

# Birds and Ships

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*Who knew wood paneling could be so romantic?* This was one of the many thoughts racing through my head as I attempted to get warm under the threadbare, scratchy blanket. Who knew that I, ever a cynic, could even process the thought of romance in a way that wasn't mocking or sarcastic? But I was feeling warm and glowing. Isn't that how romance is defined in those kinds of girl-meets-boy-and-falls-in-love movies? Was I starring in my own rom com? How did I get here?

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My friend who wasn't a friend, but wasn't quite yet a boyfriend, was located in Massachusetts. I was living in New Jersey. And we were both tired of driving 250 miles for "date night." After some discussion, we agreed that finding a mid-point somewhere in Connecticut, and preferably cheap and cheesy where we would play characters from a steamy romance novel, would be best. I found the Milford Motel the way all sexy romance characters find their no-tell motels by Googling "I-95" and "cheesy motel" and "wood paneling." The Milford Motel was the first hit, and given that it came with a black and white print out coupon advertising a \$49.99 rate per night, it won out over less desirable locations.

After battling traffic on I-95 and I-91 respectively, we arrived at The Milford, conveniently located right off the exit from the interstates, a gem tucked in between a Pilot AutoCenter, a Wendy's, Dunkin Donuts and a Penthouse Playmates "boutique." We were greeted by a mangy grey and white cat seated on a cracked vinyl chair in the inappropriately-named reception area. A surly "host" behind bullet-proof glass handed us two faded, blue towels and the giant key to Room 131 where my friend, a son of a Boston cop, informed me that the dents in the door could have only been made by a cops' baton during some sort of raid.

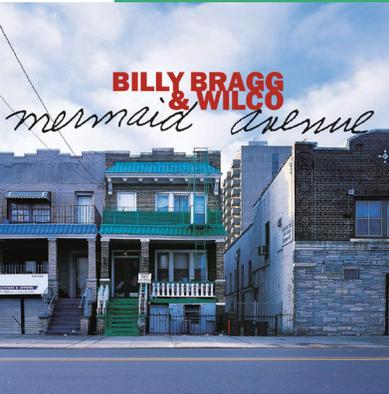
Inside wasn't much better. One light hung over a busted table with two faded chairs, and the bed, barely larger than a twin, had a scratched formica headboard, two deflated pillows, one flat sheet and a bedspread that looked eerily similar to one my parents had donated to Goodwill in 1980. My friend and I looked at each other and immediately burst out laughing. We threw our provisions – iPods, beer, and candy – on the table and headed to our planned outing of Mexican food and bowling.

At El Torrero, Milford, Connecticut's home of the one-liter margarita, we wolfed down tequila, indulged on empanadas and fajitas, and discussed all the reasons why our previous marriages had failed. I was still smarting from my failure to succeed, and he was still trying to adjust to a life that didn't include seeing his daughter every day. The weight of our combined baggage should have dampened the evening, but we laughed and talked long after our plates were cleared.

"Did you bring it," I asked.

"Your playlist? I uploaded the songs last night."

"Did you listen to any of them?"



Billy Bragg & Wilco

"Birds and Ships"

Mermaid Avenue

06/1998

Elektra

"Some. On the way down."

"So...?"

I held my breath. I have a complicated relationship with my playlists, and constantly revising the soundtrack to my life, depending on my moods. As a "mix-tape" junkie, when I make a mix for someone, I spend hours poring through my music library, selecting only songs that means something to me and tell the story of the mix-receiver and I. The final playlist I had presented to my friend had been revised six times after deliberate and methodical consideration and included a careful selection of songs that didn't mention anything about dating or worse, BOYFRIENDS. They were all "getting to know you" or "missing you" songs with a few classics thrown in for good measure. If asked, I could always say the mix was a representation of certain times in musical history.

"I loved it," he said. "Especially 'Birds and Ships.'"

"Oh, I love that one too. It's a Woody Guthrie song. Wilco and Billy Bragg recorded it for a collection they did of his previously unreleased stuff."

"That line, 'where might my lonesome lover be,'" he paused, and looked at me.

"Yeah." I could feel myself reddening and looked away, swigging happily on my tequila.

We sat in silence for a bit longer, making eye contact every once in a while, and blushing, before heading back to the motel.

On the rock-hard, scratchy bed, we lay side by side, headphones on, listening to my playlist. Earlier in our not-quite relationship, we had discovered how well we slept next to each other, how our various limbs fit together like puzzle pieces. I rolled over onto my side, letting him spoon me. Bob Dylan sang about leaving me lonesome when I go, and a cover of The Beatles "Don't Let Me Down" rang softly in our ears. At "I'm in love for the first time, this time it's going to last," I smiled and grasped his hand, while he snuggled in closer. And then "Birds and Ships."

I started at the wood paneling, feeling like I was having some sort of out of body experience. I was deeply drunk, and the room rocked slowly as my thoughts fired away in rapid, cannon-fire progression, carefully cataloging my good luck, followed by "this is crazy" followed by "what's next" and then, "I am probably going to fuck this up too." I have always wanted to turn my brain off for just five minutes, if only to appreciate the silences in moments like these.

"Where might my lonesome lover be?" came through the headphones.

I realized that the back of my neck was wet, and I reached up to touch my friend's face, wiping his very quiet tears. My inner monologue finally shut up.

"I am glad I'm here," I said quietly, into the darkness, still staring at the walls.

"Me too."

I rolled over and buried my face into his warm neck, where I'm told I fell asleep.

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Years later, we are navigating the evening routine. There are lunches to be made, dishes to be washed, homework to review, and emails to respond to. With three children and two careers, life sometimes feels like a never-ending list of unenjoyable tasks. We have the added stress of packing for a trip. The girls are heading off to visit their grandparents in New Jersey while we ride our bikes through Italy. It's a double celebration of sorts. My husband recently turned 50, and we made it to our 10<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary. We hurry over our well-worn paths in the kitchen, filling out paperwork, checking off lists and barking orders at our children. The music, which had just been background noise, comes into focus. The first few chords of "Birds and Ships" fill the air, and stop, just for a moment to touch shoulders and lean into one another, before continuing our chores. I am still glad to be here.