your fear.*"

### #1.3

The sun has melted into a glowing splotch behind the buildings on Enghavevej, coloring the sky over Vesterbro an apocalyptic violet. We run down the alley with walls covered in posters of past and future concerts. Barbara Moleko overlaps a row of Medinas and I only register Tim

Christensen's eyes under Volbeat's distorted logo on a poster that is losing its grip on the wall, as I race by with a boy in each hand. We stop at the door of Medley Studios.

"Now remember, no fighting or mischief. Daddy just has to record some guitar and then we can get ice cream on the way home if you're good."

I press the doorbell.

"Can't I have crisps instead?" Noah asks and self-consciously adjusts his skater cap. A foreboding of imminent teenage life.

"I don't want crisps," Oliver protests and clumsily tries to turn his cap sideways.

"Why do you always copy me?" Noah makes an irritated monkey-face at his brother and turns his cap back. Oliver turns his cap back too.

"Stop it!" I give both hands a little squeeze.

The door opens just before the conflict escalates and the boys direct their full attention towards the longhaired rock prototype before them.

"Hey Marc, hey guys. What's up? Are you coming to the studio with dad?" Sonny roars as if he were addressing a stadium filled with fans. The boys follow Sonny calmly down the hallway covered in gold and platinum discs. *Midt Om Natten* by Kim Larsen, 500.000 sold; *Copenhagen Heart* by Billy Peters, 200.000 sold; *Dizzy Mizz Lizzy* by Dizzy Mizz Lizzy, 250.000 sold. But the boys' eyes are locked on Sonny whom they study with impressed fascination: the chain hanging low on his thigh, the studded belt, pointed boots, tattooed arms and his long black hair hanging halfway down his back. I've spent many hours in Sonny's perpetual positive company over the years. But to the boys, he's a new acquaintance. I throw our jackets on a battered leather chair in the lounge area.

"Coffee?" Sonny asks rhetorically as he powers up the coffee grinder next to the legendary espresso machine.

"Yes, please," I shout over the noise of coffee beans being ground and walk into the control room.

"Hey boys!" Billy cries out with his rusty voice and jumps up from the leather chair in front of the blinking spaceship of a mixing desk. The black-clad figure doesn't look 70 as he strikes a boxer pose, ducks, blocks and throws a few hooks at the boys in slow motion who laugh shyly. He kisses everyone's cheeks and takes my arm.

"How are you son?" He asks enthusiastically in the warm voice I know so well. Billy's intense gaze radiates from a face marked by decades on the road. An appropriate rock 'n' roll patina. A lock of hair from his combed-back silver mane hangs in front of his eyes.

“Thanks, I’m alright, a bit busy,” I answer and exhale slowly as I wriggle the guitar bag of my sweaty back.

“Talent is always busy... it’s like that.” Billy winks, slaps me on the shoulder and walks towards the door.

“Sonny, grab a couple of cold cokes for the boys, would you?”

The boys settle into the sofa at the back of the room with their iPads as their drinks are served.

“Have you heard the songs since our last session?” Billy asks while Sonny sits down at the mixer.

“No, actually I haven’t.”

“Perfect! Rock hasn’t rolled like this since *Copenhagen Heart*,” Sonny declares and double-clicks on the folder, *Billy Peters – New Album*, on the big screen in front of the window overlooking the recording room. Sonny continues with his eyes glued to the screen.

“We’re keeping it minimalistic, not too many dubs—”

Billy interrupts enthusiastically. “Bona fide rock and roll.”

Sonny respectfully awaits further comments from Billy before continuing, “—just the sound of Billy’s unique voice and a great band. All we need is an extra bit of stardust here and there. You know, some good old Marc magic.” Sonny winks to me.

“No problem,” I answer.

I tune and bend the strings a little on my beloved blonde 65-telecaster. I bought it with my first royalty check amid a dream. How can 20 years have gone by since then? It feels like only a few days ago that we stood in this exact same studio and recorded an album that would change my life. An album that turned my hobby and passion into my profession.

But now, watching Noah and Oliver walk around in the same rooms where we walked, longhaired and clad in flannel shirts and Dr. Martens, I realize that it was in a distant past. A different life.

Sonny double-clicks on the *Figure of Eight* folder. A rainbow of colored audio tracks fills the screen and the faders on the mixer slide up and down as if guided by the hands of ghosts.

“I’ve miked a vintage Marshall up for you in there,” says Sonny.

