



An excerpt from
VINYL TIGER
Dave Di Vito

To be published
NOVEMBER 2015
In ebook form

Copyright © Dave Di Vito 2015

All rights reserved.

**However, you are free to share this “Vinyl Tiger”
excerpt around.**

**Information about the complete “Vinyl Tiger” book
and availability is listed after the excerpt.**

www.paperlesstiger.net

THOSE EARLY YEARS

“London is burning. Again,” she sighed. Sitting at the window she could literally smell it. The acrid smell of burning rubber put her off her cigarette. She butt it out on the window and casually tossed it down to the street.

When there’s that much unrest and restlessness circulating sometimes there’s no option other than to fight. To don that cloth over your mouth, cut that lemon up, put it in your mouth, and fight your way forward. Moving through the murkiness and the wreckage all around you. Pushing through the obstacles.

Events unfold around us all the time. Sometimes we’re involved in them, sometimes not. But the world tends to move like an obstacle course. A maze. If you’re smart enough not to fit, not to kick and fuss; to surrender only to the inevitable, then you’ll move forward. But if you focus too much on what you want and how something is supposed to be, then you’ll be constantly disappointed by what you actually get. You get bogged down like a mouldy old stump in a dark forest. And your progress is halted.

When the barriers don’t tumble down of their own accord you have to be alert enough to read the signs. The maze is easier to navigate if you can change your plans and ideas at a moment’s notice and be prepared to take an alternate route. You can’t just wave a wand and expect a golden pathway to appear, all shiny and pristine, because that shit only happens in fairy tales and the world is often a nasty place.

In a way you have to take a savage, wild approach to things. Follow your instincts, follow your heart and allow for the fact that not everybody in the urban jungle wants to see you shine. They have their own agendas that they’re trying to push. And yours might simply run contrary to theirs. But their opposition should never stop you from pouncing when you sense that the moment is just right.

Long before he arrived in London, where almost daily he watched with wide eyes as the city tore itself apart, he’d already been looking for this kind of world.

He had what from the outside seemed like an idyllic youth. He lived in a perfectly nondescript city, did what was expected of him and rarely acted on his impulse to break the rules or to get up to mischief.

He’d excelled in his studies, not because he was particularly gifted or intelligent, but because he had no trouble understanding what was expected of him. A path of least resistance even if the actual

demands of study offered no real challenge. Even then he had a way of recognising the end goal and just heading toward it, regardless of whether it was unpleasant or not. A single mindedness.

He'd been raised with a set of values that he abhorred. The things that his family placed value on seemed ridiculous to him. If anything, those values seemed to further isolate him from them. He already had a complex about not looking like anyone else in his family. His Eurasian appearance was like the white elephant no one dared acknowledge in his blue eyed household.

His parents were like sheep dressed as wolves. At home they harped on about *compassion* and *peace* and *respect for others*, but their daily lives were all but defined by their work ethic. Their long days working in middle class jungles. In factories and plants. It was only later when he ventured out of that world that he realised how much their values, which had seemed so ridiculous to him, had in fact formed him at his core. It was the internal conflict with this value system that would propel him to do the things he did.

If anything, the thing he resented most about that life was that it seemed like the easy way out. It was an offensive way of living only in that it didn't seem to hold any meaning for him. It just seemed so familiar and premeditated. Devoid of surprises. Ok, it was depressing to him.

He'd seen so many people of his generation who were already growing up and starting to dress like their own parents. People like his older siblings who were only a few years older than him but who were thinking, speaking and acting like people twice their age.

There may have been all kinds of movements rising up in different parts of the world, but for the most part, history seemed to be repeating itself. And he was dismayed that there seemed to be so little visible progress being made on his generation's part. At least in that neck of the woods that he called home where his male peers invested all their time and energy into cars and sport, their female peers seemingly happy to go along with seconding them.

He felt isolated by the lack of desire on their parts to forge forward in their own directions or to acknowledge the changing times. Something was burning inside of him, just as was occurring outwardly on the streets of London and other places. Something that resembled rage, but was more like a plea for change.

The voice inside constantly told him that this was not the road he should be taking. That his destiny wasn't simply something laid out for him like a set of social boxes that needed to be ticked off along the way. *Graduation? Tick. Employed? Tick. Coupled? Tick. Engaged? Tick. Married? Tick. First home? Tick.*

So when he sensed that there were signs appearing to him, he wasted no time in throwing caution to the wind. Any ambition he had for the career in journalism that awaited him was ready to be diverted elsewhere. After a year at university on a scholarship and of living in a share house in the Melbourne inner city, which seemed a little more tolerable than where he'd grown up, he jumped at the first offer that was made to him. By that older man that he'd been seeing on the sly.

Of course there were dozens of reasons why they couldn't be seen out in public together. Not in that way. Yes, the older man was married. But the problem didn't rest with his wife. She knew about their arrangement and by all accounts was happy for him to come along for the ride and to guest star in their marriage.

But some semblance of discretion had to be kept up. Not only because society wasn't yet ready to support any show of affection on their parts. But because the foundation of their relationship wasn't solid. They weren't a couple. The silver fox was a professor that he studied under. He had been seduced by him, no doubt in the same way that other students before him had been. But they enjoyed being together because the sex was fun and because there were no heavy ties between the two of them.

For the professor, bouncing off of the teenager's unharnessed energy was intoxicating. Tasting his naivety and the untamed, restless ambition that seemed to colour the youth's approach to everything back then was utterly thrilling. He encountered students like that every so often. The ones who were so gripped by the desire to do something different that it often provoked them to act out defiantly in almost every context. That unconventional behaviour had a way of helping them redefine their own worlds and their places in them, and was an incredibly attractive proposition to those who'd reached a point where they'd felt that they'd already seen (and done) it all.

There was something about this student that seemed to differ from the others he'd taken under his wing and into his bed. This one had been the first to show a complete disdain for the couple's *new age* tendencies. He seemed to think that theirs was a wholesale and unsubstantial embracing of Eastern thought and of Buddhism.

He'd grown up with it, he'd say, and it made him laugh how white people in particular, saw it as an exotic answer to *everything*. But all the same, the couple wanted him to come along with them on their annual spiritual pilgrimage to India. The professor pitched it as a way of helping his charge broaden his horizons.

The academic had suggested he join them for a little while on the ashram to see if it was his thing or not. *It could be a growing experience*. And it would help he and his wife avoid having to spend too much time on their own. Having a third or fourth wheel in this case would be a blessing. Their long marriage was testament to the fact that they'd minimised the time they'd spent alone together, right out from their honeymoon which they'd taken with friends on a Pacific Island in the sixties.

If the ashram was not his thing, the professor said, well, there was a whole country waiting to be roamed. An entire subcontinent to explore, to photograph and to sketch. It would be just the thing he needed to help inspire him for all those part time design projects he seemed to be working on.

So he broke the news that he was heading off to India to his loving, straightforward family over the Sunday dinner he was still required to attend. But he didn't explain who he was going with, 'cos that simply wasn't their business. He watched as they looked at him with a look of shock and disbelief, that *he*, of all people, would be so stupid to think it a good idea to suspend his studies and risk his scholarship to go abroad.

They were furious and incapable of understanding that this was his ticket out of the maze in every conceivable way. That finally, the first real *interesting* possibility was presenting itself. That he absolutely had to take advantage of the free ticket and the experience on offer because student housing, cadetships and all the part time work he had weren't fitting the bill.

He'd never been out of the country before. Not even on a plane before. But somehow his street smarts kicked in early. What he hadn't counted on was arriving in India and very quickly being made to feel like he was not an equal but a bit of entertainment.

Much of the first week there was groggy in his memory. He remembered that the ashram was as beautiful as they said it would be. He remembered the kind of terracotta landscape and the hot, dry air that seemed to drain him of his energy. Each day he was plied with *ganja* by the professor. When he would turn down the joints they offered him they would instead slip it into his *lassi* or whatever it was that he was being given to eat.

