

An Introduction to Modern Music

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I was sitting under my window, listening. I'd been there for two hours. A dog was barking a few houses away and a homeless man in the park across the street was bellowing like a pirate. The porchlight was on outside my window and the moths were plinking into the bulb cover and hitting the window screen. My father's Honda pulled into the parking lot. It sounded like a vacuum cleaner with a pebble caught in the rollers. My father got out and put his keys into his pocket. I listened for footsteps on the wooden stairway. When I didn't hear them, I knew he was stopping to take off his shoes. He came up the stairs and turned the doorhandle like a thief.

I was at the window again a few nights later. The dog up the street wasn't barking, and the park was empty because the police had come by an hour earlier to kick everybody out. There were no moths because my mother had turned off the porchlight. I picked up the phone to call the Time Lady. The line was already open, but no one was talking. I could hear music playing and people conversing in the background. Then a man picked up the phone. "I don't see him. Did you call over to Margaritaville?" I heard a click. I held my breath. The man said, "You still there?"

I woke up when a door slammed somewhere in the apartment. I heard my mother crying. I could tell from the echo that she was in the bathroom. Then I heard my father's voice. "I was having a drink with the other waiters," he said.

"Stop," my mother said. "I called the restaurant."

I'd called the restaurant too. The woman who answered the phone said my father had left at four, as usual.

"We were out in back. On the patio," my father said. "Who answered the phone?"

"Oh, Christ!" my mother screamed. She pulled the bathroom door open so hard it hit the toilet and made water slosh onto the floor. "I'm not a rag, you asshole. I'll find the bitch and slice her goddam lips off. I'll slit her throat."

The neighbor on my side of the apartment began pounding the walls. But my mother kept yelling. I didn't hear my father for a long time and I thought he'd slipped out somehow. I imagined my mother standing in there alone, ranting to an empty room. Then I heard the refrigerator door being opened and the timer being set on the microwave.

I lay there thinking we were going to move again. I was eleven years old and I'd already lived in five different cities. Before Santa Cruz we'd lived in San Diego, Riverside, Fontana, and Bakersfield. And in each of those cities we'd lived in two or three places, usually apartments, but a few houses too. I was in the fifth grade and I'd been to eight schools. My father had worked at a dozen different restaurants that I could remember. My mother had worked at only three different jobs, but she'd also gone a few years without working at all. I hated all these moves and changes, but the good thing was that if we ended up somewhere I didn't like I knew we'd move again before long.

The next night my father didn't come home at all. In the morning I heard my mother taking her suitcases down from the shelf in her closet. She came into my bedroom and sat down on the edge of the bed. She was wearing one of the skirt suits she usually wore to her receptionist job at Dr. Leavitt's Dentistry, but she didn't have any make-up on and her hair wasn't sprayed. She looked at everything in the room except me.

"I'm going away for a little while, Sweetie. But I'll be in touch in a few days. This is nothing against you."

A man was waiting in a car down in the parking lot. My mother went out and told him to pull up closer to the stairs. She made a few trips up and down the stairs and then I heard her going through the cabinets in the kitchen.

I wanted to scream, but I just lay there, quiet. I thought of the time my mother decided we should start going to church. This was back in San Diego. My father didn't want to go. He said church was for old people. "Fine," my mother told him. "I'll pray for you." She bought me a yellow dress with puffy sleeves and a white bow at the neck, and a pair of black patent leather shoes. The next Sunday we left the apartment while my father was still sleeping and drove to the Lutheran church on Clairemont Drive. The pews were uncomfortable, and I couldn't see over the heads of the people in front of me. By the end of the sermon I was asleep with my head on my mother's lap. We went back the next Sunday, and the next, and then we skipped a week, but went the next. Then we never went again. This was the pattern with my mother. She always tried things like diets and exercise machines and self-hypnosis, and then stopped doing them after a couple weeks. I hoped staying away from the family was something she was going to try for a while and then quit, but it occurred to me that the family could be the temporary thing she was giving up.

