

## Add It Up by The Violent Femmes (from Mix Tape: Music Memoirs by Ruben Carbajal)

### Racine, Wisconsin 1984

I was never the same after my grand mal seizure. The day before, I was an invisible high school freshman, a kid without distinction or friends. From kindergarten through eighth grade I had been segregated in a program for gifted and talented students. When high school came, the program ended, and we were all left to fend for ourselves in a large, anonymous public school. My friend was sent off to the nuns at a Catholic institution, and my other best friend joined the football team. One day I tried eating at the cafeteria with him and his new buddies.

Imagine a long lunch table full of huge, blocky guys, all proudly sporting their numbered jerseys, boasting loudly about the girls they had or wanted to fuck. I remember quietly listening, thinking they were lying, or if they weren't, wishing they were. It was one of the most unpleasant experiences I can remember. It must've been, because I chose solitude rather than dining with the barbarians again.

To top everything off, I was a devout, born-again Christian. Though no one knew this, it didn't do much to close the chasm I felt between me and the rest of the known universe. I was indifferent, confused, clueless. I didn't care what I wore to school, and it showed. What sticks out most about this period is feeling like a ghost, wandering the halls, killing time because I had no one to kill it with.

I was found writhing uncontrollably, foaming at the mouth at the bottom of a staircase of my high school. As they rolled me into the hospital, the veins in my chest began to bulge, and I went into cardiac arrest. A doctor informed my mother that I was in a coma one I would most likely never come out of. To everyone's surprise, I woke up the next day in a dark hospital room, hooked up to a lot of machines. I felt like I had been hit by an eighteen-wheeler. A doctor hovered over me.

"What is *your name*? What *year is it*? Who is *the president*?"

My initial reaction was to respond,

"*It's 1964...JFK...JFK is in the White House...*"

Something told me to answer Ronald Reagan, and keep my sarcasm to myself. Miraculously, I spent the weekend in the hospital and returned to school that Monday.

In forty-eight hours, I had become a household name. The rumors had avalanched into a wave of wild speculation. I was a vegetable, wheelchair-bound, dead. Steve, a burnout friend from Junior High who had settled nicely into a

clique of cigarette-pounding metal-heads, approached me. Gingerly, hypnotically, he waved his hands over my face.

"Ruuben...Rubennnn?"

"What do you want Steve?"

"Oh my god! They told me you were *blind!*"

Eventually, the unexpected fame of spazzing out in the middle of seventh period wore off. But now, at least, my name was out there. My outline was thrown into little bit sharper relief in those anonymous hallways. It was soon after the accident that I discovered the first floor alcove of lockers, where the punks hung out. They were the most interesting thing I'd seen in or out of school in a long time. Long and tattered trench coats, strange angular haircuts, *guys* wearing pink chuck Taylors.

There was a warmth to their interactions, but always under a thick blanket of sarcasm, something that was hard for me to decipher at first. They seemed more like a band, a family, than a high-school clique. When they'd talk to each other, there was a rhythmic horse-like flick in their necks, as they swiped the hair out of their eyes. Everything they wore was hand-made and retrofitted. Almost none of it had been bought new, and if it was, it had been spray-painted, safety-pinned or personalized.

Patiently, I started hanging around the periphery of this gang, waiting for someone to invite me over. When it finally happened, I expected a certain amount of hazing, and tensed up inside in anticipation, but it never came. What may have saved me was the fact that Jason, the clear leader of the group, had invited me in. He was a senior and was known for bringing punk to our school. He was well regarded, popular even. His hair was shaved, all but for a unicorn like spike above his forehead. Another senior in the group took pity on me, because he knew me from Drama club, then my only affiliation. He asked me if I had ever heard of the Violent Femmes.

Miracle of miracles, I had.

Randy, the friend who went to Catholic school, had played them for me the summer before school started. He was in the throes of an enthusiasm that I couldn't understand. This whiny, desperate voice, it almost seemed comical. Then, there was the matter of *the language*.

*"Why can't I get just one fuck? Why can't I get just one fuck? Guess got something to do with luck, cause' I waited my whole life for just one..."*

The lyrics shocked my innocent Christian ears. This music was dangerous. I didn't want to have anything to do with the feeling of panic and discomfort that it gave me.

On the alcove of the first floor, amidst those lockers, I decided to give that band another chance. I took a bus to the mall after school and purchased a

cassette: a little girl in a white dress peering into a door. An innocuous enough package for what would amount to pure Teen Angst TNT.

Upstairs in my room, I popped the cassette into my boom box and I listened. This time, with an open mind. A lot had happened since the end of eighth grade. I was desperate. I was confused and lonely and pathetic. I was a depressed freak, made more depressed and freakish by a humiliating accident and a subsequent routine of anti-seizure medication. It's main side effect? Depression. Certainly, I was comical. I really wasn't so interested in getting fucked, as girls still terrified me. But surely, I wanted to be loved.

That night, Gordon Gano's smart-alecky abandon bounced off my bedroom walls, his heart unmistakably, proudly on his sleeve. This was music written by and for misfits. It was clear that the guys churning out this rave-up of existential pain weren't going to get laid for a long time. And they could play. Gordon Gano's voice, once you got used to it, was stirring and complex. Smart, horny, edgy, restless, honest, sarcastic, alienated. At last there was someone in my corner, a shrieking, danceable manifesto for the passion, misery, and longing that had built up inside me in a confusingly short time, and which had, until now, no outlet.

The tape didn't leave my Walkman for a year. Everything seemed to click and follow naturally once those ten songs came into my life. Not that things suddenly improved, on the contrary, in many ways things just got harder. Now I an anthem, a tone, an attitude, *style*. I began to shop exclusively at Value Village. I was still an outcast, but now a proud one with a newly developed bad attitude. I didn't give a fuck what you thought of me, but I was desperately lonely. I wanted a girl, even though it was the most frightening thing I could imagine. Even my faith in Jesus Christ took a blow from this newly found and liberating instinct that I should start questioning everyone and everything that had been laid out before me. I had become, in a colloquial and albeit skewed-photocopy-of-a-photocopy-Southern-Wisconsin-way, a punk.

When the Femmes played live in Milwaukee at the Oriental Theater in 1986, and Gordon Gano thanked the boys in the balcony for being so rowdy, it was one of the proudest moments of my life.