He'd pass out on his bed and wake up late the next day to find that he was soiled. Sometimes in his own bodily fluids and waste, but usually in that of others. It was only after a week or so that his body began to better tolerate what it was constantly being plied with. And it was only then, on what seemed like another typical day where he'd again been all but ignored during the day but been made the centre of attention in the king sized bed at night, that he realised what had been happening to him. He'd passed out again that night but had come to a little after 2 am. When he woke he saw that lying next to him was his professor and the professor's similarly aged, but fat and hairy friend. As they snored away he felt acute pain and discomfort all over. His skin was covered in red blotches and he stank. The mattress and sheet beneath him were only slightly damp but the smell that they and his body gave off made him realise just how the night's events had proceeded.

Those men, those married men, more than twice his age, had both taken turns in having their violent ways with him. They'd held him down and ploughed away at him, taking turns at restraining him by forcing his head down into the mattress while they emptied themselves into him as if it was a form of spiritual release. They'd slapped him around when he offered up his weakened resistance and had literally pissed all over him as he fell into a slumber. The acrid taste he had at the corner of his lips was one that he didn't recognise, but given that even his hair smelt like urine, he understood the level to which they'd taken things.

So although his instinct was to take swift and violent revenge with whatever he could find in the room, he instead began to think about how he could get out of there as soon as possible. His anger and discomfort authorised him to raid their wallets which he found in the back pockets of their pants and in the bedside drawers, and he took nearly all the cash that was in them. He felt the amounts were warranted by the level of humiliation he'd sustained.

He clearly understood the sign being communicated to him. That he, if he stayed, would be their plaything. Not a younger equal, not a person. Just a plaything.

He gathered his things and crept out of the bungalow and stealthily made his way through the grounds, having to walk a kilometre or so before he finally spotted a rickshaw driver who agreed to take him to the nearby train station. The same station where he had alighted just over a week before. He spoke slowly with the attendee in the booth and learned there was a train that would pass by, in just two ungodly hours' time. It was a sleeper train that would take him up into the hill stations in just six or seven hours.

He bought himself a ticket and searched for a faucet. In the darkness of the area behind the kiosk, he lathered up the soap from his bag and washed himself. He took great care to soap himself anywhere he could reach and then sat under the faucet to rinse himself off. He disposed of the small towel he had and returned to the platform, where there were the first signs of the nocturnal comings and goings of people. The occasional rat scampered by but he consoled himself with a fried pastry and a soft drink whose name he didn't recognise, but whose sugars restored the energy his body had been wringed of.

He doubted whether or not this had all been one huge mistake on his part. Coming to India and leaving the room. Was he simply over reacting to a night that had gotten out of hand? Perhaps the problem was his. Perhaps he wasn't as progressive and daring as he had thought he was. Maybe he had been naïve to not understand what the invitation had meant in the first place. And what would he do if they turned up at the station, the only logical place he would've gone, before the train arrived? But it hurt to think, let alone to sit on his ass, so he leaned his head against the grimy wall and propped his bottom up a bit so that it was not bearing all of his weight and compounding his agony. And from that uncomfortable position, more yogic than the entire week at the ashram had ever been, he kept an eye on both the clock and on the station gates.

As he waited nervously, he realised he hadn't really been at an ashram. Perhaps in name it was one, but really, it was just the vestige of a bygone era where people like the professor took delight in masking degradation with opportunism. He'd been in the company of pseudo ex hippies, who shrouded their wealth, their obnoxiousness and their questionable moral attitudes in the guise of being intellectually *open* and *enlightened*.

Being aware that he had endured the kind of humiliating things he would never have otherwise consented to made him feel incredibly vulnerable when the waves of anger he felt temporarily subsided. Being in a foreign environment made everything that much more humiliating and alienating.

On the train people were transfixed by him, partly because sleep held no fascination for them. They marvelled at his (bleached) blond hair and his luminescent skin and at the contradiction of his Eurasian face. People also stared at him simply because he was something new and exotic for them to look at after having already been couped up in their compartments for hours on end.

Hearing that a foreigner was on board brought out visitors from other carriages who were equally taken by him. When that interest subsided, a turbaned Sikh explained that people would soon enough be clambering on board to offer some chai and some roti, but that in the meantime he could have some of his water, *"if you want it."* The Sikh sensed that the youth was tiring of all of the attention, so struck up a conversation with him to help distract him from the staring.

He asked the foreigner where he was from and seemed stupefied when he answered *'Australia'* instead of Turkey or Afghanistan or some neighbouring place. The Sikh asked what he was doing here and in reply was told that he was on holiday, that he wanted to explore the world, because the real explanation would've probably left him dumbfounded. Though he was young, the youth knew that when someone handed you kindness and water it wasn't the ideal moment to explain that you'd spent the week seeing none of the country but every inch of a pair of middle aged bodies. It would be such an uncouth thing to talk about at that hour especially with that soft, nurturing light that was slowly coming into the carriage. The light that finally made it not seem like a cage on rails.

By the time the train finally arrived at its destination he'd already been given a crash course in surviving the Indian rail system and had been taught to buy food and drink from the vendors who swarmed onto the train anytime any time it was moving slow enough to board. In that long but short ride, he'd also been forced to hem in his spiralling emotions and to deal with the confronting desperation of the beggars who seemed to preternaturally sniff him out.

Drawing from his newly bulging wallet, he quickly availed himself of a cheap hotel room to stay in for a while, before he had to make his next decision. But within a week he was teaching English in an orphanage, simply because someone had asked him to and it seemed like it would be a good way to regroup. Soon enough, he was living with a British born Indian, the only other foreigner in town and he would stay in that small town for months.

A combination of isolation and desperation quickly led to two entering into what could be loosely termed a relationship together. In their downtime, and especially during those long evenings with limited electricity, the two contented themselves with sex, reading by candle light or with the Brit, Anesh, teaching him how to play some of the more basic chords and progressions on the guitar.

For a while, things seemed idyllic. They enjoyed each other's company, they were both doing what they considered useful work at the orphanage and the months seemed to pass without drama, even when they both had to be taken over the border for what seemed like forever just to renew their visas.

But soon enough things soured, because, well, he didn't really know why. He just knew that there was more that he wanted to do and see and to experience, and that he'd never be able to do them if he stayed there in that little house in the hill town that, until that point, had meant everything to him. But the experiential expiry date had presented itself to him so quickly, as had Anesh's, who was kind and clever and creative, but like the first shop you see when you're shopping. And one must never content themselves with the first set of windows.

He didn't exactly break Anesh's heart when he apologised, saying that he had to leave, but his guilt encouraged him to leave the kids in the orphanage without saying goodbye to them, because, it reasoned, the last thing they needed was yet another adult kissing them off.

His restlessness and the Indian train system took him away from the lush, high altitude greenery and across the parched countryside to New Delhi, where he figured he could finally find a local hairdresser to dye his hair, which was now getting longer and that had become an awful combination of regrowth and orangey ends. It had become so long that he'd taken to wearing it in a top bun that resembled some kind of mutant pineapple. He settled on an auburn red colour and spent a few weeks exploring the city and further afield in Agra and the surrounds, writing postcards and collecting vinyl discs of Hindi pop. The cash that he'd taken as compensation for his indignity at the ashram came in handy again because he used it to buy a ticket to Bombay when Delhi's charms wore off and to rent a hotel room there for another couple of weeks.

By the time the six month mark of his time in India rolled around another opportunity presented itself. A visiting scout from a modelling agency had spotted him and his shining *henna* head in an expat bar where he'd been bussing tables and had asked if he was interested in doing a little modelling.

The scout took him back to a hotel room, much *swisher* than his own, and photographed him up against the wallpaper with a polaroid camera, showing him the pictures before he scribbled something in kanji all over their white frames. The scout was sweet and respectful and seemed to ignore the possibility of trying anything untoward, instead instructing him to be downstairs in the foyer the next morning at 10am if he wanted a job.

