

Music as Life: To Live and Die In LA

By Robert V Aldrich

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FROM THE MIND OF

RVA

Reia Maynard moved her phone so she could see her math book better.

Sitting on the bus stop outside of her school, she was one of the only students still on the municipal campus. Two girls were sitting at the far end of the stop, one braiding the other's hair. One of the boys from math class was playing a video game, his smile practically glowing when the late afternoon sun glinted off his braces. A few others from the accelerated learning track were around, none of them doing much special.

The downtown school was chipped brick and faded paint. Door handles had long lost not only their luster but their metal shine all together. Windows were broken. The sidewalk outside was cracked, similar to the adjacent potholes in the road. The smell of garbage and tobacco wafted through the air, along with deep frying and motor oil. The urban haze of sound and scent alike hung around the school like a fog. Reia ignored it as she had become so accustomed to doing. She was focused on two things. One was her math notes. The other was the music.

The song playing through her phone's earbuds started over, repeating the same track. As Reia wrote algebraic equations yet once again, in an effort to memorize them down to the pencil strokes, she didn't notice she was singing along. "In the heat of the day, every time you go away, I have to piece my life together...every time you're away..."

She glanced at her phone and saw the album cover for Wang Chung's To Live and Die in LA. The orange hazy sky with the half-sun peeking out behind the horizon, the green letters fixed up at her. Reia studied the 1980s album art for only a second before she noticed a shadow passing over her. The bus was arriving, the other students already lining up. Reia gathered her book to her chest, not even closing it so she could get back to studying faster. She pulled her backpack by the top strap and dashed up the steps onto the bus.

"I'm home," Reia called as she pushed open the door of the apartment. Stale, scalding hot air greeted her along with the smell of warping paint. Reia laid her backpack down on the sofa sectional and crossed the living room to the window A/C unit that faced out into the parking lot. She clicked it on low and heard it knock a few times before the fans began to very slowly begin to turn.

She cracked the adjacent window, pulling up the blinds just a little now that the sun wasn't shining straight in. "Mom?" she called. The apartment was stained white without any decorations, causing her voice to echo. The mismatched furniture of various ages, styles, and vitality looked less like a living room and more like a cheap furniture showroom.

Reia went into the kitchen and found a yellow page torn from a legal pad on the counter. The edges were just starting to move from the air the A/C unit was beginning to churn. Reia picked up the page. Her mother's ugly handwriting read:

"I picked up a shift at work. Fix dinner for you and the boys. Mom."

When Reia opened the refrigerator, she found only half a package of hotdogs on the white grated shelves. She could see all the way to the beige, aged wall at the back. A carton of eggs was half-full. A bag of apples was starting to brown on the bottom shelf. A bit of this and that throughout but nothing that would add up to a full meal.

"Man," Reia griped. She shut the fridge door, trying to take at least a moment of delight in the semi-cold air that buffeted back at her. She turned and headed down the hall of the two-bedroom apartment. In her shared bedroom, her single bed was partitioned from her brothers' bunkbeds by an office divider they'd found in a dumpster. Reia went to the bedside table, another artifact from the complex's dumpster, and pulled out the drawer. Reia had to pull it in such a way that the face wouldn't tug off.

From the drawer she took out a tiny plastic change purse. She unzipped it, causing coins to jingle. She scooped out half a fist's worth of money and returned the purse. She looked down at the change, more of it pennies than not, and quickly began to consider her culinary options.

The corner shop smelled like onions and burned plastic. As evening was transitioning into dusk and the sky was darker than it was light, Reia waited in line with a box of macaroni in her hands. She rocked forward and back on her feet, lightly stamping with either end of her foot as she waited.

"And give me some scratchers, man," said the burly guy in front of her. From his back pocket, he fished out several twenties and passed them through the security glass to the register. In exchange, he got several lottery tickets. He took his quart of milk and six-pack of beer and headed out, leaving Reia to be next.

"\$4.16," said the old man behind the register. He put out his cigarette before taking her money.

Reia laid down her coins and began to quickly count them out on the plexiglass counter, beneath which were ancient ads for cigarette brands that had already been discontinued. As she counted, she mouthed, "If I let myself go, and for where I just don't know, I'd maybe hit some cold new river..."

Nathan's eyes barely made it past the lip of the first pot on the stove. He watched the water bubble under the intense heat, steam rising into the dispersal fan over the stove. "It's boiling!" he said a little too loudly.

"I know," said Reia as she very carefully measured what little milk they had into the measuring cup. She had both the macaroni and the hotdogs laid out on the spotless but not pristine counter in the order needed to be applied to make the meal.

"That means it's ready, right?" Nathan asked.

"No, we've got to make sure it's clean first," said Reia. She went over to the boiling pot. She looked into the water, then removed the pot and poured the boiling contents into the adjacent pot. She turned on that eye and refilled the boiling pot. The water that came out of the faucet brought with it a soap-like smell.

Nathan watched Reia move around the kitchen, then asked, "What are you singing?"

"Just a song," she said, after she realized she'd been humming.

Cameron came into the kitchen and asked, "When's dinner?"

"Hotdogs will be ready in thirteen minutes," she said as she dropped the dogs into the boiling water.

Cameron watched her boil them and sneered. "Can't you cook 'em in the stove?"

"That uses too much energy," Reia told him as she turned the dogs.

"Yeah, but it tastes better," he contested.

"Then you can use your money and you can go buy some hotdogs and you can cook them however you want after you pay the electric bill," Reia let him know. She stirred the hotdogs some more, trying to make sure all sides of the pinkish-brown tubes of meat were exposed.

"I don't want macacheese," Cameron whined.

"Then don't have any," was the option Reia let him have. She kept on with dinner. Cameron finally pouted off. Once he was gone, Reia turned to Nathan. "Would you get some ketchup out of the drawer and put them on the plates?"

"Okay," said her youngest brother. He went to the farthest drawer and opened it, revealing an extensive stash of condiment packets from different fast food and takeout restaurants. "How many?"

"Three each," said Reia.

"I want four," Nathan challenged.

"Three," Reia insisted, focusing on dinner.

Nathan fished out nine ketchup packets from different restaurants and began to tear them open on the plates already laid out on the dinette set. As he squirted the condiments onto the plate, he asked, "Are you going to play games with us?"

"Not until report cards," she said.

"You never play games with us," Nathan whined.

