

# If I Buy Her Candy, Will She Know Who I Am?

Harmony Cox

When I was fifteen years old, my mother sent me on a fact-finding mission to the Ohio Lesbian Festival, a smaller corn-fed cousin to the sprawling militant matriarch that was the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival. My aunt was going with her wife, and my mother thought it would be good for me to go be among those as hairy and liberated as I aspired to be. She was also confident that I was gay, and she was intent on going above and beyond to prove how cool with that she could be.

It wasn't a performative thing, at least not entirely (though she did often gloat about how annoyed it would make my grandparents). She was a social worker in the 90s at the height of the AIDS crisis, and many of her beloved clients were queer people whose abandonment by their families resulted in them having to depend on state-appointed strangers like my mother to survive. These stories rocked her so badly that she turned us all into stalwart allies to the gay and lesbian community in my city, consumed with the need to love them five times as hard as anyone who had ever spurned them. She filled our house with queer people and queer media, resulting in rainbow flags on all of our backpacks and at least one summer where the soundtrack to *Priscilla Queen of the Desert* was also the soundtrack to our lives.

We were always told by our mother that she would accept us unconditionally if we ever wanted to come out, and I believe she died disappointed that none of us ever did. I don't think for a second that anyone can be recruited into queerness, but if the homosexual cabal right-wingers warned us about ever felt the need to try, my mother would have been posted up alongside them with dental dams and PFLAG brochures.

Unfortunately for my mother, I was in no position to process her aggressive acceptance of me. I was such a late bloomer that I was barely aware of the fact other people had genitals, much less that I would have preferences about them. But that mattered little to her. She saw the alternative comics posters on my wall, most of which prominently featured gal pals gal-pallin' it up. (Of course, Maggie and Hopey were gay, and Katchoo and Francine to boot. I hadn't gotten to the parts of the comics that explained that yet. In my defense, the queer content in alternative comics was scarce in those days, and who could afford to buy every issue?!) When she did my laundry and found a purloined Leatherman in my back pocket, her suspicions were confirmed enough to send me on a road trip to find myself.

I wish I could tell you that this trip put all of the pieces into place for me, and I realized that I'd be unwittingly riding the Kinsey scale like a slide whistle for my adult life. However, real life is not that narratively simple. All of the meaning I took from our trip was found in retrospect, so terrified I was to experience things firsthand. I was too shy to even make conversation with the rowdy minivan full of ladies we rode up with, responding with smiles and shakes of my head to their friendly questions. My godmother assured everyone in the car that my silence was not an unhappy one, and that I just needed "time to warm up." Then they left me in peace.

SLEATER-KINNEY DIG ME OUT



Sleater-Kinney

"Buy Her Candy"

Dig Me Out

04/1997

Kill Rock Stars

Once we arrived at the festival, it quickly became apparent that I was the seventh wheel on this big gay velocipede. Everyone else I was with was an adult, and firmly an adult at that—the second youngest person in the car was thirty-four, double and then some to my young self. They were nice people, but this was their day off, and nobody had signed up to babysit. My godmother, bless her soul, set me up with a lawn chair under a shady tree a good distance away from their party wagon. She asked me if I'd be OK on my own for a while, and I nodded eagerly, desperate to be away from a wagonload of intimidating strangers. She pressed some money into my hand and told me to go have fun, then she left me alone for the afternoon.

I peered over the top of my Lois Duncan novel and watched my aunt and her wife cavort with their nearest and dearest. They were all proud self-proclaimed butches, with short hair and thick bodies and flannel shirts tucked neatly into ruffled jeans and cargo shorts. I saw two Leathermen identical to the one I'd stolen from my father, winking merrily from belt holsters. I watched them enviously, devouring their presence. Here were women who defiantly took up space, stomping their workboots in the grass and roaring laughter into the skies like lions staking out territory. They were loud and mannish and assertive and opinionated and so perfectly themselves. Everything I'd been taught to hate about myself they celebrated as if it was the single greatest accomplishment a person could achieve. I could not see a place for myself among them as a young person—how could I laugh so long? How could I curse so loudly? Who would let me swig Franzia straight from the box?

Eventually I got bored watching their bacchanalia, and decided to go see what else the festival had to offer. Mostly I saw women—all women, only women, every kind of women I could think of. I walked past music tents where aging grannies with acoustic guitars were leading Joan Baez singalongs and cursing presidents who had not been in office in decades. I walked past artisans with hair hanging down to the grass, hawking glass-blown one-hitters modeled after the Venus of Willendorf. I saw plenty of butches like my godmother, yes—but femmes too, touching up their lipstick and complaining about what the humidity was doing to their hair. I saw women painted like wood nymphs and plastered with Planned Parenthood bumper stickers. I saw women who wore their radical leanings on their sleeves like a badge of honor, and I saw women with sweaters around their shoulders who pushed baby strollers and would not have been out of place at my snooty high school's PTA. There was even a woman made of grass at the accurately named "Pussy Putt-Putt" gaming booth. Every woman found a home here, united in sisterhood.

Everybody but me, I firmly reminded myself. I had a crush on a new boy every week, even if my fantasies rarely escalated past handholding. I was vaguely aware that people could be bisexual, but I was equally aware that it was somehow the wrong thing to be, and it was more virtuous to pick a side. It was easy to see myself in Archie comics, pining after a dimwitted boy who didn't know I was alive. Not so with a badass like Katchoo. I was never as confident as my queer heroines, never ready to number myself among them. My feelings about women were murkier, harder to identify, and easier to ignore. I'd resolved to be straight, God help me, no matter what.

