

## Blow It Away

Sometimes, powerful songs seem to resonate with the listeners. People who are affected by a particular melody or lyric will listen to the song over and over again, and they never grow tired of hearing it. It just seems to describe current life in a way that nothing else can. And when a song like that is heard, it touches something deep inside the soul. When music has that much of an effect, the song will never be forgotten.

My friends have song like these. Most of them are by Taylor Swift. They'll come up to me at school and say, "Oh my gosh, Annie, have you heard the new Taylor Swift song? It totally describes what my boyfriend and I are going through!" and I'll nod, and I'll act like I understand. But I don't. Because the songs that affect me aren't love songs about breakups and boyfriends. They're not happy songs. They are deeply disturbing, depressing songs. Even if the listener is not going through exactly what the lyrics describe, the song still affects them. And if that listener *did* happen to be experiencing what the song said, they would completely break down. Which is exactly what I do when I hear them. What I did, anyway. I've grown stronger in the past four years. But sometimes, one of those songs will come on the radio and I just can't help myself.

One of these songs is by Garth Brooks. All about a man cheating on his wife. When I hear it, I imagine that the man is drunk. And when he comes home in the middle of the storm, in the middle of the night, neither the man nor his wife see the little girl peeking around the corner of the room where they are arguing. They don't see the tears on her face as she silently wishes for them to stop fighting. Silently, because she learned early on that if you come in between mommy and daddy's arguments... Well, the back of daddy's hand doesn't feel good on a tiny, pale face.

There's another song, a Miranda Lambert number that gives me hope. It is a badass, don't-mess-with-me song. And though I know I won't ever be capable of the actions that the main

character takes, it makes me hopeful that maybe someday I can be free. Someday, I can save myself from this.

Most of the songs that get under my skin are country songs. Country songs always seem to have a story behind them, while other genres seem to focus on the beats and rhythms or talk only about sex and drugs. But country songs, well, those are the ones that have real meaning. And in Oklahoma, where I live, that's pretty much all we listen to. My friends and I, anyway. There are other people in school who like rap and hip-hop and rock. One suck rocker-boy asked me out once. And though I liked him, I said no. I'll never have a boyfriend while I live where I live. He'll want to know about my life. And I won't want to tell him.

Because who would want to tell someone else about her miserable existence in a house with a man that never smiles? With a man who's always drunk. With a man who treats his only child like boxing equipment. With a man whose wife left four years ago and never came back. Even though she promised she would.

That was the last thing my mother had said to me. "I'll come back for you, Annie."

She whispered it so fiercely in my ear that I couldn't help but believe her. But for weeks, I waited by the window, a forlorn twelve-year old, watching for her old pickup truck to come rolling in the driveway of the old house. Sometimes I still catch myself wishing that I'll see her pull up, and she'll shout for me to get in, and we'll drive away and never look back. But she never came back. I don't blame her anymore. Why would she want to come back to a house that held all those awful memories? The good ones would have long since been erased by the man my father had become.

My mother and father had been happy when they got married. My mother was a nurse in the town's hospital, and my father was a respected police officer in our town. They had done things

properly, as things are not always done in a small town. They were married, and then they produced me a year later. When I was six years old, things started to go downhill, and it started with the death of my grandparents. They had died in a car crash, much too young. They were only in their fifties. They left the ranch and all the horses to their only child, my father, who promptly drove it into the ground. He began drinking, upset by his parents' death. He lost his job, though most of the officers still revered him as the great cop he used to be. My mother tried to console him, but eventually gave up. He ended up selling the horses to pay for his gambling debt. And eventually, all that was left of the beautiful ranch was a worn, dilapidated property that nobody wanted to live on, and a weathered barn, empty of animals. The yard was grown over. The driveway was shrouded by masses of trees and shrubs. And the inside of the main house, in which we still lived, was falling apart.

So it's no wonder that my mother didn't want to come back. I wouldn't either. But I might have, if my daughter was waiting for me. If she had her bags packed, waiting for the day that her angel would save her from the man she didn't want to call "Dad" anymore. But she didn't, and here I was, four years later, wondering what to do with my life. Wondering how to escape the clutches of my father. Wondering how to escape the clutches of this tiny town in Oklahoma. I had a part-time job, and I went to school, but I still had to come home at night, where my father was always waiting for me, whiskey bottle in one hand, and an overdue bill in the other. Angry. Waiting for someone to take it out on. I needed to escape. I couldn't take the torture anymore.

And suddenly, the answer showed up right in front my face, in the form of a song, of course. It was always music that hit me the hardest. And this song hit me harder than any other song I'd ever heard. It came out of the blue. I was riding home from school with a girlfriend, and suddenly she turned up the radio that I had not been listening to. "Have you heard this new Carrie

Underwood song?" she asked me. "It's a-may-zing. Chilling."

