

1 The Smiths, “Unlovable”

I don't believe in the devil anymore. But if I did, he would look a lot like Ari Malcolm Klein. My ex has eyes the same amber color as his skin, with flecks of red-gold in the iris, as if you could see the flames licking behind them.

Ari walked into our dressing room with just minutes to spare. This was our first gig in three years, for God's sake. Seventies punk rock, CBGB style, flowed into the dressing room from the club outside. He flicked on a red-fringed lamp and leaned against a battered gunmetal school desk serving as the makeup table. I'd been worried about him, but he looked fine . . . not just as in “Everything's fine,” but “Damn, ain't he fine.” Still had his near-feminine leonine grace, an economy of movement, and a way of looking you in the eyes until you dropped your gaze.

He did that to me right now, and when I lowered my eyes, I saw he was holding a small glassine Baggie casually between his index and middle fingers. He lifted it a bit, winked at me. “You want some?” he said. He was naked to the waist, a slight discoloration on his arm where a tattoo of my name had once been, with the suspenders of his pants hanging down his legs.

I felt like cussing him out. He couldn't be bothered to say *hi* or *hello* or *we're gonna tear this muthafucka up*. Just, *You want some?* I took a deep breath and played it icy. “No,” I said, perching on the edge of a couch that looked like it had been slept on. “The only thing I'm on is Effexor.” A little depressive's humor. “I don't get high anymore.”

“Oh, you don't,” he said, tapping a neat free-form line on the back of his hand. Then he held one nostril and—quickquick—it was gone. “Well, it's here,” he said, rubbing his sinuses. “If you want it.”

“I don't,” I said. For one, I didn't even know what it was, not that that used to stop me. But whatever Ari was taking was always trouble, for him and for me. And I didn't need trouble right now. All I needed

was to get this shit right. Just have one killer show, help our friend out, and see what manifested from there.

The last time I was onstage was more than a year ago, just a three-song-solo set at a showcase in Crown Heights. Red, my best girl from college, had put me up to it. Tonight was different, though. Davide, who'd become our drummer after Red left the band, was riddled with cancer. And had no health insurance. And had a girlfriend and two kids. So a bunch of us banded together to get him a little money to pay his bills, and maybe even save a bit for his little girls, if we raised enough.

A month ago, I would have said that the chance of me and Ari playing together was about as remote as the pope announcing he'd gotten married. But Red, who was here now fussing with my wardrobe, guilted us until we agreed to join the three-band bill. Red and the other organizers had wangled a deal where they took both the door and the drink profits from the Orchid—a very good deal.

The Orchid was where the music critics went when they wanted to see what was next. And after college, when I was doing real music criticism, not just being the face for some two-bit video show, this used to be my spot. I was one of the loud ones, you know, who would start talking shit about a weak band while they were still onstage, just to see if they could take the heat. Sometimes they crumbled, and sometimes it made them stronger. I felt like I had earned that power, the right to make or break a band before their album had even hit the streets.

Now, it was my turn to take the heat. And the decision to cross those few feet from the rows of couches and tables, from the safety of the darkness to the glare of the spotlight, seemed more foolish by the second.

We got the five-minute shout from the sound guy, a man with a long white ZZ Top beard. Ari bit his hangnails and I wanted to take his calloused fingertips into my mouth and smooth his eyebrows, just the way I used to.

Red had always been as petite as a pixie, with nappy apricot-colored hair and a delicate face. She tucked my hair into a chignon and asked me if my shirt was too tight. She'd made the shirt herself, in the back

of the little boutique she owned on Nostrand Avenue. And somehow in the week between the fitting and the show I'd gained just enough weight to make it seem more like a corset than a blouse.

"Baby, I asked if the shirt was too tight."

"No, Red. It's great." I had to breathe shallowly to keep the seams from ripping, but man, did it look good on me, bloodred raw silk that hugged my rib cage and blossomed like an overripe rose around the cleavage.

Someone came behind me and kissed me on the cheek, his chest brushing my back. I turned around and tilted my head up so I could properly see his face. He had flawless rich brown skin and his eyes were tight, almond-shaped, like a Benin mask. He tipped his head to me and then bent to give Red a hug. "You remember Leo," she said.

