

Such Good Songs
BY
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“Life is a lemon and I want my money back.”

There was nothing new or innovative in the idea of a progressive viral infection. At the time the whole thing started there were probably thousands in existence, most of them invented and developed for the purpose of damaging or destroying an enemy. The virus that took out most of England in 1992 was loosed by an avoidable course of accidents. A rush of small human errors combined with a test tube upended at the close of a long, hot afternoon, an extractor fan that shouldn't have been working and a sudden gust of wind in April that carried the mutating virus out into the last really beautiful day. The spread of infection was as good as instantaneous. Five million people were dead by the end of the first day, fifteen million by the end of the first week. By the beginning of May, England as it had been was gone forever.

I was immune to the first virus, but I missed the all-out horror because I was in flight at the time. I had a plane-flying friend with contacts and rather than landing at Heathrow we came into a small airport to the south of London. I'd been on a business trip. I worked for a record company who paid me to travel the world in search of settings for rock videos. I still loved the work, believe me, but it had made me cynical: I'd come to see the most beautiful areas of the world in terms of filmage with the heavy pound of percussion or the mindless insistence of rap providing background music. I was never going to tolerate rap: my heart belonged to rock and roll. As time went by, with music getting better and better there were times when listening to a good guitar riff, or a series of chords that reached in and snagged themselves around one's soul, were better than sex. Anyway, enough of that. My plane landed at half past six on the evening of May 13th, and I stepped onto the ground with no awareness of the terrible things that had been happening.

Even before I got into my car and turned on the radio, I knew that something was wrong. I think there was something inside of me that knew the world had changed forever: I could hear the sounds of a hundred sirens screaming into the warm evening air. I hesitated for just a moment before I turned on the news, and for that moment nothing had changed and everything was still alright. Then my fingers moved on the dash and the beginning of the end began.

That evening, with the sun setting in a sky that was tinged with violet and peach, I drove toward a city of hell from which – for the next five years – I never really emerged. I never finished the drive, I had no choice but to abandon my car. I hauled off the road just where the M4 branched out and was

chopped down. There were dead cars with dead people in them all over. And the silence... The silence was so profound it *hurt*.

The virus worked at record-breaking speed. Most of those who survived to the end of the first day hung around for another three years, at which point the virus mutated and took the numbers down still further. Forget an audience to a rock concert: by the end of those three years I doubt that there were enough people left to make up an average-sized rock band.

I won't bore you with the details of how I struggled to live during those empty years, but I will admit that although our government might have had a dull idea of how to deal with atomic bombs or terrorist attacks, it knew it all when it came to shooting itself in the foot. In fact, the entire government had been taken by the virus by the end of the first day. Wennerdale was only fifty miles from London and the spring winds blowing that day were strong: by the time they'd changed direction, London no longer had a population. Just a handful of survivors who couldn't decide if they'd been lucky to live or damned by not dying.

I was in an oddly good situation, at least at first. A previous lover (who'd walked out on me) had aligned herself to the survivalist school of shopping. She had tried to force me into making at least basic preparations in case of death or disaster (she hadn't anticipated *both*), and when I said I didn't care, went ahead and stocked us up with bottled water, dried milk, candles, tinned goods and batteries. When she walked out on me she left the store intact. She'd even included with that a radio tape cassette that ran on batteries. I wonder what became of her.

So year three came and went and the virus mutated and more people died. Occasionally I saw people, but for the greater part of the time there seemed to be no-one else in the world, and I was beginning to be haunted by the sound of my heartbeat. Some days that was all I seemed to hear. Some nights it was loud enough to deafen me. I had to do something to shut out that beat, so I began to play music all the time, relying on tapes rather than CDs because they used less power. I played endless rock and roll. I needed *noise*. It was partly the percussion: I needed to listen to another beat to that of my heart, which seemed otherwise to be alone in the wilderness.

Year four passed by. Year five came along and was sliding into year six and spring again when I heard another sound beside that of my music, and the beating of my heart: Radio Dalgrith was suddenly back on the map.

