

AIR PLAYGROUND LOVE

Sung by Gordon Tacks



Air

"Playground Love"

The Virgin Suicides

02/2000

Record Makers ·
Source · Virgin

Playground Love

Scout Bolton

**Note, names have been changed*

I remember the first time I saw Marshmallow Fluff for sale, in its hyperreal, bubble-shiny jar in the food court, red, screw-on lid like a bright, special puck, and beneath, a kind of glowing, sticky cloud-food I had always imagined was hiding inside the candy apples of Willy Wonka's invention room, Gene Wilder passing me the jar and a spoon and smiling through his brilliant eyes—you're here, you don't have to leave, this is yours.

We'd gone to the food hall at Selfridges, I'd never been in a place so brazen about the wealth it hoped to attract. It was the imported foods section, we were in America now, and there was this whole row of them, the row above with all the American cereals I'd only ever seen in the films I grew up with, and filling the row below were thick, glass bottles of technicolour sugar drinks of the kinds of exciting flavours we're supposed to turn our noses up at on this side of the pond.

Caspar said I could get anything when he saw the pupils in my wild eyes widen over toward the little French corner where I saw dusted, tiny truffles and pastries brushed with real gold leaf—people eat *gold*, I said, and Caspar cooed right back to me: not by the *bullion*, darling. But it was the Marshmallow Fluff—good Lord, I couldn't wait to tell everyone I'd been to the place where you could buy real Chanel perfume, real Jimmy Choos, and the sticky, shiny insides of marshmallows, all in the same store. I spoke about it all the way to Caspar's car because he'd bought me a jar and I didn't know for how long I was expected to wait before eating it.

"Do you have a spoon in your car?" I asked him.

"I shouldn't have thought so," he replied. "Just scoop it out with your fingers," was his suggestion. Fiddling with his car keys.

"I can't, I'd never stop washing my hands. I'm not obsessive compulsive or anything; I just don't like sticky things."

"I'm not bothered by them," he said. "I'll feed you."

As soon as we climbed in and I felt the cool leather hit the back of my thighs, Caspar thumbed into the silvery, paper seal and with his two dominant fingers on his pale white hand, dug out a cloud of Marshmallow Fluff, and fed it through my lips and onto my tongue; let me bite most of it off of him and even tell him I wasn't done when he tried to pull his hand away. Every time I caught a gasp between laughs on that journey home, Caspar took his eyes off the road very briefly to spoon the fluff into my mouth, and that was when he first said, "I love you."

Before long it was time to meet Caspar's friends. The night Caspar first took me home, I'd met a few of them already, but I don't think they'd noticed me creeping like a ghost between his bedroom, the living room, and the bathroom, and during such antisocial hours it's hard for anyone to really notice anything—we were all awake, and that's always for a reason. All I remember of Caspar's friends that night was they were dressed well and

glittering, laughing loud or drowsing out, elegant and languid in the sultry dusk of an early spring morning. One of them locked eyes with me as I swam like silk into the kitchen for juice. He was a spry, rawboned boy whose eyes brimmed over with this deep mood of unknown contempt. In that moment he seemed to hate me, so I resolved to hate him in return. I'd never hated someone so incredibly beautiful before, let alone so immediately, but I really did, suddenly that morning, before letting myself back into Caspar's room, where he lay stone-still in sleep, rather swiftly, his soft tongue hiding in his cool sedative head. But I knew it was there.

In the fridge were bottles of Italian beer, bottled and corked fizzy wine that Caspar called "shampoo", several lemons, a couple of pomegranates, a few limes. "There's bottles of Stoli in the freezer, and some martini glasses," he said.

"Won't it freeze?" I asked. "Also, what's Stoli?"

"It's vodka, darling," he chuckled. "And no, of course it won't freeze. Didn't they teach you anything at school? Vodka has enough alcohol in it that the freezing temperature gets lowered quite a bit. It will freeze, but not in my freezer."

"And the fruit?"

"Garnishes," he said, *obviously*. I suddenly felt weird that I'd asked. Of course they were. People don't just sit and eat lemons. Do they? No, they *obviously* don't. I wasn't even going to bother asking why he'd put glasses in the freezer, too.

I asked Caspar who was coming and he said only a couple of people, and I wondered why there was so much booze for just the four of us, but as my time with Caspar progressed I came to understand the necessity of an overstocked booze supply and its ability to make people feel at ease. "There's Katherine," he said. "She's my ex but from like, ten years ago? And then there's Plum."

"That's a weird name," I said, and squinted whilst saying it, like the light had got in. "How old is she with a name like that?"

"Oh no, Plum's a he. An old nickname, I forget how he got it," said Caspar, rectifying my mistake. "Another ex I'm afraid, but again, from like, *aeons* ago. You're gonna love him, I think. He's..." and then he laughed. "He may tease you, but he does that with everybody. I haven't really told him much about you."

I went to the bathroom to pencil my eyeliner back on, creating shadowy, dark half-moons on my young skin and waiting alone for something to happen, and it did—I heard someone else come into Caspar's flat. A new voice. I stood with my back to the bathroom door against the old *Wizard of Oz* poster and waited to fall into it. I never did, so I opened the door into Caspar's vivid evening instead. And there he fucking was.

