



# Echoes in the Living Room

*Twenty Years On*

A BASSLINE ROMANCE STORY

# Echoes in the Living Room: Twenty Years On

The marquee went up crooked, came down, and went up straight the second time, mostly because Gav refused to let anyone else near the guy ropes.

"I rigged a sound system in a field with three plug sockets and a tractor battery in '96," he said, knees in the wet grass of Stuart and Sarah's back garden, "I think I can manage a gazebo."

"You said that twenty minutes ago and it fell on Jules," Stuart called from the patio, holding two folding chairs like a man who had learned, over twenty years of marriage, exactly how much he was allowed to help.

"It grazed me," Jules said. "Barely. I've had worse from a glowstick."

She said it the way she said most things now — light, quick, already moving on to the next thing — but Sarah caught the look that passed under it anyway. Jules had landed in Sheffield for the weekend with one overnight bag and the particular brightness of someone who'd spent the drive up deciding not to talk about the divorce. Sarah let her have it. There'd be a moment later, probably with wine, probably after eleven, when it would come out properly. There always was, with Jules. You just had to wait for the gap in the noise.

For now, the noise was the point. Twenty years to the week since they'd met under the lasers at Gatecrasher, and Sarah had wanted exactly one thing: not a hotel function room, not a string quartet, but the back garden, fairy lights in the apple tree, and everyone who'd actually been there the first time around.

Everyone who could make it, anyway.

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"Have you heard from Dave?" Sarah asked, propping her phone against the trestle table where it could be checked without looking like she was checking it.

"Last I heard he was 'sorting flights,'" Stuart said, with the specific weight of a man who had learned not to trust that phrase from Dave. "Which could mean he's at the gate or could mean he's googling Koh Phangan to Phuket bus times."

Big Dave had been threatening to come back for the party since March, and true to form had also threatened, in the same string of messages, to send a goat as a gift instead, "because flights are mental money and a goat is for life, Stu, think about it," followed twenty minutes later by a voice note insisting he'd actually booked something, he was definitely coming, he just needed to "sort a couple of things first." Nobody had been able to get a straight answer out of

him in a week. He'd left Sheffield two years back — not dramatically, there'd been no bust-up, no big leaving do, just a slow drift that started with a yoga teacher training course he did "for something to do" after his knee finally gave out on five-a-side and ended with him not really coming back, just visiting. He was somewhere outside Koh Phangan now, building a retreat one bungalow at a time, and he sent voice notes instead of texts, always far too long, always somehow still recognisably the bloke who'd once talked a farmer into letting four hundred ravers onto his land for the price of a crate of lager and a promise to leave it tidier than they found it.

They had. Just about.

"Right," Gav said, dusting grass off his knees, "marquee's up, sound's up, and before anyone asks — yes, I brought a system. No, it's not the size of the one from the field. Calm down."

"Nobody's calm down-ing you, Gav," Jules said. "We're delighted. We've missed the bass shaking the fillings out of our teeth."

"It's a tasteful amount of bass."

"There's no such thing and you know it."

This was the rhythm of them, still, after everything — Gav building, Jules ribbing, the two of them somehow never quite a couple and never quite not something, twenty-odd years of near-misses that had settled, eventually, into the easiest friendship either of them had. Gav had Pete now, three years in and still doing that thing where he found an excuse to mention him every fifteen minutes, and a sound hire business that ran half of Sheffield's weddings and all of its fortieths. Jules had a flat on her own for the first time since university, a decree absolute four months old, and a tendency to talk slightly too fast about how fine she was with it.

Sarah watched Gav glance toward the gate every few minutes and didn't say anything. Pete had texted that morning — work thing, might be late, might not make it at all — and Gav had read it twice and put his phone face-down on the table, which was as close as Gav came to admitting something had unsettled him.

Sarah's phone buzzed on the table. A message from Dave: *boarding!! see you in a few hours x.* Then, ninety seconds later: *actual flight not boarding. delayed. don't panic. THE GOAT IS STILL AN OPTION.*

"He's delayed," Sarah announced to the garden at large, "and he's bringing up the goat again."

"Tell him no goat," Jules called back. "We've got nowhere to put a goat."

"I have told him no goat four separate times this week."

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By eight, the garden had filled up properly, and the noise from upstairs had not gone down, despite three separate attempts at bedtime.

