

“Have you got all that?” he asked Barrett at their first meeting.

“I have. Enough chips to open a decent-sized chippy, I’d say.”



The band moved out of the working men’s club and relocated to the attic at Al’s house. He told them to help themselves to biscuits, tea, whatever was in the fridge. Yes, they could smoke and drink; his mum and dad wouldn’t mind.

“They’re liberals, anything goes!”

Al was obsessive about music. He had boxes full of compilation tapes and the band rarely found a group of which he hadn’t heard. They trusted his judgement, bombarding him with questions:

“Is that guitar sound too Bauhaus? Should I chop it up a bit so it’s slightly Gang of Four?”

At one practice Barrett took hold of Carey’s guitar. He coiled his little finger around the volume control, teasing out sound. Abstractedly, he tweaked the tuning pegs with his other hand, tilting his head towards the speaker to listen better.

“The tuning is slipping, can you hear it?”

Carey lied that he could.

“And the action is rubbish. You almost need a clamp to hold down a chord.”

Carey was uneasy whenever Barrett used musical terms like *the action*. It was the vocabulary of separatism, taking them away from the streets.

“If you get a decent guitar you’ll feel a lot more confident about your playing,” said Barrett.

The next Saturday they walked to Archibald's second-hand shop on the outskirts of town, amid the chip wrappers and discarded drinks cans, the taxi ranks and boarded up houses. Carey had first called there when he was about thirteen, pressed up to the wire grille at the window, staring at the shiny things framed by fairy lights. These were left up all year round as if Christmas never left this speck of the world. A fly's compound eye was needed to see everything jammed in there. And it was all designed to make lives louder, brighter, happier: drum kits, guitars, stylophones, bikes, lava lamps, football games, piles of magazines, model airplanes, flags, mouth organs, fishing rods, microphones, records, snooker cues, table tennis tables, amplifiers, postcards, record players.

At the entrance, hidden beneath oilcloth, was a device to pick up footsteps and trigger an alarm. The noise was so loud it made the floor vibrate. Customers would cover their ears and check for gunshot wounds. Old Archibald was out from the back immediately:

"Yes?"

He always looked at everyone dismissively as if he'd finally found the person responsible for posting dog dirt through his letterbox. His skin was yellow from spending too long under the fairy lights and his cheeks drawn and tense as if he'd eaten his lips in retaliation for a secret they'd revealed years before. The visitors to his shop were in his web now and he was going to eat them alive or toy with them a while, at least.

Carey and Barrett stood there, light-headed among the Calor gas and solder fumes.

"We're looking for an electric guitar. I bought one off you last year and I'd like to swap it for a better one," said Carey.

The alarm screamed. A woman entered with a lad aged about ten. She was carrying an electric guitar too. Archie asked what she wanted.

“This bloody thing doesn’t work.”

She said her husband had adapted a kettle lead and plugged it into a wall socket but they couldn’t hear a thing, not a dicky bird. Archibald’s teeth did a kind of jig.

“You stuck it into a plug socket and expected it to work? Without an amplifier?”

The woman said he hadn’t told her nothing about no amplifier when he sold it to them; this wasn’t on.

“Everyone knows you need an amp to hear anything. You could have blown yourselves to kingdom come.”

He refused to give her money back. She said she’d return later. With her husband. To sort him out.

“Bring half the street with you if you like, love.”

He turned back to the pair:

“Right, what was it you two buggerlugs wanted?”

Before they could begin negotiations, he warned:

“If it’s a part-ex you’re after, I’ll be taking your picture.”

He reached under the counter and waved a Polaroid Instamatic.

“Wonderful thing, this. I get you to smile like good ’uns and then I stick your mug shots on my wall in the back room — just in case you’ve nicked any of the stuff you’re shoving on to me, even if you’re claiming I sold you it.”

He laughed a dry laugh that broke into a hacking cough.

