

# The Day Jimi Hendrix Died

My mother and I fled the city in mid June by car, off to spend a few lakeside months with her complicated boyfriend, Bob. The maple leaves pinwheeled goodbye as we sped up the parkway to New Hampshire. Relieved to be leaving, we did not mind that we got off to a late start. Summer vacation beckoned alluringly to both of us, I escaping from the private school where I was perpetually the scholarship girl, and my mother embracing her destiny as a woman who summered in the country. As night fell, I watched our black and shaggy Scottish terrier disappear into the shadows behind my mother's seat. I remembered past drives to New England, and being so small that I could sleep there with ease, a sparrow princess on a pillow nestled at others' feet.

Folded up now under a blanket next to the other goods in our caravan, I rested my hands on the dog's neck, my fingers interlaced with her collar as I watched beams of light from the other cars alternately chase and be chased across the padded vinyl ceiling. As I always had, I pretended that the other cars were giant land crabs with eyestalks malignantly aglow. They raced us to our destruction, allowing us to escape, just barely, by virtue of our superior human cunning and mammalian agility.

Thus hounded by radioactive monsters, we wended our way to the shores of Lake

Winnepesaukee and surveyed its midnight ink by cloud-occluded moonlight. I was proud of my mother's prowess behind the wheel, and we went triumphantly to bed between sheets that exhaled dust and fresh water dampness.

The first week in our new temporary quarters, I lost part of my knee in the gravelly foothills near the lake. Billy Roger's brand new red three speed birthday present carried me down the highest hill in the area, my liquid hair flying out in streamers behind me, still wet from water skiing. Pumping with all my might in first gear, I hit a patch of sand going what must have been 25 m.p.h. and lost control of the bike. The handle bars popped free of a pair of crucial bolts and spun a few perfect 360's before the asphalt rose up to greet my face. I scrambled through air to get away from the earth and slid thirty yards in gravel, dirt and sand, all my farflung limbs on the bike and off the ground except my right knee, which eroded with geologic precision against the pavement.

Blubbering and bleeding profusely, covered with sweat and grit and leaking fluids at a rate I had yet to experience in my nine tender years, I met Mr. Rogers at the top of the hill. He glowered at me without a word as he wrenched away Billy's broken pride and joy and left me so alone and disconsolate that I thought I would surely die. Only the vision of my mother in the redoubtable company of the local wives gathered together on the Rogers' front porch kept me from being swallowed by those Indian hills right on the spot where I wept.

Catching sight of her once over the rise, I dogtrotted into the sweeping cavalry of her arms and she carried me away to the ministrations of the first aid kit. In our hasty

retreat, I overheard Mrs. Rogers stage whisper to another beer and butter-bred heifer that you'd have thought from how loud I was crying that I had just been murdered. My mother paid no mind, only blanching slightly at the amount of blood we were trailing behind, but from the safety of her shoulder I shot arrows of pure hatred into our crimson wake.

In the kitchen, a smell of yeast pervaded the medical operation. My mother was getting back to her roots and baking bread that summer. Sitting me down on the counter by the sink, my mother cleaned everything not torn to the bone with warm water and Ivory soap and we surveyed the crater of my knee. Lesser lunar seas were discovered on my toes and other leg, but this vast lake of blood and cartilage suppurating before us impressed even my mother's saturnine boyfriend, the salesman who had championed our exodus from the city. An award winning representative of televisions and household electronics, it was in his summer sales territory that my knee had been flayed.

"Maybe I should go outside and get you a stick," he offered drily, as my mother opened the brown bottle of hydrogen peroxide with trembling hands. "You could bite down like a childbearing squaw," he suggested, raising his eyebrows for some comic relief. My mother laughed nervously and I rolled my eyes, but we were all wondering if it was going to sting really badly when she poured the peroxide over my knee. I simply looked up at her with doggy trust, our limpid pools of brown and blue exchanging secret codes of love before she set her jaw to the task.

