



Fleetwood Mac

"Rhiannon"

Fleetwood Mac

07/1975

Reprise

On "Rhiannon" by Fleetwood Mac

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In one of my favorite childhood photos, I'm two years old, completely naked but for the pacifier in my mouth & the giant mop of jet-black hair on my head. I'm standing in a perfect ballet stance, winged foot, pointed toes—the starkness of my tiny legs reflected in the giant Rolling Stones mirror propped against the wall behind me.

Like this, classic rock was the backdrop of my entire childhood, oftentimes in the same violent juxtaposition with my hypersensitive girl-self. I'd sit transfixed in front of the record cabinet, slowly turning knob after knob on the receiver. I didn't know what they did, but I found comfort in the soft clicks & whispering static they caused. I'd ask for Zeppelin, Pink Floyd, The Who, & my parents would amusedly comply, doing the very adult work of removing records from their sleeves & nestling needle into groove. I would lie on my back on the quintessentially early-90s grey carpet, & stare up at the ceiling—a precocious five-year-old parody of a 70s stoner kid—not understanding the music, but *feeling it* nonetheless.

Music was a communal experience in my house. Whether it poured from that bulky record cabinet in the basement, or from cassettes in my father's Buick Riviera, I acquired his musical taste via osmosis—all the men near his age, their similarly callused fingers & long hair, their growling voices shaping the way I saw not only the world, but myself. I accepted the hyper-masculine world my musical exposure painted without much question. I was just a *girl*—my job was to point my toes & sit up straight, & as long as I made these things my priority, it was okay to still worship music, too.

Amidst the guitar riffs & basslines, I started elementary school. My first day, I wore a blue flower-print dress, long wavy hair sprayed back from my face. I don't remember picking out my own clothes as a kid, but based on photos, wherever my parents bought them may very well have been the same place the costume designer for *Blossom* shopped. Everything feminine, flowing, floral. Unfortunately for my teacher & classmates, my budding personality was the opposite of all those things. I was aggressive, demanding, attention-seeking. If I wanted someone to be my best friend (a label that, for seven year olds, changed on a weekly basis) & they said no, I would become furious, balling my fists up & hitting the row of backpacks hanging near the door. If someone wanted to share the Matchbox cars with me, I'd throw them at the poor kids' heads until they relented. If Ms. Brodie wouldn't let me have the white flag in the color game, I would seethe & refuse to speak the rest of the day, the anger consuming & reddening my tiny body.

About the same time, I started having panic attacks—I became suddenly convinced that my parents didn't want to come pick me up from school, in spite of the fact that they'd never even been late to get me. One night, I sat at the kitchen counter—my mother's black boombox playing next to me—& insisted I was too sick to go to school the next day. *My stomach huuuuuurts*, I over-acted. *I'm probably gonna throw up if you make me go.*

It was the next afternoon, bored out of my mind during my fake sick day, that I took it upon myself to go into the basement & open the plywood doors of the cassette rack. Climbing up on the back of the couch, I gingerly pulled open the splintered door &

started taking tapes down, one by one. I hid as many as I could in a Halloween candy bucket & carried them up to my bedroom before making a second trip for the Walkman & its tiny metal headphones.

I'd slide a tape in, listen for a few seconds, fast forward, repeat. This warp-speed method gave me my first exposure to the hair metal music that—based on how infrequently it was played around the house—must have fallen quickly out of my dad's favor. But more than that, it gave me my first taste of Ann & Nancy Wilson, Grace Slick, Janis Joplin, Pat Benatar, Debbie Harry, Annie Lennox. In retrospect, my father must have listened to *some* female-fronted bands... he had these cassettes, after all. I just can't remember it actually happening.

It wasn't until I reached the bottom of the plastic orange pumpkin that I found a tape I couldn't bring myself to fast forward. Fleetwood Mac's self-titled album. As soon as I heard Stevie Nicks' voice on "Rhiannon," I was mesmerized. (As an adult, the irony that it had been played through Lindsey Buckingham's tracks, but stopped by Stevie's first one isn't lost on me.) Her voice wavered with something my seven-year-old brain had yet to label *vulnerability*, but at the same time, it was so self-assured. As she soared from the low purr of *she rules her life like a bird in flight & who will be her lover* to the powerful belt of *all your life, you've never seen a woman taken by the wind*, she was at once delicate & defiant, adult & child-like.

