

Kirk Curnutt

Hellow Liz, Goodbye Teeth

"Hey Mr. Seagrove," Nina says as we cross the Alabama state line on the road to Atlanta. "You going to be on the barricade tonight?"

I watch her giggle in my rearview. My daughter, Chloe, is too far to the right of the backseat for me to see, but I'm sure she, too, chuckles at my expense. I'm chauffeuring the girls to this evening's Liz Phair concert at the Roxy in Buckhead, and they're amused that I would buy myself a ticket rather than wait in the car. Liz Phair is Chloe's latest musical obsession, which is odd given that, ten years ago, when I was only in my late twenties, she was mine, too. I was an original devotee of *Exile in Guyville*, the indie-rock epic that made Liz Phair a household name—at least in households inhabited by overeducated, underemployed graduate students with enough free time to fret over what music back then was and wasn't truly "alternative."

"I'm too old for the barricade," I admit, pretending the question was serious. "I used to love concerts, you know, being right at the pit even. But anymore I'm claustrophobic. Plus the body odor. I smell other people and I can't relax."

"Uh, Dad." Chloe leans forward. Ever since she bobbed her hair Louise Brooks-style every word out of her mouth has seemed precociously brash and sophisticated. "Exactly which concerts were they? Ozark Mountain Daredevils?"

"Pure Prairie League," Nina offers.

"No, no, no," my daughter decides. "I remember now. It was Pablo Cruise."

Actually, I did sit through Pablo Cruise once. It was 1977. I was twelve, and it was my sister's fault. Like every other sixteen year-old that August—my sister was the same age Chloe and Nina are now—she was into that band, and come September, she wasn't. But I won't tell the girls that story. Instead, I impress them with tales of the concert injuries more likely to qualify me for cool: the broken toe from Concrete Blonde, the black eye earned when I stooped to tie a shoelace at Cowboy Mouth. A stage diver once decked

me while Babes in Toyland blazed through "Sweet '69," and way back in 1984 when I was a college freshman I literally lost the shirt off my back at the Violent Femmes—though exactly which tune, I can't remember. I even start in on the time that several women frustrated by long toilet lines at David Allan Coe invaded the men's room just as I began relieving myself in the urinal trough. Then I realize some stories are better left untold.

"Hey, Dad," Chloe says. "Tell Nina your Shelby Lynne story."

The last time I drove two hours to the Roxy was to see Shelby Lynne. It was such a bittersweet experience that I haven't been back in the three years since. Part of it had to do with my date, my second wife, who was then only a week away from becoming my second ex-wife. We'd set aside our mutual dislike long enough for a reunion tryst. Of course, that's not the story I share. That one involves my meeting Shelby Lynne. We ran into her behind the Roxy, where she was autographing napkins and plastic beer cups for female fans, most of who appeared to be gay, or at least drunk enough to act like it. On a lark I grabbed the Shelby Lynne CD from my car and joined the long line. As I waited I rehearsed the obscure tidbits of knowledge about her I'd recite so she'd know I was a true fan. When my turn came, however, all I could manage was a nervous blurt. A swirl of a hand later I had my autograph, and I was jostled aside.

"That's not the funny part," Chloe assures Nina. "Get to the funny part, Dad."

"The funny part? Well, the funny part is that she was signing in black ink, which you'd expect, I suppose, only the CD cover is black, too. I mean, it's printed on black paper. There's no way to see black ballpoint on black paper. If you hold the CD up to the light you see a little chicken scratch there, but you can't tell it's a signature, much less hers. It just looks like a crease."

Nina laughs, but only mildly, because at the end of the day the funny part isn't all that funny. I have much better stories I could tell, but I won't. They're not appropriate for sixteen year olds.

