

## GIRL AFRAID

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Flying out of Manchester, picking at the chipped purple glitter of her nail polish, she tries not to think of anything. In her lap, the little machine whirrs. With a mechanical motion, barely glancing down, she opens it and flips over the tape. The song starts where it left off, minus about five seconds; she nods, allows herself a smile, of recognition but of something else too, something she can't define. It's as if the song is speaking directly to her, as if someone out there - she raises her eyes and probes the darkness outside the window - knows her. Cares. As if the answer is out there somewhere, in the velvet blackness, even if she's not sure what her question might be.

She knows each song by heart; she's listened to nothing but this for the last six weeks. And the in-between bits too, where John Peel introduces the bands in his voice that reminds her of honey and tar mixed together. A random night on Radio One, as she'd twiddled with the dials while rain smudged the streets beyond her window into something formless, otherworldly. A random night, a random hour, the random decision to hit the Record button, and yet somehow it had become the soundtrack to her life. A dozen or so songs of which she never grew bored. Each one speaking to her, of her life. How could she stop listening?

Prefab Sprout now: a voice, a bit like Morrissey's, now she comes to think of it, singing about words being like trains, a way of getting past things that 'have no name'. She wonders about that for a moment, about the name of the group, what it means, and about nameless things. Like the feeling she has, almost all the time now. The strange dread, a dread without object, a fear of something she can't put her finger on. They tell her she's good at English, have predicted an A at O level, an A

level, perhaps even uni. But if she has this talent, how come she can't put this feeling into words?

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Reclining on a lounge by the pool, she turns over the cassette. After one day in the sun, her legs have scorched; she's hoping they'll turn brown before the week is out, that she'll have at least one thing to show for the holiday. Unfurling them in front of her, she throws her arms up over her head, closes her eyes, abandons herself to the beat of the sun on her body. She feels both sleepy and alert, as if something is waiting for her. She doesn't know what, but it both excites and frightens her. She opens her eyes and glances about her, but there's no one there.

Mum, Dad and Damian are down on the beach, pinking like prawns. If she cranes her neck a little she can just about see them from the terrace where she lies. Damian, ten, is building a sandcastle with a girl of about the same age. They are laughing, flashing white teeth in the sun. She shields her eyes, feels a headache coming on. She doesn't know why she can't be with them, why there's suddenly this funny sour taste in her mouth, this feeling of her chest filling, or her lungs seizing up, or something, whenever she watches them. They look so ordinary, just like everybody else, with their Woolworth's towels and too-tight Speedoes and pale skin slathered with grease like turkeys basted for the oven.

*Ordinary* - the word makes her shudder despite the noon heat. She turns up the volume on her Walkman, tries to drown it out, erase it from her head. She closes her eyes again.

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At the bar, Damian perched on a stool beside her, she lets her long legs dangle and glances about her as she slurps her iced Tango through a straw. Mum and Dad have sent them down ahead, told them not to stray from the bar, not to talk to strangers. She's not sure about the waiter who keeps looking at her as he passes, with lowered eyelids and smoky blue-grey eyes. Does he count as a stranger? Is he one of the forbidden? Not that she could speak to him, if she tried: every time he glances in her direction, she feels dizzy, has to steady herself against the bar with her hand. The fear returns. Or did it ever really go away?

Throat burning it's so dry, she remembers how it was in Affleck's Palace that time, as she browsed for clothes that would express - she didn't know in what way - how she felt inside. Different. Marked. Cursed, perhaps. And suddenly she'd clocked him, rifling through the rails but eyes on her. She pretended not to know, and he'd finally stopped her at the door, asked her if she wanted a coffee. She'd looked into eyes full of a kind of desperate hope and wanted to say 'yes', but 'no' came out instead. And she'd stood there with her bags - inside, a frayed beige suede jacket, a mohair tanktop, ankle boots - and wondered when life would begin.

She takes another sip of the garish orange liquid, shakes her head. The evening ahead unspools in her mind's eye like a slow-motion film, long hours between her and the moment she can lie on her bed again, looking out into the night, watching the waves glint like little knives beneath the moon, listening to her tape, over and over.

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By the pool again, The Associates, Scritti Politti, The Psychedelic Furs in her ears, she's trying to lose herself to the stark red light that floods her eyelids when she closes them, to let it flood her entirely, as if she has slipped into a bath of blood:

warm, enfolding blood. But here's that feeling again, of a presence, an imminence. She's imagining things again.

A shadow falls across her. She peels open her eyes and he's there, a halo of sun around his head, a tray crowded with empty glasses held aloft on his hand. He's gazing down at her, but with the sun behind him she can't read his expression.

He looks around them, but on this little terrace, partitioned off by a bank of foliage, they can't be seen. Slowly, as if sleepwalking, he bends to place the tray on the table by her lounge and comes to squat beside her. He's so close, she can smell the vestiges of cheap aftershave on his collar, overlaid by sweat, can see an area of his scalp where the hair is growing sparse. He must be as old as her dad, maybe even older. And yet between her legs she's grown wet for him. Her desire shocks her.

