

## “All the Pretty Mouths”

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*“That was an oldie, for all of you mouth-breathers, titled ‘The End,’ by The Doors. Let’s start tonight’s lit-quiz with this question: Jim Morrison and his group of Venice Beach rebel-rockers named their band after a book about L.S.D... does anybody out there know the title of the book? Call in now for two free tickets to see Erasure Huddle, back together, playing live at The Danceteria tomorrow night. While you reach for that stupid-phone, here’s another literary-music question: which novel inspired the name of the album ‘Get Behind Me, Satan!’ by the White Stripes? I’ve got it on deck, and I’m gonna play ‘My Doorbell’ for you from it, while you cheat to get the answers.”*

Laurel taps down the volume on the satellite radio remote with a petulant sigh. “What are you doing,” she says into her tablet.

“I’m between clients,” answers her second spouse, named Brain.

“Hubby, I’ll bet,” Laurel scoffs.

“You ask that I check in, every night, Sweet Wife, and here I am, checking in. And I hear diva noise from you. Anyhow. Shhh. How am I supposed to take this diva noise from you?”

With another sigh, Laurel stifles her diva with: “I’m cramping, a dookie. Hold on.” Laurel pads in her Vipers slippers across the epoxied floor of their (her) loft-style apartment to retrieve a knitting basket. She verifies that the White Stripes, rather than Keen speaking in that radio-smooth way of his, is playing on air, and lowers the volume again. “Before you ask: Yes, I’m having an intense and entirely mental affair with Guru Kid Keen.”

“That deejay! I hear his hippy-dippy tripe, in the background.”

With half her mind rifling through college-era trivia about indie music and lit, Laurel shuffles to clear a seat on a magazine-strewn ottoman serving as centerpiece in the loft. Her slippers, shipped/flown from the official Vipers store in Hawaii, are comfy, rather than cutesy, and about as stylish as her uncle’s retired jersey, a facsimile of which she wears when home alone. The slippers keep her grounded, her long feet sheathed in common luxury; the retro GRANT No. 13 jersey reminds her of the family Grant’s successes. She wears only granny panties, beneath.

“Do you wanna see Erasure Huddle tomorrow, at the Danceteria? I will call him! I can get us comped.”

Brain gets to scoff: “I’ll bet.”

“You know I’m itching to speak with him again. I want your consent! My guru. Kid Keen. He needs to know the author and book that Jimmy Morrison stole from, for the name of his band The Doors.”

“Huxley’s *Doors of Perception*. Everybody knows that. You know that.”

Mockingly: “Are you certain? I thought Ken Kesey wrote *The Doors*.”

“Nice try, Sweet Wife.”

“Am I less than opaque? As a mocker?” Laurel pads away from and back to the oversized ottoman. “Mock, mock, mock, mock, mock!”

“Aldous Huxley. Aldous... Not that pervert professor from Bellingham University, Ferdinand, Ferdinand Huxley, who you like almost as much as that psychedelic-minded deejay. You raved about Hux all last season.”

“What a mad season that was,” Laurel agrees. “Prof Hux! Oh, how I get moist, thinking about him.”

“Despite your cramping.”

“Yes. You are such a brain, Brain.”

Laurel slips her slippers off her feet to examine her knitted socks. Today is snarled with Dayglo dip-dyed yarn, to replace the fuzzed-out efforts from her blue-grey period. In a moment of giving she tosses the gently-worn slippers toward the bedroom door to remind herself to donate the used-up Vipers paraphernalia and buy another pair. When she notices Guru Kid Keen again on the radio, she turns him up, and says to Brain: “Hold on.”

*“...is my trivia question too difficult? Are my disciples ignoring me? Oh, I see. The switchboard is off. L.M.A.O. If you can get through on the phone line, tell me the name of the author and book inspiring the name of the band The Doors, plus tell me what L.M.A.O. is an acronym for. And, L.S.D. Pronunciation counts! If you know those three simple trivia, this station will send you to Erasure Huddle, in a stretch limo. How wow! Now, while you Google or Bing or DuckDuck or whatever all else... Go on, get your answers, I'm waiting...”* Kid Keen blows air into the mic, as if disgusted with the ease of his easy listeners. *“While you do your cheating, here’s ‘Mock Song,’ by Phish, because a little birdie just told me to play a mock-song. On deck after that little Phish ditty is Trey Anastasio’s solo stunt, ‘Cayman Review’.”*

With a rushing shimmery glow, Laurel turns egomaniacal. Imagine, Kid Keen bugging her! He has to be, she thinks, him and his mock-synchronicity; right after I say the word ‘mock,’ he plays a mock-song! How wow. And he must know I would

never cheat by using the 'net for the answers, she surmises; that's too cheap. "I'm available again for you, Doodles," Laurel smooches into the tablet.