I take my cue and walk into the recording room, plug in, strike a few chords and sit on the stool, borrowed from the grand piano a few feet behind me.

Through the window to the control room, I can see the tops of Sonny and Billy’s heads. Behind them, the kids are immersed in their iPads. That should buy me some time to get some guitar stuff on tape. Now it’s just up to

me to play something worth recording. The realization buzzes nervously in my chest. It never bothered me in the past. It flowed effortlessly from my fingers as soon as the music played. But now self-consciousness and doubt have turned into a vicious circle. The more I think that my playing has to be great, the worse it gets. And the worse it gets, the more I think that it has to be better.

“Can you hear me?” Sonny’s voice in my headphones asks.

“Yup,” I answer at the microphone on the Marshall cabinet.

“We’ll just take a run through while I adjust the sound. 1– 2– 3– 4–“

The dirty, bluesy guitar riff churns in my headphones. After two bars, the drumbeat kicks in and Billy’s raspy voice snarls like Bob Dylan with Rod Stewart’s vocal cords.

*“Every time I believe I am on the right way*

*I am back at the beginning like a figure of eight”*

I fill the gaps with trite blues licks and fiddle a bit with my amp. Maybe I need a little more crunch? I try some strategically placed long notes. I shake my head. Not right. Maybe a little less crunch? I turn the knobs again. The music stops and Sonny is back in my headphones.

“Hey, does it sound ok for you?”

“Yeah, it’s cool. I just don’t know how much crunch I need.”

“It sounds great, but I don’t think we need anything before the solo and the rest of the song. I’ll punch you in a few bars before.”

“Cool.”

*“Every time I believe I am on the right way...”*

I fall in on the riff before my fingers crawl further up the fretboard, bend and screech and suddenly freeze. The band plays on without me. I hammer on the strings and the music stops.

“Alright?” Sonny asks.

“Yeah, yeah, I just want to...” I have no idea what “I just want to”. I run through a couple of scales in the song’s key. “Ok, let’s go again,” I shout.

*“Ooh like a figure of eight, hey!”*

I start higher up on the fretboard but play myself into a corner after a few bars.

“Stop! Give me another go,” I shout and hit the strings a couple of times in irritation.

*“...Ooh like a figure of eight, hey!”*

I close my eyes and clench my teeth. The notes writhe in and out of the riff. I wander out of key to an extent where it can no longer be classified as

improvisation. Sonny is back in my headphones with screaming and shouting in the background.

“Eh, you better come in.”

In the control room, Billy is standing at a safe distance from the boys, grappling on the sofa, trying to get their attention.

“Boys, eh, hey, come on...”

I send the boss an apologetic expression, jog over to the sofa and separate the wrestlers.

“Oli wouldn’t let me see his game...”

“He called me stupid,” Oli shouts.

“Stop now!” I order and grab hold of their arms. “Now behave. Remember our deal.”

“I’m hungry,” Noah says.

“Do you like drums?” Sonny interrupts.

The boys light up. They follow Sonny into the recording room past my guitar setup and into a soundproof booth with a drum set and a case full of percussion instruments. Noah sits down with drumsticks in his hands, Oliver finds a set of bongos and produces an instant inferno of sound. Sonny shuts the door. Silence. I thank him and smile at the sight of the two banging away on the other side of the thick glass.

“I guess we’ve bought ourselves some time for a great solo,” Sonny smiles to me puts his hand on my shoulder and asks confidentially. “Dude, you seem, ehm, tense. Are you ok?”

“I’m ok,” I answer and sit down with my guitar again.

“Just take it easy. Let’s get some of the good old Fuzzfinger magic going.” Sonny smiles and closes the door. I see the top of his black hair next to Billy’s silver top. A tic pulls the corner of my right eye.

*“Ooh like a figure of eight, hey!”*

Billy’s words echo in my skull with a depressing relevance. My life has become an incessant circuit of logistics, vicious circles of Mia and stress. Same shit over and over again. The music plays as I sit staring hopelessly at my guitar. Sonny stops the tape.

“Did you miss the cue? No problem, here it comes again.”

*“Ooh like a...”*

I force my way in angrily after hey and insistently bend the same note for two full bars before letting my fingers run hysterically up and down until Billy’s voice returns for the last chorus.

The music stops and Sonny is back in my headphones.

“Badass, but perhaps a bit too aggressive here, we think...”



“Come out here,” Billy adds.

I untangle myself from my guitar and headphones and walk into the control room.

