

Good Bad Songs

“Huh AJ, what do you want buddy?” AJ is looking at Ari from his crib but Ari sees Alyssa scrambling eggs and standing in front of AJ with the pan, splitting them with the spatula, cooling the eggs off with her breath.

AJ turns his head this way and that way as Ari straps him into his highchair, and Ari fumbles with the plastic until it clicks and AJ looks him in the eye, AJ’s eyes like Alyssa’s, pale as pools and it’s too much.

Last night, when Alyssa was driven away in an ambulance, the bruises on her arm beneath her black tee shirt were not from Ari’s hands. Ari had thought about that as they took the train home, jostled between a crew of sweat-slicked teenagers who were passing a Poland Springs bottle back and forth, laughing maniacally, their bright boxers cupping their ass cheeks where their jeans slung low and menacing.

Once home, Alyssa wanted to go downstairs and Ari had made one reasonable request at the top of the stairs to their apartment, “Don’t.” Alyssa had been taking things down to the basement for months—a dirty blender, how-to books, fuzzy throw blankets, the baby’s old socks—junk, essentially, but not to her: she was making something.

Ari said it again, “Don’t.” She did, and he took her arm where her bruises were alive, fresh as thumbprints. She twisted her arm loose and forward and the release sprang her down all the way.

He saw her slumped body on the floor by the curved staircase. He wanted to zip it back, like a train reeling on rewind, skin healing as if by retouch.

Months ago in September Ari was in his office. He had gotten promoted from cold calling and the window above his desk gave him a sidelong glance at The Prudential, the peek of the building a smoke of blue. He kept protein bars in his desk and he would break the chalky snack in half and take his lunch break clicking through Google, avoiding phone calls from his wife, calls that with no doubt pertained to the happenings of his son, the brightening quality of his hair, a noise that sounded like, “Oh,” escaping from his lips, Alyssa saying it over and over, “Oh, oh, oh! He said it. I *heard* it.”

An ad appeared on the screen. Promotional tickets from one of those sites that sell last minute, the lead singer of Converge in pixelated black and white, inky reptile tattoos up to his neck, bent down and screaming into a mic against a thrashing crowd. He hadn't been to a Converge show since high school.

That night, he headed to The Sinclair in khaki work pants with his necktie balled in his jacket. He walked slowly, feeling the almost-fall breeze on his face as the sun shot laser-like shafts through the alleys. As he approached, the awning at The Sinclair slightly fluttered, and he thought, only once, of going home.

Inside, security patted him down and checked the insides of his pockets. A big lady, hair tightly-coiled into a Z-pattern, pulled out his tie and shot him a look, but he was already scanning the entrance past the kids waiting for the ATM. Their soaring Mohawks and bullet belts caught the spotty blue light from the bar. The lady tossed his tie back and when he caught it, his reflexes surprised him.

He crossed the hall, past the neon bathroom signs. The line snaked down the stairs and the girls in it wore fishnets, platform boots, pirate shirts, and loose wristbands. One

turned as he passed, bellybutton gleaming metal as she leaned against the railing. When he looked up, her face was round as a record, her parched white hair framing her cheeks, something in her eyes fragile and violent like she was being handcuffed. Or maybe she was scared of him, he couldn't know.

He slipped into line with the guys by the bar as they ordered loudly, gesturing at the bartender as they threw up indecipherable fingers. He knew that inside they would be brothers, packed in sardine-like, pushing through like a wave that would break at the front where the spasms of the guitar made the crowd shift. The lead singer would scream, face contorted like he was vomiting as the crowd formed a circle pit—bumping shoulders, ramming elbows into chests, body slamming until someone fell and someone else picked them up. Later, he would leap from above the rope, tourist of the microcosm, his body rushing down a river of bright and sturdy hands.

Alyssa didn't ask about the marks as he buttoned up his shirt that next morning. He could feel her assessing them as he dressed: two on his shoulder, one on his thigh, though he didn't remember getting hit or hurt. His son coughed and it crackled through the monitor's speaker. Alyssa leapt up from bed. He turned up his collar around a red splotch on his neck. It looked like a hickey but it'd turn blue by noon.

He raised his chin as he worked his tie through his collar. She came back into the bedroom in his old ARMY sweatshirt and sighed with hostility, bouncing their son lightly against her shoulder. She turned toward the muted light of their bedroom window.

“Where were you last night?”

He watched her rock AJ back and forth with her bony hand sprawled over his four-month-old forehead.

“The sales meeting ran late,” he said. “Rick ordered pizza.”

