



A Moon Shaped Pool

Frank Houston

It ended just like that. One day I was married, the next day I was taking down all the pictures of myself and my ex-wife to-be. The wedding photos, the beach getaway scenes, even the family portraits. The ending was like an ice shelf plunging into the Arctic: invisible but known forces roiling in the background until the day when something broke.

She had moved out; I was there, picking up the pieces, stowing things in boxes I'd probably never open, making a small mountain of furniture and old electronics in my living room, items to be retrieved by men in a truck from the thrift store.

I put the framed photographs in a box along with the wedding album and paraphernalia that we'd preserved: the program from the ceremony, with its poetry and literary passages praising love; the wedding invitation on midnight blue paper with gold stars and speckles; the invoices for the honeymoon suite and the reception DJ who, less than a year later, would be killed at his day job at Cantor Fitzgerald on 9/11.

We had met in the fall of 1996 at a Web startup in Chelsea, and a few months later we fell hard for one another. One of many magnetic forces between us was music. Our tastes overlapped almost entirely—Beatles and Stones, The Who and Hendrix, Stevie Wonder and Marvin Gaye—but we also each brought something new to the other. I introduced her to Bowie. She introduced me to Radiohead.

One night we were gallivanting in SoHo—everywhere we went, we gallivanted—and we passed Thom Yorke sitting alone at a sidewalk table in front of a restaurant on Spring Street. With his baleful bad eye Yorke stared back at us, seemingly wondering if he'd been recognized.

That summer we went together to Tower Records to buy *OK Computer*. Some albums grow on you; others blow your mind on first listen. *OK Computer* blew our minds. We were living in New York City, right in the middle of the dawning digital age, The Great Acceleration, and here was our favorite band, laying down the soundtrack to our lives.

Album after album, this soundtrack seemed to play in the background throughout our marriage, right up until the end of it. We got engaged and *Kid A* came out. The opening arpeggio of "Everything in its Right Place" seemed to strike notes I already had in me, maybe because it seemed as though everything was. After the dot-com bust, we decided to move to South Florida, and as the boxes piled up around us, we listened to *Amnesiac*. "Pyramid Song" spoke to a wistfulness and regret that somehow connected to those boxes. We were distracted with work and worry, but it was as if, deep inside, I knew I would be looking back at this time and mourning something lost. "All the things I used to see ... All my past and futures." We left the city less than two months before 9/11.

Years and albums went by. Our world had gotten smaller around us. Finding the time to connect with one another was work. We were exhausted and we became roommates, doing chores and fretting about bills. *In Rainbows* dropped in 2007, and though our marriage would limp along for several more years, the cadences of longing in "Nude" struck close to the bone: "There'll be something missing / Now that you've found it, it's gone / Now that you feel it, you don't / You've gone off the rails."

Radiohead

A Moon Shaped Pool

05/2016

XL

My wife and I had veered badly off course. In 2015, it all fell apart. Six months after our separation, a new Radiohead album was released. And so *A Moon Shaped Pool* became the record of my divorce.

With the exception of the overtly political “Burn the Witch,” it seemed as if every song connected somehow to it. Of all the ways the band had been playing in the background of my life, this was the strangest. Many of the album’s tracks were reportedly inspired by Yorke’s breakup with his longtime partner, Rachel Owen, after a two-decade relationship. *A Moon Shaped Pool* opened a vista on the past twenty years of my life, too, coinciding with, and heightening, a period of deep rumination. Who I was then versus who I was now. How it had come to this. How I would move forward.

The “Daydreamers” who “never learn”—they had been us, fighting reality by trying to hold a broken marriage together, “beyond the point of no return” as we’d spiraled literally out of control. “Then it’s too late / The damage is done.” The piano arpeggios circle the melody, cautiously at first, then swirling with dizzying urgency, evoking a sense of bewilderment at the passage of time that I had just begun to reflect on; almost two decades of my life had blurred by without my noticing it.

