

Lullaby for Adults

After Miranda started talking, nobody stuck around, not even other girls. She felt like a telemarketer. For her sister Leah's party, she'd teased any curl out of her hair, tied it back, and put on a green pencil dress, eyeliner, and this almost neon lipstick. But they could probably tell she was still in high school. Sitting on the couch by herself, drinking, Miranda decided she hated them, at least the girls.

By the time the living room had emptied, only the light of a few guttering candles kept Miranda from crashing. She put her feet into a sleeping bag lying on the sofa. She was alone, or at least thought she was, until a dirty-blond boy flopped down next to her. She kept quiet to keep him from leaving too.

This seemed to work—he picked up a guitar. As he strummed it, his bottom lip enveloped the top. “A lullaby for adults. For pale brunettes like you.” The strings' vibration touched her. “AJ,” he introduced himself. “From a little band called Lonely One-Oh-One.” When he offered his hand, she slipped further into the sleeping bag, up to her breasts. After a heavy thrum, he pointed the guitar at the ceiling. His voice smelled like his gum. Just before she could taste it, she burrowed in over her head. “I'd like to give you a kiss,” he said. She snorted and raised her legs, putting her feet in and immediately lifting them from his lap, as if it were hot to the touch. “You're hard to read, aren't you?” She thought answering might give her away, so she simpered instead. The couch creaked.

From deep inside, his breath warmed the sleeping bag, and this warmth drew her into an awaiting drowsiness. Maybe it was just because she was the only girl left. His hand poked her

thigh and skated inward. She flailed. Sweat smeared the bag inside and pressed cold against her. His hands lingered in her grasp.

Metal clicked the way an unlatched buckle sounds, slid like an unfastening zipper. Creeps were supposed to come drooling, poorly dressed. That's what mama had said once while tucking her in. She forced herself not to think of her mother. He whispered, "Think I could get into you." She clutched the cloth in her fists. Turning her head made a bitter wad fill her gasp. Her body mindlessly swelled with curiosity about his hands. How had they become so callous?

But it was his primed glance, like the ting off the tip of a fang. The minute pupil of his mouth made him look as if he were choked for breath between verses. These features made her think he was just as innocent and exposed as she was. In a sense, she was swallowing him too. Years later she would recognize that same flare of fake astonishment in a moving, high-definition, flat-screen portrait of him hanging on the wall. He was wearing her own face, like the mask for a girl costume.

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In the morning she avoided the mirror while trying to pee. She decided she wouldn't tell Leah. That meant she wouldn't tell anybody. She stepped onto the front porch to smoke one or maybe more of the cigarettes he had recommended and dropped into her palm before he jetted. Maybe it was the smiling red of the morning light that held back the waterworks? Maybe she just wasn't the type of person who cries after losing her virginity.

She heard the voices of her sister's roommate and of Leah herself, "Our mama always said 'slept like the dead,' instead of slept like a baby. Mamas can say any ole weird thing to their kids, and the little ones just have to listen. Not just anybody can blurt whatever she wants. Did

y'all see Carol Ann last night?" Like anybody cared what Leah thought. "Hey, kid sister. Some party, huh? Lord. This place looks like a flop house." Leah sniffed. "Miranda, did you give some lucky beau a fish sandwich?"

Miranda searched for a prop. Leah reached out to hold her sister's cheek, but Miranda ducked. Without a cigarette, she raised her chin to hold back the waterworks. She snatched the nearest drink, a can of coke on the table. The can, a makeshift ashtray, tossed flecks that coated her throat.

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The awful taste made a desert of her larynx, but it worked. Miranda didn't cry or tell. They went to breakfast at a diner, and she brought a composition notebook, her diary, to write down the line *desert of her larynx* as a lyric. Greta, Leah's friend, was next to her. Next to Greta was her boyfriend, Kevin. Greta asked who this was playing. "*Lonely 101*. Local legends," Kevin answered. "You know, they're working on a new album." In Greta's face and across Miranda, he sang—

Our love is viable, you're the one, my setting son.

"It's timed to come at the same time his son is born. It's a play on words."

"Wasn't that guy at your party last night?" Greta asked.

"Who wasn't?" Leah sneered.

"No way," howled Kevin.

Miranda asked to bum a cigarette to make him shut up. He gave her the smoke without making eye contact, but Miranda could feel the darting glances of the others. Leah, Miss Do-As-I-Say-Not-As-I-Do, would never light up in such a cramped booth. Miranda pored over the filter

for a second, lit up, then thumbed her pager, as if there was a number displayed with somewhere else for her to be. The plume of exhaled smoke reminded her of an ole-timey record player. A guy at another table said, “I mean, there’s a difference between being a feminist and being a bitch.”