"So you going to try for Liz Phair's autograph?" Nina wants to know. In the rearview I watch her twist sideways and stretch her legs across Chloe's lap. The motion flips back the hem of her mini, exposing half a thigh. Nina's a good kid, I suppose, but recently she's anointed herself a sexpot. She can't show up in a tank top that's not tight enough to crush the ribs of a third grader, or pull on jeans whose plunging waistline won't bare her coccyx. Tonight she sports a thin cami that exposes a countywide swath of belly, plus shiny knee-high boots. In my day you had to scout out a Rick James video to find a woman dressed like this.

"I'm too old for autographs," I admit. Only it's another question that isn't begging an answer. It's just a joke, and as usual with my daughter and her friends—as always with them—the joke's on me.

Exactly a week ago tonight I walked into my daughter's bedroom to discover her and Nina singing "Fuck and Run," the most famous entry in the Liz Phair songbook. Although neither girl is particularly musical, they're threatening to start a band, and each knows enough guitar to strum the chorus, which goes *I can feel it in my bones / I'm gonna spend another year alone / It's fuck and run, fuck and run / Even when I was seventeen, fuck and run.*

Ten years ago when I had time to worry about what lyrics mean I interpreted these words as a protest against presumptive sex. The man that the song's addressed to takes intimacy for granted, leaving the narrator pleading for romance. *Whatever happened to a boyfriend?* she wants to know. *The kind of guy who tries to win you over?* I like to think I'm sympathetic, even if I have been divorced twice, but there's something rather startling about the first time you hear your child say *fuck* that prevented me from sharing my interpretation with the girls. Instead, I did what I've always done when I'm in the same room with Chloe and a nude scene flares up in a movie or a rapper unleashes a scatological sluice of rhyme: I turned 180 degrees and walked away.

Only later, after Nina was called home to dinner, could I confront my daughter. She was in the kitchen, flipping

through a magazine while a pot of spaghetti boiled on the stovetop. To confirm my suspicions I checked the bookcase of CDs I keep in my study. Sure enough, my Ps had been ransacked, and all five of my Liz Phairs—three official releases and a pair of bootlegs that cost me thirty bucks apiece—were gone.

"You know," I told her, "I've never had a problem with you borrowing my CDs. I've always *wanted* you to because music was—you know—something we could share. But some stuff I have can be a little...*rough*, and there's—uh—words and—oh—ideas even that I'm not sure you're ready for. So before you grab one next time, you ask me first, okay?"

She looked at me with the kind of baffled face that humans are only capable of between the ages of twelve and twenty, the look of supreme indignity says *you can't be serious*.

"You can't be serious," she said.

"Well, no, I'm actually very serious." Bubbles of hot water jumped through the twists of steam, splashing the pot sides and hissing on the orange stove coils.

"It's not anything I haven't heard before."

"That's comforting to know. You better check your noodles. I don't want my pot burned."

As she rose to spoon through the foam I poured a glass of milk and thought of how I hadn't always been the best of dads. I was only twenty-one when Chloe was born. I was one of those guys who marries young and divorces after learning he's even younger than he knew. For a lot of years distractions kept me from her. I always paid my child support, but somehow work, trips, parties, and girlfriends all seemed more pressing. It's only been since my second marriage failed that Chloe's stayed regularly at my place. I'm more lenient than her mother, she tells me.

"There's an article on her in that magazine."

"On who?" The milk coated my insides.

"Liz Phair. She's got a new CD coming out, and critics are creaming her. They say she's too poppy. The message boards are going nuts on. They say she's sold out. Here she's trying to be a teen idol and she's almost your age."

"She's almost my age? Wow. That would mean she's...*not even forty yet.*"

"Yeah, but she's *acting* young, being sexy and all. I'm surprised you ever heard of her."

"Why would you say that?"

She strained the noodles through a colander and opened a can of sauce. I was wishing I were gulping something stronger than milk. "You don't listen to girl singers," she said.

"That's not true. Go look at my CDs—just don't *take* them. There's a lot of women in there: PJ Harvey, Tori Amos, Kristin Hersh and Tonya Donnelly, Courtney Love, L7, Veruca Salt, Poe, Sleater-Kinney. And that's just off the top of my head."

