

Mamama

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Dreaming Is Free

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I would have taken a bullet for Michael.

That was the fantasy: I'm in Los Angeles, land of my birth and of Michael Jackson's superstardom. Usually, the setting is an amusement park (as a seven-year-old who had been transplanted to a Midwestern town, I pictured California as one big family fun zone). With a towering steel-and-wood roller-coaster as a mountain-range backdrop, the pint-sized lead singer of the Jackson 5 is spreading his love on his followers. I'm there (to comfort him, wrap my world of dreams around him, I'm so glad that I found him), at the front of the crowd, awaiting his benediction—a word, a glance, an autograph.

Michael and I are mere feet apart when I see the man with the gun. Menacing. Jealous. A hater.

"No!" I scream, and the next few seconds pass in slow motion.

I leap in front of Michael as the muzzle flashes . . . The bullet lodges in my shoulder, perilously close to my heart. . . . Guards tackle the assassin, and Michael rushes to my side.

"You saved my life," he says, gently, sadly, tenderly.

"I love you," I whisper.

We both cry.

Assassination fascination: I suppose it's what happens when you were born less than a year after John F. Kennedy was killed, when the slayings of Martin Luther King Jr., Robert Kennedy, and Malcolm X punctuated your toddler years like so many cosmic time-outs. I imagine it's a shared trait of "my generation," that is, no generation—we of that age group that's too squirrely for the yuppies and too old-school for the slackers. Who knows, maybe news of the gunman at the Rolling Stones' '69 Altamont concert had penetrated my grade-school consciousness. I always was a bit of a pop culture junkie.

My first crush was a cartoon—a cartoon who was a child prodigy, who became the King of Pop, who devolved into a surgical composite of our culture’s psychic breakdown. In 1971 *The Jackson 5ive*, a series produced by animation kings Rankin-Bass, made being music stars look like the Great American Adventure. The five brothers carried on the tradition of The Monkees, the Beatles in *A Hard Day’s Night*, and Our Gang in *Little Rascals*. Only the Jacksons were our age, sort of. (Being a cartoon made them seem younger than they were.) I was born the year the Beatles played *The Ed Sullivan Show*; the Monkees were more my older brother’s cup of tea. But musicians beamed every Saturday morning onto the TV screen in my Midwestern ranch-house living room made rock and roll seem like the Jetsons’ space home or the Flintstones’ stone age: a domesticated fantasy realm.

My brother has confessed that around the same time I was obsessing about Michael’s fancy footwork, fuzzy Afro, and angel voice, he fell for *Speed Racer*’s limpid eyes. Brett, two years older and cerebrally light years ahead of me, was my partner in pop-cultural immersion. Cartoons helped us imagine a miscegenated, bisexual future. But how were we, as adults, supposed to manage real-life relationships when we got our start with the perennial happy endings of Technicolor, bubble-edged creations?

Some three decades later, the ironies of my prepubescent imagination are abundantly clear. These days, Michael Jackson gets arrested for allegedly acting out fantasies somewhat different from my own, with little boys, not little girls. Apparently, life in the Jackson 5 was not quite the fantastic adventure depicted in cartoons.

But the ’70s were an age of innocence. I wanted not merely to meet Michael, become his girlfriend, and save him—Did I somehow know he needed rescuing? Was it, in fact, obvious?—I wanted, of course, to be him. A rock star. A singing, dancing world traveler. A being whose divine gift lifted him above the dull, daily duties of life (homework, jobs, dishes, bills).

I wonder if Michael wishes he had had my relatively normal, safe, happy, if daydream-obsessed, childhood. Would he star in this role-play movie, trade places with not necessarily me, but someone like me? Someone not on a crash course for obliteration by the dream/hit factory, his very face erased.

I’m not sure those dreams did either of us any good.

But we’ll always have the music.

Jackson 5 Greatest Hits. All music obsessives ask each other, What was your first album? That was mine. Plus, I owned a 45 of “Ben,” Michael’s love song to a rat. Seven-inch vinyl was where it was at when I was growing up in a small Wisconsin city. We heard the songs played by WLS in Chicago on our transistor radios, saved our allowances, rode our bikes to K-Mart, and brought home the hits. Though record collecting now seems to have become the ultimate nerdy fanboy domain, it was we girls who traded 45s while boys fretted over baseball cards.