He gestures for her to take off her headphones, and she realises that for a moment the rush of blood in her ears has drowned out the music, the music that has become part of her this last month and more, the cadence of her body, the thud of her heart and the flow of her.

He takes the headphones, adjusts them slightly and places them over his own ears, cocks his head on one side. A bemused smile ripples across his features; his eyes, fast on hers, are questioning. She doesn't know what this question is either, can only guess.

'The Cocteau Twins,' she tells him, straining to hear the tinny music about the poolside noise. Not that she needs to hear; she knows the playing order by heart. He's watching her lips now, observing her from beneath those hooded lids, but she knows that he doesn't understand what she said, that it doesn't matter what she said. That there was more than one question in his eyes.

He looks up and around as if waking from sleep, and then he reaches out and runs his fine smooth fingers over her bare arm in the same movement as he rises up

and away from her, already reaching back to the table for his tray, scanning the poolside again. Before she can say anything, he's going, melting away like a beguiling dream that won't let you keep hold, and her racing heart is drowning out the music from the headphones cast aside on the canvas of the lounge.

And she wants to curl up right there and not get up again. But she's not so lost that she didn't clock, as he moved away from her, the name on the little brass badge on his chest.

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At the bar again, on her way back from the loo to the restaurant, she breathes in, swallows the anxiety that's lodged in her throat like a fur ball, and thrusts the square of folded paper towards the man polishing the glasses.

'For Javier,' she says, not even sure if she's saying it the right way, feeling as if her legs are going to give way beneath her, unable to look him in the face as she speaks. Then she turns and, without daring to turn around to see if he's even on duty tonight, walks back to the restaurant, keeping her pace steady, fighting the urge to break into a run.

At the table, Dad is signing the room tab as Mum stubs out her cigarette and stands up, dressed to the nines for dinner in this terrible restaurant with its tepid eat-all-you-can buffet and lousy pianist. Her mother: standing there with that blue eyeshadow, that hair that's so set she might as well still have her rollers in.

She stares, wondering how ordinariness can suddenly look so strange, how what is most familiar can become, in a heartbeat, so alien. She feels a sudden stab of pity for Damian; she, at least, will be able to leave in a year's time. Jangly guitars start up in her head. A year: she can bear that, surely? She turns and heads for the lift.

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Damian slips quickly into sleep, exhausted by the pool and the beach. She's never felt so awake in her life. Opening the balcony door, she steps out into the darkness, looks out over the sea, blue and calm by day but threatening by night, oily-looking and fathomless. She makes to put on her headphones but then remembers. Sitting down, she watches a couple walking on the sand below her. For a moment they stand looking out at the swell, hand in hand. Then they head to the end of the beach, clamber over some rocks and disappear.

She glances towards the door, checks her watch. The bar stays open until late, and there's no telling when he might finish. She's amazed she even had the guts to do it, and she has no idea what she will say or do if he does show up. But something inside her has broken, some kind of bind or restraint. She's still frightened as hell, but she'll be more frightened if she just lets life carry her along like a leaf on the water.

Though her watch tells her it's past two, she's still not sleepy. She steps inside, takes a blanket from her bed, looking at Damian's face in slumber, so untainted, so unmarked by life. She tries to remember when it started, chewing at her guts every morning when she awoke, like a rodent. Bubbling up inside her. But she can't. Or had it always been there, part of her, part of being alive?

She heads back out onto the balcony, sits down again.

He's not coming, she knows that now. She doesn't know why - perhaps he wasn't working tonight, or perhaps he had other plans he couldn't get out of. Perhaps - who knows? - he has a family to go home to. Or perhaps he, too, was afraid. She'll never know. For a moment she lets the fear wash over her, submits to it: the fear of failure, of being unloved, of never amounting to anything. But then she thinks she's

not sure that it really matters anyway, that he didn't come. He wanted her, she saw that in his eyes, felt it in the way his fingers twitched as they met her arm, as if electricity had passed between them.

On the table before her lies her notebook, open, the cheap, chewed Biro finally still beside it. Words have filled the ruled lines across the pages, exploded out of them, running down the margins, filling all available space like an army of insects marching across the white space. She doesn't really know where they came from, the words, only that they erupted from her as she stared out over the waves, over the beach with its idling couples, with its teenagers swigging from beer bottles on the boardwalk. Had almost vomited out of her as she sat looking at the string of nightclubs with their glittering strings of lights and flickering neon, luring people in like flies to overripe fruit.

The yearning inside her she'd felt at the poolside, the yearning to be part of all this, to be part of *something*: that was what had fuelled her as she wrote, letting the words stream out of her like an exorcism, not caring what they meant, not trying to shape or force them, knowing only that they provided relief. The kind of relief that only the razor blade had afforded her, on those days when it seemed that the rain outside her window would never stop, that the grey streets of Withington must finally yield, must be worn away.

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Flying into Manchester, her notebook spread in front of her, the sublime, floating guitars untangling her as they always do, she looks out at the lights, at the rain washing away the city's grime, purging it of its sins. Her eyes move back to the pages, her fingers reach again for her pen. She's found her means of escape.

**The End**