

nick & norah's

INFINITE PLAYLIST

Rachel Cohn &
David Levithan

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The Acknowledgments Playlist

1. Tina Turner—"The Best" (for Jennifer Rudolph Walsh, Lisa Grubka, and Katie Glick)
2. Ray Charles—"You Are My Sunshine" (for Alicia Gordon and Bari Zibrak)
3. Lucinda Williams—"2 Kool 2 B 4-Gotten" (for Lorene Scafaria)
4. Belle & Sebastian—"Wrapped Up in Books" (for Jack Martin)
5. Prince—"Nothing Compares 2 U" (for Joe Monti)
6. Elvis Costello—"Alison" (for Allison Wortche)
7. The Cure—"Pictures of You" (for Melissa Nelson and Isabel Warren-Lynch)
8. Louis Armstrong—"A Kiss to Build a Dream On" (for all the good people of Knopf)
9. The Beatles—"Paperback Writer" (for our dear author friends)
10. Julie Andrews—"The Sound of Music" (for our loving families)
11. Rufus w/ Chaka Khan—"You Got the Love" (for Stephanie and Al)
12. Kylie Minogue—"Can't Get You Out of My Head" (for Billy and Nicolicious)
13. Jens Lekman—"You Are the Light (By Which I Travel into This and That)" (for Nick)
14. Kelly Clarkson—"Miss Independent" (for Anna)
15. Q and Not U—"Wonderful People" (for Martha)
16. The Magnetic Fields—"How Fucking Romantic" (for Nancy)

1. NICK

The day begins in the middle of the night. I am not paying attention to anything but the bass in my hand, the noise in my ears. Dev is screaming, Thom is flailing, and I am the clockwork, I am the one who takes this thing called music and lines it up with this thing called time. I am the ticking, I am the pulsing, I am underneath every part of this moment. We don't have a drummer. Dev has thrown off his shirt and Thom is careening into feedback and I am behind them, I am the generator. I am listening and I am not listening because what I'm playing isn't something I'm thinking about, it's something I'm feeling all over. All eyes are on us. Or at least that's what I can imagine in my stageblindness. It's a small room and we're a big noise and I am the nonqueer bassist in a queercore band who is filling the room with undertone as Dev sing-screams, *Fuck the Man / Fuck the Man / I really want to / Fuck the Man*. I am punctuating and I am puncturing and I am punching the air with my body as my fingers press hard into the chords. Sweat, malice, and hunger pour from me. This is release, or maybe it's just a plea for release. Dev is wailing now and Thom is crashing and even though my feet don't move I am traveling hard. I look past the light and see people shaking, people jumping around, people watching as

Dev takes the microphone into his mouth and keeps yelling the words. I throw the chords at them, I drench them in the soundwaves, I am making time so loud that they have to hear it. I am stronger than words and I am bigger than the box I'm in, and then I see her in the crowd and I fall apart.

I fucking told her not to come. While she was busy ripping me into pieces, that was the one fragment I begged to keep. *Please don't come to the shows. I don't want to see you there.* And she had said yes, and it hadn't been a lie then. But it turned into a lie at some point, because here she is, and my fingers are losing their place, and my buzz is losing its edge, and everything about me goes from crying out to just plain crying—all in the time it takes for me to see the shape of her lips. And then I see—oh fuck no—that she's not alone, that she's with some guy, and while she'll say she's come to watch me, there's no doubt in my mind that she's come so I can watch her. *It's over,* she'd said, and wasn't that the biggest lie of all? I am stumbling through the notes and Dev is onto the next verse and Thom is playing a little faster than he should, so I have to catch up as she leans into this guy and rocks her head like I'm making this music for her, when if I could, I would take it all away and give her as much silence as she's given me pain.

I try to keep up with Dev and Thom. We're called The Fuck Offs tonight, but that's a new name and it'll probably only last three gigs before Dev comes up with another. We've already been Porn Yesterday, The Black Handkerchiefs, The Vengeful Hairdressers, and None Of Your Business. I don't really use my vote, except to veto Dev's

stupider ideas. (“Dude,” I had to tell him, “nobody wants to see a band called *Dickache*.”) Dev’s out to pierce the pierced, tattoo the tattooed, and have his way with the messy punk boys who come to our shows not knowing they’ll end up wanting to mess around with the guy challenging *How big is your cocker spaniel?* into the mic. Dev’s from a town in Jersey called Lodi, and that makes perfect sense to me, since he’s nothing if not an idol in reverse. Thom’s from South Orange, and has only had an ‘h’ in his first name for the past two months. I’m from Hoboken, as close to the city as you can get without actually being in the city. On nights like this, with a chance to play in front of more than just our friends, I’d swim across the Hudson if I had to, in order to get to this cave of a club. At least until Tris shows up and I find myself bleeding invisibly across the stage.