"Maybe so," Chloe observed, "but you've only got *one* Kristin Hersh and *one* L7, as opposed to *every* Replacements, *every* R.E.M., *every* U2. But you've got *lots* of Liz Phair."

I'd never realized I was this inconstant when it came to women singers. Story of my life, I guess.

"I bought her because she was intelligent, witty, strong, and fun. She could be shocking, but it wasn't contrived. She had candor. When I listened to her I felt enlightened. For a while there I listened to her so much she almost became my id."

"Your what?"

"Never mind."

She was still skimming the article. "You know what, though? I don't think you'd have a shot with her, Dad."

"That's too bad. I guess I'll stop writing her letters promising to shoot a president if she'll only love me."

"She likes strong men. Alpha males. It talks here about her making out in a bar with a Marine she just met. She says they got kicked out of the place things got so wild."

"Well, God bless America. And nice to know you think so highly of me."

She closed the magazine and returned the spaghetti to the pot. "I *do* think highly of you. Those things you liked about her—intelligence, candor, stuff like that? They're the things I like. That means we have similar tastes."

I was halfway through a swallow. "I think I'm being snookered," I admitted.

"It's all right—you're good at it. She's in Hotlanta in a few days, only Nina's parents won't let her go unless there's an adult driving, so we nominated you."

"Just for the record, I won't let you go without an adult, either."

"Then we're on the same page!" She poured the sauce atop the drained spaghetti, mixed it with a fork, and began eating straight from the pot. "Tickets are \$25. They're general admission, but we're afraid it'll sell out, so could you get them today? I bookmarked the order form on your computer."

A hundred miles into Georgia we arrive at the Liz Phair show, only I have the distinct feeling we've strayed into a PTA meeting. The floor of the Roxy is evenly divided among teenage girls and adults old enough to be their parents. Chloe and Nina disappear into a sea of peers, all of who flit and gambol about. On my side of the room, the enthusiasms of youth are more annoying than amusing. Here we've paid good money only to be reminded that ours is no longer the freshest of generations. Why is Liz Phair playing an all-ages show, anyway? She's ours; she's one of us. We weren't that old when we discovered her, and when we discovered her wasn't that long ago—just a president away from the current one, one Honda Rabbit removed from the Ford Expedition we presently drive, only a marriage or two in our past. Surely, we're thinking, surely it's not yet time for us to be middle-aged.

"I blame the new shit," decides the blonde who elbows my ribcage each time she chugs her soda. She's already complained about the unavailability of beer—the Roxy can't serve alcohol at all-ages shows. By "shit" she refers to Liz Phair's current CD, which, if I'm overhearing her right, is controversial because it's not really Liz Phair's voice we're hearing, not the *authentic* Liz Phair we once knew, loved, and, in our delusions, *possessed*, but someone who's out to conquer what this woman calls the "lip gloss market." "It's a

mid-life crisis," she tells her friend. "It's like your dad buying a sports car on his fiftieth birthday—it's just not dignified."

If I were Liz Phair I wouldn't take the criticism too hard. This woman has been at every concert I've ever attended. She's the Fan Who Feels Betrayed. She's the type that so associates a piece of music with a certain pivotal but remote moment in her life that she can't stand the fact that both time and her band have marched on. I've heard her (or at least her kind) say with a straight face that "I Want to Hold Your Hand" is a better song than "Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds," that Nick Drake was smart to die when his best work was behind him, that Elvis Costello never made a better record than *My Aim is True*, his first. (Hello?—*Imperial Bedroom*, maybe?). If she were eighty instead of forty she'd say Sinatra never should've split from Tommy Dorsey, and if she were three hundred she'd claim Mendelssohn was washed up after *St. Matthew's Passion*—which he conducted when he was all of twenty. As annoying as I find The Fan Who Feels Betrayed, she's not nearly as bad as the Perennial Frat Bro, a pair of whom loiter to the far side of the blonde and her friend, doing what Perennial Frat Bros do: talk bumptiously about Things That Aren't Likely, like their having a shot with Liz Phair.

