

The stage is huge. Lighting rigs and speaker systems tower above us and there's a noise I can't yet place. Slowly I tune in to the rhythmic roaring of a vigorous crowd. They're invisible; coloured lights glare down on me and I'm looking out into darkness. The roaring echoes around the stadium and the air seems to thicken with it. I feel tiny.

I look to my band mates. They're wide-eyed. It's time to put our rock faces on. My fingers on the strings, my shoulder under the strap of the bass, my feet on the floor – every part of me burns. We hold each other's gaze for a second or two, then a nod, three taps from the drumsticks and we blast out the first note. We've made it. No going back.



Wednesday

Like flicking a switch, we turn loud messy garage Rock into white noise and tinnitus. The padded grey walls of the practice room snap depressingly back into focus. We stand dumb in our school uniforms, sound-proofed.

‘What? Why’d we stop playing?’

That’s Spike. He’s so completely out of time with the rest of us we figure he must not have adjusted for daylight saving. He seems genuinely confused at the sudden silence. Something hums electrically behind him.

‘Spi-ike!’ We try to call him back to Earth.

‘Are you all right, mate? You’re all over the place.’

‘Sorry, I thought it was sounding good.’ He leans over to switch off his amp, which lets out a nasty squeal before thumping into silence.

‘It sounded crap,’ I correct him, lifting my bass

over my head and resting it against the wall. Ed sits behind his drum kit spinning his sticks and playing with the kick: *boom-BOOM* punctuating his thoughts and furrowed brow. He looks severe as ever with his freshly shaved head.

I decide to take control. ‘Okay, what’s up with you guys? Spike’s all over the place, Ed looks like he’s been kicked in the guts and Jay – well, you look all right I suppose.’

‘Thanks, *babe!*’ Jay foolishly takes my observation as a compliment, runs his hand over his shaggy hair and winks at me. I give him the stink eye and continue my inquest, ‘Seriously, what’s going on here? We’re a mess!’

Ed’s frown is deadly. He does a quick double kick on the bass drum. ‘Sorry, Paige, I’m just getting a bit jaded.’

‘What, about the band? Or ... life?’

‘I thought it sounded good.’ Spike adds his two-cents worth again and hoists up his sagging jeans. I’m still looking at Jaded Ed. ‘We can call it a day if you want.’

I’m reluctant to give up after about three-quarters of an hour of out-of-time noise-making, but it’s just not working.

‘Nah, let’s try again.’ Ed straightens, ‘Spike, you need to listen to my beat – maybe turn your amp down a bit or stand closer to me or something. Jay, get the lyrics right. Paige, keep it steady.’

Okay, so we're back into it. Good. This is important. I heave my bass back onto my body and turn it up.

This is why I love Wednesdays. Even though we have six periods instead of the usual five, and lunch is about fifteen minutes shorter, and stats is last period when collective brain power is at its lowest ebb, we have band practice after school without fail. Vox Pop formed for last year's Rockfest competition. We got through to the regional final and played our hearts out to a vociferous crowd, but this year we're aiming to win the thing. Last year's winners, Stink Kitten, are fast becoming legends; their increasingly hairy faces gracing magazine covers and the cinematic masterpiece for their winning single, filled with slow pensive close ups and sepia filters. So cool.

Anyway, we get to use the practice room in the music suite from 3.30pm until 5.15pm every Wednesday. Actually, the cleaners are never that prompt, so we usually just play until we get kicked out. The gear is all set up so I can keep my own bass at home for silent headphone practices when the family's in, and cacophonous, wall-rattling rambunctiousness when they're out.

I've got calloused fingertips, because bass strings are really thick and when I play I can't think about anything else except exactly what's happening in that moment. It's a noisy kind of Zen meditation my family are trying to support.

After practice, Ed and I are walking home together.

There's a sense of urgency to our step, emphasised by an insistent southerly. He's pulled a beanie over his baldness and we manage to eke out a little conversation about Rockfest. The regionals take place in June, which is not far away, and then nationals are later in the year. If we get through. Over summer we were able to cram a few extra practices in around the half-dead motorbikes in Ed's garage, but once a week is probably not quite enough if we're serious about winning.

'Do you think Spike will hold it together for the heats?' I ask. Lengths of my hair swirl around and blow into my face. I push them away with a free hand.

'Yeah. He's pretty good on stage. He just needs to sort his timing out.'

