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The Earworm's Song

Randilee Sequeira Larson

My mother has always been a character. Even when I was little I knew she was... different than other moms. She was eccentric. Deidre had enough strange habits and strange stories to keep my sister and me delightfully enthralled our whole childhood.

For example, she wasn't Christian or Catholic, like all the other moms in town. She was a witch, a self-proclaimed witch, with a penchant for the superstitious. It compelled her to own a rosary, usually several, at all times.

"You never know when you might need one," she explained, "for emergencies. They're good juju."

I inherited that superstitious habit. They say these kinds of things tend to be genetic, passed on from mother to daughter to granddaughter. Years of soul-crushing, institutionalized education hasn't made a dent in it. I've never lost touch with my superstitious side. I still pray the rosary when I need that good juju:

Hail Mary, Full of Grace.

Mom used to tell us stories about strange medical phenomena too, leprosy, elephantiasis, small pox; all the good, gruesome ones. My favorite was L.S.S.—"Last Song Syndrome."

L.S.S., my mother said, could afflict anyone, not just musicians. She said it was caused by these funny little creatures called "earworms" and that, like all good diseases, it had the potential to be *fatal*, a fact that excited my morbid little mind and got my imagination running wild.

She'd often tell a story about an unknown pianist, from an unknown point of history, who hung himself with one of his piano strings just to get away from the earworm's song.

The Lord is With Thee...

Later, when I was in the army, I had a Drill Sergeant who knew all about L.S.S.

I'd wake up in the morning, make my way to CQ, glue my ass to a seat, and the stereo would already be screaming out the day's song. Sometimes it was the Jeopardy theme. Sometimes it was a crappy, early 2000s pop-rock ballad. Once, it was "The Song that Never Ends." But his favorite was a children's song from a recent animated movie about LEGOS:

Everything is awesome!

Everything is cool when you're part of a team!

Everything is awesome.... When we're living our dream!

He would play the song, whatever it was, on a loop all day. Sometimes it'd be a couple of hours before you'd really notice it, but once you noticed it, you could never ignore it again.

The words, that stupid tune, they would wriggle their way between the folds in my brain and grab onto my neurons so tightly it'd take a scorched earth policy just to weed the fuckers out. If only I could find a way to crack open my skull and napalm my grey matter into oblivion.

I'd squeeze my eyes shut and try to drown it out with the only thing I could think of:

Hail Mary, Full of Grace, the Lord is with Thee.

Blessed art thou amongst women and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus.

The reason for the rosary, like my mother said, is to amass some good juju in your life. “Juju” is a word we used all the time around my house growing up. It was the Karmic force my tribe adhered to. It shaped the family code of ethics. Things either brought good juju or bad juju. Rosaries brought good juju, obviously. Using a handicap stall when you weren’t handicapped brought bad juju. Giving away your last cigarette to a stranger is good juju. Taking the last biscuit at dinner is bad juju.

In case you were wonder... Yes.

Constitutional, low-key, torture via a techno-beat and appallingly obnoxious lyrics is definitely an example of “bad juju.”

Besides the rosaries, Mom had only one other article of Christianity in our home: a framed photo of Jesus Christ hanging over her bed. Not one of Him on the cross, or as a baby, or weeping on the Mount in fear of His coming death; she had one of Him laughing, as if He’d just heard a funny joke.

She loved that picture so much. When I asked her why, she said, “Nobody ever shows Jesus smiling in pictures. But I know he laughed. I know he made jokes. They don’t tell us whether he did or he didn’t, but I know he did. Jesus had to have been fun to hang out with. He wouldn’t be God if he didn’t laugh sometimes.”

While that might seem like a sound argument, I have my doubts. Nobody ever shows pictures of Drill Sergeants laughing either, and there’s a reason for it.

Back in CQ, two days after it was introduced, the same electro-trash tune is still assaulting my ears:

*I feel more awesome than an awesome possum!
Dip my body in chocolate frostin’!
Three years later, wash off the frostin’!
Smellin’ like a blossom, everything is awesome....*

My palm is marked with moon-shaped indents from clenching my hands. The inside of my lip is raw from chewing. My soul is desperately trying to leave my body but my flesh keeps getting in the way. It takes every ounce of willpower not to peel it off myself.

When I think of Mom's old stories, and the unknown pianist, I begin to worry.

Hail Mary, Full of Grace, the Lord is with Thee.

Blessed art Thou amongst women and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus.

*Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death,
Amen...*

Back when I was little, I imagined earworms as funny little bugs. I pictured them as tiny, blue caterpillars, dressed in fancy clothes and carrying around Seussian-style music making devices. They'd hitch a ride to your brain on some kind of sound wave, preferably a catchy, not-very-well-liked tune; they'd get settled in and make themselves at home somewhere between your frontal and temporal lobes. Then, with no regard for your sanity, they'd kick up their feet, pull out their instrument, and play the same tune on a loop until you cracked:

Trees, frogs, clogs

They're awesome!

Rocks, clocks, and socks

They're awesome!

Figs, and jigs, and twigs

That's awesome!

Everything you see, or think, or say

Is awesome!

Now I understand that earworms can come in many shapes and sizes. Perhaps there are little blue earworms with their little conductor's outfits and their "Seussical" instruments somewhere, but I haven't found that particular breed, yet.

My earworm is 6'2", camouflage-clad, and permanently attached to a set of earplugs. That sneaky little bastard.

By day three I'm visibly shaking in my seat. At night, I dream of piano cords and napalm; if only I could sleep. The soldier next to me, who has been ripping a tiny pink eraser into smaller and smaller pieces for the past hour, nudges me gently, reminding me not to let my brains leak out on the table.

"That's what the trash is for," she says, and I agree, reaching for a tissue to sop up the mess.

And then I pray:

Hail Mary Full of Grace

Everything is Awesome

Blessed are thou amongst women

And blessed is the fruits of chocolate frosting.

Holy Mary,

Mother of Awesome Possums,

Pray for us sinners...

Right now.