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Laurie Graham

## YOU KNOW HOW PEOPLE ARE IN SMALL TOWNS

That night, Jimmy busted me for taping people's conversations in the bar. *Get a boyfriend, or a fuckin hobby*, he said and then he chucked my recorder out the back door. Almost canned me for what he called 'potential legal nightmares.' But writing it all down didn't work. My words weren't the same—I never got through school all the way. Plus, I'd end up missing the parts I'd want to write down because Jimmy insisted his establishment was a class operation, that table service would bring in a 'more refined clientele.' Never anything but a sea of old guys at the tables, who would've preferred the Legion except the Legion had been closed two years by then. Like they gave a damn whether there was a cocktail napkin underneath their pitcher of OV.

By the time Jimmy caught me, I had three shoeboxes full of recorded-over tapes. My rockabilly collection may as well have not existed. But I knew, for instance, that Gene Vincent's *Rebel Heart Volume 4* was that time when Mortie spilled his money woes to some trucker running feed between Barrhead and Winnipeg. I knew also that Carl Perkins' *Original Sun Greatest Hits* was Rudy and Billy for a full hour, both sides of the tape, talking hockey while their wives were running off to Edmonton to become lesbians together. All their shit about the Oilers showing more hustle and pulling up their bootstraps and every cliché you can think of, and now their wives can hop the city bus and see the Oilers play in person anytime they want. Not like they ever would. That's the last night I saw Rudy and Billy talking together in the bar. Couldn't handle the shame of it.

I also knew that my Wanda Jackson compilation—she's my personal hero, the chick that taught me how to sing—was that one Sunday when Jimmy talked Darren into working two more shifts a week in the dishpit for less money, did it right there behind the bar and in front of the regulars, because he thought Darren was slow and wouldn't catch on.

I went and stood in the middle of Main and Second with my busted recorder in my purse and tried to imagine the empty streets clogged, the wide sidewalks buzzing with people, noise, cars, music wafting from doorways. Instead, sky, stars brighter than the streetlights, sparse, old sagging buildings trailing off in four directions and petering out after barely half a kilometre. No music, save for the coyotes.

The town is shaped like the body of a guitar, slanted to the west a bit. You have to imagine the neck. Go north, up Main, pass the false fronts lining the street, and four hours later you'll hit Fort Mac. Huge money there, hugest of the huge, but you'd have to sleep in your car and even a cheeseburger at the McDick's costs a week's pay. Turn around the other way, stare past the boarded-up train station, and you got Lloydminster, right-wing farmers on the Alberta side, left-wing farmers on the Saskatchewan side. East toward the highway, there's nothing. Bush. Fishing. You could buy a little cabin in the wiles of northern Saskatchewan for as much as a tank of gas. Look west, and you're on the Lesbian Trail, as the assholes around town used to call it, a direct line to Edmonton, the self-professed Gateway to the North.

So what happens when you stuff three hundred and some people into a guitar body? You get an echo chamber, a goddamn reverb device. The distance to other things becomes crucial.

The bar's heavy wooden door swung open and Darren lumbered out with the night's garbage in clear plastic bags in his hands. He had his eyes to the ground, like he'd dropped his quarter and needed to make a phone call. Darren was a tall guy, appeared even taller because he was big-boned. He had feet like those flippers you wear into the lake, too big even for his size. He bumped into the legs of the dishwashing station more often than he missed. And he wore that same expression on his face all the time, like he just got finished asking a life-or-death question, his mouth turned up at one corner, his eyes waiting. This was Darren and how I saw him three, four, five nights a week.

I called to his stooped back from the middle of the road. No answer. I walked over to him. He turned when he heard my heels clipping along the asphalt. The question was gone from his face. His jaw was set, his lips were pursed. Deep concentration.

"What'd you lose, bud?" I said.

"Here." He thrust the garbage bags at me and pulled a straw from the pocket of his apron. He fixed his eyes on little doughnuts of dirt pushed up from a crack in the sidewalk. With ants running every which way, he got down on his knees and began scooping ants into the straw, his finger clamped over one end, the side of his other hand corralling them toward him.

My old friend Marlene from high school went to Australia right after she graduated. She sent me a postcard from Melbourne, where she wrote about this lady at the hostel who had stopped taking her meds and locked herself in the shower room. *Wait for the bugs, wait for the bugs*, she wrote that all over the walls with her own shit. That came to mind as I watched Darren coax those ants into a white plastic straw in the middle of deserted Main Street on a Saturday. One o'clock in the morning. *Wait for the bugs*.

When he thought he had collected enough he heaved himself back onto his feet and grabbed my left fist. The bags smacked against our legs as he led me around to the back of the building. The motion light blinked on when we rounded the corner and—I can't lie—my stomach jumped a little. The frost on the new grass along the side of the building made my ankles feel prickly and wet.