They left with a Fender Stratocaster copy that Barrett said played well. The neck was narrow, making it easier to hold down chords. Carey was annoyed because the guitar they traded (which Archie had described as a ‘beaut’ when he sold it to him a year before) was now a ‘plank with a few strings on’.

Green set out a glowing testimony to *Lunch Brake*. The show, he said, reached the perfect demographic audience for Barrett — ex-fans who wanted to know what he was up to, many of them women who still had a soft spot for him. They didn't read the *NME* any more or surf the internet but relied on the television and radio to tell them what was happening. He had been their heart-throb, a memory of 'lost youth they'd want to revisit'. Barrett sighed. Green smiled, apologised, and went on:

"They'll see you on telly and that same afternoon they'll be throwing your new album into the shopping trolley while they're scooting around Sainsbury's. Or, alternatively, getting their kids to download it from iTunes."

"That's a very patronising view of middle-aged women," said Barrett.

"Oh, fuck off. You know what I mean."

Green was fully aware that the album wasn't actually stocked by Sainsbury's or any other supermarket chain. Headfall, Barrett's record company, didn't have accounts with them because it couldn't offer sufficient discount. It was an independent affiliated to a major, specialising in acts that no longer justified large investment but had maintained a loyal and decent-sized core audience, basically the last stop-off point in the formal music industry.

"So you think it's a good idea?" asked Barrett.

"I do."

"Let's do it, then."

★

Al unexpectedly announced that he was packing in his A levels to start a job at an outdoor activity centre about thirty miles away.

“I can’t stand being inside all day,” he said. “And if I pass the exams it only qualifies me for an office job, which I don’t want.”

Within days he phoned Barrett and told him he’d fallen in love, with Lauren, an American college student staying with a party at the centre.

The band next saw him two weeks later as they filed into his parents’ carrying their instruments. He was so happy his body appeared to be wrapped in lights, flashing on and off. He moved and spoke quickly and was rubbing his hands together, then wiping them on his jeans as though afraid of catching fire. Afterwards Carey said to Barrett:

“Have you noticed with Al that he’s either really up or pretty down?”

Barrett said he had.

Group Hex entered another competition, to win a free session at a local recording studio. They sent in a cassette of tracks taped at a practice. A few days later they received a letter notifying them that as runner-ups they had won a day in The Crypt at half the usual rate.

“I didn’t know just anyone could go in a studio. I thought you had to be famous or something first,” said Fisher.

Carey was aware that in a studio the instruments were recorded individually and mixed together later. He suggested another approach:

“I think we should record the whole thing live and all play at once.”

“But this is a chance to make it sound really good,” said Barrett. “They can overdub, where they get about three guitars playing the same thing but on different tracks, so it’s really powerful.”

“It’s false though, isn’t it?” said Carey. “That’s not how we normally play. How can it have feeling? I thought that’s what we were about.”

Fisher disagreed:

“What have we got to lose? We can practise loads so we get our parts spot-on.”

Since when had this Barrett-Fisher alliance formed, wondered Carey. The bastards.



*Godspace*, Barrett’s seventh solo album, had been heavily influenced by Mensch, a collective of left-field German musicians. A year or so earlier Green had lent him a set of their albums, worried that Barrett’s approach had become too conventional. Mensch took what sounded like the sound of distant sawmills and hammers clanking on to concrete, taped it, slowed it down and fed it through masses of digital echo. Barely music, it was more the soundtrack to an almost forgotten dream.

Barrett had plagiarised their sound but where they used spoken samples—an American mumbling about burning fields (‘The black smoke like a murder of crows, wings joined, sky all dark, no sound ...’)—he sang lyrics of great portent. The opening song, the album’s *motif* (as it said in the accompanying press release), was called *The Grave* and lasted eleven minutes:

‘Walking from the womb, already I see my tomb.’

