

Earworm

By

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Characters

The Song - f, the anthropomorphic personification of a punk breakup song

Sasha - f, from late teens thru 30s, the writer/main performer of The Song.

Jory - trans f, from late teens thru 30s, musical arranger of The Song, Sasha's girlfriend and bassist.

Trevor - m, from late teens thru 30s, music teacher, Sasha's high school ex-boy friend

Kess - f, late 20s- early 30s, music journalist currently dating Trevor

Elise - f, 30s, Trevor's sister

Other Songs:

Track Three - played by the actor playing Elise

Track Six- played by the actor playing Sasha

Track Seven and That Other Song- played by the actor playing Jory

Time: The present

Place: An abstract space, peppered with piles of music equipment, paraphernalia and crappy green room furniture that becomes a bar, an apartment, a basement practice space, a concert venue stage and green room.

Note: The symbol / indicates overlapping dialogue.

Act One

SCENE ONE

An abstract space, peppered with piles of music equipment and paraphernalia. From one of them, something stirs. A person? Seemingly made up of guitar strings, amp cords, headphone wires tangled every which way, scraps of notated sheet music, band flyers, and notebook paper with lyrics scrawled on them in five different shades of ink. She is THE SONG. She perches, birdlike, and stares straight at the audience for a long moment. Focused, but very rarely still.

THE SONG

Humans. How do you do it? Sit there in one place like that, staring at just one thing? Me, right now. It's fucking unsportsmanlike, you know that? Bringing the full force of your existence to bear on this one sliver of space. I mean, don't you get tired of it? Start feeling the itch to float through radio frequencies - dance with a city's residents in 18,543 separate cars at the same time - pop up in someone's brain in Des Moines - get practiced on a hand-me-down guitar in Osaka - all in one moment, one blink. Nicely spread out across consciousnesses, borders, time zones. Hmm. Maybe you can't? Maybe you wouldn't if you could. Weird. Songs aren't made to sit still. Doesn't come naturally to us. But tonight is ... different. There's gonna be a concert on this stage in a couple hours. People standing here playing me and listening in the audience that ... I'm not so sure I've come to terms with? And you know - I'm turning thirteen this year. Even though everybody thinks I'm ten, 'cause that's when I got on the radio, like airplay is fucking *everything*. So yeah. Not super old in song years, but long enough to start you thinking. About the impact you've made. The relationships. Which parts of yourself you're proud of and which ones - well, that's what I'm here for. What I presume you're here in such a disturbingly solid way to watch. So try and keep up. If you want to know who's gonna be here tonight and why it matters, you'll have to be in four places at once. First stop, 7:30pm in Asheville, a couple weeks ago.

Sasha, 30, and Jory, same, enter with the confidence of rock stars on stage, made more casual by the lack of an audience. They head to a pile with amps, mic stands, etc. Sasha, exuding frontwoman energy even in repose, picks up a guitar, plugs in. Jory, as befits someone more laid back, grabs a bass.

THE SONG

I'm onstage at The Orange Peel. For sound check.

Sasha and Jory play a few notes, fiddle with the settings on their amps, tuning a bit, etc.

THE SONG

With Sasha and Jory, some of the people most responsible for my existence. You all have it pretty easy. Only ever made from two people, tops. For me, there's the people that wrote me. The musicians and producers building up sonic muscle and tissue around my written bones, all their influences pumping in and out of my kick-drum heart. It gets ... complicated. (to Sasha and Jory) Doesn't it?

SASHA

(into a mic)

I am the very model of a modern major general. I've information vegetable, animal and mineral. (to an unseen board op) A bit more in the monitor?

THE SONG

If you didn't play me in a show, the fans would fucking mutiny. You both know it.

SASHA

(into the mic)

I know the kings of England and can quote the fights historical- Good.

THE SONG

Do you resent that?

JORY

(laughs to herself)

Never gets old.

SASHA

What doesn't?

JORY

You being a big ol' closet theatre dork.

SASHA

Whatever. You know you love it when I sing you show tunes.

JORY

That's a lot to do with how and when you sing them to me.

A playful kiss between them as The Song watches.

THE SONG

As for me, well - no one likes being an obligation.

Sasha lets a chord ring out on the guitar.

JORY

God, I missed the acoustics in this place!

SASHA

Right? Good to be back. Can we hit the riff to 'Candles Out' real quick?

JORY

So we're for sure ditching the unplugged version?

Sasha tunes a string on her guitar, buying more time before she answers.

THE SONG

(to Sasha)

The original's not been the same between us since Pittsburgh.

SASHA

(to Jory)

I think it's time. How about you?

JORY

Great venue for the old school way. Shake the rafters a bit.

THE SONG

Think you can muster the passion for it? 'Cause last time-

Jory plunges into a thunderous bass line, which takes The Song by surprise.

JORY

Yeah, there she is. Good to have you back.

THE SONG

Thanks.

Sasha joins in on guitar.

THE SONG

Oh yeah. Being played acoustic is freeing, in a mixed bag sort of way. Kinda like being naked in public. But this- this is closer to fully myself than I've felt in a long time. (to Sasha) You're sure this is okay?

As Sasha and Jory sing and play through the first verse, The Song grabs two chairs from a stack of crappy green room furniture, sets one on each side of the stage.

Kess, 28, looking every inch the hip music journalist, sits down in one of the chairs, now driving in her car. Elise, 32, dressed down to earth and happy about it, sits and drives in the other chair.

The sound of the music suddenly switches from live performance the tinnier sound of it being played on a car stereo.

THE SONG

Second stop, exact same moment, but 6:30pm Central Standard. I'm on the radio. At ten years, which isn't bad. Not played quite as much on the coasts anymore, but still fondly remembered in America's sagging midsection.

KESS

Yes!

She turns the volume up, and sings along with abandon.

THE SONG

I'm with Kess as she drives down Highway 40. (inhales deeply) You have no idea what a rush it is being sung along to. There's a whole conversation going on between us in the way she sings my lyrics. Like this. (to Kess) You sound excited tonight.

KESS

(as though carrying on a conversation in her own head)

Lots to be excited about.

THE SONG

Like what?

KESS

Seeing him again.

THE SONG

The guy you're dating? That's new.

KESS

I know. And I'm meeting his sister, so even more excitement.

THE SONG

Um, I think you mean nerve-wracking awkwardness.

KESS

Some of that, too. But I don't know. Getting the three of us together, it's one of those things someone does when they expect you to be around for a while. And I like that idea. A lot, actually.

The Song places her hand tenderly on Kess' arm.

THE SONG

Just remember, it's something you want, but you don't need it.

KESS

I know. Felt it as soon as this came on the radio. I'm fine. Whatever happens, I'm going to be fine. Which is another thing I'm really excited about.

The Song drinks it in for a moment, then walks over to Elise's "car."

THE SONG

I'm in Elise's car, too. (to Elise) You're not quite sure what to do with me, are you? I can never quite sink into your body. Always get snagged in the brain, inspected under a microscope for just what it is I mean for you. But it's something.

Trevor enters, rifles through a milk crate of records piled up on another part of the stage - a music store.

THE SONG

Better than with this guy. I'm playing in the record store he's browsing in, and, well -

She enters Trevor's space. Trevor looks up at the store's speakers, sighs. Tries to ignore it. The Song walks over to him. He grows visibly uncomfortable.

THE SONG

We're not what you'd call friends. Which I'm fine with. Asshole deserves what he gets. But ... how long can you hold a grudge before it just gets fucking petty? A decade? Two?

Trevor turns his back on her, goes to another crate of records. The Song follows him to the next crate, runs her fingers along the tops of the records. His agitation increases.

THE SONG

We have unfinished business, Trevor. I may be at a point where I don't want to leave it that way.

Trevor slams a record back in the crate and leaves.

THE SONG

We can tell when you don't like us. Doesn't mean we're done with you, though.

The Song pushes the crate back into its pile, then pulls a table over in front of Elise, who now sits at a bar. Sasha and Jory finish going through the first verse and chorus, stop playing.

SASHA

Damn. Old school way might actually work tonight.

JORY

(looking out at the venue)

And it'll be just the right kind of loud.

They exit. So does Kess. Trevor enters, and joins Elise at her table, where The Song has dragged over a couple more chairs. She watches from the sidelines.

TREVOR

Hey.

ELISE

What is it?

TREVOR

What? I just sat down.

ELISE

Yeah, but you were doing that thing.

TREVOR

What/ thing?

ELISE

That huffy-stompy thing. When you came in.

TREVOR

It's not/ important.

ELISE

So what is it?

TREVOR

I had the day off, okay? Thought I'd do some thrifting, then head to Vintage Vinyl. Both places, *It* was playing.

ELISE

Oh god.

TREVOR

Both of them.

ELISE

It was on the radio when I drove here, too.

TREVOR

How does a fucking ten year old punk song get that much airplay still?

THE SONG

Midwest represent.

TREVOR

It's like *It's* haunting me. On purpose.

THE SONG

Pretty much.

ELISE

I thought you got over that.

TREVOR

I did. Mostly. But now there's this girl, and she's amazing, and suddenly everywhere I go, there's this big blinking sign reminder of all my personal failings/ so it's-

ELISE

Oh my god. So this is serious.

TREVOR

It's a dumb old song. I'll deal with it.

ELISE

No, with you and her. It's like, *serious* serious.

TREVOR

Why do you think I've been wanting you to meet her?

ELISE

Because I thought you wanted me to meet her. But you want her to meet "the family."

TREVOR

It's really not that huge of a deal.

ELISE

Come on, Trev. Big sisters are the relational drawbridge that leads to Mom and Dad. And you haven't tried getting anyone over that moat for a while now, so/ it's pretty huge.

TREVOR

Yes, she's special. Yes, I want you to know her. But can we not turn this into some big historic moment? I want to have drinks, not sign the fucking Treaty of Versailles.

ELISE

So you see this relationship as unconditional surrender?

TREVOR

I don't want to see it as anything. I just want to feel it for a while. Is that okay?

ELISE

Depends on what it feels like.

TREVOR

It's ... weird. Because it's not that crazy electric thing I feel at first. It's relaxing, almost. Like I'm sort of able to rest in this other life that just ... fits with me. You know?

ELISE

Oh my god. This is so. Totally./ It.

TREVOR

Don't, Elise.

ELISE

I mean, you're talking about her like she could be,/ you know-

TREVOR

Don't you dare say, "She's the one."

ELISE

But what if she is?

TREVOR

A) There's no such thing as/ "the one."

Kess enters, looks around.

ELISE

I just mean the one you eventually end/ up with.

TREVOR

And B)- (spots Kess) Kess! Over here.

KESS

Hey.

She gives Trevor a quick kiss hello.

KESS

Good to see you.

TREVOR

You too.

KESS

And you're Elise? Great to meet you, finally. I'm Kess.

ELISE

I know. He hasn't stopped talking about you since the interview.

KESS

Did he tell you I was the one who called him afterwards?

ELISE

No.

TREVOR

Of course you were! Like I'm gonna call up a writer from Rolling Stone/ of all places-

KESS

I mostly just freelance-

TREVOR

-after a nice little "human interest" story, and be like, "Hey, you wanna grab coffee or something?" Please. I knew you were out of my league from minute one.

KESS

Whatever. You actually teach kids how to make the stuff I just write about, so I don't know where you're coming from with this whole me being out of your league thing.

A cheerful kiss for punctuation.

KESS

But if you had been the one to call, I probably would have said no.

ELISE

Really?

TREVOR

See?

KESS

I mean, my job basically consists of meeting guys who assume the whole world wants to fuck them, letting them go on and on about themselves, and then publishing what they say for the huge audience that does, in fact, want to fuck them. And even with this education piece, Trevor was the one music tutor I interviewed who didn't talk some big game and hand me a demo from the band that's "actually their real gig." He was just who he was. It was refreshing.

TREVOR

I had to face the fact pretty early that there were people who were cut out for the whole rock star thing - I mean, people I knew personally. But, as much as I wanted it, I wasn't one of them.

KESS

Could you maybe stop with the whole honestly looking at yourself and being at peace with what you find thing? I don't want to get all hot in front of your sister.

TREVOR

That's a ... very specific thing to get turned on by.

KESS

I know. Ooh. I should totally make a playlist for it. Challenging, but it could really pay off.

ELISE

Oh my god. There are two of you.

KESS

(laughs)

Is that a good thing or a bad thing?

ELISE

No, it's great. I'm just surprised anyone can keep up with him! This girl I liked sophomore year would make mixes for me to listen to, and I would, but, you know- I'd gravitate to one or two songs I really liked and that'd be it. Meanwhile, Mr. Eighth grade music fanatic/over here-

TREVOR

Oh god-

ELISE

Would take them without even asking-

TREVOR

You left them in the living room. Totally fair game.

ELISE

- and by the time I got home from a date, he was an expert on every new band in the mix, complete with back stories, who I should listen to more of, who only put out a couple good singles then lost it-

KESS

I'm the same way. The minute I hear some new great thing, I want to know everything about it.

ELISE

So have you managed to talk about anything that *isn't* music in the - however many months you've been together now?

KESS

What is it - three?

TREVOR

Sounds right.

THE SONG

Three months. And I haven't come up yet.

KESS

And we've managed to talk about a little bit of everything.

THE SONG

Really.

TREVOR

Yeah.

THE SONG

Okay, then. Let's do this.

She stands up, enters their space, and starts playing over the bar's sound system.

TREVOR

Oh my god. Seriously?

KESS

Oh my god. Yes!

TREVOR

This song has been playing everywhere I go today!

KESS

Yeah, it was on the radio on my way here, and it was driving me crazy.

TREVOR

So you're not/ a fan either?

KESS

I just wanted to get up and dance to it so bad! Did I tell you that this was the album that first made me want to write about music?

Trevor and Elise share a look.

TREVOR

No, you definitely did not tell me that.

Kess jumps up and takes Trevor's hand.

KESS

Dance with me.

TREVOR

What? No, I- / I can't.

KESS

Come on!

TREVOR

Plus, how do you even dance to something like this?

KESS

However the hell you want. That's kind of the point.

TREVOR

Thanks, but I - I'm gonna sit this one out.

KESS

Fine. (pulls Elise up from her chair) Then your sister and I will just go have fun without you! (to Elise) Come on!

Kess hits the dance floor, thrashing around with The Song. Elise lingers at the table.

ELISE

Do I need to talk her back to the table? 'Cause I can/do that.

TREVOR

No. She wants to dance. She should dance. You too. I would, but I just-

ELISE

I know.

TREVOR

Then go give her a partner so I can stop feeling like the biggest killjoy ever. Please.

ELISE

You're sure you're okay?

I will be.

TREVOR

Elise joins Kess on the floor. The Song sits down across from Trevor.

THE SONG

(to Trevor)

I'm done torturing you, Trevor. Maybe you would know that if you'd open up for once and-

He shifts in his seat, turning away from her.

THE SONG

Yeah, maybe that is too much to ask. But look, Kess and I have been through the shit together, okay? She's not letting go of me anytime soon. So if you want to be with her, you're gonna have to deal with me. (pause) And I'm at this point in my life where I'm ... coming to terms with certain things and - we need to talk, Trevor. Can we just talk?

Trevor's eyes are on Kess dancing.

TREVOR

This is the album that made her who she is.

THE SONG

Yeah. There's no getting around it. So. Are we gonna do this?

