

PUNK AND ZEN

by
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I know that it's easier fought than won
Everything that's good? Already done
Nothing ever seems to work out right
Close your eyes and dream tonight

When everything just falls away
You learn that nothing gold can stay
Love Calls Again

When the world comes crashing in
And the good guy never wins
Love Calls Again

I know what it's like to push too far
Perception makes it all seem so hard
Just don't stop—don't throw yourself away
You can make it to another day

When everything just falls away
You learn that nothing gold can stay
Love Calls Again

When the world comes crashing in
And the good guy never wins
Love Calls Again

from "Love Calls" by Life Underwater

us, it's them, and after all, they knew they were never very lovable to begin with—they just somehow seem to push everyone who loves them away.

We, of course, swallow this hook, line, and sinker, and vow to ourselves that *we, you, I* will be the one, *the very one*, because of our goodness and purity of love, to prove to the damaged basket case of a boy/girl/alien once and for all that yes, love is real, life is good, and sex, well, okay, it would be nice (oh so very, very nice), but not necessary, because, after all, this is true love. And there are no conditions on true love, especially for those (read: *us*, the suckers) who are noble of heart. Besides, that's not what we're all about, since we're so noble and good and all, and we don't want the poor wounded boy/girl/alien to think we're just in this to get laid—really.

Third, and it never fails, comes the come-here-no-go-away sequence. Conversations tend to run along these lines: “This is never going to work; it's not you, it's me—get out,” followed by tears and groveling, vehement statements as to why we, the hero of this epic, aren't really good enough; the tragic departure scene; and then, a call on the car phone (if you can afford one) halfway home on a five-hour drive: “Baby, I'm sorry, I miss you, I need you, come back.” Whereupon, the knight turns the steel horse around (or gets on the bus or the plane, pulls out a bicycle, or walks) back to the scene of the original bloodletting, all forgiveness and understanding because, after all, they're hurting, they've had a damaging past, and we're here to heal that—*all* of that.

At about this point, casual friends and distant cousins have started to make comments, like, “Hmm, why don't you hang out with *us* tonight? We have a few friends coming over, remember [insert name of puppy-love crush]? Yeah, we just ran into each other, and wouldn't it be great? If we all hung out?” or other such things like, “Geez, are you okay? Wanna talk about it?” And our most intimate friends and family are just telling us directly, “Lose the crazy boy/girl/alien—you're getting, no, wait, you *are* brain damaged. C'mon, we'll get you drunk, and laid, and you'll feel much better.”

The sad thing is, how did they know we weren't getting laid? All this suffering, and no loving to make up for it. Oh, yeah, maybe, a couple of times, maybe a lot—the first few weeks—but then, all that baggage shows up (damage, remember?) and, well, it just ain't happening anymore.

After a long time of this (and we, the noble rescuers, put up with this for a while, sometimes years, because the boy/girl/alien never really breaks it clean, so we have hope), we finally realize that we've been had, taken for a ride, to the cleaners and back, tire tracks on our backs, nobility wasted, heart sore and certainly not nearly as trusting or as nice as before. Sometimes the rescuer becomes the boy/girl/alien to some other undeserving good sort, and the cycle continues: hallelujah and pass the ammunition.

This is one type of love, and I'm sad to say, I've not only witnessed this happen to beloved family members and friends, but I myself have followed this sad, sad pattern.

STUDIO B

*I've been dreaming again and something tells me
I'm standing on the wall—if I don't jump, I'll fall
I've been feeling again and I remember
There's nothing left to gain drinking from the pain
I say good-bye for the moment—I say good-bye and I'm
frozen
I say good-bye for the moment—I say good-bye and I'm
golden
...
Don't cry for me*

“I Say Good-bye”—Life Underwater

I sat alone outside the control room because, with the exception of the bassist who was doing some backup vocal takes, everyone else had found somewhere else in the building to be for the moment, grabbing food or cigarettes or some other such stuff. No such luck for me, though. I was sucking down a cup of tea that was probably too cold to do any good, as well as missing milk and sugar—which is the way I like it, but unfortunately milk was out if I wanted to sing—and trying to collect myself.

Through the soundproof glass doors I could see the hands of Mr. Jeremy J. “Bear” Jenns, the engineer, flying over the hundred thousand points of light, buttons, sliders, and whatchamacallits, eyes closed and grooving to the sound that wasn't merely enough for him to have flowing through his headset, but also had to be pumped through the studio monitors.

As for myself, I couldn't tell if my teeth were rattling and hands bouncing because I was nervous or because I could hear the tracks for myself, and they were making circular waves in my cup. So much for soundproof, I thought wryly and grimaced, then downed the rest of the tepid brown water.

