

Lost Track

A story of love, work, garbage, impermanence, chewing tobacco, and electronic music



Eric S. Piotrowski

For Stu, who loves electronic music; and
Chinny, who gets most of my references.

To entire sincerity there belongs ceaselessness.

Confucius

My hands sank into something

plastic and squishy. I made a grotesque face as I felt my fingers move around the thick nasty whatever it was. I imagined a diaper filled with diarrhea, or a grocery bag full of raccoon intestines. I wished I wasn't wearing my favorite green hoodie.

"Eww!" I said, then immediately closed my mouth and fought back some gut heaving. The stench of trash and vomit and garbage and filth and putrescence was everywhere. I could feel it seeping into my sneakers, winding through my hair, billowing into my hoodie.

Serena was face-down in the muck to my right. A swarm of flies droned around each of us, darting about as we sifted through the city's trash. Mounds of garbage surrounded us on every side. She spit again, a disgusting line of brown slobber flying from her lips.

"Are you chewing again?"

She shrugged. "Just a little. It's keeping me focused." Another spit, in my direction.

"Gross!" I said. "Aim that crap somewhere else." I pulled a blue gym bag out of the slime and unzipped it, then recoiled from the gruesome new stench of death and old meat. I tried again to hold back the puke, but my stomach was gripping my whole throat and pushing its way into my mouth. I turned to the side and watched breakfast spew across a black garbage bag. I groaned and wiped at my face with my arm.

It's funny what good music will do to you.

When they first started dating, Serena's boyfriend Chad made a mix disc for her, filled with stuff she liked and stuff he hoped she'd like. Some of it was way off-base, but one of the tracks was just glorious. We listened to it over and over and over. Five times a day for weeks. The beat was electric, both literally and figuratively. An AK-47 with sick grooving keys all around it and this pitchshifted vocal that fit perfectly. The kind of thing you have to turn the volume up on, then just keep turning it up, because it's never loud enough. Like the first time I heard "Hive" from Rogue Element. Only better.

Problem was, we never bothered to learn what the song was called, or who made it. We looked on the silly little CD cover he'd made, but it had some long, complicated title that we would never remember. Normally I would immediately hunt down more info on the band, so I could find more of their stuff. But at the time I was worried with "Chad's

Track” (as we called it) that their other songs wouldn’t be as good, so we just let it be what it was. And now, here we were.

After the breakup Serena began chewing tobacco. It was really weird for her, totally out of character. She was a chocoholic with a passion for sugary kids’ cereals. She said something once about how he made fun of her for never doing anything dangerous, so I guessed the chewing was a weird act of defiance or something. People do weird things when love breaks apart.

She also threw out a lot of his stuff. Burned some of it. Gave some of it back. And then we realized that the CD had been in one of those piles. She was pretty sure it was the one we’d thrown out. So now we were plowing through acres of dog feces and rancid leftovers, praying that the next pile would bring us back to that heavenly beat.

“I’m starting to wonder if this is really worth it,” Serena said, letting fly another globby brown stream. She gestured toward me. “You’re puking, I’m getting sick, and I’m hungry as all hell.”

“Twenty more minutes,” I said. “Then we’ll call it a day.” I turned around and dipped back into a mound of garbage. Suddenly I noticed an old pizza box from Doughey’s and gave a little shriek.

“What?” Serena asked, whirling to see me hop over to it. I waved the box in the air and she joined me. We were the only people we knew who ordered from Doughey’s. Their pizza sucked, but it was cheap. Sure enough, the box heralded a bag of our own trash. I ripped open the black plastic and flung aside old electric bills and banana peels. Finally, at the bottom, I hit paydirt. I pulled a short stack of case-less discs out of the muck and held them aloft. I let the first two fall back into the garbage, and grinned like an idiot as I finally set eyes on Chad’s Mix.

We raced back to the car. “It was track four,” I said, fumbling with my keys as Serena wiped the disc on her sleeve.

“No way,” she said. “It was six.” We sank into the seats and I ejected *Orbital 2* from the CD player. Serena gave me a hesitant look. “You think it might screw up your stereo?” she asked.

“I don’t care,” I said, pushing her hand and forcing the disc inside. “It’ll be worth it.” For several tense seconds, we watched the display blink “reading” at us. Then it kept blinking. “Uh oh,” I said. Not a good sign. More blinking. “Dammit!” I said, banging the steering wheel. The display switched to “error” and ejected the disc.