One reviewer had sneered:

‘Barrett opens like Boris Karloff rising from his sepulchral majesty. You’re meant to be afraid, very afraid, as he simpers on about what a drag it is to be alive but all we really hear in our mythical haunted castle is the sound of hysterical, derisive guffawing.’



Lauren was sixteen and, according to Al, the prettiest, cleverest girl in the world. Barrett and Carey met her at his house the next Friday evening. She was tall and boyish with fierce brown eyes, wearing a loosely stitched jumper pulled out of shape and almost reaching her knees. She didn’t make eye contact or ask any questions, answering theirs with ‘sure’, ‘cool’ or ‘no way!’

They trooped out to the nearest pub which was full of people washed and scrubbed for the weekend. Lauren had never been in a pub before. She was soon tipsy and began filtering through the various rooms. Al kept rising from his seat, concerned about her. Carey saw her talking to the locals—the bloke with a red face and a glass eye, the lads in the pool room. When she came back she was trailed by two or three of these and they backed up between the tables as if queuing for something but not sure what. She sat down beside Al and kissed him passionately for several seconds full on the lips. The men-in-waiting drifted away.

After Al and Lauren had disengaged, Barrett resumed their conversation. He wanted to know, as ever, what Al thought of new tracks, song titles and ideas. While Al spoke, Lauren turned to face him, staring at his mouth. She carried on until he

became self-conscious and his words dried up. She forced her lips against his again.



Green had kept the review from Barrett but in his more antagonistic moods he was tempted to show it, if only to make a point: *this is what happens when you go off at a crazy tangent and pretend to be something you're not. I was hoping for a few weirder outros or the odd experimental middle eight, not a wholesale abandonment of your every musical and lyrical trademark.*

He had also been vague about the number of albums ordered by shops and downloaded.

“How’s it shifting?” Barrett asked.

“Pretty briskly.”

Barrett was astute enough not to ask for precise numbers. A gentle ambiguous truth sufficed.

The figures supplied to Green by Headfall showed that across the UK *Godspace* had sold approximately eight hundred copies into shops and a similar number had been legally downloaded. Green had been hoping for healthy upfront sales to save revealing to Barrett the extent to which his career had contracted. How could he tell a man who, famously, was once said to have had a copy of one of his albums in every ten homes in the UK, now had such paltry sales?

Green could see that future releases would probably become mail order or download-only and Barrett was set to join the ranks of ex-pop stars selling a few hundred copies of each album — though claiming it was a few thousand — to a resolute set of ageing fans via the internet, with whom they were practically on first name terms.



At closing time they walked back to the house. Al's brother, Rob, was home from university, sitting in the kitchen reading a book. He was fascinated by his brother's new girlfriend and bombarded her with questions: did she like England? What was it like in New Jersey? What music was she into? How long was she staying? She answered at first but then reverted to body language: a nod, a shrug, an upside-down smile.

"What do you think of our pubs?"

She pulled an 'I dunno' face. He had an idea.

"We've got some peanut butter. You Americans love that, don't you?"

"Where is it?"

"In the cupboard."

Walking past him, she opened the cupboard door and took the jar from the shelf. Screwing off the lid, she dipped in her fingers, scooping out a handful.

"Well, mind my manners!" said Rob.

She froze, glaring at him. Her nostrils were flared, her top lip raised.

"It was a joke," he said.

She didn't move.

"... a joke, I didn't mean it."

"FUCK YOU!" she screamed, slamming down the jar as she left the kitchen.

Al ran after her and returned a few minutes later. He tried to explain:

"You shouldn't have said that. Americans have a different sense of humour than us. How was she supposed to know it was a joke?"

When Barrett left the office, Green sat back in his chair. He started thinking about the pigeon. He'd seen birds like that as a kid. His mother had told him that if you caught them and undid the string they were okay; the trouble was catching them. Barrett was like that fucking pigeon. He needed unfastening, from himself.

