**Angel Is a Centerfold**

In 1982, Nana takes me to Oakland Mall in Madison Heights, a working class suburb north of Detroit. Sometimes I walk from my family’s apartment to this mall with a babysitter, crossing busy 14 Mile Road with just enough change to buy a 45 single. But my grandmother drives us today. She has offered to buy me not just a 45 but an LP.

I walk through Harmony House to the back to scan the rows of Top 40 45s displayed across the wall. Then I flip through the rock albums, alpha order. Fingers on slick plastic-covered squares, I anticipate the chance to unwrap a new album carefully so as not to scratch the cover, for that is to be treasured, too. When I remember what I want is popular and should be on full display above the racks, I see it: *Freeze Frame*. The J. Geils Band.

Nana gave me the money already and I take my album to the cash register up front. The young men ringing sales will be the same men who smile and flirt with me when I’m older. When I’m the age they sing about in songs: sixteen, seventeen. But also when I’m fifteen, fourteen, thirteen. I will be on a first name basis with the men because they kept those jobs over years, a certain kind of prestige job that won’t pay much, but has importance because it is music, even if this is still a corporate shop and not an independent. And when my purchase is placed in a bag and handed to me, I meet my Nana outside, in the aisle of this atrium wing of the mall.

*What did you get?* I pull out the record to show her. She looks pleased for me. She is reading the song list. She stops on “Centerfold”. *Centerfold? Do you know what a centerfold is?*

I know the hit single and its chorus of schoolyard chants. I know the video with pretty girls dancing in a classroom. And yes, I know what a centerfold is. *It’s the picture in the middle of a magazine. Like a poster!* Like the one I will later pull out from a teen magazine, the poster of Michael Jackson, with the creases I can never smooth away, the telltale sign that a poster was once folded and not as valuable anymore, yes, that is what a centerfold is to me, and while my Nana does not say anything more, I never forget her piercing concern, the way she let me know she had so much more to say but would not.

At age seven I don’t own a camera. I have no sense of the power of photographs. I know nothing of modeling or pornography or a typical magazine’s vast distribution network, so when J. Geils Band lead singer Peter Wolf sings of opening up that *girlie magazine* and finding his *ex* who was once “pure like snowflakes” framed on the page*,* frozen for the world to see, I don’t understand what’s happening. I don’t understand his sense of loss. Or if this is a terrible a-ha moment when he knows once and for all that nothing is sacred, that everything can be *stained*—well, these claims of corruption sail over my head—yet somehow stick. Frames that are frozen, now, in me.

Leave our apartment complex and decide not to go to Oakland Mall, go the other way towards the 7-11 on John R road, and you can drive by Augie’s. I noticed Augie’s, a lot, with its sign announcing upcoming bands and drink specials. My family never went inside. But I knew it was a country bar. Little me imagined singer-songwriter Juice Newton, my *angel of the morning*, accompanied yet standing solo in a smoky haze, spotlight on her face. Or my Crystal Gayle with her impossibly long hair and tight blue jeans. My mother favored Country & Western and I loved the vocalists, the yearning in their songs. I’d seen enough movies to know that in honkytonks, the men could fight and throw bottles, yet somehow the angelic singers stood above, wore the *soft, fuzzy sweaters, too magical to touch*. I knew nothing of the women’s true lives or the roughness of the music business. To me, these women stood for flag-waving American beauty, and I felt a heart tug when I saw the sign. In that honkytonk, angels sang. The men ached to be by their side.

I lay in my child’s bed and listened to the men make their promises. Foreigner was waiting for a girl like me. REO Speedwagon would keep on loving me. I heard them on my Cookie Monster clock radio, or on the 45s I played on my parents’ living room stereo. A latch-key kid, I surrounded myself with music, but I also wandered out with the neighbor kids, the motley crew of white native-borns and immigrants who gathered on the front steps, played kickball, or looked for snakes in the high grass near the highway.

Neighbor kids might have worn white-armed concert jerseys, but we didn’t talk much music. But there was plenty of talk. Outside on the commons, I heard the curse “whore” for the first time. Kids must have said “whore” often because I can still conjure the mental imagery. First, I’d spell the word as “hoar”. I’d see the letters in my head: H O A R. Then what did I see? An overweight homeless woman in scraggly clothes, pushing a grocery cart filled with her belongings. The worse kind of ogre. Nobody would keep on loving her.

