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H.E. GRAHAME

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MIXTAPE

By H.E. Grahame

Some names in these stories have been replaced. Some remain unchanged. “Some secrets weren’t meant to be told.”

01 - The Music or The Misery - Fall Out Boy

Which came first—the music or the misery? Did the music break me, or was I already broken, and the music just gave my misery a voice? For years, I flirted with both in intoxicated infatuation, stockpiling an arsenal of melodies about romance and heartbreak. Disney Princes were never as charming as floppy-haired poets with guitars and happily ever afters were never as happy as the stories told in verse and chorus. I didn't learn about love from my parents' train-wrecked marriage full of lies and manipulation or about unrequited longing from primetime drama. Heartbreak, desire, lust, and betrayal were taught in the bridges and melodies and harmonies of screaming guitars. I found my pulse with a bass line, and my breath was accented with drumbeats. It was impossible to tell which came first.

As far back as I can remember, important moments in my life were punctuated with a soundtrack, so naturally the idea of love also came with an accompanying score. It was a haphazard mix of songs without the skill and precision found in a good mixtape: the opening number failed to pull the crowd, the roller coaster progression of tempo left the listener woozy, and the genres mixed in ways that could make even the most eclectic audiophile cringe; but it was my soundtrack. My misery. The music and the misery were both woven into the entire idea of love; neither misery nor heartbreak could exist without a song. Happiness and joy required composition and orchestration. Romance, it seemed, might be more about finding the right song than finding the right moment.

“It’s true romance is dead / I shot it in the chest and in the head.”

02 - Take It Away – The Used

They often say that we learn about love from our family first. We find it in the ways that our mothers soothe us and our fathers guide us. We learn how to treat each other and how to care. My parents, despite all their attempts, were hardly capable of teaching anyone about love. Their relationship was toxic on its best days and shades of a third world war on the worst ones. Their “stay together for the kid” devotion to their marriage bloodied love up and spit it out on the ground. They lied, manipulated, cheated and resented each other for stealing away the lives that “could have been.” Their resentment always seemed to catch me in its crossfire for the part I played. That abuse taught me how to be independent and logical. My parents kept a roof over my head and food in my stomach, but when it came to love, they were only able to teach me about anger and manipulation. Maybe it’s all that they knew. Maybe it’s all that I deserved. Maybe the misery started there, leading me into the open arms of my mom’s old vinyl records and letting the Beatles and Johnny Cash teach me the rudimentary skills that would define me.

Having a skewed idea of how to treat people left me with few friends. I was easily envious and held on too tightly to relationships for fear of losing them. If family is where we first learned of love, friends are lesson two.

In the late winter of 1997, Star Wars returned to the little movie theatre in my tiny town. I had grown up watching the Star Wars trilogy on VHS with my dad on Saturday mornings in lieu of cartoons, and for the two weeks the film screened in town I spent all of my allowance seeing it as many times as I could on the big screen. On the afternoon of the last showing I made my way to the theatre with Amber and Scott.

Amber and Scott were two of my oldest friends despite the fact that I always felt like the third wheel with them. I was often excluded from their inside jokes or was the victim of their pranks, but those moments just made me work harder to be a better friend. The more loyal and trusting I was with them, the more they exploited my fidelity as gullibility and the more they found ways to humiliate me. They were my best friends.

As we settled in for the movie with our Red Vines and Coke, Erik — a boy from down the road — joined us, sitting beside me. Erik was friends with Amber's older brother Allen and had always seemed like a nice guy. I offered him some candy. He smiled. The movie began.

The theatre had only been dark for a few minutes before Erik took off his jacket and laid it across his lap. And mine. As the opening words scrolled across the movie screen his hand rubbed across my thigh then slid between my legs. Terrified of making a scene, I squirmed away from him and crossed my legs. Undeterred, he continued to push his fingers against my skin.

“Scott,” I hissed, “trade me seats?”

Scott shook his head, “I’m comfy.”

The next two hours continued in much the same way: Erik’s hands, cloaked by jacket and darkness, desperately seeking contact, me, uncomfortable and embarrassed, passive-aggressively trying to escape, Han and Luke in space and Scott and Amber oblivious.

