

Love & Watch

I Can Hear You From 12,000 Miles Away

Somewhere in my childhood, I must have done something good



Belinda Gosbee

5 min

Rated:
General

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I Can Hear You From 12,000 Miles Away | Somewhere in my childhood, I must have done something good

Illustration by Michele Svingoska

A heavy cloud fills the view. The wind gently whistles and snow-covered mountains slowly unveil themselves. We descend into a vista of snow, ice, rock before gliding over a final craggy cliff face and emerging onto an emerald green valley below.

A bird begins to chirp. And another. A stir of music begins to sweetly mimic the bird as we fall onto yet greener pastures and a majestic blue lake. A bell chimes from a tiny town nestled along its shores. There are lakes now, and castles. And so much green. A meadow. And a tiny person, who slowly grows bigger as we approach. They begin to spin, arms raised in joy. The tears are already in my eyes — they started forming way back when we were in the snow drifts. A bittersweet medley of emotions have engulfed my heart: Joy and sadness, love and loss, excitement and apprehension. I'm home.

These are the first two minutes and thirty-six seconds of Rodgers and Hammerstein's Oscar-winning picture, *The Sound of Music*, and I know each moment by heart.

I also know this moment by heart: My mother stands in front of a very small me, towel drying me from a bath and lathering moisturizer thickly onto each limb. She lovingly sings "My Favorite Things", distracting me enough to rub the thick, much-hated cream into my angry eczema-ridden skin. I sing along with her in joy.

Many people have a favorite movie. But *The Sound of Music* (or *SOM*, as my sister and I refer to it) is not just our favorite. It's a hard-wired, emotional part of our history, lovingly watched for the first chunk of our lives on a worn-out VHS tape from which Nanna had patiently cut out each commercial break.

It was 2014 and I'd been living in Los Angeles for four years. I regularly received emails about various screenings and performances, and too often they got buried in my inbox. But on this day, something caught my eye. Two words. Christopher Plummer. He was coming to LA to perform his one-man show.

What happened next is a blur. I threw myself at Centre Theatre Group's virtual box office without skipping a beat and waited breathlessly as the final page loaded to see if I'd secured a seat. And then, there it was: Seat C-30, Section: Mezzanine of the Ahmanson Theatre. I let out a long slow breath, cheered at no one in particular, and hurriedly texted my sister. I was in.

My sister and I self-cast ourselves as the Von Trapp children early on, starting as two of the youngest. We took on the character and dialogue of whoever was closest to our present age, until we aged up to the next one. Each migration up the Von Trapp ladder was both thrilling and sad as we said *auf wiedersehen* to someone we'd come to love. I remember thinking how old Liesl was, and then one day I had graduated to Liesl. These days we're both older than The Captain — and advancing full tilt towards Frau Schmidt.

I find myself parked at The Ahmanson and slowly climb the stairs to the theatre. With time to kill, I collect my tickets, settle into a seat at the theatre bar and order a glass of vino. It's the first time all week I've been able to sit and catch my breath. Relax. My eyes wander down to the program in my hands and that's when the reality of it sinks in. My eyes fill with emotion, threatening to spill onto my glossy playbill. I am about to see Christopher Plummer, the patriarch of my youth, in the flesh.

I pull myself together before I draw attention as some loon sitting by herself weeping. I finish my drink and head into the theatre. Inside, the set is beautiful and astonishing. Books piled upon books rise off-kilter, in a tower over the stage, looking as if they might topple at any moment. The show is to follow Plummer's love affair with the great books of his life. I try to sit patiently but I can't stop squirming. I fire off texts to my sister, desperate for her to be a part of the excitement. I get no reply. I need to feel like someone is witnessing this with me, and that someone can only be her. But she doesn't answer. Then the lights go down.

The minute Christopher Plummer walks onstage the crowd stands and applauds as if they too have been waiting decades to meet the man. The tears fill my eyes again as I stand cheering with them. I know this will be a brilliant night because I'm going to witness an incredible actor, one of my favorites. But all I want to do is squeeze my sister's hand. The Captain is in my midst and she isn't with me. She's 12,000 miles away. A tear slips down my face as I hear her say, "Fräulein, is it to be at every meal, or merely at dinnertime, that you intend leading us all through this rare and wonderful world of... indigestion?"