He watches Kess and Elise, focused on the music and each other, having a good time. A high wave of shame and hurt crashes over him. He gets up quietly and leaves.

THE SONG

Every single time. You're not going to be able to run from me forever.

Lights down on Kess and Elise, still unaware that Trevor is gone.

SCENE TWO

The Song moves the table back to the pile of furniture, and replaces it with a couch. Then adds a camera on a tripod.

THE SONG

So real quick, a detour from one of my favorite places to one I fucking hate. Dance floors, great. People come there to commune with us. Also to grind on each other. It's special. But a concert venue green room, I stay the fuck away. It's a place defined by the fact that the music doesn't happen in it. No one wants to hear me, think about me, nothing.

Sasha and Jory enter, post-show, drenched with sweat, chugging bottled water.

THE SONG

Sometimes people talk about me. Like this time, a year ago at The Vic in Chicago. It's basically watching your own dissection. Yeah. I'm out.

She exits the room, and stands outside the door, joined by Kess, a year younger, more stylish than last time. The Song takes on the role of a roadie, checking Kess' press lanyard.

SASHA

God, I'm so fucking old!

JORY

You went at it hard as ever tonight.

SASHA

Yeah, but now I feel it. The adrenaline used to just skip me right across. Tonight, though- (collapses onto the couch with a grunt) my body knows exactly what it just did.

JORY

Should've picked the right instrument. Just nodding aggressively puts me pretty high up on the Bass Player Expressiveness scale.

SASHA

Lucky.

Jory points to a piece of paper near Sasha.

JORY

That an extra set list?

SASHA

Yeah.

JORY

You mind if I-

Sasha hands it to her.

SASHA

You're the sweetest ever.

Jory shrugs, pokes her head out of the green room, addresses the Song as though she's a roadie for the band.

JORY

Can you make sure one of the fans gets this?

THE SONG/ ROADIE

Which one?

JORY

I usually go with whoever looks too shy to ask. (To Kess) Be just one more sec. That cool?

KESS

Sure.

JORY

Great.

Jory comes back into the room as the Song exits with the set list.

JORY

Reporter's waiting, by the way.

SASHA

Figured - I saw the camera set up already. Doesn't waste any time, does she?

JORY

It's smart.

SASHA

If your theory's correct.

JORY

It is. So. You ready to do this?

SASHA

No. You?

JORY

Nope.

SASHA

Great. Send her in.

Jory opens the door to the green room.

JORY

We're ready for you, Kess.

Kess enters.

KESS

Great. Good to see you both again.

SASHA

You too. It doesn't quite feel like a tour lately without a Kess interview. We were one of your first, right?

KESS

You remember. Yeah, not even quite out of college.

JORY

Back when the whole gender transition thing broke. And you were the only one who didn't ask a single bullshit question about my junk. So yeah, that sort of thing tends to stick in your memory.

KESS

(taken aback)

Wow. I'm honored. And also, that's kind of fucked up.

JORY

Yeah.

KESS

So ... how's the tour been going so far?

SASHA

Not too bad. It's been a while, so we're still shaking the cobwebs off, you know how it is.

KESS

It didn't look like that from out there. Do you mind if I get the camera rolling, or you need another minute/ before we-

JORY

Nah, if we're doin' this, let's get to it.

KESS

Okay, great.

She turns the camera on, then takes a seat.

KESS

Thanks again for squeezing me in right after a show. I know you guys must be exhausted.

JORY

That's the general idea.

KESS

What is?

SASHA

Jory's convinced that you scheduled this interview right after so we'd be too raw and tired to keep our usual guard up.

KESS

(laughs)

Really? So why did you agree, then?

JORY

'Cause it's a fucking fantastic idea. *I'm* tired of reading the shit I say in these things. I can imagine how everybody else feels.

SASHA

It becomes routine so quick. You play the same cities, sing the same songs, say the same things when people ask about them. It gets hard to remember what it's even for sometimes.

KESS

Is that why you stepped off from touring the last two years?

SASHA

That was part of it.

JORY

A pretty big part.

Sasha shoots Jory a look that's annoyed and amused all at once.

SASHA

Right. So we wanted to make sure if we were gonna tour again that everything we did had a purpose beyond what's worked before. To make each one a distinct experience. So why leave interviews out of that? And then you came along with your last minute deadline, and it seemed like a good fit.

KESS

I think that specificity's really palpable in this show. Like with Candles Out. Every time I've seen you before, it's always been encore material. But now here it is, right in the middle of the set, in this stunning acoustic version that makes it sound like - like a love song in a way.

SASHA

Well, 'cause it is. When a song's been with you for as long as that one has, it grows a lot of layers, and kind of gets baked into all these different moments of your life. Most people think of it as this kind of self-care anthem, or just some angry breakup song. But what they don't know is that the first time I played that song for somebody else-

She looks at Jory, grabs her hand instinctively.

SASHA

- was the first time I saw what love could really be. So we thought we'd share that- that private moment with the song we had, and see if-

The scene suddenly freezes and rewinds.

SASHA

- angry breakup song. But what they don't know is that the first time I played that song for somebody else was the first time I saw what love could really be. So we thought-

Lights up on Trevor, on a couch on the other side of the stage, watching the interview on his phone. He pauses and rewinds it again.

SASHA

- that the first time I played that song for somebody else was the first time I saw what love could really be. So-

He pauses and rewinds it again.

SASHA

The first time I played that-

But she is interrupted by Trevor's phone ringing. Lights down on Sasha, Jory, and Kess.

SCENE THREE

Trevor looks at who's calling.

TREVOR

Shit.

Lights up on Elise, elsewhere, on her phone waiting for him to pick up. Trevor thinks about not answering it, but decides to face the music.

TREVOR

(answers)

Hey.

ELISE

Trevor, what the hell?!

TREVOR

I know, I know.

ELISE

Do you really? To just abandon us there?! I mean, what did you think that/ would even do?

TREVOR

I'm sorry. I just freaked out, okay? There was that song, and what she felt about it/ and I just-

ELISE

That's no excuse for just taking off /and leaving her there!

TREVOR

I couldn't be at that table when she got back, being who I was. To sit there, and what? Lie about it? Tell the truth, and watch her ... look at me that way? I - I didn't know what to do, so I ran home like a little kid, and I know that's stupid, and I can't even imagine what she thinks of me right now, / but that's-

ELISE

So you went home.

TREVOR

Yeah. Then started looking up the interviews she'd done with Sasha.

ELISE

And you're there now?

TREVOR

Yeah. Do you realize how many times she's interviewed them? It's/ obscene.

ELISE

Okay. That's what I needed to know.

She hangs up, texting as she exits.

TREVOR

Elise? Hello? Elise, are you there? (looks at his phone) What the hell? Fair play, I guess.

He tosses his phone on the couch, and leans back with a sigh.

TREVOR

I am such an idiot.

A knock at the door. Trevor grimaces as he gets off the couch, yelling toward the door in exasperation on his way to it.

TREVOR

I know I screwed up, Elise. You don't need to lecture me about it in person. Can we please not do this right now? I'm not-

He opens the door. To find Kess standing there.

TREVOR

Oh.

KESS

You know you screwed up. That's a start. So here's your chance. Can I come in?

He ushers her in, both of them rigid with tension.

TREVOR

It's a bit of a mess. I wasn't expecting..

KESS

Me?

TREVOR

Yeah.

KESS

So what *did* you expect me to do? Go home and sigh and cry and wonder what it meant?

TREVOR

Well, it worked for me, so-

KESS

You gonna tell me why?

A pause.

TREVOR

What did Elise say?

KESS

That 'Candles Out' brings up bad memories for you. Some ex girlfriend or something. That she thought you were over it, but ... apparently not.

TREVOR

'Some ex-girlfriend.' That's a way to put it.

KESS

So why did she have to tell me that, Trevor? If it was such a big deal to you, why didn't you say something?

TREVOR

Because it didn't seem like the right moment for that whole pile of baggage, okay? Because I thought I could handle it. But that song - it just gets right down into my skin and makes me do stupid stuff/ like this-

KESS

It didn't *make* you do a damn thing. You chose to get up/ out of that chair, and-

TREVOR

It brings me back to a point in my life when I was a dumb, selfish bastard. And sometimes when I hear it, I freak out and revert back to doing selfish bastard things. I don't even know why! It's been over a decade. I should totally be over it. And I hate that I'm not. I hate that I still - and then to hear that's the album that made you want to do what you do? I just ... couldn't. That's all that was going through my head when I left. That I just couldn't.

KESS

So what happened? What linked that song to you feeling all of this?

A pause.

TREVOR

What made you love it? Tell me that first.

KESS

That's ... really personal.

TREVOR

It's so personal you can't tell me?

KESS

I can. I'm planning on it. But not like this. I need a ... stable atmosphere to tell that story in.

TREVOR

And yet I'm expected to tell you at a moment's notice?

KESS

My loving it didn't result in me treating you like an asshole! That's the difference. I like you, Trevor. A lot, or I wouldn't fucking be here. But I am done giving my heart to assholes. So this moment right here? This is when you help me understand why what you did doesn't make you a fucking asshole. That, or-

TREVOR

Okay. All right. Can we - can we, uh, sit down, and-

KESS

Of course.

They sit on the couch, a fair distance apart.

TREVOR

So this is - well, it should just be embarrassing. But it feels a lot worse. Wow. Okay. So, the truth. It was a long time ago, and like I said, I was a dumb, selfish bastard. But who isn't at eighteen, right? Anyway, I was in a band at the time, and I met this girl, and she was - well, there was just something about her that -

Candles Out suddenly starts playing. The Song emerges from behind the couch. Kess and Trevor both freeze for a moment. Then Kess grimaces, reaches into her purse, gets out her phone, and turns it off.

TREVOR

It's your fucking ringtone?!

He's off the couch, tears in his eyes.

KESS

I switch it out every week or so. It's just been that kind of a-

She notices the tears, which causes her to well up too.

KESS

Trevor, what - I - what am I supposed to - I don't understand what's going on here. I-it's just a song!

TREVOR

If it's just a song, then why are you crying?

KESS

Why are you?!

TREVOR

(blurting it out)

Because Sasha Sever was my high school ex-girlfriend and she wrote that song about me!

A long moment of silence.

KESS

WHAT?!

Lights down on Trevor and Kess.

SCENE FOUR

The Song rearranges the "green room" into somewhere else. Moves the chairs away. Adds a record player, some dirty laundry, a notebook, a pen, a beat up old acoustic guitar and a couple posters on the wall - one of Kathleen Hanna, one of Kate Bush.

THE SONG

Where exactly did I begin? Not a simple question for me. I mean, doesn't it get boring, all of you starting to exist the same way? A guy, a girl, flaring hormones, and bam! You. Thank god for the gays and lesbians getting all science-y so there's *some* variation. But still. Is it comforting? Having this one thing that happened to you in common with everyone else? Huh. I think I prefer a little mystery.

Sasha enters, now 18, gangly, awkward in a semi-formal dress, not at all the kind of kid you'd picture becoming a rock star. She plops down on the couch excitedly, grabs a compact mirror from her purse, and starts putting on makeup. She's not very good at it.

THE SONG

When Sasha and Jory talk about my start, they place it here. Basement of the Severt residence, on Sasha's nineteenth birthday, a few hours from now. Then it's a short leap to turning this place into a makeshift studio, band rehearsals, and dropping the t from her last name in a flurry of rock persona building. But I think maybe there was a glimmer of me earlier, whispering in her head for weeks - maybe months before this. Asking questions she couldn't quite listen to yet.

The Song perches on the arm of the couch, acting and sounding a lot like 30s rock star Sasha.

THE SONG

Like - "What are you doing?"

SASHA

(talking to “herself”)

Getting ready. I’m so excited. Green eye shadow, do you think?

The Song nods.

SASHA

He got us a reservation at Charlie Gitto’s. You have to have a reservation, you know? ‘Cause it’s all fancy and expensive! And we’re both getting dressed up, and - and it shows he cares. Like, really cares. Doesn’t it? (a flicker of doubt, pushed away) But- but tonight he’s really proving it.

THE SONG

Proving what?

SASHA

That I mean something to him.

She starts applying eyeliner. Hesitant, nervous.

THE SONG

Why is that so important?

SASHA

Because it is.

THE SONG

Who says?

SASHA

Everybody.

THE SONG

Like who?

SASHA

Like Dean Martin. “You’re nobody ‘til somebody loves you.” It’s a fact. But now I’ve got Trevor.

THE SONG

But what if you didn’t?

SASHA

But I do.

But what if you didn't? THE SONG

I do. SASHA

But what if- THE SONG

I do, okay?! SASHA
(turning to The Song)

The Song backs off. Meanwhile, Sasha's turn toward The Song causes a jagged streak of eyeliner across her cheek.

Dammit! SASHA

Sasha frantically tries to undo the cosmetic damage. The Song is off the couch, back to herself.

THE SONG
5:15. The eyeliner situation gets resolved. 5:30, all systems are go. 5:35.

Sasha looks at the time, picks up her phone and dials. No answer for a good long while.

SASHA
Hey Trevor, you're probably on your way, which is why it went to voicemail, but I was just checking, 'cause it's usually good to be fifteen minutes early for a reservation. Or is that a doctor's appointment? Anyway, I can't wait! See you soon!

She hangs up.

5:40. THE SONG

SASHA
It's fine. Everything's fine. Gives me time to make sure I have everything.

Sasha rummages through her purse.

Wallet? THE SONG

Check. SASHA

House keys? THE SONG

Check. SASHA

Special mix CD for the drive there and back? THE SONG

Double check. SASHA

Great. 5:45. THE SONG

Probably traffic. But, um, I can check my makeup one more time. So ... that's good. SASHA

She takes out her mirror again, looks herself over.

It looks fine. THE SONG

Yeah. It does. SASHA

She puts the mirror back.

5:47. THE SONG

Sasha picks up her phone and calls. Again, no answer for a while.

SASHA

Hey Trevor, sorry to bug you again, but it's getting really close to the time we're supposed to be there, and I still haven't heard from you. Is everything all right? Let me know when you get this. Thanks!

She hangs up. Paces back and forth

THE SONG

Minutes stretch to encompass ancient histories. Miles paced on the carpet in front of the couch. And it is six o'clock. 6:01. 6:02. Is it hope that keeps you from calling again right away? 6:03. Or is it denial? 6:04.

Sasha looks at the phone.

THE SONG

Are you sure you really want to know?

Sasha takes a deep breath, picks up the phone.

SASHA

Trevor, it's 6:05. Where are you? Call me as soon as you get this.

She hangs up immediately.

THE SONG

For the next twenty minutes, it's panic, call, rinse, repeat.(to Sasha) Come on, Sasha, you've got to let yourself think it sometime.

Beat.

SASHA

It's not going to happen, is it?

THE SONG

Probably not.

SASHA

He doesn't even - I mean, come on. It's- it's my birthday.

THE SONG

I know.

SASHA

Alone. Again. (starts to cry) What's wrong with me?

She lays down on the couch, curls into The Song's lap, and sobs.

SASHA

(through her tears)

Why can't - why can't one good thing just happen the way it's supposed to? Why is that so hard?

THE SONG

I don't know. (picks up the phone) The next two hours are a blurred succession of tears and unanswered phone calls. Then it's 9:15.

The Song puts the phone up to her ear as Sasha continues to cry.

THE SONG

And we finally get him. Mumbles -

THE SONG AND TREVOR (OFF STAGE)

Hey.

