

July 2014

People Who Listen to Beirut

Grace Patt
Western Michigan University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/laureate>



Part of the Fiction Commons

Recommended Citation

Patt, Grace (2014) "People Who Listen to Beirut," *The Laureate*: Vol. 12 , Article 27.
Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/laureate/vol12/iss1/27>

This Fiction is brought to you for free and open access by the Lee Honors College at ScholarWorks at WMU. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Laureate by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks at WMU. For more information, please contact wmu-scholarworks@wmich.edu.

People Who Listen to Beirut

Grace Patt

Nell

The clock's wrought iron hands read 10:52 pm in the downtown square, its black and white face is lit by beams of light placed at its feet. The State Theater has just let out its 9 o'clock show, locals and tourists alike flood the sidewalk under the marquee. You can always spot a tourist from the brochure: "10 Things to Do in Downtown Traverse City" tucked in their back pocket—or if the family is wearing matching t-shirts. Their voices carry effortlessly, and we can just make out the darkened shapes from where we stand on the other side of the river. Tonight the canal running through Traverse City is still, except for the diminishing ripples from the spot where Riley canon-balled in ten minutes ago. My shorts are spattered with river water, but since it was Riley who did it, I don't really care. He has a change of clothes in his car. While we wait for him, Ian and Gina pull out a pack of cigarettes. I stand with them on the bridge hanging over the canal, even though I don't smoke.

Riley

It was a dare, and started with the idea of walking across downtown to jump off the pier. It was one of those romantic notions that everyone agrees on but never ends up doing, sort of like our idea to drop a watermelon off the roof of a building. So I jump in the river, mostly to show off to Nell. It was great. I got a running start off the wooden walkway lining the water and canon-balled in. The canal wasn't that cold, probably as warm as the bay, if not a bit warmer. Even under the water I hear Gina shriek. Upon surfacing, the 2x4's of the dock turned murky brown with my splash, and Nell had dark spots on her shorts where the water had hit. Ian stand behind her in an old band t-shirt, and Gina's bright sundress was already to the top of the stair boards that lead down to the dock.

"Guys come on! It's only a bit of water, it's not even cold! See?"
I splash a bit at Ian and tried to get Gina with my shower.

Nell just kept smiling and shaking her head.

"But seriously, come on in, it's actually a nice change from the humid air."

"No thanks, Riley. I do love swimming, but I think I'm going to have to pass on this one," Ian says in his monotone.

"Come on, stop acting silly, we got a party to get to. It's almost eleven and everyone will be wondering why we're not there!" Nell says, still trying to suppress a giggle.

"Oh fine, I guess we should, since it *is* at your house," I reply. There was no ladder, so I swim to the dock and hoist myself up. "I have a change of clothes in my car, just a second." The dry wood feels good beneath my bare feet as I climb the steps from the riverfront and towards my Subaru Outback in the parking lot.

Nell

"I'm so excited for your party. The last BPP of 2011, I'm going to miss this summer and your Back-Porch-Parties," Ian states to me before he takes another pull from his cigarette. "I wish you didn't have to leave, Nell. You're going to be so far away."

"I know," I say back, "I'll miss you guys a lot too. I promise I'll try to get back for a couple weekends other than holidays."

"You promise, right? I don't want you turning into one of those transfer snobs that talks of nothing but how great Northwestern University is!" Gina says.

"Oh come on! That's not me at all. I would never forget my friends, no matter where the four of us are in the world," I say, glancing after Riley as he disappears toward his car.

The wind off the bay is blowing inland now, and carries their smoke toward downtown Traverse City. The smell is so familiar and it makes me want to try a cigarette. Ian flicks his butt over the rail and it spirals downstream with the slow current. Riley appears on the other side of the bridge. I watch him saunter toward our trio. He's wearing khakis and a sweater vest. Instead of slouching like the rest of us, Riley stands straight as he leans over to watch the flow of the river. He doesn't smoke either.

Riley

They're smoking on the railing when I come back with my dry clothes—all except Nell, of course. I commandeer a spot next to Gina, just because it's the closest to the parking lot. I unfasten my brown satchel and my boney fingers fish out my iPod, a routine my mind is familiar with. I turn on Beirut, an indie band all of us ended up falling in love with a couple months ago. "Elephant Gun" is first in the shuffle: "*If I was young I'd flee this town.*" The artificial melody emitting from the small speakers seems to float on the air, thick with humidity.

"Are you guys ready to head to Nell's house now?"

