



Lucinda Williams

"Are You Alright?"

West

02/2007

Lost Highway

On Lucinda Williams' "Are You Alright?"

Allison McCarthy

I know a little something about killing time on the road. Traffic moves at a sluggish pace on four-lane highways peppered with fender benders, car fires, flat tires, broken-down vehicles, police blockades. For the past eight years, I've driven from Maryland to Virginia through a region that [experts call](#) "the most congested metropolitan area in the United States, a place where the average driver burns 67 hours and 32 gallons of gas each year sitting in traffic." In the early morning and late evening hours, my car would weave through suburban one-lane roads littered with potholes and the shredded remains of rubber or glass from the latest accident; I braced myself for the inevitable delays on the interstate. Each night, I inched into the driveway, numb and weary, my feet heavy and stiff with each step toward the house.

During one of those end-of-the-workday Sisyphean drives, my exhaustion manifested as ugly-crying. What remained from my meager supply of composure leaked in uneven streams through puffy eyes and blue-black streaks of mascara; I fumbled uselessly behind the passenger's seat for the Kleenex. Finding a crumpled napkin on the floor felt like salvation.

I blew my nose while keeping one hand on the steering wheel, shaking my head for emphasis at the lonesome refrain from a song that always shatters me. Lucinda Williams kept asking, *Could you give me / some kind of sign / Are you alright?*

No. I wasn't.

My ex-boyfriend and I used to talk about everything, back in the those first hazy, honey-battered months of love. Without my asking, he'd put me up on the world's highest pedestal, all before he realized that I was just as fallible and prone to fucking up as anyone. But in the sweet spot of our relationship – about eighteen months before he caught onto my faults and imperfections – we were golden, wildly optimistic about a future together. We watched his closest friends get married, and during their vows, he leaned into my shoulder to say the words I'd always hoped to hear from a man I loved: "That'll be us someday."

Before we went to bed one night, he asked how I felt about him.

I knew what the real questions were:

Is there something been bothering you?

Are you alright?

I wish you'd give me a little clue.

"This is all happening really fast," I said. "But I care about you. More than anyone."

"Good," he whispered. "You're the most important person in my life."

I'd waited for years to find the kind of guy Lucinda claimed would "hug and kiss you / hug and kiss you," passionately, frequently, readily. We clung to each other in the dark. Our affection seemed so easy, maybe even everlasting.

On that crying jag of a drive home, as the last note ended, I played the song again. And again. The mournful repetition soothed me as nothing else could. Her question for the ghost of a lost love was the same as mine: a warbling echo of unfathomable regret and longing, beseeching notes that wailed into the proverbial void. On some level, I realized *Are you alright* was a rhetorical question – and maybe even unknowable – and yet it didn't stop me from singing along with Lucinda each and every time. *Are you alright?*

The shift between us over the two years we were together happened, in his mind, because hard times kept gunning for him: a mild criticism on social justice written by a friend while gaming; a faulty car engine light; the raise his boss had promised and never came through on; the end of his apartment's lease and the question of whether to stay put with a higher rent or go elsewhere. He didn't see obstacles as challenges to overcome, the sort of moments that test your mettle and prove you just might be tougher than the rest. Instead, he saw each hardship—no matter its severity—as a personal affront to his dignity.

His stream of constant complaints soon shifted into shouting matches directed at me — the woman who had, he'd now realized, failed at being the Perfect Pedestal Girlfriend. Maybe I wasn't so important, after all. And then his rage turned towards people who'd caused him no harm. He mocked family members and made fun of my friends, insisting they weren't sensible or even worthy of my time.

Are you alright became as much a question for me as it was for him. A month before our breakup, he laid next to me in bed and asked if I wanted to get married. What could I say that wouldn't make him angry? I thought about what it would mean to spend the rest of my life with someone whose moods alternated between love and ire, contempt and affection.

"Aren't you scared?" I said.

He didn't respond.

We both went to sleep, let the fissure of hurt lie between us.

When he moved into a new apartment — his life stuffed in shabby cardboard boxes that littered his entire bedroom floor — he asked if I could see myself living there with him. I picked at a loose piece of packing tape, refused to meet his gaze.

"Not just now," I said.

"You want to live with someone eventually," he told me. "You just don't want to live with me."

Some songs are a jolt — the unexpected bursts of welcome energy I bop along to so that I can face the tasks ahead — while other songs are a balm for stress. And so in this way, it made sense that at the end of a two-year relationship – after many fights, many

misunderstandings and the impasses of our differing values and selves – it was Lucinda Williams who I turned to in those dark and dusky hours alone, driving to and from home, back and forth, all the time working over the two questions that lacked satisfying answers:

Are you alright?

I wish you'd give me a little clue.

We went to dinner a week after that tense conversation in his new apartment. On our last night together, we talked lightly about nothing in particular, smiling and murmuring softly over heaping plates of pasta and garlic bread. Neither of us said anything about what had transpired on his bedroom floor. I thought about how the speaker in "Are You Alright?" wouldn't have left anything to subtext; she posed her questions directly: "*Is there something you want to say... Just tell me that you're okay.*" But on that last night, neither of us felt brave enough to ask.

He drove me home and walked me to the front door. I wanted to steady his uneasy stance under the porch lights. I kissed him hard, the kind of kiss I hoped he'd remember long after the fights and tension faded away in our memories.

"I love you," he said. "I really do."

"I know," I said. "I love you, too."

I wish I could say this was how we ended things between us, but in truth, it was only the last time we would see each other in-person. For a few more weeks, we kept talking, but even a five-minute "how are you?" text took up more of my day than I wanted to give him. He'd write back a few lines, brief and terse. This idle chatter turned out to be the real breakup – after a brief conversation about a local book festival, he didn't text me the next day, or the day after that, or email a week later, or show up at my front door. We ghosted each other, and to this day, we've never had contact since that last text. I disappeared (*flew away / like a little bird*) and so did he.

"Are You Alright?" is a masterwork from a songwriter who knows that some questions are best left unanswered, even if we can't help asking ourselves why it all turned out the way it did. Knowing I might never understand why our relationship ended so painfully or how his life would turn out, I started to ask myself new questions: what did I want out of a life without him?

I traveled, focused on writing and submitting new material for publication, none of it broaching the subject of him. I went to New York for a weekend, the Grand Canyon for a week. A year after our last text, I flew off to a writer's retreat in India. When I made that leap into writing halfway around the world, it turned out to be the adventure of a lifetime. I stayed up with new friends, then feverishly scribbled page after page in my journal, listening to Lucinda on my laptop, drinking ginger and chai tea at night while I worked through different topics for future essays. The time to think, listen, and reflect slowly exorcised the pain I'd carried with me from the breakup.

One afternoon in India, I dozed off in a boarding school bedroom and dreamt that I saw my ex-boyfriend's mom on my old college campus. In the dream, she seemed happier to

talk to me than she ever had been in real life. "I want you to know that's he okay," she said. "He's moved on to someone else."

When I woke up, I turned over on my side, fumbled for a pen. It was the answer I'd been waiting for, an unbidden offering from the universe, and the dream gave me more solace than I'd felt in the year since he and I'd last spoken. After so many restless nights on the road — alone but also with Lucinda Williams, silently asking him all those questions in my head — I didn't toss and turn in fits of insomnia, wanting to rewrite the ending of our story. What was lost now felt a little more bearable. We were both alright, I was sure of that now. And I'd finally found a way to stop crying on the road, to sleep alone and happy through the night.