"Where were we? Ferdinand Huxley. The sexpot prof from Bell U that you have the hots for, for whatever reason."

Letting a giggle escape, Laurel reaches for a packet of the Dayglo yarn. The new plastic knitting needles are such a gaudy plastic that only Dayglo suffices, in her mind. She imagines a dip-dyed scarf to match the socks. She imagines herself scarfing the bounty of the planet.

"That Professor," continues Brain." Imagine, how he went and disentangled himself from those felonies. What a feat."

"Felonies!" screams Laurel. "Only the harshest label, of Sexual Offender, attached. If those acid-headed first-year coeds had been 17 instead of what, 18? he'd be a Sexual Predator and in prison for much longer. Either way, he fucked the wrong girls, or, uh, the wrong women. They were grown women, according to the law. Tattling prude ditzes, on drugs! Poor old Ferdinand."

"Poor now, yeah, after all those lawyer fees."

"I'm getting moister! Would you play hooky on those clients tonight, Doodlebug?"

A muffled guffaw, another conspicuous "Shhh," from Brain's end.

Laurel feels anxious and cautious. "Am I on speaker phone? Brain, did your client come in?"

Brain's voice grows louder, more intimate, as if he's adjusted the phone closer to his mouth. "My client did come in. How did you guess."

Somewhat frustrated now, wanting to be with Brain on video instead of only audio, Laurel tears open the wrapper on the yarn. "You have such a pretty moufph."

"Moufph."

"Deliver us from evil." Laurel grins and muses a long while on the film "Deliverance," about how watching the rape scene with fatty Ned Beatty made her laugh and then cringe, intensely reminding her of her first anal fuck, at age 15, by a 19-year-old, whom she'd requested it from. "Who is he tonight? Is he worthy of your talent, your expert hands, your handling? My uncle – good old number 13 – said you were good, by the by, at sports massage, did I tell you? 'Excellent, for a nerd,' is what he said, verbatim."

"For a nerd'."

"That's what he said, and he would know, considering his whole existence, the existence of the whole team of Vipers, is dependent on the body."

“I do have a pretty moufph?”

Laurel suspects Brain is talking to his client, rather than her, and choses to ignore the question.

“You are a nerd, Doodles. From your skinny-balinky frame down to your funny-haha name. One of the many reasons I fell in love, with you. Forgiving your annoyingly braces-fixed perfectly perpendicular teeth.” Laurel begins to knit, then stands to search for her hands-free ear-device so she can relax her insect-like arms and shoulders into her hobby. She believes that Kid Keen is doing his mightiest to ask only questions that she knows the answers to. “Shall I let you go so you can work on your client, hubby-number-two?”

“Emphasis on ‘number-two’? As in: Shit?”

“You’re listening to me ramble, on speaker, I’m guessing.” Laurel knits, half-expecting another guffaw-shhh from her working hubby. “Doodle?”

Brain finally gets back with: “I’m here. That client came and went already.”

“Came and went? Just like my ex, funny-haha.”

“Back to your first – good old ‘number-one’.”

“Jealous?”

“I am, actually. Him being all Fed-certified, protecting you, harboring you, giving you all of those hints, about how to hide your stash in a safety deposit box—”

“We never mention The Box. Doodlebug how could you.”

“Did I say ‘box’? I meant ‘fox’; you safely deposit your lox. In a tiny style Fort Knox. Not to be confused with docks or mocks or cocks or frocks. Crazy as a lox—”

“Enough! Next you’ll be mentioning my first anal fuck.” Laurel bats away her lingering teen angst – that sensation of being a bug-in-amber, her adolescent lankiness of body and mind and emotion... that strange memory imprint, with bent arms and knees, mulling the after-effects of getting exactly what she asked for from Jef, pondering later the historical Spartans and shameless pederasty and ensuing boy-come-uppance while relaxed on that shiny purple beanbag chair in her first apartment, even after the retro halogen bulb burst and got into its seams. Waiflike Jef, from down the hall, coming and going, going and coming, and then he and his fiancée Jenniffer abruptly moving away, quitting college entirely, while Laurel had to sit in her apartment by herself, wondering if study-buddy Chuck (with the webbed fingers) would ever visit her again to cram for a high school humanities exam, or how to write an essay on Shakespeare’s “Comedy of Errors,” with that pungent line said with a pirate’s lilt: “Ay, when fowls have no feathers, and fish have no fin.” She imagines the deformed Chuck has committed suicide already, and that Jef and Jenniffer have a gaggle of waif-kids with three-letter names, just like his, missing a letter.