"Yes I do," Reia told him. "I play whenever I get an A or a B on a test, a quiz, or when report cards come out. Video games are a reward. They're like candy. Candy tastes good but it rots your teeth. Video games are fun but they rot your brain. So I only play when I get good grades. It's my reward."

"Yeah," Nathan said, not understanding, barely comprehending. He fell silent until dinner was ready. The three siblings all fell into familiar patterns as they waited on dinner.

"I wonder why I live alone here," Reia sang quietly in her bed. "I wonder why we spend these nights together...Is this the room I'll live my life forever..." Shifting in the bed on the other side of her divider made her perk up from her homework. She took out her earbuds and listened but heard only the soft sleeping of her two brothers. She turned back to her phone and started to settle again when she heard the front door unlock.

By the time Reia made it to the living room, her mom was already locking the door back. In her apron from work, the woman in her early thirties kicked off her sneakers and removed her nametag. "Hey, baby," she said with barely a glance at Reia. She flopped down in the couch sectional and exhaled heavily. Long black hair fell free of the scarf she wore it in and rained down over her shoulders. "Long day." She looked at her eldest and smiled. "Are the boys in bed?"

Reia nodded, yawning. "I put them to bed at eight."

"Eight?" her mom remarked. She smiled, mostly on the left side of her mouth. "How'd Cameron take that?"

"Nathan threw the bigger fit," Reia told her. "He wanted to watch Family Guy. I told them no." Her mom smiled tiredly, purple-shaded lids drooping. Every time she blinked, her eyes opened back up a little bit less. "Did you hear from that job?"

Her mom shook her head. "No," she said with forced serenity. "They said it'd be four to six weeks before they called, though, so maybe it's not all bad just yet. Besides, my boss at the tire place said he'd give me some extra hours." She exhaled and fanned herself. "Whoo, honey, it's hot."

"I didn't want to run the A/C," said Reia.

"Why not, baby?" her mom asked, almost like she was teasing her. "It's alright." She got up and padded over to the window unit, all while Reia watched helplessly. Her mother clicked the unit on high. When the fans only slightly began to move, she smacked the unit.

"The motor has to get going, mom," Reia almost implored. "Turn it on low, and let it get moving." Her mom didn't say anything; she just smacked it again. "It's going to break like the last—"

"No, it'll be fine," her mom said over her. The fans began to spin and chilled air began to pump into the apartment. Her mom stuck her face right at the window unit and let the air blow right at her, knocking back her curls. She exhaled happily. She finally straightened up and walked passed her daughter.

Reia watched her mom go into her bedroom, closing the door most of the way. Reia went to the A/C unit and turned it to medium, hoping that splitting the difference wouldn't anger her mother too much. She headed back to her room and sat back down.

No longer in the mood for algebra, she opened her phone's browser and began to consider some web pages. She checked the battery life and did some quick math to decide how long she could be on the phone before needing to recharge. Doing so would require waiting until she got to school the next day.

Reia settled on some local want ads. She looked over the bicycles and wondered who would ride their bike inside of city limits. She considered the car ads, but knew nothing advertised would run. Or run for long. She looked through the collectibles, trying to get some ideas for Cameron's birthday in two months. She spotted a DVD player for sale. The ad didn't seem to process its quality and Reia considered investing to resell it.

As she considered the possibilities, she scrolled into the services page. There, an ad jumped out at her:

Music as Life

Music classes for therapy and self-exploration

Explore life's questions through the study of music

no experience necessary; not a musical lessons or musical theory class

Reia turned the page, then stopped. She blinked, then went back. She read the ad, then read it again. She tilted her head and squinted. "What?" she whispered, barely even making any noise. The ad rolled around inside her mind for a moment as she tried to process it. She zoomed in on the ad, the letters automatically adjusting. She studied each word as if determined to figure out the font type.

"We could run away to paradise," she heard herself quote from the song. She looked at the ad again, her eyes narrowing distrustfully.

She saved the listing, confident she would discard it later.

Almost twelve hours later, Reia was sitting in her first period class, waiting for the day to begin. She had her phone out and she was staring once again at the ad. She read and reread the ad over and over. As she did, rather than read it aloud, her lips whispered, "I wonder why in LA...to live and die in LA..."

The room was like most in her school. The ceiling tiles were different colors, some of them the color of water stains. Some of the floor tiles were chipped. The white board was stained, but mostly clean. Old books sat on warped shelves built into the wall. Too few outlets meant extension cords lined the perimeter of the room. Old posters with bubbled laminate dotted the walls. The posters had once been bright and garish colors, popular in decades past. Now they were faded by the florescent lights that buzzed above.

With a sigh, Reia surrendered and clicked the contact listing. Her phone's email popped up and she declared to herself, "This is dumb." She composed a quick email, simple and to the point, as the early bell chimed. There were still ten minutes until class started. Reia looked around at the mostly empty room and wondered what the other students had to do that kept them from being in their seats already. Traffic outside the classroom was sporadic, but noisy with the squeak of sneakers and the chatter of students.

Startling Reia, her phone buzzed silently, rattling on the desktop. She snatched it up, stunned and a little unsettled. The response read:

"Reia,

Thanks for writing. I'm glad you're interested in the class. I don't typically discuss rates until the first class (which is free). If you're interested, I have spots available today or tomorrow. What time would work for you?

- Morgan Brandywyne"

Reia checked her fellow students. There were still precious few in the room. There was also no sign of their teacher yet either. She looked at the message, read it again, re-read it again, then clicked her phone dark. She sat it down and crossed her hands in her lap, staring at her phone like it was a viper.

A troubled look crossed her brow. She tapped her feet, a habit she'd worked hard to break herself of earlier in the year. She reached for the phone but stopped herself. She sat back from it, looking at it distrustfully. She scratched an itch on her temple, she adjusted her pigtails, she did everything to stall. Finally, she grabbed up the phone and re-read the message. "This is dumb," she chastised herself, even as she responded.

She set the phone down again and closed her eyes. Her feet tapped. "Mom's going to kill me," she whispered, like that was the least of her disappointments she'd face. She opened her eyes and exhaled again, looking around at the still empty room. Her response came back at the speed of texting.

"Reia,

Classes are most often held in my home. The first meeting is just an informal discussion to determine compatibility and to see if you are interested in the class. I tend to meet in the afternoon, but I have morning availabilities.

