

# A Different Slant of Light

THE SEQUEL TO  
*INCOMPLETE*



**J.D. LEVIN**



**A DIFFERENT  
SLANT OF LIGHT**

**ANOVEL**

J.D. LEVIN

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Once again, this is for my daughters,  
**Alexandra and Charlotte.**  
You're more important to me than rock and roll.  
Thank you for making my life complete.



**INTRO RIFF**





# PROLOGUE

## “Sail Away”



**W**inning the war is only the first half of the story. Growing up, we encounter countless books and songs and films that culminate in the hero’s long-awaited moment of glory. We salivate over these stories, ascribing mythical qualities to the fictionalized fantasies that we devour like movie theater popcorn.

If you’re anything like me, you probably geek out over the sublimely static story arc: the mild-mannered zero transforms into a superhuman hero, overcomes the overwhelming odds, and rides off into the sunset with true love in tow. Perhaps you invest a few hours of your life into the intricately woven threads of a hero’s journey, tracing lines of lineage across the fabric of the narrative. Along the way, you witness the protagonist ascending to the apex of the mountain and basking in the radiant glow of the humble heavens overhead – or, in my case, ending up with a major label recording contract and a hit song. You would think that such an ending would wrap up the disparate strands in a tidy bow: the protagonist lives happily ever after with his beautiful wife and his everlasting rock and roll glory, ensuring that his legacy will be cherished for eternity.

But that’s not the way life works.

One might assume that a lifetime of fame rests upon the weary wings of the victor, the humble hero who braves the tempest-tossed seas and cleverly escapes claustrophobic islands – but still survives to tell the tale. Perhaps, you anticipate that the golden shores of home allow him to

bask in the beaming rays of his unfettered accomplishments. You know, the standard Hollywood feel-good ending: roll the credits, cue the lights, and chomp down those last few bites of popcorn before you leave the theater and head home.

I'm here to tell you that it's never as simple as a movie-script ending. There's no gentle fade to darkness, no inspirational song blaring from the speakers as the credits scroll indefinitely down the screen in a black-and-white epilogue. Our lives linger on, like incomplete novels with an infinite number of chapters that stretch on for eternity.

Until, of course, they don't.

Sure, some of those real-life stories fit snugly into the Hero's Journey archetype. Even in the romanticized realm of rock and roll, you've got a few figures who have ventured to hell and back, barely surviving to tell the tale: Johnny Cash, Tina Turner, Ray Charles, Elton John... and my namesake, Brian Wilson. Everything works out for them in the end, and they live out the remainder of their days in peaceful tranquility. Kind of.

Some artists are capable of catapulting themselves to a musical Mt. Olympus in the heavens, where they spend eternity with the Gods of Rock and Roll. But that's not everyone's story. Some become producers. Some invest in real estate. Some open restaurant franchises.

As for me, I became a high school English teacher.

Call me Brian. Or Mr. Smith. Or even "Brick." I know it's not as catchy as Ishmael, but it'll have to do. After all, when your freshman football coach thinks you look more like a white whale than a peg-legged captain, your nickname is bound to be a little bizarre. Obviously, if you've read this book's predecessor, you've heard all about my life story – and you know that the stormy seas of adolescence can be cruel.

It's a miracle that I survived.

Of course, as you'll see soon enough, I almost didn't make it.

This is the story of how I flew too close to the sun.

As a stubborn high school kid, I daydreamed of a lifelong career in the music industry. With my bass guitar in one hand and a songwriter's

notepad in the other, I enveloped myself in wings made of wax, pledging to fly away from my labyrinthine home in the scorching Ojai Valley to the cool, comforting shoreline of Los Angeles. Heck, I even got accepted to UCLA and met my future wife in the dorms. For a while, it seemed like the future was full of boundless potential, rife with radiant possibility. I stretched my arms to the firmament and coasted on the cool winds of victory, sailing high above the tumultuous oceans below. I figured that even if things didn't work out – even if I crash-landed in the waters beneath me – I would simply sail back to shore, my arms coolly caressed by the brisk baptismal waves.

But things didn't work out that way. After all, the ocean is a terrain of terrible uncertainty. It will suffocate you just as quickly as embrace you.

And, when I was twenty-one years old, I almost drowned.

Of course, I wasn't the first voyager in my family. When my great-great-great-grandparents sailed the tempestuous tides from Russia to the United States in the early 1900s, they couldn't have foreseen the complicated world that their aching ancestors would inherit. Those Smith forefathers renounced their homeland of *pogroms* and protests and persecution for the promise of a new home: America. Though they might not have faced sirens and cyclopes along the way, they inevitably endured heartache and hopelessness when they left their old world behind. My forebears were long-suffering sailors, searching for salvation across the stubborn seas. They were *proto-surfers*, if you will. But these ancestors were Cossacks dressed in cassocks and caftans, instead of Californians clothed in swim trunks and Huarache sandals. *Surfin' U.S.A.*, looked a lot different in the early decades of the twentieth century.