“Brain-fart,” Brain posits, out of the blue. “Were those acid-headed coeds from Bell U., the twits who ratted on Huxley, were they the same two girls your first hubby rescued from certain trouble, after they got stranded by the bus driver, way out in Sticksville?”

“L.M.A.O. I have to! Brain, how hilarious. You have a mind like a steel trap. How hilarious. I forgot all about them dosing on my sheet. L.M.A.O. Oh! Oops! Fuckles! Fuckle-dee-dee!” Dropping her inch of Dayglo sock, Laurel slips over the epoxy to poke up the volume with a needle.

On his program, Kid Keen warbles: *“Whew! ‘Cayman Review’! A decent way to spend a few many minutes, am I right? I’m always right. I’m Kid Keen. Guru Kid Keen. Now about the switchboard. It’s F.U.B.A.R. This can only be buggy news for you, my fans, my disciples, my uneasy listeners! Mention the acronym F.U.B.A.R. when you get through on the phones and I will personally provide a bag of sex toys for your limo ride – stretch. L.M.A.O. Yesterday, I received an email from a malcontent who only wants to hear songs by musicians who comprise The 27 Club – that’s a club for druggie performers who died or committed suicide at the peak of their careers, all of them age: 27. Amy Winehouse: ‘(I’m Not Going to) Rehab’. Kurt Cobain and Nirvana, doing that Bowie cover of ‘Man Who Sold the World’. Shannon Hoon and Blind Melon: ‘No Rain’. Janis Joplin: ‘Down on Me’. And: ‘Have You Ever Been Experienced?’ by Jim Hendrix. Jim Morrison’s ‘The End,’ which I did play, ahem!, for all you mouth-breathers out there. I forget who all else from the list. Sad as all get-out, that malcontent and her email... Yet she inspired me. In her honor, I’ve created the final lit-quiz-question of the night: Which witch of a writer inspired this Erasure Huddle tune, ‘Ode to Shoeless Joe’? If you can guess good, or if you’re a good Googler maybe, I promise that I, Guru Keen Keen!, will accompany you and your date, in the limo if you wish, then take the both of you backstage after the show with V.I.P. passes – another acronym for you! – did I promise all this? How wow. You know Kid Keen is, my disciples of the post-modern age of rock, your guru. A complete freak, of an honest man. True, this! To recap: a free ride in a stretch limo (and a free threeway with me if you wish), all the free booze you can stomach, a free concert, a V.I.P. distinction, which means free backstage passes. Did I mention it’s an all-ages show? Funtastic. How wow! Are my disciples enjoying these tunes, glossed with lit? Good. Now, prick up your ears to this Erasure Huddles homage, titled ‘Ode to Shoeless Joe’.”*

Laurel lowers the volume again, only a few notches, guessing that the song will be as long as Trey’s “Last Tube,” from that honky-tonk album with “Cayman Review” on it, maybe even longer, knowing Erasure Huddle. She feels entranced by the lit-quiz and wonders if Kid Keen would prefer she drive now to the studio to personally “call (on)” him with her answers.

“Sweetness, my client is here for his rub.”

“How many more tonight?”

“One more, after this one. You know this is hell-season. The team is a wreck. Heated up for the finals. Feeling brittle. I’m having to double-up on some of my slots.”

“Double penetration on some of your slots?”

“Time-slots!”

“You give all your time-slots to the University jocks, Dookie. When am I gonna get my nextrub? The one I got when we got engaged? Like the one you gave on our wedding night? Like the one you did on my birthday?”

“Like those rubs?”

“Yes. Like those rubs. I wannanotha rub! Fuckles. Egad. Typical Spartan mentality: leave the wives at home while you go and do your sparring and rubbing.”

“What’s she babbling on about Spartans for? What is her damage?” buzzes distantly into Laurel’s ear. Hot flashes? She worries, before age 30?

“Shhh,” comes Brain’s reply.

“Again with the shushing! I can guess which client is in your office now. That out gay, that trendy player, am I right? He wants you all to himself. Am I right? Am I damaged? Or am I clairvoyant, Dookie?”

“She’s definitely both damaged and clairvoyant,” is the next murmur from Brain’s client.