The next morning he crossed town as instructed and was there early, which was good because the scout and two other *extraordinarily beautiful* creatures were already waiting for him. He nervously introduced himself to the others after the Svengali failed to do so and made small talk with them during the minivan ride, learning that one was an Israeli and the other a German. Neither seemed to know anything about where they were going, both having also been spotted in bars over the last few days and made privy only to the same offer and unclear details.

At 11am they all arrived at a studio lot and were ushered into a warehouse, where they were made to strip down to their underwear. It was then that tailors and dressers started to swathe them in a range of outfits. At that point he didn't know much about fashion but he realised that these were probably not high end clothes that they were going to be modelling. He didn't know it yet, but his face and his likeness, as captured that day, along with those of Adi and Yevron's, would end up forever appearing on the awnings of a range of tailor shops across the subcontinent. The kinds that lure in travellers with the promise of a quick and cheap knock off designer suit or outfit. Even today, a walk through the backstreets in some Indian cities still offers a sighting or two of those images that are now as weathered as the fashions being modelled in them.

But this was just the first of a series of jobs they had lined up for him. He spent the night with Adi, who, despite his incredible gorgeousness was very approachable. Adi had given him the signal at a certain point during the day that things were going to go beyond simply standing in front of a camera together. The next day they all made their way over to the same hotel lobby and piled back into the same minivan but this time they were taken to an entirely different lot. He followed the same procedures again, now without the nerves or uncertainty of the first day, because a) he'd already fucked his brains out with one of the other models the night before, and, b) because he now at least partly knew what was expected of him. These factors combined to make him feel more relaxed and sure about himself despite the absurdity of the situation, and of the inadequateness he'd felt when he first saw the strapping gents he would model with.

The clothes were better made this time around and the photo shoot was longer and more demanding. He had to learn to follow instructions and to interpret the photographer which meant that he had no time to keep thinking about how absurd this opportunity was and of how it would never have happened if he'd stayed home in Melbourne, where all they were interested in were people who looked like his siblings with their perfect blue eyes and blonde hair. And not in someone like him. He'd always been the *exotic* one even when the situation didn't call for it. The one who looked like he'd been trafficked in from some Asian plateau yet, somehow, everyone managed to pretend like there was no issue when it was clear he was the Martian of the family.

During a break the Svengali returned and expressed how impressed he was with the three of them. He explained that because of visa problems, Yevron wouldn't be able to, but that both Adi and he were invited to come to Tokyo to do some modelling work there. Adi accepted on the spot, leading the Svengali to turn to the Melbournian. "*So, what do you say?*"

Soft drinks, beer, shoes, tennis rackets. Foreign faces needed for some low key ad campaigns and catalogues there. And just like Adi had, he expressed that he was more than open to and grateful for the offer. A resounding yes.

The following week he and Adi hung out together while the paperwork was being prepared. Yevron had moved on to Goa for a few last weeks of rest and relaxation, giving he and Adi the chance to get

know each other better. The sex was good but the companionship and conversation was better because it buffered everything else in Bombay which otherwise seemed like a giant stimulant. Their conversation felt like the only real and grounded thing in that otherwise over the top place.

In Tokyo they were ushered into an apartment complex near Koganei in the city's west, nowhere near the prestigious Ginza, where he'd learned the bulk of foreign models were living. He never got much of a chance to meet many of them, but from what he understood, the majority of them weren't there by happy chance. They'd paid their dues and as such were able to command top dollar. He and Adi on the other hand were just another couple of faces in the cheaper sub industry that had popped up, offering manufacturers and advertising agencies foreign faces at more manageable prices. They were housed with another foreigner, a reasonably good looking French guy who'd been working there forever but whose social skills and attitude towards his new roommates were questionable.

Although their work schedules often crossed, he and Adi managed to find the time to explore Tokyo during their free time. Often that meant curtailing their nights out to catch the last trains of the night, but occasionally, if schedule permitted, they pulled the odd all-nighter with a return back to the apartment with the morning's first trains.

Though their earnings paled in comparison to the city's real foreign elite of models, their free board and accommodation meant that whatever they earned was theirs to keep. He wasn't sure if a return to Melbourne would be on the cards once the work dried up. His family seemed a little disturbed by how his gallivanting was somehow paying off for him. But it seemed to them like a holiday and holidays always have to end, "*Otherwise,*" his mother reminded him in her letter, "*they aren't holidays, are they?*"

The working visas were pricklier in Japan than elsewhere and as a result their permission to stay and work expired after three months.

Adi, in a very neutral tone, told him that he was planning to go back to his hometown near Hamburg. He knew that he would never visit Adi there but he made his promises to nonetheless.

A few days later the two of them said their goodbyes after being paid out in full by the modelling agency. They hugged it out at Tokyo station before Adi headed into the sprawling station to find his train to Narita airport and the Melbournian to the *shinkansen* (fast train) platforms for his onward journey to Kyoto. Though there was deep affection for one another on both their parts there also seemed to be some relief in knowing that the dusk that surrounded them also marked the resumption of their respective journeys down their own roads.

He'd vaguely decided to head to London between being paid out and spending a few days in the old imperial capital. After securing himself a flight he felt at ease to soak up the atmosphere of the quaint

city and learned quickly that he was just a hop, skip and a jump from Osaka, whose record stores he scoured, adding old J-pop and *enka* records to his growing vinyl collection. Though he loved his afternoons traipsing around Osaka, he preferred the sleepier Kyoto for its combination of old and new and for offering him the first substantial green vistas that he'd seen in months. By the time he actually left for London he'd fallen in love with the place and vowed to return, a feeling that had not presented itself to him at any time in India or Tokyo.

In London he found modelling was no longer an option for him, even though he'd amassed a reasonably impressive portfolio to draw from by the time he arrived. In London, Asia, where things had come so easily to him, suddenly seemed so far away.

"*Too edgy*", "*too ethnic*", "*too short*". The British agents' words differed but the sense was always the same. Basically every one of his insecurities laid bare and verbalised. A refrain often delivered in stuffy, upper class accents or in accents that betrayed Britain's usual class hierarchy. Each time the tweed pterodactyls dismissed him from an audition or a casting call he understood that little bit more that he would need to pursue other options at some point.

He found a room in a house with four others and worked bussing tables, waiting, and occasionally doing some life modelling at an art college. The art college acted like a marketplace for him. It was there he picked up occasional lovers, some design work and a second hand guitar which he treated like a child. He could barely remember any of the things that Anesh had taught him but persisting and persevering with daily practice helped him fill the gaps in his schizophrenic work schedule.

Although he was working like a dog, getting paid fuck all, and had no firm idea of what lay next, he was content. Things were fun, especially in that share house that was falling apart at the seams. By virtue of his house mates' and his own outgoingness, he began to move in more rambunctious London circles.

The new people, the occasional drugs and the ever present music all brought him a plethora of new experiences and stimulants to draw from and helped him forget that he was effectively starting from scratch again.

He achieved different forms of notoriety as time passed. To some he was the guy who designed record sleeves for all kinds of punk and rock bands, many of whom he befriended in the process. To others he was the guy in the underground clubs that was impossible to ignore because he was often asked to wear the most outlandish of outfits by his up and coming designer friends. He was always prominent in those places, because most of the time he'd wrangled his way in getting paid to dance or to DJ.

Life in London inched him closer to what he imagined it was supposed to look like for him. It seemed to be better represented by those occasions when he was at some party sporting something like one of his designer friend's velvet fig leaves, an unruly crop of spiky blond hair and a pair of Dr. Martens while doing his thing dancing in a cage or hitting on some cashed up pharmacist or well to do rich kid. It certainly didn't resemble the life that he'd left behind back in his hometown.

When their housing situation became untenable on account of rising rent and the ever diminishing income among the five of them, he began squatting with a friend, Shelly. She called herself an *artist* whenever she met somebody, but she, he, and most of their friends couldn't ever really make such grand claims.