THE SONG

- with the hoarseness of the half-asleep. (listens, then to Sasha) Says he couldn't sleep the night before, and crashed right after work. (listens) Really? (to Sasha) He doesn't get why we're making such a big deal about this. I don't think he realizes what day it is. (listens) Yeah. There we go. (to Sasha) A deep sigh, and he'll be right over. Which brings us to 9:41.

Sasha sits up, wipes the tears from her eyes. Trevor enters, younger, very much in wannabe rock star mode - dyed black hair, skinny jeans, Sisters Of Mercy t shirt, etc.

TREVOR

Hey. So, uh, yeah. I'm here. What did you want to/ do now that-

SASHA

You're not dressed up.

TREVOR

I got the impression from the 23 voice messages you left me that you wanted me here right the fuck now, but/ if you'd prefer I-

SASHA

No, it's just - do you still want to go out for dinner/ somewhere, or- ?

TREVOR

Oh. Yeah. But it's not like any place open past 10pm is gonna have a strict dress code or anything. So-

Sasha fights the tears, but can't quite stop.

TREVOR

Look, I'm sorry, okay? This was a terrible fucking day for things to go the way they did. But that's what happened. And it's not like I did it on purpose. So we can sit here and be miserable, or we can go salvage some kind of fun for your birthday.

THE SONG

(whispers in her ear)

This is bullshit, Sasha.

SASHA

(trying to pull herself together)

Yeah. Yeah, we can.

TREVOR

All right. So where do you wanna go?

THE SONG

You're letting him off this easy?

SASHA

I don't know.

TREVOR

There's the Applebee's down Lindbergh that's always open late. You can probably get something free for your birthday, even.

SASHA

Applebees. (looks down at her elegant dress, lets out an angry laugh) I'm sure I'll fit right in!

TREVOR

Jesus, Sasha. I'm doing my best here.

SASHA

Are you?

SASHA AND THE SONG

'Cause it doesn't feel like that.

TREVOR

So this is what tonight's gonna be? Us sitting here arguing over spilt milk? Because I already apologized for that. And I'm here right now, ready to take you out somewhere. But if you need this to be all about you and how you/ got your feelings hurt-

SASHA

It's my fucking birthday!

TREVOR

You think I don't know that?

SASHA

You didn't when you answered the phone.

TREVOR

I was half-asleep!

SASHA

And why was that?

TREVOR

I told you, I didn't sleep last night, and crashed right after work.

THE SONG

Without setting the alarm?

SASHA

Oh my god.

TREVOR

Sasha -

SASHA

You could have. You could have set an alarm. But -

THE SONG

He didn't remember.

TREVOR

Can we not make this about/ whose fault it is -

SASHA

I've been so excited for this, thinking about it, waiting for it. (holding back tears) And you just forgot?!

TREVOR

I'm not playing this game tonight, Sasha. I'm not gonna spend the whole time patting you on the head until you stop feeling sorry for yourself, so/ if that's-

SASHA

Do you love me?

THE SONG

Oh shit.

A long pause.

TREVOR

You know, Cicero's is open late, and it's a lot nicer than Applebee's. A bit more of a drive/ but-

SASHA

Do you love me?

TREVOR

I'm here, aren't I?

THE SONG

He can't even say it.

SASHA

It's been a year and a half, and you can't- what are you even doing here?

TREVOR

Trying to have fun! I thought that's what we were doing. I mean, I like you. You're fun to hang out with when you're not being all needy like this -

SASHA

But you don't love me.

TREVOR

(sighs)

I really didn't want to get into this tonight.

THE SONG

Tonight?

SASHA

So what- you've been *planning* on breaking up with me?

TREVOR

Well, not on your birthday, but now you've brought up the whole love thing. And so what am I supposed to do? Pretend I feel that way? Would that somehow be better because of what day it is? I mean, what do you want me to do?

The Song tries to hold Sasha back, but Sasha throw her off and advances.

SASHA

(pushing through tears)

I want you to love me. And- and not even a lot. Maybe just a little, like just the start of love. Or, or just try to, if you don't yet. And you can show me- you can show me what I can do to help. 'Cause this- this not feeling it, it doesn't have to be permanent. It just means that I haven't been loving you right. But I can change. I can do it better.

TREVOR

Sasha-

SASHA

I can. Just give me another chance to/ and-

TREVOR

Sasha, please- I just- I'm sorry. Really. I thought we were - I didn't know you felt all of this. If I had, I-

SASHA

You - you don't want to be with me.

TREVOR

Not the way you just talked about. I'm really sorry, but I don't.

SASHA

Why not?

TREVOR

I- it's not anything you did/ or didn't do-

SASHA

So why won't anybody ever be with me the way I need them to?! What is it? What am I doing wrong?

TREVOR

I really can't help you with that.

SASHA

No- no, but you have to. You owe me that much, Trevor. We've been together a year and a half. That means something. That means that it doesn't end like this.

She grabs his arm, pulls toward the couch.

SASHA

Just - just stay for a minute. We'll sit and talk, and be adults/ and we won't-

TREVOR

Sasha, it's over.

SASHA

I know. But not like this, okay? Let's sit and take some time/ to-

He yanks his hand away from hers. It throws her off balance and sends her onto the couch.

TREVOR

You know why I don't love you, Sasha? Because of shit like this. It's never easy with you. You complicate everything! You're a needy fucking mess and I can't take it anymore! I am going somewhere in my life, Sasha. And I can't keep carrying your baggage around.

SASHA

Trevor-

TREVOR

I'm sorry, but I just can't.

He exits. Sasha sits, shocked, for a moment. Then she curls up, buries her face in the couch and sobs. The Song crouches next to her.

THE SONG

The first night is all tears. Not all for Trevor.

The Song gently wipes the tears from Sasha's cheeks, examines them on her fingers.

THE SONG

There are some for the loss of him. But mostly tears of rejection. There's been a reservoir of them deep in your chest. His is just the one that cracks the dam. The carelessness of your father. The physical distance from him. The coldness of your mother. The vast emotional chasm that somehow fits inside the basement stairwell.

SASHA

Elsie Mendoza.

THE SONG

Your first crush.

SASHA

Jonas Harwick,

THE SONG

Your first boyfriend.

SASHA

Other girls, other boys.

THE SONG

And you yourself, rejecting thoughts and desires you don't know what to do with. They all rush together in a great torrent that eventually washes you up on the shores of sleep. Daytime is filled with all the strange rituals of the breakup. Word spreads. Friends call. You tell the same story nine different times. He may have left the basement the night before, but the idea of him grows large in his body's absence. More tears the second night, but this time they ebb and flow.

Sasha slumps into the couch and wipes away her tears.

THE SONG

By Wednesday, the hurt has settled into a dull, consistent ache. A routine emerges. Sasha comes home from her shitty summer job, collapses on the couch, then stares at the wall or the TV, depending on her mood. And without fail, her mind revolves around one question.

SASHA

What's the matter with me?

The Song perches on the couch next to her.

THE SONG

It takes until Friday for her to listen to my answer.

SASHA

Really. What makes everyone wanna get the hell away?

THE SONG

Everyone? What about your friends?

SASHA

Well, most/ everyone-

THE SONG

What about Jory?

Beat.

SASHA

There is Jory.

THE SONG

You think she wants to get the hell away from you?

SASHA

I don't know. Maybe she does and she's/ just not-

THE SONG

Look at me and tell me Jory wants to get away from you.

Sasha looks straight at her, knows the truth immediately.

SASHA

No. She doesn't.

THE SONG

You remember what she told you she sees in your eyes?

SASHA

(quiet)

Yes.

THE SONG

What does she see? Say it. Say it out loud.

SASHA

(holding back tears)

That I'm stronger than anyone realizes.

THE SONG

Does she think something's the matter with you?

SASHA

But Dad- and- and Trevor, they-

THE SONG

What if it's not you, Sasha?

SASHA

What?

THE SONG

What if they're *wrong*?

SASHA

But-

THE SONG

So consumed with themselves they can't see you clearly. Trevor, your mom, your dad, those stupid old crushes - what if they're wrong about you and Jory's right?

SASHA

Could that- could that be true?

THE SONG

These people - they walked out of your life, but their voices are still in your head. Trying to shift the blame of their fucking carelessness onto you.

SASHA

They- they just tossed me away, like- like-

THE SONG

Did they ever really take the time to find out what you're capable of?

SASHA

They just used me for what they needed/ and-

THE SONG

Did they ever do one fucking thing to deserve a say in how you live your life? To make them an expert on who you really are?

The answer comes out of Sasha slowly, with the effort it takes to shift a paradigm.

SASHA

No. They never fucking did.

THE SONG

So you know what? Fuck them.

SASHA

Yeah.

THE SONG

Fuck them and their blindness. Fuck them and their complete inability to listen.

SASHA

Fuck them and their never once asking for all the love I had to give them. For never suspecting I was capable of it.

THE SONG

Fuck them and their leaving.

SASHA

Fuck them and their staying when their hearts weren't in it. You think I need your pity, Trevor?! I'm stronger than that.

THE SONG

You're goddamn right.

SASHA

And I'm going to fucking prove it.

Sasha and The Song have worked themselves to full-on standing up on the couch.

SASHA

(yelling out to the world)

You hear that, asshole?! Just wait! Just fucking wait and see what it is I become!

THE SONG

Fuck all your assumptions!

SASHA

Fuck your expectations!

SASHA AND THE SONG

FUCK 'EM ALL!

SASHA

And just watch me.

She jumps off the couch, paces the room.

THE SONG

So that's an end to tears.

Sasha grabs her guitar, straps it on, continues pacing while thrashing about on it.

THE SONG

It's here that it happens. Me. Becoming.

She walks up behind Sasha, presses herself against her. They begin to move in unison.

THE SONG

No longer just a voice in your head, I become a series of motions. Random at first. Just rage and sadness mixed with muscle memory. It's good to be outside of you. To be something in the world. But not enough. There is a shape I want to be. Can you feel it?

Sasha nods, keeps playing, but it becomes more purposeful. Starts to resemble that familiar progression.

THE SONG

You reach into yourself and the ether at the same time, push past millions of possible chords, combinations, rhythms and tempos. Mostly run on instinct, feeling the way forward, but keeping one part back. To analyze, complicate. Plunge through that ocean, and find-

Sasha plays the chords of the song in the basic pattern they'll stay in.

THE SONG

(sighs with relief)

There I am. There's me.

The Song's presence behind Sasha becomes less a dance and more a grateful embrace.

THE SONG

How did you do it? How did you find me in the midst of all that?

SASHA

That - that's kinda good.

THE SONG

Images introduce themselves to the melody. Grow, connect, expand into metaphors. A strong central idea.

Sasha stops playing, grabs the nearby notebook and pen, goes back and forth between scribbling and playing the guitar. The Song pivots, facing Sasha.

THE SONG

I'm more than just a progression of chords that channels a mood and is forgotten. I express a point of view. (to Sasha) No longer limited to just your mind. I can influence anybody. I can help you, explain you to others, maybe even make you money. I can grow beyond you, too.

She lets go of Sasha and steps away.

THE SONG

I am a thing in the world. Yours, but also my own. And it's like you said. (to the audience) Just fucking wait and see what it is I become.

SCENE FIVE

Kess and Trevor on Trevor's couch shortly after the end of Scene Three.

KESS

Wow.

TREVOR

So, yeah. That was pretty much it.

KESS

Wow.

TREVOR

Is it weird for you? I mean, you've kind of known the person in that song a lot longer than you've known me/ and now-

KESS

Is that really it?

TREVOR

Yeah. We both sort of avoided each other after that. For different reasons, I guess. /That, or-

KESS

And that was all there was to it, to you guys breaking up?

TREVOR

Yeah. I ... didn't realize what I had, so I treated her like crap and walked away.

KESS

And I get that, but it's just - that song has so much anger in it. And dumping her on her birthday like that, that is really shitty, but - I guess I always assumed that he- that you- had done something really awful. Hit her, cheated on her, something like that.

TREVOR

Yeah, but cheating and that stuff is kind of overrated.

KESS

What?

TREVOR

I mean, yeah, it's bad. But I feel like we give it more weight than other things to make ourselves feel better. I can honestly say I've never cheated on anyone. Ever. So that makes me a good guy, right? But looking back on that time in my life, I see ... someone who preyed on the weak. I would find needy, insecure people and use them to get what I wanted. I didn't know that's what I was doing, but in hindsight ... the pattern is there. So I could pat myself on the back for the fact that I never hit her or banged some other girl while we were together.

But when the evidence that I hurt another human being is on the radio every week or so, it's harder to say that being a good guy means staying on the right side of this or that line. And trust me, I've tried.

KESS

Tried like how?

TREVOR

The way you'd expect.

KESS

Told everyone she was a crazy bitch?

TREVOR

And told myself that I didn't deserve this, you know? But the whole martyr pose ... got in the way. So yeah. I was a manipulative asshole who used her and then threw her away. And there are consequences for doing that kind of shit.

KESS

Sometimes unexpected ones like a platinum single about how much of a jerk you are.

Beat.

TREVOR

It wasn't *that* unexpected.

KESS

You weren't surprised that she/ went and wrote-

TREVOR

Even back then, I could tell that she was gonna be good. Her early stuff was messier, but ... it was there. I maybe loved and hated that.

KESS

(it clicks)

You knew that she was better than you.

TREVOR

I didn't "know." But suspected? Was terrified of? Yeah. There was that.

Beat.

KESS

So there's ... all that stuff in that song for you.

TREVOR

Yeah.

KESS

Okay. Tonight makes more sense now. I don't know why you felt like you had to run from me instead of just coming out with it, though.

TREVOR

(sighs)

Because it's one thing to admit it to yourself, but- I didn't want you to see me that way. I didn't want you to see me as "that guy who fucked over Sasha Sever."

KESS

What do you want me to see you as?

Beat.

TREVOR

That guy that finally taught you how to ice skate.

Kess is visibly moved. She takes his hand.

KESS

Just so you know, I still do.

TREVOR

Okay. Okay.

They sit in silence. Kess shifts uncomfortably.

TREVOR

Are you- are you all right, or-

KESS

You think that you want to know. The story behind the song, right? You listen to it over and over, for years, desperate for all the details so you can really *know*. And then you get them. And suddenly, it all just seems so much ... smaller. I mean, it was one thing for me when it was abstract. Sasha was screaming against an injustice. But it's kind of another thing when I think of her specifically screaming at *you*. I don't know. I'm sorry. It's just- it's just weird.

TREVOR

Yeah. Tell me about it.

They sit, both lost in their own thoughts.

SCENE SIX

Sasha's basement, about a week after her and Trevor's breakup. Sasha is playing the second verse of the song for Jory, different in appearance at age eighteen. Hair buzzed in the back with long bangs in the front. Fairly androgynous, but even in her Siouxsie and the Banshees t shirt and gothy black skirt and eyeliner, Jory's voice, flat chest, and general appearance read a bit more "boy" than girl. Sasha plays the song differently - slower, sadder, more aware of the person she's losing in her declaration of independence. The Song sits between them, facing Jory as Sasha plays.

THE SONG

The first time being played for someone else is ... terrifying. (looks back at Sasha). (looking at Jory again) I- I don't know how to do this. I've emerged from out of someone. Yeah.. But how do you get in? Lyrics making contact with the brain?