Selected measures of a girl who becomes a woman include: age; weight; height; daily calorie intake; chest, waist, and hip measurements; bra cup. They also include: number of boys kissed; number of girls kissed; age of virginity loss; number of sex partners; number of times in love. Unfortunately, they also include: number of times touched against her will; number of times raped; number of times believed; numbers of human beings she can trust with this information. They also include number of pregnancies, number of live births, number of stillbirths and terminations. Now I imagine they include: how many sexts sent to how many recipients, intended and unintended. Question: Is it true what isn’t measured isn’t counted? Question: If we lived in a matriarchal society, would the measures change? There are other important measures, such as age woman realizes she can reject these measures. And age she realizes that if she can’t reject, she can stop caring so much. And age she stops counting at all.

In high school I’d never admit to caring about the boy groupthink, but that didn’t stop the boys from ranking us and arraying us on grids. Who is hotter than who. Who doesn’t deserve to live. Even at a high school debate camp, the boys rated us. Some of us ranked. Some did not.

I wrote well, debated, accrued the achievements that got me noticed as a young leader. My GPA, my ACT and SAT and AP scores, they counted, yes, but I knew what stats made you valued by boys.

I pushed myself not to care. *Detach* I told myself, without having that word yet. But…

I remember coming in second place. The boy debaters rated the girl debaters, and the boy I liked fessed up, said they did rate us, and I placed second. *But you should have been first*. If you’ve ever wanted to be valued in this life, tell me you wouldn’t feel something. Tell me you’d feel nothing at all.

When I was fifteen I flirted with a modeling career. This ambition lasted a few months, and generated a few jobs, including a Ram’s Horn TV spot and a music video. I’m left with a scrapbook with a single contact sheet, one tear sheet, and a few pictures my mother liked enough to enlarge.

I stopped modeling because I was told by the head of a Detroit modeling outfit that I should lose 10 pounds. I was 5’10 and 128 lbs. I was thin enough to be hired for local jobs, but not thin enough to compete in New York. Of course, this was before Kate Moss and the shrinking to bone of so many model bodies. A few years later and I may have been told 20 pounds. Or, don’t come back.

But I remember the weekend I was told to change my body to make myself more valuable. So many ways to make it in this world—did I really want to rely on looks, given how subjective beauty is, how one person sees me and the next person sees past me? I also knew beauty to be a diminishing power source and few modeling careers lasted long. And there was the reality of being a model. By high school I’d seen so many movie scenes of predators making promises and young aspirants forced to take unwanted photos or sleep with their bosses that I feared abuse was part of the deal.

At the end of the weekend, I told my mother no. I won’t lose weight for them. I don’t want their power that badly.

I always felt this was a righteous decision, though at times I wonder if I choked. It’s hard for me to know. I know what Joseph Jackson or Beyonce’s dad would have said: get on the treadmill. But my mother wasn’t like that. She never pushed. I always wonder if greatness in the performing arts, even if that performance is posing and walking—demands a slave-driving guardian with an iron grip on the reins, or the whip, willing to withhold love or resources for desired outcomes. I don’t know.

But I remember the photo studio, an airy loft above Niki’s Pizza in Greektown. I remember the lights. The focus. On me. And the photographer, soft-spoken but firm, giving instructions, the subtle tilts of chin. How it felt to have someone seriously do my makeup, hair, but also appraise, advise me to wax off the downy, barely there hair on my face. The photographer told me to bring three different looks and I think often on the fuchsia crepe gown that my mother and I bought from Saks Fifth Avenue—knowing we’d return it after the shoot, and those silver stilettos that went with it. I still have the 8x10 color still. I’d never wear such an expensive dress again. The photographer also asked me to bring a classic business look and lingerie. A strange feeling, buying a teddy with my mother and I’m only fifteen. But we did it. And there’s nothing pornographic about the resultant shot, but I am dressed in black lace and posing with a muscular man you only see from behind. The picture ran in a local weekly. Not a centerfold. Just a black and white still. I did all of this for the book I was expected to build, if I wanted a career. They told me that I had something. And whether I did or not, I never took pictures I wanted to take back. I never felt exposed.

