



**Madonna**

“This Used to Be My Playground”

*This Used to Be My Playground*

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Sire · Warner Bros.

# An Unexpected Education

Juliette van der Molen

I was always the good girl that never got caught. At least, that was what I thought until one early August morning in 1992. Like a real nerd I was ending my summer vacation by heading out to compete in some mock debate rounds to prepare for the fall season. My senior year held a lot of promise. I was president of the literary society and editor of the magazine connected to it. I was a copy editor and reporter for our school newspaper. I had held my position in honor societies and studied hard. Passionate about competitive speech and debate, I'd done a lot of work in the previous three years to secure my spot on the team. It was a miracle considering that I cried in junior high when my father made me take my first speech class. I'd been terrified. Things had changed.

My partner and I were tipped to be the team to beat, not just in our division but in the state. We were national bound, no matter that Nationals was being held in not so exciting Fargo, North Dakota that year. I could already feel victory brushing close enough to be within our grasp. I might even be able to snag a trophy and placement in Original Oratory, one of my prized individual events.

Getting ready that morning, I looked around at the cramped room I shared with my sister. I hated that my parents had divorced the previous year. I hated especially that we'd had to move out of my childhood home and into a little apartment. My side of the room was full of music posters and a shelf full of trophies draped in medals. I slipped my feet into a pair of black and white spectators, perfectly paired with a short, pleated polka dot skirt that I'd bought on sale with tips that I shoved in my apron from the pie pantry I worked in after school.

I lived just inside the district line, barely on the “right” side of the tracks, and I had to work to even afford the bus trips on some of our overnights. Already I was saving for Nationals, shoving every dollar I could scrounge up into a tin that sat nestled on my trophy shelf. Next year, I'd go to college. I was going to be a journalist, and Missouri had one of the best universities in the country for that. When I pulled the edges of my white blazer to fasten the buttons something didn't feel quite right. I smoothed a hand over my hips and stomach, I looked in the mirror; nothing appeared to be amiss. And yet, when I fastened it the button hole pulled. I readjusted and tried again. Why would my breasts grow and not the rest of my body?

Then, I began to count backwards. My mind whirled like a panicked merry-go-round. I shook my head. It couldn't be. My hands shook as I peeled off the jacket and looked up at the trophies winking their wings and lifted arms in the dull morning light. My sister slept soundlessly on the bed behind me.

*Please, god, no.*

But I knew the truth, long before the two lines appeared on a plastic stick. I was pregnant.

Ironic that my first album, which appeared under the Christmas tree years before, had been Madonna's *Like A Virgin*. I was hooked on her from the beginning. Listening to her made me feel powerful in some kind of in-your-face-girl-power camaraderie kind of way. She was courageous and out there, doing her thing and didn't give a damn what anyone thought. The thing I couldn't imagine then, but that I know now, is how many ways

Madonna would re-invent herself. In that moment, I wanted a re-invention in the worst way. I wanted to die.

Instead, I did what I was raised to do. I sucked it up. I took my medicine and took responsibility for my actions. This meant that I was going to have to marry the boy that got me pregnant. This meant that shopping for school clothes was tainted with the thought that I needed to find clothes that I could expand into. This meant that I was having my child and being responsible.

My first day of senior year I caught myself humming to Madonna with my WalkMan, but this wasn't the hot sexy Madonna I'd grown to love. This was something more soulful and serious. I spun the dial to my combo lock as her voice slipped into my ear and squeezed around my heart.

*This used to be my playground  
This used to be my childhood dream...*

I unloaded my backpack into the locker. People were high-fiving in the hall behind me, laughing and goofing around—*It's senior year, man!* I didn't turn around; pretending was hard and I just wasn't ready. For now, my pregnancy didn't show, but it was just a matter of time. The father was a year older than me and already off to university, a National Merit Scholar, rushing a fraternity house. Yeah, we were the good kids that never got caught. I stood staring into the back of my locker. I hadn't brought any decorations, none of my little pictures, and especially not a mirror. This didn't feel like a celebration, it felt like a ticking time bomb. Madonna was breaking my heart with her truth. If I'd heard this song before "Like a Virgin" would it have made a difference? Hadn't she warned me with "Papa Don't Preach?" Maybe this was her "I told you so" song.

*...And before you know  
You're feeling old  
And your heart is breaking...*

Already I had met with my guidance counselor and been advised that I had enough credits to graduate mid-semester. My hard work taking sleepy zero hour classes leaned into my favor, but not in the way I would have liked. I loved school. From the minute I stepped on the school bus my first day I was hooked. Even Mason Cleary smashing gum into my hair that my mom had to cut out after that first bus ride home hadn't deterred me. Being at school was like going to the library all day long and I couldn't get enough of it. I didn't want to graduate mid-semester. I wanted to stay with my class.

