



On “The Weather” by Built to Spill

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On the first day of the second semester of my sophomore year of college, I walked into Intermediate Italian II and fell in love at first sight. Her name was Lucy Beach, and her name really summed her up. Lucy, like luce, from lux, which is light. Beach, where the waves kiss the shore, where life rises up from the depths and walks at last on land. Lucy Beach. Her eyes were potent, and her t-shirts sported names of bands I’d never heard of.

Over the course of the semester we’d often chat before and after class, but it wasn’t until the day of our final exam that I finally worked up the guts to ask for her number. I finished the final first, and paced outside until she was done. Finally, the classroom door opened, and out walked Lucy with a searching look on her face. Then she saw me, and she looked...happy. She was holding a stack of CDs in her hands. Gifts, for me.

In high school I had often been angry, usually sad, wore all black—including a trenchcoat—and typically had headphones on blasting Nine Inch Nails, TOOL, Marilyn Manson, VNV Nation, White Zombie, and a bunch of other bands who seemed to grok my misfit angst. Once I got to college, I began transforming. I started wearing colors. I started smoking pot, and stopped getting haircuts. I walked into my first psychedelic experience and, walking out, I largely left my nihilism behind.

But, for whatever reason, whatever inertia, I still clung to my old taste in bands and songs, though their overall tone was increasingly at odds with my growing sense of joy and wonder. Those songs were a security blanket. I knew who I was when they defined me and, as exciting as transformation was, it was also scary.

Lucy Beach had burnt three albums for me, albums by bands I’d never listened to that she thought I needed to hear. *Yoshimi Battles the Pink Robots* by The Flaming Lips. *Yankee Hotel Foxtrot* by Wilco. And *Keep It Like A Secret* by Built to Spill. Taking them home that night, along with the ten magic digits of her phone number, they felt like sacred totems in my hands. I listened to them again and again, along with every other scrap of music Lucy gave me over the coming months. And meanwhile I molted, sloughed off my old angsty skin for a new one made of the same stuff as Lucy Beach: light and waves.

She blew my musical universe wide open. I’d grown up in New York City and lived there my whole life, but she showed me corners of it I’d never explored—venues of all shapes and sizes where, every night, bands performed rites of passage on stage with guitar, bass, vox, and drums. Her brother booked New York City’s Bowery Ballroom, a rock mecca, and she shared his sonic DNA. They were both magnets for good music, and I counted myself incredibly lucky, since seemingly overnight she and I had become inseparable best friends adventuring through it all together.

Of course, I felt like more than just a friend to Lucy. I’d written the story of our love since the moment I’d first laid eyes on her. It was at the end of one of our earliest hangs that I tried to kiss her. I’m a word guy; making moves isn’t my strength. But I went for it, and she dodged, deftly giving her cheek to my lips instead of her mouth. And we never really talked about it. It just sort of happened, and didn’t happen.

But I was persistent. Over the next three months, that storied summer of 2003, I courted Lucy Beach. We were spending four or five days out of the week together, gallivanting all over New York City, catching as many concerts as we could, scheming, dreaming, eating mushrooms and walking over the Brooklyn Bridge with a boombox blasting The White Stripes and laughing ourselves to the sky with the freedom of our youth.

I wrote her typewritten poems, leaving them folded up on her pillow when I left her dorm at two in the morning, stoned and dazzled with adoration. We made each other mix CDs. Hers, I was sure, were layered with all sorts of secret messages to me, and mine, I knew, were filled with not so secret messages to her, nestled into the lyrics of carefully chosen songs of love and devotion.

Then, on August 14th of 2003, I was sitting in an office in the financial district when the power cut out and my computer died. I walked outside to find that office buildings all around were emptying out. New York City, along with much of the Eastern seaboard, had lost all power. At the time, I was living at home in Queens with my family until the next semester began, but Lucy called and invited me to walk all the way to her dorm room in the East Village and crash there for the night.

This is it, I thought. This is what our story has been building towards. The mixes, the music, the poems, the late night bong hits...this is it. The blackout that will give birth to *us*.

A blackout during summer in New York City is an urban fairytale. Lucy and I bought ice cream and as much beer as we could carry while the freezers at the local bodegas slowly died. We drank Presidentes that quickly grew lukewarm and wandered the streets of the East Village, where parties had broken out on every street corner, and police patrolled through roving gangs of Roman candle wielding hipsters, ignoring countless episodes of public intoxication.

It was swelteringly hot, and when we got back to her dorm room, I sat outside the bathroom talking to Lucy through the door while she shrieked her way through an ice cold shower. Then we moved into her bedroom, smoking copious amounts of pot and sweating as we listened to Radiohead and played with Lite Brite. Lucy and I, we were kids like that. Ever playful. Ever young. The night wore on and we wound up laying side by side, stoned, our bodies sheened with sweat. The air conditioner was dead and silent. Candlelight flickered shadows on the walls.

"Lucy?"

"Yeah?"

"I love you. You know that, right?"

Lucy'd never been much of one for words. She tried to answer, tried again, stopped, and at some point, I think both of us started crying a little, sniffing. We'd been inseparable for three months. Something beautiful bound us together and both of us felt it, however differently. It was as if we were each the north end of different magnets. Cut from the same cloth, yet unable to come together, pushing apart even at our closest moments.

After a long and pregnant silence, she sat up and went over to her CD tower, the library from which I'd learned so much. She told me she wanted to play me a song. She took a CD and put it in her DiscMan, then lay beside me and headphones on my ears. Listen, she said. I lay with my back to her, my eyes wet, a little spoon whose big spoon felt an eternity apart, though she was just a few inches away.

I knew the voice right away. It belonged to Doug Martsch, the lead singer of Built to Spill, one of the bands in the stack of CDs she'd first given me. This song was new to me, though. And it carried me off, into images of clouds and the vast expanses of space and time that stretch between two human beings, no matter how close their hearts may feel.

The thing about songs is this: we think they understand us, because they seem to complete us. Even though they are born in the eyes of other humans, from their own experiences. We take the songs we love and we mold them into the cracks and fissures in our hearts, to help hold those fragile organs together, since they seem like they could fall apart at any moment. The song that Lucy played for me that night, "The Weather" by Built to Spill, it fit a fissure once, a crack that represented the space between me and her. It was her way of saying wait, not yet, I want to relish this distance, and the beauty that exists in it. It was her way of telling me that there was no one else like me in the universe, and that only made her want to keep her distance even more. The song summed up what would become our entire dance.

It took a few more weeks, but eventually, I got the girl. Lucy and I wound up dating for almost five years, but they were such young years, from 19 to 24. That childlike closeness always remained, but so did that distance, and when we broke up, it wasn't because of any sort of enmity; it just felt like we were hurtling towards forever together and we weren't sure that we were ready for that, or right for that. So we spiraled off from one another. And in the near decade since then, "The Weather" has stayed in my heart, slithering like a liquid medicine to fill a crack wider and deeper than the one that separated me and Lucy ever was.

We are such small and fragile things in a world whose physical existence is an eternal storm. That night, that song was a bridge between us. Lucy held the song in her heart as she played it into my ears. She knew every word, every moment, and though we were apart, we were together. And I worry sometimes; I worry that the distance between two minds, two hearts, two bodies, is ultimately unbridgeable.

In a way, the closer I get to anyone, the more far away I feel from everyone, the more I fear we are all truly alone. Surrounded by wind and rain and snow, complicated landscapes across which we can see, like silhouettes, the loves and lovers that we long for. Music is medicine, though. It helps me stay connected. It gives me hope. I wait, and search, patiently but hungrily, for someone to talk to about the weather. Not just anyone will do.