

This Look is Love

Eleanor Whitney

When the phone rang that night after dinner I raced to answer it before my mom, my sock-clad feet slipping on the hardwood floor as I bellowed, "It's for me!" I ran up the grey carpeted stairs, cordless phone in hand, and slammed the door to my room.

"Hi, is Eleanor there?" a boy's voice awkwardly cracked on the other end.

My heart pounded. I already knew it was Link, a lanky sophomore with chin-length, shaggy dark hair, who had declared his intent earlier that day by pressing a handwritten note into my hand declaring "I like you Eleanor Whitney" as I had ducked into my freshman biology class.

"This is she speaking," I stumbled out, oddly formal as my mother had taught me to respond to phone inquiries.

I'd noticed him lurking around school before. He wore dark jeans above purple Converse high top sneakers, long t-shirts with band names printed on them, and flannel shirts that hung off his spindly frame. An air of mystery hung about him and he was so gaunt and his skin was so pale that some of the girls whispered that he must "do drugs."

"Thanks for your note," I squeaked. My surprise that a boy liked me, and an older one at that, stunned me into silence. This something even the pretty, preppy girls, the ones who made the varsity soccer and lacrosse teams their freshman year, dreamed about.

"So, what bands do you like?" I asked, figuring this was a safe bet.

"Nirvana. But like, tons of other stuff. Some of it's obscure. I'll make you a mixtape."

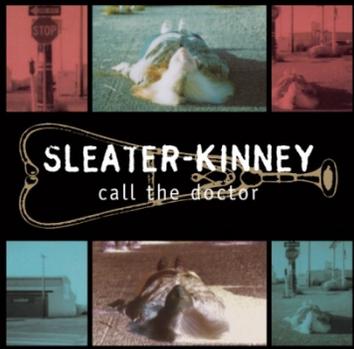
I bristled at the implied fact that I wouldn't know "obscure" bands. I'd been listening to WMPG, the college radio station, since middle school. I brushed it off, trying to be attractively nonchalant. "Yeah, cool."

"I'll bring it to school tomorrow."

The next day I ran up the granite steps to school feeling weightless despite my Timbuk2 messenger bag laden with textbooks. I was floating into a new reality. Link was waiting for me outside the door to my homeroom. A pleasant electric shock ran through me.

"Here's the tape I made you," he said by way of good morning, handing over a cassette tape with a black and white printed J-card, with "To Eleanor, From Link, Spring 1997" written on it by hand.

They Might Be Giants, Steely Dan, PJ Harvey, Sonic Youth, Liz Phair, REM, Cub, Juliana Hatfield. Songs written by Link himself. Some of the bands I had read about in the school library's battered copies of *Spin* and *Rolling Stone*, but I had to admit he knew bands I didn't. And he played guitar and recorded his own songs, something that I felt was out of my reach, despite having taken piano and clarinet lessons for years. That night, when I popped it into my tape deck, the fuzzy, jangly guitars and slightly nasally vocals made me feel at home. This was going to be my music now.



Sleater-Kinney
"Call the Doctor"

Call the Doctor

03/1996

Chainsaw

That Sunday afternoon I begged my parents to drive me to downtown Portland, Maine to meet up with Link. We spent the afternoon aimlessly wandering around the brick sidewalks as he gave me a tour of places around the refurbished fishing port where he and his friends liked to gather. They had given them their own names: A sunken brick and shrub lined courtyard in front of a hair salon was christened "Strawberry Fields." A parking garage where you could take a glass walled elevator to the roof and look out over the harbor towards the Casco Bay Islands was dubbed "Um." I followed him breathlessly, like the city I had known all my life was a brand new place to be discovered.

We first made out on the top of Um. As his tongue pushed too urgently into mine, I felt the cold, rough concrete under my back. I looked past Link's dark hair to the gray March sky as I felt a disorienting warmth and giddy nausea run through me, exhilarated yet paranoid about getting caught.

Sundays became our regular hangout, and we'd often meet up with Link's friends, who he referred to simply as "the group." They were an odd assortment of nerds, theatre kids, and hippies who had met in the poetry chat room of One Net Falmouth, a local dial up bulletin board service. They often called each other by their screen names: Blink, Wheels, and, of course, Link.

Sometimes Link and I would break away from the group and walk together, shyly holding hands until they got too sweaty. Then we'd laugh awkwardly and separate them, wiping our palms on our jeans. As we wandered in front of brick buildings housing quaint boutiques, or down to the fishy smelling docks, we talked about how after high school we'd move to Seattle and follow in the footsteps of our grunge rock idols. We'd go to University of Washington. He'd be a guitarist, and I'd be a writer, and we'd live in small bungalow overlooking the foggy sound.

