

Sara Smile

He caught me singing along to some garbage song. It was the year 2000 so you can take your pick of soulless hits—probably a boy band, or a teenage girl in a crop top, or a muscular man with restricted nasal airflow. I was waiting for a drink at a bar, spaced out; I didn't realize I'd been singing until his smile floated into the periphery of my vision and I felt impaled by humiliation.

“Terrible song,” I said, forcing a casual tone. “But it’s an earworm.”

We knew each other in that vague way you can know people in college, without ever having been introduced or had a conversation. Joey, they called him, though I decided in that moment the diminutive did not suit him; he was too tall, for one. He put an elbow on the bar and said, “Is an earworm ever terrible, though, if it’s truly an earworm?”

“Yes.”

“But it’s doing what it set out to do,” he said. “It’s effective. It’s catchy.”

“Dick Cheney is effective,” I said. “Nazis were catchy.”

The grin spread again.

The bartender slid me a beer and I took it gratefully,

holding the cold pint glass against my cheekbone. The song ended and a clash of bar-sounds filled its void: ice shaking in tin, shuffleboard pucks clacking, a couple seated at the bar hollering in dismay at a TV suspended above the bartender's head. Joe ordered a drink and began pulling crumpled bills from his jeans pocket. I was about to walk back to my booth when "Sara Smile" by Hall and Oates began to play, and he let out a moan.

"What a perfect song." His hand shot into the tall dark pile of curls atop his head, then clawed its way down his cheek as he listened.

Hall and Oates! I loved Hall and Oates! They were a rare jukebox selection for the time—mainstream 80's still felt cheesy to most people I knew, too recent to be recycled, though that wouldn't last much longer. I leaned against the bar next to him and listened to the gorgeous, sultry first verse.

"Actually," I said, unable to stop myself, "I would call this a perfect track, a perfect recording. Not a perfect song." I could tell he already halfway understood but I explained anyway, with a level of detail befitting an idea of far greater complexity: "A perfect song has stronger bones. Lyrics, chords, melody. It can be played differently, produced differently, and it will almost always be great. Take 'Both Sides Now,' if you'll excuse me being that girl in a bar talking about Joni Mitchell—any singer who doesn't completely suck can cover that song and you'll be drowning in goosebumps, right?"

It was a leap of faith that he'd even know the song, but he gave a swift nod. "Totally."

I ducked to avoid being swallowed by the armpit of a tall

guy receiving a drink from the bartender. Joe's eyes stayed on me, focused like spotlights, so I kept going. "Now, 'Sara Smile'—can you imagine anyone besides Darryl Hall singing this, exactly as he sang it on this particular day?"

Joe cocked his ear. Darryl Hall responded with a long, elegant riff.

I jabbed my finger in the air, tracing the melody. "See? The most beautiful part of the verse is just him riffing. A great song—and I'm talking about the pop-rock world here, obviously—can be improved by riffing, or ruined by riffing. But it cannot *rely* on riffing."

Joe didn't look smug or bored, which were the reactions these kinds of tangents had historically won me. He didn't give me a lecture about relativism while air-quoting the phrase "good music." He just lifted his bottle of Budweiser, paused it at his lips, and took a drink.

The tall guy beside us smacked his shoulder and Joe's eyes lit up with recognition, so it seemed we were done. But before I could leave, he turned back. "What's your name again?" He squinted at me rather severely, like I was a splinter he was trying to tweeze.

"Percy," I said. "Bye."

I walked back to the booth where my roommate and her boyfriend were planning a party I didn't want to have. "Finally," Megan said as I scooted in across from them on the honey-wood bench. "Do you think one of those jugs of SKYY is enough? Plus mixers and a keg?" She showed me a Post-it inserted into her day planner. "That would be fifty each. Unless the mixer is RedBull."

Megan was an Art History major but seemed happiest

when doing simple math. I tolerated her orderliness by indulging small acts of rebellion: unscrewed toothpaste lids, late phone bill payments—all calibrated to satisfy an inner urge for chaos without disrupting our friendship, which was important to me if only for its rarity, like an ugly diamond.

