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An Imaginary Girl

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—Senta Cunningham

“I’m not singing to an imaginary girl/I’m talking to you, my self” —Jim Morrison

Harry and I used to listen to music together in the evenings while my mother went to night school. It was 1975. He was in the Navy and we were stationed in the “Mohavee Desert,” as I wrote in a letter to my grandmother. Harry is my step-father, but I really had no impression of my real father at the time, so when he came into our lives, it became my first memory of being loved by a man. And he really did love me. He taught me to wash dishes one evening after dinner. We had our hands in the soapy water; I was on a chair so I could reach. My hand left an impression in the bubbles with a gentle touch. “Can I call you daddy?” I asked. He said he would like that. It was around this time he introduced me to music. I would kiss my mom good-bye, and pull her wooden rocking chair in front of my father’s stereo system. The entertainment center was a looming wooden structure covering an entire wall. “The Monster” was painted black and home to a reel to reel, huge speakers, a turn table, all kinds of sound equipment I can’t name and rows and rows of albums in colorful sleeves. Other shelves displayed wooden peace fingers, incense holders, crystal brandy snifters and nautical memorabilia. So, the ritual would begin. After I took a bath, my father dried my long hair, carefully combing out all the knots. He turned the lights down, and with me in my mother’s rocking chair, and him in an old, wooden desk chair we found on a trek through the dried and cracked desert, my father got up and gently laid the needle to vinyl. We didn’t say anything. We just sat in the dusky room, listening to music and enjoying the company. This is the moment I fell in love with the melancholy of Pink Floyd, the wail of Jimi’s guitar, my father and his songs.

* * *

RUSHED TOWARD THE BUILDING where my history of rock and roll class was being held. The clock in my car informed me I was running late. I had taken this teacher for film and lit and I knew he despised tardiness. He wrote my letter of recommendation to a four-year and I didn’t want

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to disappoint him. Having no idea where my class was, I turned down the first corridor I saw. There was a labyrinth of hallways stemming off in many directions, but there at the end of the darkness, I saw a figure. It was a man, but his features were blurred. The fading sun cast light behind his body, giving him a hazy glow. I walked toward the man.

“Hi, Anna.” I squinted to see better, but recognized the voice.

“Hi, Mr. Z.” I held out my hand and he leaned in and gave me a hug. I closed my eyes. His warmth was tangible, something I could sink my fingers into, wrap up and take home with me.

“You look different.”

“I do?”

“It’s your hair, I guess,” he smiled, “welcome to my class.” He held out his arms in a gesture that ushered me past him and into the darkened classroom. As I brushed past, I heard “L.A. Woman” emanate from the speakers as loud as Morrison himself would have performed. I felt the sound waves resonate in my chest. The thick sweetness of incense filled my mind and the flicker of a candle’s flame cast dancing shadows on the walls. I chose my chair amongst the dark figures already in the

room and became mesmerized with the light show projection. Swirling colors danced and blended, driving into an eternity that seemed to exist beyond the screen. If driving too fast down a deserted highway at night had a sound, “L.A. Woman” was it.

The darkness swaddled me like a blanket. I imagined my classmates had disappeared; I wanted to sit with this man all night, listening to music as tendrils of patchouli-laced smoke escaped the white ashed tip of the incense stick.

My ex-boyfriend had expressed a desire to take this class a couple weeks before. I told him the course was probably full, but there stood Chris the following day in the parking lot, waiting as he said he would. I walked over to him and led the way to class.

“Hey,” I asked in a sarcastic tone, “how does a girl introduce her ex-boyfriend?” I laughed. Chris grabbed my arm to slow me. His smile tried to hide his disease. I knew the look fairly well. It felt dangerous. I looked away.

“Why won’t you introduce me as your boyfriend?” His question was more accusation than query. He clenched my arm a little too hard...

A teacher writes his lesson on the

blackboard as students file in for class. He looks alarmed as the sound of a man yelling comes from outside. He walks to the door to check on the commotion. He slams the classroom door open and walks with purpose over to the angry man. “Get your hands off her,” the Teacher insists. Angry Man looks toward the ground and lets the Girl’s arm go; he’s no match for the authority of an older man—The Warrior, The Law, The Father. The Teacher puts his hand on the Girl’s back and leads her to the safety of his classroom, away from the dangerous grasp of Angry Man. He asks the Girl if she will be ok as he slips his reassuring arms around her shoulders. The Teacher looks back to make sure she is safe from her aggressor. Angry Man slowly walks away with his hands in his pockets, head down in shame as the scene begins to fade...

