



talking to
girls about
duran duran

ONE YOUNG MAN'S QUEST
FOR TRUE LOVE AND
A COOLER HAIRCUT

ROB SHEFFIELD

DUTTON



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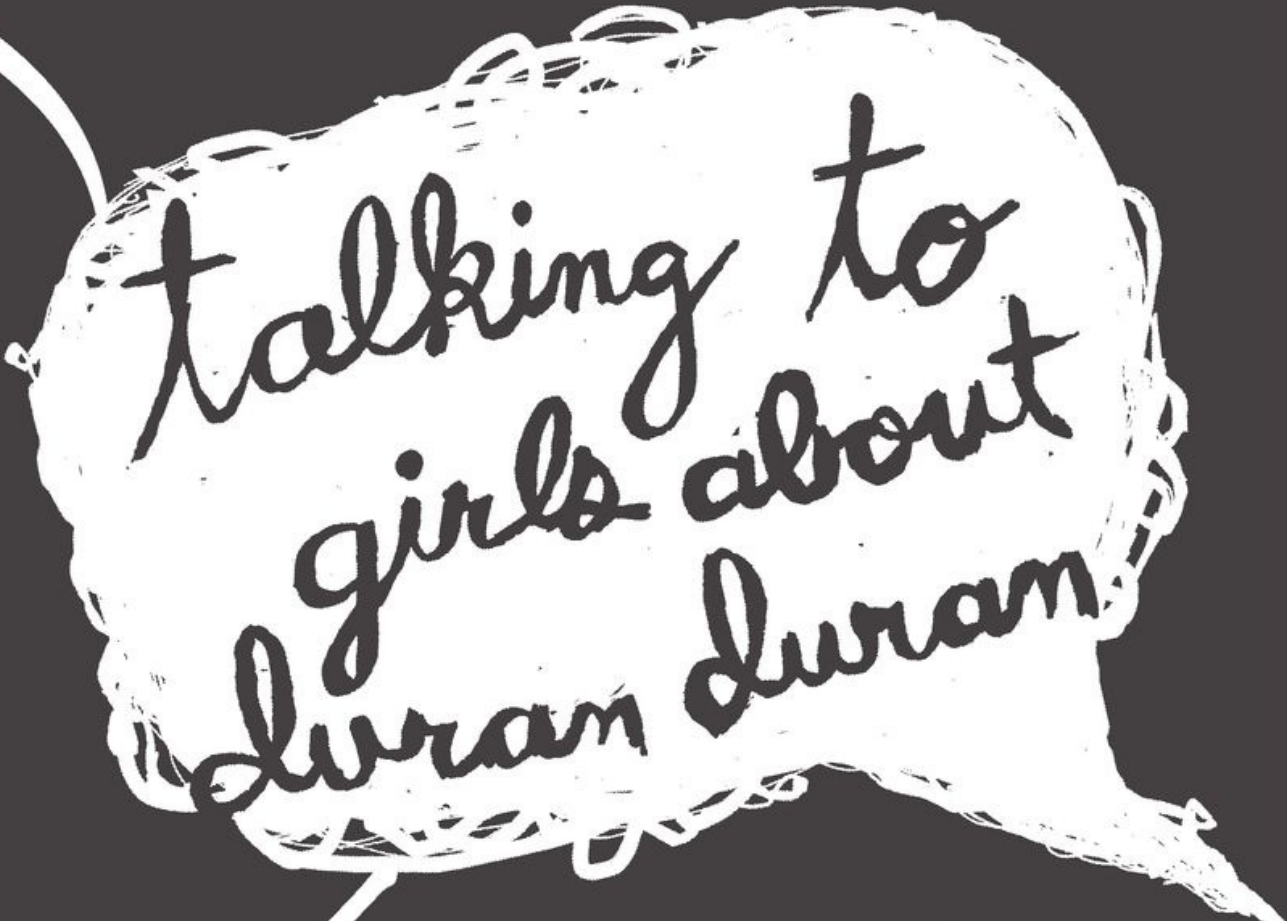
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LOSS, ONE SONG AT A TIME



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“LOOK AT THE TWO PEOPLE DANCING ON EITHER
SIDE OF YOU. IF YOU DON’T SEE A GIRL,
YOU ARE DANCING INCORRECTLY.”

—THE KEYBOARDIST FOR LCD SOUNDSYSTEM

Introduction

If you ever step into the Wayback Machine and zip to the 1980s, you will have some interesting conversations, even though nobody will believe a word you say. You can tell people the twentieth century will end without a nuclear war. The Soviet Union will dissolve, the Berlin Wall will come down, and people will start using these things called “ringtones” that make their pants randomly sing “Eye of the Tiger.” America will elect a black president who spent his college days listening to the Beatles in the 50s.

But there’s one claim nobody will believe: Duran Duran are still famous.

