

Liner Notes

Jamie was stuck. He had been sitting in the same spot for about an hour and was becoming increasingly aware of the uncomfortable, rubber-coated, metal grid that would, he was sure, leave his back looking like a geometry problem that night. “The same spot” was a bench next to the railing on the second story of the mall about 2 miles from his house. This was where he went whenever he got stuck on the not-yet-titled screenplay he was writing. He was never very good at shopping, but he had always been an excellent observer. This, of course, meant that he was always the first to point out if someone had gotten a haircut or if there was a bug on the ceiling above someone’s head. Now, however, he was hoping that this “talent” of his would somehow make inspiration come a little easier. Jamie had that big ugly block that every writer dreads in the way that a cyclist might dread the tiniest, but most perfectly placed pebble in the road. Here he could watch a variety of people float, wobble, and sometimes dart past him while he imagined what kind of person they might be like. There are so many assumptions that can be made just by watching someone pass by you. Of course he never knew whether or not any of the obscurities he thought up were true, but that’s what he liked so much about this little activity of his.

Jamie Kcartzlovsky was a senior in high school and couldn’t be more ready to leave. It wasn’t that he didn’t like high school, because he did. It was things like linoleum floors, and the smell of the cafeteria, and “required reading” that he couldn’t stand. He was about six feet tall, but he liked to tell people he was 5’12”. He had shaggy brown hair that was fairly long and obviously not a top priority of his. During his hellish middle school years, he had all different hairstyles ranging from a Mohawk to a buzz cut. Now, he didn’t really care. On this particular day, he was wearing jeans, his old black converse

sneakers, and his worn-to-comfort Rolling Stones three-quarters-length shirt. He had been diagnosed with ADHD when he was in the fifth grade and had just recently stopped taking his medicine because everyone figured he was growing out of it, but lately he was having trouble keeping still for very long. He was constantly bouncing his leg or drumming his fingers against his thigh and he was starting to think that this lack-of-medication could be part of the reason he was having trouble writing lately.

He looked over to his right and saw an Asian man that looked a little past middle-aged who was scanning the windows of the art gallery. Jamie would have thought of this as cool, but the man was looking at the paintings that Jamie called “the boring ones”. Paintings of things like hilly landscapes, juvenile church choirs, and fruit. Jamie immediately started making a bulleted list in his head about this guy:

- He was most likely one of six members of the chess club back in high school.
- He was probably married to a wife that smiles a lot.
- He has one daughter who is in high school and who wears glasses.
- His family uses placemats with a flower border on them.

Satisfied and amused, he started to turn his head to the left and as he did he saw an old man walking toward him with a metallic gold cane and hot pink knee socks. He had to put his head down to keep from laughing until the man passed and he started wishing that his friend Rajeev was with him. Rajeev was one of two of his best friends and people-watching was one of their favorite past times. They were always able to crack each other up just by commenting on what they saw. Everyone that knew them knew that they were hilarious when they were together and were always the entertaining ones at parties.

Unable to stand the hot-plate feel of the bench branding his back anymore, he decided he would actually do some walking around this time. He stepped onto the escalator watching the neon green spaces between the steps flash by; they always reminded him of the movie "Contact."

On his ride down to the first floor of the mall he spotted the music store right next to Belks and, remembering that he still hadn't gotten the *Garden State* soundtrack, he decided he might as well go in and look for it while he was there.

Jamie headed toward the back of the music store where he figured the soundtracks would be. As he was walking aimlessly up and down the aisles on the carpet that's so thin it's more just like a protective skin for the concrete underbelly of the mall, he took notice of that familiar smell that he had missed for so long; the smell of recently released CD's and cellophane waiting to be aggravated. Something drew his attention toward the front of the store. Maybe it was the changing of tracks over the loudspeaker or maybe it was just his typical short attention span, but as he looked toward the front counter he saw a girl. He tried to arrange a string of words in his head that made sense, but his mind had gone completely blank. For the first time in months he didn't need Ritalin to keep his focus. Valerie did it all on her own. Jamie didn't actually know what her name was, but in his mind he had already written her into his script- as Valerie. It wasn't love at first sight. It wasn't lust or infatuation. Too many people have too many pre-conceived ideas of what happens when someone is caught staring at someone else of the opposite sex. This wasn't any of those things.