A chime lets Laurel know someone needs her services. “Oop, got a call coming through. Hold on.” She clicks a nub on her tablet to drop Brain and pick up the incoming caller, and says, “This is Laurel Reilly.”

“Laurel Grant-Rutherford-Reilly? Is it really you? This is Mrs Rutherford.”

Resetting her mind, Laurel has difficulty placing the voice. “My ex-mother-in-law? Or...”

“No! Do I sound like that old stick-in-the-mud? I’m Greta Rutherford. I was at your wedding, Laurel, do you remember? You invited everyone who’d bought some of that sublime acid you were selling at the time. (My friend Wilma bought it, not me, but I came anyway as a guest.) Nice trips, by the way. Anyway, I married your ex as soon as I heard about his divorce from you. I’d saved his phony (emphasis on phone) work number, you know, after he rescued me and Wilma on our bad bus trip.”

“Really, Gret?”

“You hadn’t heard? We had a small wedding. Very small. Family only.”

Laurel recalls being a Grant and then a Rutherford – an internal zing that takes her by surprise, considering how much therapy she’s taken since her dad accepted her assertion that, at 15, she could better take care of herself if she were out of her immediate family’s space. All that was missing was the legal emancipation, which

she'd threatened to do, until she got her apartment on campus. It had poisoned her mother's heart against her forever, her leaving home before legal adulthood; her father had seemed happy about her choice to emancipate, especially since she'd signed up for a post-secondary course at Bell U and was about to meet her peers.

"Laurel?"

"The chubby and bubbly accountant in the peuse dress! I remember you. Who would've thunk it, you tying the knot with my ex."

"I'm so glad you let him go!"

"Hold on a sec," says Laurel, tapping the nub to bring Brain back online. "Hubby-number-two, you won't ever guess who I've got on call-waiting!"

"Hubby-number-one?"

"Close."

"I have a client here, Sweetness."

"A chubby accounting major with bad taste in dresses, who you said was a ditz, for accusing Prof Huxley of rape!"

"Not one of the acid-coeds. Well, speak of the devil."

"She married my ex!"

"What?"

"Put yourself on mute and listen in... I'll connect us in a three-way."

"All right."

Laurel configures the tablet to allow for her deception of the new Mrs Rutherford, so Brain can eavesdrop. "What can I do you for, Greta?"

"My husband mentioned that you could get me some 'dove' from your, um, 'box'."

"What are you talking about?"

"Is the code word 'love-dovey'?" Greta wants to know. "Your box, you know, from your box."

Laurel dismisses any irritation with, "Who am I, Lance Armstrong? Code words are something I never use. I'm not a coward. Simply tell me what you want, Gret, Greta, the second Mrs Rutherford."

A whispery, "E."

“Do you mean Ecstasy?”

“Yes. I want to buy some Ecstasy.”

“I’m ecstatic. Lemme check my stash and call you tomorrow.”

“Lovey!”

“Say, Greta: Did Hux truly absolutely rape you?”

“You know about that?”

“Everybody knows. I heard about the charges and the trial on the news. I found all of it almost unbelievable, frankly. If he did, I’m sorry. Or were you just riding the latest trend, of labelling men as Sexually Offensive.”

“Oh, Laurel. I hear the beat of Robert Bly’s bongos, Sister! Are you siding with Huxley on this one? As my prosecutor convinced the judge, his being in a position of authority made it a definite rape, despite my consent. I was a minor in the eyes of the law.”

“You were a junior! You were at least 20 years old.”

“Your point? You know, kids grow up a lot slower than the common perception. Our brains and bodies don’t fully mature until age 25.”

“Our brains and bodies never ‘fully mature’ until death – that’s when people (are supposed to) stop growing,” Laurel informs.

“And how does a 60-year-old wrinkly decrepit person keep growing?”

“Elders grow in ways that are subtle or reductive-looking, but they keep growing internally and externally. Growing never stops. It’s obvious to anyone who can see.”

A pause by both talkers allows Greta a brief stoner-cough while making clinking sounds, as if emptying a glass pipe into an ashtray. Meanwhile Laurel checks the stereo, where “Ode to Shoeless Joe” is droning through its first, maybe second, verse. She fidgets then with her yarn, reshaping loose tendrils into Arabic patterns on the ottoman. Next she winds her hair into a Spanish bun, securing it with her knitting needles and imagining French braids along her front hairline.

“Does this mean no E, for me?”