I can’t believe it myself. I’ve always been a Duran Duran fan. I was an ’80s kid, so I grew up on them. I watched Simon Le Bon and Nick Rhodes give “Save a Prayer” its world premiere live on MTV. I listened hard to the lyrics of “Is There Something I Should Know?” and pondered its existential vision of romantic love. I have studied their fashion, learned their wives’ names, bought their solo albums. I’ve always been obsessed with Duran Duran. But even more so, I’ve been obsessed with how girls talk about them. I’m pretty sure Duran Duran would cease to exist if girls ever stopped talking about them. Except they never do.

Talking to girls about Duran Duran? It’s how I’ve spent my life. I count on the Fab Five to help me understand all the females in my life—all the crushes and true loves, the sisters and housemates, the friends and confidantes and allies and heroes. Girls like to talk, and if you are a boy and you want to learn how to listen to girl talk, start a conversation and keep it going, that means you have to deal with Duran Duran. You learn to talk about what the girls want to talk about. And it is a truth universally acknowledged that the girls want to talk about Duran Duran.

My little sister Caroline understands. “It’s like talking to boys about wrestling,” she says. “You can’t just name check, oh, Hulk Hogan or Roddy Piper, because all that means is you used to watch WWF with your brother. So you have to act casual and mention Billy Jack Haynes or Hercules Hernandez. Then the boys are putty in your hands.”

I’ve never heard of these wrestlers, though I assume my sister knows what she’s talking about. But I guess Duran Duran are an obsession for me because they were the girls’ band that I loved and because I loved them at a time when I was figuring out what it meant to be a guy. So trying to figure them out is how I keep figuring myself out.

There’s a character in a Kingsley Amis novel who asks, “Why did I like women’s breasts so much? I was clear on why I liked them, thanks, but why did I like them *so much*?” I wonder the same thing about Duran Duran. I get why women love them, but why do women love them *so much*? I feel like if I could solve that riddle, I could solve a lot of others.

• • •

The Durannies liked girls. Like Bowie or the Beatles, they liked girls enough to want to look like girls. The admiration was mutual, and at this point they have been famous and beloved for thirty years. It’s fair to say that at the time, we all thought this band would be forgotten by now, yet everyone in the

Western world can still sing “Hungry Like the Wolf.” Simon, Nick, John, Andy and Roger remain icons of adolescent female desire. Even the tenderoni who weren’t even born in the ’80s know what “Girls on Film” is about and nurture that special relationship all ladies seem to share with John. (Sometimes also Roger. Frequently Simon. Not Andy.) How did this happen?

The ’80s, obviously. I was thirteen when the ’80s began and twenty-three when they ended, so this was the era of my adolescence, and I never figured anybody would remember the ’80s fondly after they were over. But like everything else that happened in the ’80s, Duran Duran symbolize teenage yearnings. Girls still grow up memorizing *Pretty in Pink* and *Dirty Dancing* during those constant weekend TV marathons. Any time *Sixteen Candles* comes on, my sisters can recite every scene word for word. (If I’m lucky, I get in a few Jake lines.) When Michael Jackson, John Hughes and Patricia Swayze died, these were national days of mourning. Every night in your town, you can find a bar somewhere hosting an Awesome ’80s Prom Night, where you can count on a steady loop of “Tainted Love” and “Billie Jean” and “Just Like Heaven.” Any wedding I attend degenerates into a room full of Tommys and Ginas screaming “Livin’ on a Prayer.” If that *doesn’t* happen, the couple could probably get an annulment.

If you were famous in the ’80s, you will never be *not* famous. (In theoretical physics, this principle is formally known as the Justine Bateman Constant.) Any group that was popular in the ’80s can still pack a room. When ’80s darlings Depeche Mode come to town, my wife, Ally, begins picking out her dress weeks before the show, even though I already know it’s going to be the short black one. And I know I’m her date for the show, and I know she will look deep into my eyes when Dave Gahan sings “A Question of Lust.” We played Kajagoogoo’s “Too Shy” at our wedding and nobody even walked out.

I’ve built my whole life around loving music. I’m a writer for *Rolling Stone*, so I am constantly searching for new bands and soaking up new sounds. When I started out as a music journalist, at the end of the 1980s, it was generally assumed that we were living through the lamest music era the world would ever see. But those were also the years when hip-hop exploded, beatbox disco soared, indie rock took off, and new wave invented a language of teen angst. All sorts of futuristic electronic music machines offered obnoxious noises for the plundering. All kinds of bold feminist ideas were inspiring pop stars to play around with gender roles and sexual politics, on a level that would have been unthinkable just a few years earlier. The radio could be your jam, whether you were a new-wave kid, a punk rocker, a disco fan, a hip-hop head, a Morrissey acolyte or a card-carrying member of the Cinderella Fan Club. I was every one of these at some time or another—I loved it all.

But even I didn’t think there was so much going on in the ’80s that people would still be trying to figure out all these years later. I didn’t expect I’d still be trying to figure it out either. A few years ago, I went to the Rocklahoma festival, devoted to the ’80s hair-metal bands. I stood in a field surrounded for the first and last time by thirty thousand of my fellow Quiet Riot fans, listening to the band play “Metal Health (Bang Your Head).” Was it strange? Very. Did it rock? Brutally.