Darren held that straw like he was carrying something too hot to manage, his finger still plugging up the bottom. He swung his gaze toward the ground in front of the dumpster. "I'll do 'em."

I obeyed, and tossed the garbage bags against the cement wall with the rest of the shit. The entire ass-end of that place was a garbage heap: the sheets of lattice piled up in a stack from when Jimmy thought making a patio was a good idea. Right beside where we dump our grease and our pounds of boozy limes and reams of untouched cocktail napkins. Real smart.

Darren reached over to the ledge beside the fire door and handed me my pack of cigarettes.

"You forgot again." He kept his eyes glued to the straw.

"Shit Darren, is that why you dragged me back here? I just ripped a crater in my last pair of nylons."

"No. There's two things. One—" He pointed to my smokes.

“Two—” He nodded to the old lattice behind me. “There.”

I turned and looked. Didn’t see anything.

Darren stepped around me and hauled himself onto the stack of lattice. In the flood sent out from the motion lights, he pointed with the straw at what looked like a fist-sized blister in the wall. “See? Come up,” he said, and reached his hand out. Almost right away, I heard peeping.

“How do you suppose I’ll do that in a goddamn skirt, Darren?”

“Come up.” He took a step forward and shook his hand at me. “Put your foot against the side.”

“Yes, there’s birds. I can hear them.”

“Come on.”

“*Okay.*” I grabbed his hand with both of mine and he hoisted me up like I was made of cotton. The criss-crossed pattern of the lattice made it damn near impossible to keep my balance, and I wrenched my ankle pretty good when a piece of the thin wood split under my heel. I kicked the shoes off and my feet immediately began to freeze.

It was a swallow’s nest, hard-caked mud and straw packed in a tiny semi-circle against the wall. I had to stand on tiptoe to see inside. I couldn’t see much except for these two upturned, open beaks that looked like the heads of flowers. A mess of dark-grey fuzz, and the beginnings—I mean the *very beginnings*—of beige breast feathers. A thin, rank smell. They were huddled together so close they looked like siamese twins, some kind of miniature freak show.

Darren jiggled an ant out into his palm and snapped his middle finger down on top of it like a catapult. The motion light clicked off. I leaned behind Darren and waved my arms and it blinked on again. Darren rubbed his finger back and forth against his palm until that ant was nothing but a tiny ball of goo and parts. He did the same with a bunch more, and lost an equal number as they dropped from his hand or escaped up his wrist. He stuck one of the ant nuggets to the lip of the straw and handed it to me like it was made of glass. “Hold this over top of them,” he said.

I did. They jumped all over one another, snapped at the straw until the ant ball fell into the mouth of the rounder one on the left. I got one to the skinny guy to even things out, then handed the straw back to Darren.”

“That’s pretty amazing,” I said, because it was. Darren’s face was in shadow, only his hands were lit as he prepared the straw again. Only the thick sound of his breathing as he hunched over the nest. When he was finished, he put the straw back in his apron and wiped his hand on the hip of his jeans.

“You gonna teach them to fly too?” I said. “Rig yourself up with a pair of wings and a fake beak?”

“Nope. If I move ’em to Dad’s barn though, there’s tons of adults in there.”

“How you gonna manage that?” Darren’s dad Winston was a snarly old bastard. I could imagine how he’d react to his son gluing a swallow’s nest into a dark corner of his barn. I’d hear Winston grumbling about Darren during his Thursday night pint. Most of that was about some doctor’s test results, and the expense of it, and his wife being overzealous and obsessed.

“I dunno how I’ll move ’em yet.” Darren jumped down from the lattice pile, fell

onto his knees on the concrete and it sounded like eggs cracking. I shimmied down after him and helped him to his feet. The motion light flickered off and on again. Darren heaved the garbage bags into the dumpster and checked the fire door to see that it was locked, then he turned to me, slouched awkwardly, took a step forward.

“Three,” he said.

And he kissed me, landed one square on my lips, soft and solid. I pulled away. Gave him a push to the chest that was maybe too hard.

“How the hell old are you?” I said.

I was ashamed. Darren McGregor is a fine human being. But you know how people are in small towns.

“Thirty-four. You taste like cigarettes.”

I had one going in my right hand that I’d forgotten about completely. I brought it to my lips. “I’ve got six years on you, bud.”

Judge me, I don’t care. We both had to work the next evening anyway, so I agreed to meet Darren after he spent the first part of the afternoon at Mrs. Ingersoll’s. Mrs. Ingersoll paid Darren to come around after church and do all the stuff she never allowed herself to do on a Sunday. You know, old school Sabbath stuff: run the dishwasher, pick up the phone receiver and dial a number, drive her bloody car to Mugg’s Convenience and buy shit for her, use the pinking shears on her scrapbooks. She even had her lights on a timer so she didn’t have to operate the switches. Before he died, she employed her husband Percy to do these tasks, because he was, as she put it, ‘a doomed heathen, at the rate he’s going.’ One of our barstools had permanent indents from where Percy parked his ass, night after night, as he sat staring at the television. Didn’t matter what was on. Just to get some peace from that woman.

