



Spice Girls

“Wannabe”

Spice

09/1996

Virgin

Wannabe

Em Mitchell

All week they’d been teasing the release. Trailer spots every few hours informed us “Friday, 5pm,” with brief flickers of images, snatches of distant half-swallowed music: some unknown video presentation imminent. Gather ‘round the fire, children, this was 1996—year of a Royal divorce and IRA bombs, Mad Cow Disease, Dolly the sheep, Take That’s sad end, and Blair in the wings for “Cool Britannia” to rise. The only good way to premiere a music video then was television, of course.

I was curious. Christ knows now I didn’t realise just how much. I was fascinated in the pure mathematic choice of the trailers, and counted the timings between spots—every three hours, I measured. Sat in wait to test my theorem for when it would appear next, my sister beside me with a brighter anticipation in mind. And then there it was, 5 o’clock. And then again, at 8. Again, 11. And in the strange, marbled thinking of a child, it felt as if I’d conjured it up.

My sister was visibly shaken—and why not? Every inch of this promotion was primed to mainline endorphins in her like psychic Benzedrine. All week I heard her talk about it, her and her friends—on the phone, in the street, from the car as she splintered off from me (the clean, naïve, blonde round thing I was) to the front gate of the high school, to watch her collapse into her cluster of friends like a frazzled bouquet—in mime from behind the car window, with their poses and their smoky eyes, their frayed blazer cuffs with a hole for the thumb, socks and skirts rigged two inches higher than school regulation. Their ties strangled into a heart-shaped knot at their necks, each of one of them had two greasy strands of hair (on-trend that decade) hanging in front of their faces like limp lotus feelers, from their cinched-back ponytailed scalps.

The way they appeared, performed for one another, they were the nearest thing to aliens I knew.

But what *did* I know? I was eight. Eight-year-olds held a dimmer view, then. We had no easy route to desire, no relation to the concept of that desire, no language, no mirror in nature or in glass for it, but for maybe seeing dogs hump in alleyways once in a while, which was, of course, always hilarious. We buoyed, me and my peers, in a soft, androgynous puppy world, but what I glimpsed from the crack in the door of my sister’s fleshly universe sent my sinuses throbbing. My mind reeled with incomprehension at their sensational exhibition.

So *these* were girls. And I was a boy—

I was the boy who left it too late to go piss one night
and toddled ‘cross the landing like
the Pink Panther: put up the seat slid PJs down to knees
and with my backside on show and door open failed to recall
my sister’s sleepover—so
mid-piss, the steady trickle of giggles behind me sound
and over-shoulder I see those same
High School Girls in pyjama mode themselves
their beehived heads peer round the door

with their hands to their mouths
the purest shame!

I was the boy
whose two best friends in primary school
were Stephanie and Racheal—
I called Stephanie my girl-friend, and we held hands
and hoped the hyphenate would not be found.
I called Racheal “Stephanie’s friend” and felt safe
in the lie I didn’t know it was.

I was the boy who
danced ballet on the football pitch
when I got bored of playing, which was often, and often
instant.

I was the boy who drew nude Barbie dolls
to understand some semblance of myself and who
when caught, was accused of something else I couldn’t
even then conceive of.

I was the boy who I was the boy who
I was the boy who I was.

All week they’d been teasing the release, and then: Friday, 5pm.

My sister, sensing the specialness of this event, like a lunar phenomenon, didn’t sit
but stood before the telly, remote in hand, and rocked from foot to foot as if readying
herself to catch something coming toward her at great speed. Which it was—it was her
entire life.

I had the privilege to observe. I sat on the carpet, cross-legged behind her, enough of
a view to absorb her, her expression, and the screen too—I wanted to know what sort of
peculiar magic compelled her so.

And then the announcer incanted: *And now, a special presentation.* I heard the muffled
scream of joy from my sister’s clenched throat, distant, quiet, as if from another room. It
was the sound her poor tight ponytail might make if it could talk. The screen went black.

We all know the song. Know the video. For three minutes 57 seconds I watched, eyes
darting, scrolling, between the screen and my sister, my sister, the screen. The coughing
keyboard riff, the high kicks, the backflips. The struts, the sudden paused catwalk poses,
the sarcastic coy mouths. And the interplays, the Girls tossing *bon mots* between them
like a ball, the chaos, the spilled champagne, the clattering high heels across posh
lamine floors. The snooty extras utterly shocked, the stiff butlers. The mounting of
tables, the hops, the jigged hips, their faces up in the camera gurning one moment,
cooing the next; the sense of identity and iconography stamped so hard into the screen it
was yet another universe splayed open to me—a sanitised version of adulthood, the
whole thing a single unbroken take, inside some Platonic Ideal of wealth and pomp, now
shred open by these fun, unfussy, *real* women—and my sister!

