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The Song That Lives On

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The Song That Lives On

Katie Miller

When I was in middle school, I was an internalized emo. I didn't look the part, but I wrote sad, angsty poetry and listened to bands I *thought* I related to because they sang about sad, angsty things: Paramore, Fall Out Boy, The Ready Set. Lyrics have always been the element of music I've focused most on; I'm constantly in awe of how musicians find the perfect words to capture such raw emotions.

Josh was the only person my age that I could relate to on the same level. We would spend the thirty minutes between church and confirmation class having in-depth conversations about our favorite bands and dissecting their lyrics, trying to find a deeper meaning. I remember one day he brought up the band Evanescence, specifically the song "My Immortal." He was shocked to learn that I didn't know the song and immediately played it for me in the lobby of our church.

The slow piano melody sounded vaguely familiar, but Amy Lee's vocals awakened something within me. I knew the song, like something I'd heard on the radio once or twice and only retained the main parts, but I remembered it nonetheless.

As a Valentine's Day gift that year, Josh gave me a burnt copy of Evanescence's *Fallen* album, and my twelve-year-old self thought it was the most romantic gesture in the history of mankind. I clutched the homemade CD to my chest the entire drive home and ran up to my room, practically slamming the disc into my stereo. I lay in bed, staring at the ceiling as each song played, feeling my mind expanding with the knowledge and emotion each song evoked within me. When the CD

finished, I replayed “My Immortal” a few more times, memorizing every line and trying to conjure new meanings to share with Josh at church the following Sunday.

I remember telling Ryan about that silly CD last year, right before Valentine’s Day. We were discussing our mutual disdain for the holiday; even as a couple we never understood the purpose of celebrating it. I don’t know what made him laugh harder: the fact that my first Valentine’s Day gift was an Evanescence CD or that I gave my seventh grade “boyfriend” a terribly-written, over-the-top love poem in return. Or maybe it was the story about how my friend Michael gave me chocolate in the shape of an apple the following Valentine’s Day.

Either way, Ryan and I vowed to only give each other Valentine’s Day gifts that could out-criinge the gifts of my past. I promised to write him an overly dramatic middle school era poem, and he promised to make me a mixtape with lots of Evanescence songs.

Eight years ago, our confirmation classes had monthly meetings with our mentors. Everyone in sixth through eighth grade was forced to sit across from our elderly mentors and discuss how certain events in our lives related to faith.

I don’t recall what the question was, but I confided in my mentor that my friend Alexa was self-harming. She had sworn me to secrecy, but that’s a heavy weight to bear on a twelve-year-old. The only people I’d told at that point were my parents—and Josh.

I remember my scrawny legs carrying myself out of the church's multipurpose room, wiping hot tears from my face, and running straight to the courtyard. Josh had followed me and quietly sat next to me on the rusted bench, draping an arm around me.

Neither of us said much. I stared at the small fountain in front of us, realizing I was hurting while everyone else was inside carrying on as usual. The walls of the church surrounded us on all sides, towering over us. For a second, it felt like I was Amy Lee in the "My Immortal" video. The tall churches and buildings of Placa de Sant Felip closing around Lee, the black-and-white video capturing the sadness of the moment, a distraught Lee wandering aimlessly through Barcelona as happy children play soccer around her.

"When you cried, I'd wipe away all of your tears. When you screamed, I'd fight away all of your fears. And I've held your hand through all of these years. But you still have all of me."

Though we only exchanged a few words in that courtyard, Josh remained my rock: sturdy, trustworthy, reliable.

He had all of me.

Ben Moody wrote "My Immortal" in memory of his late grandfather. Though its inspiration came from death and being "haunted" by that person's spirit, the ultimate theme of the song is loss.

A week after filming the music video, Moody unexpectedly quit the band. In an interview, Lee said, "I think none of us knew, including him, that he was going anywhere."

Ryan and I didn't expect to go anywhere, either.

I knew his mental health wasn't anywhere near its best, and I knew it had been affecting us, but we were getting better as a couple. But that didn't change our ending: sitting on the edge of my bed, both of us crying, neither of us wanting or expecting what was happening. It was like he just woke up that morning, nearly six months ago now, and realized he needed to be alone in order to get better, mentally and emotionally. And all I could do was agree.