“Why are you so quiet?” Amber asked later as we sat in the RV clubhouse in her backyard. “You’re never this quiet.”

I shrugged.

“Yeah, what’s wrong?” Scott asked, popping the tab on a can of grape soda.

“You won’t believe me,” I frowned.

“Of course we will,” Amber assured. “That’s what friends do. They have each other’s backs.”

I sighed and shamefully told them about what had happened during the movie.

Amber looked worried. Scott looked angry. She excused herself from the RV, and he erupted, ranting about how Erik was a jerk and not even very cute.

When Amber returned she leaned against the door with her arms crossed. “I told Allen about what you just said.”

“What?” It was such an embarrassing story. I was mortified

“He said that Erik would never do that and you’re making things up.”

My mouth dropped open in disbelief. “No, I didn—No! I didn’t make it up. Why would I make that up?”

“Because you want attention. It’s a really awful thing to accuse someone of doing. I thought you were a better person than that, Heather. Maybe you should go home and figure out why you’re so desperate for attention that you would do that to someone and lie to us.”

I looked at Scott

“I’m really disappointed,” he said coldly.

I took my bag and trudged the two blocks back home. *Alone. Broken.*

Monday morning on the bus to school, Erik, with perfect timing, loudly yelled to his friend a few seats away, "Heather tried to get into my pants but I said 'ew no way' and now she's lying and saying I hit on her. She's so pathetic."

There was an unusually long moment of quiet followed by laughter and jeers. It felt like the entire world was laughing at me. I wished I could have disappeared into the tacky plastic bus seats.

If friends are the second way we learn about love, I was only learning about betrayal, humiliation and loneliness. I turned up Green Day and Nirvana and let them teach me how to numb the pain.

***“Cause everyone's got one / A story to kill me / I'm so apathetic in my resentment
/ Living, loving, knowing not”***

03-Love Song For A Savior – Jars of Clay

For years, I thought I was in love with Derek. He was only a few years older, but I was sure that his age made him wiser and more interesting than any of the gross boys in my class. He wrote angsty poems, read comic books and played guitar in a band. He was sarcastic and brooding and almost always a little mysterious. All of my friends were smitten with him as well, but I was there first. I had made first contact and won the role of “friend” before any of them ever had a chance to make a move.

Of course, the drawback to the friend role is that once you’re there it is nearly impossible to find a way out, and loyally I served as his best friend as he fell in and out of love with those same friends of mine.

Unrequited love consumed me as I painfully longed for Derek to see me the way that he saw my friends. ***Just one time.*** I wanted to be the object of his affection—or at least the person who made him smile.

One summer we were alone in his bedroom; I sat on a steamer trunk full of comic books as he paced the floor in front of me. He was excitedly telling me about a screenplay he had written for one of his high school classes. It was about a girl who was always forgotten and always invisible. She was pretty and smart in a way that made her approachable but also unobtainable. In the play, the self-insert “bad boy” falls hard for

her but she doesn't seem to notice or care—blah, blah, blah... I hadn't even been listening to him; I had been watching him: the way that the near-sunset light sneaked through the curtains to illuminate the flecks of red in his dark brown hair and the way his eyes seemed more green with his excitement. I was mesmerized by the way his lips moved across his too-white teeth as he spoke and by the way he bounced a little as he got to the “good parts” of the story.

Without warning, he plopped down onto the trunk beside me, pushing the manuscript into my lap. “Listen,” he instructed, pressing the remote control for his stereo. The song began about a girl in a fragrant field of wildflowers, but all I could smell was his scent. I could feel his breath against my cheek in the snug seat. It was calm and close. I could hear my heart pounding as he shifted closer to me, his thigh pressing against mine. I was dizzy with infatuation.

“Here,” he pointed out as the chorus began: ‘I want to fall in love with you...’
“Have you ever—y’know—had a song fit so perfectly with a moment? Like it was scripted and rehearsed?”

I nodded, dumbfounded. This moment. This one. Right now.

He sighed and shifted back to his feet, “That’s exactly how I felt when I wrote this part of the play.”

I murmured something in return, trying to ignore the fact that he was talking about another girl in another place and another time. I was drowning in this moment. If this was what falling in love felt like—butterflies and electricity, tension and terror, and hope—then I wanted to fall hard into its depths. I wanted to breathe in each dulcet note and let the melodies fill my lungs with their song; *I want to fall in love...*With him.

