

# On “Miserable” by Lit

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For Diane and Todd

I am fourteen when my parents decide that it’s imperative for us to take a two-week road trip in the ‘91 Oldsmobile Cutlass Ciera from our home in Connecticut across the country. Well, not *all* the way across, omitting states I actually wanted to see, like California and Washington, where all my favorite musicians were from. Instead, we’d stop just short of the Idaho border, going as west as the edge of Wyoming, visiting nearly every National Park and major geologic formation on the way once we crossed the Mississippi. We had done this already, as family vacations when I was 2 and 3 and 4, driving around in a huge RV. But it had been ten years, and the combination of watching me prepare to enter high school and the longing for a vacation more extravagant than the annual 3-day weekends we’d spend in New Hampshire must’ve been the perfect conditions for my parents to act on what probably started as a fleeting pang of nostalgia.

None of this plan appeals to me: cell phones are only for celebrities in 1999, so I will have to spend two whole weeks truly away from my friends. *We’ll still be driving back through Illinois the day of the Semi-Formal! It’s not even possible to make up two weeks of work when school is done nine days after we get home!*

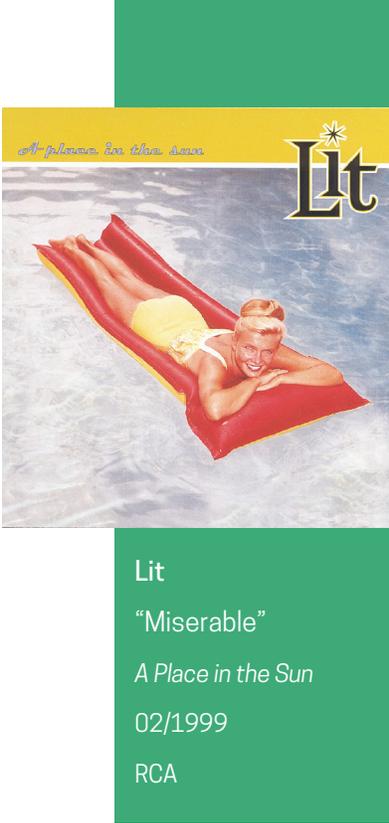
My parents looked up from the dining room table covered in maps and a handwritten itinerary, and compromised to calm me. We’d get some phone cards, and I could call friends in the evening, much like I did at home. They’d shift a few days here and there, aim to drive a longer stretch before stopping, and we’d get home Friday morning, in time for me to get ready and make it to the dance on time.

When tasked with packing, which my parents handled deliberately with care and a checklist, I didn’t have to think that hard. I knew exactly everything I needed: JNCOs, band t-shirts, metallic hair mascara, and as many packages of double-A batteries as I could stockpile, in order to fuel my Discman.

The two 8-packs of batteries still weren’t enough: I was submerged in my headphones for hours a day, as my parents took turns driving. Sometimes, if we were near a major metro area, they’d turn around and alert me that I could probably conserve some power by listening to the radio with them for a while, but mostly we were in isolated areas that offered weak signals of oldies, religious programs, or unending static.

I listened to every disc I brought at least ten times. But I listened to Lit’s *A Place in the Sun* the most, and “Miserable,” naturally, was the go-to track of the whole trip. I doubt I even understood the full extent of the lyrics’ wordplay, but I latched on hard to the unabashed wallowing of it. “Miserable” was the perfect soundtrack, really: one-chord verses, simple, a performance of emotional nakedness in exactly the way I was at 14: trying hard to be edgier and cleverer and more serious than anyone could possibly take me. Expressions of enthusiasm for anything other than music or meeting up with my friends were a sign of immaturity, a violation.

I sat in the backseat, carving out my own little world, looking out the window for as long as I could without getting car sick. I saw an Amish family on a buggy in Ohio, along with farm after farm. There was an enormous brush fire at one of them, close enough to the road to feel its heat. It was mid-sunset, and the flames and the long, extended



midwestern horizon were drenched in smoke and every kind of pink and orange light. I had never seen a fire ungoverned like that; it scared and dazzled me, a reaction I kept to myself.

Earlier in Ohio, my parents had a misunderstanding—a kind of totally ordinary snippy exchange that can easily escalate when one is trapped in a sedan for 18 hours a day surrounded by family. My mother had recently undergone an elaborate oral surgery, and was likely in a lot of pain, another probable factor in facilitating this rare fight. (Looking back, I think we left the day after her procedure, so we could return in time for my school dance: a detail I'm sure I neglected to notice as a kid.) Their voices continued to raise over the volume of my headphones. These are not the contouring silicone of today's earbuds, but the chintzy foam-covered speakers on an adjustable headband, so it doesn't take much to interfere. But I slid them away, and listened to their animated exchange grow heated. We pulled into the empty parking lot of a drive-thru car wash in the middle of the afternoon. We stayed there until their shouts softened into conversation, apology, and eventual laughter. It impressed me how artfully everything was resolved—and how quickly, having spent the last few years steeped in the often-unresolved drama of my adolescent friend groups. I returned my headphones to my ears as we drove towards Indiana, and a hotel room that offered each of us a little more space.

I acted totally disaffected at every major sight: the Badlands' yawning rust-red formations, the vista of the Grand Tetons, the awe of Devil's Tower, my Discman serving as my defense in the big back pocket of my giant wide-leg jeans. Despite my shrug at every sight, out here I was a kind of Schrodinger's Teenager: both apathetic and not, until someone could observe otherwise. My parents would be the only ones observing it, but just in case, I would tamp down my wonder anyway, in fear of someone discovering my uncool enthusiasm. Enjoying a family road trip would be the biggest betrayal of the young identity I'd curated.

Twenty years later, Lit is now mostly based in Nashville, trading in distortion pedals for pedal steel guitar. 14-year-old me wants to call them sell-outs, taking the bait of a re-brand because country is more lucrative than whatever late-90s genre wore long goatees with bowling shirts and studded belts. But 34-year-old me knows better, and kind of understands. I live in a place where I see sprawling fields draped in the sunset's pink light almost daily, Amish farms on rolling hills with mountains as their backdrop, where every car ride is filled with contented sighs of wonder, with a shriek of joy at a cow scratching her ear against a fence post or a red tailed hawk circling overhead: an act unrecognizable to my late-90s self.

None of the friends I'd been so worried about leaving for two weeks even knew what to say whenever I called from our hotel. I went to that semi-formal without a date, and can't remember anything else about it beyond a hazy outline of the cafeteria with dimmed lights, a DJ in one corner. To be fair, I don't remember a lot about Yellowstone Park or Mount Rushmore, either. But I remember, from the vantage point of the back seat, surrounded by the blue plush interior of the Oldsmobile, the way my parents looked at each other, even when they were shouting: a falseness, a defense mechanism, a kind of acting miserable, when it was so clear it wasn't what they really felt.