“Anna? Anna, answer me. Why won’t you introduce me as your boyfriend?” I pulled my arm away and walked into class. Mr. Z, the Vietnam vet, ex-cop and father of daughters, was there at his desk, reading over his lecture notes.

My affection turned into something unfamiliar to me, something trite from the lyrics of an 80’s rock song or a Charlotte Bronte novel.

I did my make-up for him. I wore denim and black boots. I let my hair down in a hippie-chick mess. I versed myself in the language he loved, something from the era of Haight or the Summer of Love. I wanted him to want me. I wanted to know him, as if knowing him would introduce me to myself. It felt like I was being seen for the very first time. I didn’t have outlines before he gazed at me; I was a ghost. An imaginary girl.

Mr. Z wore a t-shirt with a famous album cover on it to class one evening. The shirt caressed his enduring arms. Red print inviting Sticky Fingers straddled his chest. As he walked by, I noticed a silk screened sugar tongue lick the small of his back. I imagined fluttering kisses where those crimson lips left off. My gaze was lost in a sea of black cotton, until a glimmer from his gold band chastised my playful eye. I looked away. The girl sitting next to me gave me an impatient look.

“What?”

“Nothing,” she replied in disgust. She shifted in her seat away from me, smoothed her skirt over her knees and put her neatly typed essay in front of her, readying it for collection. Her name was typed in a fancy Victorian font.

For a whole year after class, I didn't hear a word from Mr. Z. I wrote him a few emails, always addressing some aspect of his role as my teacher: Could he write me a letter for grad school? Did he have room in his mythology and literature class? I gave him updates on my progress in school. I reread the scarlet notes he scrawled in the margins of my papers: you have a brilliant mind, you comment on the religious element quite eloquently, you are a true heroine who will undoubtedly succeed.

I dreamt I had climbed to the top of an immense glacier and peered over the precipice. Before me was an icy wilderness sprawled to the farthest edges of my dreamscape. I called out for Mr. Z. He didn't answer.

I finally moved on, stopped the silly emails and forced myself to focus on my studies. Some of my girl friends talked me into online dating. They took pictures that didn't look a thing like me. Like a geisha under a mask of make-up and with my hair full of super hold Aqua Net, Haley held the camera and barked orders at me: "Stick out your chin... farther! It makes your face look thinner." "Hold in your stomach, stick out your chest." "Straddle that

chair." I even held a wine glass to make it seem as if I were the life of some fictitious party.

My efforts landed me the email address of a semi-handsome guitar player. I was always too self-conscious to meet in person, so we emailed for a couple months. He quoted sensual lyrics to me. He was educated, played in a band, could have used some facial hair...a goatee maybe, but overall, he was a catch. Or so I thought. We lost interest in each other. All we had were a few contrived pictures, some tired, spell-checked lines and the artificial glow of a computer screen.

Commencement finally arrived. My last interaction with Mr. Z had been a hug and a promise to invite him to my graduation. I felt apprehensive after not hearing from him in so long, but I really wanted him there, so I sent him an invitation via a friend who had his class.

As I walked from the stage with my diploma later that week, I heard his voice. "Anna!" I looked over. He stood with his daughter, waving at me. There was the object of my affection. And he was here for me. As I walked out in the procession with my class, he handed me a balloon and a card. We hugged. The memory of his warmth mixed with a

rousing scent that wasn't sprayed or lathered on. The card was touching, tied up nicely with a quote from one of our favorite films: "The world is a better place with you in it."

The summer flew by quickly and Mr. Z and I kept in touch on occasion. I tried to forget about the year we never spoke.

One evening, I opened an email from Mr. Z and read a returned message: BLOCKED ADDRESS. Had he blocked my address? Did I overstep our boundaries? Did his wife ask him to end his contact with me? My eyes started to tear. He really did choose to ignore me in the past. In that moment, the sins of men became Mr. Z's burden: the time John snapped my bra in front of the class. The time my period stained my white shorts and all the boys laughed. Cruz dumped me after we kissed with our mouths open. Chris slept with that chick from his economics class, the one with a Tinkerbell tattoo on her back. My step-father's drill sergeant cadence demanded perfection...my real father never knew me...I heard he had two sons after the war...he didn't need me...why would he need me? He didn't even look at me on his way out the door. He grabbed his

Army-issue duffle bag and never came back.

