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Diamond Star Halo

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TEQUILA, 'STALLION BOYS'

RECORDED ROCKFARM AUGUST 1977

TRACK LISTING

DUST ROAD BLUES - 5.26 A. Connor / J. Connor

STALLION BOYS - 4.54 J. Connor

SILVER STUDDED NIGHT 5.42 A. Connor / J. Connor / H. Connor / C. Connor / J. Connor / D. Connor / K. Connor / T. Connor / J. Connor

PRAIRIE GAL - 4.59 A. Connor

KENTUCKY KARTWHEEL - 3.05 A. Connor / J. Connor / H. Connor / C. Connor / J. Connor / D. Connor / K. Connor / T. Connor / J. Connor

ON MY FAITHFUL KNEES - 4.53 A. Connor / J. Connor / H. Connor / C. Connor / J. Connor / D. Connor / K. Connor / T. Connor / J. Connor

LITTLE GIRL - 3.32 A. Connor

SILVER BUS BLUES - 4.33 A. Connor / J. Connor

THE BOY'S SONG - 3.29 J. Connor

GOODBYE JENNY - 2.27 A. Connor

PART ONE:

1977

1.

The one thing my family can agree on – and what I can *swear* is true – is that Fred Connor came to us, we, the Llewelyns of Rockfarm, in the parched summer of 1977.

It was a big year for us. It was the beginning of it all.

First the bin men didn't come, and then it was the Queen's Jubilee (though we were Welsh, so that didn't mean much). When my big brother Vincent stole Mum's safety pins to sing along to a different *God Save the Queen*, our Nana Lew said times were shifting. When Elvis Presley, the King of Rock 'n' Roll, died, Nana told us *everything* had shifted.

After Elvis died, Nana said the Evil Eye was out, so she taught me how to give dead legs and snakebites, and how to pray backwards to her Saints in her *capel* made of bones, nestled like a shoulder blade into her hill. After Elvis, my mother stopped worrying about stones falling on her children; my baby sister Molly learned to growl, and Vincent wore Mum's cheesecloth dress.

After Elvis, we found Fred Connor.

It was a day when the beech leaves were just thinking of colour and change; a day when the warm rain that pounded Rockfarm bubbled and spat. It was a day like any other day when we found Fred Connor wrapped up in a red cloak on one of our guest beds.

This baby was almost breathless; and he was the smallest I'd

ever seen. Mum had us kids huddle round that piss-yellow candlewick cover to really take him in, and when she touched Fred's forehead with her cold wedding band, he opened his black eyes. I didn't understand what she meant when she squealed, 'Kids, come look! He's part seal-pup, part bloody Heathcliff.'

I do now.

Of course we all knew where Fred had come from, and it wasn't from the birds and the bees and the shaky knees of our parents: our dad hadn't picked him up, an urchin, one dark and stormy night, and Fred didn't fly half-cocked from Never Never Land, either. No, Fred Connor arrived at our farm weeks before with an American band called Tequila. Though Fred didn't arrive on his own two feet: Fred Connor kind of *floated*.

This is where I'll start then, though the truth is I don't know where to begin because I came out backwards.

'Arse-wise,' Nana Lew calls it; so maybe the story begins with Rockfarm: this home I was born to, this recording studio built by my freckle-handed father on his own Welsh mud.

Rockfarm: a place where rock stars in sunglasses roam, a place where farm cats have toes that run up their legs like pegs on a line.

My Rockfarm.

1

By the time the silver bus turned off the main road that would lead you to the rest of Wales, we were standing in a line in the courtyard. We had walked up the track from Nana's Big House, past her capel, past her glistening fields, because it was time.

Everything, even the crickets and the old bones beneath us, seemed to be waiting.

The courtyard was square. At one end were the stables with our horses, and at the other were the stables Dad had converted into a recording studio: drum solos and playback were our lullabies up here. This was where the bands lived. You see, Rockfarm was a grand farm, and it once belonged to an English Bastard. Now it was just us Llewelyns, and our guests.

A red chicken pecked at a plectrum in the dust at my feet, and I stared at its fleshy crown jiggling with each stab. I thought child-thoughts (you know – those blurry, tasty wisps of things that jump in pictures, fast as the score on a pinball machine).

I was wondering if chickens could swim.

I was wondering if I could eat cowpats.

I was wondering why my dad had a farm if he wasn't a farmer.

He was standing with us, my dad. My dad was conker-eyed. My dad was Ivan Comfort Llewelyn. Nana named him that because she knew her only son would be a comfort to *all* womankind.