It’s always weird to see how the Hair Decade lives on, even for people barely old enough to remember it. Every week, in my neighborhood of Greenpoint, Brooklyn, I go and see young bands getting brand-new kicks out of ’80s beats. At the time, we all figured we were stuck in an Epoch of Bogus. The country was in horrific shape, with Reagan and his cronies running amok. It was customary to blame music for the poisonous state of the nation. Nobody would have suspected that anyone would ever go to the movies to relive 1985 (*The Wedding Singer*), 1987 (*Adventureland*) or Jesus, 1986 (*Hot Tub Time Machine*). I mean, the biggest movie of 1985 was the one where Michael Fox used a time machine to get the hell out of 1985. We were young, bored and dumb, so we couldn’t

wait for it all to end. But something has kept this all alive. And in retrospect, the Epoch of Boge evolved into the Apex of Awesome. Who made this decision?

Girls, obviously. As Tone Loc said, “This is the Eighties and I’m down with the ladies.” The ladies were not necessarily down with Tone Loc—but they’re down with the ’80s, and it’s feminine passion that sustains the whole mythology of ’80s teen dreams. And of all the absurd and perverted artifacts from that time, nothing keeps them feeling fascination like Duran Duran. Which is why I’ve always been fascinated too. How the hell did men and women communicate before they had this band to discuss? Fortunately, I’ll never have to know.

The first girls I shared them with were my high school pals Heather and Lisa, girlie girls who liked to talk about Duran Duran because they liked to say the name, which they pronounced, “Jran Jran.” Heather and Lisa taught me about sushi, high heels, “Wake Me Up Before You Go-Go,” the value of earrings shaped like pieces of sushi, and the importance of never letting Lisa drive your car—but the most crucial lesson was Duran Duran. We would go out for ice cream and they would sing along with the radio, using spoons for mikes, and we would wait until the next time “Union of the Snake” “Hungry Like the Wolf ” came on WHTT, which was never a long wait.

Lisa’s cousin was a model who was married to the keyboardist in this band, and she went to the wedding. We grilled her for the details—apparently her uncle gave a moving toast, which was drowned out by the ecstatic squeals of Roger Taylor’s date in the backless dress as he licked her entire spine, vertebra by vertebra. Lisa also had sordid backstage gossip of drugs and sex. But what really mattered to me? The way Lisa said their name: “Jran Jran.” I tried to say it that way too.

Heather and Lisa had disposable boyfriends who suffered at their hands and made me secretly feel grateful to be above such things. I was better at being a girlfriend than a boyfriend anyway. I wasn’t really living the Duran Duran lifestyle, which seemed to involve dedicating your life to traveling to distant locales where you would flip over tables and pour champagne for pouty vixens who would help you apply your mascara. I might have been a shy, bookish geek, but I was totally hung up on this pop group who were devoted to sex and glamour and danger. I loved how fiercely girls loved DD, and how fearless DD were in the face of so much girl worship. I was pretty sure I had a lot to learn from the guys.

I envied the religious intensity of their fandom. One day, you’re a perfectly ordinary suburban princess, content with Journey and Styx, and then you hear something new and all of a sudden you’re one of *those girls*. It’s funny because a female audience is often a fickle audience, and yet it goes both ways. A “girls’ artist,” whether it’s Depeche Mode or Neil Diamond or Duran Duran or Jeff Buckley or Luther Vandross or R.E.M. or the New Kids, commands a certain loyalty that never really goes away. An adult woman might have a slightly mocking, slightly ironic relationship to her teenage Duran-loving self, and yet she can still feel that love in a non-ironic way. And when adult women talk about them, they turn into *those girls* again.

That’s why Duran Duran always keep coming up in conversation, no matter where I am or who I’m talking to. A few weeks ago, I went to see a band called the Cribs at the Bowery Ballroom in New York and wound up at the bar talking to a music-industry lawyer who represents the biggest names in hip-hop. Within five minutes, she was raving about John Taylor. She’d just been in the Bahamas staying at a posh resort where (by coincidence) Duran Duran were staying, in rehearsals for their upcoming reunion tour. She was in the pool with John Taylor, swimming past him in her bikini, trying to turn his head, telling herself, “I am swimming in John Taylor’s water. The chlorine touching his body is touching mine.”

This woman obviously loves them in a way that’s very different from how I love them, yet in some

ways not so different, and I guess those differences intrigue me. Even if I didn't share those dreams splashing in John Taylor's backwash, I definitely associated the music with sexual yearning, and loved how girls would get a certain glow in the throes of pop passion. My feelings for these girls could get all mixed up in identification with the band—maybe girls would scream for me the way they screamed for DD if only I modeled my life on Simon Le Bon, and borrowed his lipliner, and spiced my conversation with lines like “My mouth is alive with juices like wine.” It might take years of monastic devotion. I might have to go to exotic locales and have sex with actual wolves.