In the days before the world ended, Radio Dalgrith was quite well known. Motivated by a bright-eyed public relations office, and in a truly astonishing attempt at promoting public goodwill toward their nefarious offices, Radio Dalgrith had been established back in '84. They produced a daily three-hour

show. Said hours were an almost uninterrupted stream of rock and roll which pretty much electrified the nation's youth, not to mention those of us past first youth and still playing air guitar when there was no-one around to witness us. Their frequency, 98.5-99.8 meant nothing at the time the station first went on the air, but it turned out to have a nice dramatic irony all its own. When the facts were eventually recorded, 98.5 to 99.8 turned out to be the percentage of the human race *not* to survive viral infection Pandora 8. If you want the only other even faintly humorous association, try Cellar Black Cat, which had been heard in dying corners all over the world.

(Cellar Black Cat was the operation set up to contain the virus. There was as much chance of anyone finding the virus, let alone contain it, as a they might a black cat in a... You take my point. Very fucking funny.)

Radio Dalgrith came across that day clear and bright. The voice that addressed me – and anyone else still alive and in possession of sanity and/or batteries – sounded clear and sensible and organised. The facts that followed I had to piece together over the next days.

Dalgrith was Wennerdale's sister company. With a open line always between them, and an instantaneous link-up, within seconds of the virus hitting the air, Dalgrith secured their site from everything and everyone. Not even God could have gotten in. Vast metal shields closed down over the windows and the incoming air was forcibly sanitized. While the rest of the country and the rest of the world were dropping like flies, the inhabitants of the Dalgrith offices were crossing themselves and probably sacrificing to their gods.

Once they'd finished wetting themselves, probably.

Though Dalgrith had in no way contributed to the disaster, they must have reckoned that silence was their best defence. And of course, they must have known that there would be precious few people listening. With no reason to want to reach the nation, Dalgrith stayed silent for a long time. Indeed they stayed quiet until they had a good reason for breaking radio silence. Dalgrith came onto the air to offer hope, and the knowledge of the Trail.

The Trail wasn't really a road at all. Spanning the distance between Wennerdale and Dalgrith, it ran along the west coast of the country, superimposed over the old B7 road. The B7 had run further than both sites, but it was only the direct connection that mattered to Crofton, who came up with the initial idea, putting it into practice before anyone else saw what was going on.

Pretty much ignored after the motorway came into being, the B7 was due to die of neglect, had it not been for Crofton, a smartarse who'd had more than her fair share of foresight. A scientist first and foremost, she had a weekend-and-

every-holiday obsession with racing cars, which accounted for the plan she'd promulgated and forced into being. By the time the powers that were had discovered Crofton's sideline, too much money had gone down that route – no pun intended – for them to dismiss it. Besides, the whole thing made a horrible sort of sense. While the government proper had never been told about the Trail, someone sufficiently high up and powerful pulled strings enough to approve the invisible budget. So what if the health service took a cut that year, and for the following decade? Who cared if fewer pensioners survived the winter, with the heating cost supplement denied? Who needed health or pensioners? Underway by '87, a new road, alien in form and entirely secret, was designed and implanted over the old B7. Specialised vehicles were designed and brought into being, windowless but for specialised front and rear views, and used to run between Dalgrith and Wennerdale, carrying whatever illegal and toxic materials the general public – and the bulk of government, including its leader – never got to hear about.

When Pandora 8 was first produced, and someone realised just how serious a virus they had on their hands, no care for the public was under consideration. All that mattered was how the occupants of one site could swap over to the other, assuming neither were infected. Even the PM had no idea about the sealed vehicles that were wheeled out onto the track in the south of the country, loaded with fuel, headed for the north. The trip took seven hours. It was impossible to cut that time and still remain secret.

Of course, you're thinking that the radio broadcast was stunningly honest, and wondering how such a secretive organisation would reveal so much of its antecedents. But it wasn't like that: for me to understand the Trail and how it had come about, I had to get myself to Wennerdale without dying.