“I told Trent what we discussed about not inviting the whole world,” she said as she took a sip of her *Cosmopolitan*, casting a significant look at the boyfriend. Poor Trent. I had expected them to be broken up by now.

“Is Joey Morrow coming?” Trent said to me, with one eye on Megan. When I shrugged, he pushed: “You were talking to him at the bar, right? He’s in my Econ.”

Megan twisted to peer out of the booth. “Oh, him—Joey and Zoe who both like Bowie. Yeah, they’re cool.”

I knew this, that he had a girlfriend. I watched him across the bar and thought of a rom-com I’d seen at an unfortunately impressionable age in which a man says, gazing longingly at the female lead: “A girl like that is born with a boyfriend.” With Joe it wasn’t the flawless jawline, the arching eyebrows over wide-set eyes—those were offset, in the equation of attractiveness I had learned from these same movies, by the hooked nose and gapped teeth, the too-square shoulders atop a gangly-tall body. But the way he held those angular limbs, as if this jerking energy was the obvious way to make them work. The way he smiled so easily, and frowned so easily, tortured by a blue-eyed soul song. A boy like that is born with a girlfriend.

“Amoeba warning,” Megan muttered, her eyes darting over my shoulder.

I felt a rush of fight-or-flight but didn’t turn around. I knew

she was referring to staff members of Amoeba Records, the legendary Berkeley music store where I'd worked sophomore year before switching to its inferior cousin, Rasputin Music, just up the street. Amoeba had been a hellscape of pretentious snobs and one thoroughly horrifying sexual encounter; Rasputin had been fine but boring, and nobody ever talked about the actual songs there either. Now I waitressed at a diner for twice the money and felt lucky to be free of the lot of them.

“Just the undergrads,” Megan updated. “The guy with the mutton chops and two others. No Neil.”

Of course. Neil would never come to a bar like this, blocks from campus, famous for accepting even the worst fake ID's. My adrenaline eased.

“Should you invite them to the party?” she asked, nostrils flaring. “You have two seconds to decide.”

This stumped me—I hated them, but I could talk to them. “Okay!” I yelled, just in time for the Amoebans to pass by our booth without so much as a nod, let alone a conversation. Trent whistled a low tone that could be interpreted as either pity or mockery.

I recognized all three from behind. We hadn't been close as coworkers; they had been too focused on proving themselves to the elder statesmen of the staff, the ones with hard drug experience and complicated living situations in Oakland. There was also an incident in which the mutton-chops guy had made fun of me for not knowing The Brian Jonestown Massacre and I'd responded by accusing him of being “all breadth, no depth,” a view I still held: music was a collector's habit to those guys, a sprawl of

knowledge more than a well of joy. But still. A hello would've been called for.

Megan caught my eye, communicating sympathy with her face. I sent back gratitude. "Let's just get RedBull for ourselves," I said, and she beamed.

Trent began dropping hints that the two of them should go back to his apartment, even though it was only ten and our names were on the list to play shuffleboard. At least I'd gotten out for a bit, I figured. At least I wouldn't have to keep discussing the relative merits of vodka mixers. He slid me his half-finished pint before following Megan out of the booth like a puppy. It was the kind of beer that tasted like rubber bands but I drank it anyway, urgently, aware of the clock ticking on how long a girl could be alone in a bar before she became monstrously conspicuous. I feigned interest in the stained-glass lampshade hanging low over the booth.

"Name a song that's both."

Joe was standing at the foot of the booth.

I lifted the beer to hide my smile, thinking fast. "In My Life' by The Beatles," I said. "The original cut with George Martin's weird sped-up piano solo. A perfect song with perfect bones, plus they nailed the context."

"Eh," he said, visibly disappointed by this answer. He slid onto the bench across from me. "I would argue the double-tracked vocals were a mistake."

I folded my arms and tried to play the song in my head.

"Lennon insisted on those effects because he hated his voice," he said. "But it's such an intimate song—we should feel like he's just alone, singing to us, don't you think?"

