

That Trick Play

Katie Runde

Fountains of Wayne's *Welcome Interstate Managers* is an album full of contrasts: bright pop beats balance out the loneliness and loss of the lyrics in some tracks, while the PG-13 teen-pop song "Stacy's Mom" is just about, you know, Stacy's mom. "Bright Future in Sales" is catchy pop rock about being so overwhelmed by your shitty office job and your burgeoning alcoholism that you pass out in planter at the Port Authority, while "Hackensack" is a love song about longing in Jersey while the love of your life goes off to do something cooler somewhere far away.

My college boyfriend and I played the album on repeat when we road tripped back to New Jersey from the Florida Keys with my dad. The three of us had stayed a little longer than my mom and my younger sister, who flew home ahead of us. It was the winter of 2004, and my CD was an illegally burned copy, with the title Sharpied in marker. All of our music was stolen then.

"All Kinds of Time" is a song on the album about a high school quarterback that stretches the moment between the snap and his receiver's catch into a four minute-and-20-second slow-motion meditation. It repeats the phrase "he's got all kinds of time" so many times that we know the point is that he does, tonight, but he doesn't, really. The Tobias Wolff short story "Bullet in the Brain" pulls off a similar, impossible trick of capturing a whole life through the lens of a singular moment, of letting us linger in that place for a few pages or a few minutes in a way you never can in real life.

Like my burned, stolen CD, this time with my dad, this whole trip, and the three years before that were all stolen, too. It wasn't a bullet in his brain, but a tumor in there that they said was supposed to have killed him quick sometime during my sophomore year of college. Instead, experimental drugs held it off for another three years, changing him into five or six different kinds of not-him people along the way, taking away most of his sight while it was at it.

Every three months for the last three years, they'd told us he wasn't dying yet, and to go home and live with whomever he was, for a little while more. He had good stretches, of brisk walks and morning mass and lunches at the pub, and bad stretches of being so mean or obstinate that I had to pretend I was a different kind of not-me when I was with him, too, had to turn off the impatient, bewildered teenage college kid and pretend I was a mature, neutral observer, a cheerful and unexhausted helper, an improv actor who could roll with any cue without losing her shit. My sister and I started calling him Marty, instead of dad.

In "All Kinds of Time," the quarterback feels a strange inner peace in his body, in knowing who he is in the world in that moment after the snap, in the muscle memory of the thousands of throws he's made before, in the feeling that his family is watching, his team is behind him, and the receiver is waiting under a golden ray of light. After the chaos of the three years before it, our trip to the Keys had been an unexpected peaceful stretch of warm evenings watching the boats lit up for Christmas and early mornings making small talk with the fishermen on Seven Mile Bridge. We'd taken family trips to the Keys before my dad got sick, and our familiar rented condo, the conch chowder, and the Jimmy Buffett cover bands everywhere let us all relax a little.



Fountains of Wayne

"All Kinds of Time"

Welcome Interstate Managers

06/2003

S-Curve · Virgin

If my mom was nervous about two twenty-one-year-olds taking over for a week and then driving a few thousand miles in her minivan, she didn't say so. In "Bullet in the Brain," the narrator lists all the things he doesn't remember in his last moments before he dies, all the details that fall away, and then tells us about the singular, sensory memory of a day on a baseball field that endures before everything fades to black. I hope a few of our last days in the Keys with my dad had a shot at being those enduring kinds of memories: an afternoon arguing about Notre Dame football over cheeseburgers at Herbie's, an evening with Coors Lights on the patio laughing at the strange diving pelicans.

On the road trip home, I chose a Super 8 with bulletproof glass at the check-in window for us to stay at for the night, instead of the nicer hotel nearby. It was the kind of place my dad would have chosen if he were in charge, because he had been cheap and rich at the same time when he was himself. I didn't know then which parts of the old him were worth adopting myself and which ones I should let fall away, and so I chose this one terrible trait to try on, this irrational preference for horrible hotels.

My boyfriend tried and failed to convince me in the parking lot to stay at the not-murdery Marriott nearby, but I was having none of it. We slept on top of the cigarette-burned Super 8 blankets. I admitted the next day that the Super 8 had been a dumb idea, and my boyfriend agreed, without getting mad about it, and then drove the minivan for another fifteen hours even though he'd hardly slept the night before.

In *Everything Happens*, her podcast about battling her own stage-four cancer and what hard, necessary truths it's taught her, writer and professor Kate Bowler talks about living her life in three-month intervals. She says each one feels like a step back from a cliff, she says you can make yourself a little a space where you can live, on the cliff, for a while. In "All Kinds of Time," the quarterback takes a step back, under attack from the defense, knowing with such certainty in that moment that he's safe, that no one and nothing can touch him.

For the three years my dad was sick, we lived with the opposite of that QB's confidence, knowing we were playing in some weird new-rules overtime that could run out at any moment. And for three more months after our road trip with my dad, we played by those rules a little longer. I went back to college for my last semester. My boyfriend wrote the lyrics to "Hey Julie," a bright, poppy song from *Welcome Interstate Managers* about getting worn down and who's there to pick you up at the end of the day, on a Post-It when I didn't know if I'd make it through student teaching.

My mom and my sister came out for graduation in May, even though by March my dad's time had already started to run out. By June the game would be over, and he would be gone.

There's such a sad undercurrent to "All Kinds of Time," in the dramatic irony of what we know and the quarterback doesn't: the magic of his moment on the field is finite, the flip side of that golden, invincible feeling he has is that it's all actually over before it even begins. I feel a little sorry for him, wondering whether his life will be a disappointment after this throw, whether he'll try and measure every good thing that ever happens to him against these few seconds on this one Friday night under the lights.

Losing someone when you're young gives you a way to measure what's worth giving a shit about a few decades earlier than a lot of people get it. It's the inverse of what happens to the quarterback in "All Kinds of Time." It's a weird superpower to take with you into adulthood, really – REALLY getting at twenty-one that you're not immortal and this whole thing will be over in about a minute one way or another.

I can't say I've made every decision since 2004 with this in mind. I watch a lot of reality TV and spent a beautiful fall Saturday evening in line for three hours to upgrade my iPhone. But with all the big ones, I think I've decided what to do knowing no one really has all kinds of time. I've never taken a job that I hated so much I wanted to get drunk and sleep in a planter. I use all my credit card points on really nice hotels. I take road trips with my own daughters to see our favorite people whenever I can. I always try and really ask strangers about their lives and learn about them when I meet them. When I was 23, I married that college boyfriend who drove with Marty and me and burned me the *Welcome Interstate Managers* CD. And I try to write stories that pull off that impossible trick in "All Kinds of Time," that trick play you can't do in real life as it's happening, of manipulating one moment into something much longer