They'd become presences on the underground scene in London, but beyond being immortalised in a post card, their influence was insulated by the walls of the clubs, gay bars and private parties that they frequented. These were the kind of places where he was celebrated as much for his caustic sense of humour as he was for the ingenuity of the DJ'ing work he did with his Asian music collection. Beyond that world, he and his friends were subject to all kinds of insults and derision from passers-by on the street. His ethnic inspired flamboyance didn't sit well with the gritty times. And a hyper coloured foreigner lurking their streets dared Londoners to stare and make comments about his outlandish garb and devil may care attitude.

Eventually though, the bottom even fell out of the underground work force. Money got tighter and tighter as nearly all of his cash in hand work disappeared. Things were so bad in London that many of his friends considered moving away from the city just to keep getting by.

Kicked out of their squat, he and Shelley temporarily camped out on friends' living room sofas and floors until they availed themselves of another squat, this time on the edge of Kensington with another friend, Lövda, where they would remain for the rest of his time in London.

The life modelling that he did had morphed into nude modelling for a few gay and straight porn rags here and there and it was at this time that he occasionally began to turn the odd trick when things got absolutely dire.

It probably would've been easy enough to take the step into the oldest profession more committedly, but the few times he did straight out fuck for money took every ounce of concentration and effort on his part that it didn't seem worth the paltry £20 or £30 that his clients would squeeze into his hand afterwards.

As the financial crunch tightened, he settled instead for private life modelling sessions with benefits for a select set of regulars with whom he didn't mind taking things further. Those special modelling sessions, in addition to pocket money, also meant having somewhere to have a hot shower or decent meal rather than having to rely on plates that always included some exotic form of tinned food as occurred at the draughty, glorified bedsit that he and the girls had commandeered.

All the whilst, he, his guitar and the used sheet music he picked up around the traps, were keeping each other company, and slowly, he learnt enough of the old staples and classics to feel confident when playing the guitar. He told himself that he just needed to know how and when to strum and where to place those fingers. He'd also taken to playing along with Shelly's boyfriend who he considered to be both a guitar virtuoso and a complete twat.

After a particularly tough six month run where he'd had to drop towel weekly, someone he met at one of his DJ gigs (where he worked under the moniker of *Vinyl Tiger*, a mildly racist nickname that he had collected somewhere along the way), asked if he would be interested in working afternoons at a record store.

The store manager interrogated him, checking to see if he could reel off the names of all the old Stooges albums or if he knew who Iannis Xenakis was. By virtue of the things he'd learnt from the people he hung around with, rather than through his own innate, eclectic taste, he managed to answer enough of the questions correctly to warrant being hired on the spot.

Once he started working there, for a couple of paltry pounds per hour, he found that despite the manager's insistence that this was a serious record store for collectors, people never really asked him about obscure records. They seemed to be more concerned with where they could find a copy of Blondie's *Parallel Lines* or of the Buzzcock's *Love Bites*. The store also attracted a clientele that he had no trouble recognising. With a glint in their eyes, they'd ask where Grace Jones' *Fame* album was, or where anything by Andrea True was. He made a point of walking people over to those titles, learning that it was London record store cruising at its finest. Conversations inevitably included comments like '*have we met before?*' or '*you're so and so's friend right?*' or the giveaway '*was that you dancing at Sombrero's?*'. To clinch the deals, the conversations usually began to wind up with an open invitation of sorts. '*Are you planning on going to So and So's party?*' or '*are you coming up to Hacienda?*' '*I hear such and such is coming to Bang this week. Will I see you there?*'

On one particularly slow afternoon, a 30 something guy was flicking through the second hand section of the discs. He watched him, waiting, wondering whether it would be a Buzzcocks or an Andrea True style conversation. Eventually, after seeing that everybody else had left the store, the shopper approached the counter and made an enquiry. About Joni Mitchell's *Blue*.

He glared at the tall, dark haired customer. All wide shoulders but glasses so thick that he brought Nana Maskouri to mind.

He looked at him with contempt. Not because he'd disturbed his NME reading, but because there were few things that riled him in the record store. "Why on earth would you want that tired old record?"

'Mr. Maskouri' smiled in reply and blankly began to respond. "It's not for me...I scratched my friend's copy so deeply with the stylus that she won't talk to me until I replace it. Worse still, she insists on still playing it even though I scratched *Carey*, the only damn song I can actually tolerate on the whole album."

He smiled at the customer's candour and found Mr. Maskouri a copy of the LP. As he handed it over he decided to put it out there. "Lesbians are so protective of Joni Mitchell. It's so predictable," he said caustically.

"She is a bit," the thirty something conceded with a laugh. "But she's a good friend."

"Who? Joni Mitchell?"

"No. Sarah."

He rung up the register and gave Mr. Maskouri his change.

"What's your name baby?" he asked, handing him the receipt.

"Binyamin," the New Yorker replied. "But Ben is *more than fine*. Yours?"

"I'm Alekzandr," he said, popping his gum and smiling.

"Well it's very nice to meet you Alekzandr."

Alekz smiled cockily, looking his new acquaintance over and chewing away at his gum like it was a lifeline. They stood at the counter chatting for ages...a good half an hour or so, pausing briefly only when another customer came in.

On paper, he was a New York Jew, but in reality he was an entrepreneur who split so much of his time traveling between London and the Big Apple, that he didn't seem to belong to either place anymore. 'I'm always on business,' he explained.

"How long are you here for?"

"Oh about another ten days. Listen, do you have a number that I can call you on?" Ben asked.

"Not really. I mean I'm here from Monday to Friday in the afternoons, but my boss goes mental when I get too many personal calls."

"Because guys are always calling you?"

"Ha. No, nothing like that. It's more like my office number."

"For what?"

"I do gigs. I'm a DJ and a dancer."

"I didn't know."

"How would you? You're not from here."

He looked at Alekzandr and couldn't work out if the cockiness was grating or endearing. "Listen, I'm free tonight if you want to get some dinner and a drink."

Endearing it was, then?

Because it was a Tuesday night, and because they only had thirty two quid between them, they settled on the grungy curry place for a quick bite then a few pints at one of the pubs nearby before a nightcap at an off licence that Alekz frequented on the odd occasion.

It was the first real date he'd found himself on in years. And easily the first time he could remember being with someone and feeling, what, romantic?

From the morning after their date, when Alekz woke up in Ben's bed, they became a reasonably frequent couple. Frequent in the sense that they were together whenever Ben was in town. Sid Vicious may have died, and it may have rocked some of Alekz's circles in London, but he was too busy contemplating the new thing he was creating in his life to pay too much attention.

This new relationship wasn't marked by any of the tragedy or inevitability of Vicious' death, and made Alekz feel like the lone person in his world who seemed to want to celebrate something rather than grieve for somebody.

From the beginning Ben did what few others in Alekz's wide circles of friends were able to. He breathed fresh air into Alekz's life. For so long Alekz and company had been so stuck in survival mode that their thoughts seemed to ricochet exclusively from hand to mouth. To making the best of an eternally trying situation. With time, Ben's motivation and self-determination rubbed off on him. As the months passed and Vicious' mourning cloud dispersed, Alek began examining his life and goals, propelled by Ben's belief that he could be doing something more productive and rewarding with his time.

Music seemed to be the mantra being silently chanted in Alekzandr's head. *Music*: the magic word that popped up when he was asked what he wanted to do next. One week, with Ben safely ensconced in New York, Alekz found the courage to try and piece together bits of a song that had been floating around in his head for months. There had been mornings he woke up to the Indian styled melody despite there being no radio in the room. Or days when he would scribble down little verses in the margins of old NMEs or whatever paper he was reading.

Sitting down to consciously document the sounds in his head was another thing entirely. But each morning for a week he tried. He made notes about the melodies he heard, trying to write them down phonetically if he couldn't recognise the notes. He tried to strum them back on the guitar and on the days when the music was too hard to focus on, he concentrated instead on the stanzas which seemed much easier to write and shape.