The J. Geils Band song says she’s wearing a negligee. She could still be exposed, this is still a *girlie* magazine. But maybe she’s not. Maybe her outfit is skimpy and of course shows her figure, but plenty of teddys cover nipples and crotch. Maybe this isn’t the kind of lingerie you find in sex shops that lift and offer naked breasts, that leave down there open for whatever the lover wants to do. Maybe she is perfectly covered if using our American media-agreed standard of what is and isn’t considered pornography. Maybe no one should be mad. But as I grow older, I learn that for some men, this is not covered enough. That for some men, no one else should be entitled to stare at his woman in lust, and if a woman poses like this, she an accomplice to the theft of what is supposed to be his. Tom Petty sings *everbody’s got to fight to be free* but for us women, those of us in United States of America, with the Bill of Rights and civil rights and a legal status that is clearly on extreme better footing than many other places in this world, but not all, I can’t help but think of us as free people of color during slave days. Yes, we’re free. But precariously so. Someone could hi-jack us. Domineering men abound. Some are charismatic, some are just bullies. And what happens to you if your man’s religion tells him you need to be modest? What happens to you if his ego tells him he needs to keep you in place? What happens to you if he’s just plain jealous? The centerfold wears a negligee and while Peter Wolf seems wounded, he doesn’t seem angry. But this doesn’t mean he hasn’t judged her. This doesn’t mean he isn’t holding what he considers the paper proof of her morals, of what she is willing to do for another man, for money. He’d still fuck her—of course, why not, she’s not too sullied for that—but I imagine an open place her for in his heart is now closed.

At college, in a city a thousand miles away, I’ll take my first women’s studies course. One day, our professor, with her tender eyes and brow of earnest brilliance, she will lead us on a procession to the front of the room. She prepared us for this day, or tried to as best she could. And now, on a table usually used for Danish pastry and cut sandwiches, she’s displayed what has been vilified in our syllabus readings, the slick-paged porn magazines, soft-core to hard, open for us to gaze, gawk, or quickly turn away from as our single-file line of nineteen and twenty-ish women proceeds down the aisle—no *nah nah, na nah nah nah* chorus of *Angel is a Centerfold*, just my knotted stomach as we are instructed to look at exhibits A, B, C (and triple D), to take our time with the proof of women’s victimization and commodification for us right there, proof on paper, proof of the insatiable market demand, for having studied this intersection of patriarchy and capitalism, as pornography was consistently characterized in the readings, any notions of participant consent are tainted in our eyes. I can still hear the professor telling us that yes, we may find ourselves aroused by these pictures, but that is normal, understandable in our culture where the imagery of pop culture constantly tiptoes to the brink of pornography—surrounds us, is doing all it can to make us open our wallets and buy, be. But in this fluorescent-lit classroom, in this slow procession to the front of the class, no pictures arouse me when it’s my turn to stare at the legs splayed, mouths splayed, the permanent splay the photo creates, the photo editor enforces when there are no next frames showing the legs close, the mouths close, the cleansed face, and there is forever open invitation. No ropes show but she’s been hogtied for as long as the image exists. And there it is—the most famous image of our classroom readings, the oiled legs sticking out of the meatgrinder, and the other side ground meat—and there’s the one with the woman stuck face-first in a garbage can and she is just legs and ass. And she is trash. And she is meat. And she is a joke. And she is an arousing set of glory holes. And she is trauma for an onlooker. And she has been paid or not paid for this public display. My senses don’t betray the gravity of the moment. I am not turned on. I feel numb, the grief that something I hoped would be proven wrong is not, and for some moments, I hold that horror inside until it crusts over, becomes knowledge I don’t know what to do with, becomes scar tissue, becomes something I can’t really touch twenty years later as I write this because I’ve seen more life since then, enough to know that these pictures are not the whole of male desire, of male-female relations, but the horror is still there, still something I’d rather not feel or stare at for long.