Did I ever. After Red had introduced us at a record release party I had spent two days wrapped in schoolgirl fantasies: me in his arms, his arms around me, some heavy imaginary petting. No dream sex . . . yet.

We'd met for dinner once since then. Leo told me all about his management company, his hip-hop clients, how he was trying to bring some integrity back to the rap game. And he'd told me I should jump back in the flow, albeit as a solo act.

"You look good, baby," Leo said. He kissed me on both cheeks and turned toward Ari. I suspected the two of them were too similar under the skin to like each other. Leo was dark; Ari light. Leo had his hair in minitwists; Ari's was cropped. Leo was dressed in a crisp black suit. Ari, as usual, was punk-rocking it out. But underneath the skin, both Leo and Ari believed they were crusaders in a world of hypocrisy, and that no one could tell them how to live. That was what attracted me to each of them, and what made them insufferable solo and just plain dangerous together.

I tried some fast talking about the wardrobe to distract Leo, but he put his arm around me and turned his body and mine so we faced Ari as a unit.

"You might want to get dressed," Leo said softly.

"I'm dressed," Ari said.

"Like that?" Leo said.

“Like this.” Ari sported shiny black shoes, tuxedo pants, suspenders, and, of course, the bare chest.

“This isn’t some high school talent show.” Then Leo focused his eyes on the Baggie, lying on the old desk. He picked it up, drew it close. I’d always had eagle eyes. Even from a couple feet away, I could see the powder’s yellowish tinge and the fine grain.

“Do the world a favor,” Leo said, tossing the bag back on a table. “Keep this shit out of my girl’s life.”

I’d been focused on avoiding a fight, but I got distracted by the words . . . *my girl*. I liked his possessiveness, presumptuous though it was. I liked the fact that we hadn’t even gone on a date and he was claiming me. No one had in a very long time.

“It’s okay,” I said to Leo. “Ari’s just . . . Ari.”

“And you are a queen,” he said.

The sound guy shouted, “Get the fuck onstage.” He was never one for niceties.

Ari picked up his guitar. Slowly.

I turned to Leo. “It really means a lot to me that you came out. And, as far as Ari’s . . . stuff . . . is concerned, I’m not tempted.”

“You shouldn’t be worried about being tempted,” Leo said. “You should get serious about making music your career again. That’s the reason I’m here, baby, to see what you got. And you,” Leo said, turning to Ari, “should really get the fuck dressed.”

“Last time I checked, I wasn’t your punk-ass bitch,” Ari said. His words slurred slightly, so slightly that no one besides me would probably notice. Ari was looking me in the eyes as he said it. And then he turned, parted the velvet curtains, and walked out on the stage.

“Thank fucking *God*,” the sound guy said. “*About . . . fucking . . . time.*”

Red fiddled with my shirt again. “Honey, if it’s too tight, you can’t breathe. You can’t breathe, you can’t sing. Quick, let’s get you out of this.”

“Just let it go. I’ve gotta go,” I said, pushing her hands away.

“That’s right,” Leo said. “She better get onstage.”

“Leo, I know you mean well, but you better get out of my kitchen,”

Red said. And he did, if reluctantly. That was Red, a no-shit-taking Creole girl who could make men twice her size hop to.

“I’m not trying to stress you out, baby girl,” Red said. “But we should probably get you out of this. I’ve got a couple more things in my bag that will make you look out of sight.”

“It’s all good,” I told Red. It wasn’t, actually. I was short of breath, and my palms were sweating. Part wardrobe malfunction, part panic attack. Damn. If I could have given this all up, I would have, a long time ago. But music was my heartbeat, my oxygen, my bridge to the world. My demon, too. Oh, Jesus. Showtime.

2 Sky, “Confess”

I'd forgotten what it was like to take the first step out of the shadows, to squint past the lights and listen for the first applause. It came quickly, harder and harder, like rain changing to hailstorms. The corners of my eyes began to ache; my nose tickled; and I clenched my eyes to keep the tears from forming.

“It’s been . . . ,” I said lifting the mic from its cradle. I stopped, looked at Ari—who wasn’t looking at me—and took a deep breath. “It’s been a long time, been a long time, been a long lonely lonely lonely time.” I managed a laugh and heard echoes in the crowd. “Thanks for coming. Thanks. And, Davide,” I said, one of those stupid tears running down my cheek. “Thanks for bringing us together again.”