When Shelly's boyfriend was around he asked for help, singing out the missing parts of the melody that were haunting him and having the twat show him how to play the chords out on the guitar. When he felt that he'd been able to capture the essence of the song he hopped around the city, using his friends' equipment to record the various parts of the song he would need. The guitar, the keyboard chords, his vocals and a very simple programmed sequence. When he added that material together what he came up with was something he called *When You're Away*. It would be the prototype of what would later become *Without You*, one of his first official singles.

In the weeks in which Ben was in New York, Alekz continued to plug away at the other ideas that were now coming more frequently, his elaboration of them resulting in three more reasonably uncomplicated numbers; *Tiger Stripes*, *Beat* and *Hand to Mouth*.

At the record store he racked his brain trying to think of the name of the record producer guy who would often come in. He hadn't seen him in months but remembered that he'd told him about his little studio in East London once. The guy seemed to pop up every now and then in NME with a little blurb about whichever latest protégé he was working with. Those protégés seemed to either go on to bigger and better things with someone else or to amount to nothing musically.

While he racked his brain to work out what his name was he continued plodding away at the record store and at his morning life drawing classes. Drumming up conversation with one of the students he knew, it dawned on him that the college had some of the equipment he might need to further develop his demos.

He set about trying to find someone he knew in the music department and to convince them to allow him to play around with the TEAC 2340 so that he could polish the quality of his demos. In reality he planned to simply rerecord the different parts of each track and feed each through the multitrack recorder which would unify the sounds in a way his crude demo recording equipment couldn't.

When the anonymous producer guy finally returned to the store, Alekz made a big song and dance of it. He handed him an envelope which he said had been expressly left for him by one of the stars of the local club scene, who knew he came here regularly. It must've been a day of weakness on the producer's part because he voluntarily accepted the package. Truth be told, he hadn't had a breakthrough act in a while and he needed someone fresh to work with.

Ryan, the producer type, took the songs home and listened to them but didn't think there was much to them. They sounded incredibly amateur to him and the overall songs weren't anywhere near as memorable as perhaps their melodies or occasional verses were. But a few days later he found that he still had a couple of the melodies floating around in his head and on replaying the tape reconsidered his options. He knew that the demo belonged to the store clerk. That voice was unmistakeable. He put his feelers out and found that he was indeed considered one of the growing

stars on the local club circuit. But he was hesitant in returning to the store too soon. A few weeks later he saw a listing for *Vinyl Tiger* at one of the local gay clubs and decided to head on down despite his better judgement.

He watched Alekz's set from a secluded corner of the club, and watched how the flamboyantly dressed DJ seemed to have no problems in mixing old Hindi records by people like Lata Mangeshkar or Manna Day with his own music and other songs from the street culture. At times he would step away from the turnstiles and dance as the songs played out, pulling people up onto the stage or diving down to dance with them for a few minutes.

When Ryan returned to the record store it was with a completely different impression of the young hustler. After having seen him in action he figured that there was enough crass appeal and oversized personality to suggest that he had potential after all.

"You know, it's thanks to you that I visited my first ever gay club the other night."

"Really?" he smiled. "Why? Were you looking for me?"

"Yes," he admitted, grimacing somewhat at the kid's overpowering cockiness. "But not in the way you think. It was research."

"Research for what?"

"To see if you were worth all the fuss you made over yourself when you gave me your tape."

"Oh," Alekz replied. Then he beamed. "And I guess you decided I was."

Alekz's goal was to mix that old classical, bombastic Hindi sound that careened around his head with something contemporary and synthetic. Ryan found that Alekzandr's clear concept was ridiculous but that it seemed there might be an audience for it given the reaction of the clubbers that night.

"You basically want me to turn your songs into ethnic disco moments?" he asked incredulously.

"Exactly! An ethnic disco that just explodes!" Alekz replied, almost with a squeal.

Using the four songs he'd written, the two set to work sporadically. Sometimes it was in the evenings after his shifts at the record store, otherwise in the early mornings before Ryan would spend the afternoons working with the other acts he was desperately trying to get off the ground.

Ryan knew his way around the studio and was particularly adept at programming the then new forms of sequencers and programmers available. Because money was so tight, they made an unorthodox but typical arrangement. In return for the ridiculously low upfront recording costs Ryan would be credited as a co-writer of each of the four songs. Meaning they'd split any song writing royalties in perpetuity.

The singer had convinced a few of his own musically able friends to donate their time for free to the recordings. He had bartered a deal with one group to design a couple of record sleeves for them in return for them spending a day in the studio with him. The shortfall in what he couldn't pay for from his wages was made up for by Ben, who shelled out the missing £400 in good faith and as an act of support.

Tiger Stripes and *Beat* were clearly the two strongest tracks on the demo tape and both the singer and Ryan tried to shop them around, meeting all kinds of resistance to the disco sound and to the singer's wafer thin vocals.

In the summer of 1979 the singer made his first proper live appearance at an underground club in West London. Rehearsing for a week beforehand with three of his friends (fellow part time cage dancers), they came up with a threadbare set of choreography for the four songs. Some simple props were co-opted into the act; some red chairs and four brightly coloured parasols that he'd found in Chinatown to go alongside the costumes that he and a friend of his had fashioned from the cheapest and most garish sari fabric that they could find.

He designed and printed off hundreds of flyers at the art college which he and his friends subsequently distributed everywhere they could; in record stores, at the clubs they made their weekly rounds in; even posting them to telegraph poles and walls in defiance of the *Post No Bills* warnings, ensuring that their 'guerrilla publicity campaign' was being captured by a photographer friend for posterity.

The idea of performing didn't seem to be bothering him in the lead up. He felt sufficiently rehearsed and now just wanted it to be over and done with.

When 1am rolled around the night of his performance, he was a bundle of nerves but in good spirits. He'd done a line of coke with his dancers; it was his shout that night as a thanks to them.

It was finally coming together. The photos taken before the performance that night pointed to his first stage incarnation. He was wearing a garish, sleeveless jumpsuit in a fabric that seemed to have a mind and ecosystem all its own and that caused him to sweat in all number of places. His hair was back to being henna red, but slicked back like he'd just come out of the water. His caramel eyes glistened behind a wall of kohl, staring out from under the huge bindi he'd stuck on his forehead.

He was tall and lithe and laughingly told anyone and everyone that he was the reincarnation of Ziggy Stardust, by way of Kerala. Ben had brought his own polaroid camera along and used up four film packs taking shots of Alekz and his mismatched dancers and of the regular crew who made up their extended London family.

There were a little over 150 people in the club but there was hardly any room for the stage that had been erected. It was perhaps only six or seven square meters but from when the lights went down

and came back on for the opening strains of *Tiger Stripes*, he prowled every inch of it, every centimetre. The gaudy Hindi sound and the pumping beats got the punters moving, but mostly, they were focused on him and the dancers and on the striking visual impression they made.

He used a microphone to sing over his backing tracks and the effect produced a cacophony of sounds that were sometimes jarring and off key. But people couldn't take their eyes off of what was happening on stage. Whatever the music lacked it was made up for with his stage presence. The choreography was sexy, smart and salacious and he probably got more applause after the first song on that account than he did for the actual song itself.

The second song, with its faster pace and melody, had the bulk of his friends who had commandeered the front area of the audience, in a frenzy to which he and the dancers responded by dancing even more vigorously as *Beat*, a play on where gays meet out in the open, played out. *When You're Away*, was introduced with a cute dedication to Ben and its mid-tempo slowed things down a little. The dancers had devised a more fluid routine where they were mostly dancing to the music while seated on their chairs. The effect seemed to be like they were just casually stretching and doing yoga in long, languid motions and in unison.

The excitement of finally bringing these songs to life for the first time, of singing them *live*, gave him a huge adrenaline rush and this particular club, where he often danced in the skimpiest of outfits in its cages or DJ'ed, felt like home and a natural place to perform for the first time.

