

Trust

by Kevin Cheeseman

‘Give this to Finn. He’ll know what to do with it.’

Leo tore the page out of his notebook and handed it to me. He saw Finn as often as I did, so I don’t know why he asked me to deliver it. Maybe it suited him to use a go-between. He liked to play games with people. I folded the paper and tucked it into my wallet.

‘That’s it? No message?’

‘No.’

‘That’s it? No message?’

‘No. He said you’d know what to do with it.’

Finn looked again at the creased paper with the scrawled lines on it.

‘He doesn’t want it for himself?’

‘I guess not.’

‘What is this? Scraps from the king’s table?’

I was taken aback by Finn’s reaction. He and Leo were friends and their professional relationship benefited both of them. Leo was revered as one of the most important songwriters of his generation, while Finn’s band made chart-friendly versions of his songs. It was win-win.

I’d read the note myself when I stopped for gas and coffee on the road down to LA. Just a few lines, a couple of dozen words. Although I knew it was original, it seemed

familiar, like a fragment of a poem I'd always known. Something about a river. About wanting to follow it, wherever it flowed.

Finn took a drag on his joint and frowned. He made smoking dope look about as much fun as clearing a blocked toilet. He stood up and looked down the valley to where the city lay in a yellow haze. I sat on his sofa and marvelled at how uncluttered his living room was. In my experience, most musicians lived in disorder, but Finn was obsessively tidy. He turned back to me.

'Well, if you see him, tell him thanks. I guess.'

'So – do you know what to do with it?'

'Sure. I mean – maybe. There's not much there, to be frank.'

He picked up a notebook from the table and flicked through pages covered in small, precise handwriting until he found an empty place, and slipped the note carefully inside.

'Do you want a coffee or do you need to be some place? You're a busy guy, I guess.'

I got the message. He was right, I said, people were expecting me. As I walked back to my car I heard him strumming his twelve-string guitar. A songwriter can't put things off. He has to write as soon as inspiration strikes. Even if his muse is a dope dealer with a page torn from a notebook.

A couple of weeks later, I was in The Manic Minstrel where Finn was playing a solo set to an excited crowd. Finn was nobody's fool. He would deny rumours of the band falling apart, but still promote his solo work as a fallback strategy, just in case. Finn's show consisted of acoustic versions of the band's hits mixed with some fresh material he was trying out.

About halfway through, he announced a new number and I immediately recognised the opening words. Something about following a river to the sea. I was astonished at what he had crafted from those few lines of Leo's. The plaintive melody, the evocative lyrics – they were moving and instantly memorable. The audience loved it and during Finn's encore someone shouted out for him to 'play that river song again'. It got even more applause the second time around.

After the show, I made my way backstage. Finn was holding court in his dressing room, still high on the adrenaline of a successful performance. I grabbed a beer and hung back until everyone else had left.

'Hey Finn, great show.'

'Oh hi. Did you catch it? Great crowd tonight. They appreciate good material here.'

'I love what you've done with Leo's lyrics, man. That river song blew me away.'

'What do you mean, "Leo's lyrics"? That's my fucking song, man. What did Leo contribute? Twenty-nine words? Twenty-nine fucking words? Does that make it Leo's song?'

I was stuttering some words of apology when I saw Finn looking over my shoulder. Leo was standing in the doorway, wearing dark glasses and a cap pulled low over his head. He stepped into the room, acknowledged me with a smile, and gave Finn a hug and a kiss on the cheek. He must have missed his outburst.

'Amazing show, Finn. I only snuck in for the second half, but you sounded incredible.'

For a moment, Finn looked embarrassed by this praise but he quickly regained his cool.

‘I wish I’d known you were here, man. We could have done something together.’

‘It’s your show, Finn. You don’t need me up there, cramping your style.’

Leo’s minder knocked on the door. ‘Time to go, Leo. The paparazzi found out you’re here.’

‘I’m coming. Next time, Finn.’

A friendly punch in the chest served as a farewell to me and then he was gone.

Driving down Highway One the next summer, I heard Leo being interviewed on the radio. The host loved his new album but she was puzzled by something.

‘I have to ask you about the closing track. It’s titled, rather curiously, “And Loyalty in 29 Words”. It’s a beautiful song – about friendship, I suppose. I find it incredible that you can convey so much with so few words, but – maybe I’m being obtuse here – no matter how many times I count, it just keeps coming out at twenty-eight.’

Leo laughed. He was in one of his teasing moods.

‘Did you really count the words? I can’t believe anyone would do that!’

‘I just needed to check, I suppose.’

‘Well, I guess a word got lost someplace.’

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