- Morgan"

A thousand stories swirled in Reia's head. Every news report she'd ever heard about an abduction, an assault, filled her mind. Ten thousand fates, each more horrific than the last, were visited upon Reia inside her own imagination. Frantic terror crawled up her spine and lashed about in her thoughts.

Reia closed her eyes. She deactivated her phone and set it on her desk. She again set up straight and folded her hands in her lap. Calm prevailed.

"Is this the room I'll live my life forever?" Reia sang to herself, hearing herself but not aware of her own actions to make the music happen. She opened her eyes and looked at the classroom. Faded posters. Water-stained ceiling. Chipped floor. Noise from the hall. The smell of the city's unwashed alleys filtering in through the rattling, inadequate air conditioning vents. All so familiar.

Reia took up her phone again and offered a proposal. She sent it and then stared vacantly into space. "This is dumb," she told herself. Her hand vibrated, the response prompt.

"Reia,

I do know the coffee shop you're talking about and ten sounds great. I'll see you there.
- Morgan"

Reia did some quick calculations in her head and determined how many bus rides it would take to get to her destination. She rose and began to collect her things when her teacher walked in. Mr. Johnson took one look at her and asked, "Going somewhere?"

Reia didn't slow down her packing. "I've got a job interview."

Mr. Johnson balked. "You? You've got a job interview?"

Reia slung her backpack over her shoulders. "Yes."

"You're in middle school!" he exclaimed, his voice cracking slightly.

Reia was undaunted as she zipped up her backpack. "I can get a work release from my mom and work up to fifteen hours a week legally."

Mr. Johnson balked but for different reasons. He looked at the handful of kids who had filtered in, all of them paying more attention to their phones than to Reia or the teacher. He dabbed at sweat that was beading on his aged brow. "Reia..." He set his briefcase down at his desk and approached. He got on one knee to try and minimize the height difference. "I know that some kids your age gets jobs, but..." She waited expectantly for him to finish his sentence. "Reia, I don't want you to throw away your future, just for some instant gratification now. I know cell phones are hot, or whatever you think you need the money for. But you don't need to jeopardize your grades for some extra cash." Reia's hackles rose and she scowled.

Mr. Johnson switched tactics, standing up. He pushed his dark brown jacket back and adjusted his belt a little as he shifted his weight from one foot to the other. "Now, you know you can't leave school, right?"

Reia told him, "You're welcome to call my mom." She walked around him and headed out the door.

"Reia?" he called. "Reia!" His voice was drowned out in the chatter and din in the school hallway.

"I'd either swim or I'd drown, or just keep falling down and down," Reia sang to herself as her legs shook. Sitting in the coffee shop of stained wood, she was the only black person in the space. Likewise, she was the only person without anything to drink. She was also the only person under twenty. Paranoia was getting the better of her as her phone played the enigmatic song. It sat on her backpack next to her in the rear-most seat, away from the eyes of the post-college baristas behind the counter.

The coffee shop was hopping in the late morning, with most of the tables taken by individuals. A dozen laptops and tablets were sprinkled among the people working in the coffee-scented establishment. Dark wood paneling and local art of contrasting styles covered the walls. Lights were recessed high into the ceiling, leaving the place mostly lit by natural light coming in through the windows. Everyone was living their own life, indifferent or oblivious to the young girl with skin darker than the walls.

There was little doubt when Morgan walked in because he stood out immediately. A large man, he wore a deep green shirt beneath a black overcoat despite the warm weather. He spotted Reia and she spotted him simultaneously. A troubled look accompanied him as he crossed the coffee shop to meet her. "Reia?" he questioned a little gruffly, almost twice her height. She only nodded.

Morgan looked around the coffee shop warily. Back to her, he cautiously asked, "You're the one who emailed me about the Music as Life class?" She nodded. Taken aback, he simply stood over her for a moment with a surprised expression. After a moment, he turned and looked in all directions. "Like, for real?" he prompted. She nodded again. One eyebrow went up and he asked, "Do you speak?"

"Yes," she said, a little irritated.

Morgan let out an uncertain breath, then pulled out the seat opposite the middle school girl. "Well...okay," he finally decided. He started to sit down, then did one more survey of the establishment. He sat heavily, his coat hanging to one side. "So yeah," he proposed, arms of thick muscles crossed over his chest. He seemed resigned to an experience far different from what he was expecting. He looked at Reia and she at him. "What do you want to talk about?" He crossed a leg.

"I'm interested in the Music as Life class," Reia told him with big eyes fixed on him.

"Well, yeah, I got that," Morgan nodded. He gestured for her to begin.

Reia waited, then asked, "Is it okay that I'm a minor?"

"I assume," said Morgan, clearly not sure but not worried about it. "A child, a minor, wrote me asking about the class I offer. You're either serious or you're working up to ask for some sort of help. Either way..." He gestured at the moment they found themselves sharing.

Reia waited for a second and asked, "That's it?" He just shrugged, like he was as at as much of a loss as her. "Is this the class?"

He glanced away, hemming a bit. "Sort of?" he seemed to decide.

"This is a therapy class?" she asked in minor disbelief.

"This isn't a therapy class in a traditional sense," he explained. "I'm not an accredited therapist in any discipline." He gestured ambivalently. "We just talk about music. Usually a particular band or song, but..." He left it at that.

"And that's a therapy class," she concluded condescendingly.

"You'd be amazed what comes out once you get to talking," Morgan said, indifferent to her tone. Reia was unprepared for Morgan to flip the script on her. "So why are you here?" he asked. He looked at her obtrusively, like he could see inside of her. She stiffened and averted her eyes, which made Morgan's brow furl. "What's this about?"

Reia looked down at her hands clasped in her lap. She said, her words aimed at her knees, "I was just curious." Now she shrugged.

"What, you just discovered funk? You go digging through your parents' old CDs?" Morgan pushed gently. Reia glanced up at him, unsure what he was getting at. "Your skipping school for this," Morgan told her. "And since I assume I'm not on To Catch A Predator..." He again looked around the coffee shop and its patrons going on about their business. "I'm guessing this is more than just curiosity." Reia was stone-faced. "So come on," Morgan encouraged her. "You got me here. First class is free. Let's talk about music. What are you listening to? What do you like?" Something about the way he studied her eyes made her nervous, a nervousness that compounded when he asked with a knowing tone, "You got a song stuck in your head?"

Reia's heart raced, but she took a leap of faith. "You know the song To Live and Die in LA?"