I hit send and for a brief moment felt vindicated. I laid my grief at Mr. Z's feet and demanded an explanation. My message raced toward the man who had abandoned me like the rest. I didn't eat that day, I just cried. I finally saw a return email. I reluctantly opened it.

Anna,

I just got home and read your emails. Are you ok? Past students of mine are always very special and nothing pleases me more than to have them say hi and remember me from a class they took. You have always been more special than the others because of our hallowed relationship as teacher/student, friend/friend and one human being to another in this crazy world of ours. Please accept my deepest apology if anything I've said or done caused you pain. I sympathize with your

feelings. Those of us who are astute enough to enter the field of English and study and read and write about some of the most bizarre, innermost regions of the mind, are a bit in tune with the wonders of life itself, and, as a result, are much more sensitive, sometimes to our own detriment. Be assured you are very much loved and respected. There is nothing to forgive you for. Nothing has changed for me. It was good to read such emotion. There were hints of Mary Shelley there. At first I thought you were writing a story and wanted me to see how it sounded. You should capitalize on that!

Take care, Mr. Z.

I found out he was going to a Stones concert in the city in a couple weeks, and we both had tickets, so we wished each other a good time

and hoped to cross paths.

After the concert, my friend and I ran to catch the transit train. The next tram stopped and Michelle jumped on when the doors swung open. Bodies covered in black tees and the dank of pot smoke swarmed in front of me and the doors slammed shut, leaving me on the platform alone. I looked at my friend through the window and shrugged my shoulders, resigning to meet her in the parking lot. Staring into the well-lit vehicle, I watched people rush to be seated. A colorful, tie-dyed shirt caught my eye. The man wore pajama bottoms patterned with scarlet, Kali-inspired lips. I looked up and realized I knew the man. It was Mr. Z. I needed to talk to him. I wanted to sit with him. What was his favorite song? I wanted the night to be ours. I banged on the doors. As the train started pulling away, his wife came over and stood next to him. She had an ample smile and golden brown eyes; her long, dark hair spilled over her shoulders. He put his arm around her. She was beautiful. As they took their seats, I watched the train move away from me slowly, and into the night. I glanced up toward the skyline. The city lights seemed brighter, magnified, until they finally blurred into a

brilliant mess.

I turned as a train moving in the other direction pulled up to the platform. I wiped my eyes and hugged myself as the sea breeze chilled my body. The jeans and black sweater I squeezed into earlier felt oppressive and I couldn't wait to put on my flannel pajamas. I put my purse down and swung my leather jacket on for warmth. My hair was a frizzy mess after contending with the moist evening air. I got on the train and found a place to stand among the crowd. Finally seeing an empty seat, I sat down, leaned my cheek against the window and watched the scenery swim by. A man's voice pulled me from my reverie.

"Is this seat taken?"

"Uh, no, actually. Have a seat."

"My name is Sean." He was a young man with brown eyes, dark wavy hair and a perfectly trimmed goatee.

"How did you like the show?" he asked.

"I loved it."

"Hey, I was going to listen to some music on the way." Sean pulled out a black IPOD, pressed a few buttons and handed me one of the ear buds. I put the tiny speaker to my ear and gazed, very

briefly, into his eyes.

"One of my favorites." I smiled. Sean nodded. He continued to gaze at me even after I looked away. We leaned our heads back and listened to the music. The stars were out. The moon was up. The train rolled into the night.

I finally found Michelle waiting by the car. Once on the road, I laid my head against the window and slept. When I opened my eyes again, I stared at my filmy reflection in the window until my focus retrained on a car driving by. It was Mr. Z's maroon sedan. He stayed on I-5 as we merged right onto the 120 bypass. I felt around in my jacket pocket and was relieved I hadn't lost it. I pulled the ticket stub out and turned it over in my hand. I read the phone number and name scrawled in red ink: Sean. I ran my fingers over the writing and put it back into my pocket.

"Hey, Michelle?"

"Mm hmm?"

"Let's put some music on." Still basking in a post-concert afterglow, we sang out loud and off key. We were almost home.

