

iBrood



by

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Secure in the embrace of an Irish pub, a young man sits alone at a tall table. His spot was carefully chosen, his stool repositioned, to place him in a back corner but with a clean line of sight to the front windows. In his left hand is a black velvet ring box with 1.21 carats of three months' salary. In his right--as is as often as not the case--is an iPod. His left thumb nervously traces circles in the velvet; his right works the scroll wheel with little more intent, though incalculably greater effect. A shuffling drumbeat rasps in his earbuds, a soft, jazzy intro he forces toward an artificial crescendo with an unconscious inching of his thumb.

She is meeting him. She, whom the ring is for, is supposed to meet him. He messaged her, told her, asked her, to meet him here. The message was funny, flirty, apologetic. They had exchanged angry words three days before. Terrible, tear-filled, unforgivable words. But

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yesterday, walking along Jewelers' Row with Earth, Wind & Fire and the clockwork landslide of the Phoenix horns [*Got to get you in / Got to get you in / Into my life / Into my life*] playing for his ears alone, forgiveness sparkled with clarion certainty in a shop window. But now, in this moment, a moody saxophone with audible breath framing every note introduces a creep of doubt. It is gone with a thumbshift.

Folky strumming. Guitar? No. Each chord dissolves with an exotic, metallic echo. Mandolin. It strikes him as music someone made honestly, sitting on a grassy hill, swaying to each strum with unembarrassed passion. It was a picnic on a grassy hill where he first told her he loved her. It could not have been more heartfelt, more perfect. I love you. He cupped her face with one hand and wiped away a sentimental tear tracing along her cheekbone with his thumb (his mighty thumb!). [*Just before our love got lost you said / I am as constant as the northern star*] Who is that, he wonders, glancing down. Joni Mitchell. How'd she get on here? From that day, from that moment on the hill, nothing that followed seemed to match its sun-drenched promise. They moved in together and her constant presence, once pure comfort, began to feel invasive. Those words, first spoken at the instant of ripened perfection, had acquired a way of tasting stiffer and drier in his mouth than he believed they should have. [*So bitter and so sweet*] Every quarrel, every grating pass of daily strife, shook his confidence in that hilltop rapture--while hers seem to grow organically over time. [*She knew your devils and your deeds and she said / Go to him, stay with him if you can / But be prepared to bleed*] This makes his thumb look for something else.

Ah, Marvin Gaye. No one could mind that. [*Mercy, mercy me*] His eyes are drawn to the large plasma TVs mounted above the bar in space that by right and tradition should belong to beer advertisements. [*Things ain't how they used to be*] These enormous TVs with their ceaseless flow of mesmerizing disinformation were everywhere now. In bars, restaurants, stores, subway stops, Times Square. [*Where did all the blue skies go?*] Even the Blue Whale Room at the goddamn American Museum of Natural History. It's not right, he had said. These beautiful old dioramas having to compete with technological distraction. Since when did you become opposed to distracting technology, she had said, tugging on the wires he had forgotten were still plugged into his ears. Embarrassed, amused, he took them out and answered, Hey, I had the sound off. Their mutual laughter echoed from the whale's belly and they locked arms as they walked on. [*Things ain't how they used to be*]

Half the TVs around the bar are tuned to news channels. Nothing but endless war and disease and disaster in the making. [*Poison is the wind that blows*] Sometimes it seems like there's no point in looking to the future. This world is being squeezed toward oblivion by greed and fanaticism we can barely comprehend, much less oppose. What good is an outlook like that, she had said. How does that help you, or anyone, get through life? It can keep you from making a mistake, he answered. Making a mistake. His thumb taps a few times as if to make distance from the thought.

[*If I could reach the stars / I'd pull one down for you*] There. Eric Clapton, sweet and lowdown, at his finest. The patrons in the bar seem to slow down. Happy hour is a mellow, languid affair full of deep draughts and silent laughter. That couple there. They're new. She's flirting hard, touching his arm and laughing. He's cracking jokes and making faces just for the joy of seeing delight light up in hers. [*I'd shine it on my heart / So you could see the truth*] Over there, a table with a white guy, a blonde girl, a black guy, and a Latino guy (Indian, maybe?) is ablur with raucous camaraderie. That's what this world needs. That's what shifts the balance. Different people connecting with simple fellowship. Any person can do that. Every person has that offer. He has that to offer. [*I would be the sunlight in your universe / You would think my love was really something good / Baby if I could / Change the world*] It's just a party with some of my friends, she had pleaded. I want you to come. I want you to meet them. They're fun. Then I'm sure you'll have a good time, he said, pulling on noise-canceling headphones then clicking the Bose remote. He felt rather than heard the door slam. [*Baby if I could / Chay-ayee-ange...*]

His thumb wanders a bit, but stays with Clapton. Tears in Heaven. Did you know it's about his five-year-old son who fell out a window and died? Do you know every bit of trivia about every song ever recorded, she had asked. Pretty much, sweetheart. Pretty much. A man wondering if his dead child would ever know him. They had stood together, barely breathing, as they watched the pink plus sign materialize. What do you want to do, she asked. Well, it's your decision, but I know I don't want a child right now, he had answered. Just right now? Or ever? I don't know, sweetheart. I don't know. But I know not right now. OK, she had agreed, to his great relief. Afterward, things went back to normal. Things were good, better than good, for a while. But things have a way of circling around again, and nine months later, like cosmic clockwork, it did. I'm not saying now, she had said. I not asking when, I'm just asking do you

think you ever will? Why do you keep bringing this up? Why does it matter? Because it matters to me, she said. I want a family. I want us to be a family. I want to make our lives complete. He snapped. He roared back. You want to make yourself complete! You want to fill a hole inside you you blame me for! Stop looking to me to redeem your mistake! That exchange was three days ago now. Three days of an empty apartment no amount of high fidelity noise could fill. Three days of his ears ringing with his own contemptible voice until it became clear that what had sparkled in a jeweler's window was not a broad path to her forgiveness, but a needle's eye to his own redemption.

Time can bring you down

Time can bend your knee

Time can break your heart

Have you begging please

Begging please

His thumb can not rest. It searches compulsively yet finds no peace anywhere on the dial. Suddenly, a familiar shape glimmers in the distortion of the glass blocks framing the pub's front window. The coloring, the height, the gait--they all seem right, but he can't see for sure. The figure passes in front of the clear glass, but the face is obscured by a series of neon beer signs (those damn beer signs!).

Quickly, he shuts off the iPod, plucks out the earbuds, and stuffs it all into a pocket. Without the scratch-resistant case. Without even wrapping the wires around it. It is stowed in a fashion more hasty and unceremonious than it has ever known.

He holds the velvet ring box with two hands now, between trembling left and right index fingers and thumbs, and takes deep, deliberate breaths as he watches the front door start to swing inward.

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