"They can hear the bass through the floor," Sarah said, coming back out for the second time with a wine glass she hadn't actually managed to drink from yet. "It's like trying to put a couple of meerkats to sleep next to a generator."

Scott and Matt were six, technically meant to be in bed an hour ago, and currently visible as two small shapes pressed against the upstairs window, watching the garden the way kids watch something they've been told, with total injustice, that they're not allowed to join.

"Whose idea was it to name them after DJs," Jules said, not for the first time, "if you didn't want them to grow up wanting to be at the party."

"Mine," Sarah said, entirely unrepentant. "Scott Bond got us through some very bad shifts at the warehouse and Matt Hardwick's sets at Gatecrasher are the reason I can still hear out of one ear properly. It felt right."

"It felt mental," Stuart said, "and I said so at the time, and you didn't listen, and now we've got two six-year-olds who think 'Adagio for Strings' is a lullaby."

"It is a lullaby. It's the best lullaby ever written."

Upstairs, the curtain twitched, and two faces reappeared, undeterred.

It was Jules who started it, really — not engineered, not planned, just the kind of accident parties produce if you leave them alone long enough.

"Right," she announced, planting herself behind Gav's decks with the unbothered confidence of a woman three glasses of Prosecco deep, "Sarah Mitchell, you have not touched a pair of headphones since 1998 and that ends tonight."

"I have a mortgage now, Jules, I can't just—"

"You produced an entire set for that field, don't you dare tell me you've forgotten how the crossfader works."

Sarah went red, then went anyway, because some things you don't actually need persuading on, you just need permission. Gav talked her through the gain on his newer kit, muttering something about how the desk was "basically the same logic, just shinier," and the first thing she

dropped wasn't even smooth, came in half a bar early and stumbled the beatmatch, and the whole garden cheered anyway because nobody there had come for precision.

"See," she said, breathless, grinning properly for the first time all night, "I've still got it."

"You've got forty percent of it," Stuart said, but he was already rolling his sleeves up, already crossing the patio toward her, because if Sarah was having a go there was no version of tonight where he wasn't getting his hands on a fader too.

They'd just got into something decent, Stuart riding the next track in clumsily but in time, when Sarah's phone lit up on top of the monitor speaker, screen turned to the garden, Dave's name filling it edge to edge.

"He's video calling," Sarah said, half a beat from laughing already. "Why is he video calling, he never video calls—"

"Because he's got something to show you, knowing him," Jules said, already reaching to answer it before Sarah could stop her, and the screen filled with the inside of a taxi, streetlights sliding past, and Dave's face far too close to the camera, sunburnt and grinning.

"I'M NEARLY THERE," he bellowed, loud enough that half the garden turned toward the phone instead of the decks. "Tell the cabbie I'm good for it, he doesn't believe me, I keep telling him I'm good for it—"

It was the noise of him, more than anything, that did it — Stuart laughing too hard to keep his hand steady on the crossfader, half-turning toward the phone instead of the desk, and somewhere in the scramble the queue jumped, the wrong track loaded, and four bars of a build came rolling out of the speakers before anyone had touched a thing on purpose. A snare roll. And then it dropped — that bassline, the one everyone in the garden over the age of thirty knew in their bones before their brains caught up — and for one half-second there was a kind of held breath across the whole lawn.

"Oh, you're joking," Sarah said, and started laughing before she'd even decided to, phone still in Jules's hand, Dave's tinny voice yelling something about the universe wanting that track to play.

Stuart took her hand off the desk and pulled her into the middle of the marquee instead, the way he had been doing, in one form or another, since 1996, and twenty years folded up small enough to fit in his palm.

"Last time I heard this," he said, "we were standing in a field with no shoes."

"You had shoes. You lost one."

"I lost one. That's different."

Jules whooped from somewhere near the marquee pole, the particular unselfconscious sound she used to make at nineteen and apparently still had in her when nobody was watching her closely enough to remind her she was meant to be the divorced one tonight, the one people were being gentle with.

That was when the side gate banged open, and Gav appeared through it walking backwards, arms spread like a man unveiling something, talking too fast and too loud even by his standards.

"Right, so, I need everyone to stay very calm," he said, "because I have been planning this since March and I will not have it ruined by anyone being weird about it—"

"Gav, what have you done," Jules said.