It took me the better part of two weeks to get there, and I came close to giving up every other minute of every day, but I wasn't going to stop. I understood that if I wanted to live on in a new environment I had to follow the rules. The plan was easy enough in theory: get to Wennerdale without dying (no mean feat), survive all the blood tests that would immediately be taken and then get sealed into one of the Trail cars. Sealed in? I couldn't quite believe that aspect but no-one at Wennerdale smiled when they told me. They told me a lot of things, it being so very seldom that anyone reached them at all. Ironically, some people got there just in time to die, flattened by some viral mutation or just tired to death.

Wennerdale: a possible future, wreathed in barbed wire. Every day on my way there I had passed dead bodies. Leaving London was like being buried in hopelessness or hell. I really had trouble until I found a bicycle that had wheels still attached. There was not a car still rolling. I had my tapes in a bag and as much food as I could carry when I left home for the last time. The motorways that I passed, and the ordinary B roads that I crossed, were nothing but chains

of metal tombs. That first April day the virus had wrestled with the rush-hour traffic and gridlocked England forever. Half the time I had to carry the bicycle clear of the mess all around. Going over the Queen Elizabeth Bridge was like climbing up out of hell.

The blood tests were demanding and they hurt. I wasn't good at talking to the people who took my blood and tested it. It was only when I'd gone beyond that stage and been taken to see the sealed cars that I had for the first time a concrete visualisation of a future.

Crofton must have thought about what could happen and had planned ahead for it. I gathered that she'd visualised travelling the B7 Trail as being like going into space. But instead of landing on the moon, you'd hit Dalgrith, and if you hit Dalgrith, you'd live. How did they know that last for fact? Well, that was the secret they let me in on once they'd decided that there was a point to my being.

The blood tests had demonstrated what the Wennerdale staff wanted to see: I was immune to the first virus and carried no hint of the mutated virus. The only danger left was that I might begin to support the newest and most toxic strain, which was wiping out 99.9% of everyone it touched, and this was what it all centered around. Bearing all this in mind, pleased as they were that I was still standing, they gave the last details and left me alone in a room with one of the sealed cars so that I might decide to go ahead or not.

They told me that at Dalgrith I'd have a real chance for life and a future. Up there on the west coast they had a small community and it was growing, and one day their numbers might reach a hundred. I had been shocked by that: I hadn't known just how near to completely demolishing the population the virus had come. But as the new strain was an immediate killer, they had to take preventative measures. The new strain had a maximum life expectancy of 6.5 hours. It could make an appearance anywhere in-between the limits of five minutes to the 6.5 hours. The trip by sealed car to Dalgrith took 7 hours, and that was what it all revolved around: you'd get into the car, be given an injection of the new strain at which time the one and only car door would be sealed. If you made it to Dalgrith alive they knew you were safe. If you weren't safe, well, you didn't reach Dalgrith alive. Once the virus was dead they'd chip you out and burn your body, sterilise the car shell and prepare to do it all again. It was the sealing bit that scared me: once in there was no way of getting out. I'd be entering a strange womb that would deliver me into life or death.

It took me over an hour to decide.

They let me take my tapes and the cassette player. They seemed to find this weakness of mine amusing, living as they did in a small but frighteningly

modern world. I didn't care: my tapes were archaic and so was their owner. I had a shower – which felt wonderful – was given new clothes to wear. Then they strapped me into the driving seat. I was inside the car in a kind of underground garage, where everything smelled very new and somehow alien. Someone rolled up my left sleeve and jabbed another needle into my skin. It hurt. They jumped back and the car door slid down from above and the air through the window looked smoky and blue as they soldered shut the door.

If anyone wished me good luck I didn't hear them. I was too busy dealing with feeling scared and sick: for a moment all I wanted was to get back out of my metal coffin. But it was too late. I had nowhere to go but on.

I pressed the ignition on the right side of the dash and two things happened: the car roared into life and the doors that held me back from the outside world opened. The car and I shot out into the world in a cloud of half-burned diesel.

From the first instant, the car was moving faster than any car I'd ever driven. Although it ran on tracks it was no easy ride: the car was fitted with a front shovel, like a snow plough, that could clear off the Trail itself anything that had fallen onto it. There were plenty of things that had.

