



U2

Achtung Baby

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Island

Achtung Baby by U2—How I Survived my Adolescence

Jessica Siobhan Frank

It's April 14, 1993 and I arrive at Carl Sandburg Junior High School before my friends have. My father picked me up at 7, and I am eager to get to school after 10 days of hell on the adolescent floor of the mental hospital. I turned 14 a few weeks earlier, and at 14, any day without your friends is a long day. Ten of them strung together in the scariest place on earth made days feel like weeks, and I was more than ready to go back to school.

I give hugs all around. My friends knew where I was, and they were happy to see me. My friend Bryan says to me, "Hey Jess, I've got something for you," and motions me to his locker. He pulls out a CD. "This is that album I was telling you about," he says, the conversation from weeks earlier materializes in my head. "Listen to it."

He hands me *Achtung, Baby* by U2, and I thank him. My friend Todd comments later, "Oh yeah, that's a good one" and I take it home.

Home, a place I am scared to go because of the last time I was there. Home, where my mother and brother live with me, but not my dad. Home, where I swallowed a bottle of pills the last night of Spring Break and called my best friend Jeanne, who told her dad, who told my mom, who took me to the hospital.

My mom and I have a rocky relationship and this living situation isn't ideal, but I'm only 14 and my opinion isn't worth much, nor do I have the maturity to voice it well. No one takes me seriously, so I do the most serious thing I can think of. When she drives me to the hospital, it's anger in the driver's seat, not concern. I ruin her evening by wanting to die.

I open the door at our house and quickly go into my room to avoid talking to anyone. I take the CD out of my Esprit backpack and load it into the portable CD player I got for Christmas a few months earlier. My speakers are plugged in, another present, and I hit that triangle play button.

Todd told me to play Track 3, "One," that he thinks I'll really like it, so that's where I start. "Is it getting better/or do you feel the same?" Bono sings to me. I'm immediately thinking it's not a coincidence I'm hearing these words on this day of all days. I listen to it again. And again.

By the time my mother hollers at me for dinner, I've listened to the whole album, reading the liner notes as each song comes on. I am grateful I have something else to listen to besides the Top 40 and rap of B96, the local radio station popular in my high school. I am grateful to have something else to listen to besides my own thoughts.

The next week, I talk with Bryan about the album. By this time, I have returned his and bought my own. I am rarely without my Discman and headphones now, both either on me or in my backpack. I tell him "I don't understand that line in "Trying to Throw Your Arms Around the World.""

"Which line?" he asks between kisses with my friend Stephanie. They've been going out for six months or so—a junior high record. His neck is blotched with red hickeys that I can't stop staring at.

"A woman needs a man like a fish needs a bicycle," I tell him.

He laughs and cocks his head at me. "Does a fish need a bicycle, Jess?"

"No."

"Well, there you go." And he goes back to whispering things in Stephanie's ear that makes her giggle.

My step-sister has a small party at my dad's house to celebrate her recent wedding. It's in May and is outside and people I barely know are coming in and out of the house with plates of fruit salad and brownies. It's been a month and a day since I got out of the hospital, and I can't forget that. I normally love people and parties and socializing, but I'm not up for it. I don't want to call any attention to myself and worry my dad, so I go to the basement with my CD. I put it in the stereo, the speakers as tall as my little brother and I lay on the carpet and close my eyes. Today, it's Track 6 "So Cruel" on repeat, and I think about what it must be like to be loved. All of my friends have had their first boyfriends and girlfriends, first handholding, first kisses, and I have not. I wonder what's wrong with me; I wonder if anyone will ever hear this song and think about me. I wonder if I will ever break anyone's heart the way Bono's has been when he sings, "Her skin is pale/ like God's only dove/screams like an angel for your love/ then she makes you watch her from above/ and you need her like a drug." I doubt anyone will ever need me like a drug, but it's a nice thought.

I spend the entirety of the party in the basement, and the only one that seems to notice is my new brother-in-law, who sees me when I finally come upstairs. "Why the hell were you being so anti-social?" he asks.

Todd gives me a tape of *Joshua Tree* to listen to shortly after 8th grade graduation. I play it in my mother's van and she is skeptical. "This music doesn't sound glorifying to the Lord," she says as we pick up some of my youth group friends. Only when one girl says, "Oh, U2 is a good band, Mrs. Frank. Bono is a Christian," does my mother take her finger off the eject button. Because a good girl church friend told her this, it must be true, but not when I say anything of the sort.

We listen to it again as my mother drops my friends and I off at the movie theater. We tell her we're going to see *Weekend at Bernie's II* but actually we go to see *What's Love Got to do With it*. One of my friends with us is the son of missionaries, and Mom doesn't question our story.

The tape stays in the van most of the time so I don't have to talk to my mother. Inside her house, I stay in my room and listen to "Love is Blindness" on repeat, wondering if there's any truth to the song, at least the parts I understand.

I walk around high school with orange earphones on at lunch and in passing periods. I'm not depressed but I'm not happy; I just exist. Around me, dozens of girls my age dress in flannel and stop washing their hair. They talk about how depressed they are and wear too much makeup in ways that makes me slightly jealous. I've never been that trendy. I listen to "Who's Gonna Ride Your Wild Horses" on my way to geometry and think about my own horses, only mine are tame. They are as tame as bunny rabbits. I'd love to have wild horses.

I've been having nightmares from the hospital lately, and my mother won't believe the stories I've told her. In the hospital was the first time I heard the word "manipulation" used to explain my behavior, how my suicide attempt was a manipulation to get my mother to do the things I wanted her to do. This was according to her, of course. And when I start describing the nightmares I'm having about the things I saw, she dismisses me and tells me none of it happened. I fall asleep to my CD, starting at Track 1, to hopefully drown out the memories. I generally fall asleep by the end of "One."

She takes me to the psychologist because she can't handle me. I'm 16 and nerdy and haven't done anything but mouth off to her. The doctor gives us both forms to fill out to see if I have ADD, as my mother is convinced I do. That would require medication. When we are done, the doctor looks at my sheet, then hers, then back at mine and turns them both around to show us. I answered the questions about myself and she answered them about me, too, as we were instructed. The doctor says the two assessments are night and day from each other and my mother turns red. We leave without any prescriptions and she never takes me back. I put my headphones on as she drives and feel good. It's the first time any doctor took my word over my mother's. She is again angry in the driver's seat, but I am lost in "Mysterious Ways" and feeling like I could be the heroine of my own life. "One day you'll look back/And when you see/Where you were held/How by this love/While you could stand there/You could move on this moment/Follow this feeling."