

Son Can You Play Me a Memory?

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Summer of 1990, Omaha, Nebraska, sitting on some designer carpet shag rug, in a well-lit living room with lofted-ceilings and sky-light windows. It's the middle of the afternoon, sun overhead beaming down on the vinyl records I'm looking through. Lori and I playing her father's Billy Joel album, *Piano Man*. I'm staring at Billy Joel's ghost-like image on the cover — pale face and dark circles under his eyes. It's the image of the road rocker — a piano man — really? He looks well-fed with distinctive brown eyes on the otherwise black and white cover. He's married to Christie Brinkley; lucky guy. He can really play. He's not just wanking out another redundant guitar solo.

We both know the song by heart. Who doesn't? We've heard our parents sing it. We've heard it played in the grocery aisles of Albertsons. It's one of the melodies of the time, so different from the music of the heavy metal band *Metallica* whose faces are painted on the biker jacket I wear. Lori's the artist who painted the band members' faces on my back, so good they look like photos done by a professional. She's the first real live artist I know. She's a model, too. Sponsored by some talent agency here in the city. Lots of girls are, but she could really make it. I've seen her glossy promo-pictures on display at Westroads Mall — Lori's face and figure back-lit for stardom. If only she could get over her ex-boyfriend.

I'm singing under my breath, smiling at her as she dances around this large living room. I'm wondering why we aren't listening to the heavy metal that makes up the sound of our lives, but I'm relieved, too. The metal was giving me a headache. Started sounding the same. And our briefly gorgeous lives, our group, has changed in the last

year. Even if Lori still mopes over her ex all the time, she's no longer with him, making me moony and hopeful.

This vinyl is a familial change. A song I've grown up with. I'm realizing, maybe for the first time, I'm past the point of liking a band just because my friends say they are cool. In another week Lori will remove James, Lars, Kirk and Jason's faces from my leather jacket and paint an enormous picture of Marilyn Monroe's face in their place.

"He loves me not," she says. Her arms stretched out — she's spinning out of control like a prop-plane. She has decided she doesn't love him anymore. "Fuck. Shit, dude." She sounds just like him. Profanity never seemed to come naturally for her. Her voice harsh from the cigarettes. She hangs on to his "dude" and vulgarities. Neither one of us have found what we are looking for. And I'm not sure either of us knows exactly what that is yet.

She collapses on the floor. Crash and burn. She won't waste another minute obsessing over him. She lies on her back, staring straight up into the blinding sunshine that casts its rays around her whole body which glistens. She closes her eyes. I stare at her tan, long legs. Her lean athletic shoulders and arms are beautiful and bigger than mine.

She pulls a pack of Marlboro Lights out of the front pocket of her very tight jean shorts and hammers too many times on one side of the box. She rips the plastic wrapper off. Opens it. "He loves me not," she says lifting one cigarette out of the pack. "He loves me not," lifting another and tossing it to me. I can see her sports bra through the sleeveless faded *Metallica* t-shirt she has cut up

herself — one of her ex's old ones.

They mirrored each other's looks. Both metal and punk beautiful. When they walked into a room together you stared. They were a mix of Sid and Nancy, minus the drugs, and with better hair and both better kept. But, something happened after four years of their high school crush. He's cut, with a new girl now. Has been for a better part of a year. She can't articulate the break-up. She doesn't understand.

"Dude. I just don't dig her anymore," he said to me. "She wants to get married."

I'm so infatuated with Lori, who I know isn't much interested in me. She's two years older — already graduated — hanging on in the Midwest for what? It's obvious she's still obsessed. A stranger to herself without him. Prozac has just hit shelves but neither of us know about it. Depression is expected — celebrated in some circles. Since we've been hanging out more she's been trying to get over this guy who she will never get back, and I'm the rebound; the clingy romantic. The band I play rhythm guitar and sing out of key in has recorded a song called, "Nice Guys Finish Last".

I am laughing to myself, reading the liner notes, lyrics of this song the whole world knows by heart. "Billy fucking Joel." How does a guy from Hicksville, Long Island connect with two people in Omaha? Community. Melody. Our yearning to be adults so badly, if only we knew where to go — and how we could afford to get there. We are *waitresses practicing politics* and through osmosis, and perhaps our early disillusionment, *businessmen slowly getting stoned*. Loneliness. Longing. *I am sure I could be a movie star if I could get out of this place* and if I could find the manual and get some kind of serious training.

Later, an hour later, we kiss during that lull in the day before rush hour and evening ascend — this

one and only time. Soon she disappears, or I quit coming around. This is where the memory stops.

Three years later I see her at a party — her hair is shorter. She's talking with others but seems to be there alone. I wonder if women always cut their hair when they go through major life changes. Her clothes are still dark. Not as put together. And who am I to talk? A single guy back in the city half-drunk looking, and not finding, true love. Immediately I feel that knot in my stomach. But what is it? Not so much longing for her anymore but the loneliness I'd continue to feel until I didn't. I feel better about myself for not hanging on and hanging out with Lori any longer than I did. She's still beautiful of course, but I have enough sense to know I am a small part of the past she's running from.

"Fuck. Shit, dude!" She says when we see each other. Neither one of us sure whether to hug or high-five. She is still scratching at the backs of her hands. Little scratch. Small talk. Awkward talk. A smoke. That's where that particular memory ends.

There's more of course — brief snapshots. The three of us — Lori, her boyfriend and me walking through Westroads or Crossroads Mall. Their amazing relationship. Their hands occasionally clasped — lips often locked. Me the third wheel. Heads always turning in their direction. We were suburban punk beauties. I mimicked the clothes they wore. We had long hair pulled back in ponytails and on other days it was hanging in our faces. I paid girls I knew to sew my jeans so tight to fit around my calves I needed help getting them off.

Snapshots. Synthesis. A reel-to-reel I pray never ends. These recollections are who I am. And the truth is, I can't remember Lori's last name. I really can't. I tried. Perhaps she was just a manic dream girl who never had a thing for me at all.

I'm married now. I have been for over twenty years. I'm in love with a woman who knocks me out with her wit and beauty. I'm lucky. Maybe I'm just like you.

I can look up old friends on Facebook—if I can remember their names. When I do, I can see I avoided a few big bullets. Before I was on Facebook a student in my prison class said, "You don't want to look those old girlfriends up. Just remember them like you remember them." That was sound advice. I should have listened. Aren't the character traits of Facebook a bit shallow and narcissistic?

I'm sure there's a few people who have stalked me via a few clicks. I imagine them saying, "Wow! Dodged a big big blunder there." "God, he's a poet. Oh grow up already. And a professor. Makes sense. He could never shut up." "He always always always wanted to be a rock star. Please."

Every time I hear "Piano Man", that undying song, I am transported back to those lofted ceilings and skylight windows—a shine a little too bright. I carefully peel the record from the thin, almost see through paper that protects it. The static from the vinyl still clinging. I hold the record by its edges and carefully place it on the turntable. I can see her spinning. We are both looking up. The melody begins. For a few briefly gorgeous minutes we are both laughing, we are both singing, we are young, *feelin' alright*—and, every time, I think of Billy Joel's ghost-like face. He's on wife number four, now.