As soon as he was able to blink, he quickly tried to think of a reason to come back to the store tomorrow.

On his drive home it seemed as if Jamie were able to count each white line on the road as they slid by and disappeared under his car. Had Valerie slowed time along with

his thoughts? With his eyes still on the road, his right hand found the CD player and soon after, Placebo's "Sleeping with Ghosts" took over all the vacant air in the car. As the lyric-filled oxygen passed in front of his mouth he told it, "I found my inspiration. And I gave her a name."

When he finally made it home and half-ran/half-tripped into his house, he said hi to his mom who was sitting on the couch filling out documents of some form (his mom was always filling out documents), and hurried up to his room. There were clothes, videos, and a variety of other little oddities scattered all over the dark carpet, but Jamie's path seemed predetermined; he glided over to his desk where his laptop sat without having to think twice about avoiding the mess that took over the majority of his floor. He was the cyclist that missed the pebble in the road by half-an-inch.

His fingers on the keys held a striking similarity to a rainstorm on pavement. Words were spilling out of his head at a rate that was almost too quick for his hands to keep up with. He poured and poured until the clicking of the keys became deafening and he could no longer hear himself think. The lack of chemical assistance in his system was taking over and turning the tiniest things into distractions. Aggravated with himself, but pleased with the restoration of life to his screenplay, he decided he would call it a night.

As he was beginning to doze off, Jamie decided that for the time being, Valerie would dictate what happened in the script. Why not? Jamie was obviously having trouble coming up with stuff on his own anyway. He fell asleep eager for tomorrow to start.

When tomorrow started he got dressed, fueled up on Pop-Tarts and 2% milk, went downstairs and spoke with his mom for a while, and then headed off to the mall. Of course it crossed his mind that if he kept doing this people were bound to notice, but he decided that he didn't really care. He was desperate. And if that made him obvious then he was willing to accept it. That's how someone in desperation works.

Once he got to the mall, he went straight to the music store stopping only to open the door for a woman pushing a stroller. The effect that Valerie had on his chemical balance was ridiculous. Normally if he had gone without medicine for this long, especially at a crowded place like the mall, there would be a distraction almost every fifteen feet or so. He stepped off the tiled floor and onto the recognizably thin carpet of the music store purposely walking through the metal detectors furthest away from the front counter. He walked over to the 'B' section before daring to glance over at the front counter. He pretended to be interested in the first CD he saw, which in this case was "The Bloodhound Gang". In actuality, Jamie couldn't stand "The Bloodhound Gang", but he also couldn't stand writer's block. In the end, shaking the latter of the two issues won out so he picked up the CD, flipped it over to read the back, and slowly lifted his eyes toward the check out counter on the other side of the store. Valerie wasn't there. Nervous and confused, Jamie scanned the rest of the store to see if maybe she had just temporarily left her post, but he didn't see her. A feeling of emptiness and disappointment began to engulf him. He turned his attention back toward the front of the store again to check one last time and that's when he saw her. She was walking through the metal detectors he had just passed through moments before. She had her bag slung over one shoulder and her work shirt over the other, but the first thing he noticed was that she was smiling. The way her smile cut and collapsed on her lips made the blood that had frozen in his brain immediately come alive and fill with letters. Sentences. Scenes. She was happy. Why was she happy? His head started once again flooding with ideas. What could he work into his script that would make her character happy? He returned the Bloodhound Gang CD to its plastic designated section and picked up a "Blood Brothers" CD.

"At least this one isn't nearly as embarrassing", he thought to himself.

As his eyes followed her to the check out counter, he made a mental note of the way she talked so excitedly to the person behind the cash register. Talking excitedly. Smiling. She was happy. Maybe she got a new dog, maybe she got the last chocolate chip bagel at the bakery on her way to work, maybe a sibling had come to visit. Jamie liked the last one the best. Now that his work for the day was done here, he walked back through the metal detectors and back onto the tiled floor to head home. Once again on his way home, time seemed to have slowed down. Maybe it was just that his mind was working so fast that everything else seemed slow in comparison. Once again he got home, once again he said hi to his mom who was filling out documents on the couch, and once again he ran upstairs to his laptop and typed until it hurt. Except it wouldn't only be once again. It would be over and over again. Except for the weekends (he figured out Valerie didn't work on the weekends), this became his (almost) daily routine. Whatever her mood seemed to be that day, he adjusted the script accordingly. Little did she know how much power she had at her disposal. And everyday he went into the store, Jamie marveled at how he had managed to avoid coming in contact with her. She was always at least an arms-length away.