***“He's more than the laughter or the stars in the heavens. / As close as a heartbeat
or a song on her lips.”***

04- Summer Wind Was Always Our Song – The Ataris

Hungry for the feeling of butterflies I had felt that summer in Derek's bedroom, I fell in and out of infatuation with every boy I knew. If a boy smiled at me I'd suddenly have feelings for him; if he rebuffed me, the feelings seemed even stronger. I crowded my notebook covers with marker-drawn names and stars and hearts. Sometimes, when you don't know what love looks like, you take anything you can get that comes close, and I was greedy for it—whatever it was.

Cowardly, I was infatuated on the sidelines, rarely making a move. Crush after crush left me destroyed but still running after that feeling. There were occasional bits of luck where I kissed a cute boy behind the cafeteria or snuggled with a dark stranger for a few hours by the pond. Luck never went further than a little heavy petting. *I knew better.* I knew from experience that touches like that led to humiliation and doubt. I was starving for affection, not ridicule.

I also had boyfriends; their most attractive quality was that they liked me. There was the casual, long-distance guy who was dating three other girls but dumped me when I kissed another guy, and the summer fling who broke up with me to save our friendship and on his wedding day told me that he would never quite be over me. There was the boy next door who let me break his heart and kiss his best friend, and the upper-class theater guy who was trying to prove to himself that he wasn't gay. There

was the clingy freshman that puppy dogged after me until I agreed to be his girl, and the angry loser who complained that I was a tease and hit me when I said the wrong things.

Then there was John.

John and I met while I was fighting with Bryan, his best friend. Bryan and I had the kind of relationship that only existed in the silent pauses in our arguments, which were never ending. Naturally, I was head-over-heels for him. As Bryan's best friend, John was a wealth of knowledge about him and a good ally to have. We began spending time together, and soon John became my best friend.

John was different than the other guys I knew. He was very religious. Mormon. He had plans to go to the Temple, serve a mission, and come home to wed and have a family like all good Mormon boys are taught to. I was an agnostic who didn't want children and had a moral objection to a privilege of marriage that was not extended to all. Despite our differences, we fell in love.

For the first time, I was in a relationship without the imminent pressure of sex. Knowing that I wouldn't have to face the shame of it made me comfortable and adventurous. Together, we pushed the boundaries of the "no sex" agreement, bending and blurring the line but never taking it too far. When things went further than intended, I wasn't alone in shame. I shouldered shame from him for not stopping us sooner, but he carried the weight of his religious upbringing. Equally guilty in the activities and equally ashamed, we carried on for four blissful months. Four months of complete happiness. I

agreed to consider a future with John. His future. The one he was driven to have with God and babies and happily-ever-after in suburbia. I didn't care that I was giving up everything I believed. It was worth it, as far as I could see, to find that feeling with my best friend.

Valentine's Day arrived a week after our four-month anniversary. As a hopeless romantic, I had always wanted to have a boyfriend for Valentine's Day and share in the magic and romance of the Hallmark holiday instead of crying over chick flicks alone by myself. I pulled up to his house for our romantic date, my arms filled with meaningful gifts and sappy poems. He was waiting for me on the porch. I knew something was wrong.

"Nothing, everything is fine," he assured when I asked, kissing me chastely on the mouth.

"You're lying."

He shifted uncomfortably. "Let's just go have a nice night and we will talk about it later. Let's not ruin the night."

The night was ruined. There was no way to just pretend that there wasn't some potentially horrific thing sitting in the corner like a forgotten gift. I pressed the issue further until he cracked.

"I'm breaking up with you," he said firmly.

“What?” I had to have misunderstood. Everything was fine. It was Valentine’s Day. We were in love.

“I’m sorry. I prayed to God about it. He told me that it’s the right thing to do”

“God? God told you to dump me?”

He nodded. “He said that you are too much of a temptation. You’re a harlot. You tempt me to do things that I shouldn’t. You should be ashamed of yourself and I should be with someone who is more righteous and lives in God’s light.”

I was both confused and angry. “Temptation? I’m pretty sure I’m not the only one of us initiating that kind of thing.”

