

this happened to a friend of mine once

The show concludes, my favorite song goes unplayed. That's okay, I liked all the other songs too. My favorite song isn't one that's "live show compatible", anyway.

The crowd congregates in the lobby. The concrete floor leads up to concrete walls and then to a concrete ceiling. Unfriendly, and by design, I'm sure. It's a particular mix of people that gather here, aftershow. Glory-day chasers, new fans, gearheads. I'm probably closest to "new fan", though it feels like it's been a long time. Music you like will do that to you, though, especially when it slots in just right.

I'm standing with someone I know, but don't know well. She's an internet acquaintance— you know how it is. It's nice not to be alone sometimes but I'm not sure if this is one of those times. We're waiting our turn to speak with the lead singer. Internet Acquaintance is holding something she'd like him to sign. It's... A VHS tape. He voiced a character in the movie contained within it some 30 years ago. She thinks it's funny. I guess I agree.

Lead Singer is graciously chatting with fans. The line is, frankly, not that long, and we are able to hear each conversation as it takes place. There's a dynamic at play here; each fan who speaks to him speaks with him as though they are old friends. But again, it's each and every one of them. In succession. In earshot of each other. You know? It's weird. And I can't decide what's weirder: the fans for behaving this way or Lead Singer for engendering it. And then I look down at myself (a fan), noting where my feet are planted (in line to speak with Lead Singer), and opt to stop thinking about it.

We reach the front of the line. Internet Acquaintance goes first. She chats with Lead Singer like she has many times before, as she told me while we waited. I watch as his face goes from confusion to polite agreement to genuine recognition. He laughs with her, recalling out loud for her that he remembers having fun recording voice lines. Their conversation gives me the same weird feelings as before. Internet Acquaintance beckons her boyfriend over to take a picture of her and Lead Singer. She's sure to check the outcome before saying, "See you soon," to Lead Singer and nothing to me. She leaves.

We both watch her go for a moment. When I look at him again, he's taking a sip from his drink and as he sets it back down, I take a step forward. I remember, belatedly, that it is not the first time he and I have spoken, either.

"Hi," I say. "Great show tonight."

"Thank you," Lead Singer says. "It was fun. We haven't been out this way in years."

"I bet. I saw you with another group out west and that was fun, but this was exciting. Getting the band back together, as they say."

"Exactly," he laughs a little at my bad joke and I feel a pulling sensation in my chest. "That's exactly it."

Here, he takes another sip. I rub at my shoulder.

"How have you been?" he asks me, his lips smacking at the taste.

Ah, he remembered. He remembered me. We've spoken before, I mentioned that to you here, I'm sure. I take stock. How have I been? I shrug, noncommittal.

"Not that great," I say, grim mirth in my voice. Weary. "It's been tough. I've been struggling."

He sets his glass down and leans in close, gripping my shoulders.

"I know," he says. Gin is strong on his breath. "I know."

"You know?" I ask. This seems like much, even for him. How could he know? The hold he has on me is comforting, his hands warm against my skin, even through the sleeves of my t-shirt.

"Yes," he says, sagely. "It's him, isn't it? Your boyfriend?"

I'm not sure how he knows that but that thought is only fleeting as the next ushers itself in: Yes. He sees it on my face; he lifts a hand up to say he understands without my saying it. He backs away a little, brows knit together as if searching for the next step. He scrubs a hand down his face, like he's feeling tired and hurt too. I know that he is, his heart is big; there's empathy in there for me, just for me.

"I think I know what you have to do," he says. I'm distantly aware of the people still in line behind me, chattering away and killing time until their own turn. Very distantly.

"What?" It's been so long and I've been hurting for so much of it. I'm tired. I really am tired, bone-deep. "I'll try anything."

And I mean it. He takes my hands in his.

"You have to run," he says. "Get out of here. Leave!"

He pushes some imaginary hurdle out of the way, a sweeping gesture of his arm. I look at him, searching his face. The emotion of it all seems to have brought a bead of sweat to his hairline. I feel my eyes grow wide as it sets in, this new reality of mine.

"Leave," I say. I pull the bundle of our four hands closer to my chest. "Lead Singer, where will I go?"

"It doesn't matter," he says. I can see each idea appear on his face in succession. He's formulating an airtight getaway for me. "In fact, it's better if you tell no one. Don't go home from here. Just go. Don't use credit cards. Pull your cash and go until you can't and land wherever that is."

Again, he sees it in my face. I'm afraid. Wouldn't you be?

"You'll be okay," he says. He pulls me in by the back of my neck to kiss my forehead, firm with a deep breath in. Like he loves me. "I promise."

"Okay," is all I can say in return. The adrenaline is pumping through me now, ready to take the leap. "Okay."

Lead Singer looks over his shoulder. Squeezes my hands.

"Go," he says, looking back at me now with wide eyes. He releases me. "Go. I'll cover for you. Go!"

I scramble two steps back from him, the urgency setting in. I look past him, then back at him.

"Will you come find me?"

He checks over his shoulder again before leaning in, playfully clandestine.

"Always. I'll always find you."

I turn, and run.

otto LA is a writer and is also just some guy.