By the time the final song, *Hand To Mouth* played out and his circle of friends had whipped up a deafening cacophony of applause and cat calls, he realised the gig was over.

They took their bows and then hugged and kissed one another on stage, still high on the rush of the lines they'd done and the thrill of a good first show in which they had averted any major disaster. The rest of the night was spent partying at the club with drink cards and some left over coke which kept the evening moving along quite nicely.

After dawn, he and Ben cabbied it back to Ben's apartment. It took Alekz nearly ten minutes to remove all the parts of his trademark summer look of heavy makeup, black leggings, bracelets and layers of shredded singlets and cut off tees. Once he had, he took the £20 that the club had paid him (the dancers had been paid £10 each) and lodged it within the pages of the Sylvia Plath anthology he was no longer reading. He vowed never to touch it, like he never again wanted to read Plath, before he showered off all the grime that had accumulated. He sucked off Ben who fell asleep from exhaustion before he could even climax before he himself passed out in a haze on the edge of the bed.

Over the following months he managed to get booked at some other clubs in London and even Manchester. Although the costumes were sometimes changed, the choreography stayed much the same for the shows. Some audiences were made of as little as 50 or 60 people but occasionally he

filled the small venues he was playing in to capacity. Word had spread around London about his show and about the clubby *Kerala* music he was making, and as a result, doors opened to him.

Ryan managed to secure him a deal with a tiny independent label to record a couple of singles after the label's head attended one of Alekz's gigs and had found himself shocked by all the commotion the tone deaf singer was capable of creating. The deal wasn't exactly artist friendly and nor was Ryan's cut in the grander scheme of things. But a deal's a deal and without the means to have someone look over the fine print Alekz decided to throw caution to the wind.

It was one of those situations in life when you think you're as close to something as you're ever going to get. You enter in to a pact even when you know it's probably not ideal because there are no other options on the table. Better something than nothing. We do it all the time in our daily lives.

Alekz figured that Ryan's deal for him was at least a start. A foot in the door to pursuing and developing his own sound. The label though, had different ideas. They wanted to tone down some of the *Hindi* elements of the songs in order to make them more disco friendly. The belief was that they would sell more records across Europe where the demand for dance music was much stronger than in the UK. Too much ethnicity, they feared, might alienate too many potential buyers in that market.

So Ryan recalibrated the original tracks into more standard disco versions of their former selves but the singer hated the new mixes. The two of them began to argue nonstop in the lead up to the label's printing of the singles. Ryan too had grown fond of the original songs but wanted the chance to finally earn back some of his investment. At one point in a meeting in the studio, after having been played the final versions, Alekzandr threw a tantrum. His songs had literally become disco tracks with just a hint of all that had made them special to him in the first place.

"These are just songs. It always works like this," Ryan said, trying to console him and to contain the situation. "You play their game first and then you get to play yours. You have to trust in the people who do this for a living. It's in their interests to make sure you appeal to the widest possible audience."

But the singer was furious and inconsolable. Firstly, because he realised that in removing what made the records *his*, they basically removed any motivation on his part to see them succeed. It could've been *anyone* singing over the tinny disco track that they ended up with. He also hated the fact that Ryan had clearly outplayed and outsmarted him.

Tiger Stripes was sent for pressing, protected as it was by the airtight contract that Alekz had signed. There was no budget for a promotional campaign but when push came to shove Alekz caved somewhat and agreed to perform at a series of shows that had been lined up for him. He also eventually agreed to design a cheap sleeve for the track after the label told him the alternative was a cheaper plain sleeve which would just make the single seem anonymous.

When it was put out to market, word of mouth helped it sell around 8,000 copies in the UK, and a similar number across Western Europe. Its moderate success led to *Beat* also being issued as a single. The verses referring to cottaging were considered oblique enough that they were retained. *Beat* sold about 9,000 copies in the UK but bombed in the European markets where it sold less than a third of the copies that had been shipped to stores.

The UK sales of the two singles had been sufficient enough to land him his first ever appearances in any charts, respectively peaking at No.73 and No.71 in the UK Top 75.

For Alekz the fact that they'd reached the chart at all meant that they were a success in his eyes. But the indie label had other ideas. They'd managed to recoup their miniscule investment but to them it was clear that to offer Alekz another set of releases wouldn't be worth their while. The returns wouldn't be worth the potential outlay they would face in having to develop him beyond anything other than a novelty club act.

Ryan came out of the arrangement best. In having helmed two singles that had made it, even into the lowest reaches of the charts, it was as if he'd placed a full page advertisement for his services. A stream of unknown talent managers beat a path to his door thereafter, with whom he negotiated very agreeable rates to produce their equally unknown protégés.

Once the whole *singles saga* had cooled somewhat, and life had returned back to normal for Alekz, Ben found the courage to take the singer out of London for a weekend.

"You know I've been looking for something a little more substantial lately, don't you?"

"Work wise? Yeah," Alekz answered.

"I've been offered a good full time role. It's pretty well paid and I think it could be fun. It would mean that I'd become the only New York rep for the company."

Alekz looked at him for a few moments to decipher what had been said. "You brought me to fucking Brighton to tell me you won't be coming to London anymore? What does that mean? That we're ending things here and now?" the singer asked coldly.

"No. And Yes. I mean I can't keep coming here every month anymore. But I was thinking, considering how the label thing isn't working here for you, maybe you could come to New York. See if it fits you."

"But I don't know anybody in New York," he said, smarting from the reminder about the label.

"Well, you know me."

"But it would be like starting all over again."

"Yeah, but you would do really well there, you know? They'll love you there."

"Isn't that all a bit *A Star Is Born*?"

Ben laughed. "Maybe. A little. But seriously. You have these records now, you can at least shop them around even if they aren't really what you wanted them to be."

"No I can't. They belong to Ryan and the label. Not to me."

"Yes, but you can write some more songs...and you can tell them straight up that you've already sold thousands of records in Europe and the UK. Besides, your music would work really well there. They would go mad for it."

"I don't know. I've gotten kind of used to it here. Things are just starting to work out for me, even if they're not. I feel like I'd be throwing the baby out with the bath water if I just left things and started all over again."

"Yeah, but I've gotten used to you too."

The singer fidgeted with his bracelets. "I've gotten used to you too. I just need some time to think about it."

"Lekke, I can pay for the airfare." He tended to use his nickname for Alekz when he tried to pre-empt having his head bitten off.

"So can I. If I ever receive the royalties, but it's not about that. It's just, I don't know, it seems kind of crazy that I just up and leave because you have to."

"Well I don't want you to take it like a punishment. I'd hate that we had to stop seeing each other just because I have to take this job there. Besides, it's New York I'm asking you to come to, not Siberia."

"Can't you find something else here?"

"I was lucky enough to find what I did where I did. It's not the easiest time to be making money."

"You don't need to tell me about that. Where would I go?" Alekz asked, hopefully.

"Well, my parents had an old rental apartment in Brooklyn. It's small, but you could take it."

"Where would you be?"

"I'm sharing in Manhattan," he said dismissively. "I don't see what you have to lose though. Come over, give it a couple of months and if you don't like it, you can just come back to London."

"Wait, you would have me move country but you wouldn't live with me?"

"You're a free spirit Lekke. You need your own time, your own space. Besides, we can see each other as often as we want that way, but not all the time if we don't want to."

"But I want to see you all the time."

"No you don't," Ben chuckled.

"No. I know, you're right," the singer responded, with a chuckle. "I just wanted to see how it sounded," he said, the tension finally slipping away.

"Listen, think about it. Take a chance, see how it goes. London will be here waiting for you if you don't like it. And I'll be there, making sure you enjoy it. And if you sort things out with the label, then it's only a flight back. You're not moving back to Australia, you know."