He cleared his throat as if he had rehearsed for this argument, “But you are the only one who has a past of a sexual nature. You have corrupted me and turned me to sin. I’m sorry. I can’t love you. You are sinful and God will punish you.”

I dropped the gifts I was still holding onto his porch with a thud and ran to my car, tears falling down my face. Ridiculed and humiliated by my best friend and God. Love was a jerk.

As I started the car, the music started to play, *These breakup songs make sense again...* I jabbed my finger on the eject button and tossed the CD out the window. I would not let this song be ruined by this misery, but I was afraid it was already too late.

I was falling apart at my seams and needed someone to hold me together, or someone just to hold me and tell me that I was not forsaken and vile. Five minutes later, I pulled up in front of a familiar house and tearfully walked to the door. Before I could knock, the door opened and Bryan gathered me in a tight hug.

“John said you would be headed here.”

***“Just one last time / Can I call you my sweetheart? / My best friend? / Why do all
good things come to an end?”***

05-Konstantine – Something Corporate

The concert had already started when I arrived. I was late. Stuck at work until far past the end of my shift. I'd missed half of the show, and the crowd was so packed into the club that I thought it was going to be nearly impossible to find my friends.

Fortunately, as the singer talked about the band's newest album, the lights panned across the room, illuminating CJ perched on the railing with Anthony watching her adoringly and Bryan leaning beside them. I wove through the bodies, squeezing in between Bryan and a large pillar as the band started into their next song. I wasn't sure Bryan had even seen me until suddenly his fingers laced through mine and he smiled, eyes still fixated on the stage. This was our song. The one we had found together in a post-John day of loitering at the CD store. I'd made it just in time. Moments like this were rare. Our timing always seemed to be off.

After John and I broke up and our friends took sides, I was left with only Bryan. Despite being John's best friend for years, he'd refused to pick a side and insisted on keeping us both. When Bryan was dating, we were friends, but when he was single, we were something a *little closer*. But I was still in mourning over John, and a *little closer* was never close enough to be anything. We still fought like we had when we first met but not as frequently, and our fights usually ended with cuddling on the couch watching *The Powerpuff Girls* instead of silence and hate.

I could feel that thrill of butterflies, but I was skittish and terrified. I loved the tension between us: the Ross-and-Rachel-will-they-won't-they and the way that it all just fit.

A few months later at a music festival in Las Vegas, Bryan said solemnly "We need to talk." Bryan was single at the time, and our cartoon cuddles had become more frequent and less secret. He took a deep breath, "Kim says she wants to date me."

"Okay," I said in an irritated tone. Maybe if I didn't let myself feel anything then it wouldn't matter.

"Do you know any reason why I shouldn't?" he asked slowly.

I shrugged. "Nope."

"You can't think of just one reason?" he asked again.

I shook my head.

"Heather. All you have to do is give me one reason why I should say no and I will. I just need you to say it," he pleaded.

“I can’t think of one single reason why you and ‘Miss Granola’ shouldn’t be together. Not one. Do what you want. I don’t care who you date. I don’t care about you,” I spat and angrily stormed away.

The problem was that I did care. I wanted to tell him not to date her because he should give us a chance. I wanted to hold on to *The Powerpuff Girls* and the late nights on my couch where we talked until dawn, letting down our defenses and being honest. I wanted to hear him tell me that I was beautiful without my emotional walls protecting me. I wanted to be the reason that he told Kim no.

But I couldn’t...

...and I never did.

Like great songs, some loves are perfect in their imperfections and best the way they are. They aren’t meant for rewrites and mashups. Great loves, even the ones that never happen, are the kind of melodies you don’t forget. I made it in time for our song but not in time for our love, and yet the melody still plays the same.

“This is to a girl who got into my head / with all the fucked up things I did”

06- Alibis – Marianas Trench

Several years later, I sat in the cold, sterile bathroom of an apartment I could barely afford just off the campus of a college I had dropped out of with a razor blade pressed to my arm. An artful flick of the wrist produced a shallow ribbon of crimson, and I smiled as the blood beaded along the line. It wasn't about attention anymore. It was about feeling something. It was about being in control of the pain. Each thin razorblade kiss felt like love and tension. It was drama and understanding. Like an addict desperate for the next fix, I longed for the next cut. It was the kind of love you fall into without realizing the damage it's causing.