A testament to the mentality of the collector, I still own that dog-eared album. On the cover, Michael looks nothing like the specter that haunts tabloid television. His image is positively Afrocentric in that groovy '70s way: big hair, nose, lips, collar. He's wearing a choker, and his colorful shirt is open. Michael doesn't look like an adult, but he's no kid either.

The joy, the glee, the abandon, the excitement are all in his voice. The Beatles were great, yeah, but sometimes I think pop music truly peaked later, with the bubblegum soul of the Jackson 5. John, Paul, George, and Ringo would have been inspiration-impaired without Motown, the Sound of Young America. And in Michael, Motown head Berry Gordy found what he had always been looking for: an old soul with a young voice.

Pop music is Peter Pan, the Pied Piper. It's Ponce de Leon's fountain of youth bottled and sold worldwide or spritzed into the air for free. Hear a song you loved as a child three decades later, and you're young again. Connect with a current hit, even as a middle-aged geezer, and you've tapped into the secret society of youth culture.

I bought into the dream factory big time, and it still levies a tithe on my soul. I've just always loved music. Dancing on a coffee table at my parents' cocktail parties, I would entertain the guests by singing all the parts on the Hair and Jesus Christ Superstar soundtracks. The Beatles—all four of them; why choose?—were among my earliest adolescent crushes. Punk rock saved my bored, zit-faced teenage life and taught me to screech, "Oh bondage, up yours." Funk taught me to dance, hip-hop showed me the news, and electronica transported me. Along the way, I decided to write about it all.

Some people are born musicians. I was born a listener. My first concert memories are of Dave Brubeck playing the slinky chords of "Take 5" by the Lake Michigan shore every year at Milwaukee's outdoor beer bacchanal, Summerfest. My family's table would be full of empty cups and fried-food containers, and my parents would be in front of the stage swing dancing. At night's end, Brett and I would pile into the back of the station wagon and sleep on the hour-and-a-half ride home down a quiet highway. Getting a DUI wasn't a suburban *bête noire* in those days, and I always felt safe in our Chevy cocoon, watching the star-filled country sky out the back window.

Occasionally, Dad would take out one of his classical records and ensconce himself in our living room, where he would sink deep into the strings. Usually, this was late at night, and he would be in some kind of mood. Sometimes, we'd have to ask him to put the headphones on, but even so, he would shout along to some rousing section, causing the rest of us to giggle. Brett adopted similar habits when he hit adolescence, but his headphone affairs were with the Doors, Bruce Springsteen, and the Clash.

Suburban bohemians, my parents actively fostered a song-filled house. Christmas brought new musical gifts: One year, it was two acoustic guitars in black cases with big red ribbons; another, it was a stereo; a third, Dad enlisted us kids' assistance in preparing a surprise for Mom. We covered a giant piece of brown paper with grade-school graffiti, then draped the improvised wrapping over a standup piano next to the Christmas tree. Mom feigned disbelief when she pulled off the homemade wrapping, but I can't imagine what else she thought it hid.

She never did learn to play, but Brett and I did. Always good students (perhaps because our parents were teachers), we learned how to sit properly at piano recitals, hold our hands just right, and make it through a piece of music without hitting too many wrong keys. We also tried our hands at guitar and viola. When I was around seven, I begged Mom and Dad to get me a drum kit like the one our neighbor Jon had, but that's where they drew the line. (Instead, I wound up spending years dating, living with, marrying, and raising drummers.) I think Brett and I both, separately, reluctantly, and inevitably, came to the conclusion that our rock-star ambitions would have to find other channels. Dreams, ideas, and love for music we had in spades, but the fact was, we lacked talent.

Mom had it though: She used to sing show tunes as she washed dishes or vacuumed the house, or just when she was happy. I loved to sing too but never had Mom's pipes, so I learned to keep my self-serenades discreet. Mostly, I sang out the car window. We spent our summer vacations pulling a trailer across America—probably the best education I ever got. I'd sit in the back seat on those long drives and toss my songs into the prairies, mountains, suburbs, and deserts.