When I had my first actual girlfriend, she tried putting makeup on me; I begged her to “give me the Nick Rhodes,” although I was secretly hoping she would accidentally give me the John Taylor. As a die-hard punk rock chick, she hated Duran Duran, but she liked the idea of a boyfriend who looked a little bit more like John Taylor. Unfortunately, I ended up looking kind of like Andy Taylor's bag-lady auntie. I had to face the facts. Being Duran Duran was never going to be an option. I would have to settle for being a fan.

When you're a boy, you sometimes begrudge the rock stars who are bogarting your share of feminine attention. When I met Peter Buck of R.E.M., he mentioned something I'd written about resenting how much girls loved his band. I was mortified, but he just smiled and said, “In my day, it was David Bowie. I was mad at him because my girlfriends liked him better than me.”

Duran Duran rank high on this chart. Boys always hated them, and there's no way the band didn't know it. They simply didn't care.

The way girls raved about DD was so different from the way we boys talked about the bands we liked. I remember hours of debate in the high school lunchroom about the Clash: which was better, *London Calling* or *Sandinista!*? Is “Lover's Rock” really about oral sex? Which member of the band truly understood the geopolitical context of Nicaraguan history? Who had a cooler name, Joe Strummer or Tory Crimes? My female rocker friends call this “boy list language,” and they won't tolerate it. When I talk about Duran Duran with other guys, which admittedly doesn't happen all that often, we end up debating whether the Power Station was a better side project than Arcadia. No Duran Duran chick, not even the hard-core obsessives, would sit through a conversation like that.

I will always love the Clash, because I loved them so much when I was fourteen, and I love how you can start a conversation with almost literally any dude about the Clash. For instance, if you *are* a dude, you are still stuck halfway through the last paragraph, spluttering, “*London Calling* is *much* better than *Sandinista!*” This is just the way we dissect the things we love. But it's tougher to talk to women about the Clash. (They love “Stand by Me” but they don't care that it's really called “Train in Vain” instead of “Stand by Me.”) So Duran Duran are a much bigger part of my day-to-day life.

I still feel like I have a lot to learn from Duran Duran. They're Zen masters on the path of infinite sluttiness, shower-nozzle heroes devoted to inspiring female fantasies. One of the things I admire about them is how they sincerely do not give a shit whether boys like them. They surrender gracefully to the female gaze. They still wear the makeup, they still dress like tarts, and every time they do a reunion tour, they play the hits they know will make the Durannies scream. They have never sold out to their girls, and there's nothing about them that would evoke the dreaded words “guilty pleasure.” As Oscar Wilde said, no civilized man ever regrets a pleasure, and no uncivilized man knows what pleasure is.

The songs in this book are some of my favorite '80s relics, the songs that warped my brain with dubious ideas, boneheaded goals, laughable hopes and timeless mysteries. They might not necessari-

be the greatest songs of the pre-Snooki era, or the most important, or the most popular. But they're a songs I love. And they add up to a playlist that gives a taste of that moment. In a way, you could think of these songs as Bobby Brown's pants. There's an episode of VH1's trashy reality show *Celebrity Fit Club* where everyone sits around the bonfire. They're supposed to bring some personal possession that represents the old life they're leaving behind, so they can toss it into the fire. Bobby Brown holds up a pair of baggy, sequined pants that could only come from the '80s and says, "You know I had to be high to buy these." (Sebastian Bach nods. He understands.) But I'm not tossing these songs into any kind of fire—I'm just shaking them to see what memories come tumbling out. And of course, a lot of those memories have to do with love, and learning about love through pop music.

It's complicated, the way we use pop culture artifacts in our day-to-day emotional relationships. The popular stereotype of this is the overbearing boyfriend who tries to get his girlfriend to appreciate free jazz, football or World War II documentaries—but everyone knows it goes both ways. Consider *Pretty Woman*, a movie that only exists so women can force their boyfriends to watch it. Your boyfriend has probably seen it more times than you have, once for every relationship. (Never more than once—unless something was seriously wrong.) And while you may kid yourself he thinks the women are hot, he's really just showing off that he's man enough to take the punishment. When you're a guy watching *Pretty Woman* with your girlfriend, you *are* Julia Roberts in the scene where Richard Gere takes her to the opera to see if she cries, because if she does, it means she's sensitive and deep and worthy to operate Richard's gear. Watching this scene on a date, you're the pretty woman, the ho on display in the opera box. And maybe you really do want to cry, if only because the supposed opera music is just the piano riff from Bruce Springsteen's "Racing in the Street."

But there's nothing at all wrong with an exchange like this. As a boy, experiences like this are part of learning girl languages. What else is pop culture for? Since I grew up with rock-and-roll parents bonding over the songs they loved, it never really occurred to me that love and music belonged to separate categories. When my mom and dad were growing up as 1950s rock and rollers, both sang "The Still of the Nite" with their respective high school friends; my mom took the lead while my dad took the "shoo-doo shooby-doo" part, so they were a natural match. I'm sure that my mom and dad would find lots of other ways to bond if they didn't have music. But bringing people together is what music has always done best.