Serena slumped back in her seat. “The radio is sticking its tongue out at us,” she said.

The door of the dryer opened

with a clank and I pulled my head back, recoiling from the fumes. I clenched my teeth violently and half-grunted, half-screamed a very bad word. I sank to my knees, the rough stone basement floor digging in through the denim.

Serena looked over from the tiny little desk where she was drawing another comic strip. “No good?” she asked.

I batted the dryer door weakly. It swung toward the latch, but remained open. “This sucks,” I said. “Now they smell like garbage, butt, filth, *and* fabric softener.” Even worse, the CD had refused to cooperate with any of the players we’d tried: her portable, my computer, the GameBox. Serena read somewhere that baking a CD in the oven might help, so she tried that. All we got was a nasty new smell in the oven.

She approached, and put up a hand when she came into stink range. “Oh, yegods,” she said. “Same crap, but now it’s covered with bleach and perfume.”

I sighed. “And don’t just make it worse by covering it up with some Right Guard,” I sang. She’d never been a De La fan, but the reference made me smile anyway. But I was still pissed. “That’s my favorite hoodie in there,” I said, and looked up at her. “Any luck with the boots?”

“Nope,” she said. She’d been spraying them with harsh cleansers and hot water every day for a week. “I don’t think we’ve got many options left.”

“This sucks,” I said again. She walked back to her tiny desk and spat into an old coffee can. “Guh!” I cried. “That is too gross for words,” I put a hand to my stomach. “Like I wasn’t sick to my guts already.” I sighed. “You have got to give that up.” *No wonder you haven’t met anyone else.*

She shrugged. “When the time is right,” she said. “Meantime, what are we going to do with this stuff?” She gestured to the dryer, the stench wafting out of the crack in the door. My gaze wandered around the basement, my nose still clenched in a disgusted wrinkle.

“We’ve gotta do something,” I said. “The dryer is already coated in that stink.” Another sigh. “That was my favorite hoodie,” I said again. I could see the sleeve through the crack in the door. “We’ve been through so much together.” I was only sort of joking.

Serena nodded absently. “We gotta just throw it all away,” she said. “Never look back.” Then she froze. “No, wait.” She bolted upstairs and

came back a minute later with a paper grocery sack. She held her breath and shoved the nasty garbage clothes into the bag.

“Actual unretouched photo of sack,” I said.

She stopped rolling the top shut and gave me a look. “What the fudge is that?”

I waved a hand and smiled. “Inside joke.” She looked at me. “Just a normal book,” I said. “It’s called *How To Get It Done*.”

She tilted her head down at me. “I’ve told you before — inside jokes are pointless unless you’re telling them to someone who *knows what you’re talking about!*” She gave the bag a shake and said “Come on,” then started up the stairs. I followed along. Up in the kitchen she opened the oven, grabbed Chad’s mix disc, and dropped it into the bag.

Outside, she picked up her boots — dripping with cleanser and water — and jammed them into the bag. It was hard to close now, but she motioned for me to open the trunk of my car and dumped the bulging mass inside. “Come on,” she said again, climbing into the passenger seat.

I got in and started it up. “Where to?” She directed me to the gas station two streets way, then went inside. She returned a minute later with a shiny red plastic gas container. She pulled a nozzle out from the pump and put some gas in the container, then banged on the trunk. I opened it up and she put the gas inside, then returned to the passenger seat.

“You remember that warehouse I dragged you to last year?” she asked. “Where Chad and I used to go for those weird picnics?”

“Yeah.”

“Take me there.” She rolled down the window and spat into the parking lot as I pulled away.

The warehouse was huge.

Possibly an old factory or assembly line. An ancient husk of postindustrial decay, it must have been 80 years old. Brown paint peeling under layers of rusting rust. Gaping holes where windows had been smashed away decades ago. A cavernous floor, with big swinging doors that no longer cared about keeping anything out or in. Clumps of heavy metal barrels sat in one corner, with a weird orange ooze pooled on the ground among them. Dirt and grime like a sick carpet.

I kicked a tin can, hard. It clattered a few feet and lay dead again, less than a third of the way across the floor. “You came here for *picnics*?” I asked.

Serena nodded. “Yeah, Chad said he liked the feel of this place.” She walked slowly toward the opposite wall, clutching the grocery sack in one hand, gas can in the other. “Something about how it was so big and powerful, but so empty.”

