

Earworm

By

Shualee Cook

Characters

The Song - female, any race, the anthropomorphic personification of a punk breakup song

Sasha - female, any race, from late teens thru 30s, the writer/main performer of The Song.

Jory - trans female, any race, from late teens thru 30s, musical arranger of The Song, Sasha's girlfriend and bassist.

Trevor - male, any race, from late teens thru 30s, music teacher, Sasha's high school ex-boy friend

Kess - female, any race, late 20s- early 30s, music journalist currently dating Trevor

Elise - female, any race, 30s, Trevor's sister

Other Songs:

Track Three - played by the actor playing Elise

Track Six- played by the actor playing Sasha

Track Seven and That Other Song- played by the actor playing Jory

Time: The present

Place: An abstract space, peppered with piles of music equipment, paraphernalia and crappy green room furniture that becomes a bar, an apartment, a basement practice space, a concert venue stage and green room.

Note: The symbol / indicates overlapping dialogue.

Act One

SCENE ONE

An abstract space, peppered with piles of music equipment and paraphernalia. From one of them, something stirs. A person? Seemingly made up of guitar strings, amp cords, headphone wires tangled every which way, scraps of notated sheet music, band flyers, and notebook paper with lyrics scrawled on them in five different shades of ink. She is THE SONG. She perches, birdlike, and stares straight at the audience for a long moment. Focused, but very rarely still.

THE SONG

Humans. How do you do it? Sit there in one place like that, staring at just one thing? Me, right now. It's fucking unsportsmanlike, you know that? Bringing the full force of your existence to bear on this one sliver of space. I mean, don't you get tired of it? Start feeling the itch to float through radio frequencies - dance with a city's residents in 18,543 separate cars at the same time - pop up in someone's brain in Des Moines - get practiced on a hand-me-down guitar in Osaka - all in one moment, one blink. Nicely spread out across consciousnesses, borders, time zones. Hmm. Maybe you can't? Maybe you wouldn't if you could. Weird. Songs aren't made to sit still. Doesn't come naturally to us. But tonight is ... different. There's gonna be a concert on this stage in a couple hours. People standing here playing me and listening in the audience that ... I'm not so sure I've come to terms with? And you know - I'm turning thirteen this year. Even though everybody thinks I'm ten, 'cause that's when I got on the radio, like airplay is fucking *everything*. So yeah. Not super old in song years, but long enough to start you thinking. About the impact you've made. The relationships. Which parts of yourself you're proud of and which ones - well, that's what I'm here for. What I presume you're here in such a disturbingly solid way to watch. So try and keep up. If you want to know who's gonna be here tonight and why it matters, you'll have to be in four places at once. First stop, 7:30pm in Asheville, a couple weeks ago.

Sasha, 30, and Jory, same, enter with the confidence of rock stars on stage, made more casual by the lack of an audience. They head to a pile with amps, mic stands, etc. Sasha, exuding frontwoman energy even in repose, picks up a guitar, plugs in. Jory, as befits someone more laid back, grabs a bass.

THE SONG

I'm onstage at The Orange Peel. For sound check.

Sasha and Jory play a few notes, fiddle with the settings on their amps, tuning a bit, etc.

THE SONG

With Sasha and Jory, some of the people most responsible for my existence. You all have it pretty easy. Only ever made from two people, tops. For me, there's the people that wrote me. The musicians and producers building up sonic muscle and tissue around my written bones, **all their influences pumping in and out of my kick-drum heart**. It gets ... complicated. (to Sasha and Jory) Doesn't it?

SASHA

(into a mic)

I am the very model of a modern major general. I've information vegetable, animal and mineral. (to an unseen board op) A bit more in the monitor?

THE SONG

If you didn't play me in a show, the fans would fucking mutiny. You both know it.

SASHA

(into the mic)

I know the kings of England and can quote the fights historical- Good.

THE SONG

Do you resent that?

JORY

(laughs to herself)

Never gets old.

SASHA

What doesn't?

JORY

You being a big ol' closet theatre dork.

SASHA

Whatever. You know you love it when I sing you show tunes.

JORY

That's a lot to do with how and when you sing them to me.