My sister was ecstatic. I could see it was everything, everything, everything she
thought she would get, and more—every syllable and intonation, every swish of limb and
choreographic glottal stop, cheeky wink, each chant and drumbeat, in the presence of
men, the preening, stuffy men and the women, the preening, stuffy women; in the setting,

in the Girls, in each strand of their hair, every pore, their dress, their dance, their pose, swagger or remoteness, sweetness, dexterity or growl—my sister tried to replicate, as she shook her hips side to side, improvising in these moments a copy of the orderly madness before her. Never have I seen someone since who so badly wanted to be a part of the thing they were seeing; trying to enact her way into it, as if she could dance her way to become part of the video itself.

I was the boy who thought it was pronounced
wan-á-bee, like “wasabi”
for far too long.

And it was *catchy as fuck*. Even at eight, I was a posturing, self-conscious child, and there, on the carpet, had to restrain my ankle which so desperately wanted to tap in-time to the song, restrain the ache in my hips which wanted so badly to sway, restrain the smile from alighting on my face in any obvious way.

I could assure anyone who came in, I was just waiting for *Art Attack*.

Ah! And the chorus.

In years to come you will hear men complain
when “Wannabe” comes on the speaker system
of the “nonsense” of its Zig-a-zig ah!
With pretension to critique, they’ll whine
But it doesn’t mean anything—these, the same
men who’ll laud whatever French Theory
can justify their own
erasures of emotion—the zig-a-zig
like a zipper flipped down, up, down
and the Ah—nearly, not quite, an O—
The O, the well of one all-becoming
O—of course they could never hope
to understand. Unskillful lovers
are often quick to pedant.

And it’s brash, and it’s swaggerful in a ganglier, carefree way—totally unlike the slow, testicular swagger of the men I observed in my life—a confidence earned from the inside, tumbling out; not predicated on what flesh that flesh could boss about, but what its own flesh could express from an inner sense of itself.

All this, more or less, occurred to my sister then, wordless. Parcelled down into nearly four minutes of 90s Sugarpop, it must have felt like being hit by a train. And it occurred to me, too. I learned something, then, that would take me decades to understand. Because I couldn’t feel it for myself. Not yet.

Because all the while, the Eye of God observes
cold and remote—we were told
in Sunday School, how when the Rapture came
for each of us, we would go before God.
How, in a crowd, we would be asked to stand
before him, and be judged
for our earthly actions.

The teacher described it like a VHS
shown on a large screen for all to see.
*Would you be pleased with what you saw
if you were there now?* she asked us,
implicating our death
implicating our entire lives
under the Eye, my entire life
I lived, and watched, and watched
the Eye of God watching too.
I was three: actor, observer, judge.
Who would not feel shame?
This is how we are made unfree.

I was the boy who
was taught to hold himself
in guilt, apart from the joy.

But the sheer *velocity*, the propulsion evident in every single line of every Girl, delivered in their individuated voices—they were a mythos of temperaments: like the furies, like archetypes, like Roman idols—The Lion, The Athlete, The Aesthete, The Child, The Rebel.

And when the chorus burst in, close-harmony'd, like a sonic metaphor for intimacy, it meant so much to my sister—as a replication of the relationships of her own life, her own friends. My sister could see The Lion of *her* group, The Rebel; or see herself in The Child or The Athlete; note The Aesthete of her circle. The joy was in its silliness, its lightness, but above all else the *fellowship* it represented—literally arm-in-arm, their havoc-causing, chaotic togetherness an inviolable bond that was equal parts fun and blood pact.

It was a relation I only glimpsed the surface of, in my own life: a coterie, a coven, a protectorate that did not exist for little boys with soft supple eyes.

I was the boy
who wanted this, wanted more
the boy who saw in that mirror plain
in the ecstatic sway of his sister
the missing part
saw in the strange, the alien law
of the Other myself—an alien too
a wish embodied, half a soul
in search for the instant
sisterhood the mystic
the myth ritual of acceptance.

Because however ditsy and cheap, however manufactured, however focus-grouped or laundered, however gaudily Girl Power has aged; however complex and knotted beyond its scope the world now feels—now is, now yet will be; however yet more dark and bloody it seems every year has become since, from the simpler time of that song; however many dystopias and fascists and terrible terrible monstrous things yet to come, what it holds, high above all this, is pure unadulterated JOY—a joy unflinching, a joy empowered, a joy that quite simply, more than all else, will *not take your shit anymore*.

Love me right, or fuck right off.

But don't worry, this is a happy story.
God got put away. The actor, observer, judge
dissolve—I'm simply *me* now, more or less.

And years later, early on in these new ladydays
as we get ready, sincerely,
offhand, you call me "one of the girls"—
one of the girls!—and my heart
or more, the heart of my
entire life, leaps, near explodes—ah!

And I find a beating heart
a boo who wants for me
the equal of their own need
and I to theirs, and so
together we discover
we laugh and collapse
turn the clock back beyond
the insistence of past
to reclaim our now.

No longer a *want* but a *be*.