One day that he went into the music store, she seemed particularly upset. Her eyes were continuously downcast and the redness of her face suggested hours spent with salty eyes. It was the same way for about a week. Every day he went into the store she carried with her that same sort of heavy sadness. So of course this was mirrored in Jamie's screenplay. Valerie and this nameless script were holding hands and spiraling downward while Jamie ran next to them tracing their path with his finger.

One evening Jamie's other best friend Frank came over; he wanted to read any progress Jamie had made with his script. Frank had a wide toothy smile, was an excellent pianist, and never had the same hair color for more than a week. This week it was in a

short pink and purple striped Mohawk with the front of it swept forward over his forehead. Jamie would normally be reluctant to let anyone read what he was writing unless he was completely happy with it, but at this point he was just glad there was actually something to read- a lot to read actually. Plus, Frank was one of his best friends so he wasn't quite as shy about his work around him as he was with other people. Jamie sat on his bed bouncing his leg and tapping a pencil against his thigh while Frank sat at his desk and scrolled through the pages and pages of new material on the laptop. Jamie had told Frank about Valerie the week before so it was no surprise to him that she had taken over the majority of the script. When he was done reading, Frank turned to Jamie and said, "I'm falling in love with Valerie. But dude, all of a sudden it totally nose-dives. I didn't know you were writing a tragedy."

Jamie looked up from the picked-at eraser on the pencil he was holding. "I didn't either," he mused.

"It gets really depressing. Abusive boyfriends, a dead mom, drugs..."

"I know, I know. I don't know what to do. I don't know what I'm *doing*. I didn't mean for this to happen. But honestly, right now I'm more concerned with the real Valerie instead of my little fantasy one."

"But dude, you don't even know her."

"But that's the thing! I *feel* like I do. I know that probably sounds creepy or stalker-ish or whatever, but... I don't know. It's really hard to explain." He paused. "Like... have you ever seen someone across the room at a party or something who you can't take your eyes off of, but you're not sure why? And you see them talking and laughing with someone else and you just *wish* that you could be the one they seem so familiar with. You know what I mean?"

"Yeah, definitely."

“Well I guess that’s pretty much what this is like. For some reason that I can’t really put my finger on, she means so much to me. And I hate seeing her like this. I want to help her *so* badly. But she’s like this... intangible TV character.”

“Only because you’ve made her that way.”

“I know. But man... I need to start lifting the script back up. In a way it feels like that’s the next best thing to actually helping the real Valerie.”

Frank made quotation marks signs with his fingers. “The real Valerie.”

“Yeaah I know. The real whatever-her-name-is.”

“Well I mean hey- there’s nothing really wrong with that. You definitely *do* need to do something about the downturn of the script. And maybe sometime- who knows- what goes around comes around, right?”

Jamie shrugged. “Am I pathetic?”

“I think the appropriate word here would be *sympathetic*.”

Jamie half-smiled as he returned to studying the scraggly eraser. After a few moments he went over to his laptop and, with Frank’s help, he started working on trying to resolve this so-close-to-his-heart-character’s problems. It’s always such a pain in the ass revising a script, but Jamie felt it was worth it. The illuminated dots of the digital clock morphed their shape again and again until both Frank and Jamie had had it with problem solving for the night. Frank said goodbye to Jamie and his mother and Jamie crawled under his faded black comforter to pass the hours until it was tomorrow again.

The sun rose the next morning around 6:15 making the sky an orchestra of water-colors. Summer sunrises are always the most beautiful. When Jamie opened his eyes, he had that moment of perfect contentment that comes at the waking of every day just before you remember everything prior to that moment. He had gone to sleep with his Valerie character much happier than she was before and woke up realizing that that wasn’t

necessarily the case for “the real Valerie.” He went through his daily motions again and drove to the mall in his corduroy button-up shirt and gray pants. The hole in the side of his ancient black sneakers distracted him whenever he noticed it out of the corner of his eye. Peripheral vision sometimes seems like a curse for people with AD(H)D.