Morgan nodded. "Yeah, I know it. It wasn't particularly popular here in America."

"I've got it stuck in my head," Reia confessed quietly. "It's weird. I didn't even notice until one day I was listening to it and I was like 'I can sing along to this whole thing' and I didn't even...I just, I don't even know how I came across it."

"What, were you listening to YouTube or Pandora or something?" Morgan asked. Reia shrugged narrow shoulders, eyes averted, her gaze avoiding his. "And it got stuck in your head. Something about it just registered with you."

"Yeah." She nodded. "It's not even like my favorite song or nothing. I just...it's there and it's always stuck in my head." There was a desperation to her voice, to the trouble the situation posed to her.

"And that troubles you?" Reia nodded again. "Why?" Morgan pushed, getting captivated by the puzzle. He leaned on the table they shared at the back, hand on his chin. "I mean, the song sampled a Prince song. And 2pac was one of the best rappers of the 90s. Anybody would get that—"

"What?" Reia exclaimed. Her normally passive face was clinched up in confusion. "2pac?" She said the rapper's name like it was a curse.

"Tupac Shakur," Morgan nodded. "To Live and Die in LA was one of his songs, one of his last songs. It sampled a Prince song called Do Me, Baby." Reia only stared for a moment, her jaw hanging open. Morgan began to get unnerved sitting across from the girl. "What?" he asked cautiously before he looked around the coffee shop like he was about to get mugged.

"I'm talking about the other To Live and Die in LA," Reia said almost accusatorily. Morgan's head cocked curiously to the side, totally lost, so Reia pulled out her phone. She cued up the song, which was always ready. She handed over her earbuds. Morgan accepted them as the synth player of new wave music started up and the vocals of Jack Hues began.

"Huh," Morgan finally said as the song began to the chorus. "I..." He picked up Reia's phone and studied the album cover. "Wang Chung, huh?" He handed the phone and the earbuds back to Reia as his mind raced. "They did Dance Hall Days, Everybody Have Fun Tonight, and...another one. I've never heard this song. I don't think I've even heard of the movie it's from." He took out his own phone and began to search with it. Reia watched him type with his thumbs. "William Petersen and Willem Dafoe. By

the guy who did French Connection. I'll be damned," he said to himself. He put his phone away. "I wonder if it's on Netflix," he asked of no one.

"I just don't get it," Reia confessed to the stranger across from her. "It's like...stuck." She gestured at her own head, pretty much the first time her hands had left her lap. "I know every line. I could probably play it if I had an instrument." Morgan just nodded. "But why? It's not that good." She laughed with a touch of fear. "Why's this song, of all the songs, stuck in my head?"

"That troubling, huh?" asked Morgan. Reia couldn't tell if he was belittling her. He took a breath and again leaned on the table. "I'd have to research it before I could say. Maybe the scales..." He gave up and shook his head with an indifferent shrug.

Reia looked into her lap and said, "So that's why I was curious about the class." She looked up at Morgan. "What do the classes cost?"

"They're free." It was a simple, quick but unhurried answer.

Reia scowled. "They're free for everybody or they're free for me?"

"Does it matter?" asked Morgan, almost like it was a quiz. Reia's glare confirmed that it did. "They're free for you," he said. "I charge on a sliding scale."

"What scale is that?" asked Reia.

"The one I make up," he returned.

Reia only grew more angry. "I don't need a handout."

"It's not a handout," Morgan told her, chuckling at the mere suggestion. "I do these classes for my own edification. I charge what I want. Right now, I don't want to charge anything."

Reia repeated, "I don't need a handout."

"You asked what the tuition was, I told you," Morgan put simply. "You don't want to take the class, that's fine." He leaned back and studied her. An attentive gaze settled on her, settled into her. Again, Reia glanced away. Morgan watched her for a moment more, then took his cue to look away. "I'm getting some coffee," he said as he rose. "If you're still here when I get back, I'll assume you want to go forward with the class. We can work out the schedule and I'll start looking into this song."

"And if I'm not?" Reia asked him.

Morgan chuckled and left her to decide.

Laying with her head at the foot of the bed, Reia stared up at the history book. It was from the library, checked out just that day. It wasn't for her grade but a high school textbook. Still, she read what her own class was reviewing, getting deeper into the facts and dates. On her chest, laying atop a pink tank-top, her phone played. The cover of *To Live and Die in LA* on the screen, the music poured through the earbuds.

"In every word that you say, I feel my freedom slip away," she sang quietly to herself.

The next line was drowned out by her brothers. "QUIT IT!" squealed Nathan. Reia dropped her book onto her chest and sighed in exasperation. Amidst the sound of fighting, she turned off her song and rolled off of her bed. Arms dangling as she sulked her way down the hall, she headed into the living room where Nathan and Cameron were fighting in a video game. "Guys!" she yelled.

"Tell him to stop it!" Nathan yelled, pointing at Cameron.

"Shut up," Camron told his little brother. "You whine every time you lose."

"You're cheating!" Nathan griped.

"It's a video game; I can't cheat unless I hacked the game," Cameron told him.

"Nu-uh!" Nathan yelled.

"Guys!" Reia shouted. "I'm studying!"

"No you're not," Cameron told her as he faced the screen. His racer shot across the finish line and he held up his hands. Nathan flopped down on the box they'd been using as seats and sulked.

"I am too studying," Reia snapped at the older of the two boys.

"You're straight-As," Cameron told her as he turned around on his own box. "When you're straight-As and you still study, you're just a dork."

Reia rolled her eyes. "Whatever. Just stop shouting."

She only made it a few steps back down the hallway when Nathan came running after her. "What are you doing?" he asked.

"I told you; studying," she said. "What you should be doing."

"I don't like studying," he said. "It's boring."

"Then you're doing it wrong," said Reia. She got back into their room and climbed onto the bed. She started to put her earbuds in when Nathan crawled onto the bed with her. "No, don't get—" She didn't protest fast enough and a metal twang sounded from underneath the bed.

"Sorry!" Nathan exclaimed before leaping off the bed. Reia leapt off as well and dropped to the floor. Doing so caused the office divider between her and the boys' side to swing but it didn't fall. Reia checked under her bed, pushing around the cardboard boxes of her clothes. She checked everywhere she could think of, but didn't see any damage. She got up off the ground and glared at Nathan but said nothing.