And it didn't hurt a bit. My mother was so relieved. But I did endure torture with a

ban placed upon any swimming, a precaution against possible infection which she reluctantly enforced over the rest of the summer. Once formed, my scabs excreted pus and goo in fabulously lurid shades of green and yellow, surrounded by crusting scarlet and burgundy scales, the whole set in a field of purple and blue bruises. I resembled a scientific survey of Arctic lichens and had the dubious advantage of intriguing the neighborhood boys with the gross virtues of my bicycling trophy.

As the summer wore on, the giant scabs itched and gave me heat crazed twinges of madness. The beach was utterly unsatisfying, peppered with small stones. I could splash my hands and dip my feet, but if I paddled too long in the shallows, my wounds would get wet and custardy and threaten to open up again, inviting infection and general disgust.

“Get away from the water,” my mother would yell, when I had been splashing around for too long. “I don’t want to have to tell you again.” She would often look at me half sternly, half pleadingly. I knew what that was about.

It was better if I stayed away from the house when Bob was around on the weekends, and that way I wouldn’t get into trouble or have to do a million things around the house to ‘pull my weight’. “Why don’t you clean out the seats in my car?”, he would command with a faint air of suggestion, as though it were meant to be a request, but which we both knew was not. I tried to be generally cooperative for her sake, but Bob was a walking volcano on the prowl for maidenly sacrifices. I melted into the woods and practiced invisibility.

Sometimes I would hang out with the other kids, and so it was one evening at a

seance on the pebbled beach that I fell in love with Harold. A night owl band of innocents, we tried to contact Houdini. Harold told ghost stories and then a chest washed up on the dimpled shore, a styrofoam cooler really, which we were sure was a sign. But I did not need a message from beyond the grave to know that Harold was a black and magic potion for me. He was tan and fifteen, with cascades of blond hair like a cocker spaniel and an open smile like the gates of heaven.

I don't know why it had taken me so long to see it, but when I gazed at his caramel sweetness blazing across from me by the campfire that night, I was swept away like a pale green leaf in a tornado. He was so perfect, so normal, so uncomplicated. He walked around shirtless with his nipples peeping coyly like the eyespots on an exotic moth, his legs in faded cut-offs striding through my tender heart as though sheathed in land-grabbing pioneer boots. I wanted to lay down before him like an untrammelled valley, a verdant little cup on the horizon awaiting the fulfillment of his embrace.

His family rented the house on the other end of our small beach, and they had a player piano, and an endless number of gigantic jigsaw puzzles set up on card tables at the side porch. They had a white motor boat with gleaming chrome stripes and there was always an abundance of something to eat. They seemed genuinely happy together and I never heard them fight. Music was always playing in their house. I wanted them to take me back home with them so I could moon over Harold and not have to think about homework, or Bob or the greyness of New York City. I just wanted to be with Harold forever, to soothe his seldom furrowed brow and lap up his golden tan like wild honey in an oasis.

It was around this time that I first heard the expression 'puppy love'. I was disgusted when I realized that the adults were referring to me. What a bunch of ignoramuses and even my beloved mother was giving me that coddling, indulgent, self-congratulatory look. Bob pretended not to notice, but I could see them exchanging smirks behind my back. This was much, much worse than my knee; my life turned into the living hell my accident had promised to make it become, because of course Harold, my golden, gorgeous fifteen year old Harold was not looking twice at my skinny, female nine year old self who couldn't even go swimming and had the world's ugliest deformity and grossest scab growing on my body quite literally like the pustulant, cankerous sore that it was. No, I was abject filth and he was a god. "(They Long To Be) Close To You" was on the charts that summer, and just like Karen Carpenter, I knew that angels attended Harold's birth, sprinkling moon dust in his hair and golden starlight in his eyes of blue.

Love, I had already recognized, was a disease. It was the lingering side effects that I had not counted upon as being quite so noxious. I wandered about the sacred burial grounds forgotten amongst the Indian hills above Lake Winnepesaukee and moped with a guidebook to North American birds. I imitated the maddened laughter of loons while I slithered and sprawled on the great glacial boulders which presciently overlooked Harold's house. With my head lolled back on the shoulders of those landlocked and stony whales, I left my tee shirt hiked up, exposing my navel to the sky in the hopes that *he* might wander by, and seduced by my innocent charms, stay a while.