Taking off his glasses, Green rubbed his eyes. This time he hadn't issued the regular gentle, ambiguous truth but a complete falsehood. An appearance on *Lunch Brake* for an artist like Barrett was almost worthless and, most likely, another stage in the shutdown of his career. Green could visualise everything: Tommy Hulme, the presenter, prattling on about Barrett's supposed lascivious past (sardonically, with a few rehearsed puns) while Barrett smiled self-deprecatingly, interjecting a few lines of his own to prove he could 'laugh at himself', a necessary property of ageing rock stars. Barrett, in return for playing Hulme's stooge, would be granted two minutes (maximum) to run through one of his old hits. In a bid to relay his artistic worth, he would change the words or elongate the middle section, anything to reinforce his self-image as an individualist, someone constantly changing, experimenting, eternally relevant, man.

Green was also apprehensive of him appearing on a show that viewed piss-taking as high art. It would look as if Barrett didn't have the capacity to discern or, worse, accepted any offer of television, however vulgar. He would be further branding himself as a curio, a frothy lightweight, a quick hit nostalgia fix. Green had agreed to the booking only because he was eager for national exposure. The radio and press pluggers had garnered

little and a sign of life was a necessity. Barrett, like all artists, had to have a drip-drip level of attention, especially around a record release and Green felt obliged to drop in this sweetener, giving the impression of behind-the-scenes busyness and showing that the record hadn't been released into a void. He felt he owed it to Headfall, too.

Only now, alone in his office, did he face what he'd known all along but ignored like something large and cumbersome left in a room but covered by a dust sheet. Barrett wasn't going to sell additional copies of *Godspace* by appearing on *Lunch Break*. If he sold any extra albums it would be from his back catalogue, from which neither he, Headfall or Barrett earned anything because he was still in debt to previous labels.



Carl left the band before the half-price studio session. No hard feelings, he said, but he wanted to form an ensemble with a lad who'd put an advert in the paper for 'synth-slaves'. Guitar bands were on the way out, he proclaimed. The future was in bleak soundscapes scaring people half to death, reflecting back to them the desolation of their lives and environment. They should check out Cabaret Voltaire and Throbbing Gristle for more enlightenment. They already had.

"Everything is fucked up," he said, cheerfully. "They're flattening everything and rebuilding in concrete, all these underpasses and walkways, the precinct in town. The world's going to be completely different a decade from now, if they've not bombed it to fuck."

He had been reading up on Dada and Futurism. His new band (which wasn't, he insisted, a 'band' in the conventional

sense) would embrace the philosophy of Filippo Marinetti, the founding father of Futurism. They would mesh performance, literature and visual art, and encourage their audience to interact, to 'create' with them.

At his final practice with Group Hex he passed around the set-list he had already contrived for his new project, song titles awaiting songs. Among them were *The Rats Shall Eat The Survivors*, *Hamburger Face* and *They Stuffed Our Shoes With Paper*.

Afterwards Barrett said he was glad he'd gone.

"He's been getting on my nerves with that dance he does, the thing with his knees going to one side."

Carey knew exactly what he meant. Fisher had another complaint:

"I can't stand the way he lets his mouth sort of hang open when he stops singing. He looks a right spaz."

The three of them agreed that this petty and peevish attention to detail made for great bands.

★

Back on the telly. At last, thought Barrett, as he walked through Soho. A drink was in order, to celebrate. A social drink. While the rest of the world worked and slogged and drifted to night-time, he'd get there first. Let the suits rush around and the bus drivers wrestle for space with the taxi drivers and van wollahs. Let the builders fill the skips, fasten up the scaffolding. Double vodka, then two or three more. For good luck. Which pub? Which pub to fall into from these twenty thousand streets under the sky? Did it matter? Any. The Porcupine, just off Charing Cross Road. Fine. He skipped through the door, as good as.

“Vodka please, a double.”

“With ice?”

“Please.”

Ice was a treat, it made for a different drink than the one in his jacket pocket.