A playful kiss between them as The Song watches.

THE SONG

As for me, well - no one likes being an obligation.

JORY

Gimme a strum?

Sasha obliges on the guitar.

JORY

God, I missed the acoustics in this place!

SASHA

Right? Good to be back. Can we hit the riff to 'Candles Out' real quick?

JORY

So we're for sure ditching the unplugged version?

Sasha tunes a string on her guitar, buying more time before she answers.

THE SONG

(to Sasha)

The original's not been the same between us since Pittsburgh.

SASHA

(to Jory)

I think it's time. How about you?

JORY

Great venue for the old school way. Shake the rafters a bit.

THE SONG

Think you can muster the passion for it? 'Cause last time-

Jory plunges into a thunderous bass line, which takes The Song by surprise.

JORY

Yeah, there she is. Good to have you back.

THE SONG

Thanks.

Sasha joins in on guitar.

THE SONG

Oh yeah. Being played acoustic is freeing, in a mixed bag sort of way. Kinda like being naked in public. But this- this is closer to fully myself than I've felt in a long time. (to Sasha) You're sure this is/okay?

SASHA

Okay if we play through to the yelly part? See if I/ can still-

JORY

Yeah, it's been a while.

They play through the first verse as The Song grabs two chairs from a stack of crappy green room furniture, sets one on each side of the stage. Kess, 28, looking every inch the hip music journalist, sits down in one of the chairs, now driving in her car. Elise, 32, dressed down to earth and happy about it, sits and drives in the other chair.

THE SONG

Second stop, exact same moment, but 6:30pm Central Standard. I'm on the radio. At ten years, which isn't bad. Not played quite as much on the coasts anymore, but still fondly remembered in America's sagging midsection.

KESS

Yes!

She turns the volume up, and sings along with abandon.

THE SONG

I'm with Kess as she drives down Highway 40. (inhales deeply) You have no idea what a rush it is being sung along to. There's a whole conversation going on between us in the way she sings my lyrics. Like this. (to Kess) You sound excited tonight.

KESS

(as though carrying on a conversation in her own head)

Lots to be excited about.

THE SONG

Like what?

KESS

Seeing him again.

THE SONG

The guy you're dating? That's new.

KESS

I know. And I'm meeting his sister, so even more excitement.

THE SONG

Um, I think you mean nerve-wracking awkwardness.

KESS

Some of that, too. But I don't know. Getting the three of us together, it's one of those things someone does when they expect you to be around for a while. And I like that idea. A lot, actually.

THE SONG

You really want this one to work out.

KESS

(a sudden realization)

Yeah. I really do.

The Song places her hand tenderly on Kess' arm.

THE SONG

Just remember, it's something you want, but you don't need it.

KESS

I know. Felt it as soon as this came on the radio. I'm fine. Whatever happens, I'm going to be fine. Which is another thing I'm really excited about.

The Song drinks it in for a moment, then walks over to Elise's "car."

THE SONG

I'm in Elise's car, too. (to Elise) You're not quite sure what to do with me, are you? I can never quite sink into your body. Always get snagged in the brain, inspected under a microscope for just what it is I mean for you. But it's something.

Trevor enters, rifles through a milk crate of records piled up on another part of the stage - a music store.

THE SONG

Better than with this guy. I'm playing in the record store he's browsing in, and, well -

She enters Trevor's space. Trevor looks up at the store's speakers, sighs. Tries to ignore it.

THE SONG

We're not what you'd call friends. Which I'm fine with. Asshole deserves what he gets. But ... how long can you hold a grudge before it just gets fucking petty? A decade? Two?

The Song walks over to him. He grows visibly uncomfortable.

THE SONG

We have unfinished business, Trevor. I may be at a point where I don't want to leave it that way.

Trevor turns his back on her, goes to another crate of records.

THE SONG

We can tell when you don't like us. Playing in a room full of people is- is like surfing if surfing was a religious ritual.

The Song follows Trevor to the next crate, runs her fingers along the tops of the records. His agitation increases.

THE SONG

You're pulled along on those collective brainwaves, weaving them together. Riding the emotions you evoke, the memories. Moving through their bodies, rushing down to their feet with the rhythm, and then -

Trevor slams a record back in the crate and leaves.