Our trailer was our stagecoach and traveling classroom. We were pioneers, far from our roots, tight-knit, often tight-lipped. It was the era when the big-city AM stations carried music miles into the hinterlands and played the hits, and the hits were good. There were no cassettes, CDs, or satellite radio yet, and certainly no iPods into which we each plugged in separately. There was just the car radio, binding us all together with deliciously sugary pop and irresistible, saccharine ballads.

Brett was my best friend, sounding board, and think tank—when I could pull him out of his books. I remember having to coax him to play stuffed animals in the back seat; then he would only join if I let him be the rock star. He'd pick one plush toy to animate, while I'd man a cast of ten. Blacky, his Scotty (earned by sending in proofs of purchase from Scott tissue papers), was an Elvis in his depressive stage. While my tigers, koalas, cougars, and monkeys were arguing over recording contracts and tour plans, Blacky would be howling the saddest hound-dog song you ever heard. Once, he threw down his mike, stormed out of the studio, and disappeared into the night, shouting, "I don't want your money! No one understands me!"

I looked up at my red-faced brother with his hair in his eyes. Okay.

Brett and I shared 45s and LPs. He was at least as obsessed with music as I was, and since he was older, I learned about bands from him. He checked records out of the library: Joni Mitchell, Led Zeppelin, Cream. The first one bored me, and the second one scared me, but *Wheels of Fire*, I dug. When our ages were still in the single digits, I owned more 45s than he, but once we hit the doubles, his LP collection outpaced mine. I wasn't focused enough; I was buying clothes, jewelry, posters. Brett saved his allowance and lawn-mowing money every week, went to the local record store/head shop, and bought the latest releases he'd read about in *Rolling Stone* or the *Milwaukee Journal*: Elvis Costello, the Jam, Robert Johnson.

We were an intellectual family: well read, highly opinionated, and overly fond of puns. Mom and Dad discussed almost everything with us—politics, movies, music, current events, books, economics, psychology, sociology, history. We toured national parks and monuments, watched spewing geysers and Civil War reenactments. I vividly remember my parents' grimness when we visited Madison shortly after campus bombings there. They wanted Brett and me to see the dangers of extremism, how ideologues could tear apart the country, even in such a smart, lovely town as Madison. Like the times, Mom and Dad were leaving conservative shadows behind them. Democrats, Deweyians, Unitarians, they were also ahead of their time.

I remember once an older couple pulled alongside our brown Chevy station wagon, with our canoe on top, dog inside, and trailer behind. The woman rolled down her window and shouted, "You're so beautiful! The American dream!" Mom laughed so hard she started to cry.

Brett and I are demographic freaks: third-generation Californians, born in the same Glendale hospital as Dad and his dad. Our father was an only child whose beloved mother died when he was twelve; Gladys was the unknown heroine who haunted my childhood. Dad never forgave his father's quick remarriage. For birthdays and Christmas, the woman everyone called Sugar sent me perfume and jewelry, a collection that I kept shoved away in a drawer of my desk—femininity not discarded but banished.

Our left-coast legacy was cut short when we moved to Beloit, Wisconsin, when I was four. My brother and I were allergic to smog, Ronald Reagan was elected governor of California, and Dad got a job as a professor at a small liberal arts college, so away we went.

My parents left their families thousands of miles away when we moved to Beloit. We didn't know anyone there, or in the state of Wisconsin, or really in the whole Midwest. We were like thousands of academic families, committed to the primacy of mind over matter, expected to plop down in a little American town and make it our own.

Our neighborhood was a place of solitude but not of fences, which meant we kids could run from the back of Scott's place, through three yards, past Joyrie's, to Jon's stone castle on the hill. Or we rode bikes. If you were really good—and lucky—you could start at the top of Jon's hill, lean sideways on the curve around Joyrie's, only have to pedal slightly up the gradual slope past Scott's, then glide down the ravine past my house and halfway up the other side—all with no hands. With a creek, field, and woods, Turtle Ridge was a bucolic setting for an active tomboy and a safe haven for her bookworm brother.