Learning to speak girl languages is a tricky business. Since I am married to an astrophysicist, I am constantly looking for ways to drop the Kuiper belt or Oort cloud into conversation. I try to impress Ally by making clever references to 3753 Cruithne, the earth's little-known "second moon," although it's more precisely described as a dynamic gravitational companion. I don't know if I impress her, but she appreciates the effort. She likes lots of '80s goth bands that I hated at the time—The Sisters of Mercy, Love and Rockets, Nitzer Ebb—but I love them now, because they're part of her language. She likes noisy, spazzy math-rock bands that only boys like, so she is also used to speaking boy languages. She's the only person I've ever met who can critique the accuracy of Google Mars as well as the Birthday Party discography.

But it's possible we will never agree on anything the way we agree on Duran Duran. Something about the music keeps promising that if I could finally figure out Duran Duran, I would finally understand women, and maybe even understand love.

Loving Duran Duran has been one of the constants in my life, but I have no idea what they would sound like if the women in my life stopped loving them. I guess I'll never know. I could claim that

Duran Duran taught me everything I know about women, but that's not exactly accurate: I learned from listening to girls talk about Duran Duran.

THE GO-GO'S

“Our Lips Are Sealed”

1980

It was my first coat- and-tie dance, and I couldn't get out of it because I'd told my sisters about it. They put some serious muscle into dressing me up. All three of my sisters got in on the act—Ann was thirteen, Tracey was twelve, Caroline was only four—and even though I was the oldest at fourteen, I had no authority to say no. I was desperate to get out of the dance and do what I always did on a Friday night, which was stay home and watch *The Dukes of Hazzard*, but there was no way I was getting out of this. My sisters were intent on dolling me up. My coughing fits and “I think I've got the consumption, I mean mumps, or maybe scarlet fever” routine did nothing to fool them.

So instead of spending my quality time with Bo, Luke, Daisy and the General, I was getting my hair done. The soirees at the Milton Hoosic Club were swank affairs, with a live band to play “Sweet Home Alabama,” “Cocaine” and the same songs every band played at any teen dance. But I was going to look spiffy. My sisters strong-armed me to the sink, bent me over the basin, and shampooed me. Ann picked out one of my dad's ties while Tracey put conditioner in my hair. They sent Caroline to ask Mom if they could shave me.

“Moooooom?”

“Go ahead,” my mom said, trying to concentrate on her book. “No blood, okay?”

There wasn't much legitimate stubble on my chin—I had just turned fourteen—but a few minutes later, there was foam on my face and a general consensus that debris had been cleared. Then they went for the fuzz at the back of my neck. I sat stoically while Tracey blow-dried my hair and Ann brushed it. They taught me to shine my shoes and supervised as I brushed the Cheetos dust out of my braces.

A couple hours later, I was officially dressed to kill. My sisters circled me with hand mirrors approving their handiwork from every angle. Tracey proclaimed, “Our little baby's growing up!” Ann folded a handkerchief for the pocket square and pinned my corsage.

If I'd had a date for the dance, she might have been impressed by my slick surface. But I didn't. In fact, all I remembered about the dance was watching the band—the guitarist had a six-foot plastic tube attached to his microphone stand and a jug of Jim Beam at his feet, so he could liquor up during the band's heartfelt rendition of Foghat's “Stone Blue.” I was stone blue about missing my date with

Daisy Duke.

But I knew better than to give my sisters any back talk. These were ferocious Irish girls and they drilled me well. In fact, when I saw the movie *Mean Girls*, I kept wondering when the mean girls were supposed to show up—I mean, all due respect to Lindsay Lohan and crew, but my sisters would have eaten these chicks for breakfast.

My sisters were the coolest people I knew, and still are. I have always aspired to be like them and know what they know. My sisters were the color and noise in my black-and-white boy world—how they pitied my friends who had brothers. Boys seemed incredibly tedious and dim compared to my sisters who were always a rush of energy and excitement, buzzing over all the books, records, jokes, rumors, and ideas we were discovering together. I grew up thriving on the commotion of their girl noise, whether they were laughing or singing or staging an intervention because somebody was wearing stirrup pants. I always loved being lost in that girl noise.

Yet there are so many things my sisters know about each other that I never will. They constantly laugh about private jokes I don't get, quote movies I haven't seen, nurse each other through crises they wouldn't even tell me about. They know all the symptoms when one of their kids is sick. They fight, but they make up. They explode and then go right back to loving one another as fiercely as ever. It's one of the millions of secrets they share that their brother will never understand.

It's still dramatic when my sisters get together, and it always will be. In any family function, my role is to race from sister to sister saying, "She didn't mean it." It's like an opera with too many duchesses in one castle. Just a few years ago, when we were all supposed to be adults and beyond such things, my sisters kicked my mom and dad out of the house so we could have an evening at home, just us—my three sisters, their three boyfriends, and me. (One of these boyfriends was a husband.) We played board games by the fire, and perhaps a beverage or two was consumed. Then Ann mentioned the word "dollop."

This is an extremely loaded word in our family, because of an incident a few years ago when Tracey wanted to use some of Caroline's fancy shampoo, you know, *expensive* shampoo. Caroline wouldn't let Tracey use it. Not even a dollop.