She climbed carefully back onto her bed and began to resettle. She pulled her book over and her earbuds. "What are you listening to?" he asked.

"A song," Reia said curtly.

"What song is it?" Nathan asked with a big smile.

Not wanting to but unable to think of a reason not to, Reia unplugged her earbuds and turned up the volume. She let the song play, all the way until it reached the closing refrain. She let the lyrics "I can't get away, to live and die in LA," trail off and then she turned off the song.

"That sounds kind of sad," said Nathan, his nose crinkled in confused dislike. "Is it a sad song? Why are you listening to a sad song? Are you sad?"

Reia didn't have time to answer his questions, they came so fast. Nor did she have time to answer once he'd asked them all. They heard the telltale sound of the front door locks unlatching. "Mommy!" Nathan squealed and he ran for the door.

By the time Reia had set aside her things and headed into the hallway, her mother was inside and hugging both boys that clutched her tight around the legs. "Hey, babies," she told them both, brushing the backs of their

heads. Reia approached more cautiously, recognizing their mother's sunlight return as ominous. Her mom looked up from her boys and smiled at Reia, a smile that wavered when she realized that Reia already knew something was amiss. "I'm going to take us out to dinner," she told the boys as she focused on Reia, unable to break her worried gaze.

Reia pushed the little car along the dinette set tabletop. She brushed it with her finger, very gently pressing it along its path with tiny strokes like a painter. She guided the cheap toy on hard plastic wheels in no direction and for no purpose. The garish colored car was covered in poorly-placed stickers that came with the child's meal.

Out from the hall came Reia's mother. She sighed with relief and began to collect the wrappers of food from the fast food feast. "I was sure Nathan was going to take that thing to bed with him," she told Reia as she crumpled up the burger containers. She pushed them into the overfilled bag of trash that stood in the corner of the kitchen.

"Those can be recycled," Reia said futilely.

The table mostly cleared, her mom asked, "Are you going to stay up? Gonna play some video games?"

"Not until after the quiz," Reia said distantly.

"That's right," her mom said with false gravitas. She pulled out her seat and sat across from Reia. "What is it? An hour for a B and two for a A?"

The lack of 'an' irritated Reia. "Two and a half hours," Reia said. "That was my reward for getting straight As last year. If I get an A on a quiz or a test, I get two and a half hours of video games."

Her mom nodded like she was indulging a toddler's make-believe. "Well, I think you should play some. I promise not to tell." She laughed at her own silly joke.

As a difficult segue, Reia asked, "What else aren't you telling?"

Reia's mom stiffened. A catty glower came over her and she said, "Look at you, being all grown-up."

Reia suppressed the urge to say 'like I have a choice' and instead remained silent. Her stone-faced stare served her well, causing her mother to fold.

The light in her mother's eyes faded, as did her smile. She crossed her arms and coughed nervously. She crossed her legs, then undid that and crossed them the other way. She looked down, then up, then sniffed at the grease-saturated air in the hot apartment. "I got laid off."

Reia was surprised but she wasn't shocked. "From the tire place?"

"No, the, uh, the diner," her mom admitted. Panic hit Reia like a ton of bricks, but her only expression of it was to close her eyes and look away. "It's going to be okay." Her mother said it to no one in particular. "The office position is still...it's still a few days before they, uh, before they said they'd..." She looked at the A/C unit in the window. "We really got to get a new one of those." She got up and crossed the small apartment to turn up the unit. She cranked it all the way up from the get-go. When the blades stalled as they tried to spin, she smacked it a few times.

Reia just stared at her brother's new toy, the kid's meal prize. "Is this the way I'll live my life forever..." she whispered to herself. "I wonder why in LA..."

Reia found Morgan in the pavilion at the south end of the city park. Rain battered down on the wooden roof as he sat at the cement bench. The whole pavilion was a flat slab of cement covered by the sloped roof. The bench itself looked like it had been poured at the same time, from the same material, as the ground itself. Meanwhile, the rain constantly pattered on the wood and metal rooftop. The sloped design was reminiscent of a carnival from days passed.

Reia walked along a path made of slate set into a gravel walkway through the city park. Far removed from downtown, the air smelled strange to be devoid of pollutants and contaminants. A few birds could be heard through the rain, just as 80s pop music. Reia followed the sound of the Wang Chang song, mesmerized by its sound. It was so different now, compared to hearing it through her earbuds. Broadcast aloud was a totally different experience, especially in the unfavorable acoustics of the rainy park.

Morgan noted her as she neared, rain blotting her plastic transparent umbrella. "Sup," he told her as she stepped into the empty pavilion. She left her umbrella by the edge before joining him. "Sorry about the rain. I didn't think to check the forecast."

"It's fine," Reia told the man. She had a bit of trouble negotiating the bench seat meant for full-grown adults. She had to awkwardly reach to get her elbows onto the table between them. "Is this where you usually meet your clients?"

"No, we usually meet in my home, but I don't want to invite an underage girl alone into my house," Morgan told her. He turned off the song and closed his laptop, then set it aside. "Have a good week?" She didn't really answer. "So have you seen the movie? The song is from its soundtrack."

"I googled it," said Reia. "It's from the 80s and stuff. It's about some FBI guys."

"Secret service, but same thing," Morgan shrugged. "They're trying to stop a counterfeiter. It's about corruption and the line between obligation and obsession." Reia listened academically. Morgan waited for a moment. Rain pounded on the wooden roof. The scent of opening flowers drifted in on the humidity as the hot air of the mild storm overhead was pushed by distant and muffled rumbles of far-off thunder. "What do you hear? When you listen to the song?"

Reia's shoulders went up and down and she shook her head. "I don't know." The juvenile answer contrasted with the ambitious girl Morgan knew he was sitting across from. When Morgan continued to wait, Reia offered, "It's just a song." She looked at him. "That's the thing."

"What thing?" Morgan asked, using her words against her.

Reia grew frustrated quickly. "This song. It's not that good, but it's...it's like in my brain or something." Reia looked at Morgan like she expected him to answer her definitively. Instead, he sat still, listening very deliberately. His patient attention irritated her. "It's...I don't get it. It's not great. It's not good." Started, Reia discovered she couldn't stop. "I can't dance to it, I don't really get it. It's not a song in a movie I like or that I've seen or anything. It's not something anybody I know listens to. I don't even know how I found it. I don't even remember how it got stuck in my head or when, just that one day, I realized I'd been listening to this one song over and over. And it's not even a good song."