I nodded. “That’s deep, man.”

“Yeah, well.” She spat, the splattery gob of brown sauce blending perfectly into the disgusting floor. “He was a deep guy.”

I saw some tiny rodent bones up against a wall, partially covered by a small chips bag with an old design on it. “Eww!” I said. “Freakin’ rat bones.”

Serena jogged over to where I was grimacing at the remains. “Woah,” she said, and spat carefully, to avoid disturbing the gravesite. “I remember that old logo for Salt Doodles.” We gazed for a few seconds at the bizarre combination of snacks and rats.

“Can you imagine?” I said eventually. “You die, your body rots, you get eaten by maggots and whatever. And then someone comes and eats some potato chips and tosses the bag on top of your final resting place, and it just stays there.”

Serena nodded. “Yeah, and then both your bones *and* the Doodles bag become part of some sad hollow ghost building.”

“Yeah,” I said. “Your bones are buried by the bag, but both you and the bag are buried by time.”

“It’s like we came from one garbage dump to another.”

I shook my head. “No way, man. Garbage dumps are nasty, but they’re *alive*. Just because you throw it away doesn’t mean it’s dead.”

Serena nodded. “Yeah, you’re right.” She took a deep breath and spat, then gave the grocery sack a shake. “Speaking of which.” She flung the sack in front of us. The boots tried to push out through the rolled-up top, but gave up and lay still. Serena flipped the cap off the gas can and the popping noise bounced off the walls. She jiggled the gasoline over the bag, splashing oily liquid everywhere. It sank into the brown paper, coursing over the boulder-shaped package. Rivulets of gasoline ran over the edges and drifted toward the doors. The last few drops dripped around, and she chucked the can behind us.

Then she spat on the bag. “You suck, Chad,” she said. “The only good thing you ever gave me was that song.”

I nodded. “And we can’t even listen to it.” I hocked a little phlegm from the back of my throat and spat on the bag, too. I wanted it to have some sort of meaning, but really I was just clearing my throat. Chad had never done me wrong, but I was angry for how he treated Serena at the end.

She took a lighter out of her pocket, a miniature plastic piece of junk she’d probably bought at the gas station. She knelt down to one of the gasoline tendrils walking away from the bag, flicked the lighter, and set the flame into the puddle. I expected it to meander toward the sack like that scene in *The Usual Suspects*, but instead it all seemed to flare up at once.

I stepped back as a nasty cloud of garbage-smelling black smoke puffed up and blew toward us. The fire was also creeping slowly, as gasoline continued to spread away, so I took another step back and expected Serena to do the same. But instead she just stood there, watching the fire consume her boots and our clothing. The puddle of gas crawled up to her shoes, but turned right once it got there.

The stench got really nasty, like the flame was unleashing some primordial evil that had seeped into our clothes. *Why didn’t my green hoodie smell nice as it passed into the next world*, I wondered. We had had some fantastic times, experiences that surely infused it with warm memories of happiness and sunshine. I put my right arm over my face and tried not to breathe. But Serena just stood there, as though her olfactories had gone dead. “Dude,” I said finally. “Back up. Your clothes are going to smell like that nasty garbage again.” But she didn’t move.

Instead, she pulled the can of chewing tobacco from her back pocket and gazed at it. The fading light of the flames danced on it. “This is still the first can,” she said. “I bought it the day he took off.” She took the lid off and shook a few loose pieces toward the fire. “Now it’s all gone.”

I nodded and rolled my eyes a little. How clichéd. “I guess this is the right time, huh?”

She put a finger in her mouth and pulled the wad of sloppy brown-black goop out, and flung it into the fire. Then she dropped the can on top. It clattered over the smoldering ashes and fell onto the floor. She kicked the can back into the ashes and moved the pile around. The last licks of flame were dying out, and she spat one last time onto the mess.

Then she pulled a new can of tobacco out of her front pocket and undid the plastic tape. She took the lid off and drew out a pinch, then

pushed it into her lip. “I guess not,” she said, and began walking toward the car.

Monday, 7:37 AM.

Slouched in barely-padded mismatched chairs at RealWork Incorporated. Smell of oily coffee waving through the air, surrounded by people just like us. Waiting. Wasting our time.

