

# Beside the Green, Green Grass

Jennifer Walter

On Sundays I am convinced my mom is an angel. She stands at the lectern behind the polished oakwood banister, just feet from the altar—the holiest of holies—hands raised like palm branches oblivious to the Ash Wednesday ritual. With her voice, she can command a crowd. She can make things move.

When I was just old enough to sit alone at Mass in the crowd with everybody else, I watched her stand above the sea of somber heads, sleepy and nodding obediently through the prayers. But when the organ started and Mom began to sing, the rosy stained-glass sunlight seemed to pour through the windows. Voices rose with her, casting nets into the depths of their own spirits, hauling feasts of fishes and gracious prayers translated into song. I thought, when my time comes and I reach the gates of heaven, she will be there, singing.

*Kiss me, out of the bearded barley / Nightly, beside the green, green grass*

Whenever my dad has a few too many beers, he starts to sing while playing his guitar. He doesn't reach deep into his belly and project his voice like he should—all his singing rises through the chest and throat; a recipe for damaged vocal cords and, not to mention, weak singing. He sometimes sings while slouched over, reclining into the couch. And he can't harmonize for shit.

Normally it goes like this: his friend George, a salt-and-pepper ponytailed rocker who plays in a cover band, comes to visit. They set up the equipment: amps, microphones, and the huge binder of guitar tabs with their favorite songs to play. Plus a case of Angry Orchard or Corona in the fridge. It starts out tame, but as the night goes on, empty bottles line up on the coffee table and the hours pass and pass. The amps become louder, the strumming more furious, and the singing more garbled.

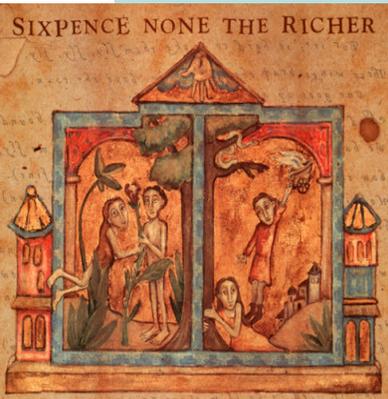
The duet usually begins as a shy thing. Dad will begin by strumming the first few chords. Mom will be in the kitchen, sending emails or washing dishes. She recognizes the intro immediately—"Kiss Me" by Sixpence None the Richer. Sometimes she tries to ignore it because she has work to do. "C'mon honey," Dad insists. Sometimes my sisters and I are there and try to convince her as well. In the end, she always sings.

Dad, tall and heavysset, swaying in his white New Balances and Life is Good t-shirt, wears a black Ovation electric-acoustic swung around his body, baptized with the smell of stale cigarettes and sweat. Soft eyes and protective presence, watching her gently from underneath a beige baseball cap as he strums along. Mom is small but electric, just five-foot-three, but moves mountains with her voice. No matter how many times they perform, I cannot look away. It is the holiest altar I know.

There is something about the song that has always made me feel like crying. It is not sadness, but perhaps tenderness. Maybe it's the key the song is written in or the fact that seeing my parents still in love after all these years is nothing short of a miracle.

*Swing swing, swing the spinnin' step / You'll wear those shoes and I will wear that dress*

They met in Boston 18 years old, both in their first year of engineering school and hundreds of miles away from home. This was back when The Modern Lovers sang about California desert parties and late-night dancing from a tape player in Dad's dorm room.



Sixpence None the Richer

"Kiss Me"

Sixpence None the Richer

11/1997

Squint, Elektra

Dad makes mixtapes for her. Cassettes with the tracks and artists written on them in mechanical pencil. Yaz, Depeche Mode, The The—songs she has never heard from bands that very well could be made up. Music Dad heard via his older brother, John, and found cool enough to keep in his repertoire.

I don't know when they first heard the song "Kiss Me." I like to think it was sometime in the beginning, when they kept making eye contact on the staircase on the way to class.

In a photo from that same year, they are standing in the front yard of my grandma's house, arms draped over each other, hair wild and warm in the summer sun. She wears a baby-pink dress with a white collar. He wears a striped t-shirt and the brightest, whitest smile I have ever seen cross his face. It is the first summer that she comes to visit him in Michigan, just months after they meet. I like to think they both knew the song then. He couldn't play guitar yet, but she could always sing.

*Beneath the milky twilight ...*

I can't remember which day I got the phone call. It was either the 6th or 7th of May.

In a hostel in the heart of Hamburg, Germany, it is around 10 p.m. when I am holding my friend's hair back as he violently pukes into the toilet. Too much beer. I help him find pajamas so he can crawl into one of the beds. I am completely sober.

Dad left for a business trip to Las Vegas in the morning a few days ago, Michigan time. My sisters are waking up like normal and going to school, as they always do. Mom is running errands, taking the dog for walks and testing new parts that came in from China. The next day I will get back on a bus and return to the small town in the middle of Hessen I have called home for the past three months.

And then they get the news. By the time my sisters call me, Mom is already on a plane to Las Vegas. I am in the hallway outside the hostel room around 11 p.m. screaming into the phone, but my sisters reassure me. He's got the best doctor in the area, a specialist in cardiac surgeries. His college friend, Barry, is there with him, along with one of Grandma's nursing friends. He is not alone. He will be okay.

The next morning they book me a ticket to Vegas on the first flight I can catch. Just one more night in my dorm and I will be on the way.

That evening I walk around the neighborhood clutching a rosary and praying frantically in English and German, English and German, trying to escape into the rhythm of prayer, the repetitive words dictating my breathing patterns. I am alone on the side of a hill watching the sun set over an elementary school and all the houses with families inside of them.

