



George Jones

"He Stopped Loving Her Today"

I Am What I Am

09/1980

Epic

Rust Belt Blues

Lauren Parker

The winter before my parents' divorce was final, I was 16, and my father was taking it badly. He'd gone from hostile and absent to desperate, and we'd spend evenings isolated in his battered Chevy Tahoe. The soundtrack of his grief was a song by George Jones. Some people's dads are obsessed with b-sides and obscure tracks, but my dad was cliché and jumped at the chance to play "He Stopped Loving Her Today," one of George Jones' most famous hits, over and over, hitting the back button on the CD deck as the last couple notes faded out. "Help me get your mom back," he said, as the cab of the Chevy filled up with mournful lines like, "He kept her picture on his wall, went half-crazy now and then, He still loved her through it all, hoping she'd come back again." I didn't say anything; things went best if I didn't say anything. I sat in his truck, bouncing over the ragged pavement, my ears full of George's story, hoping we wouldn't be gone for too many hours this time.

I don't envy a country man's muse. It has terrible payoff. You're only important when you're gone. "This is the best country song ever written," he'd say, and then sing "She said 'you'll forget in time,'" his notes flattening on the *you'll*. Then he'd fall silent for the remaining 3 minutes and 17 seconds. I'd been encouraging my mother to leave since I was 12 and had gone from sympathetic to glacial—dwelling on my discomfort, so deep and sharp I couldn't predict where it ended. He was never as interested in me as when he was about losing my mother. I'd scoot closer to the window, the seat belt digging into the side of my cheek, trying to imagine living in the rooms of the lit farmhouses we'd pass. I wondered how others coped with being the woman in the song who hasn't left yet.

Like most country songs, "He Stopped Loving Her Today" is a tale of a woman leaving a man; his parting words are that he will love her until he dies. It lacks other country themes: trucks, dogs, Budweiser, but it does have six chords and the truth. My childhood was spackled together with dismissive platitudes: *it is what it is*, and *I am what I am*. It's hard to figure out who you are in the shadow of so much certainty, reaching out from under my father's darkness to get enough light to grow.

There are bars in this town where you'd encounter a fist to the face for shitting on George Jones. "He Stopped Loving Her Today" is his biggest hit after almost a decade of a failing career. Frayed and cracked from years of blue-collar alcoholism enabled by top-shelf money, George's voice wasn't what it once was. Misshapen and rough, the notes cut their way out of his throat. It shot up the charts on debut, and reemerged the week of his death to hit number 21. The whole album volleys between shameful resignation and throwing up his hands, telling you what you see is what you get. To this day, that song sneaks up on me, moving through the world like one of my father's moods.

There are women who don't make it into country songs. The most important part of "He Stopped Loving Her Today" is what's been left out. It's the cavernous vacancies of the story, the ownership, the responsibility. Country, for all its painstaking honesty, never tells us why women leave. Just that a man stuck it out until the very end, saving letters and keeping pictures, mixing bitterness with his bitters, picking at wounds until they swell and warm with infection. They don't write country songs about me. No one writes about their 16-year-old daughter who just wants them to do something to make loving them worth it.

My father's relationship with George Jones is better than his relationship with me. It's easy to love people who don't need anything from you. It's easy to love an old drunk with a

guitar. It's easy to love a voice carrying through a sound system. I'm hard to love. My father poured over the same fights, kept pushing repeat—I wasn't the same every time, my needs didn't fit into meter, chorus. Our fights looped in my head, stuck, like a groove in the record.

My dad holds vigil for a wife he made up, telling stories edited where he is the hero. My father treasures the past, asking about friends from years ago, hanging onto broken furniture, outdated technology, and rusty farm equipment. His voice holds the clipped Midwestern consonants and drawn out vowels of his father, but he holds onto hurts with the same reverence as joy. My list of transgressions became too long: not wearing a dress in my graduation pictures, not picking up every time he called, not being able to do math in my head, not asking him for help. My father being in touch with his emotions made him more articulate of all the things I didn't live up to.

George Jones died in 2013. I was living in the mountains of New Hampshire and I hadn't spoken to my father in a full year. For 24 hours I could not listen to a single radio station without hearing George's gravely lilt crooning and all I could think was *motherfucker, I loved him and he didn't do anything to keep me.*

The day after my college graduation, my father took me out for ice cream and asked me to unpack everything he did that hurt me. I rolled out the pain, cataloging actions and reactions that made me feel unsafe, and he punctuated every one with, "Well I'm your dad." He nods in time, but can't carry the tune of my hurts. He's done his part, lived up to the brutality of feeling, played out the role of misunderstood lonesome and will be buried a hero. He's a country dad, and his story is the saddest because to him, I'm the one that left. I can't speak for honkytonk angels, but it's hard to abandon what wasn't there.

I listen to George Jones in the luxury of silence, quiet, something my father could never give me. This is my own kind of masochist drive through the backroads of my fraught teenage years, dredging my own riverbed to find pieces of us within the notes. If I see myself in the song it means that maybe he won't stop loving me until they carry him away. Another promise kept by a country man. But the love of country men is hollow, a white flag.

I love my father. Love encourages you to do things you shouldn't. It's why we hunt it. We want permission to give people as much of ourselves as we can. We want to withhold and take someone for granted and then give them a song. We can hide in the vulnerability of art. I can't change what can't be changed, but I'm still gonna try, and so I try with George. Because if I hear my father in those notes then maybe I can keep a country promise.

At the end of the song, the lost love returns to attend this man's funeral. After she had "preyed upon his mind" she returns to suffer the judgement of the singer. I am gearing up to be that woman, sorting through mementos and strange altars to a relationship that never was, underlining in red, every single "I love you." Because he doesn't have love letters, or artifacts for me. Maybe pictures taken by my grandmother, but he never thought to keep those things. I'm the projection of the childhood he didn't have, and I was supposed to live for him. I don't know if I prey upon his mind, if he is still listening to that song, still repeating those fights, or if he's finally over me for good.