When I’m a college senior one of my male roommates subscribes to *Playboy* and keeps it on the living room magazine stand with *Time* and *Sports Illustrated*. My female roommate and I will look askance at it, but chalk it up to the men’s newfound freedom. My boyfriend, eleven years older, will laugh when he sees a copy, recall the way he knew a male flight attendant neighbor was gay because he subscribed to the Playboy channel, declaring that nothing about Playboy was hardcore enough to give straight men real pleasure.

But my closest male roommate claimed otherwise. One night after drinking and exchanging backrubs he tells me: this is what we do. We pick up a magazine like this and we look for the picture of the girl that looks closest to the girl we want in real life. Then we imagine. We imagine the model is her. And when he tells me that, I feel like I’ve been let inside, the kind of entry earned by intimacy. A sharing that can’t be bought at the newsstand.

I’ve cried over pornography. I remember a birthday in my 20s and I catch my beloved with a DVD and I see the cover picture – all black women. Am I a fetish? But the girls have darker skin than I do. Does he prefer them to me? I remember, years later, catching porn left on a computer. My beloved had watched a Japanese woman giving oral sex. I am nothing like the Japanese woman, physically. Does that mean he wants women who are nothing like me? Maybe. Yes. No. All of the above? I cried. Loyal men. Devoted men. To me. But this felt like betrayal. Rightful attentions given to strangers. What should have been mine was gone.

And I remember that French gas station in my late 20s, off of some highway outside of Paris. I am with my first husband, and we’ve stopped, and I’ve gone in for water and snacks and there’s a man leafing through a pornographic magazine. This man, in his late 30s?, in ordinary office work clothes, ordinary short-cut hair, exhibits no shame, is the picture of normalcy with his naked posed women as I look for Haribo candies. Deep rage wells inside me. I’m pissed at how easy it is for men. Hot and horny? Here’s a mag. There’s a DVD. Now, just press press press and anything you want is on the private screen of your smart phone. I am not a man. Maybe I don’t understand how unthreatened I should be. That’s there’s no malice, normally. The average guy isn’t trying to fantasize you into a meat grinder. How this need not be about you at all, more about years of habit and how to cope with desire.

But even if that’s so, there’s relief, no? I thought of my struggles with monogamy. How as I learned to be married, I thought about old boyfriends, and found myself preyed upon by men who could smell a troubled young wife miles away. All I could do to resist those men. If I fantasized about them, I couldn’t claim harmlessness. Fantasy creates an opening, a focus that is valuable, it’s your very presence spent on strangers. And porn couldn’t give me what I thought I’d find in other people’s arms. So fuck the gas station guy, getting his needs met by girls on film. Fuck him just standing here, I thought, like it’s nothing. Like he’s not even embarrassed that I’m staring at him. Of course, I know nothing about this man. I could have been raging against a man mid-trauma. For what if it turned out he knew the woman in the pictures? What if I’d found the French Peter Wolf right there, too stunned to move from this gas station aisle, because that was his beloved staring back? Maybe a terrible truth that he hoped wasn’t true had been proven: No woman was an angel. Not even his.

It’s 1998, I’m 24, and late night for me is even later for my boyfriend, because he’s calling from England, from his parents’ house in Essex near the sea, the semi-detached home that reveals their privileged middle-class status, but since he is a graduate student, with no job, he is spending his mother’s money to call me, expensive Ps, more expensive per minute than the 10 cents I’m charged by Sprint. I budget $200 a month for our calls. I know he has something he really wants to say. While I work in America and he finishes school in England I want to talk to him, keep this young love alive, but on this night, when I’ve answered the phone quickly so my roommate won’t be awakened, he has said ten words and I know he’s drunk. He can speak his English with a certain savoring of the syllables, again, the privilege, the delight in the language of his heritage and place but tonight, there are extra lags and I know that my boyfriend is not home, that I am with his twin.

*I was on the Internet today*, he said. *Do you know what I saw?*

*No.*

*Well, I saw you*. And there’s something about the way he says *you*.

*I saw you in a picture*, he added.

*What kind of picture?* I ask, seized with anxiety.

*You know what kind.*

In that panicked moment, I am scrambling inside, suffused with the self-doubt an interrogator can inflict when you start to doubt your own innocence, wonder if you somehow committed the crime you’ve been accused, sleepwalked it somehow, or, in this case, got set-up, for is it possible a past lover photographed me without me knowing and shared it with a website that would post?

