

Last Dance

Marilyn sits on the front porch early every morning wearing clunky headphones clamped tight over her ears. The song *Mary Jane's Last Dance* plays scratchy inside her brain. She sings along, nodding her head to the music, stopping to punch REWIND on her Walkman whenever she forgets a word or misses a beat.

The sudden passing of Tom Petty had hit her hard.

It wasn't because she was a huge fan, but more that she was a huge liar. She found his music ordinary and never gave any real credence to the lyrics she mumbled through in wait for the chorus. Her friends liked the rocker well enough and she would pretend along, but whenever she could work it into a conversation, Marilyn would tell them and anyone else who would listen that she and Tom Petty were born the same year in the same hospital and raised in the same Florida town.

Marilyn rattled off this false claim to fame her entire life. The more she shared, the more she embellished. *He lived twenty minutes down the highway, my sister and I drove by his house once and he was out in the yard, mowing the grass, and yes, he waved.* To redeem herself, she'd add a lick of the truth, *well, no we never actually met ... that day.* She couldn't remember when the first lie flew off her tongue, but it was said and gone with no take backs. People hung on her every word like she was someone special and before long, her feigned brush with fame became as much a part of her as her lying heart.

His age at death certainly shook her, he the same age as she, that much was true, but the jolt of mortality didn't keep her from prompting condolence at the grocery store a few days following his funeral. "*Tom Petty,*" she said softly, as the cashier rang up the magazine with his picture on the front. "*We could have been high school sweethearts, if he hadn't met my best friend first.*" The manager overheard and insisted on walking her bags out to the car, the least he could do in her time of sorrow. She'd even received a sympathy card from an old friend inscribed, *I thought of you first when I heard the news, so sorry!*

The emphasis reminded her deaths are said to come in threes and perhaps the time had come for her to make things right, in the case she was second on the list. Marilyn couldn't change what was past, but she could revisit it without feeling the need to publicly admit she had lied all these years. She decided as penance for her lifelong lying ways, she would memorize every word and every nuance of Petty's greatest hits. She rummaged through her keepsake trunk and struck college gold with the find of her Walkman and a shoebox full of old audio cassettes. She chose *Mary Jane's Last Dance* to begin her self-imposed punishment, not because she preferred the song to others, but because her aunt had the same first name. When she knew the song by absolute heart, she would move on to another and another after that, until she felt herself absolved or her eardrums bled, whichever came first.

The Walkman clicks STOP. She adjusts the headphones and prepares to begin at the beginning when she notices a man riding a bicycle past her house. He carries two large wooden medicine cabinets in one hand alongside his pumping thigh with seemingly little effort. From what she could see, the cabinets were white, faced with the type of slats that

grime eternally gummy with dust and humidity and never wipe clean. He is dressed entirely in white and wears a turban. Marilyn could not recall seeing him before, but her neighbor hired transients every day to work his food forest for fast bucks. Giving the man no further mind, she pressed PLAY.

Setting up her music the next morning, Marilyn sees the biker cycle by again, this time carrying one white medicine cabinet. He waves her way with his free hand, maintaining his balance as easy as breathing. She gives him a few seconds before hurrying to the street to see where he is going. He bikes past the entrance to her neighbor's property and continues around the curve leading out to the main road. Marilyn recalls an apartment complex is under construction over that way and decides he's off to work.

She watches for him the following morning, but he doesn't ride by. *Probably a day laborer*, she imagines, *needed one day and not the next*. The Petty pause between *moving* and *on* is giving her fits. She's either a beat too early or a beat too late, but she is determined to nail it, even if doing so means rewinding the audio cassette all day long. On the tenth try, she sings *Mary Jane's Last Dance* perfect. She hits EJECT and pulls off the headphones, giving her eardrums a break. The mail truck stops in front of her house and the driver steps out with a package too large for the mailbox.

"It's a heavy one," he says, as she stands to greet him, clearing off the patio table for him to unload the large package. "Walkman? Man, I haven't seen one of those in I don't know when."

“I’ve had it with me all these years, dating back to before Tom Petty became famous,” an honest statement she felt proper to share considering his passing was indeed tragic. She puffed up her posture a bit, she felt so good, as good as when she lied.

“May he rest in peace.” The mailman removes his hat out of respect. “You know, I don’t tell many people this, but I grew up with Tom Petty in the same town, over in Gainesville. We went to the same high school. From what I remember, he was a good guy.” He makes the sign of the cross and heads on his way.

Marilyn watches him pull away from the curb and turns her attention to the delivery. She didn’t recall ordering anything. Tearing open the box, she finds a white medicine cabinet.

The slatted door bursts open. Every story Marilyn fabricated about the musician screams out, blasting her with years and years of petty lies. She slams on the headphones, but her flagrant mistruths squirm a way in past the heavy soundproof foam. *I babysat Tom Petty’s cat. I listened to Tom play dive bars before he hit it big, Tommy and me and our friends screamed around riding bikes to anywhere else, wearing swimsuits and drug store flip-flops, scraping our toes raw by misjudging the down pedal a half inch too close to the steamy asphalt.*

Marilyn sees a single audio cassette resting inside the medicine cabinet. Tom Petty’s *Wildflowers*. She reaches for a slip of paper taped to the plastic case. Lyrics to a single song spill from the unfold, the script elegant and ornate, floral and musical.

No one is ever going to believe this, comical because most believed everything she ever said. Marilyn slides the cassette into the Walkman and hits PLAY, determined to memorize every word and every beat of *Time to Move On* before day's end.