My mom tried to tell me that things were better than when she was in school. History was repeating itself. I tried to imagine my mother, my age, hiding her pregnancy beneath bulky sweatshirts and playing basketball, running track and whatever else she did. I didn't get those jock genes from either of my parents. My dad, the good-looking popular guy, pretty much had it made. In fact, he was away at a baseball tournament the day my mother went into labor. Back then, in the seventies, this wasn't something anyone wanted to recognize. My mother watched while my father walked across the stage to get his diploma shortly after I was born. She wasn't allowed to walk with her graduating class. *Shameful.*

I would get to walk with my class, but they couldn't accommodate me as I got bigger. In a few months I wouldn't fit into desks properly, and more than that, they thought it would be disruptive to have me in class—in my condition. I understood. Back then, I thought this was a fitting punishment for my transgression, the first of many I was sure were headed my way. The fact that I was facing it alone without the father by my side was frightening.

My family might support me at home, but that didn't help me in the hallways of my high school. Telling teachers and explaining things to them was mortifying. The look of shock and disappointment on their faces made me want to run and hide. More punishment. More consequences. They spoke to me like I was a fragile, breakable thing. None of them wanted to believe.

Madonna kept reminding me that I needed to move on, that this was my new reality.

*Don't hold on to the past*

*Well that's too much to ask...*

I hid it for as long as I could, until the day a photo from my ultrasound fell out of my folder and onto the floor of my parenting classroom. Ironic. There, of all places. When Danny reached down to pick it up he squinted at it hard.

"Holy shit, this is for real. Your name is on this." he breathed.

Danny was one of the preppy cool kids. He was still popping his collar even though it was on the edge of being uncool. His friends didn't mind. He had money and a house in the right neighborhood, at least his parents did, and that was enough to keep his status. I was just a breath on the right side of the school district line that landed me with all the rich kids. I wasn't a rich kid. I wasn't even middle class, especially not after the divorce.

"Give it back, please." I pleaded quietly.

The last thing I needed was Danny making some douche announcement to the whole class because he thought it would be funny. He was a clown and he liked to make fun of people. He surprised me when he handed it back to me and shook his head.

"Didn't know you were one of those girls," he said. "I mean, like one of the druggie girls."

I wanted to shove him. I knew damn well that at the big parties he had while his parents were away there were girls and guys hooking up and doing drugs. They'd been lucky not to get caught or to have an accident. It could have happened to any of us. But, it hadn't. I never was one of them and I'd fought that by being smart. I dipped in and out of cliques and learned to be a chameleon. A lot of people knew me, but I didn't have a lot of close friends. I held myself together tight and coiled up all of my anger and sadness until it squeezed around my heart and silenced my retort. While Danny wasn't going to say anything in class, the whispering and the looks started soon enough. I was a cheesy after school special, a cautionary tale. More punishment. More consequences.

Before I could get too large to be a nuisance I was sent home on a personalized learning plan. I wanted to continue my advanced placement and college prep courses. I was going to graduate with college credits. I wasn't giving up and quitting. I worked three jobs until my feet were so swollen I couldn't manage anymore. I took school tests under the supervision of my kind French teacher, who visited me every day and made me feel like I was worth more than punishments and consequences. She also happened to be the advisor for the literary society. She brought me drafts to read and let me mark them and organize them. She made me feel like I was part of something bigger than my big mistake.

It's a cliché that life can change in an instant, and it's not necessarily true. Sometimes it changes painfully slow. The life growing inside of me was changing everything one month at a time. In my limited perspective, that felt like an eternal nine months. Events unfolded and consequences unfurled until I felt powerless to stop them. I was old before I knew what it really meant to be old.

The thing I didn't know about Madonna then that might have helped me, is how many times she would reinvent herself. Over the years, I've watched in amazement as the kaleidoscope that is "her" tilts and changes in the light. Some stages are short lived and fierce. Other moments linger longer and stretch out for a period of growth. I'll categorize this under: things I wish I could tell my younger self.

*Well then there's hope yet*

*I can see your face*

*In our secret place*

*You're not just a memory*

*Say goodbye to yesterday (the dream)*

*Those are words I'll never say (I'll never say)*

My dreams may not have been realized exactly as I thought they would back then, but they've been realized. I am no longer ashamed about the path I took. I look back at myself as a young girl, saying goodbye to her childhood, and I see strength and determination. I might have made different decisions if I had a wiser, broader perspective, but then again, I might not. My mother was right: it was better for me than it was for her. I have a picture of myself holding my son before I shifted my tassel. I walked across the stage with my graduating class in the same cap and gown as everyone else.

The resilience of the human spirit is incredible. In my year of punishments and consequences, I developed skills that have brought me where I am now. For me there's a whole new playground to discover and I relish the adventure.

Today, I'm a woman re-invented and if there's a song for that, you can be sure Madonna sings it.