“Do you need a shot?” It’s not a question. Billy has already poured a Jägermeister up for me from the bottle on the little table by his chair. I empty the glass. Through the window behind Billy, I can see my guitar amp and through the window to the drum box. The boys have switched places. Oliver is hammering away on the drums with sweaty strands of hair stuck to his forehead.

“Hmm, it doesn’t gel. We just need to find that feeling. Make it blend in and lift the song,” Sonny explains diplomatically.

“More Keith and less Jimi,” Billy adds with a tinge of impatience.

I scratch my head and contemplate aloud, “But I’m just thinking, ehm, that Keith doesn’t really play solos.”

“It’s rock and roll. You don’t think it, you feel it.” Billy turns around to pour himself a new Jägermeister and completes his thought, “It’s like that.”

Sonny sends me an apologetic look. “Try some slide,” he says.

Back in the room, I put the slide on my little finger and glide up and down the fretboard a few times. Sonny waves his hand over his head so I can see his thumbs-up signal. The music fills my ears again.

*“Ooh like a figure of eight...”*

I skate aimlessly around the strings. Billy’s words poke me in the ribs like a crooked finger. *“Every time I believe I am on the right way.”* Just when our little family was ready for some easy cruising Mia couldn’t *feel us*. Despair suffocates the notes, the feeling, the inspiration. Slowly I slide down to the bottom of the guitar neck and stop.

“One more. I’ve got an idea,” I lie.

I slide slowly up the fretboard and my eyes wander around the room as if the key to the perfect solo could be hanging somewhere amongst the cables, microphones and guitars. My slide mirrors a laidback version of the chorus melody. One time through and then I glide up and play the same an octave higher. Billy’s voice returns and I glide in and out of the music and stay on the ending note until Sonny hits stop. When all else fails play along to the chorus melody, the oldest trick in the book.

“Yeah, that was cool, I think. Come in and have a listen,” Sonny says in my headphones. I feel more like staying put. I can’t handle watching Billy and Sonny pretending that I nailed it. I step into the control room like a guilty teenager.

“Nice, Marc,” says Sonny without taking his eyes off the screen.

“Whatcha think?” Sonny looks at Billy who’s leaning back in his chair with folded arms.

“Yeah, it’s ok. It’s fine,” Billy answers.

I avoid eye contact.

“It should be great not just ok,” I say and see the boys again through the windows. A tambourine flies through the air and hits a cymbal next to Oliver’s head. I hold my breath. It looks like Oliver is laughing. I focus on Billy again and only hear the last part of what he’s saying.

I nod carefully.

“So, it’s more of a theme than a solo but I think it’ll be really strong if we dub it with an organ or Moog,” Sonny concludes.

Simultaneously, I watch Oliver stand up precariously on the drum stool and fence in the air with his drumsticks. Noah jumps sideways and Oliver falls forward over the toms. His feet disappear under the window followed by both cymbal stands.

But you can give it another shot if you want?” Sonny suggests unaware of the chaotic scene playing out in the window behind him.

“No, it’s cool. Actually, I think it’s going to be supercool,” I reply and hurry towards the drum booth.

10 minutes later, we’re sitting in my old Volvo on Enghavevej.

“Seatbelts on, everybody?” I ask and turn the key in the ignition while the boys shout in unison “yes!”

“I’m hungry,” Oliver moans from the backseat the next second. Noah agrees.

“Me too. “

It’s 8 pm. Already half an hour over their bedtime.

A quarter of an hour later, we’re back in my worn-out Volvo on Enghavevej. This time in silence while the boys hold long durum kebabs before their mouths like meaty trumpets. I breathe in deeply and can only hear fragments of what Noah says with a mouth full of shawarma. Halfway up Valby Hill, I punch the steering wheel with a loud, “*Damn!*”

Noah jolts with surprise in the passenger seat.

“What’s wrong?”

“I forgot the guitar in the studio,” I answer and sigh.

“We don’t have to go back for it do we?” Noah asks. He has a blob of dressing on the tip of his nose.

“Nevermind, I’ll collect it tomorrow.”

Home at last in Vanløse, I brush the boys’ teeth and they go to bed without protest. I throw their clothes in the washing machine before I go and

tuck them in. Oliver is almost in dreamland, but Noah is lying with wide anticipatory eyes on the *Where the Wild Things Are* book on the nightstand.

Ok, I say and smile. I stroke his soft cheek, take the book and lay down next to him.