Fast-forward a hundred years, and my ancestors' great-great-great-grandson was making waves in the music industry. When I was twenty, I felt like a rock and roll Hercules, ready to tackle any lion or hydra or three-headed hellhound that came my way. But, in reality, I was much more like Icarus: a headstrong child who failed to recognize that his waxen wings would melt in the heat of the sun. And, when I tumbled from the sky, it nearly destroyed me.

But this isn't some gory Greek gameshow. If you want blood, guts,

and glory, go read *The Iliad*. As for me, I'll stick to *The Odyssey*. Sure, my band, Call Field, raged into battle during the late-1990s rock and roll renaissance, like a Trojan horse of pop-punk – but we didn't even last long enough to put out a *Greatest Hits* album. Instead, like Odysseus's crew on the island of Thrinacia, a few band members mutinied.

It didn't end well for Odysseus's men.

And it didn't end well for Call Field.

After the Trojan War, when Odysseus set sail for his homeland, he had no idea just how complicated the ensuing years would become. He didn't realize that a ten-year military campaign would transform into *twenty* years away from home. Odysseus's tragic flaw was his *hubris* – his excessive pride – and the Greek gods punished him for his arrogance. Even as he sailed towards Ithaca, desperately wishing to be reunited with his wife and son, he got lost along the way.

Although it didn't take me an entire decade, I got lost on my way home, too. Odysseus paid the price for his pride. And so did I.

This is where things get dark and ugly.

There's a reason I tried to forget my adolescence, to shroud those years in the blackout curtains of repressed memories. And, for two decades, I was able to hide in the humble anonymity of my middling middle-class existence. It was a welcome respite from the smothering silhouettes of my teenage years. Until, of course, one of my favorite students uncovered my deep, dark, depressing secret...

I used to be a rock star. Kind of.

I thought all those turbulent waters were behind me, like liquid shadows trapped and trailing in my wake. I thought the catalyzing crescendoes of those crashing waves were relegated to my yearning yesteryears. But I was wrong.

After I confessed the cruel calamities of my youth, I was forced to confront the conflagration that had consumed my adolescence. Thanks to that precocious star student of mine, I had to revisit a painful era of my life when I was set adrift at sea.

As I discovered, though, the interminable odyssey returning to

your home isn't always resolved by sailing across vast oceans. Sometimes, the journey home is in your head. And in your heart.

Like it or not, I need to look backward to gaze forward – to embrace the eye of the hurricane before I can slap those waxen wings back on my shoulders and reclaim my rightful place in the immortal nighttime sky.

It's time, dear reader.

It's time to confront the specters of my youth.

It's time to sail back into the past.



# SECOND VERSE

"Pet Sounds" was playing in my Mustang  
On the night we shared our first kiss.  
Suddenly, I didn't feel so lonely:  
I found salvation when I touched your lips.





# CHAPTER ONE

## “The Times They Are a-Changin’”



**R**ight foot. Left foot.  
Right foot. Left foot.  
Repeat for an hour.

It was an early afternoon in late October, a sinfully sunny Sunday of the casual California variety. While my wife and daughter were gardening in the backyard, embracing the festive fall glow of simmering sunshine, I was stomping away in the cavernous corners of my garage, racking up mile after mile on my trusty treadmill.

In many ways, it was just a typical weekend: I was at home with my beautiful wife and our adorable daughter, squeezing in an hourlong workout before I returned to the laborious task of grading essays. It's the Sisyphean fate of every Advanced Placement English teacher. My wife, Mel – technically *Noelani Mele'kauwela Aukake'ho'opae-Smith*, but I've lovingly called her “Mel” since we were in college – was looking casually gorgeous in denim shorts and a tank top, letting her golden skin soak up the sunshine as she tended to our makeshift garden in the backyard. Our daughter, Samantha, was huddled on the ground next to Mel, her diminutive fingers digging deeply into the soil that nourished our homegrown pumpkins and tomatoes. I, on the other hand, was forcing myself to repeat endless footfalls on the treadmill. As with many other aspects of my life, I was constantly moving, but going nowhere.

To the outside world, the scene probably looked like a benign barometer of our static suburban lives.

But this particular Sunday was different.

The day before had been emotionally exhausting: one of my star students, a precocious seventeen-year-old kid named Veronica Jones, had irritatingly insisted that I sit down for an interview and recount the complex chronicles of my youth. After stumbling across a music video of my old band on YouTube, Veronica had confronted me about my former rock-and-roll life, nagging me endlessly about my path to the fringe territories of stardom. And, since she's my daughter's favorite babysitter, I begrudgingly agreed to lay my cards on the table and tell her all about my complicated childhood.