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At a college party in Southside Birmingham one guy, a little drunk, who nodded in a genuine way while she spoke, asked her back to his place a few blocks away. Miranda had only drunk one Dixie cup of wine. Nonetheless, she was careful climbing the stairs to his garret, a room angled against the roof and reeking of sweat. His jaw was clenched. Miranda wondered if he would make an AJ smirk. He put a finger to his lips, as if she would complain. But his room stank less than the hallway and gave just enough space to undress. He gaped at her nakedness. Then he struggled with his own clothes, tripping over his half-removed pants.

The morning after, in his bachelor-pad kitchen, her one-night stand was able enough to cook an egg while simultaneously talking about running. Then he hurried to escort her outside. She stood at the corner, mouth poised. He gave her a peck and said, “I’m ‘bout to go on a two-miler. Else I’d give you a ride. You said your sister’s around, right?”

Instead of ask Leah for a ride, she walked almost five miles to her dorm. On the way, she stopped a passerby her age to ask him for a cigarette. His eyes darted left, right, at her face, then down, making a little cross over her body. It made her attempt a laugh. As he handed over the cigarette, he said, “This a walk-a-shame? Go on, girl.”

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Miranda started to feel that this was the way things should be. She would tell Leah. Then

Leah announced that in August she was leaving Birmingham for New York, where she had found a job at a publishing company. She gave the announcement with a shrug, as if she couldn't help being so lucky.

To celebrate, on Labor Day weekend they rode with some of Leah's old friends to Orange Beach. Miranda caused uproar inside the clown-car space by repeating pick-up lines like, "Baby, I read you like a book," and, "Girl, I wrote this song for you." Then he asked me what my name was."

At night they sat drinking by a bonfire on the sand. The humidity made the buzz come on faster. Fried from chain-smoking cigarettes, their voices rasped. The firelight wizened their faces. Like a good English major, Miranda had brought an Edna St. Vincent Millay book. She edged toward the flames to recite—

Time does not bring relief; you all have lied

Who told me time would ease me of my pain!

I miss him in the weeping of the rain.

At that line she stopped and turned the page. A boy stood as if he couldn't take it anymore and demanded they skinny dip.

Against the black line ribbed by moonlight, they disrobed. The elongated crash of the surf spurred everybody into a jog. She and the tall, thin, tanned preppy boy named Geoff veered from the others and sprinted further, until she dug her heels in. "I prob-ly taste like vodka," she said. Before she could make her move, his fingertips drew a line down her back.

Wind cooled rarely exposed spots on their bare skin. Miranda felt as if her touch would forever come short of him by a small distance. She watched a floater flash away across the sand.

They closed in again. Astride Geoff, she threw her head back. The moon wheeled past.

Light from the fire glistened in the granules on their skin. The others grinned at them and passed looks. Somebody had brought sleeping bags out, and one couple had already burrowed in. Miranda leaned back on her palms, as if to hold court. She imagined AJ saying, *Shut up*.

She woke abruptly. The sun had risen, the others had gone indoors, and the fire was ash. Miranda squinted at the blanched surroundings.

In an uncaffeinated blur, they crammed into the car and departed. Once they were on the road, everybody including Geoff fell asleep. “Hey, I need you to talk to me, so I don’t snooze,” the driver said. “Don’t tell your sister.”

Deflated, Miranda rested her forehead against the back of the passenger seat. “I don’t think anybody got any sleep last night, including her.”

“Yeah, baby,” he said in a low, confidential voice. He bared his teeth, as if bracing for impact.

“You probably know *Lonely 101*, don’t you?”

“Course. They won the Dixie Punk. Played Birmingham, Atlanta, New Orleans. They toured with *Foo Fighters*.”

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Miranda sold her *Foo Fighters* CDs. Then she had enough to pre-order the new *Lonely 101* release. *Foo Fighters* songs played everywhere anyways, like during time spent with Geoff and his roommates at their house. Adamant about not neglecting his friends for a girl, at some point on a typical night, in some shadowy nook, he would pinch her butt. That meant they could leave.

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After sex one night Geoff said, “My kids will have to be good at science and math.”

She blurted, “Kids? I don’t know, man. I accidentally swallowed a bunch a ashes once. I think it might have done permanent damage.”

“My name is Miranda Duvall from Jemison, Alabama. I am permanently damaged,” he said in a more countrified mockery of her voice. She gave him a sideways glance and reached for the window but didn’t have enough leverage with his legs across her lap. He rose to shut it, then pulled her down to embrace her. The room soon became stifling.

Next to her ear his voice thundered, “I remembered this girl back in New Jersey. Older. I heard she’s got like three kids now. Smart, really cute. Big, but cute, you know?”

“She was just, like, really confident in herself. One Saturday, we were at the mall bored out of our minds. She had this tight green dress on.

“My friend kept staring. She got in the car with us. She kissed my friend on the cheek, then the lips. She touched his dick.