The buzz of messages on my phone wakes me up. The book falls to the floor when I sit up. My forehead and cheeks are sweaty where the pages of the book have been stuck. *Bip-bip*, it says again. I check my phone. No new messages. *Bip-bip*. I stumble into the kitchen, squinting my eyes in the sharp light. The clock on the oven says 23:15. Mia has not come home yet. *Bip-bip*. But her phone is on the kitchen counter. 5 new messages.

## #2

### *The day after*

“Fuck!” I say on seeing the zombie in the mirror.

Two narrow, bloodshot eyes glower at me. The tiles on the bathroom floor have imprinted a cross on my forehead and the shaggy Beatles mop sticking to my temples seems more grizzled than usual. I put my face under the faucet and slurp greedily letting the water splash over my cracked lips. Suddenly the bathroom spins and I have to grab hold of the sink with both hands. I breathe in deeply until I regain my balance. I turn around and smash my shoulder into the doorframe on my way into the hallway.

I hear a noise and freeze. It’s Noah snoring. Schoolbags are in the hall.

“Shit!” I say out loud and tumble back into the bathroom, gurgle some mouthwash, splash cold water in my face and put on the clothes strewn on the hallway floor in the order I find them. Sock. Pants. Sweater. Sock.

I explain to the boys that I’m sick and that we’ve overslept as I help them get dressed and load them into the car almost unconsciously. Their mouths are moving but I can only respond with vague nods and sounds that confirm that I know they are speaking. There’s a blurry film playing between me and my surroundings. Like my whole nervous system has been shut down. I can hardly breathe. Only short inhalations and exhalations. Must keep it together until the boys are dropped off. We stop at 7-Eleven to buy their lunch and drive up to the school gate. I unload them, turn the car around and look down at the white knuckles gripping the steering wheel hard. They drive me home on autopilot. The car swings into the driveway as the muscles around my eyes explode in tics. Bush, fence, and house show themselves in stroboscopic flashes. Out of the car. Key in the door. Open. I collapse on my knees on the doormat.

“FUCK! FUCK! FUCK! FUCK!” I pound the floor then clutch my head in my hands and fall forwards. I let go. Sobbing shakes my body in unpredictable spasms like cramps after a lethal electric shock. I do not know how much time passes before I become aware of my childish weeping and stop immediately.

I drag my body to the bedroom. The blinds are still drawn. It smells of booze and sweat. I let myself fall face first into the bed.

*Bip-bip.*

A faint ray of light reflects against the side of the Glenmorangie bottle on the nightstand. I throw a pillow against the wall and sit up. Mia’s iPad is

lying in a pool of whiskey. I lift the bottle up in the air ready to smash it down into the screen.

*Bip-bip.*

I lower my arm and take a swig of the bottle. My face contorts in disgust. I drink again. And again. Then I dry the sticky whiskey puddles off the screen and open the new email.

To: Mia Mahler  
From: Torben Ebler  
Re. Chaos in Vanløse

Sweetie.

I'm so sorry to hear that! You know I'm here for you but right now, we just have to get through the storm as well as possible. There are mountains to climb but the most important thing now is the kids. I'll call as soon as I am out the door. Loving thoughts in difficult times. Kiss, sweetie.  
Torben

To: Torben Ebler  
From: Mia Mahler  
Chaos in Vanløse  
27.Nov.2014 07:48

Good morning sweetie.

My evening took an unexpected turn when I got home last night. Marc had read your texts about our Stockholm trip and way before that. So, he was pretty shaken and upset. I went into some kind of state of shock and didn't say anything or cry. He asked me to pack a suitcase and leave. Now I'm at Karina's. I've slept fine and feel good apart from being a bit nervous about the boys. I think they were asleep when I came home but I'm not sure. I'm convinced that Marc will handle this in the best possible way though.

But where does this leave you? It's totally up to you how we take advantage of this new situation.

I know that you really want to be there for me right now. But, as I wrote, I'm surprisingly ok and haven't shed a single tear!!

Yes, chaos broke loose in Vanløse. Ring as soon as you can. Anytime.

Kiss, sweetie.

Mia

My intestines withdraw in cramps. Hunched over, I run to the bathroom and cough hysterically into the toilet. My ribs mercilessly squash my insides but all I can produce is a bit of slime.

*Good morning sweetie.*

Not even the slightest sign of remorse. Self-pitying whimpers accompany each string of saliva that drips from my mouth. I can't be bothered to dry the spit from my chin as I stagger exhausted back to the kitchen and sit down at the counter. Dizzy, I open my MacBook, click on Facebook and type *Torben Ebler* on the search box.