The television was on and my father was asleep on the couch when I got home from school. His white shirt and black bowtie were lying on the floor, and he still had his wingtips on. He was sleeping on his hand, and when I woke him up his cheek had an imprint from his fingers. There was a deep groove from his wedding ring. He started rubbing his face and when he felt the groove he cringed. "Where's your mother?" he asked.

I told him about the suitcases, and about the man waiting in the car downstairs. He reached down and took his cigarettes from the pocket of his shirt. "Don't blame yourself, Sweetie," he said. "Your mother is very confused right now. Things will work out here real soon." He collected his shirt and his bowtie and went into his room. When I walked past the door, he was stacking the pictures of his and my mother's wedding on a shelf in his closet.

When I came home from school the next day, there was a note written on stationary from Dr. Leavitt's office lying on my pillow. I thought maybe my mother had moved back home, and I went into her room to check. But she wasn't there. "Hi Sweetie," the note began.

I miss you so much. I'm thinking about you all the time. I hope you're all right. I'm living in Dr. Leavitt's house in Saratoga for now, but I'll be looking for another place soon. Please understand that this arrangement is only temporary. When I get settled we'll be together again.

Love, Mom

P.S. Don't mention this note to your father.

When I tried to picture Dr. Leavitt's house, I imagined walls covered with the same newsprint wallpaper that he had in his waiting room, and Dr. Leavitt himself walking around in a blue smock with a lot of pens and sugar-free lollipops in his pocket. I knew things probably weren't like this, but picturing them this way made my mother seem real again.

Even though he stayed out until one or two in the morning, my father came home every night for the next week. His shift didn't begin until 10:00am, but every day he got up early and looked over the personal ads in the *Good Times* while I ate my cereal.

"You look tired," I said.

"You think so?"

I nodded. I watched him for a second, waiting to see if he would look at me. "Do you know when mom's coming back?"

"Not yet."

"Do you think she'll come back in a month?"

"Probably. We'll have to wait and see."

By then I was thinking of my mother as a kind of promise, something like summer vacation. But every day that I didn't hear her running the

blowdryer, or calling from the kitchen, or coming home from work with her keys jangling and her shoes clicking on the kitchen floor, I thought of that promise less and less. But I didn't get depressed. I tried to be mature. I spent a lot of time arranging and rearranging my room. I moved my bed against one wall and then the other. I sorted and resorted my clothes in different ways, first by color, then by which things I liked best, and then by function—school clothes on the left, play clothes on the right. I cut out pictures from *Vogue* and *Seventeen* and taped them to the wall next to my mirror. I kept my room vacuumed and dusted and did all my homework. I sometimes thought I might end up an orphan, but I didn't cry. I thought being brave like that made me special. Other kids started doing drugs and stealing when their parents split up, but I was just going to work harder and be the best kid I could be, better even than kids from happy homes.

My father came out of his room one morning looking more tired than usual. His hair needed washing and he was still wearing his work clothes. On his way into the kitchen he stopped at the rattan bookcase in the living room where he had a turntable and some albums. Nobody ever used the turntable, except once at Christmas when my mother made us listen to holiday music every night during dinner. To me the turntable and the albums just seemed like useless things leftover from sometime before I was born. My father stood there studying the albums for a minute, and then he put one on.

"What's this?" I asked.

"I just thought we'd have some music this morning."

I watched him for a second, then I spooned up some cereal.

"You know, I used to listen to music all the time," he said. "There were a few years there after high school, before I met your mother, when I was kind of lonely. Music was about the only thing I could always count on for company."

I stopped eating again.

"Most of what I listened to was kind of sad, but it lifted me up a little to hear it. I was glad to know other people were in the same shoes."

My father had never said anything to me like this before, and hearing it made me nervous. I thought he was trying to show me something. I didn't know if I wanted to see it.

"I don't know," he said, shrugging off those memories. "I guess I was kind of mixed up back then."