I shook my head and listened closely. And when I heard the lyrics, combined with the haunting tune, combined with the turmoil in my own head, I just about lost it. I could hardly hold myself together. I couldn't break down in front of Heather; she would ask what was wrong. And nobody knew what was wrong. I'd never told anyone that my father hit me, or that my mother had left. I never talked about myself. I never wanted to.

I barely managed to mumble thank you when she pulled up in front of my house. I jumped from the cab, away from her confused eyes, and ran for it. Ran to the barn, where I always went to cry. Nobody would find me here. Nobody really cared enough to look for me.

I sat down in the stall that used to belong to the old horse that had been my favorite, that had been my mother's favorite, and I cried. I don't know how long I was out there that day. Long enough that my tears ran dry, and the choking sobs that racked my body to the point of pain had subsided. But when I was done crying, my head was amazingly clear. And I knew how to get out now. I knew what my escape would be.

I had to plan. I watched the weather every night, waiting for the day when my escape would be possible. And soon enough, there came the day. I had everything in order. My bags were packed. I would move them to the cellar the night before the storm hit. I had the money that I needed, partly saved from my job, and partly stolen from my father's safe that he had forgotten the combination to years ago. All I needed was my birth certificate. I knew exactly where it was: in the drawer underneath the one that held my father's gun, which I would also be taking. All I had to do was wait until he passed out, and take what I needed. So that's what I did. The day before the storm was scheduled to pass right over my house, I made sure my father was out of it, and snuck to the cabinet where all of our records were kept. I grabbed the pistol and set it on the floor next to me

while I rifled through the old, dusty files until I found what I was looking for.

I was about to close the drawer, when something stopped me. The words “death certificate” had caught my eye. I figured it was Grandma’s or Grandpa’s. But when my eyes read the name, my mind didn’t register it. I read the words three times. But there it was. Plain as day. Jennifer Weston. Date of Death: June 3, 2008. I concentrated on breathing. In and out, I told myself. In and out. But I couldn’t do it. I couldn’t breathe. Realization struck. I began gasping. And the gasping turned to dry sobs, and the sobbing produced tears. I sank to the floor, my mother’s death certificate in my cold, shaking hands.

June third. How many times had I thought of that day? How many times had I repeated the date in my head, and counted the days since? How many times had I cursed that day? June third, my head screamed at me. June third. The day my mother left. The day my mother...died?

I got to my knees and wiped the tears away, desperately searching the drawer for more clues. I found only two more pieces of paper with the pertinent information. One was the police report, which I read thoroughly, first. She hadn’t stopped at a red light, and a semi had t-boned her truck, killing her instantly. After the investigation of the car accident, the detectives found that the brakes on her truck had been compromised. They believed it was an accident.

At those words, the paper crumpled in my hand. Broken brakes? No accident. Intentional. The only person who could have done that was... my father. He had been angry when she left. I flashed back to that night. She had been in her room, throwing some things in her suitcase while I watched, asking if I could go along. I didn’t know where my father was. As long as he wasn’t hitting me, I didn’t care about his whereabouts. But now I realized that he must have been outside. Ruining her brakes. Plotting her death.

The rage swelled up inside of me. My father had... he’d... I forced myself to think the

words. My father had *murdered* my mother. I took several deep breaths. How did I not know about this? I thought back again, but I could remember nothing after my mom left, nothing of the following day. I couldn't remember if someone had stopped by to share the news or not. I squeezed my eyes shut, swallowed the bile in my throat. Willed the anger to subside.

I took several more deep breaths before I looked at the second piece of paper, a newspaper clipping, yellowed with age. It was the obituary, written by a friend of my mom. A friend I hadn't seen in four years. As I read it, the kind words brought fresh tears to my eyes. All the resentment I'd felt at my mother for not coming back leaked out of me. And now all the hatred I felt for my father replaced it. I looked at the gun lying on the floor next to me; my mind flashed to the Miranda Lambert song.

With cold, shaking hands, I picked up the revolver, loaded one bullet, and pulled back the hammer. I wiped the tears away and looked at my father passed out on the couch. The way he had been almost every night for the past ten years. I closed my eyes and pointed the gun towards him. I held it there for minutes, willing myself to do what I knew I wouldn't. What I never could. Because even if I pulled the trigger, and he finally paid for his sins, my own life would be ruined by my actions. And tomorrow, my life would just be getting started. I lowered the gun.