The Song touches the sides of Jory's face for a moment, then jerks them away.

THE SONG

Ookay, not so much. That is one analytical mind you've got there. Jesus. Like being sliced to pieces.

The Song takes a few breaths to recover.

THE SONG

So maybe ... body first, mind later?

The Song reaches out, gently places her hand on Jory's. Slowly, Jory's hand and a foot begin to keep the beat.

THE SONG

Okay, yeah. Lyrics riding on the rhythm. Not just phrases to pick apart. The beat with the thought. And the feeling. Oh god, there's so much.

The Song's hands briefly slide back up to Jory's temples.

THE SONG

Yes, I'm up here now. Speaking to you.

But then slide down to her chest.

THE SONG

And here. So much experience with what Sasha's just learning. Shutting out voices that don't know you. It's been- it's been for your whole life.

Jory closes her eyes and grabs onto The Song's wrists.
The Song grabs back.

THE SONG

Yes. Do it. Shift my meaning. Not freedom from a boyfriend. Freedom from everyone. Freedom to be the woman you are when everyone else sees a boy. To be your parents' daughter, not their son. You already have it. I don't need to goad you into saying it. But I'll say it with you. That much I can do.

JORY

Thank you.

Jory opens her eyes, smiles, then gently leads The Song to the side, eyes firmly locked onto Sasha.

JORY

We'll have our moment soon.

THE SONG

But -all of that inside you -

JORY

(to The Song, but eyes still on Sasha)

I know. But do you get how big of a deal it is for her to have written these words, to be singing them? To maybe believe them even a little? She's pouring out her heart for me to receive. So I'm gonna.

THE SONG

I see your heart too. Just so you know.

Sasha finishes the song, just barely holding it together.
Silence. Sasha wipes her eyes and gets some sniffles out.

SASHA

So.. um, what do you think?

JORY

What do I- it's fucking amazing. And we'll talk all about it in a minute. But- but- I just-

She gropes for words, gives up, and wraps Sasha in an embrace. Sasha hugs back, hard. Then starts to cry.

JORY

You are a fucking badass, you know that?

Sasha laughs through her tears.

JORY

You've kept on growing, no matter what. I see you. And I am so, so proud of you.

Sasha keeps on crying. Jory holds her tight. The Song looks on.

THE SONG

They stay there, just like that, as the night grows liquid and flows by. When the tears have all got out, replaced by the much less romantic runny nose, when the breaths come more evenly, and the reasons why she was even crying in the first place move out of the pit of her stomach and into the light, Sasha thinks to herself -

SASHA

This, here - It feels different from everyone that's held me before.

JORY

Encompassed.

SASHA

But not pulled in.

JORY

Treasured.

SASHA

But not kept.

THE SONG

A question forms. A soft, rolling echo through her mind.

SASHA

Is this it?

THE SONG

She asks herself.

SASHA AND THE SONG

Is this what love can feel like?

SCENE SEVEN

The guitar shop/studio Trevor teaches at. Elise peruses a wall of guitars. Kess enters, watches her for a moment.

KESS

You play, Elise?

Elise turns, sees Kess.

ELISE

Oh, hell no. My wife does, though. Casually. Parks and parties, that sort of thing. Trevor's hooking me up with his discount for her birthday present, so- you meeting him up here?

KESS

Yeah. We've barely gotten to see each other since, you know, the other night. So we wanted to squeeze in as much time as we could.

ELISE

Things got worked out after all that?

KESS

I think so. I mean, he let me in, finally. Was honest about why he reacted the way he did. Knowing the context, it was pretty damn understandable. So, you know- I don't know what more I could reasonably expect.

ELISE

Expectations in relationships are rarely what I'd call reasonable, though.

KESS

There is that.

ELISE

So what did you unreasonably expect?

Kess sighs, frustrated, reticent. The Song enters, watching from the sidelines.

KESS

It's so embarrassing. I mean, he said all the right things. Like, in a genuine way. And I really do feel for this fucked up situation he's in. So actually, things are fine. I should be fine.

ELISE

But ...?

KESS

It's just- okay, so you've been married how long?

ELISE

About seven years.

KESS

How important would you say it is to be able to share the things you love- like, the deep, formative things- with your partner?

ELISE

That's not really a question with one answer.

KESS

I know, but generally-

ELISE

There's no "generally" with that, though. Like, every single part of it is this huge variable. Who you are, who your partner is, what the things you love are, why you love them, why you feel the need to/ share them-

KESS

It's the song! God, it feels so shallow to say it out loud. But- but it is. And see, I'm not that person, okay? I'm not the girl that backs out of things for weird little reasons. I can't stand people like that. But Candles Out is- it's not some favorites playlist kind of thing for me. I had ... an experience with it. Where it brought clarity to some pretty heavy stuff I was dealing with. The night I just laid down and listened to that whole album for the first time is this weird sort of milestone in my life. And I certainly don't expect the guy I'm with to love it.

But when listening to it is the opposite experience for us and causes him, like, actual pain? I don't know. Am I over-thinking this? I am. I'm totally freaking out over stupid little things and/ just need to-

ELISE

There are no "stupid little things." You know those bells they tie to a string for divers in movies? Where they pull on it if something's wrong? That's what most of the small stuff we fight about is. A little jingle that says, "Hey, there's something big and scary below the surface that you need to deal with, or one of us is toast."

KESS

Yeah. Maybe that's what it is.

ELISE

Actually, Sadie and I had kind of our own thing over that song once.

KESS

Really? What was it about?

ELISE

What was it about on the surface? Or what was it about, giant fucking sea monster version?

KESS

How about both?

ELISE

This was way before the wedding when we were just starting to live together. We're driving on the way to somewhere, and it comes on the radio. Sadie can tell I'm not into it, and gets this look on her face, which even at this point I recognize as the "I'm about to blow your fucking mind with how profound I am" alarm. So she launches into this whole detailed theory about how Candles Out isn't actually about a break up at all. It's about a lesbian teenager coming out to one of her parents. And it's complex. Like, with double meanings, outside sources, this whole big thing that she's obviously super proud of. And the entire time I can barely keep from cracking up 'cause, you know, I am who I am and know what I know. So I basically laugh her out of the car, declare it all bullshit, and proceed to tell her the "real story." Which completely ruins our relationship for a week.

KESS

Because, sea monster.

ELISE

Exactly. But when we actually talk about it, I realize that we're not fighting because she's mad that I shot her pet theory full of fact holes.

We're fighting because I cared more about being right than I did about listening to her. Because she wasn't telling me a story about a song. She was telling me the story of herself. How she came out to her mom. How hard it was. But I was too focused on the particulars about the lyrics being wrong to see all the truth she was giving me about her experience. I tended to do that a lot. Still happens now and then, but ... it's better.

KESS

Because you talked through it.

ELISE

Yeah.

KESS

Fuck.

ELISE

Sorry.

KESS

No, it's- it's something I need to consider. I just really didn't expect all of this to be so complicated.

ELISE

Every relationship is in some way.

THE SONG

Even ours. Right, Elise?

KESS

Yeah.

THE SONG

(to Elise)

You could finally say it.

KESS

(the music essayist gears turning)

But, you know, your wife may not have been as technically wrong about those lyrics as you thought.

THE SONG

Finally admit it to someone else.

ELISE

Really?

KESS

I mean, yes, the break up's there. But look at what Sasha did afterwards. It took a while before it became official, but/ it's still fairly soon that-

ELISE

(dawning on her)

She ended up with Jory.

KESS

Yeah. Who'd just come out as trans in a pretty harsh spotlight. And in spite of all sorts of stigmas, they're one of the happiest couples in rock. So you could make the case that when Sasha sings about rejecting her ex's influence in her life, she's also rejecting the cultural influence pushing her toward this ideal of straightness all that time.

THE SONG

You see how excited she gets when she talks about me?

KESS

Seen through the lens of how Sasha and Jory went on to live their lives, there's an argument to be made that it is, in a way, a coming out song.

ELISE

Wow. I just ... spent so long thinking of it the one way.

THE SONG

You can say it. She'll understand.

A pause. Elise's turn to be frustrated, reticent.

ELISE

If I tell you something, will you swear to never say anything to Trevor? Like, ever in your life?

KESS

After what I just admitted to you? Um, yeah.

ELISE

Sometimes, lately, when it comes on the radio, I've listened to it, and it makes me feel ... good. Like, satisfied in a weird way? Or- that's not the right word.

But I don't know why and I feel terrible that I do because he's my brother, and it hasn't been kind to him, you know?

THE SONG

Ouch.

KESS

Yeah.

THE SONG

I, uh- I am working on that, so you know.

ELISE

I'm sorry. I've just not known what to do with that for a while now.

THE SONG

It's a slow process, and-

KESS

It's okay. Music just does things to us. It's beautiful and terrible sometimes, and it's kinda scary how little control we have over what it can do and when it decides to.

THE SONG

It's less of a conscious decision than it is a- yeah. I'll shut up now.

Beat.

Trevor enters.

TREVOR

Hey. You're here.

KESS

Yeah. I know I'm a little early.

TREVOR

No, that's fine. I just- I told Elise I'd help her out-

KESS

Yeah, the birthday present.

ELISE

I was telling her all about it.

TREVOR

Cool. So you don't mind if we- ?

KESS

No, go for it. I've got some work emails and stuff go through anyway.

TREVOR

Great. It shouldn't take too long. I've already scouted out a few options.

ELISE

Awesome. It was good catching up with you, Kess.

KESS

You too.

Trevor leads Elise further into the studio.

TREVOR

These ones here might be a bit too fancy. I'm thinking the best quality for your money's going to be the Martin X Series, or one the Breedloves over here-

KESS

(to "herself")

I have to tell him.

THE SONG

About our moment?

KESS

What I'm feeling won't make sense to him if I don't.

THE SONG

That story is ... a lot. It could fuck things up.

KESS

If I hide it, things are fucked anyway. I know his side of things so he gets to know mine. That's the only way these things stay real.

THE SONG

And you want it to? This specific one?

Kess thinks for a moment.

KESS

There's one way to find out.

THE SONG

I'm - I'm not ready for this. That moment is for us. I don't want him to hear about it, I don't want him to talk to you about it, or ... be anywhere near it. So much of my life at the start was about him, or aimed at him and -

Kess exits. The Song clutches her chest from some internal pain.

THE SONG

(yelling after her)

Goddammit! He shouldn't be able to get any more! Not that part. Not the ones I'm most proud of. He doesn't see me the way you do, Kess. And if you tell that man *our* story, if you look into his eyes while you do it, feeling what he feels about it ... will you still see me the way you do now? Or will you find something else? (hand clutching her chest again) Something less pure than it felt back then. Some - (pulls her hand away) no. I'm forgetting one of the most important parts. Come on. Focus. Focus!

SCENE EIGHT

The Song pushes a couch and some other things back into Sasha's basement configuration.

THE SONG

Kess connects to things in me that weren't there when Sasha wrote me. My beginning wasn't complete until this.

Sasha enters, carrying a small practice amp. Jory enters behind, lugging an ungainly bass guitar case in one hand, and backpack slung over one shoulder.

THE SONG

Their first official band practice. Even though they don't have a drummer yet.

SASHA

Running it through this thing?

JORY

Yeah.

SASHA

Then it'll be no problem.

JORY

Um, just 'cause it's small doesn't mean it's not loud.

SASHA

It's okay. Mom's only here for another half hour, so we won't have to worry.

JORY

Cool.

She sets down her bass, rummages through her backpack, pulls out a gothy knee length black skirt.

JORY

First things first.

Jory quickly steps out of her pants, revealing colorful striped tights underneath. She puts the skirt on.

SASHA

Can't believe they're still that uptight about you leaving the house in girl mode.

JORY

Extinction burst, you know? Realizing it's not a phase, and freaking out that they can't do shit about it.

She triumphantly kicks the pants across the room.

JORY

'Cause in two weeks, I'm out of their fucking house forever. New apartment, new life, don't have to see 'em again if I don't wanna.

She gets her bass out and starts setting up her gear.

SASHA

Oh my god. So you'll just be coming over here already wearing whatever?

JORY

Yup.

SASHA

Awesome. Though I will kinda miss seeing your ass when you're changing.

JORY

Hey, it'll always be here for you.

She playfully flips her skirt up. Laughter, then down to business.

JORY

You got lyric sheets, chords?

SASHA

Shit! I forgot to make copies. Um-

Sasha grabs her notebook off the couch, hands it to Jory.

SASHA

Here. I've got it memorized anyway.

JORY

You sure?

SASHA

Yeah, so long as you can actually read my crappy handwriting.

JORY

(studies it)

Mostly.

SASHA

So how do we get started? Just jump right into it, or-

JORY

I wouldn't mind hearing it one more time, just to get the/ feel-

FEMALE VOICE

(offstage)

Sasha-

SASHA

Yeah, mom?

FEMALE VOICE

(offstage)

Could you come up here for a minute?

SASHA

But we're just starting/ practice.

FEMALE VOICE

(offstage)

Now.

Sasha sighs dramatically, starts toward the stairs.

SASHA

I'll be right back.

JORY

No worries.

Sasha exits. Jory relaxes a bit, inspects Sasha's notebook.

THE SONG

God. Prodding me with that pointy sharp brain again.

Jory sets the notebook on a music stand, grabs her bass.

THE SONG

So what is it? What do I need?

Jory plays through the chords in the notebook. The Song moves with her.

THE SONG

Oh my god, this instrument! Where have you been all my life? So ... strong. Like you.

Jory halts, goes back a couple notes in the progression..

JORY

No, no- a slide down.

Jory slides down the neck of her bass to the next note.

THE SONG

(reacting to it physically)

Oh my god. What was *that*?

JORY
(nods in approval)

Yeah.

THE SONG

Do it again.

Jory obliges, slides back up.

THE SONG

Oh, fuck yes.

Something clicks in Jory. She speeds up. A lot. Another jolt of sensation to The Song.

THE SONG

Wait. What are you doing?

Jory's playing grows in raw power and urgency.

THE SONG

Is this ... me? I- I don't- wait.

The Song steps back, disconnecting from Jory, who stops playing, studies the lyrics.

JORY

(reading)

"Now blow your candles out."

THE SONG

Can you just-

JORY

"Can't take the heat no more." She's so close.

THE SONG

But?

JORY

It gives him too much power. It's the next line-

As Jory reads, the Song places her hand on Jory's heart.

JORY

"Don't need your flame to light my way, I'll do just fine without it. That's it. That's where the song is. And if that sentence is true-

THE SONG

And there's nothing you're more sure of than that.

JORY

Then who cares what the fuck he does? What heat can he put out that you're not able to take?

THE SONG

Because you've taken your share.

JORY

(reading)

"This was your final say. Your words just wind and smoke. I'll blow 'em out the door for good, won't matter if you shout it." Blow 'em out the door. That's not a breath. That's a fucking gale.

Jory starts playing, loud and insistent.

JORY

And it's gotta hit fast, and it's gotta hit hard.

THE SONG

(a slow revelation)

Yeah. This is who I am.

Sasha comes back down the stairs. Jory keeps playing.

SASHA

Cool. What's that?

Jory nods toward the notebook.

JORY

Song.

SASHA

Dude, that's way too fast.

JORY

Change two words and it's not.

SASHA

(skeptical)

Which ones?

JORY

"Now" to-

JORY AND THE SONG

"I'll."

JORY

"Can't" to-

JORY AND THE SONG

"Won't."