"What a piece," says the handsomer Bro. He's staring at a commemorative poster the Roxy is handing out. It's a picture of Liz Phair, splayed and seemingly naked, a guitar covering her private parts.

"I wish I was that guitar," says the chunkier and less-attractive Bro. I see the Fan Who Feels Betrayed scowl at her friend, who, not surprisingly, is also chunkier and less attractive.

"Idiots," the blonde decides.

"Morons," her friend agrees.

"They probably can't name a Liz Phair song besides 'Fuck and Run.'"

This is me butting in. I speak only because I feel foolish pretending I'm not privy to their conversation. We're jammed so tight together I'm afraid to exhale for fear of blowing a new part in the friend's hair. "That's my favorite,"

I add. "That and the one where she brags about being the queen of blow j—"

The women give me a disapproving glare. One more word out of me, they're thinking, and out comes the pepper spray. I can't blame them. They've seen me at concerts all their lives, too. I used to be The One Down Front Having Fun, but somehow I've ended up The Creepy Guy Standing By Himself, Arms Folded, Even During the Fast Songs.

It's nearly eleven p.m. before Liz Phair takes the stage, and, boy, do we need her. The crowd's energy is flagging, at least on the adult side of the room, where most of us are twenty minutes past our bedtime. We've watched the roadies test the mics and amps, and we've sat through a tedious opening act. But then lights go out, and the Roxy explodes in cheers as the silhouettes of Liz Phair and her band strut into view.

She's blonder and more ebullient than I remember from her old CD covers. She's also a lot more naked. She wears a cami that's flimsier than even Nina's, and when she slings her Fender Stratocaster across her hip to cock a pose, she reveals that her short-shorts have been strategically unzipped and peeled back to expose a cherry red triangle of panties. The crowd goes wild.

I do my best not to gape at that triangle as she slices into "6'1"," the opening cut on *Exile in Guyville*. Suddenly, neither The Fan Who Feels Betrayed nor her friend seem all that betrayed. This is old Liz Phair, after all. Both women hunch forward, expectantly, demanding from the performance the balm that I suspect the song has given them through ten years of listening to it in the sadness of dark bedrooms or parked cars or whatever isolated place they retreat to to nurse the disappointments of love. They want a transfusion of its confidence, a graft of the steeliness that's flexed in each downward cascade of its stoic melody. *It's co-oh-oh-oh/d out there, and rou-uh-uh-ugh!* Liz Phair twice yells, taxing the upper limits of her register on her way to the chorus: *I kept standing 6'1" / Instead of 5'2" / And I loved my life / And I hated you....*

Even though it's a song for women, I like to think I can empathize. I myself topped out at 5'8½". Yet I wonder if I'm not compromising the message that women don't need men to know themselves, because by the time the song's over, I have to admit that I'm ogling Liz Phair. And I'm not alone.

"I love you, Liz!" a male voice screams. It's the first Perennial Frat Bro, the good-looking one.

"Love you back," she answers.

"I love your underwear, Liz!"

Just in case nobody knows that it's him, Bro No. 1 yells the same thing three songs later, right after the slinky drone "Mesmerizing," and then again after another seven songs, just as the singer is about to rip into "Help Me, Mary."

"Idiot," decides The Fan Who Feels Betrayed.

"Moron," agrees her friend.