The general consensus amongst his friends was that he was a fool to want to hang around here when New York was on offer. London, they constantly reminded him, had gone to the dogs, and how fabulous would it be if he went there? Then, they'd have somewhere to stay, *somewhere to escape to?*

"London," Shelly, who was sitting at the window, reminded him, "is burning. Again." She tossed her cigarette butt down on to the street. "Plus, Ben's a keeper. You'd be mad to throw him and the big apple away." She looked at him and figured it was the moment to get real. "There's a very real chance that if you let him go, you won't ever find anything like it again. Or for ages at least," Shelly warned him. "You fruits don't exactly mate for life. And what you two have is really good. I don't know how he puts up with you."

He hated the idea of giving up on everything he'd worked so hard for, but coursing through his veins was the fear, that his life, like that of so many other men he'd encountered, ran the risk of being one marked by boats simply passing in the night. He enjoyed his freedom but, young or not, he valued the intimacy with Ben over everything else.

The insecurity that passes through all of us screams at us through even the most stubborn and solid of walls we create. It pierces through the things that we will not cede even when our options are already so limited. How tragic, he thought, that his friends had reached the same conclusion as his insecurity had. *This is your one chance.*

Our insecurity convinces us, so comprehensively and blindingly, that even something destined to collapse into a haze of dust is still the right thing for us. The stuff of all or nothing moments. So often, we let go of everything just to keep one thing. The inner surrender we make for a momentary truce with our consciences. We've all been there before.

The royalties were much lower than he'd anticipated but he still had to fight tooth and nail to be paid those couple of hundred pounds. It was the most money he'd seen since leaving Tokyo. With it, he

bought himself a one way ticket to NYC and shipped his meagre belongings to the Brooklyn address Ben had given him. Squatting doesn't exactly encourage you to rely on leaving things in storage.

The nerves he'd had from the week before his flight only dissipated when he saw Ben waiting for him outside arrivals. They hugged and Ben drove him all the way to the Brooklyn apartment while he, all wide eyed, took in the hazy silhouettes that they were zooming past. All those tall buildings seemed like elegant debutantes draped in smog.

The apartment wasn't quite what he'd expected. He had imagined that it was going to be some kind of brownstone building but instead it was a 1960s brick building with no elevator. His new home. The apartment was tiny, and a little dusty. Probably little more than 30 square metres in size with a fire escape that doubled as an unofficial balcony. It was spartanly furnished but Ben had changed the sheets and seen to the utilities.

They fucked and straight after went for a walk around the borough, the singer trying to take in his latest change of environment. *God damn New York City*. Or Brooklyn at least. Ben pointed out all the staples of the area; the local Korean, which would become his morning temple for cigarettes and whatever fruit was on offer, and some of the cheap eat places near the local park.

The singer wasted no time in hustling up some work. He quickly found some under the table waiting work and within weeks had wrangled some paid and unpaid session work as a backing vocalist. He was so haunted by the idea that he'd given up everything for Ben that he pursued any opportunity that arose to convince himself he'd made the right decision.

In addition to finding work, he made it his mission to meet and befriend as many people as he could, particularly in the clubs that he quickly began to frequent. Word had it that he'd had a couple of dance music hits in Europe, and his unique look made him hard to forget. But it wasn't only the clubs he'd hit. It was also the exhibitions, the underground fashion shows and the artist studios where he'd hang out that helped him connect with all kinds of people on the street scene. Two friendships in particular seemed to evolve quite effortlessly during that time with guys who he seemed to constantly be running into while out and about.

One, Jasper, was a film student who worked as a dancer and bus boy at a variety of clubs and events by night, and the other, Ian, a Kiwi who waited tables at a diner in the morning, worked as a courier in the afternoons and spent the rest of his time being an aspiring songwriter/musician.

After he'd performed a couple of well received DJ'ing gigs across New Jersey, Brooklyn and even on the Lower East side, he was encouraged by a couple of the venues to return with his own show. Soon enough he cajoled Jasper and Miles, another guy he'd added to his inner circle into helping him out by doing some backup dancing for him. He dusted off his old songs, his old routines and his old costumes which had finally arrived in the package that he'd shipped so many months earlier.

Though, as always, he had no phone, he was effectively always out and about working, socialising or generally keeping busy at trying to be seen. Without a phone he had no way of making regular demands on Ben, but Ben kept his word and was around as often as Alekz wanted. When asked why they never spent time together at Ben's Manhattan place, Ben would explain that he didn't want his flatmate to know that he was gay and that he preferred to spend his free time in the boroughs anyway. And Alekz chose not to press for further details, just as we agree to keep mum about certain crimes if it means keeping an inner voice at bay.

In New York, Alekz found that economics was truly international and that supply and demand functioned the same everywhere. He resumed his life modelling work on the sly and more than occasionally let a couple of his new regular patrons take things further, reckoning that it was worth the substantial increase in income if he occasionally jacked them off or blew them as they asked.

For someone who was basically a living unemployment statistic, his schedule was hectic. Waiting tables, going from ad hoc job to job and spending whatever free time he had writing, singing backup vocals and basically hanging around New York's Music Building in between.

For months, Ben and he usually spent Monday and Tuesday nights together in the Brooklyn apartment, which he'd transformed into an interesting, eclectically furnished abode, brimming with a growing collection of second hand goods and unwanted objects that he'd salvaged from the streets and repaired or at least cleaned.

London life had become a distant memory. A past life. He'd been quick in getting to know his new city and within months his social circle was equivalent to what it had been in London. But whereas he skirted the fringes of the London punk scene, here he seemed to be amidst a more hybrid music-art street scene. He was no more well known among those circles than anyone else, but people did tend to gush over him when he was with Ben, the two of them dubbed by some as the *perfect gay couple*.

But it wasn't just the flatmate situation that was strange about Ben in NYC. He seemed like he didn't want to introduce the singer to many of his own friends. There were a couple of older gay friends that he'd presented Alekz to, but, beyond that, it seemed that much of his private and professional life was off limits.

Just why, he wasn't sure. But the curiosity sometimes got the better of him, and, on one particularly late night, out and about performing in an abandoned school cum art space, where he performed a couple of new songs he'd recorded at the Music Building, the singer insisted that they sleep in the Manhattan apartment, which was significantly closer than Brooklyn.

Ben seemed crestfallen at the singer's rabid insistence.

"I don't see what the problem is. I can even sleep on the sofa if your roomie is home. I can change into my hetero self if you want me to. I just want to see where you live and I don't want to spend the next hour traveling home, especially not in this state."

Ben sighed. "Of course I won't make you go out to Brooklyn tonight Alekz. But...I have something I should tell you. I mean, I've been meaning to say it for the longest time, but I never found the right time."

It didn't take much to wind him up. "Oh, are you kidding me? You're gonna try this kind of shit out on me at this hour?" the singer said, a little shocked that he couldn't ignore the gaps in Ben's story anymore. "Let me guess, you still live with your parents?"

"No."

"Oh, you have a *boyfriend*," he said after an uncomfortable silence in which one and one finally seemed to make two for him. He started to think about the patterns of time they spent together in a way he hadn't before. It was either they were together nearly half the week or they otherwise went days without seeing each other. It seemed to point to Ben being in another relationship.

"Maybe it is easier if I do just take you home. Then you can see for yourself."

"Oh I hate this cryptic shit. You should just tell me now."

"No, it's best if you do actually see where I live. Come on."

Silently, and angrily, the singer followed Ben into a cab that zipped them out to Two Bridges, which Ben flatly explained was where his parents had bought him an apartment a few years earlier, before they themselves packed up and moved to Tel Aviv.

The lift took them to the fifth floor of a reasonably pristine building where Ben led the singer down an anodyne corridor to the furthestmost door, marked 504. The singer, who was still wearing his costume under his second hand woollen trench, and who was carrying a shiny silver bag chock full of his stage props and makeup, was still angry, but more curious than ever with this new sterile place where the plants were made of plastic and where Ben seemed to fit in more than he did.

When the 504 door was opened, it revealed an absurdly spacious apartment tastefully decorated in contemporary furnishings. There were a few paintings and framed prints on the wall and the lighting was soft, kind of welcoming.