I let the song play, free from the click of the fast forward button, & by the end of the four minutes, I'd been changed—though, of course, I didn't know how much at the time. Slipping the stiff insert from the cassette case, I learned only that the song was written by Stevie Nicks. That didn't mean much to me, of course, & in the pre-internet days I didn't have a way to put a face or any other context to the name, but her name itself became like a talisman I carried with me. *Stevie Nicks*: my little secret.

I piled the tapes—minus Fleetwood Mac—back into the pumpkin & neatly returned them to their places before my father got home from work. My new favorite album, meanwhile, rotated hiding places in my room over the next few months. First it sat on the shelf behind my Arthur books before migrating to the bottom of the pink plastic case where I kept my dress-up Minnie Mouse doll, then to the crate where I kept my winter boots & mittens—nowhere my mother would find it while changing my sheets or putting away laundry. I hid Stevie Nicks with the expertise & fervor of a teenager stashing her drugs.

I listened to the rest of the album, of course. Even as a kid, I knew Lindsey's tormented guitar playing on "I'm So Afraid" was impossible to ignore, & I was transfixed by the way Stevie emotionally ambled through "Landslide," but I always returned to "Rhiannon." It became the thing I'd look forward to each day—my father still at work, my mother cooking dinner, I'd retreat to my room with the Walkman & settle in for the four minutes of the day that made me feel like my own person.

School hadn't become any more comfortable for me, marked instead by perfectionism, anxiety, & the same lack of fitting in thanks to the hypersensitivity that'd come to define the next twenty-some years of my life. At age seven, eight, nine, I didn't understand the impact of a line like *dreams unwind, love's a state of mind*, but then again, maybe I did. I felt unwanted at school—too smart, too enthusiastic, too aggressive, too weird. At home, I often felt the same, hiding in my bedroom, teeth clamped down on the back of my tongue to hold back the nausea as I listened to one fight or another, tried to gauge people's moods by how hard they slammed the door, how many curse words they hissed

at one another, how loudly they sighed or yelled. If I heard feet on the stairs, I stifled my breath, hoping they weren't coming toward my room.

Trying to balance hiding from attention with my feral need for it caused my secretly held lyrics to come into sharp focus. Both the cat in the dark & the darkness itself, I began—ill-equipped as I was—to navigate who I was as I sat alone in that small bedroom every afternoon. Like this, *love's a state of mind* became my mantra.

The year is 1979. Stevie Nicks stands at the ballet barre, one pointe-shoe-ed leg up, stretching. After a moment, she shifts into passé, one arm fluidly sweeping over her head. As she slides down into a slow split, she doesn't notice herself in the mirror, but I do. All I can see of her is her reflection. She's tiny—5'1" on a good day—& her long gold necklace & pearl pink legwarmers are the only bits of color that stand out against her all-black ensemble. Stevie—ever in black, ever being accused of being a witch. In the wall-sized mirror, though, she is small—delicate, even. She trains her eyes on her feet & I watch as she points her toes.

If you have any problems or are worried about anything & you do ballet for just fifteen minutes, you can't think about anything but this, she finally speaks, her voice characteristically husky-sweet. The words, given as a gift in the same generous, all-knowing tone as *dreams unwind, love's a state of mind*.

I think back to that childhood photo, my toes pointed, small body reflected against the signature Rolling Stones tongue, as I see Stevie, reflected only against herself. In this way, the lines of expectation are drawn. *Rhiannon rings like a bell through the night & wouldn't you love to love her?* Just as quickly, though, they're dashed. Like Stevie, like Rhiannon, I learn to escape, to *take to the sky like a bird in flight*. I learn that *once in a million years, a lady like her rises*, learn that I am the *her*.

If you have any problems or are worried about anything... you can't think about anything but this. The year is 2018. I point my toes, play "Rhiannon."