I crumpled the cup in my hands, tossed it in the can, then picked my ass up and off the sofa I'd parked myself on to hustle back into the studio. It sounded like the backup vocal had been nailed, and that meant it would soon be my turn to do a final lead vocal take.

"All right, then, baby. Let's give it a listen," Bear said into the microphone on his board.

An alto female voice floated back into the room through the monitors. "I'd like to try that again."

"Well, it sounded pretty damn good," Bear commented mildly, "not pitchy or anything. Come on, take a break, hear it for yourself, and then see what you think," he persuaded, waving "come here" through the window into the studio. "We'll roll it under Nina's take."

Now a word about Bear. He was, well, big. His chair was custom made, large enough to hold three people comfortably, and still it bent under him. And though his military-style beard was neatly trimmed, his hair was wild—curly and long, sticking out at crazy angles. He used that mane as a holder for this foot-long, inch-wide pencil he used to manipulate the knobs and faders he couldn't reach by himself across that tremendous sound board/mixing console/mother ship communication center.

In a word, he was huge, larger than life itself, and more real than stereo color. Of course, my mind may have overreacted to the situation by painting things in hyper-realism, but then again, I'd never been in my own recording studio before, or worked with my own hand-picked engineer. Five years. It had taken five years to get to this point, and only by sweating every detail.

I heard the pop of electric disconnect, the headset being put down, then Bear slid his chair along the huge board to open the door to the right of it.

The foam-padded door opened, revealing dark long hair pulled back into a ponytail parked over a pair of usually clear, but now stony blue eyes, and lips that weren't smiling. A shirt that had been pulled off due to the threat of heat exhaustion hung from the waistband, leaving only a black tank top over black jeans, and a bass guitar slung over a

strong bare shoulder to complete the picture. Words floated in with the body.

“Dude, I think there’s one section—a measure toward the end of the break—that I’m going to need to redo,” she said, voice slightly hoarse from effort.

“Ya know, baby, you’re just a perfectionist.” I smiled, walking toward her. “Because from what I heard, I think you nailed it.”

Samantha’s eyes lit up when she heard my voice.

“Hey, you’re back!” she answered with delighted surprise. A smile that’s just for me graced her lips, and she reached out as I neared her. Caught up in the pull I always feel between us, in less than a moment I was where I wanted to be, and her lips were where I needed them, on mine.

No kidding, no shit, and I’m sure to some, no surprise, either, I live, and I mean live, for those kisses, soft and sensual, filled with tenderness and love, or hard, demanding, and speaking in the most direct way of good ol’-fashioned primal lust.

All of them inflamed desire, but this wasn’t the time or place. We had a job to do, and we were paying by the hour. A greedy moment or two, okay, well, maybe it was more, of that sweet fullness, a line of fire running from the tip of her tongue through me, and we broke off, breathless, my face flushed and warm, just in time to hear Bear speak under his breath.

“Okay, if I balance the highs here and pan through the mids—”

“I’m ready to give it a shot, Bear,” I interrupted, and he faced us, pushing that mutant pencil back into his tangled curls.

“This is one hell of a hot track.” He grinned. “You sure you inspired her enough there?” He nodded his chin at Samantha. “I mean, don’t let me interrupt. Do what you need to do to get her, uh,” he flushed into his beard, “get it down, er, done.”

I glanced over. Either Samantha was blushing or she was feeling the aftereffects of our friendly little greeting; her face was as red as mine. I squeezed her hip and let go.

“Time to get this show on the road,” I murmured in apology and eased toward the sound room door, but Samantha tightened her grip and reeled me back.

Her lips brushed against my ear. “We’ll finish this later,” she told me quietly, sending warm chills along my neck.

“Definitely,” I promised in just as heated a tone and twisted my

head for a quick kiss, but a flash exploded in my face, blinding me momentarily.

I heard a familiar laugh.

“Oh, that was perfect, love. Just keep going,” the laughing voice said. “Don’t let me stop you.”

I blinked away the white and green clouds in my eyes. “I’m blind. Candace must be here,” I said loudly. The light clouds faded and shifted from green to purple, and a slight figure approached and resolved itself.

“Hey, you know I couldn’t miss this,” she said in that slight Brit accent of hers, giving us each a hug. “You didn’t do your takes yet, did you?”

How to describe Candace? A few inches taller than me, currently she’d been coloring her wavy hair black and keeping it short so that it never came past her chin. She had incredibly beautiful green eyes, deep and dark forest green, and Candace made up in sheer energy for at least two people. Her presence was so vibrant, you had to stop to count how many people were in the room—and usually most of them were her, her and her whatchamacallit, her aura. Well, that and her camera, too.

