

Soundtracks

It is during the winter of '99 that my brother and I finally venture home for the first time since September. I hunker low in his maroon Camaro, my teeth clenched as he jack-rabbits around long silver semis. Music roars from the console, a beast intent upon prolonging my misery. My right foot pounds constantly and futilely at an imaginary brake pedal.

“You’re going way too fast!”

“What?” The one hand he has on the wheel suddenly drops down to jab at the volume button. I close my eyes tightly and pray. When I open them again, he is looking at me expectantly. I make a poor attempt to restrain my temper.

“Do you KNOW how fast you’re going, LITTLE brother?”

He grins, teasing eyes hidden behind dark sports sunglasses. “What, don’t you know how to have fun anymore?”

The sentence, though spoken in jest, stops me short. Have we really become so distant? Briefly, I consider. Since the onset of college, he spends late nights and early mornings with friends. I... well, I am in bed before eleven. His chief source of income comes from the plasma bank. Mine is the result of a steady job. I glance out the window and frown, realizing that the year which separates us has swelled to unanticipated proportions.

The miles roll on predictably, my brother conquering one tame Iowa highway after another. I soon become quite conscious of the frequent gaps in our conversation, and am relieved when the Goo Goo Dolls leap into one such silence.

“And I wonder where these dreams go,

When the world gets in your way.

What’s the point in all this screaming?

No one’s listening anyway...”

It is an uncommonly soft song and, surprisingly, one we have both come to like. I begin to murmur softly to the lyrics. He mouths most of the words, an

audible line only occasionally escaping from his lips. Our voices, I think, are terrible, but this may be the reason he joins me— one bad singer doesn't mind another.

Perhaps, however, it is for a different reason. A reason that brings to memory sled rides and tree forts and rubber band fights. Summers spent climbing hay bales, our hands red and scratched and our faces grimy with dust. That first day of school each fall, when we stepped onto the bus together. There is too much we have in common for any real rift to ever separate us.

My brother reaches out again to turn the music up as we turn down a faded country road. Our voices escalate accordingly, sounding scratchy and tuneless. I grin, noticing that that neither of us care.

My mother listens to country music as we wrap Christmas presents on the bare cold floor of her room. I lean against one wall and she the other. We take turns with the scotch tape, throwing it back and forth across the room. I allow my eyes to wander over her face, the glance accompanied by its usual sinking feeling. She has once again broken the secret contract between parents and children — she has grown older. I can make out extra wrinkles, ten more gray hairs.

A timid knock at the door cuts short my analysis. Her head lifts, and our eyes meet. They are the same deep brown.

“Who is it?” We yell out in unison, already knowing. Grins start to tug at our lips.

“It's me!” The voice needs no further identification. It is plaintive and inquisitive, laced with the excitement that holidays infuse into very young brothers.

“Go away!”

“Scram!”

My mother and I shout commands together, and they tumble over each other on their to the door. I picture them piercing the curiosity of my youngest brother like arrows, for he whines as a wounded animal might.

“Awww... please?”

We grin wider. My mother reaches over and palms the rolling knob of her ancient stereo. The Wilkinsons flood the room with their song, “26 cents.” She sings softly at first, but beautifully. I titter precariously on the edge of indecision, finally joining in with the chorus. Our fingers fly across rolls of wrapping paper and our toes curl to the beat. She is singing stronger now. I like to think that it is because I am singing with her.

“Do you remember when I sent you this song?” She does not look up, but I do, scissors pausing their gnaw across Santa and his reindeer.

“Of course.” Less than a year ago I had unwrapped her gift in the solitude of my dorm room. A CD and 26 cents. I remember my initial confusion, confusion that had transformed into a magnificent wonder as I listened. How had she known?

“When you get lonely, call me anytime at all
I’ll be there with you, always, anywhere at all.
There’s nothing I got that I wouldn’t give
And money is never enough
Here’s a penny for your thoughts,
A quarter for you call
And all of your mama’s love.”

In the darkness of my room that night, I had cried. Today, in the brightness of hers, we both smile. She finds an appreciation of life in the immortality of my likeness. By the same token, I realize mortality in hers.

I am at Erik’s apartment for New Year’s Day, and we have just finished cooking a sort of pseudo-meal. His fish patty looks resembles a bar of soap. My french fries are black-tipped. The smoke alarm has exploded into an ear-piercing wail three times in the last ten minutes. We laugh through it all, attributing the disasters to post-party hangovers, neither of us mentioning that we don’t actually drink.

When the dishes are cleared and we are, once again, bored together, I leap to the sound system in search of a meaning for our relationship that currently does not exist. He groans good-naturedly behind me, knowing what the immediate future holds, but he stands when I ask him to. I close my eyes, letting Lonestar's "Amazed" take a firmer hold on me than even his arms can.