SASHA

Really? I- I don't know.

JORY

Fair. But jump in, try it.

Sasha grabs her guitar, plays. The Song moves along behind her. The momentum carries Sasha away. By the chorus, she's yelling more than singing.

THE SONG

Muscle puts on tissue. Meaning deepens. The core of my message - you don't have to accept the labels others brand you with - to Sasha, a sudden epiphany. To Jory, battle-tested truth. In me now, it's both. I am the excitement of new discovery. I come wrapped in experience's tattered cloak. Their instruments and lives put together make me so much more than just angry. I am defiance. I am a challenge and a dare. It's there, rumbling in my feedback. *That's* who I am. *That's* what reverberates through years and through lives.

Winded, shocked at the exertion, Sasha stops playing. It takes a moment, but Jory stops too.

SASHA

Holy shit.

JORY

Yeah.

THE SONG

And if there was any venom in me at first -

SASHA

I mean, that -

THE SONG

It got flushed out right here.

SASHA

That was- holy shit!

JORY

Yeah.

THE SONG

It did.

SASHA

Let's do it again!

Jory smiles. The Song looks at Sasha's wicked grin as they gear up to start over.

THE SONG

Right?

Jory and Sasha bring their strumming hands up in preparation for the first notes.

Blackout.

Act Two

SCENE ONE

The Song stands on stage, nothing else visible.

THE SONG

So where am I now? I'm not in Trevor's apartment, where she's telling him the story of why she's so attached to me. The tune's in her head, so I could get in. But I've burst in on him enough over the years. Plus, I'm ... not so sure I want to see that. Anyway, I was there the first time, so you'll get my version.

Lights fade up on a college age Kess, lying on her bed with an unfolded album lyric sheet next to her, soaking in the music. The Song walks over to Kess' bed.

THE SONG

The question Jory embedded in me that first band practice reaches across years and miles, all the way to Kess' cramped dorm room at Northwestern as she listens through the whole album for the first time. "Are you gonna allow others to define you? Have you done it already, and not noticed?"

Kess' face and body language change - troubled, no longer at ease.

THE SONG

What is it?

KESS

It's just- it should feel triumphant. The music, the lyrics. It's all there.

THE SONG

So?

KESS

So why does my stomach feel like the floor just dropped away?

THE SONG

You answer my question, maybe I'll answer yours.

Kess turns away from The Song, studies the lyric sheet.

THE SONG

The answer's not in there. It's in you.

KESS

I just - I don't know why it makes me feel like this.

THE SONG

But can you go ahead and feel it?

Kess takes a deep breath turns flat on her back again, and closes her eyes.

THE SONG

Good.

The Song places her hands to Kess' temples as the music swirls around and through them.

THE SONG

Ears wide open to the sound. Body responsive, mostly. The mind ... wants to embrace me. But ... doesn't feel invited to the party. Huh. You- you're crying out to say my chorus to someone.

KESS

It's not like anyone's ever been that bad with me, or-

THE SONG

What do you mean "that bad?"

KESS

I mean, compared to other people-

THE SONG

Like who?

KESS

I don't have a reason to be that angry.

THE SONG

Who fucking says? You get to decide what you can/feel.

Kess brushes The Song's hands away, turns over on the bed.

THE SONG

What? All I was trying to - I just feel your need. Part of me is stuck here (hand on Kess' chest), and needs to come out. (starts to reach for Kess, but thinks better of it)

Beat.

KESS

I wish it was this easy. Just shutting out one person who's branded you as something.

THE SONG

I'm not only about one person anymore.

KESS

Then deciding who you are for yourself, just like that. It would be so much easier if somebody was just obviously wrong.

THE SONG

It's never easy. Ever.

KESS

But it's me. Tying myself in knots and I don't even know why.

Kess closes her eyes again. Candles Out ends and another, equally hard rocking song starts up.

THE SONG

(frustrated)

I'm over and it's still lodged inside you. Track Two. Another barn burner. (to Kess) What is it? You can yell and shout and own this.

KESS

No. I'm not included.

THE SONG

Who the fuck says? You can just-

Kess ignores her.

THE SONG

I don't get it. What are you waiting for?

The music shifts again, a slower, brooding song. Another Song appears. This is TRACK THREE.

TRACK THREE

(to The Song)

How 'bout you give me a crack at it? I think it needs a gentler touch.

THE SONG

Go right ahead. (to the audience) Track Three. One of those brooding slow burn songs on the album. Not exactly a ballad, but-

TRACK THREE

Not a shout in the face either.

She kneels down next to Kess.

KESS

It's fine if there's a reason for it.

TRACK THREE

But not fine for you?

KESS

The last thing this world needs is more people screaming over petty shit.

THE SONG

Oh, there's something behind that.

TRACK THREE

(to The Song)

I know. Just-

She gestures for The Song to be quiet., then gently touches Kess' arm.

TRACK THREE

I'm not about that. I'm all the small hurts you can't quite name. And you're not alone with them.

Kess slowly moves with the rhythm. Small movements. A head nod. Just a little bit of a sway in the shoulders. Track Three joins her on the bed, moves with her.

TRACK THREE

Three years ago and three hundred miles away, a teenager in a suburban basement got those same pangs in the pit of her stomach and scribbled them in a notebook.

A girl playing bass felt that same flush of shame in her cheeks when she read the words, then translated it into me. Others felt it too. The confusion of desires that woke early, of awkward experiments walked in on.

Kess suddenly goes rigid.

TRACK THREE

Oh.

THE SONG

What is it?

TRACK THREE

A voice. Memory of it yelling from a distance.

Track Three puts her hands to Kess' temples, moves her lips, but a male voice comes out.

MALE VOICE

Kess, we're about to- oh my god. What are you- stop that right now!

THE SONG

Who is that?

KESS

My dad.

MALE VOICE

Because- because good girls don't do that! Not now! Not- Jesus, Kess, why can't you go through anything the normal way?! I mean, god, what am I supposed to do with you?!

KESS

I was just trying to figure my own body out, but every little thing caused explosions. Yelling, red in the face, over nothing. All the overreactions. I just- I'm not gonna do that.

TRACK THREE

Then just listen. You can worry about whether or not you've earned it later.

KESS

Okay.

She breathes deeply, relaxes a little.

TRACK THREE

That's it. Good.

Another shift in music, strangely sped up, as are the motions of Kess and Track Three, who remains by her side.

THE SONG

Fourth song. Another loud angry one, more insistent on having its way.

Kess immediately tenses up.

TRACK THREE

Whoa, starting to lose her here.

KESS

She's just ... so confident in her own injuries.

THE SONG

I mean, it's punk rock. What did you expect?

TRACK THREE

Can you just stay open? See where it goes?

Music shift, still sped up.

THE SONG

The fifth song - slow, sad, and raw. Wow. Flows right through her.

TRACK THREE

Feeling every last bit of this one. The slow motion tragedy called growing up -

KESS

Long summer days and simple pleasures slipping through your fingers- I wish I could go back, really savor it. Maybe get it right this time. Without all the embarrassments.

Beat.

KESS

Without the shame.

TRACK THREE

(to The Song)

There. That's what it is.

Music shift. Another Song enters, TRACK SIX. She looks a lot like Sasha.

TRACK SIX

Good work. She's ready for me.

THE SONG

Track six. A no-holds-barred slice of Sasha's childhood traumas. Even more nakedly autobiographical than I am, and it shows. Fucking look at her.

TRACK SIX

They were both invested in you. I'm more lopsided. It's nothing to be jealous about.

She goes over to Kess, still lying on the bed.

TRACK SIX

This may be difficult for you, but I get the feeling that it's time. You can tell me if it isn't, though.

She reaches out and gently touches Kess' arm.

TRACK SIX

I am childhood moments touched with dirty fingers. Backyard games that go one step too far. Schoolyard taunts turning obscene. That day the boys on the block look at you differently.

KESS

(turns and looks at her)

The day that look starts to scare you.

Track Six pulls Kess up to sitting.

TRACK SIX

You recognize me?

KESS

Yes. But I shouldn't. It was never what your lyrics are heading towards. Yes, there was weirdness. A lot of it. But it was me, being all awkward and strange and ... too curious for my own good.

TRACK SIX

The weirdness, when was the first time?

KESS

I don't know. I've never thought about it.

TRACK SIX

Try. Go as far back as you can remember. When was the first time you felt like me?

Kess stares out into the distance, straining to see something out there.

KESS

A long way back. Before Kindergarten, even? It's fuzzy.

TRACK SIX

What was it?

KESS

I barely even- I was staying with a family from church while my parents were at some conference or whatever? Rough-housing with one of the kids inside while his parents were in the yard. I guess I took my shirt off or something? Got in trouble for it when the adults came back in. The only thing I really remember is sitting in this bean bag chair, my face all hot with embarrassment once they got done yelling at me.

TRACK SIX

You've never really looked at it?

KESS

Why should I? It was awkward. Who wants to dwell/ on that shit?

TRACK SIX

Or wondered why that of all things stuck with you from such an early age?

KESS

It wasn't important, okay? It was stupid. I felt bad for being stupid. Why the hell would I want to look closer at/ that?

Track Six gently puts her hand to Kess' heart. Kess freezes.

TRACK SIX

You feel me right here?

Beat.

KESS

Yes.

TRACK SIX

All kinds of emotion gathered at that one spot, turning somersaults?

KESS

Yes.

TRACK SIX

Do you want to know why?

Long pause.

KESS

Yes.

TRACK SIX

Then you're going to have to stare straight into it.

KESS

(deep breath)

Okay.

TRACK SIX

So the parents are in the yard. Where are you?

KESS

A- a bedroom. His? Yeah.

TRACK SIX

Who's he?

KESS

Their son. Older than me, not sure by how much.

TRACK SIX

What are you doing?

KESS

Playing with his toys. Action figures. Something changes. He stands me up. Starts taking off my shirt.

TRACK SIX

He takes it off?

KESS

And my shorts. And ... everything.

TRACK SIX

And then?

KESS

He ... puts me in the closet. Closes the door. Alone. In the dark. For ages. I don't think I like this game. The door opens. I get light again. Relief. But he's standing there. With ... things in his hands.

TRACK SIX

What things?

KESS

I- I don't know. Just ... things. I'm poked with, prodded. In places I feel like maybe he shouldn't be.

TRACK SIX

And what are you doing?

KESS

Just standing there. I- I don't know what else to do. I don't know what this is.

TRACK SIX

But you know what it is now?

KESS

Yes.

TRACK SIX

I'm really sorry, but you need to say the words.

KESS

(outside herself, matter-of-fact)

I was molested. Which is so weird. I never saw myself as one of those people. I thought that was just creepy uncles and- and stranger danger, and stuff that didn't happen to me.

But there it is. Maybe he didn't know what he was doing. But it happened. (the emotion of it starts to hit) I never thought- I never looked- it just blended in with everything else.

Music shift. Track Seven, the spitting image of Jory, strides straight to Kess' side.

TRACK SEVEN

(to the Songs)

It's all right. I've got her. But everyone stay close.

KESS

But it- it happened.

THE SONG

Track Seven.

KESS

It wasn't just-

THE SONG

One of three songs Jory wrote on the album.

KESS

Just another awkward moment, or- or strange situation that I blundered into.

Track Seven carefully embraces Kess as the tears start to come.

KESS

I just- I just always thought that I caused it somehow. That it- it-

TRACK SEVEN

It's all right, Kess. You didn't.

KESS

It's- it's not my fault?

TRACK SEVEN

Not even a little.

KESS

All this time, I thought it was me. That there was something wrong with me. That-

TRACK SEVEN

There's not. Nothing wrong with you or in you. Something was done to you, and all the fallout and all the grief that's followed - it's on his shoulders. You've carried it long enough.

Kess collapses into Track Seven's arms, sobbing. The other songs reach out their hands to her.

KESS

(between sobs)

I never- never asked for that. I didn't want it. It wasn't - (finally a statement, not a question) it wasn't my fault.

TRACK SEVEN

No.

TRACK SIX

But now you've looked it in the face. You've called it by its name.

THE SONG

You decided you wanted to know the truth more than you wanted not to hurt.

TRACK THREE

Do you know how much strength it takes to do that?

TRACK SEVEN

We see who you really are, Kess. And it's fucking beautiful.

A moment. The four Songs at her side, holding her, supporting her body and her grief. The music shifts rapidly, dreamlike, strange.

THE SONG

The rest of us wash over her in great waves of sound. Track eight, track nine.

TRACK THREE

The context of that moment reshapes the past.

TRACK SIX

Puzzle pieces lose their jagged edges. Things start to fit.

THE SONG

Track ten.

TRACK SEVEN

The revelation seeps into her present. What ripples reach out from that event?

KESS

Is it active in my life right now? In my thoughts and what I expect? How do you go about changing that?

THE SONG

Track eleven. Me again, in a slightly different form. A reprise born out of an impromptu jam after the third chorus that first time they played me in tempo. A pause. I could have just ended. But Jory uses the opportunity to slow back down. Let the instruments carry my melody to darker places.

Music shift. The other Songs let Kess back down on the bed, and step back just a little.

KESS

It's like I've been living in a cloud. Parts of me just fucking lost in the haze. And I thought that was normal. The way life was always going to be. It's still here. But now I know there's a lot of sky I haven't seen yet.

THE SONG

So what are you gonna do?

KESS

Right. It's not just going to go away, is it? There's a part of this that's forever.

TRACK SIX

Yeah.

TRACK THREE

Your life's been colored by that act for sixteen years.

KESS

And all that time stays painted that way?

TRACK SIX

It does.

KESS

But now I can harness it. Fill large swaths of the future with other things.

TRACK SIX

It's possible.

TRACK SEVEN

There will be days, though, when you're just going to lose. When it's all too much for you.

THE SONG

But really, every day before this one has been like that.

KESS

So if I can tear even one minute from out of that fucker's influence, I'll be better off.

TRACK SIX

Easy to say, but a lot harder to believe.

THE SONG

So what do you think you're gonna do?

She reaches out her hand to The Song.

KESS

I'm gonna sing.

The Song pulls her up onto the bed.

KESS

Because I've been dying to say what you do. So you know what? Fuck how hard it's gonna be! And fuck whether or not it lasts. I don't care. All I know is that I need to sing you now that I finally know who the fuck to sing it to!

The reprise builds to a frenzy, with Sasha's voice belting out the chorus. Kess and The Song scream it along with her. Their rendition is wild, powerful in a way that almost feels religious.

When she comes to her crashing finish, The Song steps off the bed, joining the other Songs below. Kess stands there, breath heavy with the exhaustion that comes with true release as the lights fade down on her.

TRACK THREE

Made an impact there.

TRACK SIX

I just hope it lasts.

TRACK SEVEN

We'll do what we can in the relistens. Should be a lot of them.

TRACK SIX

That only goes so far.

TRACK THREE

(to The Song)

So it's up to you now. To remind her of what she felt here.

TRACK SIX

Of what she truly wants.

TRACK SEVEN

An unexpected safe place in difficult times. You carry the torch for all of us now.

THE SONG

Wait, but- why me?

The other Songs share a knowing look.

TRACK SEVEN

Because you're the one on the radio.

SCENE TWO

Trevor's apartment. Trevor and Kess sit on his couch right after she's told him the story of the previous scene.

TREVOR

Oh my god.

KESS

Yeah. First listen through that album. Kinda hard to beat.