Just 20 minutes later when the phone rings I am sitting at my desk, playing music softly. The memories aren't all that clear. Everything fades except the dim light from my desk lamp and the phone buzzing ominously. I don't have to pick it up to know who it is or what she will say.

I tell her I can handle this, I know I can. Tell me what flight to book for the funeral. I can take care of it. This is normal, everyone goes through this. I will make a list—things to pack, trains to catch, people to tell so that I don't fail my classes.

Then somewhere an unearthly panic wells up in my chest and I scream. I throw the phone to the floor, my body going limp, collapsing against my shadow on the wall. I can't

breathe, how can anyone breathe? How am I allowed to still be alive? It is not an angel or a demon or an incredible spirit, just the feeling of 20 years of life being swept out from underneath me, the gates shuttering, keyless locks clamping into place.

That night I do not sleep. I pass out for a single hour around dawn and wake to call the airline to cancel my flight to Vegas. Please don't charge me, I beg. I know this is last minute, the plane is leaving in an hour. But really, it was an emergency, and I am sorry. My dad just died. Please, please don't make us pay that extra money. We need it for the funeral.

And then sleep pulls me back under, a hopeless, dark canon of noiseless shock. I have never known what grief is, or if I am feeling it. I cannot feel a thing, only absence and the sense that I am the only person left in the world.

*Kiss me, down by the broken tree house / Swing me, upon its hanging tire*

I am afraid to see the body. The surgery was hard on him, they said. There is so much fluid in his chest, plus they had to fly him back across the country. I am afraid it won't be my dad, that the image of his distorted remains will be the final memory I have.

The car ride to the funeral home... the walk into the doors... blankly greeting my cousins and Grandma... soft piano music in the background... am I crying? Should I be?

They lead me to where he is laying embalmed in the casket, hands, lips, face swollen to at least three times the size... the toll of trauma. The tips of his fingers are turning black, but somehow the wedding band is still on his finger.

And I feel it—the glaring, poignant absence. He isn't there. I am looking at a home that has been abandoned. All the music has stopped. There isn't even a ringing in my ears. A complete, utter void.

Later I listen to the priest preach about how Dad was a man of God. His body lays with a rosary threaded through his swollen fingers. This was the first time he had been to a church in years.

*Strike up the band and make those fireflies dance / Silver moon's sparkling*

Mom cannot sing that song anymore. She cannot sing at all. It is like the angels took their voice back, if there are any angels on this godforsaken planet.

When I return to Germany, I head right for the hills. My favorite spot in the whole country is along the dirt path by the wind turbines, overlooking the valley. Sarnau and Gossfelden are nested among the rainbow-colored, bordered patches of farmland leading to Wetter, in the distance. Gentle hills roll around the towns, nestling them safely as stitches in a quilt. I told myself one day I would hike to Wetter, but now all I can do is sit. I am in a Monet painting and I can feel the scenery melting before me, wind scarcely touching my face. If it is touching my face I cannot tell. The sun shines and yet it is still so dark.

I think about how easy I have it. I didn't have to wait in the hospital like Mom, heart in her throat, anticipating the doctor's updates. I wasn't on that plane to Vegas with my sisters and Grandma.

When Mom called that night, I was the first of her children to know. It was only a matter of minutes before the rest of the family landed in Vegas. When they boarded the plane, he

was still alive, hanging in limbo. He let go while they were in the air. "How am I going to tell your sisters that their father is dead?" she asked me.

I have played the same tape over and over again in my head: their hopeful smiles, soft hearts breaking to pieces when she tells them in plain English that he is gone. It would have to happen at the airport, so removed from everything else. It is the only image I remember from our conversation.

I think they call that survivor's guilt. My sister is graduating high school and will only have one parent to watch her walk the stage, whereas I had the luxury of both. Grandma is going to a celebration with the constant, nagging reminder of her son's permanent absence. I am sitting on a hill in the most beautiful part of Germany, pulling blades of grass out of the earth and twirling them through my fingers, while Dad's body is an ocean away, six feet underground.

*Bring, bring, bring your flowered hat / We'll take the trail marked on your father's map*

On burial day, Mom notes why the plot diggers are making the hole so big. She will be buried right next to him, she says. The land is already paid for.

Earlier that day, we close the casket for the final time. When we approach the body, she runs her fingers through his hair, brushing it back and kissing his forehead. See you on the other side, she whispers. Every tear is silent. I am watching a woman stronger than Joan of Arc commanding herself to let go.

I think, when her time comes and she reaches the gates of heaven, he will be there, playing the opening chords and waiting for her to sing. In the end, she always sings.

*Nightly, beside the green, green grass*

A year has passed and I still have not visited Dad's grave. It sits unmarked on a hill with the grass slowly growing over it.

Today, we are picking out headstones over text message. They don't make stones like great-grandpa's anymore, Mom says. We can choose from these preset colors, textures, fonts and icons. If we were going to do one like great-grandpa's, we would have to have it custom made. That just costs more money.

Father, son, husband, brother, friend. We are trying to squeeze all these titles on to the small grave marker that will one day sink completely into the ground. We are trying to agree on an icon—angels, crosses, or a floral arrangement? So many earthly decisions.

I haven't seen Mom cry once since the funeral. She soldiers on, through every holiday and decision about the gravesite. She started singing at church again, less than a year later. But my sisters told me she tried to sing "Kiss Me" at a party once and couldn't do it.

Dad, I promise I will return, but I don't know when. Maybe when the headstone is finally put down I will make a pilgrimage to where your body rests. I don't always believe in angels, but I believe in omnipresence—I never lost the part of you that lives in me. Your music and the green, green grass, growing all around.