

Limelight Memories

We were a boy band, a band of boys. A wolf pack, puppy pack, howling in falsetto. We'd stumble from our den, then slink into the open field, the stadium, into moonlight, stage light, gold and pink and haloed. We assumed our positions, then roared, echoed by the city, the night, the shrieking, fainting crowd.

We were a pack of five, with Harry our alpha. Appearing freshly tumbled from the dryer, he'd strut—loose, clean, follically shocked, shirts clinging to his skin, shooting sparks. His summer-clean smell left us prostrate on the floor, mouths open wide, waiting for his saliva to fall and splash our tongues.

Zayn, our beta: His stallion mane crowned an emergent sensuality, errant hairs askew like bed sheets mildly rumpled in their moment of inauguration. He'd squint, bite his lip, teething feelings far too deep for words. He'd sing, voice sounding on the verge of its first orgasm, the first heartbreak that would shred it, lay it to waste.

Then Louis: Aloof yet spry, a chill tingle like peppermint gum. A designer clothes hanger painted by a Renaissance master, he mugged, flashed suggestions wherever the cameras flashed. To look at him was to understand human limitation—never could you possibly achieve such cool.

Especially if you were me: Niall, the baby-faced omega, who carried kittens, was brought home to mothers, wrapped in cozy, homely sweaters gifted to me by my own. I'd stand before the mirror, greeted by my blue, blue eyes, which widened, eager and afraid, and for a split second, I imagined I could almost sense my soul, a deep-running current like my homophonic river, seizing my body in its undertow, and cresting jubilant out my open mouth, like the climax of a hit single. —Except I could never carry a solo; when the moment really mattered, I hiccupped like a coffee house folkie bombing an open mic.

Finally, Liam. *Liam Liam Liam*. Solid, he approached his daily rituals with exactitude, be they vocalizations, or his quest to perfect his frame. I'd spy him alone at the bench press, where I dreamed he'd press me. Each time I saw him, I'd get this kind of rush, it dissolved my tongue, reduced my language to looped, staccato vamping, to *yeah yeah yeah yeah yeah*, his thighs the lyrics I'd tweet in my sleep: *Squeeze me like it means/The sun tomorrow brings...*

Until one night during sound check, when my longing overwhelmed me, and I found I could no longer contain my need. While I waited to test my mic, his croon buffeted me, and I crumpled to my knees, hands on my temples, shaking. (I'd long had a reputation for clumsiness, but this was something far beyond...) Ashamed, I wobbled to my feet, ran from the venue, into the gravel lot, dizzy, on the verge of tears.

"Niall!" he called, having followed me outside. Heart pounding, I forced myself to meet his gaze, as in the mirror I'd so often met my own. I inched forward, timidly licked his face.

A terrible second passed during which I felt certain I'd fall to my death in the black hole of his silence, the disaster plastered on tomorrow's tabloids. Then he grabbed my muzzle, tucked my tail. He pinned me, locked his knot inside me, and sang me to oblivion. With the moon breaking through our hair, lighting up our skin, we were changed.

From that moment forward, on red carpets or outside concerts, I'd follow close behind him. While our security detail parted throngs, I'd wait for him to turn in my direction, extend his arm. Then I'd spring forward and nuzzle against his chest.

Young pups, the five of us begged our mothers to let us leave our packs, to venture into the night, to hunt the limelight. They had no idea we were leaving for good, that we'd be lost to them forever. They assumed they'd see us soon enough, that we'd slink back, tails between our legs, whimpering of failure, that they'd sooth us, pet our heads.

But while we hunted, the hunter found us. Captured us. One by one he assembled our pack, lured us with the promise of glory, opportunities to howl. After we signed on the dotted line, he steered us on to a balcony, where we were shocked to see the thousands that screamed our names, carried signs, anointed us.

If Harry was our alpha, then Simon was our zookeeper. As our manager, he ruled our recording studio in the manner of an old world boarding school, both figuratively and literally. He hired a crew to construct an interior classroom, where he demanded we wear navy sport coats, slacks and starched, white-collared shirts. We sat spines straight in two rows of chairs with attached desks wrapped around us, while he paced between the desks and the blackboard he'd affixed to the front wall. Beside us, a window opened on to a digital image of a manicured lawn, where I'd stare while he waved his pointer, expounded upon the history of popular music, and the venerated position he believed we should aspire to achieve within it.