"I haven't *done* anything, I have *facilitated*—" and then he stepped aside, and there, looking faintly bewildered to be standing in a back garden in Sheffield holding a bottle of Beck's someone had thrust at him at the door, was Scott Bond.

The actual Scott Bond.

There was a full two seconds of total silence, which for this particular garden, on this particular night, might have been a record — broken almost immediately by Dave's voice, still bellowing out of the phone in Jules's hand, completely unaware he'd missed the moment.

"Is that the front gate? Stu, is that my taxi at your gate, tell him I'm GOOD FOR IT—"

And then the actual gate banged again, properly this time, and Big Dave arrived in the flesh roughly four seconds behind his own phone call, rucksack on one shoulder, sunburn across his nose, sandals slapping the patio, still mid-sentence to a taxi driver who was no longer there to hear it. He clocked the garden, the marquee, the man standing next to Gav with a bottle of Beck's, and stopped dead.

"...is that Scott Bond?"

"Hello, mate," Scott said, faintly bewildered all over again.

"You're Scott Bond. In Stuart's garden. I have flown nine thousand miles and *Scott Bond* is in Stuart's garden." Dave turned, fully, to the man himself, hand already out, all business. "Listen, mate, I don't suppose you've got twenty quid on you, have you, only the taxi's still running and I've got precisely nothing in sterling—"

"Dave," Sarah said, "don't ask Scott Bond for money."

"I'm not *asking*, I'm *offering an exchange*—" and from somewhere in the rucksack he produced a fistful of crumpled notes, purple and orange, pressed them earnestly into Scott's hand. "Here. Two hundred baht. That's got to be worth something, that's nearly six quid, I looked it up on the plane—"

"I can't take a taxi to Leeds on baht, Dave," Scott said, already laughing, already clearly fond of him in the alarming, instant way people tended to become fond of Dave within about ninety seconds of meeting him.

"It's not for the taxi to Leeds, it's for *my* taxi, it's still outside—"

"You want me to pay for your taxi. With money you're giving me. That isn't mine."

"I mean, when you say it like that—"

Stuart was already pushing through the crowd with a twenty held above his head like a man delivering a ransom, and the whole garden was somewhere between cheering and crying with laughter, and Dave, still clutching his useless fistful of baht, turned to find Sarah and pulled her into a hug that lifted her clean off the ground before he'd even properly arrived.

"Happy anniversary," he said, into her hair. "Sorry I'm not skint, by the way, in case anyone thought that — I'm not skint. I'm just spectacularly unprepared. There's a difference."

"There really isn't," Jules said, arriving at his shoulder, glass in hand, shoving the phone — still live, Dave's own taxi-eye view of himself frozen mid-gesture on the screen — into his free hand. "You're still on the phone to yourself, by the way."

Dave looked down at the screen, at his own face looking back at him from four seconds earlier, and hung up on himself with enormous dignity.

"He's asleep," Sarah said to Scott, then immediately, "well — he's meant to be asleep," because the curtain upstairs had just twitched again, harder this time, and two small faces had reappeared at the glass with an expression that suggested bedtime, as a concept, was now permanently and irretrievably over.

"Get him down here," Scott said. "I'm not leaving without saying hello to the lad who's named after me. That's just manners."

So Stuart went up, and came back down two minutes later with a six-year-old on his hip in dinosaur pyjamas, hair stuck up on one side, utterly wide awake despite forty minutes of

insisting otherwise, and Matt trailing behind in matching pyjamas, refusing on principle to be left out of anything Scott was getting.

"This is Scott Bond," Stuart said, crouching, "he's a DJ, like the music Mummy plays sometimes."

Scott crouched too, which involved his knees in a way he was clearly going to feel about later, and held out a hand with the same easy showmanship he'd have used walking out to ten thousand people. "Alright, mate. I hear we've got the same name."

Scott considered this with the enormous gravity six-year-olds bring to enormous questions, looked at the bottle in the man's hand, looked at the marquee, looked back at his namesake, and said, with total confidence, "Are you famous?"

"A bit," Scott Bond said.

"Are you more famous than Daddy?"

"Don't answer that," Stuart said, "we've got a fragile ego situation."