This time, when he got into the music store, he immediately looked over to the counter; he didn’t even bother walking through the metal detectors that were the furthest away. There she was. As soon as she lifted her head he saw the recently familiar red blotchiness of her face. Feeling himself starting to become upset, he decided he was going to have to talk to her. Even if it completely ruined his screenplay, even if she never spoke to him again, he had to try- it was worth it for the possibility of seeing one of her smiles again.

Less timid than he imagined he would be, Jamie walked over to the check out counter with his hands in his pockets. This is the first time in all these visits that he had ever been standing right in front of her. Her back was to him and when she finally turned around she softly asked, “Can I help you?”

Jamie looked her as directly in the eye as he could manage. “I was just going to ask you the same thing.”

Valerie didn’t say anything, but studied Jamie for a little while. Her brow wrinkled as her eyes shifted around his face and finally landed on his eyes. “I’ve noticed you coming in here pretty often.”

She had noticed him. “Almost every day.”

“Yeah, but... you’ve never bought anything. At least not that I’ve noticed.”

She had noticed something *about* him. “Yeah, well, I don’t know. There’s just something fascinating about music stores and their checkout...,” he caught himself, “...counters.”

The smallest tease of a grin flickered across one side of her mouth. “I’m kind of surprised we’ve never crossed paths before. Well I mean... I guess being in the same store is crossing paths, but... do you know what I mean?”

“Yeah, I do.” And he really did. “We’ve never spoken.”

“Right, thanks, that’s what I was trying to say. I’m sorry, I’m having a little trouble today.” She started stacking CD’s that were sitting on top of the counter.

“Is there anything you want to talk about? Because I would love to listen.” Jamie figured that if she had stayed in the state for so long then maybe there was no else that was even making the effort to help her.

“Why would you think there was something I needed to talk about?”

“Well I... noticed how red your eyes were,” he said carefully. “And I didn’t say ‘need’, I said ‘want’.”

“Yeah well, I lit up like twenty minutes ago so that’s not surprising,” she replied, avoiding eye contact with him.

He looked at her knowingly. “Not that kind of red.”

There was a moment or two of silence before her eyes filled up, spilled over, and her cheeks became wet with so much emotion that it almost made Jamie take a step back. But if anything he needed to take a few steps towards her. So that’s what he did.

“I’m sorry,” she said trying not to let her voice break too much. “It’s always when someone asks if something’s wrong that you kind of actually realize that something *is* wrong. You... you know what I mean?”

“Yeah, I do.” And he really did. “Here, you should sit down.” He turned and walked toward the other side of the store to where there was a stool sitting in the corner with some flyers stacked on top of it. He set the flyers down on the floor and carried the stool back to where his muse was standing, so helpless and hypnotizing. When he got back to

the front counter, he didn't see Valerie. He walked around to the side and saw her sitting with her back against the inside of the counter, her knees tucked into her chest like a child against an elementary school wall. Jamie put the stool aside and sat down cross-legged right next to her. For a while, they both just sat there- her crying and him focusing on nothing but her. He guessed that this was a kind of first for both of them- him only focused on one thing and her being the only thing focused on. The heartbreaking sighs finally subsided and the silence was broken with a faint, "Why are you so nice?" leaking out of her mouth.

"Because you are," he replied, and hoped that she believed him. She seemed like someone that didn't always believe people when they complimented her.

That same half-grin broke across her lips again and he felt his mouth do the same involuntarily. "My name's Vanessa by the way."

Jamie smiled and looked down at his hands. "I was close," he said to himself.

"What?" Vanessa asked.

"Nothing." He looked up. "I'm Jamie."

"Hi, Jamie. It's nice to meet you."

"Hi. It's nice to meet you, too." And he meant it more than he'd meant anything in a long time.

"Could you do me a favor?" he asked.

"I'll try."

"Could you tell me about yourself?"

"What do you want to know?"

"Everything." And once again he didn't think it was possible to be any more sincere.

She grinned, a little in disbelief. She couldn't remember the last time someone wanted to know "everything" about her.

“But,” he continued, “I’d like to start with why your face is so red, if that’s okay.”