“It’s not like he’s got a choir behind him,” I said. “It’s just John, multiplied.”

“Oh, like it’s his multiple personalities?” He smirked. “Sounds like one of those bullshit things a music journalist would say.”

I was starting to wonder if he might be right about the song, but I wanted the last word: “‘Bullshit things a music journalist would say’ sounds like one of those bullshit things a college boy would say.”

He looked at me over the rim of his pint glass, then smiled a little as he drank. “It’s still a perfect song,” he said. “That’s more important.”

“Is it?”

We kept talking and couldn’t stop. Time stretched like pulled taffy, dipping and clumping. We took turns selecting songs that the jukebox actually, miraculously, played. The overlap in our musical tastes grew wider and wider until it began to seem infinite: indie rock and Elephant 6, the entirety of the 60’s, no guilt attached to pop pleasures. When we finished our drinks he disappeared for a few disorienting minutes, then returned with a teeming pitcher and two fresh glasses and we were right back in it. The booth was like its own room, enclosed on three sides by a wall and the high wooden backs of our benches. The rest of the bar—dark and murky, swimming with normal humans—we would observe occasionally, as if from a great distance.

Casually, I invited him to the party but he said it was Zoe’s dad’s birthday. “Do you know Zoe?” he said, leaning over the table, his high eyebrows relaxed now.

“No.” Zoe was a tasteful punk—rail thin with narrow

hips, babydoll tees and platforms, bleached hair with black roots. They had arrived together that fall as a fully formed unit, transferred into our junior-year cohort from some suburban college, both Poli-Sci majors.

“I think—” He did a quick survey of the bar crowd before looking back at me. “I think Zoe and I might be a perfect track. We need that context—family, friends, our hometown. I don’t know about the *bones* of our relationship.”

My initial response to this was guilt, as if whatever issue he had identified with his girlfriend was somehow my fault. Then I felt a stab of panic at the possibility of him being available, which I knew would turn this scenario into something I was incapable of handling. So I backpedaled: “A perfect track isn’t nothing! A perfect track can be everything! ‘Sara Smile’ was killing you, before I started my blathering!”

He nodded, running his thumbnail over a pair of initials carved into the wooden tabletop. “True. And I can’t imagine my life without her anyway, so.” He patted the table conclusively.

This relieved me enough to ease the panic. I leaned back into the corner of my side of the booth; he leaned into his. I stared at the remnants of beer-foam clinging to my glass and thought about his metaphor: a relationship as a perfect track. There was something delicious about it, the way he’d made my little take on a pop song so emotional, so very real-world. I nursed it like a hard candy.

The closing-time lights came on, and his face looked different in the glare—something sad and determined around the eyes, brutally alive. I felt a sudden yawning high in my chest, like a door inside me being pushed wide open.

He scooted to the edge of the bench and nodded at some guys near the door, then turned back to me. “Can I show you a song I’m working on?”

So he was an actual musician. I would spend the next few days processing this news, recasting the night’s conversation in light of it, but in the moment it left me stunned. Wordlessly I wrote my address on a napkin and then he was standing, bonking his head on the hanging lampshade, buttoning a ratty navy pea-coat. I stayed seated.

“Who’d you come with?” he asked.

“Oh, just some people who tolerate me,” I said. “They left.”

“Walk with us, then?”

“Nah,” I said, then realized I needed a reason. “I don’t hang out with musicians.”

“And why is that?” he asked with a laugh, walking backwards toward the door.

Because they make me unbearably jealous. “Because they always disappoint me,” I said, which was also true.

He held the napkin up in a fist. “Challenge accepted!”

I sat in the booth until someone cleared the array of empty glasses and the stunned feeling began to mutate into anticipation. His song was certain to be either mediocre or terrible, but I relished the possibilities anyway: whispery acoustic? Glitchy blips and bloopers? On the way home I bought a slice of pizza which I ate as I walked, grease dripping from the corners of a strangely unstoppable smile.