“You couldn’t call?”

He watched as a mealy stream of puke rolled down her back.

“Shit,” she said as she dropped a white bib on the carpet. He picked it up and followed her into the kitchen.

“I’m going to be late,” he said as he rinsed the bib in the sink. She bit her thumb with her free hand while the baby stirred.

“Now I have to shower,” she said.

Ari pours coffee while AJ crawls across the scratched hardwood of the kitchen floor. He watches the mug steam on the counter, hearing the charge of the voltaic sockets through the wall, incessant, the singular sound giving the whole room a screeching pitch.

He pictures Alyssa’s swollen face, wiry stitches beneath a shaved eyebrow; taut skin yellow and then pink like a sunset on the rot.

He eyes AJ who is picking out crumpled paper towels from the trash, his hair curly like his, but blonde, as if followed by an invisible sun. He sees Alyssa tumbling down the stairs. He warned her against this. He used to yell at her when she was pregnant

and pushed grains of rice into patterns on her plate. She had to count the grains, total the mound, divide it into a number that wouldn't kill her.

“You need to eat,” he would say at first, monotone, his elbow on the table and his fingers pressed into his temple. Then he would pry her fork from her fist and throw it against the wall.

“You need to eat!”

Ari was right to lose it on her. What kind of fucked up bitch doesn't eat when she's pregnant? Ari thought. He never hit her. He hit everything else, meaning to miss, meaning to make her flinch, or cringe, or crouch. There was the blender he threw, full of the sloppy green juice Alyssa mixed like a machinist. It stained the grout on the backsplash of the kitchen tile the color of blood from an alien. Her new phone was thin as a razor and he couldn't fully snap in half. He never hit her, would never, but he yanked her thin wrists to toss her onto the bed. He took her neck, jerked it once, and told her into her face through grit teeth, “Stop it. Stop it now, you understand?”

Ari didn't. Alyssa had gradually become like someone he had let drive the car with his son in the back, a strange woman who let go of the wheel. The kind who would leave the infant in a hot car while she smiled ludicrously on the beach, one hand flattened to block the sun.

Still, Ari wanted to forgive her. He poured Cheerios into a plastic bowl for AJ. Alyssa's eye would darken to plum skin then fade and Ari would pick her up with daisies in his hands from the gift shop. The doctors would tell Ari to watch out for more signs of

forgetfulness. They would drive home together. AJ would say his first words from the backseat and they would both look at him from the rear-view with tears in their eyes.

Ari lifted AJ back into the seat, his shirt stretching over his armpits as AJ twisted.

“Sit buddy,” Ari said. He held a spoon in front of AJ’s mouth. AJ looked up at him then turned his head.

By October Ari was looking for shows online during his lunch break. He bought cheap tickets and printed them out in the office, avoiding eye contact with his boss in the overly warm hallway. His walks downtown became colder as he went to see Sworn In, While She Sleeps, Glassjaw, The Red Cord, Structures, The Ghost Inside. One night he opened the front door to find Alyssa skipping down the stairs, their coffeemaker and a roll of tinfoil in her arms.

“What the hell are you doing?” he asked, and she strode like a mutant past him to unlock the basement door.

Back when she wasn’t his wife, when he was a bartender and she was a waitress with a pencil in her bun: they were just making out on the icy fire escape behind White Horse and being with her he saw how the alleyway glittered, the resolution sharp on the

asphalt and the bricks. She was like someone that looked to him, and through her looking he could see everything else.

It was winter. After shifts they rode red cabs through white streets.

“I left my ID in the cab!” she said, wind howling past her flushed cheeks.

“Come here,” he said, grinning, taking her into his down jacket. “I’ll take care of you.”

They walked half a mile in the mounting snow to An Tua Nua where his buddy was the bouncer. He ordered them hot toddies and picked up her scarf from the sticky bar floor. He found the road home in a blackout.

By November Ari and Alyssa were hardly speaking at dinner. AJ slept down the hall, the door halfway closed.

“I want to go to yoga,” Alyssa whispered, looking solemnly at her fork, her knuckles scrunching white circles into her cheeks.

“They have classes down the street,” she said.

She lifted the fork and dangled her wrist then set it down again. She scooted her chair back to grab the monitor, pressing it to her ear intently, a habit that made his chest flinch. He wanted to grab it from her and break it apart, deadening the low hum and the AM frequencies that muffled through their apartment, AJ’s amplified and steady breath. He had done it before. He had taken it and whipped it at the wall, leaving a two-inch dent and an infant who would not go back down to sleep.