We dated for nearly a year and a half, and that was the only time I'd ever seen him cry. Even as I was being broken up with, *I* was the one holding *him* and telling him it was okay, that I understood why we couldn't be together anymore.

The next day, Ryan came to my apartment to retrieve one of the flannels he'd given me when we first started dating. I made the mistake of telling him I still loved him, and he made the mistake of saying it back. When I started crying, he wiped the tears out of my eyes, just like he always did.

And that damned chorus crept into my head again.

Josh's father's passing was as sudden as it was unexpected. I was the first friend Josh called when his dad got into the accident, and I was the first to call him when I found out his dad had passed.

I remember the viewing in bits. How Josh's hug was distant, eyes glossed over. A polite smile was glued to his lips.

I would sit in the lobby of our church every Sunday for months after that, hoping to see him. He never came back. He wouldn't respond to texts or calls as frequently. Eventually, he stopped responding completely.

I remember listening to his *Fallen* CD over and over the year after we had grown apart. For listening to "My Immortal" as many times as I had at that point, singing along to the lyrics full of loss too many times to count, nothing prepared me for the death of our friendship.

Although, Josh wasn't prepared for the loss of his father, either.

Before we stopped talking completely, I remember Josh telling me he both loved and hated "My Immortal" after his dad passed away. It resonated with his emotions—anger, sadness, longing—which helped him cope at first, but it caused too much of an emotional reaction for him to handle at that point.

I remember silently hoping he would change his mind. About the song and neglecting his emotions, distancing himself from everyone.

He didn't change his mind about either.

Six months ago, when Ryan and I broke up, music became something I avoided at all costs. All the songs I listened to were about love or heartbreak, and, frankly, I wasn't in the mood to hear about either.

It wasn't until two weeks later that I decided to finally listen to music. Pressing play on my Spotify playlist, I was beginning to enjoy music again. Then the chilling piano chords that I knew by heart started to play.

I hadn't intentionally listened to "My Immortal" in years at that point. As the instrumentation and Amy Lee's vocals played through my headphones, a wave of memories washed over me. At first, I was almost happy; a feeling of nostalgia overcame me as I remembered the amazing, though short-lived, friendship Josh and I shared. Then I realized the lyrics also reflected my feelings toward Ryan.

"I'm so tired of being here," Lee croons, and suddenly I'm back in my bed crying to my best friend about not wanting to continue going through life without Ryan.

I'm reminded of the physical heartache in the days following our breakup. How I sat on the floor of my bedroom, surrounded by photos of Ryan and me, reliving each of the happy memories captured in the pictures as I cried to the point of heaving. "These wounds won't seem to heal. This pain is just too real. There's just too much that time cannot erase."

I hadn't realized the way Lee's soothing vocals contradict the angry pleading of the second verse. "If you have to leave, I wish that you would just leave. Your presence still lingers here, and it won't leave me alone." It beckoned the memory of Ryan and me, standing in the middle of Starbucks one month after breaking up, talking normally as if nothing had changed. I remember how frustrated I felt afterward because our meeting that was meant to bring closure and clarity left me more confused than I was at the beginning of the conversation. I remember wishing he would just leave me alone and wishing I could do the same.

I had been making progress in getting past the breakup at that point, but it quickly declined after our meeting. Hearing his voice, seeing the gray specks in his blue eyes, watching the way his mouth curled into a smirk reversed all of the progress I'd made.

"You still have all of me."

I still have that homemade Evanescence CD. It sat in a drawer in my bedroom for years until I rediscovered it. Dust covered the plastic front, broken from the abuse I put it through during middle school. Eight years after receiving it, the CD now sits in the center console of my car, only ever opened when I'm feeling nostalgic, which has been happening a lot more often these days. Yet nearly a decade later, the sentimentality surrounding that album is still evolving.

Forcing myself to relisten to "My Immortal" after all these years has made me realize how all forms of loss—though not the same—tie together. I hadn't realized how one song could relate to two completely different relationships that happened at two very different times in my life, nor did I realize how much those two stories overlapped. Any form of loss boils down to the same components: loss is painful, it's rarely ever expected, and it's inevitable. All we can do is celebrate the time we shared with those we've lost and move on.