I wouldn’t have dared go near her house, so I told Darren he could come over to mine. I had no designs. I wasn’t *that* desperate. Getting laid by the village simpleton wasn’t in my plan.

That was the thing, though—I didn’t see much wrong with him. If he’d lived in a big city he’d be just like everyone else. No, that’s not right. If he’d grown up in a big city, he’d still be just as odd. He’d have probably been an artist. People might’ve met him and thought he was a misunderstood genius. Had we grown up in the same neighbourhood in the same big city, maybe Darren and I could’ve been friends and no one would’ve thought twice about it.

I spent the afternoon sitting at the table with a copy of the Edmonton Journal, which I’d been getting delivered to the house for years. If I looked to the side as far as I could, until it started to ache behind my eyes, I saw grey hairs growing all screwy and shiny in the kitchen light. Two on the left side, popping out among the brown ones, at least a dozen on the right.

I kept a sparse house. Table, couple chairs. Couch, TV, big brute of a stereo. No side tables crowded with knick-knacks for me, thanks. No paintings, no family photos. No spice rack, no row of recipe books, no pile of split spruce next to the fireplace. All that shit made me uneasy. Distracted.

I was sitting there over the newspaper, hours passing like minutes, and someone knocked on the door, the back door, and at first I forgot who it was.

“You got a cat?” That hair of his, like a mophead flying in his face. He had his hands behind his back.

“Aw, I don’t want a cat.”

He brought his left hand forward. A budgie perched on his thumb. It had breast feathers the exact colour of a turquoise stone bracelet I used to have. The little thing was no wider than a carrot stick, tiny zebra stripes on his head and his wings, feet the colour of rose quartz.

“I don’t want a bird, either” I said. My younger sister had kept a parrot when we were kids, and she taught it to call me names every morning when I walked into the kitchen for breakfast. “Hook-errr! Hook-errr!” Every damn day, the back of my sister’s head shook with laughter in front of Barker’s Beauties pointing at living room sets on *The Price is Right*.

“Mizz Ingersoll’s had babies a while ago. I took one. No wait!” Darren’s other hand appeared. Another budgie, this one fluorescent yellow with little patches of green and red.

He tiptoed inside and eased the birds onto the table, on top of the unread newspaper. Half of each wing was missing, clipped at the first knuckle.

I made him scrambled eggs and bacon that afternoon, and we mostly sat and said nothing to each other. We watched the budgies hop around on the table and laughed when they tried to sample from Darren’s plate or found themselves at the edge of the table with no way to get down except to start cheeping at us. I played records, kept shuffling back to the stereo because none of them were doing it for me. The Carter Family, Duane Eddy, an old K-Tel fifties collection I had found at the church bazaar. Darren paced around the living room for a while, then came back to the kitchen doorway. He stood behind me and laid his hand lightly on my shoulder. “Your house is empty,” he said.

“I like it that way.”

“It’s sad.”

“I don’t think so.”

“You’re sad?”

“I ain’t sad. Why do you think I’m sad?”

“Your shoulder feels sad.” He rubbed at it like a person rubs a child’s cold hands.

“You’re crazy.” I flinched at what I said and his hand stopped moving.

“You’re crazy.”

“You sound like a parrot.”

“Parrot.”

I laughed. “See?”

“See?”

“I’m a fuckin parrot.”

“Fuckin parrot.”

I turned to him, still laughing, unbuttoned my blouse, undid the front clasp of my bra, and stood up. At first, it wasn’t sexual. I felt more like a kid at a birthday party, seven minutes in heaven with Bobby Boby from grade school, who I loved to play kickball with. Spin the bottle, where will it stop? I just wanted his eyes on me, right then. And, of course, it worked.

It was his turn to start laughing. He stepped forward and traced the outline of my breasts with his fingers. There were only twenty minutes before we both had to be at work.

He was right. I was crazy and I was sad. I thought I was doing the man a service, a

good turn, like civic duty. Like voting. Alms for the fuckin poor.

