


DEBBIE
HARRY
SINGS IN
FRENCH

Meagan Brothers

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For
JGB
and
JWB
and
CBGB

Living in the Real World

Tessa was cool because she brought records. Not CDs, but actual vinyl. She bought them from this record store called Right Round Records—she had a crush on the clerk. The only problem was she didn't actually have a record player. So she brought them over to my house.

“That’s one of the things I’m gonna buy with your mom’s money,” Tessa told me as she drove us both through the palm-tree-lined Tampa suburb where I lived. My dad’s company had just merged with another company in Nashville, so he was on the road all the time. My mom worked as a paralegal

until around seven, so she hired Tessa to pick me up after school and hang out with me at home until she got back. Before, I had to take the bus to the YMCA after-school program, so Tessa was definitely a step up. At least she never tried to bean me with a tetherball or lock me in the snack closet. She was a senior with a cool record store crush and a Toyota Corolla with a bumper sticker that said MY OTHER CAR IS A BROOM. I was twelve.

The first thing Tessa ever did when she came to the house was dig out my mom's record collection from its place on the bottom shelf of the bookcase. She flipped through them fast, big puffs of dust rising and catching the light coming from the front window.

"Lessee . . . Beatles, Beatles, Beatles, Beach Boys, Herman's Hermits, more Beatles, Wings, *Goodnight, Vienna*, Beatles again—shame she couldn't decide on a favorite band." She gave me a smirk and kept flipping. "Strawberry Alarm Clock, the Association, Donovan—somebody's mom was a hippie."

"Yeah, I guess so." I'd seen pictures of her as a teenager, in patched-up bell-bottom jeans, with long straight hair down to her waist. Somewhere

along the line, though, she transformed into my mom, a regular lady with a perm and a Cutlass Ciera.

“What about your dad?”

“He doesn’t really like music.”

“Doesn’t like music?” Tessa sneezed and put the records back on the shelf. “Johnny, everybody likes something, even if it’s Herb Alpert and the Tijuana Brass. What does he listen to in the car?”

“Talk radio.”

“Wow, you’re serious. That’s weird.”

“He’s just kind of a quiet guy, I guess.” My dad and I used to play together a lot when I was a little kid—he taught me how to play soccer—but as I got older, we played together less and less. He took longer and longer business trips. By the time Tessa started coming over, I barely saw him, and when I did, it was usually some strange late-night encounter. I’d be up watching *Saturday Night Live*, and he’d just be getting home. He’d fix himself a drink and sink into his recliner to watch TV with me. He’d light up a cigarette, and I’d get tense. He only smoked when he was stressed out. I’d start praying for a funny skit, like Mike Myers dressed up as Simon, the kid in the

bathtub, or Chris Farley doing the “van down by the river” guy. Dad always laughed at those—if he laughed, I knew everything was okay. But sometimes he didn’t, even if “Coffee Talk” or the “Chris Farley Show” came on. He’d just sit there, not laughing. Sometimes it was like he wasn’t even watching the TV at all—he was staring past it, looking at the dark.

The records Tessa brought over were ones I’d never heard of. This was back in the early nineties, when Pearl Jam and Nirvana and Green Day were on the radio. Tessa didn’t like any of that stuff. Her records had these obscure, blurry covers, or were just really dark. And they were almost always British.

“I can’t deal with all that third-rate Ramones-rip-off crap!” she would exclaim, as if the radio had personally insulted her. We always listened to music in the afternoon while I was struggling through my Math Concepts homework and she was reading Mary Shelley. The bands she liked were the Cure, Bauhaus, Joy Division, New Order, the Sisters of Mercy, the Damned, and, her favorite, Siouxsie and the Banshees. It was weird, dark, clanky, sort of depressing music, but I liked it. I liked everything

about Tessa. The clothes she wore, all black and lacy, and the way she wore black lipstick instead of red. She looked like a spider-girl. When my homework was done, we'd dance around the brown-carpeted living room. I imitated the dance she did—head down, feet shuffling, occasionally spinning—thinking she just made it up herself, not realizing until later, when I started going to Goth clubs, that it was how everybody danced to that kind of music.

At that point, I wasn't popular or unpopular in school. I was just sort of there. I had a couple of friends, but they were starting to get seriously involved in other things, like girls and sports teams. I knew Tessa was being paid to hang out with me, but, still, I felt like I had a cool, older friend—and a girl, to boot. I didn't know if I wanted Tessa to be my girlfriend or my big sister. But the days flew by, every school day just another waiting period until I got to hang out with her, go to the record store with her, dance with her in the living room to clangy British spider-music.

Then, one night, coming home from a conference in Miami, my dad fell asleep at the wheel. His

car jumped the median and slammed into a tour bus full of old people. The bus driver was killed instantly, along with two of the tourists. My father's funeral was held a week after my thirteenth birthday.

First my dad's brother, my uncle Sam, came for a while to help us out, but he didn't stay very long. He had a daughter, a seven-year-old we all called Bug, even though her real name was Ruth. Uncle Sam's wife left him for the doctor who delivered Bug. A few days after the funeral, though, I overheard Mom talking to her sister, my aunt Lorraine. My mom was lying in her bed—she'd been there since we first got word about the accident.

“I want Sam to leave,” Mom told Aunt Lorraine.