“But he didn’t want her to do it in front of the other guys. I didn’t care. She went down on me right there. The other dudes looked away. I had never been...intimate with anybody.” Geoff had hardened. His taller body pressed against hers, which was in fetal position. He thumbed the waistband of her pajamas. “I couldn’t believe it. I think I said, ‘Whoa,’ or something stupid.” He flattened out with a heavy sigh and took up most of the mattress. His jaw was distended. After it closed, he rolled onto his side away from her.

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More and more nights began to pass with Geoff at the lab late or working on papers. He

often ate at an all-night Waffle House then slept into the afternoon. If not studying, he drank beer with just the boys. Her roommate was usually missing, so Miranda kept to herself. *Life seems elsewhere*, she wrote in her journal, which she balanced against her abdomen. *In the morning, I'm hungry. I can't stay up anymore.*

The next day, reading these words as if they were somebody else's, she said out loud, as if to that somebody else, "Hello."

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She set the unused test strip in the medicine cabinet, next to Geoff's toothbrush, and shut the mirror-door. Her reflection trembled.

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While she walked to class, she shivered from the cold cement through the soles of her slippers. Posters for *Lonely 101*'s new album littered campus. She had her copy now, but she kept it in her closet tucked under blankets, as if it was hidden evidence. The wind tossed her hair against her face. Trees lashed themselves. Bushes shimmied. Girls' skirts lifted, revealing their panties. At the steps of the lecture hall, she froze. "Dad won't be able to just ignore this bomb," she said, thinking of her aloof father. Exhaling and setting off in the direction she had come, saying, "Whatcha think of me now?" she imagined happiness seeping from Leah's cheeks.

In a line of cars, drivers were holding their horns. The one in front had stopped to let two girls pass and continued to ogle the girls, even after they cleared his fender. The girls made faces at one another and didn't notice Miranda. Traffic moved along.

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"This is also what a white girl at Birmingham-Southern does," she said while on hold with

the abortion clinic. She had found the ad in the Diciembre 1998 issue of *La Neta*, a local Chicano newspaper, and felt like an interloper.

“Sorry. Could you speak up?” the clinic receptionist asked with that Southern manner of affected concern that always irritated Miranda.

Miranda confirmed, “Thursday. Ten o’clock.”

Ten o’clock if she could find a ride, probably with Geoff, she hoped. When he answered, she automatically said, “Hey, Geoff.” He greeted her as usual and waited. She glanced out the window at the baby-blue sky, wound the cord around her finger. Her voice became as casual as his. “I was gonna ask for a ride to *New Woman, All Women* in Five Points? The abortion clinic?” The name sounded made up when she spoke it.

He said nothing, like he had done nothing. When she was about to speak, he began, “Why?” She dug her fingernail into the seam on the phone. “Oh. You’re pregnant.”

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That Wednesday, clouds teemed with a threat of rain, weather that always burdened Miranda with a funereal fatigue. At Geoff’s request, she had switched on her electric kettle for coffee. “I guess instant’s better than church coffee,” he said, nursing his cup. Under the table, he clutched her ankle with both his feet. She wanted to ask him something, but she felt like it was too important a question. She might mess it up. “You’re not partaking?”

“I don’t know. Sorry,” she mumbled.

He set his cup down and planed his face, warping its features. Through his squished mouth, he repeated, “I don’t know,” as if again in mockery.

“I would be a good mother. I will be a good mother.”

Although she waited for his dumb hick voice, he never responded. He left without even pinching her butt. Staring out the window, she sat in what was usually his after-sex pose but without a cigarette and without having had sex. After a day of anticipating sleep, now insomnia brained her. She crossed her room to the closet and took out the CD, slipped the sheath of cellophane off the case and opened it, inserted the disc in the player, and tucked herself in. The first song was “Lullaby,” nothing but an acoustic guitar and AJ’s voice, almost country. She wondered if the lyrics were about her, as they soothed her

down to the pitch dark where you’re going and where you been.

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Tight, aching uncertainty anchored her in bed. A sharp wave came and cut her loose, and she plunged to the surface. She was sitting up, her cheeks finally wet with tears. She sat still until they dried. It was morning, and in the dorm hallway voices wailed back and forth. She left the bed and put her ear to the door. “Now we have to,” somebody said.

“What?”

“Bomb a kindergarten. In order to make up for all the abortions that won’t happen today. It was probably some wacko redneck from Pinson or Jemison or something.”

“Too soon, dude. Too soon.”

Just boys joking about a bombing. Her pager beeped. The phone rang. Nobody but Geoff ever called her. He’d probably try to make her think she wasn’t alone in this time of crisis. Instead of picking up, she pressed play on the stereo again. Something inside her rose with the volume. She switched on the kettle. On the tea tin was the staid face of the Queen. The music overwhelmed the stirring of the leafless oak branch against her window. She stood guard. It

would probably muffle the familiar rumble and shriek from within the kettle too.