“He’s fine,” he said, instead.

“I’m *checking*,” she said. As she yanked open their old built-in shelves, a warm thrumming became faster under his ribs. On tiptoes she reached for the top drawer and found his stash of old Zippos.

She lit pillar candles from their wedding on the windowsill. The wax dripped in single tears, leaving hardened but tender formations. He saw the faded glow in her hair, half tied and falling around her eyes. In his briefcase by the door: folded paper for a Lamb of God show that night at 7:30.

Before he left, telling her the Celtics were playing at The Four’s, she asked him, would he hold the baby? He was watching ESPN but muted the TV.

She said, “careful,” as she handed him over.

“Me be careful?” he said. A quick heart beat in his fists as he looked through Alyssa’s head but AJ was already in his arms, stirring uneasily then writhing. Pixilated players smashed across the screen, throwing colored light against the walls, which were half-painted in Alyssa’s indecision. Ari also took for indecision all the empty picture frames above the brick fireplace—gold-rimmed, plain-wooded, one silver and one small, shaped into an oval, meant for a black and white of either’s grandfather as a soldier.

Ari once asked, “Why aren’t there any pictures in there?”

“I don’t want the couch to see us,” Alyssa had said.

“Shhh,” he said, AJ’s face reddening. There was desperation in the force with which he kicked, going nowhere. Ari rocked him, AJ’s mouth parting to reveal tender, blank gums. Finally he settled, becoming a weightless machine in the crook of his arm. He watched the veiny translucence of his eyelids, the unknowable thoughts that swam

inside the soft pool of his head, appearing like holograms before Ari, if only he knew what they meant. He thought of the thing he didn't want to think about: exactly who AJ would be like, him or her, the tiny bones of his fingers clenched tight over his mouth.

That November night was freezing and Ari walked to the Paradise from the train with his hands inside his pockets. Snow fell discreetly, unsure of its direction. He'd started smoking again and lit up under the yolky haze of the awning.

Security tore his ticket. He bought a tallboy and finished it in the back while the openers strummed a jittery set. Two girls in jean and leather jackets tossed their heads from side to side, nodding to the *oh oh oh*'s. For a second their hair splayed out and touched as the guitar wound, giving an electrocuted look to their heads.

He took a sip of his beer and thought of AJ's scalp, the lightening baby hair. He was growing, flipping onto his stomach; his legs sprawled out from behind like a parachute, an endless stream of dribble gleaming down his chin.

AJ was five months but still Ari saw him as an attachment to Alyssa, an extension of her skin, her hands under his head, her legs, how they scissored to move towards AJ's wailing down their dark hallway at night. He saw her in the shower, in the mirror, she had been there for hours. He froze with a toothbrush hanging from his mouth. Her soap that rose into steam and poured from behind the curtain smelled like Fruity Pebbles. Her bare leg was outstretched from the tub like a magic show, bouncing AJ's car seat with her foot. AJ looked up at him with furrowed eyebrows, his shoulders straight and strapped. After Ari pat his mouth dry, he saw her hair darkened from the spray of water. Foamy soap rinsed down the braille of her spine, scalded and pink.

Back in the crowd, Ari could see the front packed in tight, and he wanted to slip between the bodies. The lights had started to swing and Ari could see the shadows of elbows begin to push, reverb booming like fists against the wall. In the corner, two kids slam danced, their collisions deliberate. They reeled back and drew themselves back together like a vortex. It was a controlled dance, an intimacy. It was technical prowess that slicked Ari's synapses, the vapor clearing his mind like a mist, a haziness momentarily leaving. It was nothing like when Ari was a kid and his stepdad drew his fist back, his one enraged eye on Ari's cheek, and followed through with a swing that struck a face he hated.

Ari was older than and different from his half-brothers that came out big-boned and blue-eyed. He wore green gages in both ears and skateboarded beneath the sun in gown-length band t-shirts, tattered plastic bags billowing in the wind. He bleached his dark hair and it faded to a whitish orange above his eyes, the color of the plastic.

"You punk," his stepdad would say at the dinner table. "You piece of filth."

But Ari knew it had nothing to do with the outside. It was his inside, something that failed to be understood. It was something dark inside him, mysterious and Israeli that caused his stepdad to fling him by the elbow down the stairs at night or to gear back while driving to punch into the side of his head with his free fist.

Ari dove into the crowd and danced. He was thrown back and threw back and felt a black heat rising from his head, a thoughtless wave of energy.