The profile picture of a banker type in a dark blue suit pops up on the screen. A sensible haircut with streaks of grey frames the chubby face that widens down into a double chin as if it was melting. The top button of the neutral, light blue shirt is undone. Stuffy-nonchalant. I shake my head. It doesn't make sense. I had always imagined it being a sporty pretty boy if Mia was to find someone else. A perfectly proportioned Ken-doll a la Ryan Reynolds or a former under-21 soccer player with David Beckham's chiseled features.

My hands are shaking. I escape back to my newsfeed. An old classmate is playing guitar. A cat is playing the piano. Friends check in at the airport. Others have reached exotic destinations and photographed their toes in the sand. The cover of the Pink Floyd classic, *The Wall*, is propped up behind a record player. Under the picture, a comment thread sticks out sharp tongues. It grows with urgent opinions on Pink Floyd pre- and post-Roger Waters. The world continues to revolve but mine has ground to a halt. Blacked out. I click on to Mia's page. Could there be a sign that I overlooked or any clues about where this will lead? I need something. Explanations? Hope? Certainty? She hasn't posted anything for months. Status: married to me. Lives in Vanløse. I see her face and my mind starts drifting. The clear, blue eyes in the profile picture stare into mine. Eyes that comforted with a loving glow in my most fragile moments. Eyes that radiated our shared joy as Oliver took his first precarious steps over the living room floor. Eyes that once said so much but are now full of secrets. I blink the tears away and scroll

down. New-year's day under a palm tree on Phi Phi island, a happy family in paradise. I study the screen. Mia smiling, her hand in mine, the boys on the perfect white sand in front of us. We were happy. Weren't we? I was happy. But I no longer know what was real and what was not. I'm looking at the past through smashed windows.

Suddenly the phone rings so I jump in my chair. It's Linda. I decline but before I put the phone down it rings again. She's not giving up.

"Yes," I say flatly.

"For god's sake, Marc! You have to pick up the phone. You scared me, are you ok?"

"No, actually," I suppress a sob before I continue, "Mia... Mia's having an affair with her boss." The words tear their way through my chest and leave my mouth with a choking feeling.

"Yes, I know. You called last night. Don't you remember?"

"No." I'm back on his page. Staring at the screen.

"Marc, do you want me to come over?" Linda sounds nervous.

*Good morning sweetie.*

"Marc?"

*Ring as soon as you can. Anytime.*

*Kiss, sweetie.*

"Marc?" Linda shouts.

"Yeah, alright. No, I'm ok."

"Listen, Marc, I think it would be best if I..."

I interrupt, "Thanks, Linda but I just need some time... alone. I'm fucked up but not suicidal. Take it easy."

"Ok, what are you doing now?"

"Looking at his Facebook page."

Silence on the line. I click *About*.

"Perfect," I sing ironically. "He's married, 49 years old, two kids..."

"Don't you get fired for that stuff? Isn't that unethical at a place of work? You can't keep that secret," says Linda.

"Well, if she can lie so convincingly to me for half a year, it can't be that hard at work." I click through the pictures. Torben standing next to flashy BMW's. A Porsche without Torben. Torben sitting on a motorbike in a showroom. Torben playing the clown on a family vacation. Congrats to Brøndby soccer club. Forza Barca.

"He's the complete opposite of me in every way," I think and simultaneously say aloud in the phone.

“Maybe that’s the point. Maybe she just needs to go that far to find her way back to herself?” Linda sounds like our couple therapist.

“I guess I thought she was going to break down and beg for a second chance when I confronted her last night. But she didn’t. That was almost as big a shock as...” I inhale deeply to regain control of my trembling voice. “She seemed almost unaffected.”

“Infatuation is a kind of mental illness, but it dwindles in time.”

I bite my lip and breathe deeply again.

“In time? It’s already been six fucking months. I don’t know if the damage is already irreparable but in time it definitely will be.” I rub my eyes. “I can’t bear this. A teenage crush fucking up a whole family.” I press my fingers into my forehead and through my hair.

“Just wait and see how fast that dirty old man gets his fingers out of the cookie jar when his own family is on the line. That will give Mia a wake-up call,” Linda answers.

“But what if he wants to commit. I know that she wants to move on with... with... *him*.”

“How can you know that?” Linda asks.

“She forgot her iPad. I’m following their emails.”

“For fuck’s sake, Marc. You’ve got to stop that.”