He grabbed a piece of chalk, reached up and drew a heart on the wall above the blackboard.

“This, dear boys, is the Beatles.”

His hand descended to the center of the blackboard, where he drew another heart, this time adding a fletched arrow for flourish.

“This is NSYNC.”

He dropped the chalk to the floor, ground it to a fine powder beneath his heel.

“And this, I’m sorry to say, is *you*.”

“My boys,” he continued. “Your forebears were lions, and you are mice. The time has come for you to conquer the jungle!”

Though severe, he was charismatic, and we all agreed he possessed genius, were won over by his commitment to the elevation and refinement of pop songcraft. He believed sincerely that every moment of our lives should be dedicated to recording albums that, when unleashed upon the world, could summon the sublime. We each found ourselves worshipful members in his cult of personality, lining up to receive our daily flagellations, driving ourselves toward improvement, in the hopes of provoking one of his wordless fist pumps, his sole demonstration of approval, which signaled what he referred to as “hitting the wow.”

Still, his judgments withered:

To Harry: *Your mouth is far too big when you sing. It was like looking into a cave—I’ve never seen anything so huge in my life!*

To Zayn: *It was a bit like ordering a hamburger, and only getting the bun. ...How dare you hold back on us—the time to soar is now!*

To Louis: *You sang like a train going off the rails—you started off in tune, then went completely off... And very, very fast.*

To Liam: *That was like going to a zoo—I mean the noises were beyond anything I have ever, ever heard!*

To me: *It was boring, your voice sounded whiny, you looked terrified. You look like you’ve been shut up in your bedroom for about a month—like one of those creatures that live in the jungle, with the massive eyes. What are they called? Bush babies.”*

During rehearsals and recording sessions, I would choke down my shame, nod in acquiescence, and work hard to perform my best impression of a confident, unflappable professional. Only later, in Liam’s arms would I weep openly, and he’d comfort me back to a more steady state.

One day, Simon asked Zayn to stay behind after our recording session, to speak with him privately. Zayn’s pulse beat like the backing track of a hi-NRG dance classic, like 140 BPM, knowing the invitation could mean only one thing. Since Simon delighted in performing his thrashings publicly, so that all of us might learn from negative example, one-on-one time meant he intended to provide Zayn with specialized attention from the master, to hone his technique, enhance his expression... the greatest of honors!

“Do you know what you have, Zayn?” Simon said.

“Dunno,” Zayn said, running one hand through his glossy mane. “A future hit single?”

Simon chuckled. “Saucy little thing, aren’t you?”

“No,” Simon continued. “What you have is the rarest of gifts—not just the voice of a lifetime, but the voice of a *generation*. But your potential may only be reached through vigilance, dedication, single-mindedness in the pursuit of your goals. Do you possess the will? Do you possess the requisite motivation that will drive you toward achievement beyond your wildest imaginings?”

“Yes,” Zayn said. “Of course.”

“I am not so sure,” Simon said. He held up a phone, on which he’d loaded an image: two of our fans posed alongside a cardboard standup that hawked our latest record.

“Do you want to be like these girls,” Simon said. “Brain dead, mediocre people? Do you want to be a mediocre person, Zayn? Someone who cannot appreciate the pursuit of truth?”

Zayn shook his head.

“I’ve seen many great ones fail. It would kill me to see you, of all the others, not make it. If only you will let me, I will guide you.”

“Please,” Zayn said. “Guide me.”

“Are you certain? For should you fail, once that door is closed, it will never reopen. I will consider you happy with the artistic, spiritual, professional death you have chosen.”

“I’m certain!” Zayn said. “I want to become extraordinary!”

That weekend, he visited Simon’s apartment. Shelves of vinyl records stretched from floor to ceiling. Against the back wall loomed an imposing row of life-sized marble statues depicting the top-grossing acts under Simon’s tutelage. The dulcet tones of Il Divo wafted from a ceiling speaker.

“You look thin,” Simon said, handing Zayn a ham sandwich made with diced apples. “You need to eat.”

Zayn sat down on a plush white sofa, lifted the sandwich, crunched. Simon settled beside him.