I didn't sleep that night. My discovery had no effect on my plans. The storm was the perfect opportunity to escape. And I was going to escape. The morning dawned cloudy and gray, ominous, a warning of the coming storm. I woke my father up, gave him a cup of coffee, and moved my bags down to the cellar. When I came back up, my father was pouring whiskey into his coffee. I clenched my teeth at the sight of him. He was a disgusting, miserable excuse for a human being. I turned my back on him, toward the cupboard. "What's for breakfast, Daddy?" I asked, my voice

sounding high and false. He didn't seem to notice. "Pancakes?" I grabbed the mix and poured some into a bowl, added water, and made pancakes for the father that didn't deserve them. That didn't deserve anything but retribution.

The day dragged. I left the weather channel on all day, pretending to read a book, while my father got more and more drunk. "There's a twister coming," I mentioned casually around ten o'clock. Only in Oklahoma would a tornado be discussed calmly.

My father only grunted and took another swig from the bottle in his hand.

"I got the cellar ready for us." Another grunt. That was the last of our conversation. Around noon, about half an hour before the tornado was to hit, I made my father a sandwich and a glass of milk. In the milk, I dissolved sleeping pills that were sure to knock him out while I made my escape. "I think we should go to the cellar, now," I told him as I walked back into the living room. "I made you a sandwich. You can eat it down there." I set the sandwich on the table in the living room. "Dad?" He was passed out again. I shook his shoulder. "Dad!" I said loudly. But he didn't budge.

I looked out the window. The wind was picking up; lightning cracked in the sky, but there was no sign of the twister yet. I tried again. "Dad!" I shouted, shaking him roughly. But all he did was snore loudly and turn away from me. As I looked down at him, I saw in my head all the other nights that my father had lain on this couch, unreachable. I saw the night my mother left. He had been drunk that night, too. He hadn't cared. Or he hadn't seemed to. But he had cared enough to cut the brakes on her car. He had cared enough to lose himself in the whiskey every night since. But he had cared in the wrong ways, about the wrong things. He had cared for his pride, not his family. The anger I felt at him grew. "I wish the collectors had killed you when you couldn't pay your debts," I spat at him. I closed my eyes. The next words came out in a whisper. "So now I

wouldn't have to." I turned to go to the cellar, leaving him in the path of the dangerous storm.

I had hardly taken one step before I turned back. He was my father. After everything he'd done, maybe he didn't deserve my help, but he was my father. If for no other reason, for that, I had to try to get him out of the twister's path. I never meant for him to be harmed. I meant for him to wake up in the cellar, alone, his home destroyed, his daughter vanished without a trace. I would be long gone.

I shook him harder and shouted louder, but he didn't wake. I splashed water on his face, but he hardly even flinched. I looked out the window again, and I saw the wind spiraling in the distance. The dark tube of dust that would close in on the house in a matter of minutes. And I was out of time. I tried and failed one last time to wake him. "I'm sorry, Daddy," I whispered, and bolted out the door to the cellar. One look at the darkening sky told me I had only seconds. So I cast one last glance toward the house and locked myself in the dim, underground haven.

I sat in the cellar for hours, listening to the wind howling and screaming above me, listening to the faint sounds of windows shattering, of boards breaking. All the while, the tears were streaming down my face. I clasped my mp3 player in my hand, trying to listen to upbeat songs, to distracting songs. Songs that would take my mind off the horror of the last twenty-four hours. But for some reason, my fingers kept finding the Carrie Underwood song. My escape anthem. I blasted the music, clasp to the hope that the end of the song brought.

Finally, when I took my headphones off, the sound outside had gone. There was no more raging wind, no more thunder, no more pounding rain. Silence had replaced the violent sounds. Cautiously, slowly, I lifted the cellar doors, and an astonishing scene met my eyes. This was not like the end of the music video, peaceful and calm. It was horrifying. There was no house; where it



should have been, there was a pile of toothpicks and broken glass instead. I looked toward the barn. The only things left were the metal bars that had formed outdoor enclosures for the horses. The wooden structure was entirely gone. There were trees strewn everywhere. Giant trees, that nobody but Mother Nature could have removed.

And there was no sign of my father.

I wiped my eyes, but they were suddenly dry; a fierce determination replaced my desolation. I started walking down the driveway to the main road, to the bus station that was only a few miles away. I hoisted my backpack on my shoulder, and rolled the small suitcase behind me, filled with my only belongings in the world. Books, clothes, and music. Money and documents. These were the only things I cared about now. These were the only things I needed to get to where I was going. I didn't know yet where the bus would take me. I didn't really care. The only thing I cared about was getting out of this god-forsaken town, getting out of this hell-hole that I had been trapped in for sixteen years. I reached the end of the driveway and took a deep breath, starting the song over again as I started down the road to my freedom.

I didn't look back.