I spent hours making little shrines and focused my powers of concentration at fairy circles I found in the woods, sprouted over with the fleshy decay of indian pipes and fern moss. I collected blue jay feathers, pine cones and rocks and made mental journeys to the moon where I would be granted my wish and become Harold's child bride. I brushed my long hair with three hundred strokes and wrote messages in the sand at night with a stick, both hoping and dreading that Harold might find these hearts and flowers with our names intertwined and come running to my side, the look of love burning deeply in his princely eyes, after which we would hold hands and run away together and I could glory in the sunshine of his love.

It was beyond explanation, whether rational or unworldly; I was simply swept away by his physical presence, which I sought out as often as possible. His acute beauty transfixed me like a saber-toothed tiger on an ice-bound plain, my free will frozen by the golden quartz striations of his two irises. It was hopeless. We listened to music together, he intent on the guitar licks, me intent on him, and not much spoken in between. I began to write poetry.

All in all we did not socialize much with the neighboring families and certainly least of all with the Rogers. I apologized to Billy for ruining his bike, which Bob had grudgingly paid thirty dollars to have repaired. Billy didn't seem to mind at all, and we watched fireworks together on the Fourth of July, writing our names for hours in the twilight sky with sparklers which burnt to a crisp, like strips of lava-coated bacon. My injury was so spectacularly disgusting that the kids usually left me alone except to take a look, but it must not have been so easy for my mom. We were what was thought of as

'stuck up', sophisticated types from the city who ought to go back to New York where we belonged, or at least to some other lake. "Why don't you go jump in the lake?" was a popular saying amongst us kids. At Susie Cornwall's, we slurped on frozen Rocket Pops and our tongues turned electric blue and red while we listened to Tom Jones sing "What's New Pussycat?" over and over again. "Whoa, whoa, whoa..." was the chorus of replies with which we collectively drove the adults insane.

My mother was so different from the others. To help me practice my reading and to entertain her while she embroidered a quilt that she was sewing that summer, I read aloud from the Whole Earth Catalogue. There were black and white drawings of practical things: barrels and barrel staves, an apple press for making cider, a solar oven, a drip irrigation system and listings for lots of incendiary books. My mother dreamed of moving back to the land, finally finished with her earlier longings for martinis and a Manhattan skyline, the city spread out beneath her like a glittering skirt.

The quilt she was making was a subtle mix of white on white, alternating with blocks of blood red and a madras plaid of burgundy and mustard, a color scheme which oddly echoed my livid knee. She embroidered it with rings of white feathers, hand stitching every detail to perfection. The other ladies made afghans in gruesomely fluorescent polyester if they did anything at all other than swat their kids, drink beer and heat up cans of Sloppy Joe mix before their husbands ruminated home on the weekends. My mother baked four kinds of bread and wore a bikini which she filled with creamy, voluptuous curves. Her best friend Marjorie threw fund raising parties for the Berrigan brothers and sisters. So it was really no wonder that no one invited us

over for dinner, but it was too bad, since money was pretty tight and we sometimes had pancakes for dinner.

“Ooh,” I said with sincere excitement, “We’re having breakfast for dinner!” My mother shook her head at me in silent warning, pursing her lips and glancing over at Bob, who pushed his chair away from the table in disgust. I thought it was fun and different and I loved the real maple syrup, but his face dark as Jupiter’s told me to shut up now. My mother and I finished eating in silence. I did the dishes without being told and went outside to wait for bedtime. The stars twinkled in the balmy air, a stray breeze floating over from across the lake to caress my ears with tender fingers and console me. All the evening’s creatures seemed to tread softly, lest they ruffle Bob’s temper into a full-fledged rage. Slowly, the lake settled down in a circular sigh and nodded out.