“Let me take that for you,” Simon said, when Zayn had finished eating. He grabbed the plate, placed it on the floor.

Then he leaned over and kissed Zayn on the lips. He pushed his tongue inside Zayn’s mouth, thick and forceful. Zayn felt a choking sensation, struggled to breathe.

Zayn pulled away, and Simon’s eyes darkened.

“Why are you being willfull, Zayn?”

Zayn sat silent, terrified.

“How beautiful you are,” Simon said. “Like the Moroccan boys of Burroughs, delicate and fragile. You are St. Sebastian, curled and shot with arrows, the model of heroism born of weakness.”

“Um, I’m sorry,” he mouthed.

He took Zayn by the hand, led him to the bedroom. Zayn followed him obediently, willed himself to go blank, told himself that perhaps this was some form of initiation, a pathway into the special life which Simon would enable.

“Genius makes its own rules,” Simon said, as he stretched back Zayn’s legs, penetrated him. “If two men lie together, they have heat. But how can one be warm alone?”

Afterward, Zayn lay like a board in Simon’s bed. He stared at the crown molding, listened to the syrupy dance pop that oozed into the bedroom from the living room stereo. Beside him, Simon grunted. Bile rose in Zayn’s throat, his body becoming suddenly, acutely aware of what had been done to it, feeling branded and splintered.

He hurtled himself to his feet, through the front door of the apartment, down the hallway and into the elevator, where, like a doomed girl in a slasher flick, he frantically punched buttons, begged the doors to close. Outside, he ran, still naked, pursued by camera flashes, the photographers thinking headlines, thinking drug problem, thinking spiraling addiction, thinking OUT OF CONTROL.

Zayn’s bare feet pounded the concrete, he ran like a possessed athlete in the final sprint of a marathon, pushed his body past its limits in pursuit of escape, survival. Only when he was certain Simon hadn’t followed, would not find him, did he stop. He huddled panting in an alley, chewed his nails, his arm, pulled his hair and howled.

Though we loved our music, its trappings had us trapped. We’d been tempted by the bait, had barely noticed as the claws snapped close around our ankles.

At each arena, fingers reached out to grab us, poke us, grope us. Phones struck our faces, made our jaws, our cheekbones, throb. We became objects, ceased to be our own. We never could've known how this would feel—and even if someone had told us, we'd still likely have eagerly volunteered.

Exhaustion took up residence in my chest cavity, and I pushed it down, sequestered it for days at a time, until finally I collapsed, splayed like a marionette. Liam crouched and shook me, saying, *Stand up, it's show time*, then helped me to my feet. Hobbling, I ran a finger along my smile, where I feared a crease was beginning to form.

But then came the stage, an explosion of energy, *a mass of music and fire*, and the applause, endless applause, *like waves of love coming over the footlights, and wrapping us up*.

And so our predicament crystallized: Though we couldn't live like this any longer, there was no other life we were meant to live.

A month after my first night with Liam, I learned I was pregnant. My boy belly swelled. Liam and I rejoiced at this tangible manifestation of our love, while Simon and the others delighted in the positive publicity my child could bring.

But our celebration would not last long, for soon Simon announced he had unfortunate news to share.

"Shouldn't we wait for Zayn," I said, and eyed the door, always ill at ease when any of our family was absent.

"I am sorry to say that's the reason I've called you here. He has chosen to leave us."

"That rat," Louis growled. "He's going solo, isn't he?"

"No," Simon said. "He plans to leave the business entirely."

"But what will we do?" I said. "What will become of us?"

"We will continue on without him. Though it is a grave—nay, unforgivable—sin to squander such talent, we must let the universe determine his fate, as we continue to forge our own."

The night before our first performance without Zayn, I lay in bed with Liam. Though several weeks had passed since Simon announced his departure, I had not been able to quell my anxiety.

"I have this terrible feeling," I said. "Something awful is going to happen."

Liam perched on his elbow beside me, ran his palm across my pregnant belly.

“It’s alright, baby,” he said. He gripped my shoulder, knowing how a steady squeeze could calm my nerves. “We still have our talent... and each other.”

“Something is wrong,” I continued. “I’m sure of it. Zayn would never leave without saying goodbye.”

