

## *what remains*

PENNY KITTLE

I sat on top of a weathered stone pillar, the solemn, moneyed entrance to our friend Julie's house. As we waited for her, I caressed the brilliantly green, bumpy carpet of moss that grew all over. I sang, "I sat on the roof, and kicked off the moss . . ." my off-key sounds a poor imitation of our beloved Elton John. Cynthia giggled. I smiled down delightedly at her, sitting on the stairs below me, hiding her pasty legs in the shade of a broad-leafed tree. I could be ridiculous with my best friend; it was summer and we often passed time with enchanting nothingness. We were 12.

My long tan legs hung across each side of the column, legs that were just so long all of a sudden and a warm brown color that I worked hard to maintain. As I leaned forward the tips of my blonde hair brushed the moss, a stark white against this sea of green. I cherished this gift of summer color in beautiful combinations of light. "Cynthia, do you ever think we'll find a guy who will sing to us like Elton?" I asked seriously, glancing down. Her latest trip to the dermatologist had left her cheeks dry and red with painful sunburn.

She snorted. "I'm going to go for *Elton*; there's no one else like him," she smiled at me, the gleam of braces dimpling my face with light.

"Not if I get to him first," I flashed my own silver grin.

Elton's voice spoke to me. I played my albums with numbing repetition. Each time I heard the first piano notes of "Your Song," the tone resonated somewhere near gut level, leaving me breathless and uncomfortable. I listened to it over and over, lying in my bedroom surrounded by collages and posters of his face, his clothes, and his words. Elton John was my center. Music would never get any better than this.

Cynthia and I had tickets to his concert at Memorial Coliseum just eight weeks away. Cynthia was designing our T-shirts. Mine was pale blue with Elton in large glitter letters across the chest. We were going to get close enough to be noticed. I was sure if Elton saw me he'd know we were meant to spend the rest of our lives together.

My teenage son Cam put the CD in my car stereo reluctantly this morning. I rarely choose the music, but I had bought it the night before and had to hear it. The first few notes filled me with visions of 1974, racing our bicycles from one house to the other, our legs pumping furiously up that long, impossibly high hill on our way to

Julie's. Cynthia's dark hair, wavy and thick, stayed in place no matter how fast we went. Mine was a wild mess streaming behind me. She had the newer bike, clothes I coveted, and a physician for a father. Cynthia had everything I thought I was missing, and I felt more than envy. I wanted to be her.

I wonder where she is now and my stomach turns at the sad, sickness of the thought. She's been gone for 22 years, longer than she was here. I still pause in disbelief when I hear her name. Sometimes I imagine that she will turn up on my doorstep, but I feel this only briefly, and only because I refused to look in the casket.

Cynthia and I made a cassette tape one sunny afternoon in the yellow-golden living room at her house. I can see her still, seated at the piano, her slender fingers caressing the keys as I sprawled on the floor by the mustard velvet chaise lounge. We had sat on it together, secretly, admiring the expansive view of Portland out the large windows nearby. We quickly brushed the pile flat minutes later. There were many untouchables in Cynthia's majestic home.

Cynthia had asked me to come over to hear her play "Stairway to Heaven." She had the tune quickly and we giggled at her new obsession, Kenny, as she practiced. "Stairway" was the last song his band had played at the dance on Friday. Cynthia had snagged his attention before the night was over and she credited me with her find; I'd given her my ticket to the dance. I wondered briefly what would have happened if I'd gone instead of her, but I knew. She simmered with sexuality; I still looked away and hid beside my friends. Kenny had dark eyes and a lusty voice that frightened me, but not Cynthia. Years later he would seize her virginity in his battered, blue Chevy, but on this afternoon neither of us would have predicted it. We were still kids, dreaming of possibilities and the gentleness of love. We believed in a breathless voice close to our ear singing, "Yours are the sweetest eyes I've ever seen."

The sun warmed my legs crossing in the air above me to the beat of the metronome tapping out time. Cynthia sat perfectly straight, eyes focused on the music, her hands graceful, her nails a brilliant cherry. It was magical watching her play. I had wanted lessons for years but we couldn't afford them. Cynthia had this perfect room with a view of the city skyline, the immense green lawn below with two gardeners, one just for the roses.

I loved this girl.

"Let's tape you," I said as I leaped to my feet. Cynthia smiled and kept playing. I found the tape recorder plugged in by the window behind the couch and rushed to her side. Cynthia pulled her wavy, dark hair quickly into a ponytail, suddenly serious. One

inky strand fell free across her pale chin. She hit the play button and said, “Cynthia Jane Epley, master of piano, um—” she shrugged her shoulders and laughed, “Playing Led Zeppelin, and the greatest song ever written, ‘Stairway to Heaven.’” She straightened up with a quick wrinkle of her nose at me. I perched beside her with the microphone in my right hand. She eased her fingers across the keys and the first few notes began. Cynthia’s eyes smiled as she studied the notes before her. I knew she was playing for Kenny, but I liked just being a part of it all. Sunshine and all of that golden yellow—the carpet, the walls, the furniture, the lovely painting of dancing children that hung expertly over their marble fireplace—mesmerized me.

I would miss those unplanned days. Time stretched before us, one afternoon and then another. Time for sunbathing and prank phone calls. Time for grilled cheese sandwiches under the broiler and stolen Carlton cigarettes elegantly smoked on her deck. Time for talking about parents and periods, “Benny and the Jets” and boys.