TREVOR

Oh my god. I'm so- I just- can I ... hold you right now?

KESS

Yeah.

Embrace. A good one.

TREVOR

I'm so sorry. I- I don't even know what to say.

Kess clutches on to one of the arms wrapped around her.

KESS

This is good. Just this.

A quiet moment. Kess closes her eyes, relaxes into him. Trevor holds on to her, firm but not tight.

TREVOR

What was it like, after ... all that?

KESS

(shrugs)

Started to deal with it, you know? In the slow, painful, boring ways that happens. There was the one thing, though. Two weeks after that, I changed my major to journalism.

TREVOR

Because of that?

KESS

Because of what wasn't there afterwards. I mean, I had this intense experience, and all through the next couple weeks, I'm just listening to it over and over, so that it kind of becomes this weird punk rock version of The Secret Garden, you know? This hidden place that's all my own, where I can just ... figure out how to live from now on. So of course, I'm eating up every sliver of writing about the album and who made it because, well, I've just always been like that. Tons of gushing reviews. It was a pretty big deal when it came out.

TREVOR

I remember.

KESS

Oh. Yeah. I guess you would.

TREVOR

Just fucking everywhere. Sorry. Keep going.

KESS

It's just, most of these reviewers, they'd rave about it, yeah. But it was all about what it sounded like, who it did or didn't compare to, what it signaled for the music industry as a whole. I found two writers who talked about what the music did to them. One wrote three whole sentences about it. Here I'd just had this religious epiphany handed to me in a forty five minute rock record, and everybody's talking about it like it's fucking sports. I knew I couldn't be the only one, so I started writing about the feel of it. The songs that sneak up on you and take you someplace. Music's the only thing that does that. It doesn't wait in a room or on a screen for you to come and devote time to it. Music gets involved. You're probably one of the few people who knows that as well as I do.

TREVOR

Yeah. But the story of how it got involved is a lot different for me than for you.

KESS

Do you- do you worry maybe that the ways it changed each of us, they're just never going to go together?

TREVOR

I don't know. I've spent pretty much every moment since that song came out wishing it didn't exist. But to hear this, what it did for you- I know I can't keep wishing for that anymore. What it showed you is too important. So ... I don't know what the fuck to do with it. I am so glad that it spoke to you that way. But it still fucking hurts. And I'm so mad at myself that I can't just get past it and see it the way/ you do-

KESS

No. We're not playing that game, Trevor. You get to feel what you feel, okay?

TREVOR

But my stuff doesn't even compare/ to what-

KESS

I didn't tell you all that so I could beat you in some kind of Trauma Olympics. This isn't fucking sports either! We each had experiences that led us down a certain path. That's all it is.

TREVOR

Okay. Okay. I just ... really hope those paths go the same way, you know?

KESS

(indicates their embrace)

At the moment, they've brought us to this.

TREVOR

Yeah.

KESS

So maybe, right now, that can be enough.

They sit there in silence, arms around each other, savoring the "right now" as much as they can.

SCENE THREE

Sasha and Jory on stage, playing their instruments in slow motion. The Song between them.

THE SONG

A brief history of what I'm about when Sasha and Jory play me, part one. On the tiny stage at the Way Out Club, two and a half years after I was born. Small place, getting cramped. Crowd's larger than the last time we were here, by a lot. There's an energy to the room that feels special. The kind of rock show where you end up drenched in sweat, only half of which is your own. Jory's bass rumbles like a shockwave, shaking off a lifetime of old labels. Sasha pictures Trevor in the back of the crowd. Screams it right through them. Feels the surge of the audience in great waves of empathy. He was wrong. They all agree. Each time she performs it, she feels a little bit more free from his words. From the year and a half she spent trying to be someone he'd want. I roar into the audience, blowing the dust right off them. I raise the hair on the arms of a woman near the left edge of the crowd. Scout for a record label. Intense emotion pulses through her, chased by thoughts of contracts and dollar signs, but I don't fucking care. I am catharsis. I am the shedding of old skin. Powerful, with no complications.

Beat.

THE SONG

Naive enough to think I'll always stay that way.

SCENE FOUR

Table at a bar. Elise and Trevor sit together, near the bottom of their current drinks. Indie songwriter stuff playing in the background. The Song watches from the margins. Someone else sits at another table with their back to Trevor and Elise.

ELISE

That is- that is some heavy shit.

TREVOR

I know it's ... a lot. But you were the person she said I could tell, and I needed to talk to somebody about it.

ELISE

And that's how you left it? Just cuddled and things seemed okay?

TREVOR

Basically.

ELISE

And how about now?

TREVOR

Now, I just keep thinking, "What if she needs that song more than she needs me?"

ELISE

Oh, fuck.

TREVOR

And not in a jealous way, or self-pitying or anything. I mean honestly. What if that's what she needs in her life right now? What if I can never be okay with it and she notices how much it gets to me? Does she start denying herself something that important to her to try to protect me? 'Cause that's not cool, and/ I don't-

ELISE

It's also not something you have control over. So how about you just worry about the shit that concerns you in this?

TREVOR

Like what?

ELISE

Like why hearing this damn song still gets to you this much? It wasn't that bad of a breakup, Trev. Seriously. I've had way worse.

TREVOR

It's not that. It's the parts where Sasha flat out quotes me.

ELISE

Right, the "needy fucking mess" bit.

TREVOR

And the whole "It's your fault I can't love you" part. She didn't exaggerate. I'll give her that. Those are the words that came out of my mouth. I said them 'cause I knew they'd hurt. All the things I've ever said in my entire life, and those are the ones that get immortalized for future generations. The rest of the lyrics are fine, whatever. I'm over being the bad guy, mostly. But having my own cruelty thrown back in my face, word for fucking word-

ELISE

I can see that. God, if some of the shit I've yelled at Sadie during fights ended up on the radio every other day ...

TREVOR

The hurt's almost physical. Like, my shoulders tense up, I feel hot. There's this hollow feeling in my stomach?

ELISE

Just from hearing it?

TREVOR

Yeah.

ELISE

So, um, that's a thing.

TREVOR

I'm not just freaking out over small shit?

ELISE

Depends. If this is a casual thing with Kess, you can maybe let that slide. But if you picture a future with this girl and you don't want small shit to turn into big shit that comes between you later, you're gonna need to figure out where the hell those feelings are coming from.

TREVOR

Fuck.

ELISE

I know. I'll get us another round.

As Elise exits towards the bar, the background music gets louder - one of those pretty/sad indie songs ala Sufjan, Weakerthans, Magnetic Fields, etc. The person at the other table turns around. She is THAT OTHER SONG.

THE SONG

You the one playing right now?

THAT OTHER SONG

Yeah. (motions toward Trevor) I think he just noticed.

Trevor takes a deep breath, nods along with the beat of That Other Song.

THE SONG

Damn it. I can never get him to move like that!

THAT OTHER SONG

Yeah, but fans thrash around to you, right? Head nods are all I get at best.

THE SONG

Ouch.

THAT OTHER SONG

(shrugs)

Fucking indie rock, man. What can you do?

THE SONG

He seems pretty into you.

THAT OTHER SONG

Not super close or anything, but we've had moments here and there. He's back in the middle of one right now.

Trevor stands up, looks out at something that makes him smile. A light snow begins to fall.

THAT OTHER SONG

It's January, the first time he took Kess ice skating. I'm playing over the PA as he watches her go 'round the rink the first time by herself. Her eyes, her laugh, giddy with the rush of a new skill starting to click. The awkwardness giving way to a few strides of real grace. A few loose strands of her hair escape the knit cap and play in the wind.

TREVOR

(cheering her on)

Go, go, go! Woo! Yeah!

THAT OTHER SONG

Every time he hears me now, he thinks of how beautiful she was that day. Finds me romantic, which is kinda funny, 'cause if you listen to my lyrics, I'm actually pretty depressing.

Kess enters, skates up to Trevor, bundled up in winter clothes. Halfway bumps into him with a laugh. They skate together, holding hands.

TREVOR

That was amazing.

KESS

Whatever.

TREVOR

Seriously. You're sure you've never done this before?

KESS

Just once, when I was a kid.

TREVOR

So this is your first time in what? Twenty years?

KESS

Just about, yeah.

TREVOR

Well, you're a natural.

KESS

Really?

TREVOR

God, yes! It took me way longer before I wasn't just falling over every five minutes.

KESS

Thanks. I was actually super nervous when you suggested this. I almost didn't show.

TREVOR

Seriously?

KESS

Let's just say there's a reason it's been almost twenty years.

TREVOR

Ah. Lots of falls the first time? That's pretty typical, actually.

KESS

That, and just- my dad played hockey in college, so he was super stoked to teach me how to skate. But he would get so frustrated when I wasn't good at the things he was, like it just didn't compute to him that it wasn't the simplest thing in the world, you know? So it was a long day of falling down and getting yelled at for falling down and just a disaster. When we got home, I threw my skates in the garage and refused to ever go again. Did everything he could to coax me back out, but luckily mom had my back, so...

TREVOR

So you're saying that I've succeeded where others have failed?

KESS

Yup.

TREVOR

That's pretty awesome.

KESS

You're pretty awesome.

Kess goes in for a kiss but it's a bit too much to skate and kiss at the same time. She almost falls, but Trevor catches her.

TREVOR

Whoa!

KESS

Yeah, I maybe shouldn't have tried to multi-task just yet.

They stop, move carefully to the rink wall, and just lean for a bit.

TREVOR

I'm telling you, you're progressing really fast.

KESS

I have a good teacher.

TREVOR

I'm thinking it's two more times, three times tops before you can skate and kiss me at the same time.

KESS

With tongue?

TREVOR

Maybe four times for tongue.

KESS

How many for skating and second base?

TREVOR

No idea. But I'm willing to try it any time you want.

Laughter that settles into a warm glow.

KESS

Thank you, by the way.

TREVOR

For what?

KESS

I never would have tried this again if you hadn't seemed so excited about it. Every time I'd see people skating, I'd just think of cold scraped knees and lots of yelling, and be like, "No, thanks." But whenever I see them now, I'll think of this.

She kisses him, then skates off playfully. Trevor watches her go, then settles back in his seat. The music gets softer.

THAT OTHER SONG

Well, that's me fading out, so ...

THE SONG

Thanks for the glimpse. I needed that.

THAT OTHER SONG

Any time. Hope you get him to move.

That Other Song exits.

THE SONG

I've seen it now, Trevor. I know how much she means to you. And, believe it or not, I don't want to get in the way of that. Can you just talk to me? Deal with me? Just once?

Pause.

TREVOR

Okay.

THE SONG

Okay?

TREVOR

Okay.

Elise enters with more drinks.

THE SONG

All right then. I'm gonna hold you to that.

ELISE

Reinforcements have arrived.

TREVOR

Thank god.

Trevor takes a big swig, then a deep breath.

ELISE

Figured you needed that.

TREVOR

You, uh- you still friends with Sasha on social media?

ELISE

(guarded)

Yeah. You said you didn't care.

TREVOR

I don't. You knew her before I did. Two years of swim team doesn't go away 'cause I broke up with her.

ELISE

God, I can't think of the last time we actually messaged each other.

TREVOR

But she still invites you to her shows when she's in town.

ELISE

(freezes)

What?

TREVOR

Come on, Elise. You're careful online, but nobody's *that* careful.

ELISE

Shit! I thought I blocked you from seeing those!

TREVOR

You missed one. Or two.

ELISE

It's not like I actually go or anything.

TREVOR

You're not in trouble, okay? I just- I may need a favor.

ELISE

I don't know that I like the sound of that.

TREVOR

Me neither. But it's got to happen sometime.

SCENE FIVE

THE SONG

What I'm about when Sasha sings me, part two. Five months after the show at the Way Out. Lawyers have been procured, discussions had, contracts signed. This is the big time now.

Lights up on Sasha, alone in a sound booth, wearing professional headphones, standing in front of a very expensive microphone. Her clothing's more together, hair more stylishly punked out. But she's visibly nervous.

SASHA

Can we do another take of that? I just wasn't- yeah. (points to headphones) With some more playback this time? It's hard for me to let loose if it's not cranked, you know? Good. Yeah. And then just a little bit more monitor? I am the very model of a modern major general. I've information vegetable- Perfect. Let's give it another shot.

Sound of a switch being flipped. Sasha sings, but we don't hear her.

THE SONG

It's different without the crowd. No guitar in your hands to put some of the feelings into. Just you and me, alone in this tiny room.

Eighteen year old Trevor enters, stands across from her.

THE SONG

And then, not so alone. We're back there with him in that dingy basement as he confirms everything you feared was true about yourself. But now we can rewrite it.

The Song puts her hand on Sasha's shoulder. Sasha doesn't brush her off like she did during the breakup.

THE SONG

This time, don't beg. This time, tell him everything you didn't have the confidence to say then. This time he stands there and takes it. Listens to every word. And then he is gone.

Trevor disappears. Lights go down on Sasha.

THE SONG

All through the first tour, she still pictures that moment in the basement. But it's at the other end of a tunnel now. She doesn't relive it inside me. I become a declaration of her independence from all he said she was, shouted proudly to the gathered hundreds. Until this happens.

Trevor and Elise, in ill-fitting matching polo shirts, man the counter of a store. Trevor mindlessly puts stickers on CDs while Elise goes through the motions of a transaction.

THE SONG

In one of those crappy music and movie stores you could find in every single mall before the internet killed them all off. A year after tour, when she's had a break from me, working on a new album.

Elise bags an item, then hands it to The Song

ELISE

Thanks for shopping with us today. See you again soon.

TREVOR

This is so fucking mind-numbing. Why am I even here?!

ELISE

Um, 'cause you begged me to get you a job?

Sasha enters, browsing through CDs.

TREVOR

Yeah, well, I didn't know it was gonna be like- (he sees her) Oh shit.

ELISE

What, you thought it was all cool music nerd conversations and hooking up with Liv Tyler?

TREVOR

Shit shit shit shit shit.

ELISE

What?! (sees Sasha) Oh.

TREVOR

I'm, uh, gonna go shelve these. You've got the counter, right?

He runs, hides behind a shelf of CDs.

ELISE

Trevor, get back- fuck!

Sasha spots Elise. Trevor sinks down to the floor. The Song clutches her chest in pain, and sinks down with him.

SASHA

Elise?

ELISE

(acts surprised)

Holy shit! Sasha? How are you?!

SASHA

Good, good! Oh my god, it's so great to see you. How- how are things?

ELISE

Eh, you know, shitty manager gig, frumpy polo shirt, the usual. You look fantastic.

SASHA

Thanks.

ELISE

You in town for Thanksgiving, or-

SASHA

Yeah. Hadn't seen mom in a while, which is, you know, preferable. But family's important and all that, so ...

ELISE

It's just so weird seeing you back here now that you're a big rock star and everything.

SASHA

It, uh, doesn't really change things the way you think it's going to.

Sasha sees a quick flash of Trevor, crouching down behind the rack of CDs.

SASHA

Is- (quieter) Is that Trevor hiding out in the Jazz section?

ELISE

Yep. He's doing good, too.

SASHA

He doesn't have to- I'm sorry. I just never thought of him as the type who would hide from anybody.

ELISE

Yeah, well, things do change around here sometimes.

SASHA

I guess so. Well, hey, I'm playing this secret show at the Old Rock House Saturday. Just a hometown one-off sort of thing. You want me to put you on the list? You could come back stage, hang out.