Bob was proud to have my mother’s stacked form deftly framing his own. He greatly resembled a black bear, and was coated all over in small curls, resplendent quantities even of facial and body hair. He was unpredictable, had a caustic wit and deeply admired funky bass guitar and soul music. He loved history and chess, and had an abiding fascination for Hitler’s collection of occult power objects assembled during the Third Reich. He made regular and regal visits to his summer residence rented for the three of us, for a few weeks depositing with us his three daughters from an earlier marriage. They were alternately cowed, difficult, spoiled and generally unimaginative, except for the middle girl, who had a few glimmers of genuine spunk. The bulging of his ursine prow could be easily discerned from afar as he shepherded his gaggle of

female dependents to the drive-in and the Dairy Queen.

“You know, I think of you more as a son than as a daughter,” he once confided earnestly, the fact of my femaleness being just a small inconvenience in the scheme of his emotional intimacy. For all of his stern moodiness, I knew that Bob really did love me. “But you really have a smart mouth,” he added with mock menace. “I have a hairbrush on my dresser for smartalecky kids like you,” he threatened, but he never did lay a hand on me, and nor would my mother have ever let him. His father had been in the Navy for many years, and I gathered that he had taught Bob a few things about discipline.

Bob used to play a couple of games with me which I never could win. One was to help me develop faster reflexes by resting my hands palm down on his hands palm up. He’d twitch his hands to fake me out, but if I lost and didn’t take my hands away in time, he’d smack the backs of my hands hard and make me try again. The backs of my hands would get so red that it looked like I’d dipped them in boiling water, and after a while, I would want to cry. I tried not to though. Another game was when you’d lace your fingers together in his, connecting tight at the first knuckle, and then you both would squeeze to see who was stronger. The stronger person would crush the knuckles in the other person’s hands. One time my knees gave out from under me, the pain was so intense. After a while I decided that I didn’t want to play those games with him any more.

The summer got hotter and tensions with Bob seemed to run higher, the increasingly frequent arguments sending a radar signal to all the other houses around the lake to

watch out, and still I could not go swimming, but only barely cooled off in the shallows along our skimpy beach. Hot, dreary exile became my steady companion as I gazed daily on the forbidden promise of Lake Winnepesaukee, its glittering glory spreading out cruelly before me. I chased the ugly brown toads which seemed to have erupted from some nearby hollow, the familiars of trolls and wicked goblins who could have taken me away with them on some moonlit night, but instead only spewed something noisome when cornered by the nearly barren blueberry bushes. I found no lost treasures, no pots of gold, no leprechaun hideouts nor ancient Indian arrow heads still encrusted with blood.

I found one tiny wild strawberry which I could not wait to let ripen and so ate far too sour in my impatience, only to have later regrets that it was gone. I was stung by a giant black hornet though, and my great grandmother who was visiting us from the vaguely known distance of California, calling us odd endearments like 'pudding' and 'orange blossom', told my mother to wet some tobacco with a little water and then plaster that on the sting. She was of Cherokee extraction which meant that I was too, albeit diluted with the passing generations. It seemed to help, but I became slightly fevered. Bringing the spot to the succor of my mouth, I had to spit out some few astringent shreds of tobacco, so that even now, hornets and that bitter brown gold are forever rolled together in my mind. I was sad when she went back to California, but Bob was not.

Cicadas buzzed us endlessly as the summer heat rose and fell but never really dissipated. I had a lingering curiosity about a smallish but monstrous pike with which I

had come nose to nose under a neighbor's dock during my first week's bold experiments in swimming, complete with steamy face mask, when underwater exploration was still my purview. In our brief moment of silent communication, I observed the underslung jaw which housed a thousand tiny, sharp teeth and a coldness of purpose in those convex pike eyes which appeared to widen in alarm much like my own before I opened my lips in a perfect 'O' and screamed. After the bubbles of my hue and cry had dissipated, it seemed that the pike had vanished with them, for I was alone again amongst the grasses and the weathered dock posts, wondering if I had lost my chance to be educated with the fishes like the young King Arthur. Were I to venture back into the water, would that sorcerer pike be waiting for me?