Of course, no-one *maintained* the Trail. How could they? And although the Trail was fairly private, there were places where people or nature had broken through and left their mark. That was bad, but it wasn't the worst thing.

Coming out that day into the light – it was the longest day of the year – was like being born. There was no mother to stick around to nurture me; this was a metal womb and a enforced birth. The car moved so fast on the uneven bits of the track that I got knocked about – so far as the straps I wore would allow me – and sometimes we hit obstacles on the line. The worst thing was passing other cars like my own, where guinea pigs had accepted that painful jab and imprisonment, and been rocketed out into the world only to die along the way. I saw almost perfectly preserved bodies behind that heavy glass window. Blank eyes. Open mouths. There were bloodstains where some had tried to beat their way free.

The sound of my heart was getting louder than the noise the car made as it slid on and on. I reached for the portable player and pressed down the Play switch. An instant of silence that made me think: *Oh, shit, I didn't change the batteries, I didn't... Oh, what if it's broken now, I'll never... And, oh, God. I can't do this on my own.* And then the first song on the tape began and opening chords of "*In a Broken Dream*" exploded into the car. It was like air after drowning.

The tape had been labelled *Immediate Rock*. I used to think such a title might look well on my tombstone. Immediate rock was the music that took you into

its embrace from the opening chords, and when the *Dream* closed, the tape dragged me straight into Blondie's "11.59", which was less relentless than *Dream*, but which still maintained a steady beat. Two cars off to the side of me. What had sent them off the road? "*Sitting in the front row, Mary of the Fourth Form.*" It was a million years since I'd been to school and that had been nothing but an unforgivable period I never wanted to remember. I cranked up the volume to 8 and thought that it wasn't only the force of the car that was shaking me: the music was, too. As the song drew toward climax I could feel my blood pumping.

Christ! For the first time the Trail came out into the open and for the first time in maybe six years I saw the sweep of the South Downs. I knew those Downs: I'd been born within sight of them. I knew the springy turf that cushioned one's feet, and the mass of wild flowers. Butterflies, too. If I'd been in that previous world I would have done things differently: I would have gotten out of the train when I saw that sweep of hills, and gone toward the Beacon, or maybe headed for Chanctonbury Ring where local myth had it that if you ran backwards round the ring itself you might summon up the Devil.

The sky was a blue so brilliant it hurt to look at it. Then the Downs were gone and the country was shifting. But how much it had all changed since I'd last been out there to see it! I fast-forwarded the tape onto the next track, and despite everything about the situation, I found myself grinning, and sitting up a little straighter in my seat, to address the road.

"*Your mind is not your own.*" No, it probably wasn't. "*You can't breathe...*" The last word drawn out into two distinct phrases with a great gap between them. For the first time I found myself wondering how it made itself known, this latest, most virulent strain. It was certainly warm in the car, but was that so surprising? Putting my hand up to my forehead I found it damp. I held out a hand and saw that it was steady. Tension. Fuck tension: *fear*. For so long I hadn't had anything to think about, no future with which I wanted to engage, and now there really was the hope of another world.

The country had crept back. Five years since the outbreak and the countryside was beginning to recover from the devastation wrought upon it by the human race. Now there were dense banks of flowers: thrift, harebells, dog roses, common dandelions, great swathes of goldenrod, St John's Wort, the red and the white clovers, trefoils, valerian, meadowsweet. "*Trying to find a way to make it alive...*" Jesus, the backbeat on that.

The Trail missed London by miles, swinging round to the west, but I could still see the remains of the outer rings of interlocking roads that I'd fought with in my time and won out. I thought about the life I'd led there and it felt like a dream I'd never succeeded in escaping from.

Somewhere in the early afternoon I was being kept awake – I was recklessly tired – and pummelled by an unrelenting beat: “*We care a lot...*” I turned down the volume a little, and began thinking about Dalgrith. I’d heard a lot about the place from everyone at Wennerdale. Imagine being with other people again? Imagine a possible future? The sun was beating down on the top of the sealed car and I picked up another of the bottles of drink they’d stuck in the left side-pocket. Calls of nature were clearly a problem that didn’t worry the makers of the cars: if you had to wet yourself, you could just do that. What would it matter? If you made it alive, who cared about personal hygiene? And if you died en route, well, same again, I guessed... I’d always liked the shrieked irony of *We Care a Lot*.