It began in 9th grade, when a dramatic outburst for attention saw me dragging a steak knife across the back of my hand until the skin became raw and bloody. I made excuses for the wound and downplayed its cause to everyone except one person, the one I wanted attention from: the boy next door who hadn't yet dumped me for kissing his best friend or making up fake guys to give my number to. I was awful and dramatic, but more than that, I was arrogant. We were "the couple" in the school, and somehow that meant there were many boys who wanted to know me better, including the wannabe circus act and the halitosis-ridden guy in Science class. It was empowering to feel so desired, and I let that power go to my head. Boy Next Door refused to pay attention to it. He liked me from the first awkward Jurassic Park viewing kiss and forgave me every time I pushed the boundaries to get a rise. His indifference drove me

crazy. I wanted him to fight back. I wanted him angry. Because I was angry—with myself and with him and with all of the stupid 9th grade boys who could never see me until I was unavailable. So I took my anger out on my hand. He finally fought back and dumped me.

Love was no longer about butterflies and great songs. It was simply about feeling anything at all to take away the empty brokenness. Ruby kisses replaced real ones, and misery muted the music.

I had fallen in love with the pain because it was the only thing that I could feel. I was enamored with the sense of control because my entire world was in turmoil. I was smitten with the shiny silver and bold reds against my pale skin because everything else had been reduced to shades of gray. I knew that the blade would not leave me, would not make me feel anything that I didn't want to, would not beg for me to be more than I was, and would not tell me the things I had heard for too long. It would not tell me that I was shameful or worthless. It would not tell me that these cuts were penance for all the mistakes that I had made. It was love because it would not tell me that I deserved it, *even though I knew I did.*

“I don’t know how to word it / I just started to deserve it”

07 – Liar – Taking Back Sunday

“I know we promised to never speak of this again but I have to ask you a question.” Zach and I were alone in the parking lot outside a coffee shop. Our friends had just left, and it was the first moment we’d had alone.

“Heather,” he warned.

“I know, I know. Asking a question about it completely violates the whole ‘pretend it never happened’ thing, but I just need to know something.”

He sighed. “What?”

“Did it mean anything to you?”

Zach and I had been friends for ten years. He was the kind of friend you took to a party then left there so no one would know you had arrived together. He was a lead singer and his own biggest fan—that is, when he wasn’t self-deprecating and destructive. Zach ran in extremes only, no middle ground, and that was how our friendship ran as well. We seemed to fall in and out of love with each other in the same way that the seasons shift.

He was fiery, summer heat, and I was icy winter freeze. For ten years, the seasons changed but in one emotion-filled night we froze to death in the blistering heat.

It took three hours for ten years of drama to unravel on the floor of his recording studio in sloppy kisses and heated exploration. It was like jazz: messy and full of feeling, but melodic and masterful. It crashed in offbeat crescendos and thumped through expressive intervals with majesty. It was an artful mess of notes and rests.

“Just so you know,” he promised when it was over, “I won’t regret this tomorrow.”

But once tomorrow came we decided it’d be easier if we pretended nothing had happened. And we did. For nearly a week and an entire evening with our two friends, we acted normal. We were just friends.

“Did it mean anything?” he repeated, shifting awkwardly in the streetlight glow.
“You can’t ask me that. You know I got back together with Ashlee this week.”

“I know, but did it mean anything?” I said, and then quickly added, “Because it meant something to me. It doesn’t matter if it never happens again. It meant something.”

“Heather...”

“Look, I love you, okay? Whatever that means. In the end, I’m with you. Friends, Lovers, Soulmates—I don’t care. It’s you. It’s always been you.” I paused to keep the ‘you had me at hello’ chick flick moment from going too far, “I just need to know if it meant anything to you.”

“You should already know that answer,” he said curtly.

“Tell me.”

“I can’t. Ask me again when I’m single.”

I sighed in defeat. “I can’t.”

