



Tom Petty and the
Heartbreakers

"American Girl"

*Tom Petty and the
Heartbreakers*

11/1976

Shelter

On "American Girl" by Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers

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I used to have an original tee from the *Damn the Torpedoes* tour. It was awesome.

I wanted to go so bad, but didn't know anyone else who was going. I didn't know anything about concerts at all, since I'd never been to one before. I didn't drive, and there was no way my parents were gonna be able to drive me from Arlington to Landover and wait or drop and pick me up. I had plenty of cash since I'd just done collections for my paper route, but I had no ride, no way. I was stuck.

Talk about the show came up in Geometry among my group in the back. Melissa turned to me and said she and her boyfriend had been planning on going, but that he wasn't able to anymore. Before I had time to hope that she would offer me that ticket, she continued to say that her older brother had bought it and was driving. She said I could probably get a ticket from someone there, and that they could give me a ride.

This was the spring. It'd been months since we'd walked home together from that football game. Nothing since that night had ever again made me feel like I was special to her, but my self-doubt couldn't stop me from wondering.

I met them at their house. Thad had a VW bug. They were both waiting outside, and a woman I assumed was their mom waved to me from the screen door, and called "Hi Quentin!", and I waved back and wondered how she knew my name. Thad got in the driver's seat, and Melissa nudged past me to lean the passenger seat up so she could get in the back. I started to put the seat back up to sit up front when she said, "Nuh-uh mister, you're sitting back here too." I gave Thad a look with raised eyebrows above a tight-lipped smile, and he just shrugged and held the seat so I could get in the back.

This was exactly what I was hoping for, but I had in no way expected it would be anything like this. I was tongue-tied and sat stiffly trying not to accidentally lean on her, almost specifically because that was exactly what I wanted to do. There weren't any belts in the back, and Thad drove fast, so not leaning on each other was never really an option. Thad played Tom Petty songs loud on the cassette player, so we didn't do much talking. We did a little screaming about "I love this one", and some pointing out the window to bring each other's attention to passing things. Eventually it was just relaxed and we ended up leaning up on each other in a way that minimized the slipping around. Thad kept to himself and smoked a couple cigarettes up front, seemingly lost in his own thoughts.

When we got to the Cap Center, I offered to pay for parking, but Thad said something about Melissa making him promise he wouldn't let me. Because she liked me. And as that played on repeat trying to convince me, we split up. They went in, and I tried to not freak out thinking I was gonna get arrested for buying a scalped ticket. (all I knew about it were cautionary tales). I did buy a ticket, for only a little more than the actual price, from a group that someone had failed to show for. There were people selling t-shirts outside, but I didn't like any of them (in retrospect, understand now they were probably all knock-offs). As soon as I got through the gate, I bought a cool shirt from the merch booth (it was

probably too big for me). I pulled it over whatever shirt I was wearing and wore two shirts through the show.

The show was awesome. I don't really know how it compares, because it was the first and was just overwhelming. It was loud, and bright, and people were so into it, and the band was clearly having a blast. For a long time it was the best show I'd ever been to. I was hooked.

When it ended, I was worried about not finding my way back to the car, and about getting left behind (give me a break, okay? I was in 9th grade). I got there first, and Melissa and Thad showed up about 20 minutes later. She was wearing the same style tee that I'd picked, only hers looked better fitted. On the way home, Thad played the music loud again and we all three sung along (Thad had a band that he fronted, and in my mind, he looks a lot like Marshall Crenshaw; at least, he had close-cropped hair and wore those Buddy Holly glasses). After about a half hour we were getting too hoarse to sing anymore. Melissa looked me right in the eye and lifted my arm up to put it around her shoulders and fell asleep leaning up on me. Again, just what I had wished for, but totally unprepared for, and it happened anyway.

The next song that played was "American Girl". I sung it softly into her hair as she slept. Thad looked back at us quickly through the rear view mirror. When the song ended, he rewound it and played it again. I looked up into the mirror to see him smile for a second before turning back inside himself.

The next morning, I figured because I'd worn my concert tee over my other shirt that I could wear it to school without washing it. At lunch I spotted Melissa out sitting on the hood of her boyfriend's car, and she was wearing hers too. A few people asked me if I'd been smoking. In Geometry, we sat next to each other where we always sat, and people assumed we were joking when we said we'd gone to the show together. I didn't want to have to explain the whole thing, so I left it at that.

Ever since that night, "American Girl" puts me back in that moment of mystery, desperation, hope, and discovery, and for the time that it's playing I can't help but feel like it's all been worth it.