"So?" asked Morgan. His reversal took Reia by surprise. "Are only songs of a decent quality worth remembering? 'Happy Birthday' is an awful song, musically speaking." He smirked but she didn't. "But everybody knows it."

"Because it's simple," said the young girl, like being so was an insult.

Morgan didn't argue with the assessment. He simply continued. "There's room in the world for more than just the best. There's room in the world for more than excellence."

"What benefit does mediocrity offer?" asked Reia, like she had been insulted.

Morgan laughed. "How old are you again?" he asked. "Mediocrity? Is that one of your spelling words?"

"What artist or musician or-or person, doesn't try to be the best?" Reia snapped angrily.

"The best or their best?" asked Morgan, overenunciating the words to emphasize the difference. Reia was stumped. "Don't conflate an artist with their art. Don't conflate their effort with their results. And don't conflate the process with the product. Whole genres of music – jazz, for example – are based around the performance and the moment. Individual recordings aren't true samples of the work."

Reia looked genuinely unsettled. "But why would...why would somebody not...be the best?"

"You can work to be your best, and still be mediocre," Morgan explained, making use of vague movements with his hand. "The goal of art isn't to produce the best art in the world. There's more to art than that. A lot more, just as there's more to appreciating art than appreciating the best. If there the case, then we would laud only one painting, listen to one song."

"There are different genres," Reia interjected quickly. "There are different preferences, too. The best painting using two-point perspective isn't going to be the same as the one with the best...use of...stuff."

"Art isn't the Academy Awards...thank god," said Morgan. He blanched at the mere prospect. "There isn't a best painting, a best song, for each genre. And, again, there's more to art, life, everything, than perfection."

"Like what?" Reia challenged.

"Art is a nonverbal conversation," Morgan explained to the girl across from him. "It's about using stimuli to engender changes within one's emotions, if you want to be technical about it. The painter pairs reds and blues to make us feel a certain way. The musician uses a ternary form to illicit a sense of familiarity. It isn't just the product that makes something art: it's also how we feel about it, how we respond to it. That's why 'the best' is a really poor description for any artist, even a great one. Just calling someone 'the best' suggests that their art exists in a vacuum, except maybe in comparison to other art. In a lot of ways, that undermines the very concept of art, the very purpose."

"That purpose is to be the best," Reia told him certainly.

"That's not art; that's competition," Morgan promised her. "Art CAN be competitive, but that's...complicated," he said, drifting off, trying not to let his own baggage on the topic infect their discussion.

"Everybody wants to be the best," Reia insisted, almost desperately.

"Then why does music keep going back to garage rock?" Morgan challenged. "Pop music always goes back to really simple, really basic music. And that's epitomized with garage rock. 1968, Tommy James and the Shondells, Mony Mony. 1979, the Knack, My Sharona. 1991, Nirvana, Smells Like Teen Spirit. 2003, Jet, Are You Gonna Be My Girl. Every decade, every generation, music goes back to basics. It goes back to a style that is objectively, definitively not 'the best'. Why?" He leaned towards Reia. "Being the best is the goal, but not necessarily the objective. Perfection isn't the only thing that matters."

"That's not right!" she yelled at him with an edge of desperation. She leaned back and panted, she was so angry. "You try your best. Always."

"Try. Your," Morgan agreed but emphasizing those words. "Trying is a different matter. Yours is too. We both have bests, are they the same? Will an audience appreciate them equally?" Reia looked furious but Morgan didn't drop it. "And the best at what? Lyrics? Melody? Instrumentation? Or just...timing?" he gestured with his hand like he was turning a coin. "That...that intangible factor that makes a song resonate? Joe Cocker, Frank Sinatra, Ludacris, Jack White, they all built a career on elements of performing and singing that can't easily be quantified. They built their careers around mastering and messing with the tempo and rhythm of their speech pattern. Where is that in the 'best' equation?"

"Best is determined by the audience," Reia insisted suddenly, jumping at the chance to use Morgan's rationale against him.

"Perhaps," he allowed with care. "But then you have absolutely no control over how you will be perceived. That means best is nothing more than a popularity contest." Reia sat back. Her chin crumpled in and she looked on the verge of crying. "I don't know what you've been told in school or...but the best..." Morgan couldn't bring himself to speak anymore. The pained look on the little girl's face was too much for him.

Unsure what to do with any of this, Reia asked, "What's this got to do with To Live and Die in LA?"

Morgan was very soft in his tone. "It's a mediocre song by a band most people don't know the name of, from a movie most people don't know exists," he told her. "And yet, it has done and is doing what the best songs in the world have failed to do."

"What's that?" asked Reia.

"Get stuck in your head," said Morgan with a gentle smile. "Stand out," he stated with an attempt at optimism. "Captivate you."

Reia felt sick and she wasn't sure why. She sat back, her eyes darting about as if she was about to start crying. "So we should just accept the way we are and not bother trying, not bother with being the best?" With a caustic tone she asked, "We should just accept all the imperfections in the world? We should just roll over and die?"

Morgan's eyebrow rose. "I'm getting the impression this is about something other than a Wang Chung song." Reia sniffed childishly and glowered in another direction. Morgan thought for a second, and decided to tackle things indirectly. He offered, "Be careful accepting any advice from anyone when it comes to perfection, and imperfections."

"Except you?" she asked.

Morgan snickered and assured her, "Definitely include me in that list." He smiled when he said, "But also remember, you're the one who wanted to take the class. And this is a therapy class, or at least it is intended to be therapeutic. Therapy goes in places that we might not be prepared for, and can confront us with truths that are...can be upsetting."

Reia found little comfort in that notion. There was little more conversation to drown out the rain.

The door opened as Reia tried to unlock it.

She pushed on the front door of the apartment and let it swing gently open. Her emotional upheaval suddenly forgotten, a sense of worry filled her immediately. She stepped through the door cautiously, expecting to find their two-bedroom robbed. Instead, she found her mom at the dinette table. She looked up through curly bangs at her daughter and asked, "What are you doing home so early?"

Reia shuffled inside and didn't know what to say. She looked at the early-afternoon light coming in through the windows, then down at her feet. She contemplated going on the offensive and did so. "I could ask you the same thing."