A click on the tablet as Laurel disconnects with Greta and goes back to Brain, who’s waiting with baited breath, in her mind. “Can you believe that cunt? I’m talking, by the by, about my ex, not about Gret. But she’s just as bad.”

“Sweetness, I gotta hang up on you. When these boys need me, sweetness –”

“Boys!” Laurel bursts, nearly hysterical with envy, or jealousy; she forgot which applies to a threeway mindfuck. “Lucky for you that the only real boy on campus, that child genius, is so myopic and unathletic that he’d never make the team, even as mascot. What if we got into trouble for that kind of 12-year-old boy action? How wow. Married to a Sexual Predator. I could start my memoirs, as soon as I finish these fantastic Dayglo socks. (Maybe I will scarf afterward?)”

Laurel, and probably Brain, sit quietly listening to the radio program for a moment. Eventually she surmises that her hubby is Hard at Work, and that he’s muting his phone. If she hung up on him, she’d be able to synch her tablet (stupid-phone) with Kid Keen’s music selection and figure out which witch of a writer inspired the song “Ode to ‘Shoeless Joe’”; she knows Brain might destroy her somehow, if she hangs up. They have a pact: stay on the phone, whatever’s happening, barring a life/death emergency – and Erasure Huddle tickets are arguably less than that extreme – until hubby and wifey speak their (in)sincere farewell, together. Laurel knows that Brain and she would enjoy the show; they like The Danceteria immensely, and Brain could reschedule tomorrow’s sports massages for the following day. She thinks, Maybe Kid Keen’s offer is life/death.

Already the tablet is signaling: Greta calling again.

“Dookie, I’m saying my farewell. Would you respect me with yours? Could you? Would you? Or, here’s an idea: I can threeway-call Kid Keen, ahem!, with you online too. But you’ve gotta tell me which witch of a writer this song is about! Doooookie! Doobies. Doodles. I can’t cheat and my smart-phone’s way too stupid to do all of my winning. Dig? I’ve got every answer but this final one, prepared in my brain. Fuck! (My) Brain. Hurry up and come on and farewell me, please. The White Stripes, Jack and Meg White, did James Joyce’s line, ‘Get Behind Me, Satan!’ – it’s from *Dubliners*, right? that final story, or novella really, with the vampires, titled, um, ‘The Dead’? Next is Aldous Huxley’s *Doors of Perception*; you taught me that one, right, Doodles? L.M.A.O is short for Laugh My Ass Off (or, On). Lysergic Acid Die-something-or-other, that stuff that shuts off oxygen to your brain, so you can hallucinate; seriously it basically kills you and lets you stay alive; L.S. Diethylamide. Fucked Up Beyond All Recognition is another bit. Ooh, I’m prepared, right now! Would you hurry up and hang up on me, Brain? Before this catchy song by Erasure Huddle gets to its final measure. I can feel it ending already. I hear so much drumming! Hurry, before the song ends, please?”

Whether the switchboard is on or off, or mockingly ignored, is Laurel’s nagging question, to herself. She wants to drive now, get in her car and pay the toll and tool through the sordid streets of Bellingham University to the radio station on the far end of campus, to meet her guru, Kid Keen, so she can ask him about the bug he must’ve put in her tablet – that mock-song? She’s worrying enormously. She’s worried her guru intimately knows her core. To quell that, she begins packing her knitting into a tote, to bring along. If she had to wait for Kid Keen, maybe showing him her provincial side would unnerve the hipster enough to give her fair footing. She forgets that she’s pierced her hairdo with the needles and packs a spare pair before stepping into yellow and black argyle leggings and a black miniskirt barely visible beneath her jersey.

“I think it’s J D Salinger, although somehow baseball factors into the novel, so maybe it’s somebody else.”

“What, Doodles?”

“Salinger was a hermit who allowed certain teens but nobody else to visit him at his rural home. He was not a jock. He hated the spotlight. So this info is moot. Goodbye, and good luck.”

“Sayonara.”

They disconnect. As Laurel removes her headset a translucent mite creeps from the tablet onto her hand. Only because of the worry, she thinks, as she swats it off the back of her open palm by instinct. Imagined mites, according to her psychologist, signify aberration in the brainwaves; her contrary ideas about most of society being blind to the wonders of the world has already given way to hypocrisy in the form of telling her phlegmatic shrink what she wanted to hear, lest Laurel be required to take mind-numbing meds. Perfunctory, ever petulant, Laurel anyway invents a ploy and reaches for the fob to open and drive her car. It’s just a keen little bohemian bug, infesting us, she thinks. Every one of us radicals has them to remind us.