



the Mountain Goats

"No Children"

Tallahassee

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4AD

On "No Children" by the Mountain Goats

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I am - Flying down a back road in the middle of two small towns close to Houston, hands fist-pumping out the rolled-down windows—my friend Sarah, who was also my boss, and her boyfriend, Kevin are screaming along with me the lyrics to "No Children" by the Mountain Goats. At this particular moment, we were beyond exhausted. Sarah and I worked in the marketing department for the Texas Renaissance Festival. Our days usually began at 6:00am in a trailer onsite, behind the walls of the beautiful wonder-village of mostly Renaissance decor and entertainment. We would be up again in 4 hours, but had made the collective decision that any time away from the festival was needed if any chance of faking excitement for important guests was possible.

The Renaissance Festival is a place for others to escape the non-magic of their lives. To be a knight, a wench, a faerie, or go a bit off-theme and dress up as a ninja. It was a theme park of acceptance and drinking, lots of drinking. When I was really young I worked there as a child-actor and character. I had many warm memories of being paid to play, and of the festival as a place of hard, but joyful work out in Texas heat and storm.

I hope that our few remaining friends/Give up on trying to save us

For the administrative staff, however, it was closer to the real toil of a subject in debt to their king. The owner of the festival was even referred to as "King George" and his legal will was a source of weekly drama as he was aging and losing his cognitive abilities. Staff turned on each other in weekly check-ins with the King in hopes of securing more job stability or a possible inheritance of festival capital. The level of suspicion and betrayal made the work environment poisonous to even the most team-oriented. When Sarah hired me, perhaps she saw an ally, someone who would give her the strength to see the season through. The festival was only open for eight weekends, but the staff worked year-round to develop partnerships and find opportunities for free advertising. Sarah was 26. I was 18. I'm sure at other major entertainment events we would be a quarter of the marketing department. Instead, Sarah drafted Kevin to do the literal heavy lifting and shopping, I handled most of the "executive assistant" tasks, and all of us worked non-stop for two months to get ready to impress media guests in hopes of seeing attendance and ticket sales increase.

I hope we come up with a fail-safe plot/To piss off the dumb few that forgave us

When you listen to "No Children" you may find the melody has a drinking-song quality to it, but the lyrics are not something you'd find yourself shouting in camaraderie. The song can be so harsh that to think of it positively either requires a mental filter of "every line must mean the opposite of what it says" or "this is what despair sings about".

I hope we hang on past the last exit/I hope it's already too late

We: Sarah, Kevin, and I sang this over, and over, and over for months—through the preparation, through the days of the festival, even as we drove home after the last day.

We wouldn't admit to each other that we felt imprisoned by this place, by these people, by the toxic culture, by our loyalty to each other.

And I hope you blink before I do/And I hope I never get sober

Drinking. Lots of drinking. The festival was a theme park known for having lots of alcoholic consumption, and while I don't remember being drunk while I was working (mostly because I could still remember every person fired for being intoxicated while working), I also don't remember going to bed without having one or seven shots of whiskey or something called "pie" that one of the actors made which was pretty much sweetened cinnamon moonshine. I was underage but I didn't want to be left out of the night-time activities, and I was too square for pot but not square enough to just go to bed. Soon I realized that there was a certain type of fun that comes from a drunken rant, a fun that cannot be had if you are the only sober one in the room.

And I'd hope that if I found the strength to walk out/You'd stay the hell out of my way

But Sarah and I, both of us young women who were smarter than people ever gave us credit for, nicer than we should be, boundaries softened by neglect, we needed this song. We needed this song to be true and false at the same time.

I hope you die/I hope we both die

John Darnielle, singer/songwriter of the Mountain Goats, tells the story of a couple who hates each other so much that this song sounds like love except its reality is destruction. Recognizing that something was wrong, admitting it through song, escaping willfully for even a couple hours on a country road to sing it three times before we crashed on real beds—this was how we maintained sanity in the face of physical and mental exhaustion and felt proud to survive a workplace that even now feels preposterous to describe. What we didn't learn was how to leave—I know for me, I loved Sarah and Kevin too much to go. I felt bonded to them as if I had finally found my family. I knew I found my best friend when I found Mates of State, Rilo Kiley, and the Mountain Goats on Sarah's computer the first day she was out and I was answering emails for her. I felt guilty leaving her to fend for herself. If she and Kevin stayed, then so would I. I didn't really know what being family meant, but I knew you didn't give up, even if you were miserable.

I hope you die/I hope we both die

This is the only line repeated twice in the song, and while I could see someone finding aggression in wishing for another's death, I've never felt a song that had so much strength and grace in this particular sentiment. We are all going to die and there is love in giving that certainty the recognition it deserves.

At the end of "No Children", a short song under 3 minutes, the last third of it is piano and guitar and it feels like you should expect more lyrics, but none arrive. This song does not offer answers. This is not an anthem for people who want answers. This song is an anthem for people who already know the trouble they've gotten themselves into, but the struggle to leave seems harder than the struggle to remain. It's an anthem for people who know that life is supposed to be one big hole to stay in or climb out of, but who don't mind shouting at the sky either way.

Eventually we all left; Sarah spectacularly quit by driving to King George's house and demanding a few moments to speak her final words as he stood in his doorway in

nothing but a bathrobe: A story that deserves its own song. Sarah, Kevin, and I are still family. We still sing to "No Children", but with more fondness than desperation. Now we are dancing around their house in joy instead of driving in the middle of the night to escape, and may we continue to do so.