

Chapter 18

It's many a young band's dream: (1) Write some great songs and build a strong regional following, (2) pick the best tunes for a four-track demo, (3) get the demo into the right hands at the right time, (4) score a record deal and support for a U.S./European tour. Most bands never make it through step one. But for one local act, the Vagrants, the dream has quickly become a reality. The band has signed with Drunk Tank Records and is preparing to release its debut album, "Never Here," on August 1st. Having received a pre-release copy of the album, I can assure you it is well worth a listen, and at least three of the tracks—"Yes, I Can't," "Leave Me in Peace," and "Four or Eight By Twelve"—are single-worthy. Though the Vagrants faced a setback in the middle of the recording process (the unexpected departure of singer/guitarist Nick Graves), that hasn't gotten in the way of a strong debut.

— "Vagrants Prepare for Record Release, Tour," *New England Musical Express*, July 21, 1992

Section D, Lot 418

Some August predawn, 1992

Ben froze at the sound of his name.

"Pssst. Over here."

It was Vince, staring down on him from the left edge of the grave.

"You scared the shit out of me." Ben pitched aside his slop scoop, wiped his hands down his jeans.

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“Sorry. There’s just no good way to come up on a man in a grave.”

“I thought you were in London.”

“That’s next week, I think.”

“What do you mean, you *think*?”

“We’ll get to that. First, answer me this: what the hell are you doing in that soupy hole at—I don’t know—two in the morning?”

“Insomnia.”

“Do you always come here when you have insomnia?”

“Not always. But someone’s getting lowered into this hole later this morning, and it better not be soupy then.”

Vince leaned in to get a better look, as if he were missing something. “Have the dead been known to complain about such things?”

Until quite recently, Ben had questioned this kind of detail work himself. But more and more, he was seeing this place through his father’s eyes, not necessarily because he wanted to.

“The dead haven’t. But the living sometimes do, the relatives. Or you can just see it on their faces when they’re standing by a sorry-looking grave. And I kind of get their point.”

“Ben Dirjery. Ever the perfectionist.”

Ben gestured to the dirt walls surrounding him. “If these are the limits of my perfectionism, that’s pretty sad.”

Vince didn’t agree or disagree. He sat down on the edge of the grave and fished a cigarette from his breast pocket, struck a light to it. His skin seemed paler, his eyes hollower than Ben remembered, or maybe this was a trick of the ditch lantern, the way it cast up light and shadows.

“What about you?” Ben asked. “Why are you up and around at this hour?”

Vince took a pull from his cigarette and blew a plume of smoke. “My circadian rhythms are permanently fucked.”

A consequence—a necessity—of touring, Ben guessed.

“So tonight I decided to go for a drive. And when I passed this place I noticed your truck and thought I’d stop, have a look around. Then I saw your light. And I felt my soul being drawn inexplicably toward it.”

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Ben didn't respond to the joke. He had no idea how to respond to any aspect of Vince's unexpected appearance here. Yet he understood that in settling himself down by the grave, Vince was extending a kind of invitation, one that would be rude to refuse.

So Ben hoisted himself up and took a seat by Vince, considering how for all the hours the two of them had spent together in this cemetery, they'd never met up at an open grave. Sitting side by side, dangling their feet like two kids on a dock, might once have felt companionable if not exactly cozy given their surroundings. But now something was different. Vince seemed smaller and tenser than Ben remembered, as if his physical and emotional energy had become both more concentrated and more withdrawn. Or perhaps it was Ben who'd changed. Perhaps he'd grown thicker and more sluggish than he'd care to admit.

"Hey Vince?"

"Yeah."

"Leah and I, we plugged the phone back in."

"Okay," Vince said slowly, uncertainly.

"What I mean is, you don't have to drive all the way to the cemetery to reach me."

"Good to know."

When Ben and Leah lost the baby, the Vagrants were touring out West. And the first week in July, he received a letter from Vince, bearing a Tempe, Arizona, postmark, and taking up three pages torn from a Wagon Wheel Inn notepad. At the time Ben received the letter, he and Vince had been out of touch for months, during which their lives had barreled down sharply diverging paths. When Ben learned he was to be a father, he resolved to do all he could to be worthy of the title. That began with quitting the Vagrants, understanding he couldn't do both the band and fatherhood justice. It continued with working longer hours to save money, preparing—with Leah—for marriage and their baby's arrival, and with devoting any remaining time to the increasingly remote prospect of finishing college. Vince, for his part, had been occupied with rehearsing, recording, and

preparing for months on the road. That, anyway, was what Ben had imagined for his old friend in the absence of specific details.