In middle school, during Friday night sleepovers with my friend Angie, I would sit around and dream of someday having a boyfriend. Simultaneously, as Ani DiFranco or the Indigo Girls played in the background, we reminded ourselves that a boyfriend was not necessary for us to be happy. But now I had a boyfriend. And with that simple fact, I felt a sense of validation I hadn't known I'd craved acutely. It was as if my presence in his life bestowed a kind of worthiness on my own.

One night, as I tried to hide the fact I was still talking after my mother's newly imposed 10 pm phone curfew, Link mumbled, "I feel like my best songwriting is already behind me. I haven't written a song in months. You're the only thing in my life that has any meaning."

I heard my mother's footsteps approaching from down the hall, "I have to go," I whispered, "but I'll never leave you. I'll see you tomorrow."

I felt needed, important, like I was his rock. Maybe this was what love felt like.

Cassie was also part of "the group." A junior at our school, she stood out from the other girls with their long, flaxen blonde or glossy brunette hair and Lands' End coats. I'd noticed her wild, dark curly hair, rainbow-striped knee socks, John Fluevog boots, thrifted lime colored wool winter coat, and purple corduroy pants. Once she wore a bright lavender wig, cut into a swingy, chin length bob, and I had silently admired her, wishing I could be as bravely cool.

During the school week, I started spending my free periods with Cassie and Link, hanging out on a stairwell landing where someone (not us) had graffitied "NIN" on the

carpet in black sharpie. I found out that Cassie was born within a few days of me, but had skipped a grade in elementary school, where I had stayed back. That year, in late May, we were both turning sixteen and both planned to take our driver's tests. We listed out the adventures we could take together during the summer: the beach in Scarborough, Red's Dairy Freeze in South Portland, a trip to Boston.

Link, already sixteen, had yet to get his learner's permit.

The night of my birthday I received the *Rolling Stone Book of Women in Rock* from my beaming parents. The next day, I meticulously navigated through the road test, including a very precise parallel parking job, in my Mom's forest green, standard transmission Saab.

At school I excitedly showed Link my ticket to adulthood, my laminated-plastic driver's license, and exclaimed, "Now I can pick you up and we can go to Portland together on the weekends! We could even take a road trip!"

"My mother says I'm not allowed to get rides from friends," he said flatly.

Cassie passed her driver's test a few days later, and that night, defying my own mother's rule, she and I flew up the highway in her mother's bright blue Ford Escort with a MS WHO vanity plate. I watched the sunset over the salt marsh that was rushing past and felt the thrill of freedom as the sharp spring air whistled into the car through the half-open windows.

That weekend, sitting on the floor of my room, I eagerly showed Link *The Rolling Stone Book of Women in Rock*. I was especially excited to share the photos of the "girl bands" hailing from the Pacific Northwest.

"Maybe we should move to Olympia instead," I suggested excitedly.

I gazed longingly at a black and white photo of two women in a band, standing at side by side mic stands, mid-song, clutching guitars. One, clad in a dark sweater and collared shirt, leaned into the microphone conspiratorially, her dark eyes like slits, as if she was murmuring a secret to the girls in the audience. The other, in a checked dress, leaned back, as if wailing, eyes closed, a kind of angry joy coursing through her as she sang. The caption identified them as Carrie Brownstein and Corin Tucker of the band Sleater-Kinney. There was a power in the photo that mesmerized me.

"Whatever," Link scoffed, "Kurt Cobain liked all that stuff, but those labels in Olympia didn't even want to put out his records."

"Oh." I shook my head, not quite understanding what Kurt Cobain had to do with it. I decided to change the subject. "So," I began with a forced cheeriness, "the prom is coming up. Cassie and I were thinking of going, you know, to wear crazy outfits and make fun of all the soccer jocks. Do you want to come with us?"

Link recoiled with a look of horror. "I am never, never going to go to such a thing."

He paused, with a scoffing shrug, curling his lips as he spat out, "You can go, I guess."

I knew prom was stupid, but thought he'd be in on the joke. My throat and my chest started to contract with panic. Did he think I was stupid for wanting to go? Was I rejecting him?

"What will you do instead?" I managed to weeze out.

"Play Zelda."

"Well, you can change your mind."

"I'm never going to change my mind."

Later that week I sat in the school library, half-heartedly studying for my advanced algebra final, when a battered copy of *Spin* caught my eye. "Inside the Riot Grrrl Revolution!" trumpeted the headline. My breath quickened; how had I overlooked this? Not only did it have interviews with real live riot grrrls, but it included a list of "must have" Riot Grrrl albums. Sleater-Kinney's *Call the Doctor*, released a year before in 1996, topped the list.

