



Pink Floyd

“Wish You Were Here”

Wish You Were Here

09/1975

Harvest

Two Lost Souls

A Maternal Legacy to the Tune of Pink Floyd’s “Wish You Were Here”

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Rolling farmland speckled with windmills like giant specters in the distance gave way, after seven or so hours, to hills and rock. Through a raging thunderstorm that hurled rain at my car in sheets, my mom guided us up the highway, splitting from I-70 near Denver to head towards Boulder, Colorado. This was our third day on the road, my black Infiniti packed to the bursting with every possession to my name, and, in the front, the vessel’s captains: my mom and me, alternating driving, and my cat, Rooney, resting on the center console between us, paws curling over the edge as if holding on for dear life. Our little trio of adventurous souls had spent the past few days trekking across the country from our home in Mechanicsville, Maryland. Our hometown, I should say, because it isn’t home anymore—not for me. This was my great western migration, the quintessential American road trip. Call it late-term manifest destiny, call it a quarter-life crisis, call it an attempt at recreating myself—whatever. I was going to see the country with my mom, visit her friend in Boulder, stay in Las Vegas with an old friend for a bit, then move on to one of the coastal states, California, maybe, or Oregon. The first day’s journey took us from southern Maryland to Lexington, Kentucky and the next day we ventured on to Topeka, Kansas, aided by podcasts and playlists and a British murder mystery on tape.

On the third day we cruised through midwestern farmland and crossed the state line into Colorado, the West no longer a wish but a reality. Something beautiful happened as we took our exit for Boulder. We tired of the podcast that was playing and decided to scan the radio for stations—there had to be some good music playing here, in this undeniably cool place. As the radio sifted through static buzz, the gray thunderheads above us parted, downpour slowing to a drizzle, and ahead the silhouette of the Rocky Mountains appeared through the mist. A station picked up and the car’s speakers emanated the first few soft notes of a song we both knew and loved. My mom and I laughed with glee, giddy at the natural giants in front of us and at the timing of the radio, and when David Gilmour started singing, we were both right on time:

*So, so you think you can tell
Heaven from hell
Blue skies from pain
Can you tell a green field
From a cold steel rail?
A smile from a veil?
Do you think you can tell?*

It felt like fate or magic, some beautiful ritual designed for and because of us, our love for each other, for this song, for travel and exploration and the fucking mountains. When I originally brought this road trip up, my mom didn’t think she was going to come with me. She had spent days and even weeks in a van in her twenties, travelling around North America with friends, but now she was in her sixties and, despite her good health, concerned that her body wouldn’t be able to handle it. I asked her to consider it and let it go, but brought it up to her again later, asking her again if she would come with me.

"Okay!" She replied immediately, her face lighting up.

I suppose she had thought it over and changed her mind. Partially I think she was just happy that I wanted her, instead of a friend my age, to go with me so badly. And I did—this was a once in a lifetime opportunity for the two of us to deepen an already wonderful bond. The travelling went smoothly. Mom said she felt great every day, that this trip had made her gain a confidence in herself and her body that she had been missing for quite some time. She gave me a confidence in myself, too, through her pride and trust in me.

Pink Floyd is my mom's favorite band. She saw them quite a few times in the '70s and has imparted that love for them to me. My mom and my dad and I have watched live Pink Floyd DVDs together, have played silly games in their living room or cleaned the whole house with Pink Floyd albums playing loudly over the outdated but awesome sound system. "Wish You Were Here" is my mom's favorite song of all time and I understand why. The song's fuzzy opening guitar greets the listener, grainy and distant like an out of focus memory. After a brief chord progression, it's joined by a clearer, closer acoustic guitar, shaky at first, like the player is trying something on for size, attempting to recreate the electric chords and reconcile the past with the present. The opening measures act as a summons, beckoning listeners closer so that David Gilmour can, with a tired desperation, deliver the first few questioning lines. Drums come in, and along with the vocals and guitar they build into an incredible sonic force, dripping with an ache that's palpable through weathered speakers.

*Did they get you to trade
Your heroes for ghosts?
Hot ashes for trees?
Hot air for a cool breeze?
Cold comfort for change?
Did you exchange
A walk on part in the war
For a lead role in a cage?*

In Colorado my mom and I sang, staring out at a landscape comfortably familiar to her and stimulatingly foreign to me. Between us, Pink Floyd raged in careful construction, coming to a climax for the song's final verse.

*How I wish, how I wish you were here
We're just two lost souls swimming in a fish bowl
Year after year
Running over the same old ground
How we found
The same old fears
Wish you were here.*

The lyrics, the distant guitar that bookends the song, the tone of aching nostalgia—they all establish the notion of absence so prevalent in the song and on the entirety of the album for which it's the titular track. *Wish You Were Here* was a turning point for Pink Floyd. They were riding the massive global success of *Dark Side of the Moon* and still dealing with their split from original vocalist Syd Barrett. *Wish You Were Here* is about Barrett, but it's also about who Pink Floyd was as a band when they were starting out, about the fear of losing themselves in fame. And here we were, my mother and I, halfway across the country, both half-wondering when we would see each other next. Both alike

and wholly different from Pink Floyd, this was my turning point. I was starting a new life and leaving the east coast, my family, my friends, and who I used to be behind.

The few minutes "Wish You Were Here" played felt monumental. As we cruised into my mom's favorite city with her favorite song playing on an unknown radio station, the legacy of love was tangible between us—love for travel, for music, for family, for constantly discovering ourselves. I knew that as I started and settled into a new life out west there would be a lot of times when I would miss my old home, my friends, and my family. There would be a lot of times that people on the east coast would wish I was there, and a lot of times when I would wish they were out west with me. There would be an equal amount of times that I would be glad to be alone in this new place, separate from everything and everyone I used to know. But in that moment, with my mom and I singing along off-key to a song we've sung countless times before, the Rocky Mountains rising in front of us, I was just glad we were both there.