The country was still attractive in the area above London, but it was not until I’d cleared the flattest parts of the country that I began to feel that things might work out after all. The beginning of Cumbria took me by surprise, and the Lake District went by me in a kind of multi-coloured fantasy. It was still very hot.

It was still very hot. The Cumbrian hills seen from the Trail were almost magical and the light now falling on them from the first part of the west was bordering on hallucinatory: sometimes the view was so beautiful that I caught my breath. And all the time my music ploughed on. “*Nothing’s Free...*” How fucking true. I felt the strong steady beat meeting my heart’s own rhythm. I thought about the first rock and roll I’d ever heard. I was just a kid then but I’d been caught by the magic and it had never left me. A family where everyone but me was musical. We’d all drifted so far away from one another. I’d tried to find them for less than a week. Sometimes you know when you’re beaten. Sometimes you’re beaten before you even start. “*Sign upon the bloody line. A drop of yours, a drop of mine. Nothing’s free.*” No. Nothing is. Thank you, Mr Cooper. Then a memory returned and I grinned to think of it: I used to miss-hear that song: “*I want a house, ... with a table..*” rather than “*And a house, with cable...*”

Cumbria faded into Northumberland. I saw for maybe two minutes the curve of the Wall itself. The grass everywhere was getting so long. “You only call me if you’re feeling blue.” That was probably true of all the relationships I’d ever had. Oh, Christ, why is it still so hot? “*I know just what you are. Don’t push your luck too far.*”

“*I’ve got your number written on the back of my hand.*” Wasn’t that what my first lover had said? I hadn’t taken her number, she’d taken mine. Written in green ink on the back of her hand. Isn’t green ink supposed to be unlucky? We had a good time for the first six months then everything fell apart. I can’t remember who finally finished it. That dizzy time when everything makes perfect sense lasts so incredibly short a time. Time. Time? Five and a half hours and it’s getting hotter by the minute.

It's getting hotter by the minute.

It's not getting hotter by the minute. No. *I'm* getting hotter by the minute.

"I know just what you are. Don't push your luck too far."

Oh, shit.

Was the first affair the best? We were both such *kids*. That was before I'd finished school, before college, before... The sweat is now running down. The Trail in front of me is still clear. I think it's clear. I can't see it. I can't fucking see. I can't even see to press the fucking buttons. The music stops and breaks and I hear a noise like the tape itself tearing. I forgot to bring the other tapes. What was I thinking? Was I thinking? Oh, Jesus. *"Say don't you realise? Is nothing left inside? Hey, did I get you wrong? Say where's your number gone?"*

I can't fucking see because I'm fucking crying. I hoped for a moment that it might be tears of joy: new starts and all that stuff. But it's not. No. I'm hot because there's a fever that's just taken me over. My skin's burning. There's a blistering rash that's creeping minute by minute up from my fingertips to my wrists. Tearing open the sleeve of my shirt I'm in such a hurry to see what I don't want to see. It's already spread. *Shit*.

I can taste blood, which is odd because I'm not bleeding. I put up a hand to my mouth and oh, God, I *am* bleeding.

I'm not going to make it to Scotland. I really wanted to.

I'm not going to reach that place... What the fuck was it called?

At least the tape is still playing.

Such good songs.

"What about your gods? They're defective: they forgot the warranty."

Such fucking good songs. Who knew they'd last longer than love would?
Than life would?

I think I'm dying.

I'm... I'm almost not here any more.

Not long now.

Not long at all.
“*Amnesty is granted.*”

No. Maybe not this time.

Faith No More: We Care a Lot
Blondie: 11:59
Meatloaf: Life is a Lemon and Amnesty is Granted
The Jags: Back of My Hand
Alice Cooper: Nothing's Free; Lost in America.
Tina Turner: Addicted to Love
The Boomtown Rats: Mary of the Fourth Form
Rod Stewart: In a Broken Dream
Peter Gabriel.: Down the Dolce Vita

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