After that day we listened to music every morning. My father had albums by Bob Dylan, Joni Mitchell, Johnny Lee Hooker, and Al Green. At first I didn't really like any of the albums. I didn't understand the lyrics, and the music was slow and boring. Then I started listening to the words more closely, and the songs began to make sense. I hummed them on the way to school, or

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just sitting in my room. After a few weeks I gave up the Top 40 station I usually listened to and found a station that played my father's kind of music.

I was lying on the couch one afternoon, listening to Johnny Lee Hooker, when the door opened. My father came in with a woman I didn't know. The woman stood just inside the entryway and waited for my father to close the door. My father's key was stuck, and when the woman got tired of waiting for him to get it out, she stepped over and shook my hand. "Hello, Sugar," she said.

I felt myself blush. "Hi," I said. I tried to look the woman in the face, but she was staring at me so sweetly, I had to turn away.

"Sweetheart, this is my friend, Theresa," my father said.

I said "Hi" again.

"What a lovely young woman," Theresa said.

I moved over to the corner of the couch and turned down the stereo. Theresa sat down next to me and smiled again. She was pretty thin from the waist up, but heavy in the hips and thighs. I kept thinking about what she'd called me. Woman. It seemed weird. I said the word over and over in my head. I started to like it. It supported the idea that I was being mature and strong about everything.

"We'd have the spotlight on us, that's for sure," my father said. He and Theresa were laughing off the thought of going to eat at the restaurant where he worked.

"I really don't have a preference," Theresa said.

"How about lobster?" my father suggested.

"You can't afford that."

"What the hell? Let's go crazy for a change."

I folded my legs up onto the couch. "Will you bring me home leftovers?" I asked.

My father smiled. "Did I mention she has a sense of humor?" he said to Theresa.

Theresa looked away and adjusted one of her earrings.

"Get some shoes on, Sweetie," my father said. "You're coming with us."

At the restaurant Theresa spent almost the whole time talking to me. She wanted to know about my grades and hobbies and boyfriends, and what I wanted to be when I grew up. I made up a few things about some boys at school who had crushes on me. I looked at my father to see if he could tell I was lying. He wasn't paying attention. He was leaning back in his chair as though he were listening to a different conversation.

A couple of weeks later Theresa took me to the beauty saloon where she worked part-time. When we came through the door, a brass bell chimed against

the glass. The two other women who worked there and the old ladies who were sitting in the chairs all turned and looked at us. "Anyway..." one of the stylists said. All the women turned back again to face the mirrors.

"This is Erica," Theresa said. The women all turned in our direction again. They tried to look surprised to see us. "She's getting the full treatment today."

The women said, "Wonderful. Lovely. How precious."

Theresa was standing behind me with her hands on my shoulders. I saw in one of the mirrors that she was giving the women a dirty look. "Let's take the last chair," she said.

The salon smelled of perm chemicals and perfume, and the walls were decorated with faded pictures of women wearing heavy make-up and old hair-styles. On the mirror in front of Theresa's chair was a picture of my father and me standing by the roller coaster at the Boardwalk. My mother had been standing with us that day, but her part of the picture was torn away. Theresa draped a plastic sheet around my neck and took me to the sinks at the far end of the salon. "Who's been cutting your hair, Honey?" she asked.

I brought a hand from under the sheet and pointed to myself.

"Wow," Theresa said. "So efficient. When was the last time you had it cut professionally?"

I shrugged. I couldn't remember.

Theresa smiled and kept scrubbing my scalp. Her curly hair and heavy earrings dangled down near my eyes. She started to hum.

"That's Joni Mitchell," I said.

"You know Joni Mitchell? That's amazing."

I smiled.

"You know," Theresa said. "You've got a very pretty smile. It would be nice if we saw more of it."

I smiled some more, but my mouth began to ache. Theresa took me back to the chair. After pumping it up a few times she combed my hair down in front of my eyes. "So tell me about your father."

I tried to think of something to say. It suddenly seemed as though I didn't know much about him. "He's nice."

"He's bottled up. Has he always been that way?"

I considered this description. It seemed pretty accurate. "He doesn't talk much. My mom usually does the talking, when she's around."