In the letter from Tempe, Vince told Ben he'd heard what happened with the baby. He said how sorry he was. He said he'd tried calling Ben's phone number at different times but no one ever picked up. He'd gotten worried enough to call Ross, who said it would be best to write to Ben, not explaining, at least so far as Vince had indicated, about Ben and Leah's phone being out of commission, about Leah's case for keeping it that way.

In his letter, Vince never mentioned how the recording wound down. Nor did he make the mistake of bitching about touring. His narrative of life on the road, illustrated by occasional instant-camera photographs, was both specific and evasive.

Some of the specifics that stayed with Ben:

Spent two days in Las Cruces: one gig, one bad case of the flu (me). A hawk stood guard outside our motel window and I watched him for hours, whenever I wasn't sleeping. (This with a picture of a hawk on a rusted railing, his checkered brownish back to the camera.) Little worried that from now on hawks will remind me of the flu, but it might be kind of nice if the flu reminds me of hawks. . . .

What the fuck might explain the fact that since we left Texas I've had at least three dreams about waiting in long lines in institutional settings? (No picture for this one.)

The evasive part was that Vince never spoke directly about the music, or about how the shows were going, or about the inevitable comings and goings of women—though one photograph, intended to capture a framed sign on a wall opposite Vince's bed ("Bedtime prayers count double at the Seventh Day Motel") also captured his legs and the left leg, bare and white and shapely, of an unidentified female companion. Her leg, not the sign, persisted in Ben's thoughts.

Dave and Tuke were mentioned, but only in passing and never in reference to their music. A single picture offered Ben's only sight of them: Dave on top of Tuke, pinning him to the grass of some roadside or park, Tuke laughing.

Rick Boskin was absent from both the letter and the photographs, his presence suggested only by his guitar case, propped in the background of a picture of something else.

Ben understood that in all these evasions Vince had been trying to protect him, to spare him, so far as this was in Vince's powers, from envy and regret. Yet Ben also knew that if their friendship was to be sustained it could not exclude music—including the Vagrants', maybe especially the Vagrants'. This meant it was up to him to make the first move.

"I listened to the album," he said, "and it's really good. *All* of it." Meaning not just the tracks Ben had contributed to.

Vince never accepted compliments easily, as if he didn't trust them. When it was clear he wasn't going to respond to this one, Ben said, "So what about this *maybe* with London? You want to tell me about that?"

Vince held his silence a moment longer, his cigarette hand faintly trembling. A case of nerves? That wasn't like him, Ben thought.

"I want Boskin out of the band," Vince said. "Before we do any more recording. If that means he doesn't want to stick around for the first part of the European tour, I'll have to figure something out."

"It's that bad?"

"For me it is. Dave and Tuke, they're coming around to seeing my side of things. Or maybe my misery is just rubbing off on them."

"What do you mean, your side of things?"

Vince took another pull from his cigarette then leaned back so he could look Ben in the eye.

"The guy's the best guitar player I've ever worked with."

Including me, Ben thought.

"But it was a mistake for me to think we could figure out songs together. Maybe I just wanted to believe we could."

"You disagree about things?"

"Yeah, we disagree about things. But it's something more basic than that. It gets down to the level of chemistry, of which we have none."

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Vince leaned forward, ready to flick his cigarette ash into the grave, until he saw the look on Ben's face.

"Here," Ben said, handing Vince an empty soda can.

"Sorry. Wasn't thinking." Vince tapped the ash into the can.

"So you were saying there's no chemistry?"

"That's right. And I'll take some of the blame for that. I mean, the guy tries. Or tried. In the beginning he came to me with ideas, bits of songs. And maybe I should have given them more of a chance before shit-canning them. But I just have this strongly negative, almost visceral, reaction to what he thinks a song is. Like I'm almost allergic to it."

Vince stabbed out his cigarette and dropped it into the can. "I don't mean to sound dramatic, Ben. But that's the way things are for me."