"I swear, I'll only take a dollop."

"No."

"I can't have a dollop of your shampoo?"

"No."

"You can't spare a dollop? One dollop?"

"No dollops."

"Your own sister?"

Ever since the dollop incident, the word is dynamite, and nobody uses it. But on this occasion, Ann asked Caroline to pour her a dollop of Baileys. Eye contact was made, angry words were spoken, and my sisters raced upstairs to settle this matter in private. It took them about twenty minutes. They came downstairs all lovey-dovey, and we went right back to the game.

But in those twenty minutes, I sat there on the floor with all three boyfriends. I kept the conversation going—if I remember correctly, we were arguing about the U2 discography, and whether *Zooropa* was not in many ways superior to *The Joshua Tree*. The boys kept making nervous glances upstairs. I was like, "Don't look at me, dude."

In the immortal words of Keith Richards, "It's weird to be living with a bunch of chicks." But that's how I lived. To me, it seemed like a dreary waste of time not to be surrounded by bossy, zesty, loudmouthed girls. We've always been a loud family—it's fair to say that we're always the "problem"

table” at any wedding—and it’s my sisters who pump up the volume. We like to sit at the kitchen table and talk, then drink in the living room and sing Irish songs. Mom calls out the requests for each one of us to sing, and although our voices might not get any sweeter as the night goes on, we do get louder, making up in enthusiasm what we lack in accuracy. Then we go back to the kitchen table for more talk. Since Ann and Tracey have always been tall like me, each one could talk into a different ear. I learned to take two sets of orders at the same time.

My grandmother tried explaining all this to me when I was a little boy. Nana was from County Kerry, in the old country, and she explained it was the way of our people—my sisters were always going to order me around. The Irish marry late, because they tend to starve to death if they give themselves too many mouths to feed, so the mother on an Irish farm tends to be old by the time she starts having children. That’s why the eldest girl is the one who runs the farm. My grandmother was an oldest daughter, so was my mom, and so was my sister Ann. I come from a long line of Irish men who live with oldest daughters, and they basically learn to survive by washing a lot of dishes and keeping their mouths shut. My grandmother warned me that it would always be this way, but I was too young to understand. Yet meanwhile, Nana would call my sisters after school to tell them to go into the kitchen and fix me a bowl of ice cream, and maybe a milk shake with a raw egg in it for protein. And they *would*. Why?

Like any kid, I longed to be someone else, so I was fascinated by pop stars who were garish and saucy, awakening the slatternly Valley girl in my soul. I wore Psychedelic Furs and Pretenders pins on my Barracuda jacket in hopes of impressing the new-wave girl I was sure to meet any day now. Then I came home from school to watch *General Hospital* with my sisters. Dr. Noah Drake was the man—how I yearned to rock that mullet-and-lab coat look. I would have totally copped Scorpio’s accent if I thought my sisters would let me get away with it. Eventually they switched to *Guiding Light*, the more mature woman’s choice, but I still think of Laura, which is one of the many things I have in common with Christopher Cross.

Every day during those years, I walked to school over a tiny iron bridge blasted with graffiti dedicated to Ozzy. “Welcome to Ozzy’s Coven!” it said, alongside graphic depictions of Iron Man, or maybe that was just the devil wearing a hockey helmet. Either way, it was imperative to get over the bridge before the high school kids got out of school, because then it became a place for them to blast their boom boxes, smoke, drink, get high and look for something to punch out, which was obvious where I came in. If the high school kids got to the bridge first, you had two choices: either walk a couple miles out of your way or run the gauntlet.

Across the bridge was the grassy hill that the cops set fire to every summer, because the kids had planted weed there, always a seasonal highlight for the budding pyros of my neighborhood. There was a streetlight next to the bridge that the town installed just to discourage kids from hanging out after dark, but they seemed to revel in the spotlight, blasting “More Than a Feeling” and “Cat Scratch Fever” and “Iron Man” on their radios until the cops would come chase them away. Some nights we went down by the bridge to watch the high school kids who were actually *on* the bridge, hanging out and looking cool in their own desolate honeycomb hideout, even if they were inhaling Pam out of paper bags. Ozzy and Zeppelin were singing to them, not really to me—they came to proclaim their hippie dream over and celebrate the burnout losers of the new world.

The bridge is still there, but it now looks tiny and dumpy, just a twenty-foot slab of rusted iron painted green, hardly the sort of real estate you imagine Satan and his minions would bother fighting

over. But at the time, it was an epic battleground, a catwalk fraught with fright and dread and blood. I guess every American town had one of those—it was the battle of evermore.

I was the oldest kid in our house, so I was fascinated by other people's older brothers and sisters. I was thirteen when the '70s crashed into the '80s, and the prospect of all that adolescent angst stood before me like that bridge. I worshipped our babysitter, Patty, an Irish girl with red hair who took no shit from us at all. One night, my sisters and I badgered her into telling us *The Omen* as a bedtime story. She went through the whole movie scene by scene, stab wound by stab wound. I don't know how long she spent narrating the fable of Damien and his demonic conquest of the planet—maybe it took as long as it takes to watch the actual movie—but my sisters and I just screamed along, perched on the edge of the '80s.