“I’m an addict for dramatics / I confuse the two for love”

08- Kids From Yesterday – My Chemical Romance

Sweaty and breathless, I held tightly to the metal barricade in front of the stage as a sea of limbs and torsos crashed into my back. My voice rose in chorus with the band on the stage in front of me as the bass thumped the opening riff of a new song. I squealed excitedly and turned to the girl beside me as she turned to me and we screamed again together, then we both turned back to the band and yelled a third time. We mirrored one another perfectly in action and passion as the song filled our lungs: a proud anthem.

April.

I had been in the depths of depression when we met, standing outside an empty tour bus on an unseasonably cold October post-concert night. We'd both hoped to meet the band before they pulled out onto the black ribbon highway toward their next gig, but instead we met each other and became friends. April was a Titanic lifeboat as I careened toward the icy ocean floor. She was a flawed lifesaver with her own dysfunctions and broken pieces, threatening to spring a leak and drown us both. She was rough and fearless with dark hair and makeup and the take-no-shit attitude that I had lost. We complemented each other's strengths and weaknesses and somehow brought out the very best in one another.

We didn't say "I love you" in any traditional kind of way, instead offering a "text me when you get home" to let her know I made it safely or a "your lipstick looks great" because I know she worries about it. We'd say we cared in little "thinking of you" gifts and gadgets, in "have you seen this video?" posts on Facebook and in never-ending conversations about cute guys, old memories, and shared adventures. Maybe that's not how love is supposed to speak. Maybe friendship and family and love have another language altogether: a language I never learned. But maybe it's the "you've got to hear this song" or "listen to this band" that makes our friendship so special. We speak in lyrics and inside jokes and find love in the songs we share. Maybe I'd had it wrong all along, and this was what friendship was supposed to be.

***“Here we are and we won’t stop breathing / Yell it out ‘til your heart stops
beating”***

09 -Duality – Set It Off

The soundtrack to my life is written in sweat and sound, in concert venues and record stores. It's scribbled down in liner notes and playlists. Scored. Tracked. Composed. My favorite singers have stolen all of my best lines—but they were never mine to begin with.

Maybe I have it all wrong, but maybe it's all right. Maybe life and love and everything else is just a symphony of disciplined breakdowns and chaotic harmonies; of butterflies and best friends. Or maybe you only hear the music when your heart begins to break.

I could not exist without both the good and the bad—the music and the misery. There are no yellow-brick roads, just perfect disasters and all the right songs. Every note is who I am. Every scar and every broken piece is part of my story.

***“I am good, I am evil / I am solace, I am chaos / I am human, and that’s all I’ve ever
wanted to be”***

Credits:

Track 1 – “Music or Misery” by Fall Out Boy

From Under The Cork Tree: Limited Black Clouds and Underdogs Edition - © 2006 –
Island Records - Produced by Neal Avon

Track 2 – “Take It Away” by The Used

In Love And Death - © 2004 – Reprise Records – Produced by John Feldmann

Track 3 – “Love Song For A Savior” by Jars Of Clay

Jars of Clay - © 1995 – Essential/Silvertone Records – Produced by Jars of Clay &
Adrian Belew

Track 4 – “Summer Wind Was Always Our Song” by The Ataris

End Is Forever - © 2001 – Kung Fu Records – Produced by Joey Cape & Jason
Livermore

Track 5 – “Konstantine” by Something Corporate

Songs For Silent Movies - © 2003 – Drive Thru/MCA Records – Produced by Jim Wirt

Track 6 – “Alibis” by Marianas Trench

Fix Me - © 2006 – 604 Records – Produced by Dave Genn & Marianas Trench

Track 7 – “Liar [It Takes One To Know One]” by Taking Back Sunday

Louder Now - © 2006 – Warner Bros. Records – Produced by Eric Valentine

Track 8 – “Kids From Yesterday” by My Chemical Romance

Danger Days: The True Lives of the Fabulous Killjoys - © 2010 – Reprise Records –
Produced by Rob Cavallo * My Chemical Romance

Track 9 – “Duality” by Set It Off

Duality - © 2014 – Equal Vision Records – Produced by Brandon Paddock

Other songs mentioned/pilfered:

“Ever After” by Marianas Trench

“Disciplined Breakdown” by Collective Soul

“Blue Carolina” by Alkaline Trio

Hear the Songs: sptfy.com/4xj

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