"What about for Boskin?"

"Well, how would you like it if the guy you're supposed to be writing songs with shut down everything you suggested?"

Ben had been shut down by Vince on a few occasions himself. But he'd also pushed back when he thought a possibly good song—or the start of a possibly good song—was being too easily dismissed. Somehow, the two of them worked through such disagreements and came out the other end with something decent, or with a mutual agreement to cut their losses and move on.

"It's at the point, Ben, where the problem between Boskin and me, it's really gotten in the way. For the whole band. The last leg of our tour in the States, the two of us were barely speaking to each other. The only times I'd see him would be during gigs. I don't think it's any coincidence that our last few shows sounded like shit."

Glass smashed in the distance, almost certainly the work of a bottle tosser.

Vince raised an eyebrow. "Is that something you need to deal with?"

"Not now. I'll clean it up later."

"It must be weird being on the receiving end of this night-time shit."

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"It's more annoying than weird. You and me, we never left trash behind, much less broken glass."

"Kids today."

"Yeah, kids today."

A wave of drowsiness rolled through Ben. If he headed home now and crawled right into bed, he might actually be able to fall asleep. But there was work to be finished, and for the sake of the caffeine, he cracked open a fresh soda, took a cold, fizzy gulp of it.

"About Boskin," Ben said. "Mind if I play devil's advocate?"

"Go for it."

"Those two songs on the album that were new to me. 'Never Here,' and the other one." Ben couldn't remember the name.

"'Yes, I Can't.'"

"Yeah, that one. Those songs are proof to me that the two of you can put out good stuff. It might be a rough process, and not much fun for either of you, but *something's* working. And I think it might be worth taking some time to figure out what that is. Then maybe you can focus on that instead of whatever it is that's making you break out in hives."

Ben downed more of the soda. As he set the can back on the grass he saw Vince glaring at him. In the eerie underlighting of the ditch lantern, he looked almost psychopathic.

"Okay," Ben said. "What did I step in now?"

"Was there anything in particular you noticed about those two songs? Anything at all familiar?"

Ben never did well under the pressures of inquisition. At the moment the songs were a blur in his brain.

"How about the chorus in 'Yes, I Can't'?" Vince hummed a few bars to jog Ben's memory. "How about this little bit in 'Never Here'?" Vince let some of this one fly, too.

Isolated in this way, captured in hums familiar to Ben from hours and hours of practices with Vince, hours and hours of *What about this?* sessions, the snippets finally fell into place: they were bits of things that he and Vince had come up with together, bits of things that, however promising they seemed at

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the time of their creation, never became whole songs. Not, at least, when the two of them had been working together.

“I get it, Vince. You can stop.”

Vince did, his glare softening into something nearly sympathetic.

“Listen, Ben. I just want you to understand that when you say you like the album, you’re complimenting yourself. And I want you to know that it’s the last of the decent music I’m ever going to put out with Boskin, because it’s the last of the stuff I worked on with you.”

A second bottle smashed in the distance, followed by laughter—a girl’s answered by a boy’s. The sounds of lives still light on complications.

“You see what I’m getting at?”

The soda Ben had gulped seemed to have turned to churning acid. He swallowed hard to keep it in its place. “You want me to come back in. In place of Boskin.”

“Just think about it. Right now, that’s all I’m asking.”

The smart move would be to give Vince an immediate *No*, with all the resolve that might make it convincing. Instead, Ben said, “If you want an answer before the London dates, that gives me a week. Maybe not even that.”

Vince shrugged. “Take a couple of weeks. Take a month even. I’m pretty sure Boskin will stick with me through the first part of the tour. And if he doesn’t want to, I’ll work around that.”

“What makes you think he’ll go quietly? And what about the recording contract? Doesn’t it bind you to him, in some way?”

Vince reached toward his breast pocket for another cigarette, but his hands were now shaking hard enough to make this impossible. Contract jitters? Low blood sugar? Ben tried to push aside the stories he’d heard about Vince and drugs, harder drugs than pot.

Vince changed course and brushed a palm down his jacket, as if smoothing it had been his intention all along. “I bet he’ll be as relieved as I’ll be to end things.”

“What makes you think that?”

“He’s already talking to another band.”