I can't tell you how many times I've watched Maria run down from the mountaintop, or harmonize with seven frightened *kinder* tucked into her bed, or step in to sing Edelweiss when the Captain's voice fails him in the face of the Nazis. It would be an extraordinary number. But I *can* tell you that I can recite every scene verbatim with my little sister.

Thing is, I rarely watch *The SOM* these days. It somehow seems wrong to watch it alone. Lonely. Unbearable. I'm afraid that I'll be overcome with emotion and that I won't be able to shove it back in. Afraid that I'll regret choosing to live so far from my sister. Guilty, that I dared to press play without her. As the years pass, the movie seems to just become even more sacred. And hell, Mother Superior singing "Climb Every Mountain" is enough to break anyone.

As an actor, I'm rarely the starstruck type. But sitting here listening to Chris talk — the comforting rhythm and weight of his voice — I can't keep my eyes off him. He's a good fifty years older, with grey hair and a fragile frame, but there's something so powerfully familiar about him. He curses and jokes and I feel like I'm watching an old friend that I haven't seen in many years. Sitting here alone in the theatre, Christopher Plummer was also doing something he had no idea he was capable of. Though I was palpably feeling her absence, he was somehow making me feel closer to my sister. Where he stood, she stood. When I laughed with him I felt as if she were also in on the joke. When he told tales from *The SOM* I felt that we were both laughing through me.

As my sister and I have grown older we've had to devise new ways to commune through the language of *The Sound of Music*. We've tracked down rare vinyls and vintage playbooks and sent them across the miles. We'll text quotes like a secret language to each other. Last Christmas I bought us matching Christopher Plummer silhouette tees that only a fan could identify as him, and she sent me a birthday card of Maria spinning on the mountain top. It's just our way to feel closer to one another. To feel as if nothing's changed. Watching Chris Plummer on that stage, I both mourned and longed for our childhood. Because he somehow represented all of it.

As I came out of the theatre I noted that my sister had replied to the myriad of texts, filling me with joy that she'd indeed been with me during the show, though she was 17 hours ahead and at work.

As I walked off into the night I shot her a reply, that only she would understand:

"I haven't had so much fun since the day we put glue on Fräulein Josephine's toothbrush!"

The Sound of Music will always be our film.

Sometimes stories have the ability to go far beyond entertainment. They become ingrained in the very fabric of our lives, just because they were there at the right time. Comforting us like a favorite blanket, sharing in milestones like a nick of wood on a height chart, or becoming part of our history like a family crest. They're the stories that bind us. For life.

How did this story make you feel?

Tell someone.



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Written by:

Belinda Gosbee

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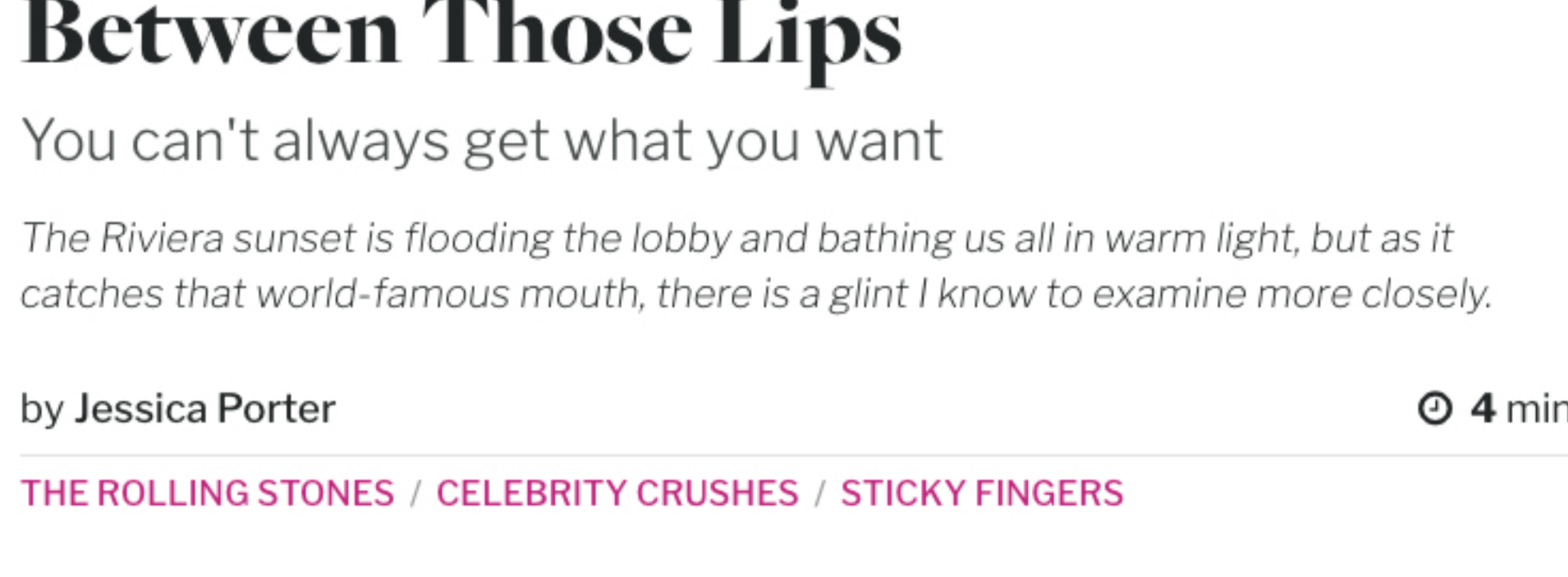
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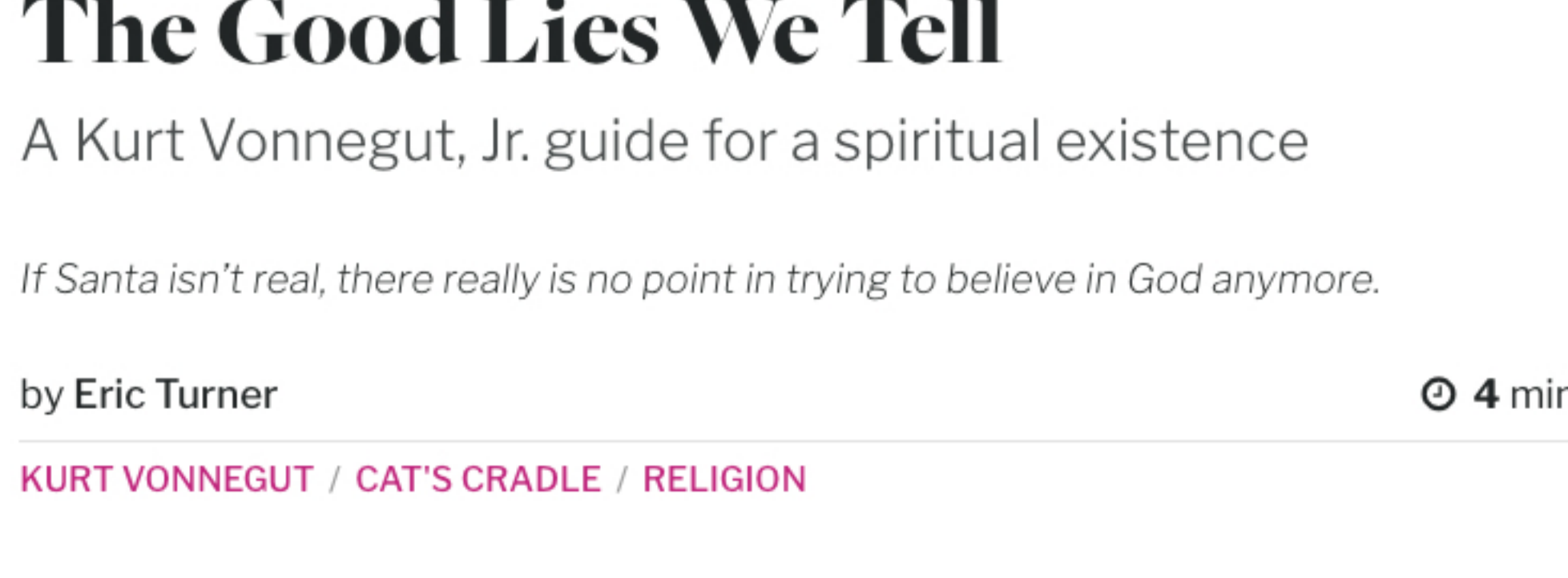
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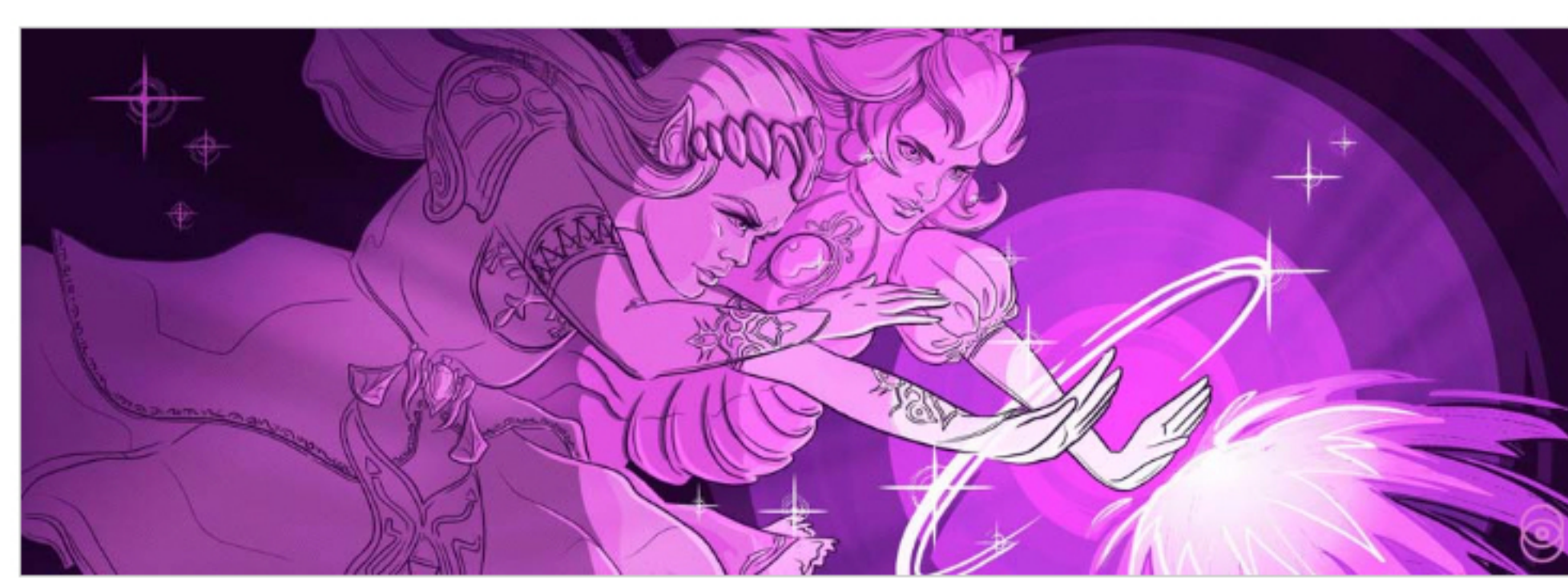
Protecting my baby dinosaurs

"What's going on?" I asked, assessing the situation. She nodded her head to a woman nearby, who was eyeing us suspiciously and mumbling to herself. "She hit me."

by Tonya Smith

5 min

THE LAND BEFORE TIME / FAMILY / LGBTQ



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The perfect combo

There is just something about Super Smash Bros. that takes even the sweetest and quietest among us and morphs them into a shit-talker of the highest order.

by Tonya Smith

4 min

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