‘Where is this band from, Ivan?’ my mother asked. Mum was balancing my baby sister Molly on a creamy hip. Mum and Molly were twins: dark glossy hair and dairy skin.

Mum glittered. Molly squeaked.

Dad grinned at them. ‘They’re all the way from America, Dolly love. Somewhere down South.’

‘All that way just to come here. Oh, Ivan.’

I felt the flutter between my parents: a warm shiver, like you get stepping into a hot bath.

‘And did you hear, Dolly? The eight of them are brothers.’

‘No!’

‘It’s true.’

‘That’s a lot of feeding.’

Dad laughed. ‘You can do it, love – you’ll cook up a storm.’

He was right. This was what my mother did. My mother cooked for the rock stars, the bands, and she cooked cleverly. My mum matched taste with sound, and the musicians who recorded here came to depend upon her. In fact, my mother’s recipes were encyclopaedic, they were prophetic, and she wrote them all down in a book called *Dolly Llewelyn’s Book of Dishes*. You’ll know a tune, maybe more, because my mother has fed anthems, classics, and one-hit wonders. Cross my heart and hope to die that without my mother’s experiments with saffron and nutmeg, some of our best-loved songs would never have been.

I felt that flutter between my parents again. Our parents fluttered a lot.

In the corner by the real stables, Nana Lew was hosing down the horses. She was done with the praying and the waiting at her capel. She threw the hose into the humbug pattern of her

collies, and the dogs bit on the jet of water, barking with pleasure. Ducks jumped and skimmed onto our pea-soup pond, our chickens squawked and scattered, and Nana Lew marched towards us.

It always made me happy, Nana coming closer. She'd be circled with her sea of black and white collies, yipping and yapping and panting with swollen tongues. She'd be a little puffed and oiled with sweat, but her wide thin mouth, and the tombstone teeth she'd got mail-order from America, well, they made me want to smile as wide and as white as her.

'Room for one more?' she asked, because we were standing in that line: first Dad, then Mum holding Molly, then me, then my older brother Vincent. The hem of Vincent's long dress trembled in the hot wind, tickling my leg. Vincent was thirteen and the dress was black satin, probably Nana's.

'What's the band called again?' Mum asked.

'Tequila, love,' said Dad.

'What?'

'*Te-queee-la*.'

'That's a stupid bloody name, Ivan.'

'Had Americans before,' Nana told them. 'Noisy buggers. Some of them go running come the mornings. In their daps. Funny lot.'

I watched my nana and my mother. I listened to the air between them. My mother and grandmother didn't mix. Mum said they didn't *emulsify*.

'Nothing wrong with looking after yourself,' Mum said.

'Hmmm,' Nana sniffed.

'Exciting, isn't it, Mam?' Dad rubbed his hands together and I could hear the hard work in them: he was always working

hard at getting Mum and Nana to love each other. Dad shook his red locks while Nana folded her arms across her enormous chest, nudging a palm under each sagging breast.

'Eight brothers is it Ivan?' she said. 'It's a bad number is eight. Seven 'ud be better.'

Mum frowned at her mother-in-law.

'Don't make that face, Dolly. I know my numbers and what they should be. They're bad luck this lot. Bringing it with them.'

'Don't start, Gladys, please.'

'Now girls.' Dad put up a freckled hand. I was the only one of us who was freckle, wax and marmalade like Dad; our red hair didn't grow, it *sprouted*.

'Our Halo sees it,' Nana muttered. 'Just look at her. Fretting.'

'You want the loo, Halo?' Mum asked.

They were both right – something was fizzing in my stomach sure as Nana's nine-day-old stew. I had to put a hand between my legs.

The courtyard was suddenly still. It was anticipation. Beyond the west stone wall our green fields were caught mid-sparkle, bright as light on a dragonfly's back. There, Nana's curly-horned sheep froze, mid-munch. I took a breath of the still quiet.

It was then we heard the bus rumble closer.

'It's them!' Nana growled.

We watched the bus glide under the red-brick arch: it was big, and it was silver.

'Expensive,' Nana Lew said, pointing. 'American.'

It turned, popping gravel. As it did, we waved. We waved hard and we stared at our stretching reflections on its shining silver

surface: on the blacked-out windows. We were flag-wavers at a homecoming parade, cheering on the cavalcade, and for a moment we were frozen like that.

The bus shuddered to a stop.