ELISE

Sure. Sounds awesome.

SASHA

Great. I'm guessing he wouldn't-

ELISE

Yeah, probably not.

SASHA

Fair enough. You got a used section in here? Where they hide all the good weird stuff?

ELISE

Yeah, right against the far wall there.

SASHA

Great. So, Saturday? Nine o'clock?

ELISE

Yeah, I'll see you there.

On her way, Sasha gets one good look at Trevor, crouched down, motionless, eyes closed. The Song staggers to her feet, breathing hard.

THE SONG

Seeing him there like that, paralyzed by insecurity, that's what did it. There was no triumph, no glory in bringing him down to that. Not anymore.

Sasha keeps walking, exits.

THE SONG

She never sang me with him in mind ever again.

SCENE SIX

Kess' apartment. Kess holds her ancient CD copy of Sasha and Jory's first album. Paces back and forth. Tries to decide something. The Song sits to the side in a daze, still recovering.

THE SONG

I haven't been about him in over seven years, and he only just now said okay. Holy shit. He said okay. He's gonna give me a chance to- what? Make things right? Is that even a thing? Now that it's going to happen, what the hell do I even want from it?

KESS

Okay. One last time.

She puts the CD in the player. Candles Out starts to play. The Song jolts up.

THE SONG

Wait. What do you mean one last time?!

KESS

Been a huge part of my life. But now I think it's time to move on.

THE SONG

Whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa. What- what are you saying? Are you-

KESS

Learned a lot from this. Grew a lot.

THE SONG

Kess, are you breaking up with me?!

KESS

But maybe I'm past it now. Maybe I got what I needed.

THE SONG

So, what? You're gonna just take what suits you and leave?

KESS

It meant so much to me back then.

THE SONG

But I don't just mean what I used to! Don't you see?

KESS

But this is now.

THE SONG

We've been growing *together* this whole time! I- I thought we always would-

KESS

And things change.

THE SONG

I change with them. Please, Kess. There's so much more I wanted to show you.

KESS

It means something totally different to him than it does to me.

THE SONG

Him? Wait, Trevor?

KESS

And I need to respect that.

THE SONG

You're choosing him over me? That's- that's not how this is supposed to work.

KESS

I can't bank on him getting over it and not feeling what he feels. It's not fair to expect him to.

THE SONG

And what about you? What about what you feel?

KESS

I- I've had my time with it. I think- I think I'll be okay.

THE SONG

I was trusted with a responsibility, Kess. Others are counting on me to remind you of what it is you really want, and I don't think this is it!

A knock at the door. Kess hurriedly turns off the music and goes to answer it.

THE SONG

You can't even let me finish?

Kess answers the door, lets Trevor in.

TREVOR

Hey.

KESS

Hey.

They greet each other with a kiss.

THE SONG

Things were finally going my way, and now this- I- I don't even know anymore.

TREVOR

So what smells so crazy delicious right now?

THE SONG

Oh, just all my hopes and dreams burning on the garbage fire that is this fucking moment, that's all.

KESS

It's this Mediterranean antipasto linguine I make with garlic butter sauce. Been wanting you to try it for a while.

TREVOR

Sounds incredible.

KESS

It's ready and waiting for us. But, uh, before we have dinner, I just wanted to- to apologize if I made it sound last night like Candles Out might somehow get in the way of- of us.

THE SONG

Kess, you don't have to/ do this.

TREVOR

No, you were being honest. That's what I want/ from you.

KESS

Because it won't, Trevor. You mean a lot to me. The fact we've been able to talk through all this means a lot to me, and I'm not going to let some song get in the way of that.

THE SONG

Some song?

TREVOR

But it's not some song. It's *your song*.

THE SONG

Thank you!

KESS

It was. But I've grown a lot since then, and I think maybe it's time for me to stop dwelling on the past-

THE SONG

I'm here right now!

KESS

And move on to whatever's next, whatever takes me somewhere new.

THE SONG

You don't have to abandon me to do that. You don't.

TREVOR

Oh. Okay. So, um-

He reaches into his jacket pocket, pulls out a pair of concert tickets.

TREVOR

What should I do with these, then?

KESS

Are- are those...

TREVOR

Yeah. For both of us. Backstage beforehand and everything. Elise and Sasha still talk every now and then, so...

KESS

Oh. Oh wow.

THE SONG

Thank. Fucking. GOD!

SCENE SEVEN

Bright lights. Sasha and Jory play, facing upstage to an unseen crowd.

THE SONG

Brief history of my meaning to Sasha and Jory, part three. Recording the second album is nothing like the first. Fights with the label galore, lots of pressure on Sasha and Jory to put more "radio friendly" material on the record. (nods toward the performance going on behind her) On tour, Jory cranks up her bass even louder, plays me raw and ragged out of protest. Sasha's voice transforms my words into a cry against corporate bullshit.

The Song stands back to back with Sasha, moves along with her.

THE SONG

On tours three and four, I mean different things every night. Frustration with Jory's fundamentalist parents, various personal revelations, tantrums about the industry categorizing us within some particular box. It's ... fine. But I miss the urgency I used to have. Then comes Pittsburgh. We're a third of the way through me, rattling against the gilded cage of the female rock star image, when -

Sasha pulls away bodily from The Song, which leaves her off balance, looking out at the crowd. Her and Jory's movement go into slow motion.

SASHA

All those people, making do with so much less than we have.

The Song reconnects with Sasha back to back again

THE SONG

Stay with me, Sasha. I can help with this.

SASHA

Their struggles are so much bigger than mine.

THE SONG

Good. Let's feel the weight of that.

SASHA

And I'm complaining about - what?

THE SONG

It's all right. Just lean forward and give me to them.

SASHA

What the fuck do I even have to scream at anymore?

THE SONG

Reach out to them and-

The Song leans back into Sasha, but Sasha abruptly moves away, causing The Song to fall to the ground. The Song sits there, in shock as Sasha keeps going.

THE SONG

What. The. Fuck?!

Sasha and Jory just keep plugging away at their instruments.

THE SONG

(to Jory)

And you, you're just gonna pretend I'm not down here?

Sasha and Jory go through the motions of the song's climax.

THE SONG

Fine. Do what you want.

The Song lies down as Jory and Sasha wrap things up. The ending gets shortened abruptly, as though they couldn't muster enough interest for a proper ending.

SASHA

Thank you, Pittsburgh!

Applause. The bright lights turn off. Sasha and Jory turn away from the audience and head "backstage". Sasha rips off her guitar immediately, on the verge of angry-crying. The Song slowly get up from off the floor and joins them.

JORY

What is it?

SASHA

I told myself I'd never do that. That I'd never just- fuck! I stood out in front of all those people, wanting something, anything, that could make them feel for three and a half fucking minutes. And I opened my mouth, and words came out. And they meant *nothing*. And I couldn't feel a goddamn thing. And I don't want to be this, Jory. I don't want to take their money for shit I don't believe in and pretend like they don't know the difference!

JORY

Sasha-

SASHA

Because they do. Those kids are going home right now, and they might be convincing themselves they had a great time, but deep down, they *know*, Jory. They know that I just lied to them.

JORY

It was an off night. Everybody/ has 'em-

SASHA

I know what an off night fucking feels like, okay?

THE SONG

That's not what this was.

JORY

Okay. I'm sorry, I didn't/ mean to-

SASHA

I know. It's just- I just-

THE SONG

You disconnected from me. Completely.

SASHA

I don't know what it means anymore.

THE SONG

Because you won't listen to me.

SASHA

I maybe haven't in a while.

THE SONG

I'm waiting on you, Sasha.

SASHA

Not in a way that matters. And I have to sing it tomorrow night. And the night after that. And the night after that. And I know you're gonna say that I just need to get through these last few dates/ but I just-

JORY

I'm not gonna say that.

SASHA

I don't want to be this.

THE SONG

So let's be something else.

SASHA

I know we can't not play it, but I don't know that I can keep going through the motions. I just/ don't know.

JORY

Okay. It's okay. We'll figure something out. We can- what if we pull a fakeout?

SASHA

What?

JORY

Maybe not a full one, but, like, a medley. Start with Candles Out, then switch into something else. A cover. Like, uh, what about Don't Dictate?

THE SONG

I do like her.

JORY

You always said they were kinda sister songs in a way. We could lead into it after the first chorus, then come back around for the bridge and chorus of Candles Out. See if one illuminates the other. Or if you wanna highlight the gender politics, Gina Young.

SASHA AND JORY

Can She Bake A Cherry Pie?

JORY

It even kinda goes with the cake metaphor.

Sasha laughs. A small one, but enough.

JORY

We can make this work, Sash. We'll find a way for now, and after tour we'll sit down and really figure it out. Okay?

She puts out her hand. Sasha takes it.

SASHA

How do you even put up with me and ... all of this?

JORY

I fucking love it. I love that you'll never just settle, ever. I love you.

SASHA

I love you too.

They kiss.

THE SONG

It's the kiss that reminds her. Playing me on her beat up old acoustic, Jory listening to every word, the love Sasha felt there in her arms afterwards.

Sasha and Jory exit.

THE SONG

The next tour, they play me unplugged, just for each other. I remember thinking how strange it is, me getting into the crowd, their heads, their hearts, more easily than I have in years when Sasha isn't even looking at them, lost in Jory's eyes the whole time. These latest dates, they've plugged back in. Been kind of a hesitant dance so far. Sasha trying hard not to put some specific expectation on it. Me still not able to really let loose. So what is it? What the fuck am I so scared of? And yeah, that was kinda where you came in.

SCENE EIGHT

Sasha and Jory spread out on a green room couch before their show.

THE SONG

And this is where Jory and Sasha lounge in a green room in their hometown before a show. And over there is where Trevor, Kess, and Elise are walking through the stage door entrance.

KESS

(to Trevor)

You okay?

TREVOR

Yeah.

KESS

All right. Green room's this way.

ELISE

You know your way around.

KESS

Yeah, I've interviewed a few different acts here.

ELISE

Look at us, hanging out with a big shot.

TREVOR

(looks around, sighs)

Yeah.

The Song clutches her chest.

THE SONG

What was that sigh for? Why did I feel it too?

Kess pokes her head into the green room.

KESS

It okay if we bug you guys for a minute?

JORY

Always.

SASHA

Yeah, yeah! Come on in.

Kess leads the others into the Green Room.

THE SONG

Yeah, I know it's important. I'm still not going in there.

She waits outside.

SASHA

It's good to see you without having to worry about an interview for once.

KESS

I know, right?

SASHA

And Elise, you're here!

ELISE

Told you I'd make it out eventually.

Sasha turns to Trevor. They're both caught off guard by seeing each other again.

SASHA

Hey.

TREVOR

Hey.

SASHA

How are you?

TREVOR

Not bad. How 'bout you?

SASHA

You know, the usual pre-show butterflies. I know it's silly to still get nervous, but ...

She finishes the sentence with a shrug. Awkward pause.

SASHA

Is- is this weird?

TREVOR

It's a little weird, yeah.

SASHA

Cool. Long as it's not just me. Come on, grab a seat. Make yourselves at home.

TREVOR

Thanks.

They do.

SASHA

So I gotta say, I'm super curious about how, like, (gestures to Kess and Trevor) this happened.

KESS

It's not the weird coincidence it seems like. I was doing a story on after school music programs trying to plug the gap in poorer districts that lost arts funding. When I started looking into it, Trevor's name kept coming up as someone doing interesting things, pretty much single handed.

TREVOR

Just at the beginning. There's something that almost looks like an organization now, so I can get back to just teaching, which is all I wanted to do in the first place.

JORY

Yeah, we saw that story. It's really cool, man.

TREVOR

Thanks. I just thought it was important, you know?

SASHA

I was really glad to read that about you. I kind of had no idea where you'd ended up.

TREVOR

Really? You and Elise/ didn't ever-

ELISE

Talk about you? Hell no.

SASHA

So when I read that you were teaching now- I don't know, it brought me back to you coming down the basement stairs with this album you bought just 'cause you thought I should hear it. You remember?

TREVOR

Yeah. Bikini Kill, Pussy Whipped.

KESS

Wait. You introduced fucking Sasha Sever to Bikini Kill?

JORY

I'm still mad you beat me to it.

ELISE

He's always been like that, somehow just kinda known what music people are gonna connect with.

SASHA

Yeah. It was the first time I'd heard punk with an actual *frontwoman*.

TREVOR

Which, in retrospect, may not have been the best decision for me personally, but hey/ you know-

SASHA

Why not?

Awkward pause.

TREVOR

Why- I mean, 'cause you wrote what you wrote? About, you know, me.

SASHA

It ... hasn't been about you for a long time, just so you know.

TREVOR

And it's not a big deal. It's just- hearing things you said that you regret, like, the exact words, over and over/ and over again-

SASHA

It gets to you that much? Is- is that why you hid from me in the record store that day?

TREVOR

You saw that? (to Elise) You didn't tell me she saw that.

ELISE

Dude, you were hysterical. For all I knew, you were this close to jumping off a bridge somewhere.

SASHA

I didn't mean for- I knew if I paraphrased what you said at all, where I was at, I'd end up reading things into it that'd be worse than what was there. I quoted you word for word 'cause I- I thought it was the only way to be fair to you.

TREVOR

(a surprised laugh)

Fair! (stops himself, thinks it through) Huh. Okay. Yeah. Yeah, I can see that.

Awkward silence. Trevor stares off, processing.
Everyone else just sits there.

JORY

I'm gonna grab a quick smoke outside so I don't, you know, (gestures to Sasha) disturb the vocal chords. If anybody wants one ...?

TREVOR

You know, yeah, I'll bum one if you don't mind.

KESS

You smoke?

Pause.

TREVOR

Sometimes.

JORY

Cool. Be right back.

Jory and Trevor head outside the green room.

SASHA

Wow.

ELISE

Yeah, sorry about that. I probably should've told you he's, um,/ still a little-

SASHA

No, it's not him. It's just- I thought I was being conscientious. To only give him the amount of shit his words deserved. But the reason I wrote it that way ultimately ... just didn't matter.

KESS

Words, music -You can't predict it. Like with Trevor and me. Same song, two people who click on so many levels. But when it plays, we end up on different sides of the world. And really, what can you do about it?

SASHA

I don't know.

She leans back, thinks about it.

SASHA

Maybe something different.

Lights down on Kess, Sasha, and Elise. Jory and Trevor smoke in silence for a moment as The Song watches.

TREVOR

(exhales)

Thanks, by the way.

JORY

Hit the spot?

TREVOR

Yeah.

JORY

Thought you might be needing one.

TREVOR

Good call.

Beat.

TREVOR

It's, uh- it's been a long time. You look ...

JORY

Different?

TREVOR

Good. It's cool to see you so comfortable in your own skin.

JORY

Thanks.

She studies him for a moment.

JORY

So ... how are you doing with that?

TREVOR

Me? Did it look like I wasn't?

JORY

Back there?

TREVOR

Was I that much of a mess?

JORY

Nothing to be ashamed of. It's kind of a good look on you.

TREVOR

Um, thanks?

JORY

'Cause back in the day, you were so cool. But in this suspicious way where you'd hit the same poses over and over. Always made me wonder what was really going on inside you. But in there, I didn't have to. You're clearly a guy with issues trying to sort them out. And you know what? I can root for that guy.

