

LIVES

Song of My Former Self

By Samantha V. Chang

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Eleven years ago, at 19, I was a nice, Midwestern Korean girl living in a decrepit former frat house in St. Paul complete with lava lamps, a beyond-creepy laundry room and an array of Grateful Dead skull bongs. I happened to be a dead ringer for James Iha, the guitarist from the Smashing Pumpkins, except for the amateur eyeliner job and frosty mauve lipstick. I sported a beauty-school shag, courtesy of a friend of a friend, complete with “razored” ends and a platinum skunk stripe. I got by as a fashion-design student with a little familial support and a meager part-time job in a vintage boutique called Heartbreaker. I remember wearing a pastel polyester vintage chevron cardigan — which looked like a very happy and tacky Easter basket — and white platforms with knee socks in the abysmal Minnesota sleet. I was actually more “Tokyo-pop-meets-Vegas” than “I-know-the-band grunge,” which would have been to my utter dismay, had I bothered to study myself more closely.

My boyfriend was a 25-year-old Irish toy designer named Zig, who had convincing dreadlocks and blue-tinged skin. He bought me illicit beers at rock shows, drove me around in his white Volkswagen Rabbit convertible and took me extreme cycling with his football Frisbee buddies on cold, fall afternoons near Lake Calhoun. I fell off my bike frequently, and in true chivalrous fashion, Zig would hoist me back on my ill-fitting seat — and I pretended it was all great fun. Then he would buy me more beer at a place called Little Tijuana’s and we would have pot-infused sex on his futon in his patchouli-scented apartment. In those days, I was always half a beer away from getting a nose ring but never mustered the gall. I didn’t have a care in the world.

After a while, Zig and I and my quasi-grunge clothes all parted ways. I graduated from beer to vodka martinis and from pot to powder at parties. Social cigarettes became desperate first-thing-in-the-morning cigarettes. Instead of vintage clothing, I started wearing low-rise designer jeans with lingerie-inspired tops and nylon Prada purses. And instead of dating boys who merely looked like rock stars, I started going out with guys who actually were rock stars, at least in certain small circles.

Then, a few years later, around the time I replaced the rock stars with men in suits, I decided that I couldn’t put my entire college education to waste (there were a couple of schools and a couple of different majors) and that I might as well try the whole “corporate thing” myself. I tried achieving respectability for a while in radio and advertising and fashion and ended up drowning my disillusionment in happy-hour cocktails.



Bob Hambly

More than a decade and three cities later, I am no longer employed, except as a full-time mother. I have identical-twin toddler daughters and an attorney husband who is 11 years my senior. We coexist on the Upper West Side with all the complexities unconditional commitment brings.

I often don't shower until 3 p.m. — not because of a hangover, or a languorous, sexual afternoon with a lover, but because one of my children wanted to read Dr. Seuss's "Ten Apples Up On Top" for the fifth time in an hour. The house could use a visit from the Red Cross. My white go-go heels have been replaced by salt-stained Danskos. My shirts all smell like apple juice and have permanent tomato-sauce stains where a child hugged my neck. My left finger has a proper Tiffany wedding band on it, but my hands are dry and weathered from dish soap and Windex. The first renegade grays are sneaking into my natural black hair, which I usually just put in a ponytail while it's still wet from the shower. I prefer Barneys when the credit cards allow me to. I wear sunscreen religiously now that sun spots are in full bloom at 30.

The time passes by quickly and sometimes so painfully. My best friend died in an alcohol-related car crash. Grandparents and beloved pets have left the world quietly. I have made peace with my mother, with whom I battled for so many years, because now she is Grandma. I have not thought of Zig in ages, but I sometimes think of others.

Sometimes I see a pretty 19-year-old girl on the street: fresh-faced and wild with a dream, gliding down the street with all eyes upon her, oblivious to the way the world snaps ribbon paths ahead of her in the wind. There are a few things in her presentation that will probably cause her to blush in the years ahead.

I turn to look, like everyone else, and I smile at her: that wary stranger-to-stranger smile. She returns it with apprehension: "Who is this woman with a double stroller, half-smiling at me?" I imagine I seem strange and worlds away but also familiar. We might both be wearing chipped black nail polish; it's one last fashion I find irresistible.

"Break a leg, sweetheart," I say in my mind.

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