'That's true, he's an awesome performer.' I enjoy performing on stage, but Spike *loves* it. He seems to gain huge amounts of energy from a crowd and becomes a complete rock and roll beast; a good quality in a lead guitarist, trust me. There's a definite force that comes from knowing a whole room full of people are there to hear you play. Nervousness, excitement and the resulting adrenalin can all be pretty powerful when used well. Apart from last year's Rockfest, we've played about six times in front of the school and a couple of times down at The Standing Room, which is like a community youth arts centre.

‘We’ll be fine, Paige. Your bass-playing has come a long way. You’re good.’ Ed doesn’t turn to look at me so misses seeing my face turn into a goofy, smiling beetroot of a thing. The wind seems to have stopped and I can feel the sun warming the top of my head.

We’ve reached my place. Ed comes right up to the door, which I push open with a foot. ‘You coming in to see Rose?’

‘Yeah, she’s expecting me.’ Ed’s expression returns to the morose look of earlier.

‘Sounds ominous.’ I give him a hard stare and we walk in.

As soon as I’m home, Linda, my step-mum, sends me upstairs to tidy my room. She says she’s never seen such a horrendous bomb site and orders me to rectify the situation immediately. I say her exaggeration makes a mockery of all the war-torn countries where bombs regularly explode, killing civilians.

Linda says, ‘Don’t be cheeky and clean up your room before *I* explode!’ But she’s trying not to laugh.

I’m happy to come up here anyway. Ed and Rose have started talking earnestly on the couch – no doubt about the Future, a particularly daunting topic of conversation. Actually, I think Rose is talking earnestly and Ed is being his usual laconic self, emitting occasional grunts of reassurance and agreement. Rose is so serious sometimes. Now that she’s in her last year of school she’s been acting as if it’s the most important

decision-making time of her life. She's already decided she's going to Otago to do science stuff – much to Dad's elation – and even though there's still months of school left before anyone's applying to leave town and pursue their dreams, she insists on talking about *when I'm at uni* with disturbing frequency. She has a straight and sensible fringe that's too short or too thick for someone her age. She sits upright on the couch, one leg folded under her, the other planted on the floor.

I kick my shoes into a corner and dump the contents of my bag onto my desk. My room is tiny. The only reason it's so messy is because it's so small and I'm *so* busy. There's a total bird's nest of cables connecting my bass, amp, headphones and stereo, and all sorts of overloaded multi-adapters and extension cords keeping all my gadgets of communication charged and humming.

A pile of books teeters beside my unmade bed. Somewhere in there is the book we're studying in English – *Finding Francine* or something – buried under some much more interesting and worthy reading material. When I read I like to have several different things on the go at once. I know it's weird, but I hate rushing through a good book and then having to go through the seven stages of grief before I can pick up another one. This way it takes me much longer to finish, and I can flick between them without having to commit to parting with something before I'm mentally prepared to do so. It helps if they're

different genres too, so the plots don't get too tangled up, and the characters don't morph back and forth into mutated versions of each other.

I don't know where to start with the clean-up, so I pick up my bass and start hammering out a riff until I'm yelled at from downstairs.

Thursday

It seems hopeless for a moment, but then I get a rush of inspiration. I run round to the back of the house, roll up the sleeve of my school shirt, contort my arm through the louvre window, unlatch the window below and wriggle my way in. I land with a thump in the laundry.

I don't have time to stop and think about where it might be, so I just storm around from room to room looking under things. What is it about the pressure of time that renders a person clumsy and impractical? I bash my head on the way down to look under the bed and then again on the way back up. At last I find my wallet jammed down the couch in a particularly careless fashion, and in my haste fumble at it for an embarrassingly long time before I get a grip. Literally *and* figuratively.

I'm running *so* late. I have no idea how this keeps happening. This morning, of course, I had the added

distraction of finding that Ringo the cat had followed me halfway around the block. I did the right thing and carried the over-fed fluffy lump back to the house, only to discover I'd forgotten my key and therefore my wallet, which holds the key, and subsequently any means of getting lunch. And today's mac'n'cheese day at the school canteen. Anyway, I'm back on track now, wallet back in bag, me back out the door.

Miss Wellesley must be on grounds duty. She has that half-present look of a teacher being made to be somewhere when they have better things to do. She opens the door to the music room, checks we haven't killed each other and moves on. We haven't killed each other, but we are violently slamming down our cards and making some pretty threatening calls on each other's game play. It's often like this. Since the weather packed in, Sam, Lily, Molly and I have been obsessed with playing 500 at lunchtime. We don't even talk about it any more.

The bell rings, and we automatically congregate in the music room and start dealing out the cards. We even seem to be keeping subconscious track of dealers from one day to the next. I think Lily might be sick of it though. She's been getting worse, not better, despite our many attempts at making her think more carefully about the cards she puts down. She also has a flighty look in her heavily made-up eyes as if the minute she hears word of a better place to eat lunch she'll be off.