As it surfaces in the mix, the outro of “Daydreamers” sounds like snoring—fittingly, as though the singer was awakening to find his life transformed. But then it becomes something more disturbing—a guttural moan, drawn out and, to my ear, disbelieving: “efil ym fo flaH.” The words are spun backwards: Half of my life. Half of my life. It has been noted that, in the song’s music video, Yorke passes through twenty-three doors: the number of years he’d spent with Owen.

“Desert Island Disk” evoked something else: the sense of freedom and independence, of beginning anew, that I hadn’t felt in years, not since I had moved to New York at age twenty-five, a few years before I met my wife there. “Now as I go upon my way / So let me go upon my way . . . Switching on a light, one I didn’t know / Totally alive, totally released.” The plucked acoustic guitar and up tempo beat echo the feeling of embarkation.

Even the songs that were not about love at all resonated in tone with my mood, and often included a line or two that somehow touched on it. “Decks Dark” opens with this announcement: “Then into your life there comes a darkness.” From “The Numbers”—an older tune formerly known, more straightforwardly, as “Silent Spring”—“The future is inside us / It’s not somewhere else.” And, pointedly, from “Ful Stop”: “Truth will mess you up.”

For the second half of my fifteen-year marriage, there was a truth, a reality, that we dared not face: We were, in fact, not meant for one another. Opposites, yes. But our belief that opposites attract was rooted in youthful naivety and fairy tale. Our personalities were on the far extremes of an emotional continuum, and for years we had struggled to find a meeting ground somewhere near the middle. We’d made ourselves miserable and crazy in the process.

More than any song on *A Moon Shaped Pool*, it was “True Love Waits” that absolutely devastated me. It still devastates me. It’s the last song on the album, and I find that when it comes around in the cue, I often turn off the music, unable to bear it. If, as is likely, I’ve heard *A Moon Shaped Pool* a hundred times since it was released, it’s possible that I have listened to “True Love Waits” fewer than a dozen.

Not long after the album came out, someone had the idea to use an algorithm (a “data-driven determination”) to analyze the chordal structure and lyrical content of Radiohead’s entire catalog to determine the band’s saddest song. (You can find the analysis here: <http://www.rcharlie.com/post/fitter-happier>.) This was a tall order. As fans (and detractors) will tell you, many, if not most, Radiohead songs are sad or desolate or morose in some way.

But I knew the answer before I even read the result. It may have had everything to do with timing, but “True Love Waits” was the most heartbreaking love song I’d ever heard.

The song dates back at least as far as 1997 (it was considered for *OK Computer*). But it took almost twenty years before it was finally recorded on *A Moon Shaped Pool*. I wondered if the decision to finally commit the song to an album might have had something to do with Yorke’s breakup with Owen. Regardless, it connected powerfully to mine.

The piano ballad is suffused with ache and regret. Yorke’s melody leaps, in one note, into a plaintive falsetto, the raw cry of a child. Love—*true love*—strips away our adult armature, leaving us as vulnerable as children, innocent and defenseless.

Just don’t leave
Don’t leave

The singer is bargaining and begging to hold onto something he knows is already gone.

Just don’t leave
Don’t leave

I experience Yorke’s plea as being directed to a time and place. When I think back to the beginning of my relationship, the giddy whirlwind of infatuation and courtship, I become enthralled and disoriented by my memories. I yearn to reconcile the two people I see then with the people they became.

Stay there, I think. *Don’t leave*.

The song ends on the dissonant major seventh note, hanging suspended in the silence that follows. Was this absence of resolution intentional? Was it meant to be open-ended, to suggest some possibility other than a conclusion? If so, it was not to be. Yorke and Owen’s relationship ended permanently when Owen died of cancer at the end of 2016, seven months after *A Moon Shaped Pool* was released.

Over the course of many listenings, I have grappled with the end of the most significant relationship of my life, too. I want to say I’ve made sense of it, but I haven’t. We are supposed to grow through these kinds of experiences, but I don’t feel like I have grown. The mystery of time only seems to deepen with age. I imagine an alternate universe in which my marriage survived, in which those two twenty-somethings held on, didn’t become unrecognizable to each other. These are the fantasies of a child, but they’re all I am left with.