THE SONG

- someone throws a wall up, and BAM! You hit it hard, and go under. Doesn't mean you're done with them, though.

The Song pushes the crate back into its pile, then pulls a table over in front of Elise, who now sits at a bar. Sasha and Jory finish going through the first verse and chorus, stop playing.

SASHA

Damn. Old school way might actually work tonight.

JORY

(looking out at the venue)

And it'll be just the right kind of loud.

They exit. So does Kess. Trevor enters, and joins Elise at her table, where The Song has dragged over a couple more chairs. She watches from the sidelines.

TREVOR

Hey.

ELISE

What is it?

TREVOR

What? I just sat down.

ELISE

Yeah, but you were doing that thing.

TREVOR

What/ thing?

ELISE

That huffy-stompy thing. When you came in.

TREVOR

It's not/ important.

ELISE

So what is it?

TREVOR

I had the day off, okay? Thought I'd do some thrifting, then head to Vintage Vinyl. Both places, *It* was playing.

ELISE

Oh god.

TREVOR

Both of them.

ELISE

It was on the radio when I drove here, too.

TREVOR

How does a fucking ten year old punk song get that much airplay still?

THE SONG

Midwest represent.

TREVOR

It's like *It's* haunting me. On purpose.

THE SONG

Pretty much.

ELISE

I thought you got over that.

TREVOR

I did. Mostly. But now there's this girl, and she's amazing, and suddenly everywhere I go, there's this big blinking sign reminder of all my personal failings/ so it's-

ELISE

Oh my god. So this is serious.

TREVOR

It's a dumb old song. I'll deal with it.

ELISE

No, with you and her. It's like, *serious* serious.

TREVOR

Why do you think I've been wanting you to meet her?

ELISE

Because I thought you wanted me to meet her. But you want her to meet "the family."

TREVOR

It's really not that huge of a deal.

ELISE

Come on, Trev. Big sisters are the relational drawbridge that leads to Mom and Dad. And you haven't tried getting anyone over that moat for a while now, so/ it's pretty huge.

TREVOR

Yes, she's special. Yes, I want you to know her. But can we not turn this into some big historic moment? I want to have drinks, not sign the fucking Treaty of Versailles.

ELISE

So you see this relationship as unconditional surrender?

TREVOR

I don't want to see it as anything. I just want to feel it for a while. Is that okay?

ELISE

Depends on what it feels like.

TREVOR

It's ... weird. Because it's not that crazy electric thing I feel at first. It's relaxing, almost. Like I'm sort of able to rest in this other life that just ... fits with me. You know?

ELISE

Oh my god. This is so. Totally./ It.

TREVOR

Don't, Elise.

ELISE

I mean, you're talking about her like she could be,/ you know-

TREVOR

Don't you dare say, "She's the one."

ELISE

But what if she is?

TREVOR

A) There's no such thing as/ "the one."

Kess enters, looks around.

ELISE

I just mean the one you eventually end/ up with.

TREVOR

And B)- (spots Kess) Kess! Over here.

KESS

Hey.

She gives Trevor a quick kiss hello.

KESS

Good to see you.

TREVOR

You too.

KESS

And you're Elise? Great to meet you, finally. I'm Kess.

ELISE

I know. He hasn't stopped talking about you since the interview.

KESS

Did he tell you I was the one who called him afterwards?

ELISE

No.

TREVOR

Of course you were! Like I'm gonna call up a writer from Rolling Stone/ of all places-

KESS

I mostly just freelance-

TREVOR

-after a nice little "human interest" story, and be like, "Hey, you wanna grab coffee or something?" Please. I knew you were out of my league from minute one.

KESS

Whatever. You actually teach kids how to make the stuff I just write about, so I don't know where you're coming from with this whole me being out of your league thing.

A cheerful kiss for punctuation.

KESS

But if you had been the one to call, I probably would have said no.

ELISE

Really?

TREVOR

See?