I'd agree, too, but I suddenly realize that I haven't checked on Chloe and Nina. I strain for a glimpse of the pit. Sure enough, the girls are on the front row, dancing under the watchful eye of a grim trio of security goons. I've never watched my daughter dance before, at least not since her fourth-grade ballet recital. It's sad to see her twist and swirl so uninhibitedly and know that she'd never allow herself to express such fluid grace if she had any inkling I was watching. The last concert we attended together she fell asleep. It was nine years ago, and she was seven. I had an extra ticket to the Rolling Stones, but I wasn't dating anyone at the time, so I took her, even though the show wouldn't start until after her bedtime. She fell asleep before Keith Richards finished his first cigarette. I held her two and a half hours straight, right up until "(I Can't Get No) Satisfaction" ended in a fireworks shower that scared her into a teary fit.

"Love you, Liz!"

The singer ignores the catcall, but the audience is fed up. Nasty looks are dispensed; scattered boos break out. The Bros love the attention. The last song is a new one, a lilting ballad called "Little Digger" that's more somber and self-critical than the carnal odes Liz Phair is famous for. From what I can tell, it's about a single mother who must explain to her young son why the man in her bed isn't his father. *I've done the damage, the damage is done, she sings. I hope to God*

that I'm the damaged one. You don't have to guess which half of the room applauds when this line is delivered. I wonder what Chloe and the kids her age make of it. Can they appreciate adult regrets? Do they believe us when we say we're sorry we're not perfect, that we've made mistakes, that if we could we'd go back and do many things differently? Or do they find our apologies burdensome, a sneaky plea for their forgiveness and reassurance? I'd really like to ask my daughter these questions, but I won't. She's let me know she hates it when her mom tries to talk to her. Maybe instead I'll buy her copy of the new Liz Phair and hope she appreciates this song. Meanwhile, she and Nina rock slowly to the beat in a sisterly embrace. My own arms remain folded at my chest.

"'Fuck and Run,' Liz! 'Fuck and Run.'"

The crowd chants for this song. The stage lights dim and the band retreats offstage, waiting for the ceremonial clapping to call them back out. From the corner of my eye I see the Bros push their way up front. The Fan Who Feels Betrayed shakes her head. "Grow up, already," I hear her say. But the Bros are oblivious, and they jostle themselves a space directly behind Chloe and Nina. They laugh and make lusty faces, gaping at the girls' hips, their legs. I decide I'm ready for this show to end.

But it hasn't ended. The band returns, and to everyone's delight, the first bars of "Fuck and Run" blast from the PA. Live, the song is tougher and meatier than the skeletal CD version. The crowd so far has been lively but not raucous, but now they bob up and down, throwing out hands as if trying to clutch at whatever wisdom the lyrics hold. The security goons begin backing kids off the barricade, including Chloe, who leans over the railing for a pick, a handshake, or some acknowledgment. Suddenly, the chunkier Bro dips to his haunches, disappearing. The next thing I know, my daughter's legs are thrown straight up in the air, white as a pair of dagger blades. Before she's flipped over the barricade, her skirt falls up around her waist, revealing panties every bit as cherry red as Liz Phair's.

I lunge forward, knifing between The Fan and her friend as I break through the rows of spectators. Drinks fly, people

tumble left and right. By the time I make it to the Bros—it only takes a few seconds, but I feel like I've run an obstacle course—my entire right arm is drenched in soda. The stuff drips off my fingers. At least it's not beer. I crash into the chunky Bro, who bellyflops to the floor. I almost fall myself, but I catch my balance just in time to grab the other Bro by the hoodie, and with a tug I jerk him to his knees. I drag him two feet to the pit, his head swallowed in collar. Across the barricade I find my daughter bucking in the arms of two goons. There's a look of panic in Chloe's eyes. She doesn't know they're not pawing for fun but wrestling her off to eject her, as they do all stage divers these days.

"She was pushed!" I cry out.

I keep yelling this because I can't hear myself over the speakers' roar. But then the buzzing in my ears suddenly isn't "Fuck and Run," but something rawer, more primitive. It's me, my voice. The band stops, the crowd goes silent. When I squint toward the stage, I see Liz Phair hunched over a monitor, gesturing at me like a schoolmarm flustered by a disruptive pupil. Only I don't think too many schoolmarms wear their short-shorts unzipped. "No fighting!" she screams.

