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ANDREANA CLAY

The death of Prince Rogers Nelson was devastating for me. It was like losing a family member, which is one of the first things I said when I was able to stop crying. Not like a freak out, what some might call hysterical, cry, but one that was deep, aching, and ongoing. It was a deep ache because it took me back to another deep ache, as music often does, to one of those defining moments as a young woman: the time when I had a tight group of young women friends, all of us teenagers, when the line between friendship, sisterhood, love, and attraction overlapped. A time before I came out as queer but felt like *these* women really knew me. And they did, a huge feat in my mostly white hometown, my mostly white family (in terms of who I lived with), and at a time when my secret sexuality and sexual practice were in “full bloom.” It was during this time that I was, perhaps, most connected to Prince, and it was the fertile ground for that relationship to build and solidify over time.

When he died I was taken back almost immediately to a night in 1987, sitting in my car in Smith Park, which was a smaller, non-party park on the north (aka Black) side of Springfield, Missouri. I was sitting alone listening to *Sign o' the Times*, on the precipice of change. In that moment, I was registering my commitment to Prince, like my girlfriends, and unlike so many others, basically, fair-weather fans who only really liked *Purple Rain*, and mostly the movie at that. Black kids I ran with didn't like Prince. They thought that Prince was nasty, like “he nasty.” Not like, as I've written about before, the cleaner/Blacker, more innocent, and “just better” Michael Jackson. Prince existed a little on the outside of that space. A certain space of Blackness. As did we—the girls I ran with who *loved* Prince. Because of how we looked, most people thought we'd like the side chicks: Vanity, Apollonia, Sheila E., or that that's who we wanted to be. We listened to *Controversy*, 1999, and *Parade* over and over again, “discussing” the merits of them vs. *Purple Rain*, which, while

good, felt too commercial. Like we lost him. His other side acts like *The Time*, *Vanity 6*, and even the *Family* were on constant rotation in our headphones, in our cars, in the apartment that Jennifer—the only of us who lived on her own—shared with her “rumored to be a drag queen and probably gay cuz he slept with dudes for money” boyfriend, T. The one she was pregnant by. It felt like it was non-stop. We adopted his and his crew’s style: lace, curly hair, boots. Some of it we stole, just to have it be real. We loved Prince so much because he felt like he was us: light skin-ded (not mixed, despite the belief that he was, which he helped to perpetuate), Black, free sex. We were the ones who existed on the outside. The ones others weren’t so into, the “chicks on the side,” ’cause we weren’t “fully Black.” Half-white because nobody could make sense of Mexican, and, for all intents and purposes, we were fast. Maybe our parents didn’t know it—until a pregnancy occurred—but everybody else seemed to. We were the girls you’d have sex with but not a relationship. And we knew that. And when I say “free sex,” I mean freedom in that we freely had sex. Reveled in it (as much as you can revel at sixteen), in being the ones nobody wanted to be with. We didn’t want to be anybody’s girlfriend, anyway, not even Prince’s. He was fine and all, and we dug his aesthetic, but he was goofy too. Like, underneath it all, he wanted “it”—intimacy, commitment, connection—more than he let on.

His desperation seemed to come through, at times, on *Sign o’ the Times*, released in 1987. The last year me and my girls were together. The year that everything changed. But, we had that moment, through the summer, when we held on, desperately, *almost*. Prince’s desperation came through the most, we concluded, in “If I Was Your Girlfriend,” music and lyrics by Camille (Prince’s female alter ego, which we didn’t actually realize until years later). Girl was desperate, we thought, which was something we’d never show or let on. But, at the same time, he was otherworldly. Though we didn’t understand everything he was saying in the song—“orgasm,” “drink every ounce,” “hold you tight and hold you long” (goofy)—he was also doing “thangs” we might consider if we wanted to be somebody’s girlfriend: “let me wash your hair,” “pick out your clothes before we go out,” “make U breakfast sometime,” “go 2 the movies and cry together,” “take care of U and do all the things that only a best friend can.” We could do that. We could be those kinds of girlfriends. We were those kinds of girlfriends, to each other.

In the voice of Camille:

If I was your girlfriend would U let me dress U
 I mean, help U pick out your clothes before we go out
 Not that you’re helpless, but sometimes, those are the things that bein’ in love’s about.

And, also in the voice of Camille:

Sugar do U know what I'm saying to U this evening?
 Maybe U think I'm being a little self-centered
 But I want 2 be all of the things U are 2 me
 Surely U can see

We were goofy, too, like Prince. In the way we wanted, in the ways we wanted one another. Forever. The way young women often let themselves be intimate with one another for the brief, before “dyke” gets attached to our practices. We wanted that. Wanted something different. Something better. Something that existed outside of where we were. Yeah, we were those kinds of girlfriends.

And as I sat in my car, alone, I reflected on that want. That love. But things were slowly changing: rumors of my father's drug addiction had already begun swirling, and his infrequent visits helped that along. T. turned out to really be gay and, along with his brother, “disappeared” to Kansas City, never to be seen again. Jennifer went ahead and had her baby, and we saw one another now and then. Graciela lost her baby, and her family moved away shortly after. Prince started to fade among our larger circle of friends, people “couldn't really get into” *Sign o' the Times*, and *Graffiti Bridge* tipped that over the edge. But for a moment, I reflected upon and wrapped myself up in my relationships with my girls and our unexplained but deep love for one another and, for a moment, I could imagine what silence looked like.

RIP Prince.

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