The front desk looked like a fast-food counter. It probably was, once upon a time. I can totally see booths lining the walls and windows where the brick is now. We might as well be using trays. Here you are today. Throw the assignment away when you’re done. Come back tomorrow, get something new that’s totally the same.

In a way, temping ought to be fun. The first day of work is always fun — you get to meet new people, be in a new environment, adjust to a new schedule. But after about three weeks, I realized that the minute differences from place to place meant nothing. The crushing similitude deflated me. Perky receptionist, meaningless filing, inane rules that I wouldn’t be around long enough to get punished for disobeying. Overqualified for the heavy lifting that paid better, underqualified for the positions that might become full-time.

I was flipping through the latest copy of *Newsweek*. News for rich people. Wall street. Washington. Business deals. Trade agreements. Environmental innovations. Eventually I started ignoring the articles and went back to page one, to examine the ads. Skinny happy people and shiny new stuff. It was all fake, of course, but it was also all transient. It came, and then it went. This lady in the toothpaste ad — where was she now? Not being the poster child for toothpaste, surely. Was she posing for some clothing catalogue? Or had she moved on to real acting?

The bark of the secretary snapped me out. “Vizcaino,” she called, not looking up from her clipboard. God, how I hated that stupid clipboard. Like it was attached to her hand or something. Serena gave me a look and traipsed up to the counter. I heard something about an office on the north side. She came back toward me clutching a job slip.

“It’s on Sherman,” she said languidly, pinching some chew into her lip. “I can take the bus.”

“Nah, it’s okay,” I said, grabbing my jacket from the chair beside me. “I need to get outta here.” We went outside and got in the car. She rolled the window down and spat.

“I can’t keep doing this,” she said. “I need something stable.”

I nodded and fiddled with my phone, swapping my attention between it and a list of songs. “Yeah,” I said. “I know what you mean. I think I’m gonna go back to Hauger’s.”

She was slouched in the seat, a hand to her eyes. “That crazy guy still the manager?”

“I dunno,” I said. “I heard he’s gotten better.” I finally got sick of looking and just hit shuffle. TMBG came on, and we both made the whip-cracking motion. “But I don’t even care. He’s not as bad as this constant back and forth.”

We waited for the light to change. “It’s one thing to hate the place you work,” she said. “But how weird is it to hate a place where we don’t even work?”

“We hate the place where we wait to work.”

She gave a weak little not-laugh, hollow with desperation. “Yeah.” She watched the world go by for a minute. “Nothing stays.”

She was quoting Cyberaktif, 1990. Where was I? I didn’t hear it when it first came out. I sang a line from the chorus. “A message to you.” I paused. “Do you think they meant that to be comforting?” I asked. *So long ago.*

She stared out the window, then stared some more. “Does it matter?” she said finally.

There’s a point where the bass drum moves beyond thump into pound. It’s to do with the size and construction of the speaker, it’s to do with the architecture of the track. And it’s to do with where you play it.

We were in the perfect place for pounding bass, but the guy running the system knew enough to keep from overdoing it. The big open space let the bass pound, without drowning in its own distortion. I was sweating too much, moving too much, but I couldn’t help it. It was Crystal Method doing Daft Punk from *Tron Legacy*. Serena was dancing near me. She gave me a look and gestured to my sweaty armpits. I knew she couldn’t hear me, but maybe she could read my lips. “It’s the music,”

I said, the evangelical via Meat Beat Manifesto. I think she recognized it, or maybe she just smiled because I was being silly. Then she looked back at the DJ.

He wasn't much to see, but she'd been looking at him all night. I got close enough for her to hear. "Go talk to him!" I yelled.

She looked back again at the clutch of ladies circling him. "Tell me you don't see those Snookis all over him," she yelled.

"But they're *Snookis*," I yelled. More pounding bass. "And he doesn't seem interested." He was frowning at the decks. *Besides*, I thought, *Snooki wouldn't know Crystal Method from crystal meth*.

But she shook her head again and made a drinking hand gesture and went toward the beverage tables. Then I heard the opening line of the Chemical Brothers on Prodigy's "Voodoo People" and I nearly pissed myself. I looked toward DJ because he'd just jumped two notches on the cool meter, but then I realized he was teasing me. It was just the first "rock the house in" bit. No one else probably even realized what they'd heard, he'd mixed it in so well. He put it in again as some other beat fell on top, and faded out the *Tron*. But he was going to bring it back, I knew it.