Ari bundles AJ up in his tiny winter coat and a matching hat that he finds in the closet. He carries him downstairs in a blanket from his crib where the frozen stroller sits outside by the stairs. On his way down, he hears the familiar swing of the mailbox shutting. Two twenty-something girls reside on the first floor, the kind who throw super-bowl parties and change doormats for insignificant holidays like Easter or July fourth. Ari can only tell them apart because one of the girls looks him in the eye to exchange hellos and the other ducks her head into her apartment before Ari could try. The nice one, Lauren, had been home with AJ last night. She is in the front shuffling letters as Ari approaches with AJ. Ari knows he will be able to assess her with one look, what she heard, what she thinks, what she will or won't do, which is always nothing. She's quiet, good with AJ and has watched him a couple times before. Lauren turns to Ari with a downcast smile and waves towards AJ.

She is the one who had rapped on their door late one night with Alyssa who had walked in apologizing. Ari stood between the opening and looked down at Lauren, ready to explain something he wasn't sure of yet, when she said, "I tripped over her downstairs in the basement in a sleeping bag." Ari opened his mouth but Lauren continued, "I thought she was a dead body."

"Thank you," Ari said then shut the door.

That was during late November, when Ari's shoulders were marked from shows. Little bruises isolated like masses of land and spread across his chest. Money got tight and he couldn't make an excuse to go out, so he bought cheap headphones and worked out in the basement where there was a set of weights by the washer and dryer, things Ari felt belonged in a cellar, the concrete cave smelling like soap suds and antifreeze. The

floor was chalky with dirt and the ceiling was cobwebbed but Alyssa had created the appearance of a living room in the deep space, a stained red rug from AJ's room and a chair from a thrift store. There was the junky end table from the upstairs closet that Alyssa had spray-painted white. On top was a frame, and inside was a photo of AJ, newly-born and asleep. Ari's muscles pulsed with new and agitated strength as he lifted, the weights clinking and spinning on the handles. He jumped rope to metal, staring at the scene the furniture made, whipping the rope under his feet where upstairs Alyssa breastfed.

Ari had tried to claim back the basement where Alyssa had begun to play something like house, half of their own missing. Ari would sit down to watch TV and the clicker would be gone. He'd open the fridge and the top shelf would be glowing with an emulsified brown juice, empty besides a moth fluttering up by the light.

"Give me that," Ari would say as Alyssa picked through the recycling at the bottom of the stairs before the basement, taking out a single brown toilet paper roll, trying to make something beautiful out of pure trash.

"No," Alyssa would say, "I threw it out from the wrong end. It's uncomfortable."

Alyssa. Dyed red hair going dark at the roots. Watcher of birds in her underwear on the porch. She sketched the eggs, pale grey, heavily marked. She took an interest to the mother, both fierce in their sitting. This was before she was a mother. At parties she took on accents, wore bright dresses with worn Converse, said big words with a kid's

lisp. She talked about inner turmoil with an amused and concentrated look in her eyes, like Ari was the only one who could understand her.

He pictured her before things got bad, as a bridesmaid, clapping under her chin by the steel arch, losing her heels in the grass then lighting a cigarette from the wrong end. On the long ride home, holding hands, she'd said, "Let's listen to good bad songs. No! Bad good songs."

Or how she'd said, "that trash is trashy," as they passed a neighbor's bin, pizza boxes strewn across the driveway. How she moved from one small job to another, became serious about making glitzy, child-like bracelets she sold online that said things like *Carmen Sandiego*, *Tommy Girl*, *Vodka*.

Their first date: he saved as much as he could from his paychecks to take her to Mistral on a Saturday night when they could both get their shifts covered. The waiter held his hand behind his back as he poured wine. They grasped fingers under the table like chained imposters on an important mission.

"I'll have the Cornish game hen," she said like a declaration. Her shoulders leaned into the table as she shrugged, her cheeks flushing with color as she sipped her Merlot. When the food came Ari looked up at Alyssa and thought he could see the blood rushing back toward her heart where it pumped too fast, leaving her face the color of the crisp tablecloth.

After they left, Ari's hands almost shaking as he hurriedly leafed through his wallet, they walked down Mass Ave. in the quiet.

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She pulled her hand away from his for emphasis, “It’s like if I do *one* thing, then I’m in the world!” He stopped and, sensing his confusion, she said, “with food, it’s more colors, or if it doesn’t look right. It’s not that I’m worried about getting fat.”

By now they were sitting on a park bench. “It’s trying to decide what to eat because it has to be pure. There’s a picture in my head next to a picture of the day and the day has a *shape*.”

