

On *Born in the U.S.A.* by Bruce Springsteen

Alina Stefanescu

"Born in the U.S.A."

He has dark curly hair, a flirt in his laugh, a flag on his mantle, two conservative parents waiting for him back in Atlanta, a family of Limbaugh-lovers and born-again Christians. Born in the U.S.A. Eating it from the inside with their wars and armchair crusades. He is the all-American boy I can't stop watching.

"Cover Me"

Bombs fall on Baghdad. We kiss like rockets, ready to burn. We are eager to stay free, running from the last time we lied, the last time we failed. He's not looking for a lover. I'm a single mother 24 years into finding my voice, learning to use it against the war. I'm a wild card, a Romanian-Alabamian. "I'm a shitty girlfriend," I tell him, "but you will never meet a better cover." He shuts the door.

"Darlington County"

We sit on stools at Jay's and argue about the Iraq war. It's our favorite bar in Arlington, the only place where the owner wears a mullet, offers three-dollar pitchers after work, reminds us of being Southern. The mounted television offers drum-rolls, small-town parades, a diorama of mediated patriotism. He says he can't question the President. Not about war. Not about national security. He was raised a patriot. I relish impugning him, love watching his face fall when I compare him to a missile. But then he kisses me and I don't know anything anymore.

"Working on the Highway"

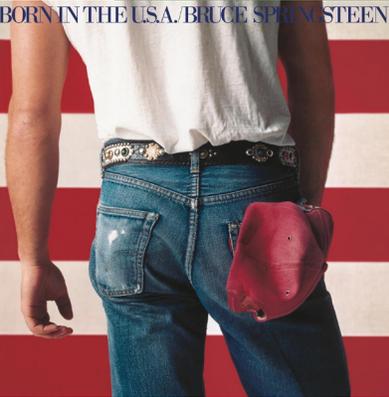
He takes me for drives along the blacktop, going nowhere, fills my head with Bruce Springsteen, shows me how to taste the parts of America I've missed. He introduces me to Walker Percy, convinces me to re-read Tocqueville, describes working two summers on a fishing boat in Alaska, learning Spanish while framing houses on pick-up construction crews. He uses his hands like someone who knows what hands can do. I wave my pen, say *Vaclav Havel*. He grabs my wrist.

"Downbound Train"

He left a pregnant girlfriend. I had an abortion. We sink into conversations we try to stay drunk enough to forget, and I don't regret anything, any morning. But it's all there in the morning.

"I'm On Fire"

Nobody at work knows he's leaving, except for me, who has learned the importance of keeping a man's secrets when they are tied to her own. He stands on a teeny stage at Red Robin for karaoke night, mic in one hand, cigarette in the other. Our friends laugh as his lips brush the mic. "This song is for Trooper," he says.



Bruce Springsteen

Various

Born in the U.S.A.

06/1984

Columbia

Our friends shrug—must be someone back home. But I know his home is shaky, and Trooper can't stop moving, can't stop watching him. *Oh oh oh I'm on fire...*

"No Surrender"

We swear to end things. We erase each other's numbers from our phones. We get drunk and call each other from friends' cell phones. He is back in Atlanta. I am in DC, watching exceptional arrogance turn into laws passed against Muslims by Congress.

"Bobby Jean"

- ▶ Aren't you afraid of breaking things?
- ▶ No. Everything I know has already been broken.
- ▶ That's a lie. Your parents are still married. Mine defected to America, chased the American dream, wound up with the great American divorce.
- ▶ You think married people aren't broken, Alina? They are.
- ▶ I don't ever want to marry. I don't want to hurt anyone. I don't want to break something I swore to make beautiful.
- ▶ We don't have to break this. We can love it and live it and let it go. Maybe that's the best way to preserve it. Come here, Alina...
- ▶ But—
- ▶ Chase this with me. Show me.

"I'm Goin' Down"

I hear this song for the first time on a mix CD he burns for me. The one labelled *Trooper*.

"Dancing in the Dark"

The man I married was also the man I left at least twice before accepting his proposal at a truck stop somewhere along a highway in Kentucky, between towns, between families, between places. He wrapped a piece of twine around my wrist. I thought we were tough enough to let love go.

He laughs: "That's where the Boss was wrong. Tough doesn't ride off on a motorcycle into the sunset. Tough is hanging around for the boring part, waiting, living on that cusp of discontent, not ever getting enough—but holding out for her anyway."

"My Hometown"

We've been married for over a decade. He still sings the Boss at the top of his lungs in the shower. The other night, we listened to *Born in the U.S.A.* together, foraging, feeling the breath of old moonlight on our backs. I hear an anthem against the wars, a paean to some imagined nation, a series of collages and erasures, an unfinished story we follow into neon sunset, fingers crossed.

When we got to this song—the last song, the end-note—I had to walk away. He wanted to know why. I told him the truth every immigrant knows—*it's not my song*. My hometown is an impossible construction. I grew up in Tuscaloosa only to be reminded that where you live is not the same thing as a home. I wasn't born in the U.S.A., but I still know all your lyrics by heart.