I could feel the heat off it, like it had driven all the way from America. I wiggled on the spot, my stomach burning, and tried to imagine who was inside: what rock star might be puzzled at the sight of a wholesome family, waving. I knew that soon a band would stumble out; soon they'd jump at the whinny of Ziggy and Stardust, our Welsh cobs. Maybe they'd be frightened by the chickens or too stoned to cope with ducks, but by day three they'd be asking to borrow saddles and feeding the pig chocolate.

'It brings out the child in them,' Mum once told us, 'because even to the greatest rock musicians in the world, a lamb is a lamb and a horse is a horse.' It was true, and so I wondered if I could depend upon this band, *Te-quee-la*, to run down to our house to ask where the tack room was, where the horse brushes were kept, and was it wrong to feed the chickens chicken crisps? Maybe it was as inevitable as me coming out arse-wise. Maybe it was as predictable as the shiver that now trembled in my stomach like a frightened hound, telling me that change was on her way.

As the bus hummed and my family drew a collective breath, its silver concertina doors sprung open.

It was a girl who waddled out first. She smiled at us as she held on to the chrome rails, and when she jumped from the last step, dust blew up. I put up a hand and she waved back.

'Hey kiddo,' she said to me.

She stood against the hot metal of the bus, one foot flat on its silver surface and one knee out. She wore a long red dress and I could just see the poke of black cowboy boots beneath the hem. The dress was tight across her tummy, though, and she couldn't close her sheepskin waistcoat. The thing was, her stomach was enormous. This girl looked like the sheep I saw blow up in Nana Lew's field: it blew up and up and groaned, until Dad had to stab it through the belly with an ice pick.

Bloat, our dad said.

I stared and wondered if he'd have to do the same here, then Mum pinched me and whispered how it was rude to stare, that it was a baby in the girl's stomach. But she wasn't much more than a baby herself. I poked out my own tummy and puffed out my cheeks. I stared down, trying to spot my feet. Vincent twitched beside me, electric.

The eight brothers were jumping out, one by one.

Vincent gasped.

Their smell wafted to us: it was cheesecake, smoke, and peanuts. They stretched out the cramp of the bus and we saw these brothers had honey-brown faces and beards of gold that glinted in the setting sun. Eight suddenly seemed a large number as they stood around the girl, protective as wolves on a kill, their blue eyes somehow the same. These brothers were huge.

The most remarkable thing about them, though, was their clothes. They all wore white suits, but these suits were embroidered with pictures as colourful as the pictures in Molly's books. On their lapels were pink and naked girls; on their arms and thighs were great, green cactus trees, silver stars, and big white pills. The stars sparkled and the naked girls seemed to be dancing as the brothers fidgeted. My family, for a small

moment, was speechless. One brother turned to gaze out at the courtyard, and I saw a big red cross and a running black horse sewn onto his wide back. I was sure I could hear cantering hooves. These men were wearing stories, and both the brothers and the stories were beautiful.

'This is it, huh?' one brother said.

'Guess so.'

'Man.'

'Where is this, anyways?'

The girl laughed and the eight brothers with beards of gold laughed with her. They all had very good teeth.

'Welcome!' Dad finally said.

'Welcome!' Mum smiled and held out a pale hand. 'I'm Dolly. This is Ivan.' The late sun shone through her cheesecloth dress; Mum didn't care for underwear. I saw a shiver ripple through the men as she moved towards them. They towered above her and they stared.

Most people liked to stare at my mother. Around here they said Dolly Halcyon Palmer-Llewelyn – my mum – was good enough to eat. They said she had cheeks like apples, eyes like chocolate, hair glossy as liquorice sticks, lips plump as cherries: all the old clichés. Even Nana Lew agreed that with a smear of sugared butter her son's choice was good enough to suck. The trouble was, sometimes people bit my mother. Couldn't help it, they said. I watched these brothers in their painted suits very carefully, because Mum had told us about the man in Rhyl who'd nibbled at her fingers in the caravan park until a nip-too-far drew blood. She'd told us about the lady in Lydmouth post office who licked her bare shoulder in the queue. 'Like a horse with a salt block, she was,' Mum said. The

thing was, I worried that my mother *let* these people lick and bite her. And because of this, I worried how long she would last. As if she was a cake, a lasagne, a piece of moist quiche, I wondered which one of us would gobble the last slice.

The prettiest brother took a step towards her. 'Abraham Connor, ma'am,' he said. He nodded a little bow, but he didn't bite.

Mum turned to the next.

'Jed Connor.'

'Hale Connor.'

'Caleb Connor, ma'am.'