"This is Plum," said Caspar, patting the head of that gaunt lad I'd seen the night I'd first gone back. I know Caspar said some more stuff, made some rather more succinct introductions, but all I remember was him eventually sauntering off into the kitchen to prepare something gorgeous, leaving me to speak with Plum, and all else dropped around him, all the furniture and framed posters on the wall and the bookshelf seemed to blend into grey, peripheral mush, and all I could focus on was this smarmy aesthete with straight-across shoulders, poised like a ballerino all smug and self-important. I had nothing to say.

"I don't like you," he said, searing through the awkward silence, "at all."

"That's okay, Plum," I spat. "I'm not too fucking keen on you either."

"Shut up," he said. "I don't know you and I don't want to know you."

And that was the first time I met Plum; the night that Katherine never showed up.

It's weird to me that Caspar and I had been together as long as we had the night we broke up. How we'd made it through four months I'm not sure, but I think Plum had something to do with it. I took so much cocaine that night I hoped I'd become jump-started and new, that I'd take that final bump that'd bring me to the pinnacle for one fine second, and from there I would fall apart and sprout new limbs, better ones, burn out my heart and watch a glowing new one form in its place like gold. Four months before that night, I'd never taken cocaine before. I don't really remember what single event that night had broke us, only Plum sitting by me in the spare room, with his clammy fingers at my wrists, asking dumb questions, like "where d'you live?" and "what's your middle name?" and "do you take medication for anything?"

Plum's chest would feel and even sound hollow as my tired head butted against it, him saying, "Stay awake. Come on, silly, stay awake." I told him to fuck off and then I puked on his shoes, and whatever Plum did or said between leaving to clean himself up and coming right back with a carton of orange juice I never asked for, ended things with me and Caspar.

If only I could remember what I'd done or said to Caspar that it ended without him telling me; that the night we broke up I don't recall seeing or speaking with him at all; that the next morning it was Plum who used Caspar's car to drive me to McDonald's and then back home to school to sit my Science GCSE, wafting a second cup of Coke under my nose when he could hear the straw-suck noise of me draining the first one.

We listened to *The Virgin Suicides* on the motorway and on repeat when we hit my town, where I laced Plum through the suburbs with half-garbled misdirections, nodding and groaning through a fierce, dull seasickness. On the third repeat, when "Playground Love" clicked on again, starting with its haunted woodblock metronome before swooshing into pale pink cotton and witching-hour blue and velvet strings, I cried.

"Do you need to throw up again?" asked Plum. "Your eyes are all red, is it coming up again?"

"No, I'm just a bit—it's like..." I barely made it through the sentence before bursting into loud, heaving sobs that caused a strange, never-before-seen stillness and silence in Plum, who was normally ready with a withering quip whenever anyone displayed any kind of big feeling, though I guess he'd never seen me have any before, which in itself was a curious thing.

Plum pulled over into the backstreet of a cul-de-sac and as the car jerked to a stop, from under the seat rolled a half-eaten tub of Durkee-Mower's Marshmallow Fluff, and I cried even harder.

"Why are you crying now?" asked Plum, picking up the jar and inspecting it for clues. "Did something on here make you cry?"

"Caspar gave me that the first time he said he loved me," I whispered, because I thought to say it aloud and hear my own voice say it might break something.

"And you're sad it's over?" said Plum, almost dismissively.

I was acutely aware of the weight of my skull and the brain it held as my neck momentarily lapsed and my head lolled forward a bit so my chin touched my chest, before yanking my head back again as if to seem in control of what had just happened. I tried to explain to Plum how it was actually kind of cute how Caspar had spoon-fed me the fluff with his two fingers, like a baby bird, my young beak yapping open and closed again, how I'd chirruped and giggled about it all day, but Plum didn't share my view.

"He's a fucking animal," he snapped, and glanced at my vomit-stained school tie, which seemed to offend him into caring. "And you're not going to school like this."

We drove to Crown Point and smoked cigarettes for hours where Plum said he'd forge a sick-note for me to give to my tutor but I told him the school wouldn't call home and even if they did, my mother wouldn't care.

For five more years we sat on that hill, looking over the town as it belched out its mill-smoke heavenward, and we two joined in with our Lucky Strike breath; as regeneration shaped the landscape along with my school, that was quietly knocked down into dust the year I turned twenty. It felt like neither me nor Plum ever aged in that time, though I did grow plumper and Plum must have looked ill, or gotten thinner, or prematurely aged, but I never noticed, and that was always my problem. No, we were only ever sixteen and twenty-five, sitting on that scruffy grassland, gossiping and squabbling and learning each other's language. And it was a week before the leukaemia killed him that I said, "I really hated you the first time I saw you," and he said, "Me too, it was hate at first sight."

"I never told you that before," I said, like it was a profound admission, some revelation that demanded reverence.

"You told me years ago, and you've told me loads since," he said, as I watched my screwed-up hands, and put my confession back into my pocket.

But we never spoke about Caspar ever again, not after that first day, even though we listened to *The Virgin Suicides* a lot, almost traditionally, and every time we basked in the nostalgia of it, how I'd been just a schoolgirl when we met and he still a fucking waster deep into his twenties; it was as if he and I were always this unlikely knockabout duo who formed an instant bond that never faded, never wavered. Yet we both knew that it just wasn't true, and the lie of Caspar's absence in our stories created a blackhole of unspoken resentment in us both which—because of loyalty—was never allowed to surface. That terrible animal, that playground lover, that savage predator and his horrid, sticky fingers, which bitterness could never allow us to admit had spun a silky string between the two of us, a gossamer and tin-can lifeline to and from our mouths and ears, that only cancer could break.