"Your mother sounds like an interesting one," Theresa said. She started humming her song again, then she stopped. "What do you think made her run off with that twenty-seven year old kid?"

"Dr. Leavitt's older than twenty-seven," I said. "He's an old man."

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"Sweetie, she doesn't live with Dr. Leavitt. She lives with his son, Marvin. He's some kind of janitor for his father."
The other women in the salon had gotten quiet. I suddenly hated them.

At breakfast a few days later my father told me that he and Theresa had broken up. "She's a little too much," he said. "She had her tubes tied when she was younger and now she's kid-happy. I'm looking for a wife, not a replacement for your mother. Besides, you're at the age now where you don't really need a mother."

"She called," I said.

"Your mother?"

"No. Theresa."

"What did she say?"

"She said I could come back to the salon anytime I wanted."

"Well, I wouldn't. It's a nice offer, but I think you should just forget about her."

I stared down at my bowl of cereal. I spooned up a bite and then let the spoon fall. "Why, Dad?" I said.

"Why what?"

"Why everything? Why don't you want Mom to come back?"

"Who said I didn't want her to come back? She left, not me."

"But why?"

"I don't know. I don't want to get into it. It's 7:30 in the damn morning. I know you're not happy with the Theresa thing, but I'll make it up."

"How?"

"See all those records in there, and that stereo? They're yours."

"To keep?"

"To keep. Take them in your room if you want. But lay off about your mother and Theresa. Okay?"

I looked down at my spoon and nodded.

I played the records every day. *Rubber Soul* and *Blood On the Tracks* were my favorites. I listened to the records in the morning when I got dressed, after school when I did my homework, and late at night as I fell asleep. The songs were like stories, and the people in them started to seem real to me, like people I wanted to be friends with. Sometimes I imagined the songs were about me, especially songs like "My Michelle" and "You're A Big Girl Now." Occasionally the songs would seem more real than my own life. But I didn't like it when this happened. When I'd get too lost in a song, I'd turn down the volume and stare at myself in the mirror. It made me sad to do this, but with everything that was happening, I didn't want to get too spaced out. I thought it was better to be sad than crazy.

One night my father took me out to a bar called the Catalyst, where we met up with his new girlfriend, Justine. The bar was an enormous room with a tiled floor and potted ferns hanging from the ceiling. It didn't look anything like the bars I'd seen in movies.

"Is she going to drink something?" Justine asked my father.

"Get her a 7-up."

Justine came back to our table with a 7-Up and two beers. She was very skinny, with arms that stuck out of her tanktop like a pair of handles on a water pump. Her fingers were about as thick as the cigarettes she smoked. She had high cheekbones and a long chin and bright green eyes, like one of the women whose pictures I had taped to my wall. But the different parts of her face didn't go with one another as well. She looked like she'd been broken and glued back together.

"Is it all right for her to be out this late?" Justine asked.

"Oh yeah," my father said. "She's a latenighter."

Justine used one of her skinny fingers to swirl the foam in her beer. She tilted her head way back and blew cigarette smoke straight up.

"I like that position," my father said.

Justine pulled her head back down and licked her lips as she smiled.

"Are we going somewhere tonight?"

"I know a place," my father said.

"I know you do."

"Erica, finish your soda. We're going to leave soon."

I took a sip of my drink and set it back down.

My father watched me. "You done?" he asked.

Justine leaned herself against my father and fingered his hair. "I don't think she's thirsty."

Justine moved into the apartment about a month later. She covered the walls of the living room with Nagel posters framed with plexiglass and red aluminum. She replaced the portable black and white television that had been my mother's with her new twenty-inch color with remote control. Her hearing had been damaged from too many years of waiting tables while bands played, so she kept the volume extremely high. One time I tried to drown out the sound of the television with a Bob Dylan album, and she came into my room and unplugged the stereo. "I put up with too much noise at work," she said. "I don't need to have it at home too."