Davide nodded and gave a cheery wave. He’d dyed his hair a shocking platinum and donned a natty retro suit, like the guys from the Style Council. He stood at the back, by the bar, sipping a cocktail through a straw. His lower face was shattered, his mouth wizened. He’d managed to chain-smoke even when he was drumming. His doctor found the tumor a year ago. Since then a stream of surgeons had taken out one side of his jaw and half of his tongue.

I tried to take a deep breath, got halfway there before the fabric of my shirt cut into me. I took a couple of quick shallow hits of the stale club air. “You ready?” I asked Ari, off mic. He nodded yes. And then, just to prove he hadn’t forgotten, he twisted two fingers together—*for luck*—and put them over his heart—*for love*.

“This one,” I said into the microphone, “is about the day I stopped believing in God.”

Ari was already playing. Softly. Flamenco-style whispers and thumps. And I knew if I said, “You ready?” again, he would just look at me and

keep playing, and I would want to jump the three feet between us and pick up that fucking guitar and smash its beautiful body over his head.

But instead, I started singing. And just as I'd hoped, just the way it was years ago, when I fell forward into the first note, he was right there with me.

*Grandma told me God lived in each bead on the rosary
That's when I believed in things that I couldn't see*

This one singer told me that when she went onstage, it was like being an animal. She could hear bits of conversations amid the babble of the crowd, every note from her band became distinct. Smells got sharper . . . her eyesight more focused. Those moments, she told me, were the best times of her life.

I was just the opposite. You see, I get invisible, lose myself. First, I fly like a ghost. This doesn't make any sense, but I see myself from the back of the room, peering through the crowd. When I start to pull away from myself, I can even feel my body, my sense of touch going numb. I used to be afraid of going ghost. But over the years I came to crave it, that moment when I leave my own body behind.

I remember the first time I soloed in the church choir, I got stage fright so bad that the music director had to drag me from my seat beside Mama to the microphone. I remember the long walk between the pews, and the ceiling lights shining down on the altar, and the reassuring smiles from the grown-ups in the adult choir. Right then I learned to do what I did now, fly in my mind to a corner of the room. Back then I saw a little girl in a pink knit dress—made by Mama of course—and white tights with matching pink shoes. Tonight, I saw a woman with a microphone, her shirt the color of a candy apple left to rot, her shoulders hunched high as a kickboxer's. I also saw the audience, their faces falling slowly into the softness of reverie. When I left myself, I wasn't the singer but the song, sound waves traveling through the air . . . no, *swimming* through the air, sinuous as mermaids.

Ari and I did a brisk march through our songbook of nineties

alternative-rock hits and misses. It was good to see people still laughing at our old jokes. This brother with long locks standing against the bar couldn't stop cracking up when we sang our song "Shadow," a Devo-esque duet with a rap chorus:

*We're the babies of the movement
And we raised our fists in pride.
Took a last sip of red Kool-Aid
And said, "Mom, can we go outside?"*
[Me] *Shit, it's hard to be so righteous when all your fucking
fans are white.*
[Ari] *Maybe we should say we're "white-chus"?*
[Me] *Aw naw, baby, that ain't right.*

Now, the funny thing was, most of the white folks in the audience—and make no mistake, the audience was mainly white—didn't even laugh. The number of black folks who'd come to see a Negro alt-rock duet could fit in one subway car with room to spare. We had to make peace with that. Or laugh at ourselves. Or laugh at them. Or all of the above.

Things were going so well with the crowd that I started to relax back into my body. I don't even know how I was managing to sing, my chest was so tight from that shirt and I was pushing out the lyrics, really selling them, but the breath wasn't coming fast enough for me to keep up. We started singing the song that our fans knew best, a piece we'd penned when we were nineteen, wearing combat boots and baggy black dusters with matching lipstick. (Yeah, Ari, too.) I tugged at my shirt, the kind of things I'd never wear back then, so girly and tight. This song still gave me shivers because it was so stupid and childish; dramatic, extravagant and lovely. Yes, it was lovely, too.