Reluctantly, I related my experiences growing up in the 1980s and 1990s. I told her about my childhood as an obese wallflower with an undiagnosed social anxiety disorder. I told her about my tortured high school romance, the claustrophobic love triangle between my teenage crush and the lead singer of my band. I told her about my prodigal path making music – that salve of salvation that had transformed me from a pushover preteen to a confident young man with prodigious potential. And I told her about how all of those disparate elements of my life led me to write Call Field's one hit song, "Incomplete (Just Like Your Smile)."

It was ugly. It was uncomfortable. It was undermining the stability of my static suburban life. But it also had some unintended side effects.

Though my adolescence wasn't painless or carefree – not by *any* means – it did have some remarkable moments. Those hazy summer days of playing rock and roll in my garage provided some pretty potent memories, and it was hard to extricate the accomplishments of my youth from the person I had become in the ensuing years.

Maybe – just *maybe* – I might have missed making music.

And writing songs.

And playing shows.

And glancing into the audience to see random strangers singing back the words I had written and humming the melodies that I had composed.

But what could the forty-year-old Brian Richard “Brick” Smith do to recapture those transient memories of lost youth? It’s not like I had a record label anymore. Or an album. Or even a band, for that matter.

Oh, to be an artist without his art...

So, there I was, less than twenty-four hours later, stewing on the situation as I clocked a few more miles on my NordicTrack treadmill. The epic conversation with Veronica had kick-started something in my heart, something I hadn’t wanted to revisit – or even think about – for a long, long time. For so many years, I felt like Orpheus in the underworld, desperately avoiding the desire to look back behind me. Now, however, as my neck craned at awkward angles to focus on forgotten fields of vision, I was forced to stare into the abyss of my adolescence.

And it hadn’t been as cataclysmic as I anticipated.

I thought about Veronica, that star student who embodied the picture-perfect, all-American kid: earnest, overachieving, thoughtful, and kind. And curious. In theory, Veronica should have been more concerned with church and grades and boys and prom dresses and social media and her future career plans as a dentist. Instead, she was singularly focused on my short-lived career in the music industry.

For some bizarre, baffling reason, Veronica thought I was *cool*. God knows why, but this high school kid wanted to research my life – as if I was Alexander Hamilton or Jerry Garcia or Kobe Bryant. Little did she know, I’m just a mild-mannered English teacher who had a brief brush with fame. Sure, being in a major-label rock band *sounds* romantic and dreamlike. The reality of the experience, however, was fierce and fleeting.

But try telling that to Veronica Jones.

I’ve never been cool. I’ve been on the *periphery* of cool, but that’s not the same thing. For God’s sakes, I’m a *high school English teacher*. There’s nothing cool about that.

Veronica Jones, however, disagrees.

And that, dear reader, left me in a bit of a pickle.

*Right foot. Left foot.*

*Right foot. Left foot.*

*Repeat.*

My life has become a comfortable routine in the time since Call Field's short-lived encounter with fame. I wake up, shower, head to work, spend the evening with my family, grade papers, plan lessons, go to sleep, and repeat the whole process, day in and day out. Maybe I squeeze in some exercise on alternating afternoons, like this particular sunny Sunday. But it's always soothingly predictable, with very little variation.

The wheels keep spinning the same way, over and over.

The motor keeps humming.

The rollers keep rotating.

And my legs keep moving.

*Right foot. Left foot.*

*Right foot. Left foot.*

*Repeat.*

When something comes along to break the routine, it's a bit jarring at first. Your body has been conditioned to wake up every morning at 5:00 AM, your internal clock begs you to climb into bed at 9:45 PM, and you can't help but feel the never-ending cloud of anxiety and stress looming over your shoulder. When a weeklong vacation (like my school's October break) interrupts your daily rituals, you have a hard time adjusting. But then, after a few days, it clicks in.

It's hard to accurately articulate the beauty of a weeklong vacation to those friends and family members who don't work in the field of education. A lot of people labor for forty hours a week: they clock in, sweat through an eight-hour shift, clock out, and forget about their work responsibilities in the evening hours.

With teachers, that's never the case. There's always another paper to grade, another lesson to plan, another parent to call. So, when that routine is snapped, that spell is broken, it feels absolutely liberating.

Instantly, you're free. You aren't shackled and chained to the overwhelming obligation of caring for an unreasonably large number of students. Instead, you can care for your family...

And you can care for yourself.

And you can focus on all of the aspects of your life that you've put on hold. Your hobbies, that laundry list of books you've wanted to read, your overflowing Netflix queue, those exotic restaurants across town... The world is suddenly full of limitless equations for happiness and health and home.

And you have time to think – *really think* – about the twists and turns that your life has taken over the years, the seemingly disconnected series of events that ultimately led you to where you are today. Maybe you'll just talk about it.

Or maybe you'll begin to write it down.

As long as you keep moving, keep working, you'll be okay. Stay the course and remain on that treadmill.

*Right foot. Left foot.*

*Right foot. Left foot.*

*Repeat.*

