

Maybe I'll Die Young Like Heroes Die

E. Kristin Anderson

Sometimes it snows in April, but not in Austin. Not even in December. December is when I lay flat on my back on white sheets and close my eyes and hope it isn't real. Sometimes it isn't. Sometimes I open my eyes and I'm in my own bed. And the sheets are soft and worn and whatever color was on sale at Ross. And the sounds I'm hearing are the mockingbirds and the cars that come up over that hill and screech to a halt when they realize they've missed their turn. December is the scar on my neck where a catheter once pressed deep into me. I was so afraid it would tear in my sleep. One night a nurse came in and wrapped my neck tight in towels, gave me more Valium, and promised I was safe. I don't know if I've ever felt truly safe in my life. But that helped.

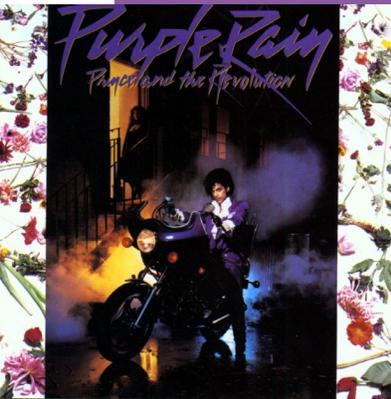
Safe isn't a place. Safe is a person. A memory. Safe is *Purple Rain* in my ears for the thousandth time because if I can hear Prince's voice I won't feel as cold as the frozen plasma rides down my neck and into every vein in my body. I won't be wrapped in a blanket filled with hot air. I won't feel microwaved and sick. I won't be crying for no reason and every reason as Prednisone flips my sense of self backward twenty years.

I remember when this was the sort of thing that only happened to other people. Other people on TV. Like an episode of *House*. I remember that time a doctor came in with his chart and told me "It's not lupus," and I actually laughed, because of course it's not lupus. It's never lupus. And I never sleep. Even in the hospital in December when it's raining outside the window and Prince and Wendy sing "I wonder U, I wonder U" and the nurse helps me plug my phone into the wall behind me because I can't maneuver to do it myself.

The body doesn't forget. It's November and I feel the cold creeping up on me. It's 53 in Austin today and I have a new coat. Faux leather, black. It makes me feel tougher than I am. I don't wear dresses as much anymore. Or heels. I wear boots and jeans and every day a new flannel because my knees and ankles throb and I am always cold, even when I'm not. I'm sensitive to the sun. Sensitive to everything. Winter is this feeling of absence. I crawl into my apartment like an animal. Hang my keys and earbuds on the hook by the door. Pee, check to make sure it's the right color. You can only piss blood in a cup so many times before it becomes impulse to make sure your kidneys aren't failing again.

Often, still, I dream of Prince. I dream he's waiting for me in an office in Maine. In a house in New York. On a bridge in Minneapolis. A bar in downtown Austin. He wants to tell me something. Or maybe wants me to tell him something. I want to be safe. I write to him, in poems. I tell him how my words are missing. How my language got flushed out of me like my diseased blood. I tell him how cold I am. How Texas is hot, but still, December is cold. February is cold. Every day is so fucking cold, and I was cold even when I was pulling wigs down over what was left of my hair, sweat rolling down my cheeks. I tell him how it all blurs together. How the memories are out of order. How dreams and memories get confused. How if I don't write it down it's like it didn't happen.

I twist my real hair around my fingers today, soft waves falling past my shoulders. I'm hiding my dark roots under a hat, sipping hot coffee and trying to explain how Prince saved my life even though really it was the medicine that also almost killed me. How medicine later killed him, and my therapist told me that I was only so angry about the



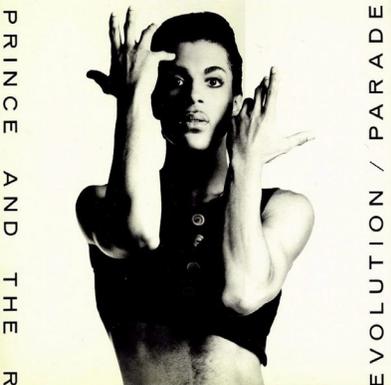
Prince and The Revolution

Various

Purple Rain

06/1984

Warner Bros.



Prince and The Revolution

Various

Parade

03/1986

Paisley Park · Warner Bros.

rumors of Prince's drug abuse because I also took painkillers. The painkillers I'd been prescribed only six weeks ago. The painkillers I quit taking within six months of quitting that therapist because I am opioid resistant and they didn't help. Perhaps I am also therapy resistant, thirty-five and trying to hide in a Starbucks cup forever.

How do you tell a ghost that when you were halfway dead and tied to the bed by a cannula that *Purple Rain* and *Parade* were the only sense of safety you could find? That family came to help but didn't help, how they pulled not just the rug but the whole foundation out from underneath you while you laid as still as possible, drunk on Phenergan, and helpless? How do you explain that the lines "when the elevator tries to break you down/punch a higher floor" became not an anthem but a commandment?

I gave my nephrologist copies of my chapbooks last year before ghosting him. The only man I can trust is my nephrologist and I haven't called him in a year and a half. I can't explain that, either. PTSD is a personal disaster creeping inside me and I can only manage it well enough to feed my cats and get coffee. Still I consider the promise that "life can be so nice." The noise of that song. The discomfort of it. The honesty of it. And I let myself remember my head heavy against the white pillow, the papery white sheets, the maxipad by my neck during plasmapheresis, the salt-free chicken broth that I tried to eat, crying, and then vomited into a salmon-pink basin.

I let myself remember that for weeks after my release, *Parade* and *Purple Rain* were still the only two albums I listened to, if only to silence the quiet of night. His songs brought a guitar against the freeze, the only thing. His voice and his pain and his joy almost made me feel at home. I was unmoored, and when you've come unmoored in this way, nothing is ever really home again. Nothing tangible. If you're lucky, maybe home is a person. For me, home was "When Doves Cry" and "Anotherloverholeinyohead." These songs almost make me feel safe. Because that winter is still inside me, wrecking me, threatening to come up and out of my throat at any minute, just give it a reason. But I wrap myself in purple and stare it down. And sometimes I'm okay, if just for a minute.