I wandered toward the beverage tables and saw Serena at the door, gazing into the night. I watched her for a second, then gagged as she spat onto the concrete. I turned away and got some water and walked over to her. "What up?" she said, not looking at me. "You thought this was 'Voodoo People'."

"I totally did," I said. "He'll play it next, watch."

"Probably."

"Serena, I'm serious. Give me a reason why you won't talk to him."

She gave that desperate weak not-laugh again. "I don't have anything to say to him."

I sighed. "You're my friend so I don't mind telling you this," I said. "But I'm getting sick of listening to you." I drank. "And that means that you're probably sick of listening to yourself."

"I try not to listen to myself these days," she said.

I rolled my eyes and drank again. The water was cold. I spilled a little in my hand and rubbed it on my forehead. "Hey," I said, looking around. "This isn't the place where we.." I made a little burning motion.

"No," she said, and spat, then gestured with her drink. "I think it's over there." She began walking. "Let's see what survived."

We peered into two different warehouses before we found the one with our charred remains. The streetlight barely lit the area around it. I sighed as I realized I was looking at the singed sleeve of my favorite hoodie. We stood for a second in silence. Serena nudged me and gestured silently into the darkness. I made out someone crumpled up in the corner, then realized it was two people.

“Oh gross,” I whispered. “Are they..?”

“Yeah, they’re totally making out. Let’s go.”

We made it back to the party and felt the music wrap itself back around us. “He’s gonna play it soon,” I said, and kicked a cup. “We need to figure out what you’re gonna say to your DJ crush.”

She stopped walking and gave me a look. “Oh come on,” I said, one hand outstretched. “That was pretty good.” She reached into her mouth and pulled out the slimy glob of tobacco and flung it toward me.

I stepped out of the way just as “Voodoo People” came on for real. I dropped my cup and water spilled everywhere and I jogged to the floor in between the stupid people who didn’t realize what they were hearing and then there was nothing but me and the tinny beat and the whirling whatever it is and that bassline swarmed in and then the static noise and the drums started pounding and it was everything and every thing and then four minutes later I looked up and there was Serena, just as lost as me and I almost cried because it was such a perfect moment and then something else came into the song that I didn’t recognize and I stopped moving because I realized that I *did* recognize it and then I actually did start crying a little bit because Serena stopped and she looked at me too and her eyes widened and I knew that she knew and then she turned and walked straight for the DJ and I followed her.

She didn’t exactly elbow a Snooki out of the way, but the girl gave her a look like she had. Serena saw a notepad where the DJ had scrawled a bunch of random words and numbers. She moved toward it and he yelled “Hey!” and she made a writing motion and he shrugged a little and nodded toward it. She turned a page and took his pen and wrote: “Please give me the name of this song” and showed it to him. He put the headphones into his shoulder and took the pen and wrote: “It’s got a crazy long title.” She took the pad back and wrote: “I know. This is really important. Can I wait and see the record?” He smiled when she showed him, and then he wrote: “Yes. Or give me your email and I’ll send it to you.” *I won’t laugh I won’t laugh I won’t laugh.* She smiled and tried to ignore me and said “yeah” but he didn’t hear her, but I did. She wrote her

email address down and then tore it off and handed it to him. He nodded with a little smile of his own and took out his wallet and put her address in it.

She turned and pulled the can of chew out of her pocket and handed it to me. I raised an eyebrow and she nodded. *Finally*. We waited until the song ended, and she turned to a new page on the pad and he pulled the disc off the turntable and showed the label to her. She scribbled furiously and ripped the page off and smiled at him. “Thanks!” she yelled as the new song came to life.

“You don’t trust me?” he yelled.

She shrugged. “Stuff happens,” she yelled. “I can’t take any more chances with this track.” She hesitated and folded the paper and handed it to me. “How about this,” she yelled to him as I put it in my pocket. “If I don’t hear from you, I can get it from her.”

He nodded and we turned to go. Then I stopped and stepped to him. “Thanks for the Chemical Brothers,” I yelled. He smiled and nodded, then turned back to the music.

When we were in the parking lot, I threw her the keys. “You drive,” I said. “I’m worn out.” We climbed in and she started up the car. I got my phone out and flicked through it. I found the Cs and Cyberaktif came on.

We listened for a minute. Then she said: “I guess it’s comforting.”

I nodded. “Can be.”

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