

A NINA SIMONE CONCERT

from David Mitchell's novel *Utopia Avenue*

“Nina Simone at Ronnie Scott’s,” says Elf. The Beast rattles through a village called Handcross. “I was seventeen. My parents would never have let me go into Soho alone, but Imogen and a boy from church chaperoned me into Satan’s Lair. [This is a joking reference to what her parents might have thought of Soho, an area of London with many music clubs. They thought it would be dangerous to go to, so Elf imagines them thinking the Devil would be there.] I’d been sneaking off to the Folk Barge at Richmond since I was fifteen but Nina Simone was in a higher league. Way higher. She floated across Ronnie Scott’s like Cleopatra on her barge. [Cleopatra was a legendary queen of Egypt, in ancient times.] A black orchid dress. Pearls the size of pebbles. She sat down and announced, ‘I am Nina Simone,’ as if daring you to contradict her. That was it. No ‘Thank you for coming,’ no ‘I’m honored to be here.’ It was our job to thank her for coming. We were honored to be there. A drummer, a bassist, and a saxophonist, that was it. She played a bluesy, folkie set. ‘Cotton-eyed Joe,’ ‘Gin House Blues,’ ‘Twelfth of Never,’ ‘Black Is the Color of My True Love’s Hair.’ No banter. No jokes. No fake heart attack. Once, a couple were whispering too loud. She eyeballed the offenders and said, ‘Pardon me, am I singing too loud for y’all?’ The couple combusted on the spot.”

A sign says Brighton is twenty miles away.

“In awe of her as I was, I never wanted to be Nina Simone,” continues Elf. “I’m a white English folk singer. She’s a black Juilliard-trained genius. She plays blues with her left hand and Bach with her right. I saw her do it. All I wanted was a few ounces of her self-assurance. I still do. Heckling Nina Simone would be like heckling a mountain. Unthinkable. Pointless. At the end she told the audience, ‘I will sing one encore, and one only.’ It was ‘The Last Rose of Summer.’ I was by the cloakroom with my sister when she left. One woman held up an album and a pen but Nina just said, ‘I am here to S-I-N-G, not S-I-G-N.’ A minder opened the door and off she departed to her secret London palace. I used to think you became a star by having hits. After that show, I started to think, *No—you are a star first, therefore you have the hits.*”