Matt, not to be outdone, announced that he was named after Matt Hardwick and was therefore "basically also famous," which nobody in the garden had the heart to argue with, and for two full minutes the entire party watched two children in dinosaur pyjamas hold court with a man whose records had soundtracked their parents falling in love, before Sarah finally scooped them both up — one under each arm, protesting loudly, already half-asleep against her shoulder by the time she reached the back door — and carried the whole, ridiculous, perfect shape of it back inside.

Scott Bond stayed another hour after that, longer than anyone had any right to expect, mostly because Gav wouldn't let him leave without "just one tune, for old times," and because Scott, three lagers in and clearly enjoying himself more than a man with a hotel booked in Leeds had any business doing, didn't take much persuading.

"I've actually got something," he said, pulling his phone out, scrolling. "Did a rework a while back. Never play it out, it's a bit — sentimental, for a set. But seeing as it's an anniversary." He plugged in, found it, looked up at the marquee, at the lot of them. "This one's called 'Not Over Yet,' in case anyone needs reminding."

It came in soft, nothing like the original drop — strings first, the vocal stretched out and patient, building slow the way the night itself had built, and Sarah felt Stuart's hand find hers before she'd even turned to look for him.

"Come here," he said, and pulled her in close under the fairy lights, the two of them barely moving, just turning slowly the way you do when you've got nowhere else to be and nobody you'd rather be there with.

"Twenty years," she said, into his shoulder.

"Twenty years." He pulled back just enough to look at her properly, the marquee lit gold behind her, Gav and Jules and Dave and a man who used to be a poster on her bedroom wall all watching without pretending not to. "You know what I keep thinking about? That night. All of it — the lasers, the crowd, four hundred people with their hands up. And somehow yours found mine."

"You make it sound very romantic for a field that smelled of cider."

"It was romantic. In the rise of the synths, you were gravity." He said it plainly, not like a line, just like something that had been sitting in him for two decades waiting for the right tune to let it out. "Still are."

Sarah didn't say anything clever back. She just held on, and let the rework carry them both somewhere just slightly out of reach of 2016, and somewhere just slightly inside it too — which was, she thought, exactly where they'd always lived.

By the time the track faded, Scott was already packing up, waving off a fresh round of thank-yous with the easy grace of a man who'd done this a thousand times and still meant it every time.

"Right, I'm off before Dave tries to pay me in baht again," he said, shaking Stuart's hand, then Gav's — pressing his number into Gav's phone himself, watching him save it under "LEGEND — DO NOT LOSE" with visible approval — then, last, pulling Sarah into a quick, genuine hug. "Tell the lad upstairs I said he can keep the name. Good investment."

"Don't encourage him," Sarah said, laughing, watching him go.

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It was gone eleven by the time the marquee thinned to its last stubborn dozen, and Dave, several hours and one borrowed twenty quid into being back on home soil, still hadn't left the decks.

"I'm just saying," he was telling Jules, fader in one hand, sandals abandoned somewhere on the lawn, "I flew nine thousand miles, I think I'm allowed a go."

"You're not allowed anywhere near that desk, you don't even live in this hemisphere."

"I live in this hemisphere *emotionally*." He put an arm round her anyway, easy as breathing, and for a second the years folded down to nothing at all — five of them in a field with no shoes and too much ambition, except now there was a mortgage somewhere under it, and a decree absolute, and a kitchen extension, and a retreat with bungalows half-built on a hillside, all of it stacked up invisibly underneath one bassline still rolling out into a Sheffield night.

Pete had reappeared by the gate twenty minutes earlier, travel-creased and apologetic, and Gav's whole face had changed before he'd even said anything, before Pete had even reached him. The two of them stood close by the fence now, not really part of the noise, just present in it, the way the best part of any party is sometimes the bit happening quietly at the edge of it.

"Same time next year?" Stuart said, arm round Sarah, watching the lawn — two small lights still glowing behind the curtain upstairs where neither boy was actually asleep yet, Dave holding court by the decks with a fader in one hand and no shoes on, owing twenty quid and not remotely bothered about it, Gav and Pete by the gate, Jules laughing at something Dave had said with her head tipped back the way she used to laugh at nineteen.

"Same time every year," Sarah said. "That's the deal. That's always been the deal."

The bassline rolled on under everything, slower now, softer, the way it always did eventually — not gone, just grown up, still moving the room it was in, and the people who'd never really left it.