Outside of being one of the most dynamic people I’d ever met, Candace was a class-A, number-one photographer, who just happened to specialize in rock’n’roll. I for one was glad she’d gotten sick of doing “A&R” (“Artists and Repertoire”) work for the label we’d all worked for and took up the flash.

Her photography was so fantastic, I actually liked the way she made me look in photos, and that’s saying something. I generally hate my pictures. Besides her wonderful eye for composition, Candace was a friend, and when it came to the band’s link to the public, I trusted her either to take our pictures or guide us in the right direction professionally. She knew her shit, she knew it cold, and she knew she knew it, too.

The light flare finally faded from my eyes, and I could see clearly again. “I’m just about to go in,” I informed her. “Glad you could make it.”

“Hey, just wanted you to have that ‘live’ feel.” Candace smiled and flashed her camera at me again. “And I wouldn’t miss this, anyway.”

I kissed Samantha’s cheek, still light-blind from the second flare. “Let’s do this thing,” I told her, nerves shaky in my throat, and I turned again for the door.

“Sit and listen with me,” Samantha invited Candace as I pushed through the foam baffling to the doorknob, twisting it firmly. I could see the overflash through the room as Candace took some shots of Bear and the sound board.

“You know, love, when these girls get down, they rock it all night,” I heard her tell Bear, and I smiled as I closed the door behind me and made my way to the microphone that had been suspended from the ceiling for me. A mounted one would have picked up sound from my feet as I danced and grooved. A set of headphones hung from an otherwise empty mike stand, and I slipped them on.

I glanced around at the drum set behind me, which sat on a riser filled with sand to dampen vibration, then looked at the various amps and guitars next to them in stands. I’d been in a vocal booth in the corner of this room before doing “scratch” vocals—a guide track for the band so that the recording would feel “live”—but that had been with the whole band, together. Now I was standing in the center of the studio, alone. I reached up to the microphone and made minute adjustments for my height and comfort.

“Okay, Nina baby, you hear me?” Bear asked in my ears, his voice almost too loud in its stereo clarity.

“Yeah, you’re fine,” I answered into my own microphone.

Through the glass I could see one or two people moving past the glass window in the sound booth so they could sit behind Bear. Probably the rest of the band, I thought.

Samantha’s voice cut into the silence of my headphones. “Kitt’s here, love.”

“Hey, Kitt,” I greeted through the mike and waved to the glass. One of those shadows might have waved back.

Suddenly I felt strange; a huge lump formed in my throat. This was completely different from either the rehearsal studio or a stage performance, and it was so very weird, singing in front of the band, having them watch instead of play with me. An idea struck me.

“Do me a favor, Bear?” I asked. “Lower the lights out there, and give me a dim spot, okay?”

“You want the smoky night club effect?” he asked, his voice perfectly stereo-balanced in the center of my head.

“No, I want the it’s-so-dark-in-here-we-can-barely-see-our-instruments-never-mind-the-audience effect,” I explained, “where

the light is so weird it makes the space very intimate, and everyone's hanging on to the sound and just feeling everything going on—like a low-burning fire.”

“Uh-huh, uh-huh.” Bear nodded and the lights dimmed. I could barely make out Bear's figure behind the board, and Samantha, Candace, and whoever else was there dissolved into vaguely humanoid shadows. The sound stage blackened around me for a moment, then a small, warm light resolved above my head, directly in front and over the microphone. The overall effect was similar to candlelight, but without the fitfulness that wax and air display.

“That good?” I heard Bear ask, his voice almost hushed in the environment we'd created.

I forced the air in and out of my lungs slowly. Focus, determination, I thought to myself, and drew up in my mind the song and its structure.

“That's perfect,” I answered in a steady voice, letting my breath out gradually.

I breathed again, still slow, still focused on muscle and air. I tried to ignore the sounds through my headphones of Bear readying the console and chairs scraping behind him.

Chairs? I asked myself. *Who's watching this now?* But I shoved that thought away. It had no place here, in this now.

“In a moment, Nina.” Bear's voice came again—strong, sure, and confident in the semidarkness. This was what he did, and did best—capture musicians, music, and emotion blended and expressed, phrase followed by phrase, note replaced by note, building and shaping the ephemeral for all time.

No pressure, no, none at all, I thought. *This is just going down on permanent record.*

I swallowed and nodded, drawing all the emotions that I needed to do the music justice into my gut and the events that had created them into my mind, because before this studio, before the music for this recording ever existed, this was my life—before all of it, even before Samantha and I finally got together. Suddenly, it all clicked. I was there, in the moment. I was ready.

My headphones came to life again when drumsticks clicked the opening time into my ears, cuing my entrance.

“One, two, three, four...”