“He's being a big help. He paid for the funeral.” Aunt Lorraine was the sensible one. She lived in Tucson with her second husband and combined family of five kids. My dad used to call them the Brady Bunch.

“I know. But he's—he just reminds me too much of . . .” Mom started crying again. My dad and Sam were brothers, but I didn't think they looked anything alike. Still, he and Bug left the next day.

After a couple of weeks, Aunt Lorraine had to go back to Tucson, and my mom pretty much flipped out. Well, maybe not flipped out so much as just slowed to a halt. She kept calling in sick to work. Tessa and I would come home to find her still there in the afternoons, knocked out on sleeping pills or drinking gin and watching the soaps. We didn't play music at all, and pretty soon Tessa stopped being able to hang out, because my mom couldn't pay her. I guess my mom figured she was home anyway, so why did I need a babysitter? Tessa called a few times to check up on me, but pretty soon she stopped calling, and I didn't see her anymore.

I took the bus after school and got my homework done on the way so I could spend the afternoons doing the real work—washing the dishes, doing the laundry, scrubbing the tub. My mom lost her job and gained about seventy-five pounds. She didn't seem to see anything anymore. Like, when I'd give her my report card, she'd just sign it and not even look at the grades. She stopped looking at the mail, too, and, after our electricity got shut off, I started opening the bills and making sure they got paid on time. I figured out how to write checks and

got pretty good at forging my mom's signature. But, watching the numbers in the checkbook get smaller and smaller every month, I started to worry about how long it was going to take before the electricity was shut off for good.

The insurance money that we got when my dad died and what was left of Mom's savings account were only going to last so long with her out of work. I started delivering papers, but with school and taking care of the house, I couldn't keep up. I lasted two weeks before I overslept twice in a row and got fired. It was weird to have to tell my mom she should try to get a job. She would look at me with her eyes all teary and say, "I know that, Johnny. Don't you think I know that?" I tried circling jobs I thought she'd like in the classifieds and leaving them on her nightstand, but I don't know if she couldn't get hired or if she just threw them away. We had to move to a tiny little two-bedroom house in what my mom called a "white-trash neighborhood." Neither of us liked the place, but I was just glad she'd gotten motivated enough to find us a new house. I was afraid we were going to end up living in the Cutlass Ciera.

I guess you can figure out why I started drinking. I didn't do it just to get wasted, like some kids, or to impress anyone. I kept it to myself. I was stressed, and, on top of it all, I was afraid somebody would find out how bad a shape my mom was in and send me to an orphanage or a foster home. I couldn't talk to anybody; I couldn't ask for help. But I could raid the liquor cabinet, and I was killing two birds with one stone. I was getting rid of the stuff so Mom wouldn't drink it, and I was giving myself a nice, easy buzz that helped me fall into a quiet, dreamless sleep.

A Shark in Jets Clothing

“Hey, man, check it out.” This big, stocky college guy with Greek letters on his T-shirt was pointing at my friend Terry and me.

“What’re you guys, a coupla vampires?” his friend asked. He was thick-necked and sunburnt, lugging two twelve-packs of Heineken out of the 7-Eleven.

“Yeah, and we’re gonna suck your blood,” Terry deadpanned. We were used to people calling us vampires.

“That’s not all they’ll suck,” Sunburn said, handing one of the twelve-packs to his friend the Greek.

“Coupla queers,” the Greek confirmed.

“Oh, are you fellas lookin’ for a double date?” Terry batted his mascara-blackened eyelashes at them and made kissy faces.

“Whatever, dude.” The Greek got in the car and revved it. Sunburn hopped in, and they peeled out of the parking lot. Their back windshield read SPRING BREAK—GO VIKINGS! in soap letters.

“Stupid frat bastards,” Terry muttered. He pulled the top off his Big Gulp, and I splashed in the last of the vodka from my inside-coat-pocket flask. It was April in Florida, but we wore our overcoats regardless of the season.

“Let’s go.” I was getting bored. The flask was empty, and there was nobody at the 7-Eleven, anyway. Most locals—our friends, anyway—took cover when spring break rolled around. Our entire town got taken over by drunken assholes like the ones we’d just met. It wasn’t as bad in Tampa as, say, Fort Lauderdale, but we got our share.

“You wanna see what Scotty’s up to?” Terry asked as we got into his car.

“Sure. I don’t care.” I just wanted to refill the flask. Terry liked everything—booze, weed, Ecstasy,

acid, mushrooms—and Scotty had it all. Me, I was strictly a booze guy. It was easier to get, cheaper, and less trouble if you got caught.

Terry and I actually met when we were kids, back at the YMCA after-school program. He was a chubby kid who sat by himself reading *Star Trek* novelizations. We ended up going to the same high school—I didn't even recognize him anymore.

“Didn't you used to go to the Y after school?” he said as he sat down next to me at lunch one day, just a few weeks into freshman year.

“Yeah.” I took the headphones out of my ears and looked up at him, suspicious. He was tall, thin, and pale white. Later I would find out he used makeup to look even paler, and eyeliner. He said his look was his art project. His hair was dyed black, with two electric blue streaks in the front. His fingernails were painted black. I wondered what he wanted with me.

“You're Johnny, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Terry Stafford.” He shook his hair out of his eyes. I felt plain next to him. I bought my own clothes, mostly from Goodwill. I kept it simple—jeans or