Somebody Said

The next night we threw our stupid party. It made for an exhausting Saturday—borrowing a car, buying booze, shoving furniture around in an attempt to make our living room, which was my bedroom, suitable for hosting. Megan and I shared a one-bedroom unit in a dilapidated triplex four blocks south of campus, though the name on our lease belonged to Megan's sister's ex who hadn't lived there since 1994—which meant that our rent was well below market value, and also that we were terrified of raising eyebrows with the property management company and thus did not complain about the non-functioning oven, the shower that took twenty minutes to drain, or the hole in the back of the closet through which a thick tree-branch was definitely growing. It was heaven compared to the dorms.

The party spilled out the front door and onto the sidewalk. I spent the night moving between clusters, laughing at things that were funny and laughing at things that were not. I had burned a perfect party mix but of course people put on whatever they wanted; by midnight I couldn't even find my disc in the haphazard piles. I viewed parties like a job: they simply had to be done. Freshman year I'd been lazy

about socializing—I'd said no when the heads popped in my door, spent Saturday nights tending to a poorly timed Elvis Costello obsession that dominated my imagination and endeared me to zero percent of my dormmates—but didn't love the crushing loneliness that eventually resulted from this approach. Since then I'd been clawing my way toward a normal college existence, and I was proud of what I'd achieved: an apartment, one actual friendship, a staggering mess of inherited CD's.

The day after the party we cleaned in small, hungover increments until it was time for Megan to host one of her informal yoga classes. I joined out of necessity, since it was happening in my bedroom, and was already brainstorming a reason to excuse myself when I heard footsteps on our porch. The tin lid of our mailbox clattering shut. I stepped over the stretched-out bodies.

A blank disc in our mailbox read "untitled for percy," an email for Joey Morrow scrawled below. The sidewalk was dark. All I could think was had he seen us through the window? The other girls in shiny black stretch pants, me in my sweats?

When I returned to the living room, Megan shot me a curious look from her sun salutation. I mumbled something about having a paper due. I hadn't told her about Joe; I knew she would reduce it all to some boring crush. I gathered my laptop and headphones and set up in the kitchen.

Joe's song was quiet but with full instrumentation, programmed drums, heavy reverb. A little Elliott Smith in the guitar styling. The lyrics were pleasantly inscrutable, with themes of gossip ("The night lit up with talk of your talk"),

betrayal (“Let’s both be Judases, see where it takes us”) and looming heartbreak (“Awoke to the memory of the possibility of the worst”).

I played it again. It didn’t suck, which I recognized for the enormous miracle it was. His singing had a striking ease to it, like he opened his mouth and some beautiful mangled truth just fell out. But the song itself felt overly considered, with plodding verses and a nice-enough melody that seemed to leave my brain the moment the song ended.

After several listens, I began composing an email response. And then the bubble next to his screenname turned green. The yoga concluded; girls began filing into our tiny kitchen to fill their water bottles. I hunched over the laptop, trying to stay out of their airspace, and went for it. IM was a new medium for me but I knew enough. I knew to keep it lower case, keep it cool.

@ileanpercy hey

@joeymorrow hey!

@ileanpercy it’s percy

@joeymorrow did you listen already?

@ileanpercy yeah it’s great!

@joeymorrow thanks man i thought you’d like it

@ileanpercy i do wish it had more of a hook

@joeymorrow i think the verses are pretty catchy no?

@ileanpercy oh, sorry, but no way - the melody in the verses is super generic.

and yet also over-written, somehow? it sounds kind of forced.

@joeymorrow damn

@ileanpercy but your singing is magical, joe, and the bridge is beautiful. so beautiful.

and weirdly it doesn't sound like a bridge

there's no big changes or anything, same line-length

it's just a better melody out of nowhere.

@joeymorrow hah i hate writing bridges, i just tossed that out

@ileanpercy if that's what happens when you toss out a melody, i'm scared of your talent

@joeymorrow hah thanks. too bad it's just a bridge, who cares about bridges

@ileanpercy well that's a dumb thing to say BUT i was thinking...could you swap the melody of the bridge with the verses?

then you would have a hook to end the verse

@joeymorrow what would i do with the current verses?

