

Soundtrack

It's always a long way to home, even longer on this dreary night. I am alone except, I suppose, for the company of my music, the songs playing randomly from the playlist. The night glides by in perfect darkness, only the car's headlights tethering me to this world. The melodies of the passing soundtrack conjure up images of broken hearts, urban wastelands, other roadways. Life is a Highway comes to an end, then a mere second of silence, to be replaced incongruously by I Wanna Hold Your Hand. The jangle of the music jolts me, and without thought I find myself transported back in time.

I am riding on a bus, not a school bus, but a city bus. This is a big deal for me. I've learned the route from home to my new school. I recognize many of the faces of the passengers. I know the bus driver, who is always the same, who always gives me a smile when I climb up the stairs on my ten year old legs. I sit half-way down the bus and I am feeling pretty grown up.

*Oh, I'll tell you something
I think you'll understand
When I say that something
I wanna hold your hand*

This is the soundtrack of my ride, running through my head in an ever repeating loop as I gaze out the window at the city going by. I know, quite self-consciously, that it is important. I understand its significance, for it is the first rock 'n roll song I have adopted as my own. No more children's songs. This is the music of teenagers, and I am one of them now, at least in my head, in my heart. I have crossed that threshold. This is the Beatles, this is 1963, and this is the first thing I have loved that I discovered on my own. This is not a gift from my parents, not something they have introduced me to. This is mine. This is my friends'. This is ours.

The bus lurches to a stop, the woman one seat up and on the other side of the aisle moaning ever so slightly. The door opens, and rising from the street, up the steps, is Pamela. Beautiful blonde Pamela, who is in my class. Who knows me, but who refuses to look at me. What does this mean?

*I wanna hold your hand
I wanna hold your hand*

Pamela, I wanna hold your hand. In my ten year old heart, that is all I want or can even imagine. But it is enough. I am launched on life's quest for love, true love. I wanna hold your hand.

The Beatles end, there is a moment of silence, and Ian and Sylvia's Four Strong Winds comes flowing up the wire and out of my speakers. The road stretches on wearily before me, unrelenting in its refusal to bring me home. A fog feebly rises.

*Four strong winds that blow lonely
Seven seas that run high
All these things that don't change
Come what may*

I am reminded of my Dad's white pick-up, which he loaned to me when I was nineteen. "Yes, you can take the truck. Go out west for the summer, but just don't smash it up." And now my best friend Dave and I are roaring down an Alberta highway, land flatter than I thought possible,

Soundtrack

but with the Calgary skyline a smudge on the horizon. And beyond that, the Rocky Mountains rising from the earth with all my hopes. Like hope, they seem to float, for the truth is all you can really perceive are their snow capped tops shining in the sun, their base too mired in the earth and too obscured by the distance to see.

It's early May and we are heading to Banff on the promise of a summer in this resort town, overflowing with the young who provide cheap labour for the hotels, the restaurants and attractions, the stores. The sun shines on us just as it shines on those distant mountain tops. Dave turns to me and says, "This is gonna be the best summer ever."

And he is right. Before the summer is over I have climbed mountains, partied in the bars until we were thrown out, stolen the Hudson's Bay flag on a dare and returned it the next night, and fallen in love. And out of love. The song ends.

Pause. The unmistakable bullet drums and raucous guitar of Born to Run commence. Bruce Springsteen sings,

*I wanna know if love is wild
I wanna know if love is real*

And into the room walks Sally. In that instance my life is changed, though I barely sense it at the time. The music plays louder but the crowd seems to fade away as all my consciousness is drawn to her, even as she stops in the door and looks around, clearly searching for someone.

It might as well be me. And evincing a courage I have so rarely felt toward women, I walk up to her and say, "Hi. I'm Jake. Would you like to dance?" She looks at me, startled, but perhaps a bit intrigued. Perhaps. "I'm looking for a friend." "I'm a friend", I say. Did I just say that? "Come on. Born to Run doesn't last forever."

And it doesn't. Just long enough for me to fall in love and for Sally to decide that one more dance wouldn't hurt. I don't remember the songs that followed, but I do remember the courage Bruce Springsteen gave to me for that one true moment.

And that is all I remember when Born to Run ends, the playlist falls silent again, and then recommences with Walking on Sunshine. The drum beats, Katrina shouts, "Ow", the Waves bang out the melody. This was our song, Sally's and mine. The song came out shortly after the birth of Johnathan and perfectly summed up our feelings at the time. Actually, not the verses, but the refrain.

*I'm walkin' on sunshine
And don't it feel good*

We'd put the record on and dance around the house, Sally holding Johnathan, me holding Johnathan, the two of us holding onto each other and our future. All the Johnathans flash before me in a kaleidoscope of half-remembered images, in our arms, stumbling to walk, first day of school, fast forward to the teens and I'm aging two years for every one of his.

Your child is a ship sent forth upon the ocean, and you are both its wind and its water. You hold them close, you let go half frightened, half proud, you wave farewell and never say goodbye.

Soundtrack

Johnathan has long ago left home, a young man finding his footing in the world, our only child. The one truly important accomplishment of my life.

The song ends. It all ends too soon. Pause. Quiet. Only for a second. And Van Morrison's voice comes out of the speakers, smooth as sailing, gentle as a breeze, strong as life itself.

*We were born before the wind
Also younger than the sun
Ere the bonnie boat was won
As we sailed into the mystic*

And I am sailing now, down this highway, as the fog thickens into rolling ocean swells. I am the boat, I am the mystic, as I float on a sea of memories and promises. This is always the song I return to for consolation. When my parents died. When Sally left me, born to run, walking on sunshine. I wanna hold your hand.

But there is no time to chase these regrets down. The exit lane materializes out of the uncertain night. For one moment I imagine driving by, but I know I won't. I turn off the highway, piercing the darkness, away from other possibilities, toward home.