KESS

I mean, my job basically consists of meeting guys who assume the whole world wants to fuck them, letting them go on and on about themselves, and then publishing what they say for the huge audience that does, in fact, want to fuck them. And even with this education piece, Trevor was the one music tutor I interviewed who didn't talk some big game and hand me a demo from the band that's "actually their real gig." He was just who he was. It was refreshing.

TREVOR

I had to face the fact pretty early that there were people who were cut out for the whole rock star thing - I mean, people I knew personally. But, as much as I wanted it, I wasn't one of them.

KESS

Could you maybe stop with the whole honestly looking at yourself and being at peace with what you find thing? I don't want to get all hot in front of your sister.

TREVOR

That's a ... very specific thing to get turned on by.

KESS

I know. Ooh. I should totally make a playlist for it. Challenging, but it could really pay off.

ELISE

Oh my god. There are two of you.

KESS

(laughs)

Is that a good thing or a bad thing?

ELISE

No, it's great. I'm just surprised any one can keep up with him! This girl I liked sophomore year would make mixes for me to listen to, and I would, but, you know- I'd gravitate to one or two songs I really liked and that'd be it. Meanwhile, Mr. Eighth grade music fanatic/over here-

TREVOR

Oh god-

ELISE

Would take them without even asking-

TREVOR

You left them in the living room. Totally fair game.

ELISE

- and by the time I got home from a date, he was an expert on every new band in the mix, complete with back stories, who I should listen to more of, who only put out a couple good singles then lost it-

KESS

I'm the same way. The minute I hear some new great thing, I want to know everything about it.

ELISE

So have you managed to talk about anything that *isn't* music in the - however many months you've been together now?

KESS

What is it - three?

TREVOR

Sounds right.

THE SONG

Three months. And I haven't come up yet.

KESS

And we've managed to talk about a little bit of everything.

THE SONG

Really.

TREVOR

Yeah.

THE SONG

Okay, then. Let's do this.

She stands up, enters their space, and starts playing over the bar's sound system.

TREVOR

Oh my god. Seriously?

KESS

Oh my god. Yes!

TREVOR

This song has been playing everywhere I go today!

KESS

Yeah, it was on the radio on my way here, and it was driving me crazy.

TREVOR

So you're not/ a fan either?

KESS

I just wanted to get up and dance to it so bad! Did I tell you that this was the album that first made me want to write about music?

Trevor and Elise share a look.

TREVOR

No, you definitely did not tell me that.

Kess jumps up and takes Trevor's hand.

KESS

Dance with me.

TREVOR

What? No, I- / I can't.

KESS

Come on!

TREVOR

Plus, how do you even dance to something like this?

KESS

However the hell you want. That's kind of the point.

TREVOR

Thanks, but I - I'm gonna sit this one out.

KESS

Fine. (pulls Elise up from her chair) Then your sister and I will just go have fun without you! (to Elise) Come on!

Kess hits the dance floor, thrashing around with The Song. Elise lingers at the table.

ELISE

Do I need to talk her back to the table? 'Cause I can/do that.

TREVOR

No. She wants to dance. She should dance. You too. I would, but I just-

ELISE

I know.

TREVOR

Then go give her a partner so I can stop feeling like the biggest killjoy ever. Please.

ELISE

You're sure you're okay?

TREVOR

I will be.

Elise joins Kess on the floor. The Song sits down across from Trevor.

THE SONG

(to Trevor)

I'm done torturing you, Trevor. Maybe you would know that if you'd open up for once and-

He shifts in his seat, turning away from her.

THE SONG

Yeah, maybe that is too much to ask. But look, Kess and I have been through the shit together, okay? She's not letting go of me anytime soon. So if you want to be with her, you're gonna have to deal with me. (pause) And I'm at this point in my life where I'm ... coming to terms with certain things and - we need to talk, Trevor. Can we just talk?

Trevor's eyes are on Kess dancing.

TREVOR

This is the album that made her who she is.

THE SONG

Yeah. There's no getting around it. So. Are we gonna do this?

He watches Kess and Elise, focused on the music and each other, having a good time. A high wave of shame and hurt crashes over him. He gets up quietly and leaves.

THE SONG

Every single time. You're not going to be able to run from me forever.

Lights down on Kess and Elise, still unaware that Trevor is gone.