“No. It’s torture but otherwise, I wouldn’t know anything. She never tells me anything.”

There’s a moment of silence before Linda asks, “But forgetting your phone and your iPad at home while you’re having an affair, how dumb is that? Maybe she wanted you to find out?”

It makes no sense. But nothing does right now. A soothing haze clouds my mind until Linda’s voice intrudes again.

“You can’t read them anymore. That’ll mess you up.”

I grunt a vague response.

“What’s his name?” Linda asks. “I’ve got to see him.”

“It’s fucked up. He has the same name as her father.”

“Creepy. Well, what is it?”

“Eh, he’s called... no, I’ll just send you a link in messenger.”

I hang up and imagine them together. Naked on top of each other. He ploughs back and forth between Mia’s legs. Sweat from his flabby neck drips onto her cheek. She writhes and moans with a passion she never expressed with me. He pumps frantically as they howl in an orgasmic duet before rolling exhausted onto their backs. Smiling. Laughing. I shake my head and pour a large glass of whiskey. I yank the freezer open and knock a couple of ice



cubes into the glass. I open the yellow pages and type *Torben Ebler* in the search window. An address in Hellerup, an expensive neighborhood north of Copenhagen and a couple of telephone numbers appear. I crosscheck his wife's name on Facebook and write down the number on a Post-it. A message from Linda pops up in Messenger.

WTF? Must be money.

Maybe. She always complained about not having enough money to shop.

He is NOT hot!

Don't think it's really about him. I think he could have been anybody.

What's up with the cycling pics??  
He looks pregnant!

Yeah, lycra = bad choice for a soft office bod!

She dumped the rock star for a suit.  
What an adventure!?

Fucking joke, fulfilling herself by falling for her boss. Officegroupie!  
I'm out.

Ok. Say the word if you need company or just something to eat.

Yup.

I close my MacBook and throw myself on the bed. The duvet is damp. I see them again. They are in his car, a big German luxury car with white leather seats. Mia is on the passenger seat turned towards him. She holds his hand between hers and fixes an intense gaze of admiration on him. I try to wriggle out of the nausea flowing through my body. I know that affairs, secrets and divorces are a part of reality. Statistically, half of all the people I

know are going to go through it. But not us! Not Marc and Mia! *That stuff only happens to other people.* I zap between a surrealistic outside in view of a tragedy with myself, my wife and my kids at the center and then a sickening, draining realization that it is actually happening. Now!

Suddenly everything I believed in has been punctuated with a question mark. Every fact and promise is a potential lie. Every hour of overtime, every meeting, just an alibi. Everything that meant anything is perched on a crumbling ledge over a dark abyss. But above all, it all seems so meaningless. She must be able to see that. I need to explain it to her. This is insane.

*It's totally up to you how we take advantage of this new situation.*

She's as cold as ice. And the film starts again. They sneak out of the office party, giggling like two horny teenagers. He lifts Mia up onto the desk in a dark office. She lays back and pulls up her skirt. I shake my head and an avalanche buries me. The new hotshot boss, text messages at night, status quo at couple therapy, Stockholm, new lingerie, weekend courses, hot yoga, "Love Never Felt So Good". The kids, the economy, the future, the past, our friends, the lies.

*"Aaargh! Fuck, fuck, fuck!"*

I jump up and pull out a dusty metal suitcase from under the bed. The plastic sleeves are sorted alphabetically in three rows. CD-covers spill over the side of the suitcase and onto the floor, Oasis – *Definitely Maybe*, Red Hot Chili Peppers – *Blood Sugar Sex Magik*, Pantera – *Vulgar Display of Power*. Albums I held in front of me like crucifixes when the vampires of everyday life tried to suck the dreams from my veins. Albums that gave me comfort and strength. Old friends banished to invisible inaccessible places. By her. I pull out a CD and march towards the stereo in the lounge.

*Good morning sweetie.*

I am dizzy. I press play. Deep, violent guitar riffs squeeze the silence out of the bungalow's walls. The windowpanes vibrate in time to the pure aggression of Slayer's "Disciple".

*God hates us all, the singer screams.*

*Chaos in Vanløse.*

I stand in the middle of the room with my eyes closed and fists clenched. A death squad of rumbling drums and tight guitar riffs whirl around the living room's redundant family backdrop where lies fill the air like heavy, toxic smoke.

*Kiss, sweetie. Mia.*

I walk over to the kitchen counter. His wife's number is written on a Post-it. I slowly press the numbers on my phone. My thumb hovers over the green dial button.