I say the first thing I think. "This isn't how I wanted us to meet," I tell her.

The words are hardly out before I'm interrupted by a cymbal crash. At least, that's what I think it is, until I decide that a cymbal would make a buzzing noise, not a buzzing sensation, which is what's vibrating through my gums. The vibrating shoots through my skull before I understand what's happened. The Bro has punched me. He's wiggled to a crouch that gives him just enough height to drive a blind uppercut into my jaw. I know it's a solid hit because when I go to gasp two incisors drop to the Roxy floor.

"You're lucky," says a paramedic as he hands me my teeth in a cup of cool water. "They came out in one piece. If we can find a dentist this late at night, he can probably glue them back in their sockets. And if not, well, nobody will notice implants. Either way, you'll get your choppers back."

I'd thank him, but there's a cold compress in the gap that formerly held my incisors. Already the paramedic and his

partner have cheered me with a rendition of "All I Want for Christmas Are My Two Front Teeth."

"We ready to roll?" A police officer strolls to the ambulance I sit in. A few feet away, under the flashing strobes on his squad car, sit the Perennial Frat Bros, looking imploringly at me. My teeth no sooner hit the floor than they were begging me not to press charges. The handsomer one promises to pay for my dental care. I really can't decide what to do. I'd like to forget the whole fracas, but the paramedics are worried that my jaw's fractured, and my head pounds so hard I can't parse my options.

"My daughter," I lisp. My words sound like kettle steam. "Her friend, too—I need to find them. They're still inside."

"You better go round them up," one paramedic tells the cop. "Those teeth won't be any good much past thirty minutes. We're pushing it as it is."

The policeman disappears beneath the Roxy marquee. The paramedics insist that I lie down to stop the bleeding, but I'm embarrassed. A crowd has gathered on the sidewalk, stealing peeks at my swelling face.

"Where were you?" I ask Chloe when the cop returns with her and Nina in tow. Their arms brim with posters, shirts, and CDs.

"She wanted to talk to us."

"Who?"

"Liz Phair. She's really cool. She was worried about us. Look at all the stuff she gave us. It's all autographed, every last thing."

"I was worried about you, too," I say, but my point is lost a paramedic returns the compress to my numbed gap. There's a moment's confusion before we can leave. Only Chloe can ride in the ambulance with me, it turns out. A squad car will have to take Nina. She looks a little frightened as another cop leads her away, her mini and black boots even more inappropriate for the occasion.

"So what's she like?" I ask once we're moving. The pot-holes along Peachtree Street set my incisors spinning in the water.

"She's cool." She's at my side on her knees, so close I feel her breath on my neck. "Funny, caring, too. She said to tell

you she's sorry she yelled at you. She didn't know I was your daughter. She didn't even see that guy flip me. All she saw were my legs. She thought I dove the barricade. They all thought I dove it."

"Well, someday you probably will. Rushing the stage is half the fun. Just don't do it until you're old enough that you don't need me to drive you. I'm too old for the barricade."

Her hand strokes my hair. She's trying to comfort me.

"She gave me her manager's email. She wants to know you're okay. And some of that stuff she signed is for you. She asked how to spell your name. Here, look."

She unrolls a poster. I see my name scrawled across the picture of Liz Phair covering her body with her guitar, along with a long message and a signature. I'm just glad it's not black ink on black paper.

"What's that all about?" I ask, pointing at a line. "Why did she write 'God Bless America' there?"

"That's the funny part," Chloe admits, smiling. "She was asking about you, and Nina and I, we kind of lied. Not a big lie, just a little one. For you. She wanted to know what you do, and I said something a little farfetched."

"Spill it, will you? My mouth hurts."

Swear to God, with that Louise Brooks bob, she's no longer a teenager. She looks twenty-five, at least.

"Well, Dad, okay, um—I told Liz Phair you're a Marine."

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