Take the Power / Fuck the Man / Take the Power / and Fuck the Man. Dev is taking the song somewhere it’s never been before: a fourth minute. I’m rutting now, waiting for the wind-down. Thom looks like he’s on the verge of a solo, which is never a good place for Thom to be. I move my feet, turn away from her, try to pretend she’s not there, which is the biggest fucking joke I’ve ever not laughed at. I try to get Dev’s attention from the periphery, but he’s too busy wiping the sweat on his chest to notice. Finally, though, he gets a burst of energy strong enough to end the thing on. So he throws out his arm and howls and I run us into the ground with a final lurch. The crowd sends us a burst of their own noise. I try to hear her voice, try to separate that single pitch from the shouts and applause. But she’s as lost to me as she was the

night I cried and she didn't turn back to see if I was okay. Three weeks, two days, and twenty-three hours ago. And she's already with someone else.

The next band is at the side of the stage. The owner of the club is motioning that our time is up. I am not so gone that I'm not gratified by the calls for more, by that little sound of letdown when the lights go up to show the crowd a clearer path back to the bar. I am the equipment bitch for this gig, so while Dev jumps into the crowd to find his most willing admirer and Thom blushing retreats to his understanding-but-emo boyfriend, I have to immediately detox so I can pack up our gear. I go from chords to cords, amped to amps. One of the guys from the next band is cool and helps me recover the cases from the back corner of the stage. But I'm the only one who can touch the instruments, putting them carefully to bed for the night. Then I offer to help the new band set up, and am glad when they say yes so I can be connecting them to the soundboard instead of spending all my energy resisting her.

My eye is still used to searching for her in a crowd. My breath is still used to catching when I see her and the light is angled just right. My body is still used to hers moving next to mine. So the distance—anything short of contact—is a constant rejection. We were together for six months, and in each of those months my desire found new ways to be fueled by her. *It's over* can't kill that. All of the songs I wrote in my head were for her, and now I can't stop them from playing. This null soundtrack. *I'm tired*, she'd said, and I told her that I was tired, too, and that I wanted to take some time for us,

too. And then she'd said, *No, I'm tired of you*, and I slipped into the surreal-but-true universe where we were over and I wasn't over it. She was no longer any kind of *here* that I could get to.

I keep my back to the crowd as I store the equipment and instruments somewhere safe. Then comes the moment when I can't keep my back to it anymore, since there's only so long that you can stare at a wall before you feel like an idiot. I am saved by the next band, which cranks the volume even higher and soon engulfs us all in beautiful chaos. They're called Are You Randy? and the lead singer is actually singing instead of moaning and Ramoning. I dare a glance into the crowd and I don't see her anymore. I don't see very many *hers* at all—it's a sea of hims pressing and crashing against one another as the lead singer tells them the state of things, breaking into bits and pieces of "I Want You to Want Me" and "Blue Moon" and "All Apologies" as he dances through his own seven veils.

I think Tris will like this band, and the fact that I know this stabs me again, because all the knowledge of what she likes is perfectly useless now. I wonder who the guy is. I wonder if the two of them knew each other three weeks and three days ago. I'm glad I didn't really see him because then I'd think of them naked. Now I just think of her naked, and it's such a vivid touch memory that my fingers actually move to take it in. I turn my head, as if I've been actually seeing her, and see Thom and his boyfriend Scot making out to the music in a corner-of-the-universe way. Dev, I figure, is still at the bar, still performing. We're underage, but that doesn't

matter here. The crowd is mostly older than us—college or should-be-in-college—and I'm aware of not really fitting in. Some of the older guys in the crowd check me out, give me a nod. It's not like I wear a Badge of Straight or anything. I nod back sometimes, when I think it's a musical acknowledgment and not an invitation. I always keep moving.

I find Dev at the bar, talking to a guy our age who looks familiar in that Type kind of way. When I get to where they're standing, I'm introduced as "the bass god, Nick," and he's introduced as "Hunter from Hunter." Dev thanks me for being equipment bitch, and from the way the conversation doesn't continue from there I know I'm interrupting. If it was Thom, my agitation would probably be noticed. But Dev needs you to spell emotions out for him, and right now I'm not in the mood. So I just tell him where I left the stuff and pretend I'm going off to search for a clear spot on the bar to summon the bartender from. And once I'm pretending that's the truth, I figure it might as well be the truth. I still can't see Tris, and there's a small part of me that's wondering if it was even her in the crowd. Maybe it was someone who looked like Tris, which would explain the guy who didn't look like anybody.