My sisters actually got to hang out with the older girls because they were on the basketball and field hockey teams. They would shoot hoops with the basketball chicks listening to F-105, and whenever anyone sank a basket, they would yell "Jojo COOKIN'!" which was the inexplicably thrilling catchphrase of the ranking disco DJ in town, Jojo Kinkaid. The debate over whether Jojo was cool or not still rages on in some extremely specialized circles, but one thing is for sure: he was cookin'.

When Ann and Tracey were on the basketball team, they used to ride the bus with the older girls who blasted the radio and taught them hand dances to go with the songs. There was a hand dance for Laura Branigan's "Gloria," another for "You Should Hear How She Talks About You." I never felt more like a boy than when I was trying to learn the hand dances. Ann and Tracey tried to teach me those, but I never could crack the girlie handclap language. They would do their handclap routine "Miss Lucy Had a Steamboat," or "Bubblegum, Bubblegum," or "The Spades Go Two Lips Together." Every time they tried teaching me to clap along, my hands would trip over each other. I watched the girls at recess clap their hands and wondered when I would crack the code, maybe with some help from the mythical Lady with the Alligator Purse.

Rhythm was girl code, which is why I was obsessed with the claps, but I never got it right. Handclaps were the difference between boy music and girl music. Boys noticed the vocals, the guitar, while the real action was going on down below, where only girls could hear it. All my sisters' favorite songs had great handclaps, and I could never learn them. It was all I could do to learn the claps in the Cars' "My Best Friend's Girl" (CLAP clap, CLAP clap) or "Let's Go" (CLAP clap, CLAP clap clap CLAP clap clap clap, let's go), or "Bette Davis Eyes" (clap CLAP, clap CLAP).

One time, Tracey came back from a school dance, laughing about how terribly this one guy danced. "They played 'Private Eyes,' and he was trying to clap along. He went 'Private eyes, CLAP CLAP, they're watching you, CLAP CLAP, they see your every move.' "

"Right. How is it supposed to go?"

"You know. 'Private eyes, clap CLAP, they're watching you, clap CLAP.' "

"So just the one clap then, the second time around."

"Watch. 'Private eyes. CLAP.' Now you."

"CLAP. CLAP."

"OK, now again. 'Private eyes! Clap CLAP!' "

"CLAP. CLAP CLAP."

"You know," Tracey said in her soothing tone. "You might just want to avoid the clapping-when-girls-are-around thing."

I nodded like I understood. I didn't. This was a girl language and I was on the outside. Girls can clap, boys can't. It was like the Nancy Drew book *The Clue of the Tapping Heels* where Nancy figured out the tap dancers are sending secret messages to the bad guys by tapping in Morse code.

When you're a kid, every step in identity is marked by a step in music. You were totally defined by which station you listened to, graduating from the kiddie station to the teenybop station to the grown-up stations. In our house, the radio was always on, whether it was my parents' doo-wop and oldies, the weekend Irish drinking songs on WROL or me and my sisters trying to navigate our own way around the dial. WRKO was AM Top 40 for girls. F-105 was FM Top 40 for seventh and eighth grade girls and sixth grade boys. Kiss-108 was disco for girls or very secure boys. WBZ and WHDH were pop for parents. WBCN ("the Rock of Boston") was rock for arty kids. WCOZ was like WBCN, but heavier and not as arty. It ran ads proclaiming "Kick Ass Rock & Roll!" or "WCOZ . . . [painful grunt]. . . the Rock & Roll MUTHA!" I believe the Mutha set a broadcasting record by playing "Whole Lotta Love" continuously for six years straight.

There was a lot of radio out there, and I didn't want to miss any of it. In seventh grade, I switched from WRKO to F-105 to WCOZ in the space of six months. By eighth and ninth grade, it was WBCN. Tenth grade introduced WHTT, the new contemporary hits radio station, which played nothing but Toni Basil's "Mickey" and Musical Youth's "Pass the Dutchie." There was always Magic 106, with the heavy-breathing seductive DJ named David Allan Boucher who was always hosting *Bedtime Magic*, the show where he would recite the lyrics of the songs in his very sexy way, as a soundtrack to what must have been the most depressing adult sex imaginable.

Top 40 radio was a constant education in the ways of the world. I learned what sex was from Barry White appearing on *The Mike Douglas Show* to sing "It's Ecstasy When You Lay Down Next to Me." Barry himself, looking fine in a green velour leisure suit, wandered out into the crowd to preach a little sermon as the band vamped on the bassline. "Is this song about one person? Is this song about three people? No! It's about two people. Yeah. Two people." I was grateful to the Round Mound of Sound for every scrap of wisdom he could throw me.

