



Regina Spektor

"Samson"

Begin to Hope

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Sire

An Anthem for Sad Girls Who Don't Know Heartbreak, But Do Know the Bible

Hannah Gordon

*You are my sweetest downfall
I loved you first, I loved you first*

The first time I heard "Samson" by Regina Spektor, I cried.

I'm sure you did, too. It's just that kind of song.

I was in my best friend Rebecca's bedroom, staring at the ceiling fan going round and round, and pretending I was someone else. We were drinking her parents' liquor—too much Jack mixed with not enough Coke—and texting boys with our plans to sneak out later that night. All of our weekends were spent like this, so we knew that we'd never actually follow through with it. We'd end up re-watching *Pride and Prejudice* or *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, just drunk enough to feel dizzy and fall asleep early. In the morning, we'd make banana pancakes doused in maple syrup, lumpy and sticky sweet.

Hearing that song was a revelation. It was transcendent.

Maybe it was all the Jack and Cokes.

But maybe it wasn't.

At fifteen, I thought I knew heartbreak, if only vicariously: I'd read books, seen movies, and listened to songs like "Samson." My aching, teenage heart would shatter anew with each fictional iteration of something I had yet to experience myself. This hurt, this pain—I thought it was the real thing. Or, at least, I thought it could compare.

"What *is* this?" I asked her once the song finished. I didn't dare speak during it, and neither did she. It was like we both didn't want to break its spell.

"Samson," Rebecca told me, and her voice was quiet. I wondered if she'd been crying, too. "Regina Spektor? You haven't heard it before?"

I hadn't. I knew about Samson, though. Judges 16. The warrior with the long, flowing hair. The man who could bring down buildings. The one who loved Delilah so much, it killed him.

Yes, I knew him well.

*Samson came to my bed
Told me that my hair was red
Told me I was beautiful, and came into my bed*

We learned how to pray before we knew what it meant. We gave our hearts to Jesus before we'd gotten to use them ourselves. We memorized the Bible before we learned it was written by men.

In eighth grade, my class attended what was called Adolescent Awareness. (The name is hilarious, in retrospect.) We were all *too* aware that we were adolescents—the acne, braces, and perpetually sweating armpits had tipped us off.

Adolescent Awareness was my Christian school's version of sex education. The teachers split us up—Brothers and Sisters in Christ going our separate ways, to separate rooms—and while the boys got to learn about male and female anatomy, sex, and porn addictions, the girls had to learn about modesty, purity, and chastity. We learned that we must never tempt our Brothers in Christ—and this was the reason for the school's strict dress code: no tank tops, no shorts, no skirts above the knee, no low cut tops. Mary was a virgin, after all.

We didn't learn about dating or love or sex or condoms or even consent. We learned to be ashamed of our bodies and the attention we would attract if we weren't careful.

As we were leaving that seminar, many of us red-faced and silent, Rebecca turned to me and said, "You know that was all bullshit, right?" She was fuming. "You know that's not how it works?"

When we were reunited with the male half of our class, we asked our friends if they'd been given an hour-long speech about chastity, too. About making themselves a "gift" for their future spouses.

Of course they hadn't.

Oh, we couldn't bring the columns down

Yeah, we couldn't destroy a single one

Once I'd heard the song, it was all I wanted to listen to. Play it again. Put it on repeat.

We'd sing along, Rebecca and I, crooning and then wailing, turning it up so loud our ears rang, feeling everything we'd never felt before. We'd listen in the car as we drove too quickly through Michigan's Irish Hills. We'd listen through shared headphones, tangled as they were, our faces pressed close. In those moments, we knew what it was to love and lose, to give without receiving, to break irrevocably.

We'd lie in her bed and think about all the boys that might someday love us like Samson. She wanted someone tall and dark, with arms bigger than her body. She wanted to be swept up and carried away from our small town. I wanted someone who could make me laugh. Someone who wouldn't mind when I was quiet. Maybe someone who'd even be quiet with me.

Thinking about these boys was one thing, but interacting with them in real life was another.

I cried after my first kiss, a lackluster moment in a dark movie theatre. Remembering Adolescent Awareness, I felt as though I'd done something wrong—something sinful—no matter how much Rebecca assured me I hadn't.

"Even if sex *was* wrong, why would kissing be?" she demanded.

Still, I didn't kiss anyone for quite some time after that, and this feeling didn't go away easily. Even when I was off at a liberal college, years later, trying to shed the religion of my youth, it'd follow me. Religion and the fear it inspired crept into almost every facet of my life, but especially sex and dating. When I eventually lost my virginity—sans marriage—the only thing I could think about was the hellfire that awaited me.

Samson went into Delilah's bed, and he was still a warrior of God. A champion. He prayed, and God listened. His hair grew back. He brought the columns down.

And history books forgot about us

And the Bible didn't mention us, not even once

Recently, I listened to "Samson" again. And again. It was still as beautiful as the first time I heard it. I felt transported back to that place: lying in bed, hearing it for the first time, and wishing to be someone else, somewhere else.

If you had asked me, back then, what I was so sad about, I wouldn't have been able to give you an answer—not a clear one, at least. I think I know now: it isn't just love that breaks your heart. Sometimes, it's just a kiss. Sometimes, it's a school. It's religion. It's a song.

Sometimes, the teenage heart breaks on its own. Maybe this is how it grows stronger.

Samson let Delilah cut his hair. He knew it would kill him, but he let her do it anyway.

The first time I heard that song, I cried, because no matter how much my heart ached, I'd never known a love like that, and I was too afraid to let myself.

When you're young, you feel things immensely—vicariously or not. A song can be more than a song. A story in a book written by men can be more than story. And what other people tell you is right or wrong, you end up believing. It takes time to break this.

It takes time to bring the columns down.