Hastily, I copied down the names of the artists and albums and that Sunday, list in hand, I scoured the used CD bins at Bullmoose Music, a basement level store Link frequented. The musty, patchouli scent of the store mixed with pizza fumes from the Italian restaurant next door as I hastily grabbed albums by Bikini Kill, Heavens to Betsy, Excuse 17, and Team Dresch. I came up empty when it came to Sleater-Kinney, however.

"Hm," sniffed Link, as he shrugged his shoulders while reviewing my purchases over a post-record store slice of pizza. "None of these bands ever signed to a major label. This movement is really just a footnote to grunge."

I recoiled, stung. "Spin magazine said these bands are good," I said half-heartedly.

From a postcard order form I found shut inside my Bikini Kill CD, I sent away for *Call The Doctor* from Sleater-Kinney's record label in Olympia, carefully wrapping a piece of notebook paper around a handwritten check from my parents. Then I waited.

The CD arrived in a cardboard package stuffed with flyers for shows, albums and zines, which fluttered onto my carpet as I giddily tore off the shrink wrap. I picked off the stubborn tape that sealed the case shut and dropped the CD into the player of my boxy stereo, a gift on my 12th birthday that I had recently covered with sparkly stickers. My fingers shook as I pushed the play button.

Would I like it?

It was really important that I like it.

"They want to socialize you
They want to purify you
They want to dignify and analyze and terrorize you..."

The music blasted out was like a missive from an alien world. The menacing tone of the detuned guitars and the warbling, searing vocals were frightening. There was an urgency to the women's voices that was unlike any of the "women in rock" Link had included on mixed tapes for me.

The song lurched forward, leaving me breathless as it barrelled into the chorus,

"This is love and you can't make it
In a formula or shake me
I'm your monster, I'm not like you

All your life is written for you..."

Raw and tempestuousness, the track burned into me. I flopped onto my purple bean bag chair, my worn out Converse, tarot cards, and mixtape cases strewn around me, staring at the ceiling, listening. I wanted nothing more than to become the women in this band. I wanted to "mess with what was sacred," like Corin and Carrie sang about.

A wave of guilt crashed through me. What would happen to me and Link?

True to his word, Link didn't budge on going to the prom. He refused to talk about it, but nursed a hurt at my defiance that caused anxiety to gnaw at the pit of my stomach. I tried to talk myself out of it: why did I insist on going to something that upset him so much? Sleater-Kinney rang in my ears, and I reassured myself: Cassie was my friend and I could do whatever I wanted with her, no matter what he thought. I just hoped Link would forgive me.

Cassie and I had work to do to get ready. To find the perfect prom dresses, we went to our favorite Goodwill in a fading strip mall in front of disused railroad tracks, next to a dusty Dollar Tree and a Payless shoe store. I swallowed my guilt about Link as I sorted through various poofy, teal taffeta creations, and discarded late-80s bridesmaids dresses that the wearers had finally realized they would not, in fact, be able to wear again.

Then I saw it: black and adorned with black sequins and bright green silken roses, a black and forest green skirt flaring out at the bottom, just above the knee. It was hideous and beautiful. I grabbed it off the rack, as if there was a crowd beside me clamoring for just this dress. I winced slightly at the \$30 price tag, but promised myself it would be worth it.

"\$15," said the cashier, disinterested, as she rang up my treasure, "Everything with the yellow tag is 50 percent off today."

Prom night arrived and Cassie and I met up at her house. I paired my dress with black fishnets, black strappy heels from Payless, and a vintage silver choker that had belonged to my grandmother. Cassie wore a bright green silk shift dress and a fuzzy black choker. We looked perfect. I tried not to think about Link at home in his room, hunched over the video game controller for his Nintendo.

The prom, held at the Elk's Hall across from the airport, was as boring as we expected. We laughed and tried to dance to songs like "YMCA" and "Sweet Dreams," the same songs I had heard last year at my eighth grade dance.

At 11 pm, we took a cab to Denny's and slid into a booth, ordering coffees, Moons Over My Hammy, and a Grand Slam breakfast.

"My field hockey teammates told me someone got stabbed here," I whispered.

"We should stay up all night and watch the sun rise," suggested Cassie.

And we did, slipping up to the top of Um at 4:30 am still dressed in our prom attire. My dress was starting to itch and the poofy sleeves dug into my shoulders, but I felt subversive and slightly dangerous as we leaned over the railing side by side as the sun rose, bright red and shimmering over the harbor as the first lobster boat chugged out to sea. I felt like I was soaring, invincible being there with Cassie. Later we collapsed, woozy from lack of sleep and too much coffee, on a blanket on her bedroom floor. As I felt her steady, sleeping breath against my forearm, I realized I was relieved Link wasn't with us.

