



Death Cab for Cutie

"Transatlanticism"

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Barsuk

Love and "Transatlanticism"

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I knew I loved my husband before it made any logical sense. He was twelve years older than me, divorced, and had a beautiful young daughter. I was 22— "almost 23," as I tried to tell him to reassure him. (It did not.) But from the moment we met, there was this connection that seemed almost supernatural. His smooth pick-up line ("Oh these? These are my old divorced guy socks") did little to deter me. Sometimes your life unfurls in front of you like a red carpet: I knew, somehow, that we were meant for each other. And there were songs that littered the way.

There was the first night he played guitar for me. I'd been teaching myself, and about all I knew was a very basic version of Josh Ritter's "Wolves." He played a song he learned in high school to woo the ladies— Extreme's "More Than Words," and I cracked up the whole time. We played songs on old iPods for each other, sometimes with the same one cued up. I played Ryan Adams's "This Is It," begging him in my heart *don't waste my time, this is it, this is really happening*. He took the acoustic guitar back to play me a "sweet song he'd remembered," and played a heartbreakingly beautiful fingerpicked version of Guns 'n' Roses' "Mr. Brownstone," which made me laugh until I cried. We both played "A Long December" by the Counting Crows—my favorite band, and he said a line from it—"All at once, you look across a crowded room to see the way that light attaches to a girl"—was the first thing he thought when we met.

I was in love. As Warren Zevon would say, "Mad love, shadow love, random love, abandoned love." Every strong adjective, verb, noun, or adverb you could slap in front of "love," that was me. I had never felt like that before, and it was so loud. My brain buzzed with the excitement of waiting to see if I had another email from him. A text message. A picture of his daughter. I might have actually been addicted to him. I've never fully understood why I lost all of my composure, all of the things that made me *me*— my logic, my ability to survive without a man. I even preferred living alone! And all the sudden, I had a new sun in my sky.

How do you come up with one song to explain that in your early twenties, you lost your mind and decided on date one that you'd found a forever love? Do you talk about the song you shared after one of his surgeries? After your stroke? Alone, on the hotel bed after a house fire? Something he wrote you? What you listened to on the way to get married? How can I tell you that I was right, it was real? That it's been seven years married, that the little girl with the big brown eyes—she's thirteen now, and she's funny and sassy?

But music has always been our language. So it is the only way I can tell you what happened, how I knew.

Three or four months into dating, neither of us had said, "I love you." I knew it already, but I also knew that, since he was coming out of a divorce, I had to allow him to say it first. We had fallen into that weird season in southern Indiana that falls between winter and spring, where depending on the day, it could be 50 degrees and sunny, or -4 and sleeting. We found ourselves with a rare day off—nothing to do, nowhere to be.

One of the strangest aspects of this part of southern Indiana is that we live about 45 minutes from an honest-to-God Utopian community, New Harmony. There's a beautiful outdoor church, beds and breakfasts, a concert venue, a movie theater that only

shows one movie, a labyrinth, an actor's studio in the summer: it's basically like skipping back in time into a place where art means everything. When Andy and I first started to date, I told him I liked to drive around and listen to music. I generally meant things that were too loud for my apartment—my Dallas cow punk bands, The Old 97s, something where I could scream along and feel less homesick. But he grabbed a few CDs and said, "Let's go for a drive."

It must have been an hour or so in by the time we got to New Harmony. We'd listened to a lot of Ryan Adams and I think the *Magnolia* soundtrack, but after we'd gotten through the little hamlet, we turned around and were surrounded by the pale blonde color of corn when it's not sure whether or not to grow back. Indiana is full of little roads like this in winter-spring, but it was so much more gorgeous in New Harmony. There were birds overhead: mostly hawks, but the occasional giant crow. We swapped family stories about our grandparents (one of our grandfathers cut part of a man's ear off with a golf club when he threw it angrily; one of our grandfathers was horribly difficult and cruel until he had a stroke, which made him very pleasant. I'll never say which). I kept thinking of how solid the landscape was: ground, brown, sprinkled with small ponds and lakes reflecting the clouds. Middle ground, pale yellow. Sky, light blue, so, so pale. And then he put on Death Cab for Cutie's *Transatlanticism*.

My best friend Eryn and I used to drive around with coffee and listen to that record in high school. I could see him wince: he'd just remembered how young I was. He listened to it during a time in his life where he wasn't sure if his marriage was going to make it. He was in his late twenties. I looked out the window again. I'd said the wrong thing, I was sure of it.

"Are you OK?" he asked.

"I'm fine," I promised. "I love this record. Sometimes I feel like a kid around you."

He nodded and put his hand on my leg. "I don't want you to feel that way," he said. "It's a reflex. These songs mean such different things to us." And he was right. I remembered buoyantly screaming the lyrics to even the most tranquil songs with Eryn, her clutching her Chai, driving backroads in Dallas suburbs in her silver Nissan Sentra. This wasn't a record of independence and celebration for him. It was a record of growing up. Maybe it was for me, too.

And now it was for me, too. Here I was, a man who shared my Chinese zodiac, exactly twelve years apart, and I was learning about real heartbreak to a soundtrack that used to symbolize something completely different. In that moment, I knew a few things: first, I somehow loved him more. Second, I would never get to go *home* to Dallas, not as my home. It would always be "back home," a distant geographic reality I could only access in my memory. And third: I was home now. This weird, bleak landscape, the one I'd had a love/hate relationship for years, was the only place I wanted to be.

The beauty in the title track "Transatlanticism" is that you have to wait for the payoff. There's a rhythmic pattern behind the sparse piano that seems to echo voices in your head more than it does a drum. Ben Gibbard's voice sweetly comes on nearly a minute into the seven-minute track and it describes such a similar landscape to the one we were driving through, I think the song took over any conversation we'd been having just moments before. When the electric guitar started ringing in, it was little more than atmosphere. It was the slight melancholy of my new home, the lovely melodicism of knowing it would be worth it.

And then of course it happens: "The distance is quite simply too much for me to row/ It seems farther than every before," and at almost three minutes in, the instruments all start picking up in intensity. If you are listening to this in complete silence, it is reverent, nearly hymn-like. But if you are listening to it with the man you are going to marry in a little over a year, completely silent, in the starkness of a place that belongs to his ex-wife, not to him or to you, then when Gibbard starts begging, "I need you so much closer, I need you so much closer," maybe it's a prayer. Maybe it's something bigger than that. What I do know is that the atmosphere was such that I don't remember being able to breathe—or whether or not it even seemed important. But Andy reached over and squeezed my thigh and we both sat there in complete, absolute sacred quiet, waiting as the instruments kept growing in intensity, for Gibbard's vocalizations: "Well come on, well come on." It always goes back to that refrain though: there are four minutes left in the song, and the only words are "I need you so much closer," and "well, come on."

For that four minutes, I would have sworn to you we'd already said our vows. We were married in my mind. Andy told me later, he never considered that we wouldn't get married. And that even though the record symbolized a very different kind of growing up for both of us—me, the first joyful yawp at independence, his, the last dying grasp of a vow of dependence he took very seriously—"Transatlanticism" has never meant anything more or different to me since that day out in Utopia, with his hand growing tighter around my thigh, while Ben Gibbard said, "So come on—I need you so much closer."

It's been more than seven years—probably closer to nine—since that day. We've been married for seven years. And still, every night, when I listen for the rise and the fall of his chest, when I feel his sweet weight and warmth next to me, when I get just a slight smell of his hair product, sometimes it makes me near tears still to think, inside of me, there is a constant yearning: I need him so much closer. Still. I need him so much closer.