Suddenly, a swirl of iridescent, colored mist filled my abdomen, the surface of which took on the luminescence and transparency of a crystal ball. The fog parted to reveal a series of moving images, sound. Liam and I watched, horrified, as my domed belly displayed each moment of what had transpired in Simon’s apartment: Simon’s violation, Zayn’s agony, his tortured escape.

I jumped from the bed, balled my fists. I felt an unfamiliar, violent rage bubble up, a blood-deep instinct like a hunter’s lust to survive.

“We have to stop him.”

The next morning, we pulled Harry and Louis aside immediately after breakfast, and I told them what we’d seen.

Louis was incredulous. “Why should we believe you? After everything Simon has done for us?”

“I was there,” Liam said. “I saw it too. Why would we lie about something like this?”

We all looked to Harry, who stood, lips tight, eyes distant, staring at the back wall as though watching a scene of some sort replay itself.

“I believe them,” he said, quiet yet firm.

His face betrayed a quick flash of recognition that chilled me. Then, just as quickly, he shook off whatever specter haunted him, and guided us through the formation of a plan.

The following day, Simon entered the classroom to find Louis waiting at the door, which he closed behind him. Harry, Liam and I stood beside our desks.

“Good morning, gentlemen,” Simon said. “You may take your seats.”

We remained standing. Simon’s eyes narrowed.

“I said, sit down.”

We stood, silent. Louis guarded the door like a sentinel.

“Boys,” Simon said, now suspicious. “What is going on?”

Harry and Liam launched themselves at Simon, pinned him to a desk. Simon bucked and thrashed. Louis stayed by the door. I stood off to one side, having been designated as “backup.”

“What are you doing,” Simon spat. “What is the meaning of this?”

“Tell us what you did to Zayn!” Harry said.

“We know everything,” Liam added. “It’s no use! Confess!”

Simon kneed Harry in the groin, shook the arm that Harry was trying with all his might to keep pinned. He bucked Harry off, Harry slid across the floor, struck the wall.

“No!” Liam shouted.

I leaned into my toes, bared my teeth, but did not feel at all certain I was equipped to join the fray.

Liam reared back, readying a punch. Simon reached into his pocket, whipped out a revolver.

“Liam, look out!” Louis shouted, and ran from the door, toward Liam.

Simon whirled, pointed the gun at Louis, “Stop right there!”

Louis lifted his hands, spread his palms. Simon circled, whipped the gun toward each of us in turn. I felt a trickle of urine run down my thigh, into my shoe.

“Don’t think I won’t use this,” Simon said. “Do you know how easy all of you would be to replace?”

Suddenly, the door of the classroom flew open, revealed a shadowed figure.

“I don’t think so, Simon!” a voice said.

I recognized it immediately, shouted— “Zayn!”

Zayn took two steps forward, into the light. Wrapped in a graffiti-painted trench coat, wind whipped, he looked like a Technicolor Van Helsing, hardened, prepared for the hunt.

“I won’t let you hurt another boy.”

He lifted a glinting crossbow, pulled back, and fired. The arrow sailed through air, struck Simon in the heart. He let out an agonized groan, then crumpled lifeless to the floor, eyes flared like the bush baby he’d once accused me of resembling, mouth frozen in a startled, open O.

Zayn dropped the weapon, extended his arms. Immediately, we ran to him, pawed his shoulders, collapsed in a huddle, embraced, our pack restored.

In that moment, in his comeuppance, our zookeeper was turned from a certainty to a question. A question in the form of a body, an object. Him having become object, no longer were we his subjects. No longer could he subject our boy bodies to his sculpting, his domination.

But the question: His body on the floor, curled into a question mark—Now what?

Or: How to dispose of the body?

Or: My boy brain racing ahead further, our future. What should we become, now that our lives were our own?

I thought about my family, how long it had been since I'd seen them, the grass and glow of home.

But as quickly as I'd conjured this longing for den, for origin, it was displaced by fresh melodies, routines. A kick step and backbeat. By potential: To forge our platinum status, to own on our terms that glint in the eyes of fans that had become like water.

“What should we do about ‘im, then?” Louis finally said, motioning to Simon.

But before we could consider our options, I felt a throbbing, a warmth spread through my abdomen. The surface of my skin prickled.