The barman didn't smile. The other drinkers didn't trade one either. Most were clinging to the bar as if it was driftwood. One read the paper, the racing page. Another stared at the optics and the packets of peanuts hanging down on a board, as if looking for a note he'd pinned up long ago. A fruit machine whirred, playing the same three or four notes constantly. Barrett thanked the barman and lingered a few seconds, hoping for conversation. Nothing doing. He sat down and opened a discarded newspaper left on a chair. He read the same stories repeatedly, only realising when he'd got a few paragraphs down. He looked about him and was suddenly downcast: full of old men, bloody awful, feels like 1952 in here.

He drank the vodka and slipped back out to the street. The day had turned overcast. Drops of rain dabbled his face. He pulled shut the lapels of his coat and kept hold as if hugging himself. The rain grew stronger. People hurried by, others gathered in shop doorways or under bus shelters. He passed the massage parlours and strip clubs, the fluorescent glow at their doorways laying out a carpet of lemony light across the wet pavement. One of the women sitting inside smiled at him. It seemed friendlier, less professional than usual. Maybe, he thought, it wasn't the routine step-this-way enticement but genuine pity for a poor wretch getting wet out there.

Before, he'd loved days like these when the sky turned black and rain flushed away protocol, making everyone the same — little creatures searching for shelter and each of them with a tale: the taxi driver, the bookshop girl, the lovers in the cafe, the

faces at the windows in the pubs. What were their lives? What was their story? How did they get there? What would they do when the rain stopped? Barrett didn't need a notebook; images and ideas fell into his mind like footprints in fresh cement, stored for later when he was back home, guitar in his arms.

The rain trickled past his collar, down his neck and into the hollow between his shoulder blades. This wasn't a poet's rain, he cursed, but merely drip-dripping water. Only when he'd been famous, when people were listening to his words, buying his records, had it counted for more.



The band were rehearsing one evening unaware that Al had arrived home from London where he'd accompanied Lauren to the airport. His mother entered the attic and motioned to Barrett. The band stopped playing.

“John, could I have a word?”

She said she'd heard noise coming from Al's room but he'd not responded to her shouting. Barrett ran down from the attic. It was quiet now. He knocked on the door, pushed it open and switched on the light. The room was a mess. Drawers were levered from their runners and tossed aside, bedding everywhere. A magazine was torn up lying next to bits of coloured cardboard. Barrett looked closer and saw that they were plane tickets and a passport. Al had attacked his tape collection too, unspooling lengths that had fallen like the guts of a dead animal around the room. Amid the chaos, Barrett saw Al lying face down on the bed.

“Al,” he said.

He wasn't sure if he heard a murmur or not. He reached over, patting his shoulder. The denim of Al's shirt was soft, the flesh

beneath sinewy. Al was in the room, flesh and bones in clothes and still breathing, but Barrett felt that most of him, the substantial part, was missing.



Barrett travelled home from London by tube, covering the last twenty miles or so by overground train. He struggled to stay awake under the soft sway of the carriage's rhythm. Esther had offered to pick him up from the station but he said he wanted to 'do some civvy'—his own term for undertaking something routine, something *ordinary* people did.

He ambled through the station car park, down a narrow alleyway and past a couple of fields. He came to a new estate of large detached houses built in sandstone. He looked through windows as he walked, into these boxes of illuminated life. They formed a cartoon strip without a narrative—people watching television, working at computers, reading newspapers, moving from one room to another. He began to pity them, these stuck, going-nowhere people. They had no relationship with hope. They tapped at a computer, talked on the phone or to each other in person but that was it, everything. It didn't lead anywhere. Even now, he thought, late in his creative life, he still had hope (as much as ever, actually). There was always the chance of something happening, breaking through: the next song, the next record. He couldn't imagine a life without hope, when you weren't pushing for something that people could share and enjoy, a song or a book or a film, something you'd made up yourself. This was why you were given a life in the first place; you were duty bound to make it special.