Are You Randy? stop playing their instruments one by one, until the lead singer croons a final, a cappella note. I wish for their sake I could say the club falls into silence at this, but in truth the air is one-half conversation. Still, that's better than average, and the band gets a lunge of applause and cheers. I clap, too, and notice that the girl next to me

puts two fingers in her mouth to whistle old-fashioned style. The sound is clear and spirited, and makes me think of Little League. The girl is dressed in a flannel shirt, and I can't tell whether that's because she's trying to bring back the only fashion style of the past fifty years that *hasn't* been brought back or whether it's because the shirt is as damn comfortable as it looks. She has very pale skin and a haircut that reads *private school* even though she's messed it up to try to hide it. The next band opened for Le Tigre on their last tour, and I figure this girl's here to see them. If I was a different kind of guy, I might try to strike up a friendly conversation, just to be, I dunno, friends. But I feel that if I talk to someone else right now, all I'll be able to do is unload.

Thom and Scot would probably be ready to go if I wanted them to, but I'm pretty sure Dev hasn't figured out yet whether he's coming back with us or not, and I'd be an asshole to put him on the spot and ask. So I'm stuck and I know it, and that's when I look to my right and see Tris and her new guy approaching the beer-spilled bar to order another round of whatever I'm not having. It's definitely her, and I'm definitely fucked, because the between-band rush is pressing toward me now and if I try to leave, I'll have to push my way out, and if I have to push my way out, she'll see me making an escape and she'll know for sure that I can't take it, and even if that's the goddamn truth I don't want her to have actual proof. She is looking so hot and I am feeling so cold and the guy she's with has his hand on her arm in a way that a gay friend would never, ever think of, and I guess that's my

own proof. I am the old model and this is the new model and I could crash out a year's worth of time on my bass and nothing, absolutely nothing, would change.

She sees me. She can't fake surprise at seeing me here, because of course she fucking knew I'd be here. So she does a little smile thing and whispers something to the new model and I can tell just from her expression that after they get their now-being-poured drinks they are going to come over and say *hello* and *good show* and—could she be so stupid and cruel?—*how are you doing?* And I can't stand the thought of it. I see it all unfolding and I know I have to do something—anything—to stop it.

So I, this random bassist in an average queercore band, turn to this girl in flannel who I don't even know and say:

"I know this is going to sound strange, but would you mind being my girlfriend for the next five minutes?"

Z. NORAH

Randy from Are You Randy? insists the bassist from the queer-core band is a 'mo, but I told him No, the guy is straight. Whether or not he's responsible for his band's shit lyrics (*Fuck the Man / Fuck the Man*—what's that trite crap?), I have no idea, but he's 'no 'mo. Trust me. There are certain things a girl just knows, like that a fourth minute on a punk song is a bad, bad idea, or that no way does a Jersey-boy bassist with Astor Place hair who wears torn-up, bleach-stained black jeans and a faded black T-shirt with orange lettering that says *When I say Jesus, you say Christ*, swing down boy-boy alley; he's working the ironic punk boy—Johnny Cash angle too hard to be a 'mo. Maybe he's a little *emo*, I told Randy, but just because he doesn't look like a Whitesnake-relic-reject like all of your band, does not automatically mean the guy's gay.

The incidental fact of his straightness doesn't mean I want to be NoMo's five-minute girlfriend, like I'm some 7-Eleven quick stop on his slut train. Only because I am the one loser here who hasn't lost all her senses to beer, dope, or hormones do I have the sense to hold back my original instinct—to yell back "FUCK, NO!" in response to NoMo's question.

I have to think about Caroline. I always have to think about Caroline.

I noticed NoMo loading equipment after his band's set while his bandmates abandoned him to score some action. I understand that scene. I am that scene, cleaning up everyone else's mess.

NoMo dresses so bad—he has to be from Jersey. And if Jersey Boy is equipment bitch, he has a van. The van's probably a piece of scrap metal with a leaking carburetor that as likely as not will pop a tire or run out of gas in the middle of the Lincoln Tunnel, but it's a risk I have to take. Somebody's got to get Caroline home. She's too drunk to risk taking her on the bus. She's also so drunk she'll go home with Randy if I'm not there to take her back to my house where she can sleep it off. Groupie bitch. If I didn't love her so much, I'd kill her.

She's lucky my parents love her just as much; her dad and stepmonster are away for the weekend, they don't give a fuck what she does, so long as she doesn't get pregnant or date any boy from a non-six-figure-plus-income household. Jerk-offs. My parents, they adore Caroline, beautiful Caroline with the long caramel hair, the big cherry Tootsie Pop lips, the juvenile delinquent arrest record. They won't care if she stumbles from my room into the kitchen tomorrow afternoon all disheveled and hung over. She's the one, not me, who meets their expectation of what the daughter of an Englewood Cliffs-livin', fat-cat record company CEO should be: *wild*.