And so the summer slowly unfurled its lazy dragon tail across the sky, a procession of weekend visits, barbeques and communion with forest sprites, and then suddenly it was time to go home again. On one of our final days, after months of longing and my knee finally back to its old self, my hangdog heart pounded in overdrive as I lifted my morose and sneakered feet up Harold's front steps, up to the side porch and past the jigsaw puzzled card tables. I found Harold with tears in his eyes, looking up at me in some unnamed grief. He waved at a chair as an invitation to sit down.

I nodded, struck dumb, and waited, our knees almost touching as we looked out over the strip of beach and the lake. I could see where I had left a heart in the sand, our initials readable even from this height, and hoped that he hadn't noticed. Then I was seized with the idea that it was my declaration of love which had brought him to this grief. Ah, it was all clear to me now, how, at the end of the summer and with the

knowledge that our passion was impossible, his pure and simple heart was overwhelmed with sorrow and therefore...

Harold interrupted my reverie and croaked out bitterly, "Jimi Hendrix died from an overdose in London last night."

His golden thighs flexing as he rose from the folding deck chair, Harold lurched to his feet and pounded his fist against the weathered gray shingles of the house. The porch trembled with his anguish, and I, unsure how to react, stayed silent and surveyed the scene for an opportunity to demonstrate my sympathy.

He rested his fists on the side railing and looked unseeing past the beach, while a curtain of wind on the opposite shore shook down the first leaves of autumn into a lazy descent over the dark water. I stood next to him and watched the growing flotilla of wrinkled boats sail away. I tentatively reached up to pat Harold's shoulder, which he allowed and did not seem to mind, had probably not even noticed until I sputtered something incoherent. Registering my proximity, he put several feet between us and asked contemptuously, "Do you even *know* who Jimi Hendrix *is*?" Unspoken was the accusation that I was just a kid, and what could I *possibly* know of the cool, of the rage, of the grandeur that was his man Jimi?

My long blonde hair swinging forward with the momentum of my rebuttal, I gestured weakly at air guitar. "Purple Haze," I squeaked. "Foxy Lady," I added, but the moment gave me pause. It was a question of cool. Harold's relationship with Jimi was at a whole other level of magnitude than my limited understanding could allow for, and I would have to be extra careful about what I claimed as *terra cognita*. I really

did know who Jimi Hendrix was, but I had seen him only dimly outlined against the tapestry of my life as a child in New York. He belonged very much more to my mother and the crew of older kids I knew.

I heard his music all the time at pot parties at which I was only tolerated because I gave really good back rubs to a few boys Harold's age. So even in my small universe, Jimi towered way beyond the horizon, casting giant shadows across the books and dolls and other ordinary objects that informed my world, but still, Jimi was not the living, incarnate god that Harold knew and adored. But I had the idea of it, I knew what Harold meant, and after all, that Jimi was dead was a tragedy even I could perceive. All this played on my silent guitar as I said suavely, "Sure, I know who Jimi Hendrix is."

With a sage concession of a nod, Harold allowed as to how I might know of his rock god after all, and he went on to gaze into the distance and slowly tell me how seared he was, how he had worshiped him from afar at concerts, how it was now too late and he'd never have the chance to see him again. Feelings I understood all too clearly, for it was what had been on my mind in the first place as I came up the steps to shyly look at Harold with silent farewells riding shotgun in my heart, my impenetrable suffering softened only by the knowledge that I could gaze upon him for a few more precious days. I sighed and looked down at my feet scuffing the porch. I knew that Harold was sad. I was sad too. We were together each one of us very sad, with no one else to make us feel better.

Harold looked at me then, I thought with new eyes. "Maybe we can hang out later

today," he said not unkindly. "But right now, I just want to be alone." And he turned back to look out over the abyss beyond the lake below our feet. I floated home, but rubbed out the love letter I had left in the sand, just in case.