Confess
Confess
Confess
Confess

And I remembered when I wrote the lines on a page I'd ripped from *Seventeen* magazine, on the wide white skirt of Whitney Houston's dress, making up-and-down arrows over the words because I couldn't read music but I could hear it in my head.

You are hateful
You are human
You are divine
You are alone

Back in school, Ari would sit there as I sang from my scribbles. Then I'd watch him write it down as real notes on paper with lines for the scale, and make it solid and real.

But now, onstage, his voice, dark and raspy, joined mine.

Confess
Confess
Confess
Confess

And every time he asked me why I didn't learn to read music, I told him it was too hard. I told him my piano teacher hated me and had traumatized me for life. I told him I was too busy studying for my chem midterm.

You are hateful
You are human
You are mine
And mine alone

What I didn't tell him was, why should I learn when he was there to hear me sing, to interpret my words, to make sure the music matched the lyrics? Back then, Ari was the only audience I wanted. I'd always felt that both of us shared an emptiness, a hole in our hearts. And music could fill that. We could fill it together.

I gathered my breath for the final note, the one I made last as long as I could stand. But the lighting in the room was dim and getting worse. The image in front of me began to pixelate, like grainy TV with a bad antenna, and suddenly I was . . .

Back in the dressing room, lying on the ratty couch. I put my hand over my eyes to shade them from the bare bulb's glare.

"Gone. Bam, hit the floor. You were completely out," said Ari. He was lighting a cigarette right under the dressing room's NO SMOKING sign. Someone, probably Red, had taken off my blouse and dressed me in a T-shirt. Through the velvet curtain that cordoned off the dressing room, I could hear people in the club talking, that kind of furious buzz when something has gone really right or wrong. "Way," Ari said, taking a deep drag of his smoke, "to end a show."

"Where's Red and Leo?"

"Red's outside, saying bye to Davide. She's gotta leave in a couple to meet the babysitter."

"And Leo?"

"That's what I want to know," Ari said. "And Leo?"

"And Leo *what?*" I said, sitting up. It felt good to breathe deeply again.

"*Precisely.*" Ari never moved a muscle on his body, except to lift up his cigarette, but his eyes were narrowed for the inquisition.

"Jeez, he's just a guy," I said. "I met him at this party that Red invited me to. He wants to manage me. But I'm not sure I want to do it." At least not, I thought, without you.

"Great," Ari said. "So this Leo guy went to the bar to get you, I don't know what, a stiff drink. Gin gimlet, if I remember right."

"Not so much anymore," I said. When Leo sat me down over dinner and given me this big spiel about managing my career, I'd laughed at first. And then he started wearing me down with that pimp-style rap. How I was more beautiful than I thought. How more people had followed my career than I even knew of. How they were waiting for me to come back and do something meaningful. It was time for me to speak

to the younger generation (one, I wryly noticed, I was clearly no longer a part of). “You could be such a vixen,” Leo said. “But there’s something . . . I can’t put my finger on it. Besides the weight.”

I was about thirty pounds heavier than I’d been when we first started performing. I’d like to think the weight went to my hips and ass, but Leo clearly hadn’t been impressed. Nor was I with his candor. I almost walked away. But that night, Leo’d kept up that tongue massage, a verbal patter that was two parts ego boost and one part lecture. I started to believe him. All the things I’d been meaning to do, but couldn’t, suddenly seemed possible.

“You okay?” Ari said, bringing me back to the present.

“Yeah. It was good . . . us . . . again. Ow!” As I twisted in my seat, I could feel bruises rising from where I’d hit the floor. “Are you good?”

Ari nodded. Then he took out the Baggie again and did a little bump.

My stomach tightened. I asked him what he was using and he just shrugged. Later, much later, he told me it was heroin mixed with meth. “If you get the mix just right,” he told me, “you feel just like you’re straight.” He’d always gone for what sped him up or slowed him down; I took the psychedelics. And we used to joke that it was a mixed marriage because of that. When we could joke.

But that night, when I asked about the drugs, Ari just tucked the bag back in his trouser pocket and said, “Wouldn’t you like to know?” And of course I would; of course, me who’d try anything once, or twice, or too many times, like trying to sing a duet with the Devil.