The words were barely audible as they leaked through her front teeth and slowly enveloped Jamie. He wanted to let them sink into his skin; he wanted to swallow them. He could have easily completely expelled all five senses on the secrets that crawled off her tongue. Secrets. He liked thinking of it that way. It made him feel close to her, but not close like when he was sitting at his computer writing about her alias. Close like people. She told him about her bi-polar boyfriend. His sickness had never really been too much of issue until he started getting sick of the side-affects of his medicine (headaches, dizziness, fatigue) and stopped taking it. That’s when he became abusive. She was always scared to tell anyone for fear that he would take it out on both of them. She timidly pushed up the sleeve on her shirt revealing a red handprint on her forearm. As Jamie started to extend his hand to lightly touch that awful mark, he realized that this situation was very similar to one of the problems he wrote in for Valerie in his script, minus the bi-polar part.

Gradually Vanessa’s words became more distinct and they started jumping out of her mouth at a much more rapid pace. What Jamie loved most about it was that he was sitting right there to catch them.. She told him about how her mother had died a couple of months ago and how now her father was in a nursing home too far away for her to visit everyday. She told him about how her brother had recently come to visit and they had a great time, but he ended up telling her that he was marrying a hairstylist and they were moving to the next state where he had gotten a job as an elementary school teacher. She told him about how because of all this she had recently been getting more heavily into drugs. He was quickly discovering that many of things Vanessa was so beautifully and tragically venting about, were very similar to what he had written into his script once he started noticing her being so upset. So, going out on a limb, he decided he would try and

give her some of the advice that he used to resolve some things with Valerie. He spoke, and was constantly aware that *she* was the one he was speaking to. She listened, and Jamie was constantly aware that *he* was the one she was listening to. They spoke and listened and made eye contact and looked away and then made eye contact again, stopping only to lower that huge metal grate at the front of the store when it was time to close up. Thank God it was almost closing time when they started talking or they would have been continuously interrupted by customers. Thank God Jamie knew the store's schedule (and Vanessa's schedule) forwards and backwards by now. After they lowered the gate, instead of sitting down on the stools or standing against the counters, they resumed their position on the ground. Only this time they sat down facing each other instead of side by side. Usually, Jamie had a painstakingly hard time holding eye contact with anyone that he hadn't known for very long, but with Vanessa it was easy for him.

They talked and laughed and told secrets and confessed and connected until the music coming through the intercom was abruptly cut off by a staticy voice. It informed all employees of the mall that the main doors would be locked in twenty minutes.

Vanessa sighed and said, "You know, most nights I welcome that dumb ass announcement."

"Not tonight?"

She shook her head. "Tonight it's kind of disappointing."

They both stood up.

"I just wanted to... thank you." After hours of being completely open with Jamie, this sentence still came out shy.

"I was just going to say the same thing to you. But you don't need to thank me."

"I didn't say 'need' I said 'want'," she smirked.

Jamie looked down at the hole in his shoe and grinned. Then he held out his hand. She took it. There was a sharp intake of breath from both of them. This was the first time they had touched. Time seemed to have slowed down again, but this time she noticed it, too. There was a pulse beating between their tangle of fingers, but they had a hard time figuring out which one of them it belonged to. They aligned the veins in their eyes once more and then dropped their hands and walked over to the metal grate. As they were lifting it up just enough for them to get out, it was pretty clear that neither of them wanted this to be the last time they spoke. And it was pretty clear to both of them that it wouldn't be. Once they were standing outside of the music store and on the tiled floor, Jamie looked back through that enormous metallic grid at the place that was now wallpapered with secrets that no one else could see. He glanced over at Vanessa and noticed that she was looking in to. It didn't matter how many people floated, wobbled, or sometimes darted through there- it was their place. They both knew it without having to say it. After a few moments she turned to him, silhouetted against their metaphoric tree house.

“You know... I know we just met, but... you talk as if you've known me for a lot longer.”

If it weren't for the light splatter of acne across his cheeks, she would have noticed him blushing.

“I have,” he said, softly looking her in the eyes.

She looked back at him quizzically for a moment and then let the corners of her mouth turn up slightly. He returned the expression and turned to walk away.

“Will you...,” she started. And he stopped walking. “Will you be back tomorrow?”

He turned to face her again.

“Of course.” The only thing that made him even happier than he already was, was knowing that she was happy; or at least that her eyes weren’t red anymore. They hadn’t been for a while now. “I still haven’t bought the *Garden State* soundtrack.”