Justine was often sick. She always had a box of Kleenex around, or a bottle of aspirin. She'd leave this stuff in the bathroom or on the kitchen counter, and then yell from the couch in the living room for someone to bring it to her.

"How come Justine's always sick?" I asked my father, one morning at breakfast.

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"She's seen a lot of tragedy in her life. Her mother died young. And her dad is a drinker. He's in jail for throwing a beer bottle at a cop, or something like that."

"But why is she sick?"

"Well, people react to things different ways."

"So she's sick because her dad's in jail?"

"Not exactly. It's more complicated than that. Just be thankful you're not growing up the way she did."

I arrived home from school one day to the sound of the television crashing against the walls and making the Nagel posters buzz. Justine was on the couch. "This came today," she said, holding out an envelope.

It was a letter from my mother. I could see from the return address that she was in Boston.

"What are you watching?" I asked.

"Laverne and Shirley."

I watched the television for a minute. Laverne was in the brewery lunch room trying to break out of Shirley's hold and beat up one of the other workers.

"How do you feel today?" I asked.

"Like hell."

"I'm sorry."

"Not your fault. Just don't make too much noise."

"Should I turn the TV down?"

Justine looked up at me and squinted. I stared down at the carpet until she looked back at the television.

"Do you ever like to play crazy eights or speed?" I asked.

She didn't answer. I didn't know if she was ignoring me, or if she just hadn't heard what I said. A commercial came on and she stretched forward and got her cigarettes off the coffee table. She lit one and threw the pack down again. "You need something?"

I shook my head. "Are you and my dad in love?" I asked.

Justine blew smoke out of the corner of her mouth. "Of course. We're getting married soon."

"Wow. I didn't know."

"This fall. Didn't your father tell you?"

I shook my head again.

"It's going to be small, but you're invited of course. You're going to be the flower girl."

I tried to look happy. Laverne and Shirley came on again.

"Are you humming?" Justine asked.

"Sorry."

"That's all right. It's just that I kind of wanted to watch this show. Maybe you could go into your room if you're going to sing."

I did what she suggested. I closed my door and braced it with the chair from my desk. Then I opened the letter from my mother.

Hello from Boston. I'm in the T-shirt business now. Marvin got an advance from his father and we're opening a little sidewalk place next week, just in time for summer. Marvin's entrepreneur magazines say Boston is one of the best cities in the country for sidewalk vending, so I'm sure we're going to make a lot of money. We've got a new apartment in a little area called Jamaica Plain. There's a little garden in back and an old fashioned kitchen. The whole thing reminds me of the house I grew up in. I love it. You haven't heard from me in a long time but I hope you're not angry with me and that you understand why I needed to do this. This may sound horrible to you, but I've come to the conclusion over the past few months that I was not cut out to be a mother. I mean, I am a mother, of course, but I truly believe that I was not meant to be. I'm not good at it, I suppose is what I'm trying to say, and it wasn't really fair to you or me that I kept on faking things. I'm sorry, of course, but to me this seems like the truth. It doesn't mean I don't still love you—I do, of course. How could I not? I just think it would be better if we could stop thinking of our relationship as one between a mother and a daughter, and start thinking of it as one between two friends. This little change in outlook might not make sense right now, but I know it will, someday. Just remember that I love you, and that even though I'm 3,000 miles away, I'm always thinking of you and hoping you're well.

Love, Mom

I took the letter over to my desk and cut it into pieces. I emptied my trash can. I got a book of matches from Justine's drawer in the bathroom and burned each piece and then dropped it into the can. I took the picture of the woman who looked like Justine and burned it whole. Then I carried the ashes into the bathroom and flushed them down the toilet.

I went back to my room and sat on my bed and listened. The sound of the television was vibrating against the wall. Every time the audience laughed, my window shook. Some teenagers in the park across the street were arguing about a basketball game, and this got the dog barking. My dad came home from work in his noisy car, and when he came up from the parking lot his wingtips pounded the stairs. I looked at my albums leaning against the turntable. I put one on to play and turned up the volume until all I could hear was music. ◆