Nell

Rounding the corner of my paint-chipped house, people are already sitting on my porch. The fluorescent light stationed above the screen door hangs and illuminates the tops of their heads. I've been hosting BPP's since our graduation from high school two years ago, so by now people just know what to do. Cheers emanate from the wooden patio when we appear around the corner. Everyone probably thinks, *Nell's here, now the party can really get started.*

Riley

Appropriately, Nell is the first to propose a toast: "To sleepless nights, my friends, and my new life. To summer!" she says. Everyone raises their shot glasses full of Captain, and in unison

everyone touches their lips to the sill of the glass and tips back their heads. The spiced rum is a familiar taste that defines the summer, and I quickly refill everyone's shot glass. "To Nell!"

"To Nell!" The BPP-goers shout back at me. Some are old high school friends, some are unfamiliar faces, and the other two are members of my foursome. Nell is the only person that doesn't answer my toast. She is blushing. When she blushes, her cheeks turn a light shade of rose, and the skin on the outer edge of her eyes smile.

Nell

It's just past two in the morning when I look at my watch. My vision is hazy with alcohol. We're playing Euchre at a table set up in the back yard. Around us, friends are playing beer pong, and a large crowd has gathered to see who will win, but I can only see Riley. We're on a team and Gina's with Ian. They're losing.

"I call hearts as trump." Riley's words seem to roll off his tongue. He winks at me from across the table, and I nod back. Our opponent's faces are unchanging, but from the corner of my eye I see Gina's eyebrow crease slightly. I lead with an ace of clubs, and we win the trick. The game continues until there's only one trick remaining. Both our scorecards say nine, both teams one hand away from a win.

"Take that!" Ian pronounces and lays down the left bower, a jack of diamonds. Gina does a thrusting motion, I smack my hand to my forehead and Riley remains motionless. The play goes clockwise around our circle. I only have a queen left. Gina lays some low, off-suit card. When it's Riley's turn the table goes silent and he wears a face of loss. *We don't have this*, I think.

"You know, you guys really have to learn strategy because," Riley's pointer finger flashes between us, "we just beat you!" He lays down the Jack of Hearts, the highest card in the game. My arms automatically fly up, he mirrors my movement, and we high-five across the small card table.

His fingers clasp around my petite hands and his skin is warm and smooth when it meets mine. The spaces between our fingers lock together. Riley's face erupts into a smile and his eyes gleam with a brightness that I've never noticed before. I go to pull away but he still firmly holds my hands, restricting me from leaning back into my lawn chair. A scent is blown my way from his swift movement. It smells like citrus and wind. I'm standing on my tiptoes in order to reach him and I almost lose my balance as I stretch over the small card table. Riley's cheeks are pink from the alcohol, or are they because he's blushing? We let go after a couple seconds, and sit back down to play another hand. He keeps looking at me with a coy smile and shrugs like he's saying *I don't know*. Next game we'll probably switch partners and Gina and I will be together, so I'll get to sit next to Riley.

Riley

Holding only two hearts, one of them being the Jack and the other a ten, I'm taking a chance on the hand when I call trump, but there's something about Nell's stare that tells me to pick it. Beirut's playing again. It's muted with the sounds of the party, and "Postcards From Italy" is playing: *And I would love to see that day, her day was mine*.

Nell leads with an ace of clubs; she knows what she's doing. Her coral nails wrap around the four cards as she lines up the edges on the table top. Her trick is sitting in a neat pile to her left. I keep the Jack hidden until Ian plays the left bower. My lips curl inward and I try to look as though we're going to lose, for the sake of suspense. Nell is panicking at this point. Her face palm says it all.

As I figured, Gina and Nell have nothing left. By this point Ian is doing a victory dance in his chair. I let out a tiny sigh and look across the table toward my partner. Slowly, without losing eye contact with Nell I say, "You know, you guys really have to learn strategy, because we just beat you!" I smack the Jack on top of the pile: priceless. Nell screams, and for a moment everyone standing in the vicinity of the card game stops to smile at her, although mine is the biggest.

We've won, and I reach towards her. High-fiving, I clutch her hands and try to stop myself from holding on too long. Nell's skin is tanner than mine. She smells of fresh water and sunscreen, a smell I have always loved, but have never told her. Her pupils have dilated to almost cover the deep chocolate of her iris. I read online once that the pupils dilate when you like someone. I wonder if it's true? I hope it's true.

"I'm going to run in the house. Does anyone want another beer?" Gina says.

"You're leaving the game? You just don't want to lose to us again," Nell yells back mockingly, a little too loud.

Gina rolls her eyes. She pushes in her chair and disappears toward the screen door into the small kitchen. Nell slowly gets up and follows her. Ian does too, and I now have no other desire than to follow Nell, wherever that may be.