



Uncle Kracker

"Follow Me"

Double Wide

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Lava · Top Dog

"Follow Me" Through the Years

Sam Frost

I was the youngest and the smallest, so I just followed the group. My feet hurt. Jean shorts were wet from water rides I never wanted to go on. They were fun, but I was small and cold. We did it for Dave. I was always Dave's little buddy. His hurt back and my legs, still waiting for a growth spurt, made us the perfect amusement park pair. My mom and his wife and kids (older, taller) ran off to roller coasters and we stayed back, carried the bags and rode the ferris wheel or racing horses. But Dave loved the boat ride. This circle float with eight seats that dives in and out of tiny waterfalls, gushing water. People on bridges squirt water guns. There's no way to stay dry, and we always went in the evening. When the line was shortest. So it was after—shoes squeaking and legs chafing—that we walked towards the center of the park as the sky began to darken. I heard the woman before I saw her. *"Follow me, everything is alright. I'll be the one to tuck you in at night."*

Her voice was screechy. Not a natural singer, but one that appeared after several beers and a chorus of "get up there!" from friends. Long, tan legs and short shorts. The kind of woman that magazines tell little girls to worship. People were cheering. I was mesmerized, couldn't look away. Little feet slowed down. Mom slowed for a second, dancing to the music. Then tugged on my hand, hurried me along to the next ride. *"And if you want to leave, I can guarantee, you won't find nobody else like me."*

Maybe I wanted to be her, standing up there with so much confidence. I whispered those lyrics to myself for the rest of the night. Staring at my feet, teeth chattering. As we watched the late-night dance show and ate soft pretzels. Back at the hotel, wrapped up in Mom's sweatshirt, as everyone shouted over board games. Still sang them the next day as we ate Long John Silver's, and I felt the grease from chicken strips stick to the roof of my mouth, form a coating. The road trip home. Squished in the middle seat. The words sounded like hope. Or longing. Some kind of emotion that I couldn't pinpoint but knew I wanted to feel. *"I'll swim through your veins like a fish in the sea."*

Sometime during the car ride I got distracted. I didn't know what the song was, forgot to sing the lyrics, and they slipped from my mind. Jumbled. I could hear the tune but couldn't replicate it. We got home, and I had toys to play with, neighborhood games to join. The woman and her voice and the words were pushed away. But they resurfaced once in a while *"I'll be the one to tuck you in at night,"* or *"you won't find nobody, else like me."* The words turned into gentle hums. I asked Mom about the song, but it must have been weeks later. She didn't remember. Didn't know what I meant by the "follow the fish" song. So I let it enter that place between knowing and not knowing, intangible but present.

Later that summer my friends and I bought Kidz Bop CDs. The first two that started a long trend of tiny voices singing censored words they didn't understand. The first CD spun and spun through "Oops...I Did It Again" and "Bye Bye Bye," moved through "Livin' La Vida Loca." Then we moved onto the next disc. "Kryptonite." "Hangin' By a Moment." We shouted *"This is the story of a girl, who cried a river and drowned the whole woorld!!"* Small voices squeaking. Then that pause between songs. What's coming next? We'd never heard of "Follow Me."

Track 8. The music started. Guitar strokes, *"You don't know how you met me, you don't know why, you can't turn around and say goodbye."* We liked the sound. Kept listening. Then

I heard the chorus. The familiar words found me. I screamed and turned up the volume. My friends stared at me. I sang along with the lines I knew, the ones I pulled up from the back of my memory. The song ended, and I hit the rewind button. Played the whole song again. Rewound. And again. Took in the lyrics. They sounded so different. So harsh. *"I'm not worried 'bout the ring you wear, 'cause as long as no one knows, then nobody can care."* I tried to explain what I was feeling, how the song let me down. Nobody else was interested, so we moved on to Britney's "Lucky." Danced, pumped arms to *"She's so lucky, she's a star, but she cries cries cries in the lonely night."* I knew all those words and the words that came on in the next track. My lips moved with my friends', but I was distracted. Stuck on different lyrics.

I thought it was a love song. But each time I listened new lines jumped out. *"I'm not the reason that you go astray."* He's talking about cheating, right? *"We'll be alright if you don't ask me to stay."* Why is he singing about this? Isn't he ashamed? I thought cheating was something bad, so why'd he make it sound so good? I told Mom about it, and she said it wasn't a very nice song. That made it more irresistible. I listened and listened and listened. It felt like a trap. One that I was quickly falling into. I told myself it was okay to like parts of it and not others. That I didn't have to like the cheating to like the way the song sounded. But it felt dirty. I felt dirty. But like sandy feet during a drive home from the beach.

Don't we all want something we can't have? A married woman. Our parents' attention and support. The whole chocolate cake. I didn't know anything about relationships, but I assumed dear, sweet Uncle Kracker knew something I didn't. That the woman he sang about was lucky. They felt something for each other, and aren't we all just trying to feel something?

But what if the woman in the song wasn't? It wasn't until I was older that I let myself wonder: what if she didn't want his love?

I'm twenty-three and sitting on my bed. Legs curled under myself. While the guy I've been seeing sits at my desk chair. "Well what is this?" Uh... "I care about you." Me too, but... "I've never felt like this before." I'm not feeling anything. I didn't know I was supposed to. Didn't think a few dinner and party invitations meant I was trapped. This guy is staring at me, wants to know what I'm thinking and not saying.

How do I tell him I want to be the woman at the amusement park, laughing and singing while her friends cheer her on. Not a care in the world. Not wrapped up in some man's fantasy. So I give him something. My own version of the lyrics. He doesn't understand. "You'll go on dates but not date me?" He must not have heard the song. He shouldn't have asked me to stay.

I can't pinpoint what it is about this song, but it's stuck with me. I always find ways to relate to it. I still find myself drawn to it, humming it at random. But it's never felt the way it did at that amusement park. The lyrics make sense now. Simply state the situation. Maybe it was the chase, not the find. Had to have it, know it. But it was all wrong. Like an unrequited love finally knocking at your door—lips too rough but you wanna make it work. I used to wonder what it said about me. The love for the song. This attraction to disloyalty. This willingness to accept pretty words. How they chase me back to childhood. The way they swim through my veins. Have these lyrics become my excuse?

Coming back to a childhood obsession with a matured mind almost feels wrong. Like trying to play make-believe with the same kind of enthusiasm. I can't transform into

dragons anymore. The seven-year-old version of myself would have never thought I'd grow to understand the affair. That I'd sing along and wonder about the details. What's the whole story, who are these people? But seven-year-old me once cried and cried and cried because a little girl kept whispering to me during a school assembly. My teacher thought I was talking too, and I had to move my Behavior Frog from green to yellow. I couldn't believe I'd broken a rule, my perfect streak of green frogs.

As I've grown, my heart has too. Stronger. Wider. More room for mistakes and questions. A gray area between right and wrong. Life does that. Creates messes and webs that we have to survive. Glitter wears off. Love is less pretty when you learn about lust.