Caroline's not a Big Disappointment like their Plain Jane, comfy-flannel-shirt-wearing, tousled bowl-head-haircut-courtesy-of-a-\$300-salon-visit-with-Mom-(Bergdorf's)-and-

a-\$5-can-of-blue-spray-paint (Ricky's), straight-edge, responsible valedictorian bitch daughter. I've chosen a gap year on a *kibbutz* in South Africa over Brown. *WHY, Norah, WHY?* I wrote my Brown admissions essay about all the music Dad appropriated from The Street then goddamned ruined to make profit for The Man. *I am not a fuckin' corporate hippie*, Dad said, laughing, after he read the essay. Dad won't deny that he's responsible for giving Top 40 radio a disproportionate percentage of its suckiest hits, yet he's proud he indoctrinated me from childhood in the sounds of every other kind of music out there so that now, at age eighteen, I can be a badass DJ when I want, but I am also an insufferable music snob. My parents have also done me the misfortune of being happily married for a quarter century, which no doubt dooms my own prospects of ever experiencing true love. Gold is not struck twice.

My parents would disown me if they knew I was in this club tonight. Hell, I could be scoring weed in Tompkins Square Park right now, on my way to a bondage bar on Avenue D, and my parents would only applaud. But this club, this is the one joint in all of Manhattan I'm supposedly forbidden from going to, owing to a long-simmering feud over a bad music deal between Dad and the club owner, Crazy Lou (who used to be my godfather, *Uncle Lou*, until all that business leading Lou to be rechristened *Crazy*). Lou's such an old punk he was around when The Ramones were junkie hustlers first and musicians second, when punk meant something other than a mass-marketing concept designed to help the bridge-and-tunnel crowd feel cool.

But Mom and Dad would move past disowning me and outright kill me if they thought I wasn't looking after their beloved Caroline. She inspires that kind of devotion in people. It's nauseating, except I am totally under Caroline's spell, too, her lead minion, have been since nursery school.

I look around the club as the between-set mass of people swarm past/through/into me like I'm a ghost with the inconvenience of malleable flesh getting in their way on the way to the beer. Damn, I've lost Caroline again. She is big on Randy tonight, which is cool—Are You Randy? don't completely suck—but Randy himself is big on E tonight, and I gotta make sure he doesn't get her alone in a corner. But I'm only 5-foot-4 on tippy toes, and 6-foot NoMo is standing in front of me, blocking my view, waiting to find out if I want to be his five-minute girlfriend and looking like that lost animal who goes around asking "Are you my mother?" in that kid book.

From behind him I don't see Caroline but I do see that stupid bitch, Tris, rhymes with *bris*, cuz that's what she'll do to a guy, rip apart his piece. She's doing her Tris strut with her big boobs sticking out in front of her, wiggling her ass in that way that gets the instant attention of every dumb schmo in her wake, even the gay boys, who seem to be highly represented here tonight, NoMo notwithstanding. She's coming right toward me. No No NOOOOOOOOOOOO. How did she find out Caroline and I would be here tonight? Does she have lookouts with text pagers set up every place Caroline and I go on a Saturday night, or what?

Boyfriend to the rescue! I answer NoMo's question by

putting my hand around his neck and pulling his face down to mine. God, I would do anything to avoid Tris recognizing me and trying to talk to me.

FUCK! I didn't expect NoMo to be such a good kisser. Asshole. See this, Randy? NO. MO. Confirmed. But I am not looking for chemistry here, just a ride home for my girl. I am also not looking for tongue, but NoMo's wastes no time sliding its way into my mouth. My mouth revolts against my mind: *Umm, feels good down here, steady girl, steaaaaady!*

No matter how good he tastes, this five-minute girlfriend still needs a few seconds to come up for air. I separate my mouth from his, hoping to catch my breath and hoping to catch Tris walking away from us without having noticed me after all.

WOW. I feel like in this riot of people, I have been kicked in the stomach, but by the giddy police. Forget about the need for oxygen. My mouth wants to go back to the place it just left.

Unfortunately, Tris is standing right in front of us, hanging on to her latest slobber victim, who is near enough now that I can positively ID him as one of Caroline's recent rejects; he's buddies with Hunter from Hunter, whose band, Hunter Does Hunter, is scheduled to play next (you're welcome, Hunter, for the introduction to Lou). Tris clutches her arm tight around the guy's waist, probably squeezing out whatever remaining life that soul-sucking skank hasn't yet gotten out of him in the three weeks or so since Caroline gave him the heave-ho.

Tris says, "Nick? Norah? How do you two, like, know each other?"