@ileanpercy recycling bin? they were really boring.

@joeymorrow damn that would be a totally different song

@ileanpercy you could keep the lyrics, just use the other melody.

@joeymorrow interesting

i'm singing it

@ileanpercy me too.

i think it works, right?

@joeymorrow dunno

i'll try it out

@ileanpercy rad.

I realized I'd been a massive asshole almost immediately after logging off. Instead of sleeping that night I revised my

end of the conversation in my head over and over, a lifelong pastime I always rationalized as productive since the lessons could apply to future interactions, though that never seemed to happen. I hadn't slept so terribly since the dorms, when I used to spend every night optimizing the thousands of social touchpoints I'd been forced to have in each cacophonous day.

Eventually I stopped revising and switched to crafting an apologetic speech. It was casual, sincere, amply self-deprecating. My plan was to deliver it on Tuesday, when I ran into him on campus, after the economics class I happened to know he shared with Trent in Haviland Hall.

The run-in worked: he was loping out the front doors of the building just as I walked by. There was a dark look on his face until he saw me, at which point it flipped to sunny surprise. I asked if he was okay and he waved me off.

"Zoe skipped Econ," he said. "You want a coffee?"

We went to the Free Speech, a modern cafe recently installed next to the computer lab, filled with informational plaques about Berkeley's free speech movement that everyone ignored. We took turns ordering coffees and brought them out to the outdoor deck.

"The song is so good now," he said as soon as we sat down. "I'm freaking out."

A loosening in my shoulders and neck, the muscles Megan called trapezoids. I scrapped my apology.

"Still tweaking lyrics. They had to be changed a lot to fit that melody." He leaned back against the concrete bench and blew into the hole in his plastic coffee cup lid. "Zoe says I owe you a beer, but a beer seems measly. Two beers?"

“Two beers sounds great. I’m just glad I didn’t hurt your, you know, feelings.”

“Fuck my feelings,” he said loudly, swatting them out of the air.

The girl sitting next to us looked annoyed. She was clutching a pink highlighter and hunched over a thick textbook, which she inched as far from us as our shared table would allow.

“Sorry,” Joe said, flashing a smile at her. “I mean, it is the Free Speech Cafe.”

Unbelievably, the girl smiled back. She returned to her highlighting noticeably less hunched.

“Hey, can I ask you something?” Joe said to me. “Do you sing, or play, or write at all?”

“No.” I took too big a gulp of coffee and burned my throat. “I have no talent, just opinions about people who do.”

“How can that be? Did you ever take piano lessons?”

“Yes. I sucked. And I just couldn’t. It’s too important to me.”

He tugged at a curl of hair from his temple. “But you’re an English major, right?”

“Only by default. I started with Theater to get closer to music, but I couldn’t stand those cheesy songs, all that jazz-hands enthusiasm.” I glanced at our tablemate’s book: enough numbers to reassure me she wasn’t a theater nerd.

“Surely you’ve written lyrics?”

“No,” I said. The trapezoids were tensing again. “I get paralyzed. I’m actually getting a bit paralyzed by this conversation, to be honest.”

He laughed and leaned back. “Okay, okay. Let’s talk about something other than music.”

We sat in silence for a second, then laughed at ourselves, play-acting an old joke. Finally I asked where he was from, though I already knew it was one of those Bay Area suburbs that meant nothing to me, and then we were talking about our childhoods and he mentioned his mom had died when he was young. Diagnosed with a melanoma the beginning of the summer before he started high school, then buried two months later, Labor Day weekend. I had to go to the bathroom but I held it.

“Were you okay?” I asked. “Are you okay?”

“No,” he said. “And yes.”

The sun came out, dappled through the low-hanging trees, and he pulled a pair of sunglasses from his backpack.

“Sensitive eyes,” he said. I remember this so clearly. The black sunglasses, the pile of curls, the blue sky and shuffling leaves behind him—the image still comes to me at random times. Then his eyebrows shot up over the sunglasses. “I almost forgot! Do you want to write a music column for our zine?”