Her mom's hard look scared her. "Girl, don't you DARE take that tone with me." Reia froze, terrified. "Your school called me at work. They said you left school early. Again." The words were dripping with rage. The silence between each sentence was dripping with accusation. "What the hell are you doing?"

Reia's throat was tight. She couldn't swallow. "I'm...I'm..."

"Spit it out!" her mom yelled.

"I'm seeing a therapist," Reia stammered, clutching her bookbag to her chest.

Reia's mother tilted her head. Her face didn't tighten, nor did it smooth out. It was as though all the tension internalized and her eyes fixated on her daughter. "And just where did you get the money for something like that?" she asked of the frivolous waste. Reia's jaw shook, a hundred words not quite able to leave her mouth. "Girl, you don't have any right to be wasting my money on something like that. You don't go throwing money down the drain on some crap like that." Her mom leaned back in the chair and crossed her arms, still staring condescendingly at Reia, trapped against the front door. "Did he tell you to take some pills?"

"It's not that kind of therapy," Reia said to her shoes.

"Oh it's not, is it?" her mother asked sarcastically and loudly. "How much does this no-pills therapy cost?" Again, Reia hesitated and again her mother snapped her. "Answer me, girl!"

"Nothing!" she said quickly. She looked up through her fear at her mother and repeated, "It doesn't cost anything."

Her mom took a long, slow breath. She leaned on one arm, putting her hand on the table. Nails counted out her frustration. "It ain't some school thing because they wouldn't have called me if it was."

"It's not school," said Reia, her voice half-lost in the apartment's heat.

"It ain't school and it don't cost; what is it?" she asked. "And girl don't you dare tell me it's one of them hand-out programs they do for poor people."

Reia only shrugged, narrow shoulders barely moving. "It's just...a thing. It's just this music therapy program."

"Music therapy?" her mom laughed. "Girl, now I KNOW you wasting my money." She shook her head in rage-filled disappointment. "And how come it free? This therapist just do it for fun?"

"Pretty much," said Reia. "I found it through the classifieds. This guy is like a music producer or something. He does this class just because. He charges some people and not others."

"Girl, you ain't so dumb to think that somebody gonna give something like that away," she accused.

"He's not charging me anything," said Reia, almost pleading.

"Oh, so he's taken pity on the poor little black girl, huh?" her mom mocked. "I told you about charity. We ain't some poor family that live begging and panhandling. We don't have everything, but we don't take handouts and giveaways. We don't live on pity! I raised you too good for that." Reia's eyes fell. The edges of her lips began to twist upward. A sneer of anger was growing. "And you doing all of this during school, too?" her mother went on. She rose from the seat, casting her gaze down on Reia. "Girl, I thought you had at least a few brains in your head. I thought you were going to be different from all these other fools."

Reia couldn't stop herself. She felt it bubble inside of her, and she couldn't stop it. The words practically vomited out of her. "You mean like you?"

She wasn't sure how her mother crossed the space so quickly but before she even processed her approach, Reia's mother slapped her across

the cheek. The blow didn't hurt, but it stung. It didn't do anything more than turn Reia's head and also blow her completely out of her mind.

"Don't you sass me," said her mother in a low, threatening tone. Finger in Reia's face, her mother repeated herself. "Don't you dare sass me."

Reia looked up at the woman, rage draining away to confusion. "Or else what?" she asked with a clinical detachment. Her eyes glassed over as she tried to understand her mother. "You'll send me to bed without supper? You'll take away some privilege? You'll beat me?" She asked like she didn't expect any of those to be out of the question, but she didn't see the purpose of them either. "What, mother, will you do, if you do not approve of my behavior?"

Reia's mother crossed her arms. Her eyes razored as she stared at her daughter like a tiger about to pounce. "My grades are excellent. I participate in everything. I'm practically raising my brothers. So what exactly do you have against me seeing a therapist?"

The conversation did not continue. The fighting did.

"What happened after that?" asked Morgan. He wore a troubled look as he leaned his chin on his hand. Reia was quiet. Sitting across from Morgan, her eyes were cast down. Beyond them, mowers were driving passed through the grassy field of the park. Leaves rustled in the midday breeze. A distant game of basketball could be heard periodically.

"I was just surprised," said Reia. "Why would she care? Why would she be so opposed to a therapist?"

"There's a large stigma that surrounds therapists and therapy, of pretty much all types," Morgan told her. He yawned when he did. "Plus, a lot of people think therapists only blame your childhood and thus your parents." Reia dismissed that notion as silly. "And that's probably part of what your mom got mad about."

"That you were going to blame her?" asked Reia.

"More that she's at fault for your situation," he said. "It's not my blame that concerns her; why should she care? It's that she is responsible for your situation."

"My situation?" Reia asked. Having left suspicion of Morgan's advice behind several sessions ago, she gave his theory a moment's thought. "What situation is that?" Morgan didn't answer but look on. "You talking about the fact that my mom works two and three jobs and we still barely have any food? You talking about how she harps about us not taking handouts, but we still shop at the church's donation shop?" Morgan said nothing. "My mom is trying to break the cycle of poverty."

"Is she?" he asked. Reia was stunned at the question. Stunned, and angered. "From what it sounds like, your mom may be in denial. She may think she's not poor; merely...what did Ronald Wright say? 'Americans see themselves as temporarily embarrassed millionaires?'" He shifted his weight a bit on the cement park bench. "And look, this is a music class, not a real therapy class. I got no room. I got no place. And it does sound like you're right. It sounds like your mom is doing her best." He paused to let that familiar word resonate with Reia. "I get that. And that's a noble thing to work on. Maybe the most important thing. But there are other cycles that one has to break. Poverty isn't the only ill that can affect a family."

"She doesn't abuse us," Reia insisted, almost insulted. Morgan was quiet. "She doesn't!"

Morgan responded academically, "Abuse comes in a lot of forms." Reia stewed. She crossed her arms and avoided Morgan's gaze laterally rather than vertically. The mowers passed by, a few grass clippings kicking up in the air but otherwise, contributing nothing more than the din of mechanical buzzing.

Once the groundskeepers had passed, Morgan said bluntly, "You're caught in extremes." Reia prompted him to continue with only a glance. "You are driven," he said, the singular word summarizing her. "You are the best, you will always be the best, and you will push yourself harder and better than anyone else around you. And yet you seem to deal with underwhelming factors all around you. You clearly have some issues with your mom, you clearly have some issues with your brothers, you've got issues with everyone around you because they can't keep up to you and part of you is angered by that. Part of you is disappointed by that. And part of you is angry at yourself for being angry with them."