He nodded, not knowing how to touch her, wishing she would just give him her hand instead of gesturing like that in the dark.

“Can you ever stop?” he asked.

“I know it’s like *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* or something. Jesus Christ, I know it’s pointless but I’m building this mountain anyway and I *need* to!”

In Ari’s dream, he was not the one that had thrown Alyssa down the stairs where she had knocked the corner of her eye against the banister and then remained slumped there at the bottom. She had really jumped, like he’d told the EMTs when they hurried through their heavy door in dark jackets. The moment after Ari had released her arm, he thought, *stitches*, and rushed down to hold her, so she’d remember he was there.

But in his dream Ari was just someone who was listening to a drum drop to a distinct beat, a riff that repeated over and over, grinding Ari’s organs into dust. Warm bodies pushed into his in the center of the pit. He banged his head against the air, losing brain cells in slow motion. He was even other people in the crowd, the kid, Ari’s double, who bumped his chest. Ari grabbed his shoulders back, pushing him hard then bashing his head into his until he reeled back against the others, Ari pushing forward and falling

backward simultaneously. At intermission, before Ari woke up, the lights went on, giving the faces from the crowd a sickly shine. The boy he pushed wore bruises like glasses. He stared at Ari, across from him on the train, the wheels screaming. Ari wiped sweat from his forehead with his t-shirt and it came back red.

Before the fight that sent Alyssa to the hospital, before Ari went to unlock the door, before he had whipped the keys at the wall beside Alyssa's head where they had made the gritting sound of a cymbal crashing against a trash can, before he grabbed Alyssa's wrists and twisted her down the stairs Ari had been at a Thrice show.

In the front hall, he made his way through the line for the bar. When he saw her, he was both surprised and not. The back of Alyssa's head looked like doll's hair, brushed and surreal. She turned back to lean against the bar. There was a ticket sticking out the top of her jeans, a black Modern Life is War t-shirt tight around her torso. She took his ear to her lips, saying, "I know where you go."

She crushed up ice with her straw, a smirk above her lip like a wink he used to love. A twang contracted around his heart, and when he looked down, Alyssa's hand was sprawled over his chest. Ari looked up. The bartender was wiping the bar down with an expressionless face.

Alyssa rolled her eyes like the nineteen-year-olds surrounding her then took his wrist past the merch table where the clerk looked up then continued folding. They stopped at the ATM, attempting to hide behind the tiny machine.

"What do you want?" Alyssa said, "You want to get away from me?"

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“Don’t act crazy.”

“You’re crazy,” she said.

“Where’s AJ?”

“With Lauren from downstairs.” She furrowed her eyebrows till he locked his arms around her, lifting her two inches above the ground so her feet swung out like the hands of an old clock.

“Can we just have a good time,” she said, “together?”

“A good bad time?” he said. She sighed into his neck.

They slipped through the club’s doors. The amplified distortion of the synth split Ari’s ears. Her dark drink sloshed onto her wrist as she turned back and mouthed something he couldn’t make out. He tried to hold her from behind but she wanted to stand next to him.

“Can you see?” he said.

“I can see perfectly,” Alyssa said. The crowd pushed them tide-like and they floated forward, getting closer to the stage. Thrice played “Unanswered Questions” as Ari took Alyssa’s drink then brought her close to his chest, kissing the ridge of her ear.

She held a bobby pin between her teeth then roughed up her hair, grinning into the light from the stage as she slipped the pin back through. The guitar made sonic commas. She took her drink back then stared into the stage, sipping icy vodka as the crowd roared around them. They stood there, married statues in a mosh that began to form around them.

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“I want to go up,” she said, looking back at him. She motioned to the pit, bodies flailing limbs above floating hands. “No,” he said, then, “you’ll get hurt.” He tensed, prepared to fight as she bounced on her heels in a constant attempt to get her way.

“I want to,” again, in his ear.

He paused, the root of some exhausted place inside him taking over, every time, and forever.

“You have to take off your ring,” he shouted, reaching for her hand, certain it would stop her.

“You’ll cut someone, see?” He slid the back of her hand slowly over his cheek, the coldness from the metal grazing his skin. She watched his eyes while he looked out into the crowd, assessing the rage. She looked down at her hand then yanked off her ring, the start. Why was the air not dangerous for her then, to count on the hands she couldn’t count? How could she give up her body for strangers, after his warning, the one word? No. He clenched the ring in his fist, beginning the clock in Ari’s chest that began to tap, quiet at first, metallic with shades of hurt that ticked ahead and had to, no matter what, complete itself inside him. So he lifted her up.

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