But in a place like this, it was harder to hide from those feelings. Either I was a poser, an unwelcome snake in the grass of the Pussy Putt-Putt, or there was a larger and scarier possibility to contend with. Fear twisted my guts. I needed to ground myself, so I put my hand in my pocket, counting the money given to me by my godmother. She'd slipped me far too much, maybe hoping I'd find shopping enough of a distraction that I wouldn't return to the van for a while. I decided to put half of it in the shoebox under my bed and

hang onto it for an emergency, as I was a frugal kid prone to disaster planning. But I was hungry, and I wanted a souvenir, so I detoured into the marketplace.

I was immediately drawn to the booksellers' tents. This was back when independent women's bookstores were all the rage, and everybody who was anybody had a tent presence at festivals like this. I darted in and nodded shyly at the staff, then began to peruse the wares available.

I spotted them in a dusty milk crate of \$5 used CDs—the band that would save my young life a hundred times over. These days, Sleater-Kinney is one of the most well-known riot grrrl acts to come out of the 90s. Most people know them best from the string of alt-hits that came from *All Hands on the Bad One*, the 2000 album that launched them into the mainstream and hiked their concert tickets to new and unaffordable heights. But back then, they were one of a handful of similar bands, scrawny angry women screaming their politics over a fuzzy back beat. *Dig Me Out* is their third album, back when they were more punk primitive than art house jams. The cover is unassuming: three polaroids of the band members staring awkwardly off camera and a large shot of Corrin Tucker's hands playing the guitar.

I know it was a powerful relic. My hands shook as I pressed wrinkled dollar bills into the hand of the earthy lady by the cashbox, too intimidated to look her in the eye. I raced back to the van and begged my aunt for her keys, ready to experience what would surely be my favorite new band though the luxury of a good car stereo. She shrugged and handed them over, making me promise to keep the window cracked.

I didn't expect my entire life to change when I hit play. I gawked at the dashboard as screams and shredding riffs filled the air, the soundtrack to a musical slaughterhouse. It was simply everything I had ever wanted. The pure angry energy, the take-no-shit feminism, the challenge in every song: these women were everything I wasn't finding anywhere else. They were female Ramones, lady Stooges, Jello Biafra and Mojo Nixon made girlflesh. They sang about the way patriarchy drags women down, the discomfort of having to swallow your emotions, the world that deserved to be held accountable. It was music to yell to, and as a fifteen-year-old malcontent, I needed to yell about something every fucking day.

It's almost embarrassing how much of me you can find on those old scratched-up CDs, even now. I still know all the words, still hum the melodies under my breath, still scream them in a car with the windows up. Every song on the album is important to me, but one in particular stands out when I look back.

"Buy Her Candy" is one of the last songs on *Dig Me Out*. While the rest of the album is three chord primal scream therapy, this particular song is almost meditative. The complex vocal harmonies from the rest of the album give way to a single voice, nearly sobbing with vibrato along a simple looping melody. The lyrics are about an uneven relationship between two women, and the sweet agony borne by the overinvested party. It's a ballad from the perspective of a woman who is struggling with an unrequited same-sex crush. It both fights with that devotion and celebrates it—even if that love is imperfect, the singer wouldn't accept anything in place of the woman she's put on a pedestal. It's a song that aches with melancholy, sweet and sad. It was also undeniably queer—a woman singing about the pain and pleasure of being in love with a flighty, fickle feminine ideal.

The first time I heard this song I cried. I buried my head in my aunt's steering column and wept like a baby, embarrassed but unable to stop. At the time, I could not explain why the song was making tears stream down my face. All I knew was that it was plunging a

bucket deep into the well of myself, rattling my stomach and throat, and drawing up tears. I thought of the feel a particular arm linked in mine, the music of her laugh, the snap of her gum, the smell of her Bath and Body Works room spray. Her eyes sparkled in my mind and I choked back a new gout of tears.

We'd been friends, best friends, but it wasn't meant to last. By the time I'd been sent to the Ohio Lesbian Festival, my mother wasn't the only one who found me suspect. She'd called me that word—the L-word that isn't love—when she told me we couldn't be friends anymore. Her parents didn't trust me. She didn't like the attention I drew to her. I wasn't worth the strange looks our classmates gave us, the homophobic slurs that chased us as I followed her like a puppy dog down the hall and offered to carry her books again.

I wasn't trying to make her life difficult. We were friends in my mind, good friends, that was all. I didn't understand what made this friendship different in the eyes of everyone but me. If I had understood that this particular song was meant as a monument to the failed relationship between Corrin Tucker and Carrie Brownstein, the women whose creative partnership was responsible for the band I came to love, perhaps I could have put the puzzle pieces together a little more quickly. Maybe I would have understood what made my feelings for my friend so all-encompassing and consuming, impossible to ignore even when they embarrassed both of us. I could have understood why I curled up in the warmth she left in my bed at sleepovers, rolling over to breathe her scent from pillows when she got up to take a shower. Maybe I would have realized that my heart was broken, and why.

Sadly, that is the double-edged curse of songs like "Buy Her Candy:" they impart emotion without context. I had the words, but I was unaware of their meaning then, and for a long time after. For a long time, it was simply a song that made me cry. Now, when I listen to that song, I understand it in a way I couldn't back then. But it was the first clue I had to the way I really felt, and I still hold it dear.