What happened that night at work was to be expected, then. It was a real unravelling, a regular old fuck-up. It was the stuff you see in a TV movie. Boy keeps trying to touch girl's ass in the professional environment, no matter how many times girl tells him to stop. Patrons in professional environment notice boy touching girl's ass, and how he's looking at her, and how she's trying not to look at him, and they start up with the catcalls. Boy, who's supposed to be in the back fixing the Rickards line, is standing in the kitchen doorway when girl says something hateful and derogatory about boy to one of the customers, to get said customer off her back, and she doesn't notice boy until it's too late. Look on boy's face is in close-up, we see the moment when boy loses hope in everything in the world and especially girl. Girl, out of the shot, tries to apologize to boy on the spot, but ends up sounding like an asshole and boy takes off into the back. Girl starts to convince herself of things like *this is best* and *you didn't want to get into it with him anyway*, as a sort of coping mechanism, and to make herself feel less that she's screwed up. Boss, who has been walking around with a sickened look on his face all night, tells girl she has crossed a line and that he'd like to talk to her about it, alone, the next day. Girl balances perfectly, down to the penny, and closes up. Girl leaves without seeing boy and apologizing, who, as it turns out, sat out back with the swallows all night and into the morning. Boss finds boy the next day at nine in the morning, asleep on the lattice pile, shivering like a newborn.

Jimmy took me into his office the next day, handed me my pink slip and I handed it right back.

"You're screwed without me," I said, and it was true. I could count on one hand the people in town capable of doing the job.

Jimmy propped himself against the busted glass-front fridge he used as a filing cabinet. He tossed the notice letter on his desk. He brought his knuckles to his chin and huffed through his nose a few times. "Okay, here it is. I don't give a rat's ass the shit you do on your own time, but not *here*. And not with *him*. Understand me?"

I stood and moved across to the safe to count out the day's float. The phone rang not a minute later and it was Darren. Calling in sick. Jimmy almost thanked him.

I took off during my half-hour break, walked over to the old train station with a pint glass of orange juice. If you were looking for me at any point during my twenties, that was where you'd find me, dangling my legs off the edge of the platform with my eyes cast out over the weeds and the rotting railroad ties. Singing, singing my damn lungs out. No clue about key or good tone or breathing or any of it.

How does that old Eddy Arnold song go: "it's that time of day again, thoughts starting to stray again at sunset"? I miss the sky there most. The clouds rolling over themselves, covering everything like the most enormous awning. It's the size that I don't see anywhere else, the dimensions of the sky and everything in it.

It was deathly still. New mosquitoes were being swooped up by the barn swallows in the field. I was shivering, though I wasn't cold. I felt like I had a body full of poison. I don't know the right words to describe the feeling.

I wound up and hurled that pint glass as high as I could. Spilled juice up the arm of my sweater. Up and up, over the two sets of tracks, over the length of chainlink behind

them, over those dipping, swerving swallows and down and down and landing with a small crack in the gravel before the fallowed field. I could've lost my mind right there, snap, gone, I'm sure of it. I could've gone and found Darren and told him I was wrong but I'm all fixed now and I'm sorry for being so scared. Instead, I lit a smoke, and walked back to work as the sky started in on a whole insane spectrum of violet in the farthest distance.

People called me his girlfriend for months. As a taunt, something lippy to say to the bartender. I became an ongoing agenda item at the Ladies' Auxiliary meetings, and the wives began using me as an excuse to keep their men out of the bar. Those old biddies in the basement of Knox United, twittering about what to do with me. Nola Lewsky, one-woman plague on the community.

Darren didn't look me in the face during his last three months at work. I was in the middle of a cheap drama. I got sick of it, sick of him, his eyes glued to my feet every time I asked him for more clean pitchers or tipped him out at close. Walking away whenever I tried to talk to him.

I tracked down the address of the home Winston locked Darren up in and tried to call, tried a few times. His folks sent him away in the fall. He had gone to Mrs. Ingersoll's one Sunday, as usual. He ran the dishwasher for her, he dialled up the number for her daughter in Edmonton. He threaded her sewing machine according to her instructions and mended the pocket of her winter coat. Then he snuck into her kitchen, snapped her budgies' little necks one at a time, put his shoes on, and let himself out her back door, locking Mrs. Ingersoll inside with the key she had given him for just such a purpose. Winston told me one night not long after, drunk off Canadian Club to the point where I think he forgot who I was, that he feared for his son in the home, but feared even more that his son had grown completely beyond hope, unmanageable, like an old tractor or a weed that had rejected all pesticides. What a load of bullshit.

The two budgies he brought that day are still with me. Loretta and Conway. Found them a really beautiful old cage at a yard sale. Then I U-hauled my whole life clear across the country and into a claptrap apartment overlooking what the art snobs call Queen West West. And what do you suppose my job is? You guessed it, tending bar. At the Cadillac Lounge. Best bar in the land, though the boss is no better. I front a rockabilly band and flirt with the bass player and get shitty on gin and tonics with the drummer and never allow a thing to happen. I have nearly perfected my Wanda Jackson growl. They called me an anomaly in *Now Magazine*: If you close your eyes when me and the boys are playing, what you hear is a filthy young lass singing about her brown-eyed handsome man. But when you open your eyes, there's a full-grown woman at the microphone, and she growls at you like her heart's a blaze run out of control and you're the one to blame. Like she could set fire to the whole damn building.