TREVOR

So blurting out the fact that I'm still haunted by an ex-girlfriend I broke up with twelve years ago is a sign of growth? (takes a drag) Yeah, I don't know about that.

JORY

If it makes you feel any better, sometimes I feel like I'm being haunted by you.

The statement hangs in the air.

TREVOR

Really.

JORY

You know how many songs Sash and I have recorded now? 73. You know how many platinum singles we have? (holds up one index finger) We spent the last decade writing about our lives together, the loving, the fighting, the fucking. Poured all of our passion into these songs. And yet the one everybody's just gotta hear is about you. It's almost like being with someone who's got kids from a previous marriage. We've been together, like, ten times longer than you and her. It's way in the past now, but every time we go on tour, I've gotta deal with your ass again, like it or not.

TREVOR

Huh. No offense, but it feels kinda good to not be the only one.

JORY

None taken.

TREVOR

I guess everybody's haunted by something.

THE SONG

(to Trevor)

And not just the past for you. This place-

JORY

Yeah.

THE SONG

Backstage of the Pageant. Like you're back inside of a dream you gave up a long time ago.

TREVOR AND THE SONG

The question is, what do you do about it?

Trevor and The Song heave a deep sigh in unison. The Song is taken aback. As though something deep inside just acted through her.

JORY

I don't suppose you've got any sage on you?

TREVOR

Plum out.

THE SONG

(clutching her chest again)

You sure? 'Cause there's some freaky possession shit going on right now.

Jory stamps out her cigarette, puts the butt in her pocket.

JORY

Well, you've gotten past the first big mistake in haunted house movies anyway.

TREVOR

What's that?

JORY

Convincing yourself it's a just a coincidence and everything's fine. If anybody ever comes out of those movies in one piece, it's 'cause they took the time to figure out what the ghost was trying to say. (pause) Unless it's The Ring, and then you're just screwed either way.

TREVOR

(laughs)

Which one's more true to life, do you think?

Jory shrugs, opens the door to the green room.

JORY

You comin'?

TREVOR

Yeah, might as well.

Jory exits, leaving the door open. Trevor puts his cigarette out. He looks out the door in the direction of where the Song is standing, sensing something there.

TREVOR

After all, I got this far.

THE SONG

All right, then. I'll see you in a bit.

A pause, then Trevor exits.

SCENE NINE

Darkness. Sasha's voice can be heard yelling some variation of "Thank you, Saint Louis!" Torrents of applause.

THE SONG

This moment, just before the encore, it's my favorite. All of you, standing in the dark, waiting. Me, waiting too. You raise your voices, clap your hands together. A ritual to summon me out of the darkness. I listen. I prepare, hoping that I bring what you need along with me. The world rushes by, faster every minute. More and more devices bring you more and more songs with the push of a button. And yet, in the midst of all that convenience, we carve out this one small moment for yearning. To taste its sweetness. We allow ourselves to feel how deeply each of us wants the other. We savor that time, aware of each second that passes until we are reunited. Out there, impatience may be a virtue, but right here, right now, we wait and we exult in it.

Sasha and Jory enter, guitars still strapped to their shoulders. The applause intensifies at the sight of them. They go through the quick maneuvers of plugging back in.

THE SONG

I'm here on stage with them, fully formed in their minds and muscle memory. And in the pause between Jory's hand going up and coming down on the E string, a conversation.

The Song raises her hand. The noise of the crowd disappears. Jory and Sasha freeze in their starting positions, Jory just about to play the opening note on her bass.

THE SONG

(to Sasha)

So, what's it going to be? What am I about this time?

Sasha unfreezes and looks at The Song directly.

SASHA

I don't know. How 'bout you?

THE SONG

Me?

SASHA

Yeah. I think you know better than I do.

THE SONG

But ... you've always-

SASHA

Held on too tight, trying to keep your meaning for myself. But all those people out there, you got into them in ways I can't imagine, and I'm done pretending that I can. I sang you for myself over a decade. It's time I sang you for them. So go on. I trust you. We'll follow your lead.

The Song smiles, and gently kisses Sasha on the cheek. She walks over to Jory, who unfreezes, starts playing the bass intro.

THE SONG

And there's those notes.

JORY

(to The Song)

You remember the first time I played them this fast?

THE SONG

When I suddenly saw all that I could be. And yeah, he's in my lyrics. A lot.

She places her hand on Jory's heart.

THE SONG

But my velocity, my righteous fury -

JORY AND THE SONG

That's us.

Jory movies and thrashes with the music more than she ever has before.

THE SONG

Yeah. Yeah, that's it.

She reaches her arms out wide. Elise, Trevor, and Kess appear, watching the show. Trevor tries to hold it together. Kess looks at him, worried. She takes his hand.

THE SONG

I explode into stories. Shirelle Watson, casting off the impossible standards of her father. Alex Chang, owning his sexuality even if his church friends don't understand it. Elise, with that unnamed emotion again.

The music distorts. Sasha and Jory's movements become exaggerated in slow motion. The Song moves between Elise, Trevor, and Kess, each inside their own separate experience of Candles Out.

ELISE

(to herself)

I shouldn't be enjoying this. God, I'm standing right next to him. But - but the crowd- and god, she's really on tonight!

THE SONG

(looking to Trevor)

And we made a deal.

TREVOR

Yeah, we did. So what is it you wanted to say to me so badly?

THE SONG

I - I thought you'd open up, and the words would just ... happen. I'm part of thousands of narratives all at once. I know the answers to each one, except for you. Help Justin Boorman deal with some deep seated mommy issues. Provide a way for Tirzah Aviv to release her pent up anger. Flow from Sarah Olsen to Alberto Mendez back to Kess. (to Kess) And you really wanna dance.

KESS

Yeah. (glances over at Trevor) But it's more important not to. With all these people thrashing around me, though-

THE SONG

It's hard to resist. Right, Elise?

Elise's body has been getting into the music in spite of her brain. She suddenly notices.

ELISE

Shit!

THE SONG

It's okay. Right now, our eyes- (clutches her chest again, to Trevor) *his* eyes are on the crowd, responding to Sasha's every snarl and gesture. We look at- *he* looks at her, onstage, fucking killing it, and all we can think is -

TREVOR AND THE SONG

I dreamed about being up there for so long.

Trevor and The Song both clutch their chests.

THE SONG

(to Trevor)

And I can feel part of you inside me, choking back the pain of missing out on-

TREVOR AND THE SONG

All I ever wanted.

THE SONG

(to Elise, frenetic)

And I'm bringing back the words you said to me- (great effort) *Him!*

ELISE, TREVOR

The first time we heard it on the radio.

Elise and Trevor step away from the other, back into their memory of the moment. The Song stays riveted to Sasha and Jory's performance.

ELISE

"Did you ever hear the theory that if everyone we knew saw all the worst things we'd done projected up on a screen, it would be the best thing that ever happened to us?"

THE SONG

(pulsing out of control with the bass beat)

And Jory's bass line shakes skeletons out of closets.

ELISE

"Because you'd have no more secrets. Lies, excuses, your image, all gone."

THE SONG

And Sasha denounces our words to our fucking face.

ELISE

"You'd be exposed, yeah. But you'd also be free in a way you've never been before."

THE SONG

As the crowd pump their fists along to our biggest mistake.

ELISE

"So Sasha just showed your worst side to the whole world."

THE SONG

And it burns it burns it burns/ it burns it burns-

ELISE

"Which makes it harder for you to ignore. And maybe that's not such a bad thing."

Trevor and Elise step back into the present with Kess
and The Song.

ELISE

I can't believe I actually said that.

The Song suddenly whirls around to Kess.

THE SONG

And god! I don't know what to do with you when you're standing still!

Kess takes the Song's hand in hers, holding onto The Song
on one side and Trevor on the other.

KESS

I'm not used to it either. I still feel you running up and down me. But I've got to be here
for him in this moment.

ELISE

And what the fuck does that have to do with anything?

KESS

Because I think I know what he's here to do.

THE SONG

God, I'm glad someone does.

KESS

The same thing I was doing when I listened your whole album in my dorm room that
night. Letting you rip the scab off so I could deal with what's underneath. That's what
you do.

The Song looks over at Trevor.

KESS

And it's not easy.

THE SONG

I've been denying it for so long.

KESS

But it's ... how we clean the wounds.

THE SONG

I've become about so many other things, it was easy to push it down and ignore it. (to Trevor) But we can't do that anymore, can we?

TREVOR

(looks at her)

No. I'm a part of you too.

THE SONG

Not just your words. There was a little hope of hurting you back that Sasha couldn't keep out of me. It caught a sliver of your eighteen year old self and encased him in amber. I didn't want to admit it -(places her hand against her chest) but he's here.

TREVOR

I know. Felt it in the hallway. He's been whispering a message in my ear every time I hear you.

THE SONG

It's not one I intended. Sasha either. (sighs) And I'm gonna be thirteen in, like, three months. I think I've hurt you enough.

TREVOR

So what do we do?

THE SONG

What Kess just reminded me I always do.

KESS

(to The Song)

All this time, I thought Trevor and I were on opposite sides of you.

THE SONG

Tear off the scab and bring him up to the surface.

KESS

But we're not.

TREVOR

Yeah, I don't know about that.

KESS

It just took him longer to be ready.

THE SONG

The night I met Kess, she had to say the name of what happened to her in order to start to be free of it. I think I need to speak his message out loud.

KESS

It's good that I'm not moving.

TREVOR

And then?

KESS

I feel your strength inside, but it's different.

THE SONG

Then you'll get to have your say.

KESS

(looks at Trevor)

Because I don't need it for myself.

Trevor turns to look at Kess too. They lock eyes. She squeezes his hand tight. Trevor turns back to the song, but keeps hold of Kess' hand.

TREVOR

Okay. Let him out.

KESS

(to both of them)

You sure about this?

TREVOR AND THE SONG

No.

KESS

(to the Song)

You've given me so much. I'm ready to be what you were for me.

TREVOR

But I just can't run any more.

KESS

The one that holds him up. Others up. Okay. Here we go. (to Elise) Time to let yourself feel what you feel.

Elise closes her eyes. The Song puts her hand on Kess' shoulder.

THE SONG

And if you can, hold us all.

The Song takes a deep breath, peels away the amp chords, guitar strings and sheet music that make up her torso. Grimaces and discomfort. Beneath them, the Sisters of Mercy t shirt Trevor wore the night he broke up with Sasha. Her voice deepens, mannerisms change. She is Trevor at eighteen, looking around them in disbelief. From here, Trevor, Kess, and Elise's separate interior experiences start to merge.

THE SONG/TEEN TREVOR

Holy fuck. You're at one of her concerts?! This car crash of a person who ruined our lives?! (takes in the sight of Trevor) God, what happened to me?

TREVOR

She didn't ruin anything.

THE SONG/TEEN TREVOR

Well, maybe not as much as you did. Fucking sellout. You lost your nerve and let go of the dream!

TREVOR

I let go of a delusion that was getting us nowhere! I'm making a difference now.

THE SONG/TEEN TREVOR

What, teaching poor little kids how to strum the guitar on weekends? Yeah, that's a great use of my potential.

KESS

It wants to get under your skin, Trevor.

THE SONG/TEEN TREVOR

I would have made us a star if you'd just stayed on track.

KESS

So let it.

THE SONG/TEEN TREVOR

But no, you had to listen to this fucking song!

KESS

You're stronger underneath than you think you are.

THE SONG/TEEN TREVOR

You let Sasha steal this applause, this audience, this whole life from us!

TREVOR

Steal? She poured her blood into this music. All you could do in a song was strike a pose.

THE SONG/TEEN TREVOR

All the great rock stars do. Get the pose down and the rest will follow.

TREVOR

Unless there's nothing else there!

Beat.

KESS

(to Trevor)

That's it. It sucks, but you have to say the words.

TREVOR

Face it. Our songs were hollow.

Elise opens her eyes, sees Teen Trevor standing there.

ELISE

Oh my god.

TREVOR

Our life was fucking hollow. But now I'm doing something *real*.

She moves upstage of the two Trevors, between them.

ELISE

That's the feeling

THE SONG/TEEN TREVOR

Yeah, so real that it doesn't pay your bills all the way.

ELISE

Proud. Of who you are now.

THE SONG/TEEN TREVOR

So real that you've got to work part time in a fucking guitar store!

ELISE

Of how far you've come from this asshole and his poison words.

THE SONG/TEEN TREVOR

Which is what you have to tell people when they ask what your "real job" is every time you tell them you're a musician!

TREVOR

I don't tell them I'm a musician anymore. I tell them I'm a teacher! Because that's who I am. What I've always been good at. And I'm not ashamed of it.

ELISE

I am so fucking happy-

THE SONG/TEEN TREVOR

You're a quitter. A sellout.

ELISE

That this song isn't about the man standing next to me tonight.

THE SONG/TEEN TREVOR

You could have had all of this!

TREVOR

You think that fixes anything? If Sasha and Jory didn't have each other, they'd have lost their fucking minds by now!

THE SONG/TEEN TREVOR

You're a loser, Trevor.

Candles Out slowly starts to build back to its live fury in the background.

TREVOR

You have no fucking clue who I am. God, I can't believe I've been listening to you this whole time!

THE SONG/TEEN TREVOR

What you are is an amateur!

KESS

You looked it in the face.

TREVOR

I left you behind for a reason.

KESS

Called it by its name.

THE SONG/TEEN TREVOR

A mediocrity!

KESS

Decided you wanted the truth more than you wanted not to hurt.

TREVOR

And I'll be damned if I let you back in even an inch.

THE SONG/TEEN TREVOR

A sad, pathetic little man who doesn't count for shit in the grand scheme of things when we could have been so much more!

Sasha starts singing the chorus. Trevor sings with her, straight at his younger self, who screams it right back.

SASHA, TREVOR AND THE
SONG/TEEN TREVOR

(half singing, half yelling)

I'LL BLOW YOUR CANDLES OUT! WON'T TAKE THE HEAT NO MORE.
DON'T NEED YOUR FLAME TO LIGHT MY WAY, I'LL DO JUST FINE
WITHOUT IT.

Kess and Elise, back in the physical reality of the moment on either side of Trevor, turn and look at him singing along in disbelief

SASHA, TREVOR AND THE
SONG/TEEN TREVOR

THIS WAS YOUR FINAL SAY! YOUR WORDS JUST WIND AND SMOKE
I'LL BLOW 'EM OUT THE DOOR FOR GOOD, WON'T MATTER IF YOU SHOUT
IT!

Kess and Elise look at each other, then back to Trevor. They start singing along too. As they go at it, The Song tears off the Sisters of Mercy T shirt, becoming more and more herself again.

SASHA, TREVOR AND THE
SONG/TEEN TREVOR, KESS, ELISE

SO WRITE YOUR LABELS FOR ME WITH ICING ON THE CAKE.
YOU THOUGHT YOU KNEW WHO I WAS, BUT THAT WAS YOUR FIRST
MISTAKE.
GLOSSED OVER LAYERS BELOW THAT YOU KNEW NOTHING ABOUT.
NOW WATCH ME BLOW YOUR CANDLES OUT, CANDLES OUT!

Sasha and Jory finish. Kess and Elise watch Trevor closely. He and The Song stand there, facing each other, energy exhausted, breathing hard. Between the breaths, a smile starts to form on their lips. Then a short, almost silent laugh.

SASHA

(to the crowd)

You guys are the best. We love you! Good night!

Blackout.