

# I Used to Be Seventeen

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TUESDAY

At preschool pickup, my son's teacher pulls me aside. "Someone didn't use his listening ears today," she says. As I stoop to hug him, I can tell something's off. That night, after his bath, his forehead's warm. I check his temperature—low-grade fever, nothing serious. "A little Tylenol won't hurt," my husband says.

I log it in my Notes app. I used to have an excellent memory. Now, after three years of motherhood, if I don't write something down immediately, it's like it never happened.

*8 p.m.—100.5°, Tylenol*

After he's asleep, a headline catches my eye: Sharon Van Etten's new album comes out on Friday. As a fan of her earlier work, I can't wait. The article mentions her lower vocal range after labor and a C-section destroyed her abdominal muscles two years ago, which I hadn't heard. Then again, I'm out of the loop. I used to pay attention. I used to read Pitchfork every morning. I used to throw gossip rags in my cart while grocery shopping with a buzz on so I could see who wore it better while I microwaved my dinner for one. That was Then. My Now only allows me the time to track the minutiae of one person's life.

WEDNESDAY

During the night, my husband hears him talking on the monitor, and goes in without waking me. He checks his temp—102°—and gives him more Tylenol before coming back to bed. When he tells me in the morning, I feel guilty, but also grateful. The fever spike means no school; as the parent who earns less money, I'm always the one on-call.

*8:00 a.m.—100.7°, Tylenol*

*9:30 a.m.—100.3°, Motrin*

*3:30 p.m.—101.5°, Tylenol*

*9:15 p.m.—102.8°, Motrin*

The day disappears in alternating bursts of liquid fever reducers, and with it, the prospect of childcare the following day. There's always Friday, I tell myself. I'll drop him off and drive, windows down, blasting that new album on my way to a coffee shop, where I'll have time to write, finally. It'll be great.

THURSDAY

*5:00 a.m.—99.3°*

*7:00 a.m.—101.2°, Motrin*

I call his pediatrician at 8:01, trying not to berate myself for not calling sooner. They tell me to bring him in. Before we leave, I sit him on the potty, but he waits until we're in the doctor's exam room to empty his bladder. Urine drips from the paper-covered table onto the linoleum as I carry him down the hall and plunk him on the plastic seat I brought from home.



Sharon Van Etten

"Seventeen"

Remind Me Tomorrow

01/2019

Jagjaguwar

The strep test is positive.

1:15 p.m.—Amoxicillin

5:30 p.m.—102.3°, Tylenol

6:45 p.m.—Motrin

I'm not sure what that last temp was. I didn't write it down.

#### FRIDAY

8:00 a.m.—103°, Amoxicillin

We cuddle on the sofa and watch what feels like eighty-seven episodes of *Sesame Street*, me and my kid who usually won't sit still through a single one. Every time that new pink Muppet whose name I don't know asks, "Do you know what time it is?!", I have no idea.

4:00 p.m.—Motrin

8:00 p.m.—Tylenol

10:00 p.m.—Motrin

I've completely forgotten about the Sharon Van Etten album. After my son's bedtime, my husband and I watch an episode of *Crashing* and fall asleep.

#### SATURDAY

7:30 a.m.—104.4°, Motrin, Amoxicillin

Meds not working. Page doc. They call in a new scrip.

10:30—Augmentin

We've been down this road before; it's nasty shit. He spits out the first dose I squirt into his mouth with a plastic syringe. White goo dribbles onto his bulldozer shirt that says TIME TO WRECK STUFF. I don't disagree.

11:00 a.m.—Tylenol

2:00 p.m.—101.8°, Motrin

5:30 p.m.—Tylenol

As more *Sesame Street* plays, I lie on the couch and open Instagram, zooming past photos taken by people from Then: happy-hour friends, ex-boyfriends still in bands, people who can take exotic vacations. I stop on a Now friend's post of her infant daughter receiving a breathing treatment for RSV. It could be worse, I tell myself, but the thought fails to comfort me.

Instead, I think of which cocktail I'd order if my husband and I were at a dark bar that does not admit children. A Dark and Stormy, perhaps? Whatever I used to drink Then. It's so hard to remember.

8:00 p.m.—Motrin, Augmentin

I forget to listen to Sharon Van Etten.

## SUNDAY

7:15 a.m.—104°, Augmentin, Motrin

10:00 a.m.—Tylenol

1:00 p.m.—Motrin

I escape to the grocery store. We need everything.

In produce, I spot a hot dad, the Kryptonite of my Now. He's a sloppier version of a guy I might've gone for back Then: gray flecks in his beard scruff, shoes barely tied, pills in his striped sweater. His boys, probably six and eight, swat each other while he pushes the cart, but he doesn't intervene. How nice that must be, not to give a shit. I want him, and I want to be him. We lock eyes over a pile of Honeycrisps as I reach for a bag of lemons; at this store, no singles are available. When I see him again at checkout, he won't look at me. It's the closest I'll get to sex all week.