I had one black dress. I knew it even before I started fingering the sweaters and shirts, pushing to the corner of my closet where I had hung clothes I never wore. It was sleeveless and trimmed in tiny, white lace with a deep V-neck that was just wrong for this occasion, but it didn’t matter; there was no decision to be made. I was dressing for her funeral; of course I would wear black. I had a warm coat so that the rains and the biting wind wouldn’t chill me, but all afternoon I shivered anyway.

When I entered the church I saw Julie and all of her siblings in a row, her parents anchoring each end in a pew several rows ahead. Across the aisle were all of Cynthia’s sorority sisters: row after row of sobbing Theta’s.

I went alone.

I sat near the back.

I didn’t cry.

Well, not until they played the tape.

I was staggered when the first notes played in the silence of that church. I thought I heard our giggles from an afternoon years before. I sat stunned and tense, afraid if I moved I might brush the shoulders of the strangers seated on each side of me. Why that tape now? Not for the cheap irony of that song I hoped; I shook with anger. Cynthia was not climbing a stairway to heaven; she was an atheist. Anyone who knew her knew. This was my friend; that afternoon was mine; I didn’t want to share. I looked up at the shadowed ceilings quickly, straining to keep the tears brimming in my eyes; I hadn’t brought any Kleenex and my nose was running. There was a sea of black jackets, shiny, silk dresses of charcoal surrounding me and Cynthia’s voice—so familiar and

suddenly near—talking to me through the speakers from each corner of the sanctuary. It was unbearable. I watched rounded backs and hunched shoulders shake.

Cynthia chuckled, but her dark, cherry casket remained silent before us.

We were serious about suntans on the brink of 16. We would lounge on her deck for hours, glistening with baby oil and singing along with the radio. Blue, cloudless skies and our perch high on a hilltop made us feel regal. I remember an afternoon when the phone rang loudly through the screen door behind us and Cynthia leapt up, holding her bikini top in one hand, the straps dangling on each side.

“Hello, Epley residence, Cynthia speaking,” she was using her doctor daughter’s voice. The tone changed instantly, “We’re on the deck in the sun doing *nothing*, Mother. You’re so paranoid.” Moments later she slammed the phone into the wall and stormed back onto the deck. She stood there a minute, a tense silence between us, before saying, “Let’s do something. Do you want to find Jose?”

I grinned. I always wanted to find Jose.

We had first seen him near the southwest reservoir on a Saturday when we couldn’t get a tennis court and rode our bikes to avoid the wait. He was suddenly standing in the road ahead expecting us to stop. I heard the low hum of Cynthia’s brakes as I depressed my own, sweet synchronicity.

“Hey,” I offered. His sly grin and deep, brown eyes unnerved me immediately, but I was determined to be confident. Cynthia silently drew her ten-speed nearer to mine, the skinny tires aligned.

“Do you two ladies want to buy some dope?” he had asked, his voice like the low purr of a cat sleeping nearby. I stood taller thinking *ladies*. It was my mirrored sunglasses for sure; I looked 18 at least. My fine blonde hair fell to my waist and I always wore lip gloss that sparkled. Jose was a man, probably a high school dropout I thought. Dangerous. Besides, we could always outrun him on our bikes.

“How much?” Cynthia was smooth.

“Twenty bucks and I’ll roll them for you,” he took in Cynthia’s shiny running shorts and tank top, lingering on her small, but perfectly rounded breasts. I hoped he wouldn’t notice my blush.

“We’ll take it,” I said with confidence. Cynthia smiled slyly behind her Vaurnets and reached in her shorts for cash. I hoped she had it; the deal was off if it depended on me. She showed us empty hands.

“Sorry,” she offered and eased onto the seat of her bike.

I followed her; glancing back at Jose watching us. He called, “Next time,” and I nodded, looking at him as I rode away until my front tire wrenched wildly to the side and I pulled my eyes forward to avoid a fall.

Since that day we’d hunted for him often. His attention was intoxicating. He always had pot, but we weren’t buying. We played a game with Jose. There were moves we needed to learn; Jose flirted and we were clever and sexual in return. There was a lingering danger that I loved. Jose made me powerful and brave.

On this day Jose couldn’t be found, but once we were out in the park our mood changed. It was the delight of trees and green, the perfect harmony of an Oregon summer, and our confidence that everything good in life still lay before us. We dreamed up marriages with muscular, sensitive men who could sing, of course. We lay across the worn metal merry-go-round and watched a few clouds pass across the hole between branches high above, our thoughts spinning silently beneath the blue sky. We dreamed of first cars and senior proms. We would play tennis together throughout our lives and always share June strawberries.

Cynthia died one night in February when the car she was in left the slick road of Santiam Pass and slid down a hill slamming against a tall Douglas fir. She was 19. Her battered body was found against a rock; she was flung far from her friends. One ski boot hung loosely from her slender foot.

I raged at the mystery of her dying—miles from Mt. Bachelor and yet in her ski boots—insistent about wearing a seatbelt but the only one unprotected, the only one to die that night. The pieces refused to fit; she remained dead.

I returned to college; I married after and moved far from Oregon. I revisit our park on my annual visit home. I feel her playful smile in the beauty of ancient woods that stir beside me. I hear Elton’s voice whisper in my ear, “I would have liked to have known you, but I was just a kid.” I miss the Cynthia who never came to be and the secrets we’d have shared beneath the silence of those trees.