The singer clocked the room and quickly zoomed in on a photo frame on a far lamp stand. He put his bag down and his bracelets jingled as he then paced across the room to inspect it. Ben simply stood by the door watching him, knowing what was about to come. He'd been down this road before a few years earlier. Yet, he felt like it was the only way to fully explain the circumstances.

Looking at the photo sent things momentarily crumbling around Alekz, along with his bravado. That standard, familiar combination of black and white outfits and those ringed fingers, so prominent that their symbolism is impossible to ignore. He couldn't imagine why he'd had to come to Manhattan to learn of this.

His every instinct was to tear Ben apart, not just because Ben had humiliated him with just a quick cross town cab ride, but because he'd thought somehow that they were pretty rock solid, especially after so long together. *The perfect gay couple*. Fooling around with someone on the side was one thing in his books. But being married was another entirely.

"She's really pretty," the singer finally said. "Is she here too? Did you bring me here to introduce me to her?"

"No, she's in Tel Aviv. Well actually, I think she's in Haifa at the moment."

"Same fucking shit," he said angrily. Then realising that he was verging on hysteria, he softened his tone. "She there on holiday?"

"Not really," Ben said, moving awkwardly over to the sofa and sitting on it.

"Well, you both look pretty young in that photo." He said it as if it was the only compliment he was capable of making.

"I was 23. Pretty much the same age you are now. It was arranged by our parents."

"The photo?" he quipped, bringing it over to the sofa.

"The marriage," Ben said sternly.

"Yes of course. So, what, was it 12 years ago?"

"Close enough to 14 actually," Ben said sadly.

A rare moment of pity washed over the singer.

"Did they organise it because the two of you were seeing each other or was it more a blind thing? Like, because you never brought girls home?"

"Something like that. The second option," Ben confessed.

"I see. I don't see any pictures of any kids."

"We don't have any. We don't have that kind of relationship."

The cynical, sarcastic side of him came to life again. "You mean you don't sleep together?"

"No. Never. Well, twice. To consecrate it I guess. Once on the wedding night. And once on the honeymoon."

"I see. But I don't see why you needed to bring me here when you could've just told me."

Ben motioned for him to follow, and then turned on the light in a room off the small corridor. It was a bedroom, swathed in pastel pinks and peach. He then crossed the corridor and turned on the light in the opposite room. The light revealed another bedroom, another double bed, this time decked out in blue and white linen.

"I see," the singer said. "Very conventional. Your taste or hers?"

"I didn't bring you here to give you a lesson on interior design. I brought you here because you needed to see things with your own eyes. Not just hear the parts you don't usually tune out when I try to explain things to you."

The singer nodded in belated acknowledgement.

"You can be flippant about things all you want. Or we can talk about them," Ben said. "She spends most of the year in Israel with her family. She's looking after her parents who aren't well and she only comes to New York for the spring. We just have this arrangement that works for us. She doesn't ask me any questions, I don't ask her any, but at the same time, neither of us throws our lives in the other's face."

The singer hated married men for the most part. He usually found them to be sanctimonious, always able to justify their behaviour, as if everything was acceptable based on *their* desires. In his experience, married men were as happy to justify a lack of interest in their spouses as they were willing to throw a little cash at him or someone like him. It was safe for them to pursue people like him who seemed to be living for the moment. But only from behind the sanctity of a life they could always fall back on, and that aspersions couldn't be cast onto. Because the certificate that binds two married people is more a license to do as they please than a symbol of a holy union.

He didn't care so much that they were so quick to render him *the other man* or even a *tart for hire*. What bothered him was that married types were rarely forthright or honest about things. Married men were always obsessed with creating elaborate worlds of smoke and mirrors and in hiding their wedding bands. Their behaviour was deemed acceptable because as a single you are owed nothing, and as a single gay guy even less. But a married man can have his cake and eat it too. Perhaps it was just naivety but the truth seems to present itself only once you're well and truly behind the web.

"I know we are going to separate eventually. I don't know when. We have talked about it. Probably after her parents pass. But in the meantime, our arrangement stays, and that's why I wanted you to come here, to see for yourself. I wanted you to see that it isn't a simple case of me being a married man looking for some fun on the side. I'm someone who did something for the good of two families. Mine wouldn't accept the road I was taking and in the end, I guess their approval was more important to me. So, I've spent half of my adult life tied to someone who I barely know but who I respect and love in my own way."

The singer's mind was all wrapped up in considering his options: to leave in a huff and raze everything. Leave Ben behind and raze everything. Leave the Brooklyn apartment and New York and raze everything on the way. Or, find a way to process things. Make them feasible, workable. Ben was a catch. Sweet, fun and sexy. They were poles apart but Ben was still capable of making Alekz melt inside, even if right now he was feeling demoted to the role of the unsophisticated, unequipped country cousin.

The New York Alekzandr had been so busy pushing himself, pushing against any and all resistance in order to create something for himself, that he sometimes was simply not capable of seeing how layered and precarious his position was. He was in New York because of Ben even if he'd already proven to himself, at his paltry 22 years of age, that he was capable of making things happen when his will pushed him hard enough. He'd been reduced to this kind of moment before. Where despite his complicity in things, he still felt worthless. Like a play thing.

But his feelings for Ben made things different this time. His instinct may have been incessantly telling him to walk away (and to raze the apartment while he was at it), but his heart and his head were in the grip of confusion and realism. In a quieter moment his heart might've reminded him that this, *my dear*, is the price one pays for living an interesting life.

But at that moment, his inner voice was only too willing to remind him that, here, in Ben's comfortable, clean, organized apartment, he was like a trumpy piece of trade. A bejewelled, kohled and outrageously dressed intruder. The kind of person who knows full well that access to these kinds of interiors is always based on getting paid to get naked and nasty in them before being eventually asked to leave.

And there's nothing more isolating than when even your own insides are not on your side. When your heart and your head just want to disown you because they've grown tired of you not listening to them when you should've and they refuse to help you clean up the mess once everything around you has burnt down.

His inner ear was ready and waiting for pretty much anything. Arrangements of how and when he would need to vacate his apartment, of how they would go about avoiding each other and of how they would have to forget one another. He was even prepared for Ben to ask him to leave at that very moment.

But what he wasn't prepared for was Ben turning to him and holding him as he did in that very moment. Telling him that he was important. That he was everything after having had to sacrifice so much. And not to worry, because together, they'd get beyond this. That he *mustn't* go.

He wasn't prepared for Ben's kind words, which were words that he didn't even have inside of himself. And so, he did something he'd promised himself he would never do. Even in the most trying of circumstances during the last four years. He cried. Not because Ben, the love of his life was married or had broken his heart, but because, in spite of how shitty he'd been in pushing Ben into this corner,

Ben was still showing him the kind of compassion and respect that he himself wasn't capable of. And he cried, because the tears somehow softened the cruel realisation that some married men were somehow a force that he couldn't reckon with. An irresistible force of good, that despite all the smoke and mirrors, was so strong that he was powerless to resist.

Like what you've read?

Feel free to share it around.

***Vinyl Tiger* is available to order via Amazon.**

Vinyl Tiger

Product Details

- **File Size:** 2625 KB
- **Print Length:** 629 pages
- **Simultaneous Device Usage:** Unlimited
- **Publisher:** Dave Di Vito; 1 edition (November 16, 2015)
- **Publication Date:** November 16, 2015
- **Sold by:** Amazon Digital Services, Inc.
- **Language:** English
- **ASIN:** B016KTU9KK

More information at: <http://www.amazon.com/dp/B016KTU9KK>

Dave Di Vito

Have comments or feedback that you'd like to share?

Contact Dave via: Email at: ddvinyltiger@gmail.com

the Paperlesstiger blog: www.paperlesstiger.net

Twitter [@DDVinyltiger](https://twitter.com/DDVinyltiger)

And get extra insights into the book and other updates about Vinyl Tiger on the Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/vinyltiger?ref=hl>