



Bruce Springsteen

“Backstreets”

Born to Run

08/1975

Columbia

The Heroes We Thought We Had to Be

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Bruce Springsteen helped me break into the local reservoir. In my hometown of Adelaide, Australia, there were few of the usual Springsteen set-pieces: boardwalks, '69 Chevys, Independence Days, promised lands, girlfriends named Mary. The reservoir was all I had. That, and my buddy, Rick.

Rick was a high school ring-in during graduating year and stood out like any newly-arrived six foot four Norwegian would. At seventeen years old, he more closely resembled a substitute teacher, his hawkish profile topped with an already receding widow's peak of wavy red hair. His apparent maturity meant he was the go-to guy to buy liquor, which made him an especially useful friend. But despite a summer abundant in pre-mixed rum-and-Cokes we had serious trouble enjoying ourselves. Our graduation results were due any day. I had lost enthusiasm for academia in the final stretch before exams and Rick had arrived too late to fully acclimatize to the curriculum. Our fate would arrive in the mail and we knew it wouldn't be good.

Like all Springsteen's young male protagonists, I was seventeen and eager to stick it to the man in my own meager, suburban way. I was longing to break out of Adelaide, my version of small-town U.S.A., and the reservoir seemed like an apt test of courage. Nobody I knew had ever actually seen it. It was protected by a ten-foot tall perimeter fence topped with barbed-wire. Beyond that was a wide dirt road patrolled by some form of police, then two miles of forest surrounding a vast lake which, in hindsight, was very likely a federal facility.

Being a man meant breaking rules. Rock 'n Roll told us the rules were arbitrary, optional, and easily ignored in the pursuit of living our best lives: only once they were broken could we survive the stultifying conformity of adulthood, which seemed to us as oppressive as the summer heat. It was a scorching-hot Tuesday when Rick and I loitered near the *No Trespassing* sign at the reservoir and waited for a gap in traffic. The cool, wet bulk of our illicitly obtained six-packs shifted in our bags. Whoosh: a gap! We shimmied up the fence and Rick slung his precious leather jacket over the barbed wire. We tumbled over the edge and sprinted for the cover of the pines. We were in.

In that era, my homeland birthed no shortage of musical rebels: AC/DC, INXS, and a band called Skyhooks whose song "Why Don't You All Get Fucked" must surely remain the most plainly-spoken ode to youthful rebellion. Still, in an era when Springsteen's anthems and barn-raisers were his most popular tracks, none spoke as eloquently to me as his ballads of struggling misfits: blue-collar gear-heads who fought father-figures to convince some girl to leave "A town full of losers." I had none of that. I lived at home with loving middle-class parents and drove a gutless Toyota my father had paid for. Worst of all, I was a virgin. Without recognizing it or deserving it, I inhabited the desperate melancholy of Springsteen's protagonists, with all their inarticulate pain. In the purgatory before adulthood the world was indifferent to guys like Rick and me, and surely that made us heroes of some kind.

We ran into the woods until the scabble of our shoes on the rutted clay was muted by a thick carpet of pine needles. Rick scanned the horizon then offered his palm. He was the only person I had ever met who high-fived. I offered a limp clap in return, a gesture which seemed especially ostentatious in the cathedral-quiet of the pines. Rick tore the silver thread from a fresh packet of cigarettes and handed me one. He expertly smoked a pack a day, pinching them between thumb and forefinger like a pencil.

It was a hundred degrees already and the sap and smoke formed a cloying fug as we crept under pine boughs. I had visions of hurling myself bodily into the water a-la "Thunder Road" or "The River" or "Spirit in the Night," or any number of songs. The ripples from my thrashing limbs would carry my impotent rage across the lake and make something beautiful of it.

We followed a tangle of brambles down a shallow ravine and tried to keep track of where we'd come. My parents thought I was at Rick's playing eight-ball, but the room was too small for the table and I kept backing the sawn-off cue into the dry-wall. I was eager to master the game, which struck me as an excellent emblem of misspent youth, but I was mercilessly thrashed every time. Rick had been taught by his cousin, whom he revered as something of a legendary pool-shark. Back in Norway they had been inseparable, and I got the impression that I was being coached to fill a role I wasn't good enough to play.

We soon came upon a brutal easement cut through the forest to prevent the power-lines being fouled by trees. Neglected, the razed earth had grown thick with wildflowers. We sat in silence, caught our breath and drank the first of our booze. The scene was unexpectedly beautiful, but the blooms reminded me of funerals, and I knew Rick was thinking the same thing. His pool-shark cousin had recently hanged himself, but Rick insisted on keeping up the delusion the death had been an accident. I had asked him about it once and the result was the only fight we ever had. We sat and smoked in companionable silence and thought of ourselves as grownups.

Leaving the field of flowers, we stumbled upon a road and brazenly took it. I was sure we would hear a car well before we could be seen, and anyway I had a secret weapon: Rick, of course. My friend had a certain reputation for ballsiness, although in retrospect it was closer to recklessness. Once, he had caught a fish at the local pier and managed to swap it at Burger King for a Whopper and large fries, so I was relying on him to talk his way out of trouble.

Soon there was a glimmer of water through the trees, and when we rounded a bend the reservoir lay before us. I had imagined clear water lapping at a grassy bank, but ten years of drought and a blazing hot Australian summer had drained the lake of any beauty. The water had been gulped down by a thirsty city, leaving twenty scummy bath rings of cracked mud above the dregs of a lake. We tested our footing, but the gentle slope at the forest edge dropped precipitously eighty yards out where the water was, the slick embankment a death trap.