It's Sam's turn now and he's screwing his face up trying to decide which card to play.

Lily whines, 'C'mon!'

'Hey I liked your cartoon today, Sam.' Molly's always good at disarming the competition.

'Thanks!' replies Sam and slams down an ace. Ha!

Sam's a *super* talented artist. He has this cartoon strip that he does every now and then and photocopies to put up guerrilla style around the school. Everyone knows he does it, but he likes to think he's Banksy or something and getting away with rebellious political street art. Usually they're just harmless caricatures of our teachers or illustrations of hilarious quotes from assembly. I bet the teachers secretly love it too; he never gets into trouble. He never has, partly because he's smart, but mostly because of his affable, dimpled smile.

Molly's turn. She's scoffing at Sam's ace. This should be interesting. It's good to see her in a good mood today – it can be touch and go. I think she has a new hair colour too, but I'm afraid to ask.

Okay, Molly's trumped us all. New dealer. Moving on.

Friday

We're all sitting in music with our heads on our desks listening to Ben Burgess' favourite song. A particularly lame lesson I can assure you. We've been taking turns to bring in a song that we love, play it for the class and explain why we like it. Is it just me or are teachers getting lazier?

I was completely bored in English last period too – a sorry state of affairs indeed. I totally feel Ms George's pain though. Lucille and Courtenay were texting each other under their desks the whole time she was talking, and then when she tried to get them to do some work they acted all flouncy and were like, 'I didn't think we were doing anything this period.' Those two talk *all* the time. Or text. It's so irritating. Even though I make a point of always sitting on the other side of the room, I can still hear their constant mutterings about god-knows-what.

Ms George spent so much of her time trying to get the lost causes back on track that she hardly noticed Lily and me writing out lyrics to our favourite songs all over the back of our exercise books. You know my capacity for the English language is so low right now I'm even thinking of handing in a Bob Dylan song for our next poetry assignment. I can't see the point of putting any more effort into creating when so much brilliant art already exists in the world. I'm not convinced Ms George reads anything we hand in anyway. There's always the same number of ticks at the same points in the margin on every essay, story and opinion piece I hand in.

The song I was thinking of is so great though. It's called 'You're Gonna Make Me Lonesome When You Go' and it's full of all this beautiful imagery like coloured clover, clouds like dragons and crickets talking in rhyme. It has this awesome harmonica part and a bouncy descending bass line. We'll see. Maybe inspiration will hit me, and I'll come up with something astounding myself, but at the moment Dylan's my only hope.

Ben scratches the back of his head, letting loose a gentle shower of dandruff. He starts telling us about what we were just listening to. Well, what some of us were listening to. I definitely drifted off for a minute or two there. It was pretty difficult to get into – all thrashing dub-step and angry vocals – and it's hard not to be a total music snob in this class.

I mean I know Vox Pop is hardly ground-breaking like The Beatles or the Sex Pistols were, but we do work pretty hard to crank out some good tunes. We're certainly more sophisticated than some of the other goons in class who have modelled themselves on that vampire band, or The whatsaname Benjamins (god, I sound like Dad!). I guess that's one of the things I like about playing with the older guys. Spike and Ed know *so* much about good music. I glean little bits of knowledge here and there so I can sound intelligent, but I don't know half the stuff they do – especially about 90s bands like Smashing Pumpkins, Rage Against the Machine and Nirvana. Ed reckons Nirvana 'epitomised the peak of teenage angst', and the relevance of music to our collective consciousness has been going steadily downhill ever since.

Ben's in a band too, with a bunch of other funny-looking guys: Garbagemaster. They're kind of like our rivals given that they're the other school band, but we secretly know there's no comparison. So anyway, Ben's talking up this song and good on him for caring, but I can't bring myself to.

Mr Shaw gets up from behind his desk, maybe realising that he has a role to play in this whole teaching thing after all. He stretches a little too ostentatiously as if he was really enjoying that time out. I spend so much time in this room, but when I look around now the faded posters seem depressingly out of date and filled with technical terms we never use in class, like

‘chromatic scale’ and ‘enharmonic interval’. I should quiz Mr Shaw about those some time.

‘Right. Thanks, Ben, very informative. It’s really great how we can be introduced to new music and it’s important that you each get a chance to share your knowledge, bring your own ideas into the classroom.’ Nice, he’s justifying his approach. ‘Next week, Paige. We’d love to hear what our resident bass player listens to. I’m sure it will be very inspiring.’

I can’t help but roll my eyes.