"And I've never been this close to anyone, or anything. . ."

I tell myself as we sway softly across the room that these lyrics are true, that he is as close to me as anyone has ever been before. But I know it is not close enough; I know that the further I stretch this relationship, the thinner it gets.

"I love you," Erik says, interrupting my traitorous thoughts. I can recall the last time I heard those words, three days and 1000 miles away.

"So what are you going to do tonight?" I had asked him then, my fingers lazily entwining with the coiled phone cord.

"I don't know," he had said. "Probably just be bored."

"How can you be bored? Don't you have a book to read or something?"

"I don't like reading books anymore."

"So find something else to do. But don't be bored."

"I don't know what to do."

I had sighed audibly, and a lengthy silence had settled between us. Finally, he had said. . .

"I love you." He had said it then as he says it now, with a dependent kind of confidence. Every fiber in me rebels against the traditional reply, but my lips form the words in a conditioned response.

"I love you too." I say it because I do not want to slow this one last dance, do not want to stop this one last song, do not want to hurt the person closest to me. I will tell him after the song. But I am safe for now, balanced on the thin highwire of our relationship for as long as the music lasts.

It is another two days later, and sounds of The Police pour out from the vents in a white-tiled barn where Dad slaves away.

“Roxanne!” sings the lead singer. “You don’t have to put out the red light!”

I grin at these lyrics, knowing what will most likely follow, and yank open a foam-reinforced door, its inner surface pock-marked by the target practice of screwdriver-wielding hired hands. Dad is inside, his broad shoulders bent as he stoops to shovel out one hog crate after another. Hungry mothers chomp at their evening meal and lift one hooped foot after the other as he cleans around each.

I slam the door behind me and his head pops up on cue, an initial wondering look soon replaced with his usual teasing countenance.

“Well, it’s a daughter!” he exclaims, as if I’ve been years gone and he’s only now remembered my existence in this world.

“Well, it’s a father!” I retort, having not thought of a better response since this game started. Besides, it is more tradition now than teasing.

He smiles and lowers his head again, shovel flying. “Grab a scraper and help out!” he yells, somehow turning the request into a challenging invitation. I answer by honoring it, and we work together for a few moments in silence.

I know, however, that he cannot resist. I am not disappointed.

“Raahxaaane!” he finally sputters, twisting the song into something hideously funny. I laugh, as I always do when he sings like this, and wonder for the hundredth time what his real voice sounds like. Is it so bad that he must hide under such an annoying and obnoxious twang?

“You don’t have to put out the reeed liiiiiiiight! Raahxaaane!”

“DAD!”

He stops in midtune, shoots me a cocky grin, and then points his finger to indicate a corner I have missed. I roll my eyes, wondering how he noticed in such a brief glance.

“Hey. . .” he barks, all humor lost in a pretense of fatherly-like wisdom, “If you’re going to do something, do it right.”

I snort softly but shovel the corner clean, turning back to him when I’m done. “Does that apply to singing as well?” I ask, a smirk dancing on my lips.

He shakes his head but cannot hide a grin of appreciation, and we work for

the last half hour accompanied by only the squeals of baby piglets and the answering grunts of contented mothers.

My entire family rides low in our smooth gliding Buick Grand National, cruising the interstates as twilight sweeps across the snowy fields. It is the night before my brother and I return to college, and the sad silence of the impending separation has settled over my mother and father like a heavy quilt. Their voices are, at best, muffled from where I am curled up in the back seat. My youngest brother's head tilts against me in a manner I once found annoying but now consider endearing, while my elder brother and I gaze out our respective tiny side windows.

Through the covert, hushed tone of my parents filters the first verse of Don McClean's "American Pie." I veer from my melancholy reverie to ask my mother to turn the music up, but her hand is on the volume knob before any words even escape my mouth.

"A long, long time ago, I can still remember how that music used to make me smile..."

I turn my head to the window once more, the lyrics on my lips. Outside, the ditches blur by so fast that I cannot concentrate on any one spot for more than a fraction of a second, and I can only see clearly by focusing on fields miles away.

I turn away from the window just as my mother begins to sing sweetly and my older brother's foot begins to tap. My father reaches for my mother's hand, their fingers entwining with the familiarity of years.

"And do you believe in rock and roll, can music save your mortal soul?"

The peace of this moment is broken only by an inevitable sense of change. Pressing a solemn face to the inner chill of a car window, I realize that these events in my life are accompanied by a soundtrack, a soundtrack to something that can only be seen clearly from a distance.