I was a child of the '70s. Women's liberation was not an ideal, but a fait accompli, as far as my skinny, barefoot self was concerned. Girls could do what the boys did, and no one cared. In fact, in our neighborhood, girly girls were uncool. Why be afraid to get your fingers dirty or a grass stain on your new pants? Wasn't that what jeans were for? I never wore a dress, a fact the snotty twins who moved in down the street noted with disdain—but then Jon, David, and Scott didn't play with Lisa and Jane, did they? I often didn't even wear a shirt, a taste for top freedom I got to revisit as an adult at gay-pride marches and then as a nursing mama. I loved being the girl who was one of the boys.

We'd left California, but California hadn't left us. In Beloit, we were strangers in a strange land: a little liberal, a little weird. Dad carried one of those male purses that were trendy in the '70s, which he bought in Amsterdam. The neighborhood kids laughed at that, but they loved our VW Bug, which we'd all pile into like some college fraternity prank on the days it was Dad's turn to drive the car pool to school.

Mama, Mom's mom, lived with us after Papa died, helping take care of Brett and me as best she could. My parents' discipline was too loose for her strict Baptist soul. I can remember her wanting to switch my backside on at least one occasion, probably because of my infamous ability to sass back. My parents, antispanking, wouldn't let her.

Mama was the family matriarch, but she was also an independent woman. She had once been a seamstress, making bathing suits in a factory, like the heroine of *Sister Carrie* or the victims of the Triangle Shirtwaist Fire. She eventually got tired of living in our basement and under our rules and moved into her own apartment. Every Wednesday when I was a teen, I would pick up Kentucky Fried Chicken and take it to Mama's place. She was always sewing, embroidering, or crocheting. She tried to teach me how to hold and work a needle, but I had no patience for such domestic endeavors. Sometimes she would try to convince me to adopt her Christian ways, shaking her head at my parents' agnosticism. Mostly, she was patient, kind, and accepting, devoted to her ever-expanding brood of children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren.

Every few summers, we took our trailer out west, where we'd visit Mom's brothers. I loved my hard-working uncles with their pickup trucks and large families. Uncle John had a pool, which seemed like the best thing in the world. His kids, in their teens and twenties, were glamorous, beautiful, and tinged with tragedy, surviving car accidents and fiancées killed in plane crashes. With their beautiful, flowing manes and wide, easy California smiles, they all seemed like stars to me.

This was California's golden era. Cousin Cathy, two years older than me and so much cooler, literally taught me to speak its language. We listened to the Eagles, Fleetwood Mac, and Shaun Cassidy; we watched Charlie's Angels, The Hardy Boys, and CHIPS; we perused Teen Beat and Tiger Beat. My jaw would drop at her stories about celebrities she had seen in grocery stores, malls, or cars. She was, literally, a valley girl, a resident of San Fernando, and she taught me to say "like," "for sure," and "tubular," even before Frank and Moon Zappa had a hit making fun of teen dialect. (Years later, in the late '90s, punk feminist Kathleen Hanna reclaimed this mode of communication as part of grrrls' unique way of being, recording the song "V.G.I.," short for Valley Girl Intelligentsia, under the name Julie Ruin. Like, for sure, talking in tongues was a way Cathy and I connected and asserted our difference, our youth, our generation.)

Like young girls everywhere, we would sneak out at night to wander, mostly just talking. We had no destination; it was all about the journey and the transgression. Occasionally, terrifyingly, helicopters would fly low overhead, shining spotlights on the mostly deserted streets. I doubt they were looking for petty curfew breakers like us, but still we hid under cars. L.A. was like that, a place brimming with boredom and chaos, teetering between fascism and anarchy.

Wisconsin offered woodsiness and four-season adventures. But sometimes, when I felt like I didn't fit in, when I was a little wild for conservative Midwestern values, particularly as I got older and hormones started making me restless, California was a beautiful, seductive, glamorous siren. I believed it was the lifestyle to which I had, literally, been born: backyard pools, movie stars on the corner, sea and sun, and the wind in my hair.

Michael Jackson was the knight of my California dreaming; then, it was Shaun Cassidy; then, the Beatles. And then, it was Bruce Springsteen, who sang about workers like my uncles, about the factories closing around us in Beloit, about little girls driving alone through the Wisconsin night.

By the time I fell for the Boss, adolescence had changed everything. Girls and boys didn't play the same way anymore; home was a place to get away from, not to. Then, Reagan was elected president. Where could we run to this time?