*I saw you on a special site. A special site for men. Pictures of women who should be virgins but are fucked, asking to be fucked, ready to be fucked, after-fucked, this is the site I’m talking about, the site for ex-virgins, for whores like you. You know what we can do to whores like you.*

He doesn’t say that, of course. He says he saw a girl who looked so much like me, was I sure it wasn’t me, and in that moment of feeling caught in the frame, I reassure him that of course it wasn’t me. An ocean separates us, and I know that if he were next to me, he’d never grow violent, not with his hands. But terror flows through me still.

He also doesn’t say that he remembers the Christmas holiday the year before. When he presumed our exclusivity by virtue of the fact that we had slept together. I told him many times that in America, it doesn’t work that way, that believe me, there are a million women who wish it did but it does not. And when he learned of the ex-boyfriends I saw during my trip home, the wound was deep. And if it wasn’t deep, it was something that my apologies and faithful monogamy could not heal. Whatever ingredient he used to build trust in us had dissolved.

The next day my boyfriend calls back and apologizes. I accept his apology.

This is our pattern. Bad twin shows up after drinking, cruel things get said, next morning, apology. It’s a relief. We are so young. We are still learning what we can and cannot accept in love.

In the song, Peter Wolf sounds like he accepts the situation. Sure, there’s initial shock. But then he sings that he and his ex can *take it to a hotel room and take it off in private.* Sex can make amends for the unlawful giving away of what should have been his, or of only a few people, not to just anyone who can buy a magazine. But my question is, say, this really happens, and she doesn’t want to go to that hotel room, will he feel entitled to force her? Will he feel pushed to punish her, too?

I don’t see the J. Geils Band anymore. Instead I think of the girls who sold themselves for pictures, sex acts, and then got left in swampy fields. Left on beaches. In parking lots. Those girls who placed ads on Craigs List. Show up to the Days Inn, the Motel Six, the Waldorf. The Air B&B apartment rented for the weekend so he can do whatever he pays for, try to get away with what he won’t. Maybe she has sex with him. Maybe he follows all of her rules. Maybe he pays her the right amount, plus tip. But. She risks all if he does not. She risks that scene in *Leaving Las Vegas* when Elizabeth Shue’s character enters the hotel room and there are three male college students who want anal sex and when she tries to leave they beat, rape, and film the whole thing. What kind of annihilation did these men attempt? What kind of annihilation did they immortalize on tape? There will be men and women who think that if someone is selling her body, there is no such thing as unearned consequences, but of course that’s bullshit. You don’t sell yourself into enslavement. You make an agreement. And they violated hers beyond measure. She lives. According to the script, according to the motion picture still available for purchase or Netflix rental, the character played by Elisabeth Shue goes on to play angel to the dying character played by Nicholas Cage. She lives while he dies. But many women treated this way do not live. They keep breathing but they’ve retreated so deeply into themselves they are shadow people. No one can touch them. And that is no way to live.

I’m a mother, a wife now, and when I cook dinner, I turn on the kitchen radio to the oldies station, WCBS in New York City. *Hello this is Mick Fleetwood of Fleetwood Mac and you’re listening to the greatest songs of all-time* as they slide into *Dreams*.But once a week—once a day?—I soak a dish, or defrost chicken breast, and there it comes – the *nah nah, nah nah nah* chorus of *Angel Is a Centerfold.* Thirty years later, this is the one J. Geils Band song they chose to canonize.

I hear *Angel is a Centerfold* and the lyrics don’t slip straight into the subconscious. I think about every single word.

The first time I type this paragraph, I write: this song still doesn’t apply to me. I’m no angel and I’ve never been a centerfold. But maybe I’m more like Peter Wolf than I admit. Maybe I’ve cried for something that was never mine.

But Peter sings on. I can’t escape his voice. His story. God it’s so easy to dismiss a song as nothing. As a child, I thought his music would be the best birthday present. I used to save my pennies for music forty-fives. I used to cross a dangerous thoroughfare just to make them my own. Ask me now to sing all of *Angel is a Centerfold* and I won’t mess up a single word.