Summer arrived and I stock piled the cash I earned from mowing neighbors' lawns to send away for more Sleater-Kinney albums and fanzines made by other girls my age that

sang their praises, gossiped about other Riot Grrrl bands, and talked deeply about their own lives. They were "messing with what was sacred" by disclosing secrets, like boyfriends who had tried to control the type of music they listened to, where they went, who they hung out with, threatening to spread nasty rumors about them or even kill themselves if they didn't comply. Link and my relationship was different I reassured myself, trying to push away the growing feeling of recognition as I read.

I continued to slip over to Link's house in the afternoons after I finished mowing lawns and before his parents came home. He'd pause the Final Fantasy or Zelda game he was playing, and we'd lay on his dark brown wooden floor. I'd count to 100, then 200, to distract myself while he slipped his hands under my sports bra. Afterwards, I kept trying to talk with him about the bands I was listening to or how other girls I had met through the mail were recording their own music, just like he was recording his. I wanted to convince him there was nothing to be threatened by, that the scene I was discovering held as much opportunity for him as it did for me. He got agitated, then silent and resentful. Fearful to lose him entirely, I continued to makeout with him, heart pounding, sweaty and silent.

Cassie got a job at a hippie pizza restaurant near the Portland ferry terminal, and on nights she didn't have to work, I would sleep over. One night, after arguing about the virtues of punk versus jam bands, I played her "Call the Doctor," silently begging that she would like it.

"Yeah," she agreed, nodding along, "This is cool."

The next day she presented me with a gift: a pair of hot pink vinyl Converse. The shoes gleamed in their newness. Her mother had picked up them up at the outlet mall in Kittery and had given Cassie a bright green vinyl pair to match. We had a friends uniform. I was humbled.

Excited about matching sneakers and girl love, I giddily told her about how, inspired by Sleater-Kinney, I wanted nothing more than to start a band or a zine with other girls.

"Would you start a zine with me?" I asked timidly, fearing the worst.

"Of course!" she exclaimed, delighted. I was relieved and felt my nervousness slip away as we began making a list of what could be in our first issue in my yellow spiral notebook.

One late summer afternoon Link and I sat on my beige bedroom carpet, talking with strained voices. Piles of my CDs, zines, and notebooks containing zine ideas and lyrics to songs I had started to write were stacked near my stereo.

Link began to plead with me, "Why do you keep listening to this music? Why do you hang out with Cassie so much? I want to go back to before you knew about any of this."

"You introduced me to Cassie. You introduced me to this music. You were the one who put Sonic Youth and Riot Grrrl-inspired bands on mixtapes for me!"

"What did Riot Grrrl ever do besides put bands like L7 and Hole on the map?" he shot back.

"Listen," I said, exasperated, trying to explain again, "Just because I like music made by women doesn't mean I don't like you. It's not an insult to you."

"Can't you see that it's taking you away from me!" he yelled, lunging at my notebooks, grabbing it and trying to tear it in half.

"Stop! Stop! Stoppit!" I shrieked, grabbing at my notebooks where I'd been collecting writing for my first zine. I hugged it to my chest protectively, adrenaline coursing through me, tears running hot down my face.

He flailed towards the pile of CDs, their plastic cases scattering all over my rug. He gathered them up and flung them at me, their sharp edges glancing off my folded arms.

I was more terrified of him finding what I had been writing or destroying my CDs than anything else. With a muffled cry, he stormed out, and rode his bike home.

Later that night the phone rang. He always called at 8:30, after dinner, and as usual I scrambled to answer the phone before my mom did.

"Hello?"

Muffled sobs came out of the receiver. "If you didn't listen to this music and didn't want make zines or be in bands I wouldn't be so mad. You are making me act like this. I can't lose you."

"You introduced me to this. This is the stuff you like. I don't understand why you don't like it."

"It wasn't supposed to be for you! Without you I don't know what I'll do with my life. I don't want to lose you. I'll kill myself. Please just stop listening to those CDs I promise I will stop being upset. Everything will go back to the way it was."

I sat on my bed, wiping my sweating hands on my taupe bedspread. His ragged breathing surged through my tangled phone cord. Exhausted nausea swept over me. If he wasn't in my life who was I going to move to the Pacific Northwest and play in rock bands with? Who would I spend my Sunday afternoons with? Who would stick sweet notes in my messenger bag during my free periods at school? What would I become?

I stared at the pink vinyl Converse Cassie had given to me, the piles of CDs, Sleater-Kinney at the top. I thought about the songs I was writing, the zine Cassie and I were going to make. I timidly hit play on the CD player. "I'm your monster, I'm not like you... I'm your monster, I'm just like you, all my life is right before you."

From here on, I thought, I would always be his monster.

My life hung before me, unwritten.

"Call the doctor! Call the doctor!" Corin Tucker wailed.

I took a deep breath, "Don't call me anymore."

Hands shaking, I placed the plastic phone onto the receiver.