Behind me in line is a woman with a baby sporting an oversized headband, perched in one of those cloth shopping-cart covers, like the one I used twice before losing it in my car somewhere. I give the mom a withering look like, *Good luck, lady.*

4:30 p.m.—98.8°

7:40 p.m.—Motrin

I forget to listen to Sharon Van Etten.

## MONDAY

7:15 a.m.—101.1°, Motrin

This fucking fever. I call the doc; they summon us back in. "Any change in your address or insurance?" the woman behind the front desk chirps. Not since three days ago, I want to say.

The flu test is negative—it's a secondary virus, according to a pediatrician that's not his usual one. "Not much we can do," he shrugs. "Call us if he's not better by Wednesday."

"But he's had a fever for a week."

"It's so hard when they're sick, isn't it?" He fingers his digital watch. "I've got three myself: seven, five, and three. Right now, they've all got the flu. My wife's going nuts at home with them." I want to ask him for her number.

As I buckle up for the drive home, I finally remember. I open Spotify and retrieve the tangled auxiliary cable from a sticky cup holder filled with cough-drop wrappers from the last cold. The album's titled *Remind Me Tomorrow*, which makes me think of the MacBook software update alerts I continually decline. Everything in my Now—except for my son—tabbed for later. The cover art shows a disaster of a nursery: toys strewn everywhere, a girl playing naked in a bin on the floor, next to what looks like a vinyl record with Sharon's face on it. Or do my bleary eyes betray me?

When I tap the first song, something else appears—a full-screen image, which animates as the first track plays. It's a video baby monitor. Immediately, I know this album is one I'll devour.

My son's asleep in his car seat by the time "Seventeen" begins its slow progression into Springsteen-style synth. It's a good thing, too. I'm not wild about him seeing me cry.

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"Seventeen" takes that conversation between Then and Now, the one running constantly in my head, and blasts it through the speakers of my sensible SUV. On that initial listen, all I can hear is pure nostalgia:

*I used to be free  
I used to be seventeen*

These lines alone are enough to make me weep. My love for my son is boundless, but there are moments when I miss having what seems like freedom. When I was seventeen, I never had to drive anyone to the pediatrician, or clean up anyone's urine, or hold anyone through fever chills. I hardly ever got sick. Now I've arrived at an age that I would have thought of as officially *old* during those selfish years. I, too, am "halfway through this life," though I hate to admit I've lived long enough to gaze into the past and wonder whether that era was "just a dream."

The song unravels layer upon painful layer that surfaces when I look back on my Then, remembering a life of hanging at "downtown hot spots" that seem no longer relevant. I've become a version of myself that I would have previously hated: segments of *Sesame Street* memorized, lusting after strangers in grocery stores, not to mention that little belly flap above my C-section scar. I can no longer remember being someone who didn't know the difference between a co-pay and a deductible.

I repeat the track, then replay it. By the time we're home, its nuance starts to unfurl like a flower. I've only ever looked back on my younger self with a sense of jealousy, but in Sharon's voice I also hear pity, or at least empathy. Her close examination of Now and Then does not let either side win. Coming from a place where I'm "sure of what I've lived and have known," something I feel deeply in my Now, I can see my younger self, naïve and female, navigating an adult world that didn't give a shit about me: "half shy," "so uncomfortably alone," "think you're so carefree" but "constantly being led astray." I consider some of the painful lessons I had to learn the hard way, things like: *He doesn't deserve you* and *Just because someone can quote a philosopher doesn't make him smart* and *Never date someone who has the master key to your apartment*.

"I wish I could show you how much you've grown," she sings. It's hard to accept that perhaps, in learning how to think about someone other than myself, I might have actually become a better person. Through her words, I can start to see more than just loss—a process of growth, in fact, that would have begun in that moment that I've only ever seen as the one that divides Now from Then: the first time I held my son. In the recovery room just outside the OR, the world that had dimmed gray as I vomited bile during surgery came roaring back into shiny, pink, expertly swaddled focus.

Different parts of "Seventeen" move me with each subsequent listen. Now the moment that hits hardest is when she sings, "I know what you're gonna be," then wails, "*I know that you're gonna be,*" a clever slant repetition. It's like telling a character in a movie you've already seen that you know how it's going to end, even though they can't hear you. You know their fate—that they have one at all—because you've lived it. It doesn't work out how they think it will, you want to tell them, but it's going to be okay.

TUESDAY

8:00 a.m.—98.7°

11:30 a.m.—98.3°

7:00 p.m.—98.7°

Back to normal. The normal of Now, anyway. That's all there is. On this day, that feels like enough.

WEDNESDAY

At preschool pickup, I feel a tickle in the back of my throat.

THURSDAY

I take my temp, then open a new note.

5:00 p.m.—101.5°