The zine, he explained, was helmed by Zoe, with contributions from a rotating cast of a dozen or so women. Joe provided the occasional band interview. It was called *Ring Finger*.

“I’m not really a writer,” I said.

“Think of it as opinionating. You’re good at that.”

“Opining,” I said.

“Girls opining is basically Ring Finger’s whole deal.”

“So is it like a riot grrrl thing?” I asked. “Because punk

music interests me only up to a point, and that point would come fast.”

“Write about whatever you want. As long as the *spirit* is a bit punk—I told her you’d have no trouble with that.”

I felt that door pushing open inside me again. John Cale! John Cage? The early No Doubt no one knew! Curse words to my heart’s content!

We both had class, but agreed to meet at the campus pub afterwards so he could buy me a beer, which he did, and then bought me another, and then we got burritos and ate them on the side of a grassy hill in the dark.

The next day I bought a copy of Ring Finger at the bookstore. The logo featured an ink drawing of a ringless ring finger raised like a middle finger, with black nail polish on a bitten-down nail. None of the names were familiar to me, thank God—nobody who had known me in my pre-Megan weirdo days. Zoe Gutierrez had written a long, smart article about her first period, studded with historical menstruation horrors. I liked it, but there was a heaviness to the whole thing, a want for humor and light-heartedness. So I decided to start there. I scribbled ideas in the margins of my lecture notes, on the plastic inner flaps of my three-ring binders, anywhere I could find an empty space. When I wasn’t scribbling I was wondering about Joe’s song, humming the bridge melody. I had this dream-like feeling of nearing some place I’d been looking for—a vacancy just my shape, hidden inside an enormous puzzle.

That Friday night after I got home from my shift at the diner, there was an email from Joe with the subject line “DONE”:

my roommates are out tonight so i can play it for you
if you wanna come over, the brown shingle house on
derby by the church

I stepped straight back into my boots and walked to his house, a once-gorgeous Craftsman with a deep, creaking porch.

He smiled when he opened the door. “You’re here!”

“I’m dying,” I said.

He rubbed his hands together like he was about to cook me a really good meal.

His bed was in the living room, a futon folded into a couch, which put us in the same socio-economic strata of upper-classmen—though a room in an actual house cost a lot more social capital. The mattress was so deep I had to tuck my feet up. I could see a sizeable kitchen off the living room, and a grand staircase decorated with college-boy mess: hoodies slung over the banister, a greasy bike chain curled on the first step like a snake.

When I looked back at Joe, he was shaking the mouse of a desktop computer. “Oh,” I said. “You’ll *play* it for me. I thought you meant you’ll *play* it for me.”

He turned, surprised. “Do you want me to *play* it for you?”

“Yes,” I said. “I mean, whatever. But yes.”

He shrugged, then picked up a guitar from the corner and perched on the opposite end of the futon. “You should hear the track afterwards though. Beer?”

He seemed nervous. I shook my head, fighting a smile.

“Okay,” he said. “It’s called ‘Somebody Said.’”

He cleared his throat and began. His guitar playing was good, finger-picking, assured. It occurred to me his hands would be rough to be touched by—or do callouses feel smooth, I wondered. The verses sounded as I knew they would with that melody, elegant and right, with a new lyric in the repeated final line that gave the song a clear hook: “Somebody said you said it was over.” He flinched when he sang it, voice cracking, and I felt with some certainty that I was watching a star—that the reaction I was having would be the reaction of anyone with eyes and ears, of hordes of college girls and sensitive young dads across America; I was not special. It gave me a surge of vertigo, like I’d leaned too far over the edge of a balcony.

The new bridge brought me back with a predictable chord change, a half-hearted couplet. It would do. A perfect third verse and that gap-toothed grin to finish.

“Holy shit,” I said.

He exhaled. “Oh, thank God.”

“You need to play shows.”

“I’m getting a band together.”

“I think my hands are actually trembling, slightly?” I held out a hand for observation and he lunged for it, clasping my fingers awkwardly in his.

“Thank you,” he said.