Later that day Harold's mother called my mother and asked if it would be all right for Harold to take me on a motor boat ride around the lake. He was an accomplished pilot and I would be safe, she promised. Since I had not hardly had any chance to go swimming that summer, in fact not much fun at all, maybe that would be a nice treat, the mothers agreed; like hens, they united the crescent ends of our beach in a cackle of telephone wire. I thought it was a sign of how starved my mother was for company that she delighted in this exchange, as I doubted that my being carried off was going to be the heartwarming apex of her summer's entertainment. I decided to go upstairs and find something special to wear. It was a momentous occasion.

Although the weather had become somewhat cool at night, the daytime was still hot with shades of Indian summer. I was looking for something sophisticated, but not prissy, something that would whisper 'woman' in Harold's alligator brain. I found the perfect thing, a dress I rarely wore if ever, a very short, nearly transparent smock with tiny blue flowers on a white background. It was so like my mother to have bought me this transcendently virginal garment, more like a chemise or a nightgown than a dress and somehow harkening back a couple of centuries to some French convent, a convent where it was okay if your underwear showed. Like Andromeda, I dressed myself on the altar of my tender passion and sent myself outside to wait as the delicate offering that I was. I sat on the concrete jetty near Harold's house, patient as a young spider, my

knees splayed to the sun. The empty boat rocked invitingly.

Harold's only comment when he eventually appeared for our romantic outing was to wonder if I wasn't going to get cold. "It gets windy on the lake," he told me flatly, and then handed me a stiff and musty life preserver, humiliatingly sized for a child. He untied a few ropes and checked the gas tank while I strapped myself into the jacket and worried about my clashing get up. My heart thundered when he gave me his hand to step into the boat. I teetered in on lovebound feet, swaying like a lotus and sat in the front seat. I could not see over the dashboard.

A pile of faded deck cushions as high as my head tottered between us and Harold waved at them nonchalantly as we started away from the jetty. Over the roar of the engine he yelled, "Why not try sitting on those?" and he gave the engine a little more juice as we turned away from the dock. The cushions were a mountain frontier separating me from my captain and I scrambled over them, eager to sit on high, laughing with delight as I held on for dear life to the bucking pile and nearly falling over as we surged into the deeps of Lake Winnepesaukee.

I was so enraptured to be sitting close to him, but Harold only looked at me askance and waved me off. "Over there," he gestured with his chin towards the corner. "Just try a few them so you can see," he sternly ordered. "That will be safer," he added, so that I would know that he was being adult and responsible. His admonition only made him more manly in my eyes, but chastened, I made my arrangements and settled in, happy to see where we were going.

And we went very fast. The wind scissored my hair into a nest of pale yellow snakes

and gave me goosebumps, chills running up and down my body like electric eels. Hands locked in a grip before me, I bounced up and down, shrieked and laughed, screaming "Faster!" as we toured the long open stretches of the mostly abandoned lake. Harold was happy to comply, and we went around and around the waterfront, crossing our wake with bronco busting crashes, then skimming the surface to come back and do it again. Leaning into the curves, Harold and I moved as one in our horsepowered water chariot.

Surprised that I was such a little speed freak, he smiled at me hugely and revved the engine until we reached the upper safety limits of the boat, but still we didn't stop. He was a daredevil and I was his cheering squad, we were outlaws outrunning the police, we were the dreaded skull and crossbones, roiling the waves, we were a stampede of whitecapped mustangs, and if the heavens had opened up and brought us straight to Jimi's side, I couldn't have been happier. I was in love and Harold didn't mind. My heart thrummed along with the engine. *'Scuse me, while I kiss the sky.*

But eventually the adventure came to a close. He brought me back to the jetty. We were flushed and happy, giggling, and I knew that I had made him feel better. I was thrilled by my power to affect a difference in his emotional state. It made me feel like a goddess, and then amazingly, he leaned over, matching the jeweled skies of his blue eyes with mine, and tenderly kissed me on the cheek. "Thanks," he whispered softly and helped me out of the boat. It was the briefest glimpse of heaven, but it was enough. I never saw him again. Somehow we never had the chance to say goodbye. Perhaps he planned it like that. But I never forgot my first kiss, the day that Jimi Hendrix died.

## **THE END**

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