We lost our nerve, retreating to the first regiment of pines and draining the rest of the booze. A mile away, on the other side of the bank, was the remains of an ad-hoc town for a period movie that no one ever saw. We talked about girls, or, more specifically, the lack of them. We had never had girlfriends and not losing our virginity in high-school seemed like a bigger failure than our poor grades. I conducted myself as a stoic loner but deep down, I ached for love. I yearned to be vulnerable and knew I had no chance of measuring up to what I thought being a man required. How could I "Blow that Camaro off my back and drive that pretty girl away" when my car was a Toyota and I had never been in a real fist fight? Once, in primary school, I'd revealed this fact to another kid—we were nine years-

old at most. He was adamant that a fight would improve my character and insisted on arranging it. Fortunately, my combatant (a friend) burst into tears and no punches were ever thrown, but the disgrace of being bullied into raising my fist at him pains me to this day. At the reservoir Rick lay back on the bed of pine needles, drunk and tired. Then he started singing, in his horrible, off-key voice.

"It's time for the good times / Forget about the bad times, ooh yeah."

For all his Springsteen swagger, Rick had the biggest collection of Madonna records I ever saw. His voice sounded like it had cracked once and never been put back together properly. Before he could launch into the next line of Madonna's "Holiday," the sun glinted off the windscreen of an SUV cruising the fake town's Main Street. Rick abruptly cut off singing. We scrambled to tie our mud-caked shoes and fled back the way we came. For all our big talk, when The Man actually showed up, our swagger was as empty as that lake behind us. We were daytime rebels: always home in time for dinner.

Being a man also meant breaking up. The next week our results arrived in the mail. We had both achieved almost identical grades but, on the new bell-curve of academia, Rick's preference for humanities had seen him graded down, whereas I had been graded up. I passed, he failed, and we split the Springsteen dream between us. Rick took the hard work and getting out, taking a job as a mud-logger for a mining company up north. I went to university in Adelaide and ended up with both a girl and a car, a 1954 Ford Zephyr convertible—the closest thing to a '69 Chevy I could afford. I convinced myself the friendship that Rick and I shared had never been designed to last beyond the convenience of adolescence. Our distance seemed natural, a correct manly extension of our silences. The reservoir was already smaller in my mind and our adventure nothing more than childish hijinks.

Then, in my third year of university, I got a message: Rick had been killed in a car accident. After that, my love of Springsteen faded. Real loss was much less romantic and much more complicated than it had seemed back at the reservoir. I was still stuck in that small town and Rick had got out, but there was nothing heroic about it. Nothing worth writing a song about.

Years later, I did get out. I convinced another girl to leave another town for another promised land. We got married and left Australia altogether and, 20 years later, ended up in New York in the exact neighborhood where Springsteen played some of his first live gigs, at the beatnik hangout Café Wha? Gradually, I rediscovered The Boss and his stories, but they seemed subtly different to me now. There was a subtext I hadn't been able to see when Rick and I thought cigarettes and trespassing were substitutes for a personality.

For all his talk of getting out, Springsteen was born in New Jersey and still lives in New Jersey. In his memoir, *Born to Run*, he admits that, as a kid he was a "mild-mannered loser" whose nickname was "Blinky" for his eye tic caused by anxiety over his abusive father. When he bought his first guitar he "Skulked home with it, not wanting the neighbors to know [his] vain and unrealistic ambitions." For all his musical obsession with hot-rods, he didn't have his driver's license until his mid-20s. Most revealing, perhaps, he claims that "one of the greatest days of [his] teenage years" was when his forty-five-year-old father, now friendless because of a toxic mix of jealousy and macho insecurity, spilled his heart out to young Springsteen: "It shocked me, made me feel uncomfortable and strangely wonderful. He showed himself to me, mess that he was."

And yet, his memoir speaks glowingly of performative masculinity: fists-fights among childhood friends to prove who was tougher; bar-room brawls presented as a metaphor for the sturm und drang of adolescence; distant, brooding father-figures too hardened to feel love; men who initiated friendship with a brief act of cruelty as if it somehow increased the value of the friendship itself. It's characters like these who also made it into his songs. They were culled in part from real life but, I suspect, these flawed everymen also simply made for better stories. The real Springsteen has spent his life struggling with guilt, loneliness, and chronic depression; trying with all his might to be better than the characters he created. His songs swing between these contradictory visions of himself: one, a hard-living tough guy doomed to destroy himself; the other a sensitive loner crushed by the weight of lost chances and failed love. He wanted us to believe he was the first guy, but I always suspected he was closer to the second.

I could have really used that version of Springsteen at the reservoir: the sensitive guy who felt everything too deeply. I would have braved barbed-wire and followed him through the labyrinth of pines and clawed my way back from the water's edge if I could have stood at the field of flowers with that guy. The real him would have known what to say—something heartfelt, something true. He might have told me that Thunder Road leads nowhere, it's just a story we tell ourselves to make us believe there's only one way to be a man. Of course, I wouldn't have listened. And Rick wouldn't have listened, and neither would his cousin who killed himself, and neither would all the other boys, standing dumbfounded at the crossroads of adulthood, staring at the false ultimatum we'd been given. We were learning to walk like the heroes we thought we had to be, but we were deaf to the small voice, hidden beneath the lyrics, that whispered: "You don't have to be broken."

But I'm here, Bruce, and I'm finally listening. So now what do we do?