'Jared Connor.'

'Duke Connor.'

'Knox Connor, ma'am.'

'Trueman Connor, ma'am. Happy to make your acquaintance.'

The men giggled, shy. Then Dad held up a freckled hand as if he was trying to stop something. 'You must be exhausted. Come inside, let's show you the place,' he said.

Ziggy, tied up and wet from Nana's hosing, began her neighing from the stable end of the courtyard, and the girl moved away from the bus. 'Y'all got horses,' she said, as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

'Shall we get you settled? Supper will be on soon.' Mum walked towards the studio and the chalets where the band would sleep. The brothers and my family followed her, without question or pause.

The girl stayed where she was. She held on to her belly with small hands.

'You talk, kiddo?'

I shrugged.

'That your momma?'

I nodded.

'Who's the crazy lady with the dogs?'

'Nana.'

She sniffed hard and stared hard. She had a voice like she was chewing dough and toffee at the same time. 'What they call you?' she asked.

'Halo.'

'Huh?'

'My name is "Halo".' I kicked my left foot behind me and caught it with my left hand. I hopped.

Halo.

It was a funny name but it was mine. I thought of how some called me *Hey-law*, depending on which side of our border I stood, Welsh or English. 'Come over by *yure*, *Hey-law* love.' Or, 'Come here, Halo.' One foot here and one foot there. In and out and shake it all about, oooh! The hokey-cokey! My Nana Lew says border life means you got your fingers in two pies but you don't ever get to eat.

The girl frowned. 'You holy?' A duck splashed onto the pond. 'Believe in the Lord?'

'My nana has a capel. Across the track there, see.' I pointed.

'Must be holy with a name like that.'

I wanted to tell her it was all Mum's idea. For the first two years of my life I was 'Baby', then Mum decided on 'Halo'. 'Diamond Star Halo' to be exact, because she loved Marc Bolan and T.Rex, because I learned to walk to 'Get It On' and Mum said I was dirty sweet and I was her girl.

It was getting dark. Lights flashed on and off in the buildings that squared the courtyard. Dad was giving the brothers the tour.

I let my foot go. 'Why do they look the same?' I asked as I watched the band through the big windows.

'They're brothers, dummy.' The girl sighed, just a tiny sigh, and turned towards the stable. 'You ride, kiddo?'

'My horse is called Donny.'

'Cute.'

'Mum said my horse was a crazy little horse so we called him Donny. He's small like me.'

The girl laughed and frowned at the same time. 'Shit,' she said, 'what *is* this place?'

'Rockfarm.'

'Got that right.' Her thumbs rubbed her belly in small circles. She tapped it.

'Are you the singer?' I asked.

'Yeah. Abe and me, we write the songs too.'

'Which one is Abe?'

'Abraham Connor. The handsome-est. The lead. My *husband*.'

'How old are you?'

'None of your business, kid. I'm old enough to be legal,' she laughed. 'In some states, anyways.' She walked towards me, and I saw how young she really was. 'You know, you talk funny. You're cute though. Crazy hair.' She pointed at my soft red sprouts. 'We'll go riding. You sure you ride? You look real young.'

'What's your name?'

'Jenny.' She smiled a freckled smile and her teeth were strong as a horse's.

It was then I did a strange thing: I lurched at her and put both of my hands flat on her drum-tight belly; I don't know why. I felt a jolt like the jolt I got from the electric fence round

Nana's sheep. My palms fizzed so much I wondered if this girl was full of nettles.

'Hey!' she cried. Then she grinned, as if people did this to her every day. 'OK, how's about you two get properly introduced? What is it, kiddo, "Halo", right? So Halo, this here's my boy Fred. Fred, this here is Miss Halo, a crazy name for a kid with crazy hair.'

'How do you know that's a boy?'

'Just know.' She blew a kiss to her stomach. 'I always did like the name "Fred". You like it, kiddo?'

'I suppose.'

Jenny pinched my cheek, and waddled off.

In the summer wind, dirt I called mine warmed my bare feet like puppies' tongues. Nana Lew told me there were Roman drains and catacombs in the earth beneath Rockfarm. She said catacombs were corridors piled up with the bones of all the English Bastards that ever were, and she said that meant our underground corridors went on for ever. When she was drunk on her sloe gin or her apple wine she told us that along these passageways of skulls and bones – that weren't *her* ancestors – there was a gateway to hell and good bloody riddance.

Through the lit windows I watched the blown-up girl move through the rehearsal room, and then disappear into my dad's studio.