Before Reia could protest, Morgan held his hand towards her. "Trust me, I know how this sounds, but this is largely coming from somebody in a

similar boat.” He gestured at himself obtusely, then restated it bluntly. “Trust me, I get it.” The abrasive sentiment slightly defused, he continued. “But that’s where songs like this, like To Live and Die in LA, come in. It’s not a great song. It’s not a perfect or ambitious song. It’s not really catchy, it’s not really mediocre. It’s somewhere inside all of that. It’s oscillating in some undefined state between extremes. That, in and of itself, can make it captivating.”

“What do you mean?” Reia asked, terrified he was on to something.

Morgan laughed and leaned back, as though mesmerized by his own assertion. “We don’t watch the best movies ever made over and over again. We don’t listen to the best songs over and over again. A lot of times, we don’t even watch our favorite movies or listen to our favorite songs. We have this collection of...of...of B-grade movies we watch, of songs we listen to. We save the really good stuff for specific occasions. But the good stuff is almost too intense, too demanding, for us to imbibe regularly. So we go for mid-shelf stuff.”

Reia was unsure of some of his terms but was following the gist of his point. “There’s a place in this world for not-the-best. That’s a hard thing to realize,” said Morgan, sharing a personal experience. “But it’s also a comforting thing to learn. It’s what helps us distinguish between being THEE best and being OUR best. And I think this song hit that mark for you.” With a sympathetic smile, he added, “Perfectly.”

Reia laid her compass onto the page and studied the results. Deciding she could trust her numbers, she began to write her answers. Across from her at the table, Nathan was flipping through spelling note cards. He was quietly repeating the letters to himself as he studied their arrangement. Cameron was across the room, laying on the end unit, reading a book. Traffic and late-day sunlight came in through the window along with the cool air from the A/C unit.

They were all startled when the phone rang. The three kids all spared quick looks and then Reia got up and ran into the kitchen, getting the phone off the wall unit. “Hello?” she said quickly.

"Hello, this is Tamara Pierce with Haywood Offices. Please note this call may be recorded for quality assurances. Am I speaking with Vivian Maynard?"

Reia's nose crunched up at the overly-polished voice on the phone. "No, this is her daughter."

"Oh," said the woman. Reia could practically hear her flipping through pages of a manual. "Uh...well, um, please let your mom know that the Haywood Offices called. We would like her to contact us at her earliest convenience so that we may schedule a training session prior to her start date at our offices."

Reia was perfectly still for a moment. She tried to speak but it was as if her body was afraid the movement might shatter the moment. "Training session," she repeated. She swallowed. "Prior to her start date?"

"Yes ma'am," said Tamara Pierce.

Reia closed her eyes and grabbed her pants. She squeezed the fabric before asking in a flat tone, "Wh-when does she start?" Both boys leapt up at the question, beginning to put together what they were hearing one side of. Cameron came over and joined Nathan in hovering over Reia.

"She starts next..." Tamara's voice trailed off. Reia could hear more shuffling. Her heart broke as she considered the possibility she'd just ruined her mom's new job. "Huh, we don't have a start date down. That's odd." The woman laughed. "Our HR office must have put the horse before the cart. Have your mom call us - our number is on our paper work or the emails. We'll get everything squared away."

"W-will do," Reia told the woman. "Thank you. Bye-bye." She hung up the phone and felt emotionally exhausted. She looked at Nathan and Cameron, all three of them perfectly still as they wrestled with the possible meaning of the call. "That was the place Mom's been waiting to hear from."

"She got the job?" asked Cameron. Reia nodded.

Cameron suddenly yelled, throwing his hands up like he was signaling a touchdown. Nathan beamed and squealed with delight. "I want to tell mom."

"Text her," Reia told him, smiling herself. She got her phone from her backpack and handed it to him. Before he could ask, she said, "Don't call her. She's at work." Nathan got to work texting at a snail's pace, his command of the alphabet still a step behind complete.

As Nathan did that, Reia looked down at her homework. For a moment, she just stared, then she abruptly shut her school books. Her normally deadpan expression contorted through trepidation into amazement and finally into a smile. She looked at the window and the A/C unit rattling away. In something of a daze, she walked into the living room and flopped down on the floor, staring vacantly for a moment. She let out a half-hearted snicker and turned on the game console. Cameron came and stood behind her and asked, "What are you doing?"

"I want to play a game," said Reia, watching as the old-style tube television came to life. She admitted as much to him as to herself, "I feel like celebrating."

"Why?" he asked a little coarsely. "You didn't get the job."

"No," Reia said distantly. "No I didn't." She looked up to her little brother. "So?" Her tone and smile only confused him more.

The fluttering notes of Wang Chung played in the background of the park. Reia sat across from Morgan, her hands on the cement surface of the park bench. Her feet swung back and forth beneath her, like opposing pendulums. The laptop to her right, she spoke over the music turned low, explaining, "Mom's first day was yesterday."

"Do you think she likes it?" Morgan asked, the question's significance clinical, not personal.

"Yeah," confirmed Reia. "She says its real different. She doesn't have to ask for a break and stuff. She doesn't have to ask for lunch; she just kind of tells people when she's going to lunch."

Morgan nodded. "You develop certain instincts in retail and service that are hard to turn off once you work in a different field. Those instincts are really draining."

"Yeah," said Reia. She looked at Morgan's laptop as it played the song. "I've been trying to let go of some of my perfection."

"Don't do that," Morgan all but warned her.

“No, I mean,” she said. “I’ve tried to stop worrying about, stop focusing on how things end up and focus more on what I’m doing. Process versus goal, I guess.” Realizing what she was saying, he nodded in understanding. “It’s kind of scary, working hard without an obvious goal,” she said. “Or maybe an obvious objective? I forget which is which.” Morgan shrugged, the specific terminology not mattering. “It’s like, how will I know when I...when I do it?”

Morgan nodded. “Goals have their place, make no mistake about it. But perfection can be a trap. Sometimes, letting go of perfection is harder than striving for it.” Reia nodded. Morgan smirked and paraphrased, “You’ll either swim or you’ll drown, or just keep falling down and down.”

Reia smiled back at him. “I think it’s that, that makes me quiver.” The pair shared a brief chuckle, and then the last thing Reia told him was, “Thank you.”

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