“Guys!” I said. They turned to face me. I lifted my shirt, looked down. The whorl of color and light had returned. The fog parted, my flesh became transparent. As before, an image materialized.

A strikingly attractive adolescent stood on the landing of a stairwell, looking up, seeming almost to be gazing straight out my belly, directly toward us watching him. I recognized in him my eyes, Liam’s jawline, and realized this was our son. My belly was revealing a vision of our future.

Behind the boy, draped against the railing, lurked a youth with Zayn’s flawless complexion. And beside him, others leaned against the wall—one with Harry’s unmistakable curls, another with Louis’s Cheshire grin. A posse of our future offspring. At the bottom of the stairway, a party of some sort was underway. Guests stood in clumps, holding drinks, wafting chatter.

The perspective quickly shifted, and now we were looking up, through our child’s eyes. I saw myself, aged. My shoulders stooped. Caked stage makeup sank into the deep lines around my eyes, my mouth. A bright t-shirt hung loosely over a small paunch. I looked like an ogre pretending to be a boy... and I was glaring at my son with utter contempt.

“Money and fame!” I said. “That’s all you care about, isn’t it?”

A dark, blood red cloud pressed around the edges of the image, threatening to overtake and obscure it, threatening to seep from my belly and choke us, flood our lungs.

“Don’t think I don’t know what you did,” my future self continued. “Siphoned the gas from our tour bus so we’d be late to the show, so you could take our place...contacted every blogger and fangirl in town to make sure they were there

to see you. I've seen the headlines—*A New Direction in Pop!* You've gone to all this effort, for what? For attention?"

"I'd do much more than that for a career this good," our son said. "All this might've been yours 15 years ago, but it's my life now! You have *never* supported me! But I showed you, didn't I? There's always someone younger and hungrier coming down the stairs behind you!"

"Why can't you give me the respect that I'm entitled to? Why can't you treat me like I would be treated by any stranger on the street?"

He scoffed. His cohort closed in around him, sneered.

"I think I'm really seeing you for the first time in my life," I continued. "And you're cheap and horrible."

"You think just because you made a little money, and sang some songs, and got a new hairdo and some expensive clothes, that you became something? You'll never be anything but a common frump from County Westmeath, whose father was a butcher!"

"In my day, we worked for what we achieved."

Our son let out a shrill, venomous laugh. "Worked!? The only work you've ever done is on that mess you call a face. Have you looked in the mirror lately? Have you, *Daddy*? You look embalmed. Like your last wish is to be buried standing up!"

"Well," I said. "In that case—we who are about to die salute you!"

I snapped my head, began to march down the stairway. Our son stretched out his foot, tripped me. I let out a shriek, toppled over. The other boys parted, pulled back against the wall as my body smacked and thumped past them, down the stairs.

In the present, the mist in my belly closed around this scene, scored by the sound of party guests, uncomfortable laughter, horrified gasps. I dropped my shirt. We were silent, the air in the room a thick stew. Finally, I was the first to speak.

"That cannot be our future," I said. "I think we know what we need to do."

We disassembled Simon's corpse, halved and hollowed his skull to make a pot. When my baby came, we gathered together. I held the newborn aloft in one hand, a jeweled dagger in the other.

The others looked at me, then looked away. I felt a paralysis worse than any stage fright.

Liam held out his hands. "If you need me to do it—"

"No," I said. "It has to be me."

I forced myself to look, not to close or avert my eyes. In a single motion, I raised the dagger, skinned and drained the baby. A mournful, sonorous howl ripped from my throat, crescendoed, my voice at last achieving a solo, coming into its own.

We ground, blended the baby's parts and fluids, then poured them into the pot we'd made from Simon's head. We heated the pot, made a tea which we sipped, ingested. We felt it course through us, rejuvenate us. Felt it freeze our features, preserve our beauty. Halt the savage march of time.

And so we repeated the ritual for the next baby, and the next, then again and again, for all the babies to come. We sacrificed our innocence to preserve our youth.

Years passed, decades passed, but for us, time remained frozen in that most glittering moment in the story of our lives: Onstage, teeth gleaming, our arms interlocked —eternally beautiful, glorious, together. We sang the best songs ever, forever and ever and ever. We waited for the applause.