One of our favorite songs was Sister Sledge's disco classic "We Are Family," still all over the radio in 1980, getting played like it was a brand-new hit even though it dated back to the summer of 1976. Our baby sister, Caroline, a decade younger than me but picking up all of our cool music in the timeless tradition of sassy little sisters throughout human history, loved to sing along with this one, making up her own words: "We are family! We got all the sisters we need!" Those are still my favorite words to that song, because (in our case) they were true. But it's funny how this song never goes away, and every generation of baby sisters puts their own spin on it. Just the other day, in a movie theater lobby outside the Harry Potter movie, I heard a little Puerto Rican girl singing it as "We are family! Yeah, Mama, sing it to me!" And she was singing it to a life-size cardboard cutout of Megan Fox, which only proves there is no limit to the Sledge sisterhood.

Rick Springfield from *General Hospital* had started making hard rock records, and although they were theoretically guitar rock records for boys, they were the girliest thing ever, and I was vaguely threatened by how much I loved them. I felt so dirty when Rick Springfield sang cute, but as Rick would say, the point is probably moot. "Jessie's Girl" turned out to be one of the '80's most enduring hits. Hell, in the Rite Aid in my neighborhood, teen girls can still buy Jesse's Girl Baked Powder Eye Shadow, which is stocked on the shelf right next to the Love's Baby Soft and Hannah Montana Glamour Guitar Lollipops.

I thrilled to the glories of rock-and-roll radio, especially the Doors. Was any band ever so perfectly designed for teenage boys? My friends and I were typical eighth grade dorks at the time, in that our sex education mostly took the form of Jim Morrison. We studied *No One Here Gets Out Alive* as if they were holy writ, and memorized the entire soliloquy in "The End," right down to the chilling "I walked on down the hall" conclusion. They seemed more like an '80s new-wave combo than a class

rock legend, in part because they clearly had no idea what they were doing and didn't even bother faking it. They prepared me for all the nightmarishly pretentious and incompetent new wave that would become my adolescent *raison d'être*. The Doors revival was in full swing, with the immortal *Rolling Stone* cover that showed Jim Morrison with the words "He's hot, he's sexy and he's dead." (I was 0 for 3 in that department.)

Can you blame us? When you're an eighth grade boy, everything sucks in your life *except* Jim Morrison. We felt Jim was a god—or at least a lord—who had faked his death and escaped to Africa. When he returned, he would reward our faith, telling us, "Well done, thou good and faithful servants." Eventually, we started to get the sinking feeling that even if Morrison did fake his death, he probably died later anyway, and we never heard about it. But that's too depressing to think about. Morrison lives! What was it Jim Morrison said? "People are strange, when you're a stranger"? More like "People impose, when you're a poseur."

I assumed my sisters would scoff at the Doors, but Tracey ended up doing a book report on *No One Here Gets Out Alive*. We were always checking out each other's music, books, magazines, everything, looking to surprise each other with new kinds of fun. One day I put on the cassette of *Jesus Christ Superstar* only to find that Tracey had taped something new over it: the Go-Go's album *Beauty and the Beat*. I grieved for a few minutes before I realized I was now off the hook and never had to listen to that annoying, bogus show-tune church shit *ever again*. Praise Jesus!

And praise the Go-Go's. Man, we listened to that tape over and over again. Every song sounded like it was the chronicle of a world that was much cooler than the '70s burnout rock we heard all around us. It was a report from California, where sassy girls got dressed up and messed up and went out to cool places to do evil. "This town is our town," they sang. "It is so glamorous! Bet you'd live here if you could and be one of us!"

I used to dream about being the only boy in the Go-Go's. I had to feel like that was the ultimate rock-star gig. I had the scenario all planned out, that I would learn to play bass and replace Kathy Valentine. (Sorry, Kathy!) I would be Jane Wiedlin's true love, and she would take me to wherever she got her hair did and fix me up a little, because I wasn't really presentable enough to hit cool places with her. Our lips would be sealed. I would get to borrow her stripey pants and sing backup on my favorite Go-Go's song, "How Much More," which was basically just the two words "girl" and "tonight" repeated over and over. Since those are the two new-waviest words in the English language, it was brilliant to give them their own song. I would rewind this song over and over, close my eyes and dream of being one of the girls. I want to be that girl tonight. Girl tonight!

I'm still in awe of my sisters. The only thing I would even consider changing about them is that their husbands are taller than I am. (We've had words about that.) But I would love to know anything as deeply as they know one another. I'll never get their ability to laugh for hours over nothing, but I crave being part of their girl noise even when I don't understand it.

What I don't get, they are more than willing to teach. I am always learning new rules from them. Giving compliments, for example—always a good idea, yet there are rules for doing it right. My sisters taught me to start with the shoes, and then keep the compliments coming. Never compliment her eyes, because that means she thinks you think she's plain. Always compliment something else before you compliment the hair, but always compliment the hair. If you're giving a compliment you don't mean, which is often advisable, sandwich it between a couple that you *do* mean. My sisters had a lot of rules.

Everything was changing so fast and moving in stereo. My voice was breaking, so I creaked from Andy Gibb highs to Isaac Hayes lows in the space of a single syllable, even when the syllable was

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