

Hit Immunity

By Elif Sinem Erdem

Today's session had, as always, ended with "Macarena." Seeing the women across from her attempt to both do the steps and the noodling of limbs only made her shout louder to keep up, to really lift the knees high, the hands, up, up, up, with a wiggle of her hips in time with the chorus. Though the women were exhausted right now, sweat casting long shadows into their athleisure gear, later they would approach her and tell her this—dancing to a song they once loathed but now functioned as time capsule to a youth that they desperately tried to capture again—was the best part, the worthwhile part of the course. That, too, made Audrey happy. She was a decade younger than the women she coached, had squarely missed the phenomenon that had swept across the country for one glorious summer she wished she had lived through. But she had lived through other dance crazes: had seen the boys in her classroom dance to Soulja Boy, had participated the one time her high school year had decided to do the Harlem Shake, had been the only one clapping when "Party Rock Anthem" came on during prom.

Audrey was happy to make them remember, but couldn't shake the deep feeling of sadness from her when she went home, a twenty minute walk to a studio apartment on the fourth floor. It



was, as always, eerily still when she arrived. Her first instinct was to put on the radio: the more overfamiliar the song, the more basic, the better. Only then would she take her jacket off and open the window, make herself a sandwich as she leafed through the latest *Harper's Bazaar* issue. She barely registered the text when the music was playing. Magazine planted on her face, she moved to the beat, hands at first, then limbs, until she was doing the worm on the couch and had no

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choice but to get up on the floor and dance again. *Splat.* The magazine had fallen down. She had to laugh at herself and sat back down. Tried to be the woman that her partners saw on dates. Across from her, in the mirror, Audrey looked like a keeper.

Across the board, whether it was man, woman or in-between, in their early twenties or in the middle of their forties, white, black, brown: they had all told her that the pop music was a problem. Nudged her away from it, asked her to stop it, broke up with her for it, or altogether made a notion that anything longer than a month was off the table if she kept this up.

Once, she had been told by a literature major that her need for pop music was simply a reflection of modern society. That she wanted noise because we were, at all times, surrounded by it. To indulge in silence was sacrilegious, but necessary if we were to hear our own voices, our own thoughts. It wasn't so complicated, Audrey had told him. She looked down the street; rush hour hadn't arrived yet, but the drab gray was punctuated with cars in white, silver, and black. It wasn't that she needed noise to survive. It was that life offered nothing beyond a good hook. The literature major knew this, too. After all, he lived life from reading event to reading event, publication to publication. She wished him good

luck in booking a reading in complete silence; she had meant it, but he had taken it as an affront. Maybe he thought of her whenever he heard a pop song by accident.

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In times of dire need—when the sadness settled in and she found herself unable to escape the thoughts—she visited the man she called her dealer. This, usually, had people jump in their seats (asking themselves, *her?*), until they met Sungjin. His bulky sweatshirts hid a sunny disposition and a keen understanding of, if not devotion to, pop music. He lived for it (his words, not hers, although whenever a pop singer released a good song, he would say he's *dead* and *gagging*) and boasted a collection of records in his apartment almost entirely of pop music. Audrey recognised most of the American and British ones, but as the owner of a music store in Manhattan, he also imported various CDs.

Today, he opened the door with a grin that went to the absolute possible limit of the human face; his feet were bouncing up and down, and he had discarded his hoodie for a tank top that was

soaked through.

“If you want to enroll in aerobics—” she said.

But he held a palm out. “Girl, I texted you a *million* times,” he said with an eye roll. “You have to listen to this. You hear it once...” He shook his head; his eyes widened from the explosion of emotion he witnessed inside, then closed. “Gagged. Dead. Song of the summer. Song of the year. Song of the century.”

Sungjin rushed into his apartment, far more cramped than hers, though they were neighbors, and kicked a couple of vinyls out of his way. Audrey was a little slower, but eventually arrived at the laptop where Sungjin hovered over it, perched and with a feverish glint to his eyes.

“You ready?” Sungjin asked.

He hit play before she answered and left the laptop as if scalded.

She saw a group of girls in position. Audrey met Sungjin’s eyes and grinned. Girl groups made the best music; this was obvious to them both. But the song didn’t come. Where was the song? Sungjin didn’t stop grinning. He started to dance like the girls did, but it soon turned to mush, the sort of noodling that tube men do. His eyes were closed, his mouth singing along. He didn’t notice that Audrey scooted closer to the video, hovered over it to check how long it was. It was a three-minute song, and so far, they had listened to two minutes of it. It was not muted. The laptop’s music was at maximum volume.

She didn’t hear any of it.

She pressed her lobes against her ear. Heard

the rush of her blood underneath, the force she exerted. When she released them, it came with a muted plop. The video had stopped and suggested new videos. Audrey clicked on one of them without thinking – a Korean pop song started playing, something reminiscent of the R&B that was popular in her childhood. She heard that. She heard the song just fine.

“What are you doing?” Sungjin asked. He pushed her aside and clicked back to the song, the name of which was so simple that Audrey forgot it as soon as she read it. “Did you not *like* it?”

“No, I...” She heard him just fine. Heard her own voice just fine. She was certain she was not suffering from sudden hearing loss. In that case, the song was entirely in mute, but Sungjin had danced, he had sung along. “Was that even in English?”

Sungjin took a few steps back, his eyebrows furrowed, arms crossed. The song was playing, and Audrey made sure she watched the video, in which the teenage girls were mouthing to the song and dancing in a circle. There was no doubt a song here, a pop hit that detonated as reliably as any other. And she knew it was a reliable hit because even in a state of anger, Sungjin was still mouthing along to it. He closed his eyes at what she supposed was the chorus. He wouldn’t *fool* her, would he? He wouldn’t just play nothing and call it song of the century, let alone be gagged, dead.

There was nothing happening in the music video that she could describe as unique. There

were no boys, only dancing in various studios to outfits she would describe as cute in an outré way. The dancing itself seemed pulled from aerobic exercises and hip hop, complete with a split, the sort many girl group music videos featured nowadays. The girls looked indistinguishably cute and feminine, all sporting brown hair that trailed behind them in long, glossy waves. If they sang about anything—Audrey found she was a horrendous lip-reader in this short timespan—it was no doubt about the first brush of teenage infatuation. But these were details. All this could be amended with the melody, the strength of the song.

Audrey decided to guess. “It reminds me of ‘Call Me Maybe’ a bit.”

He raised his eyes and kissed his teeth. “I don’t know if that’s a good comparison.” She only knew that the song was over when he peeled his eyes away from the screen and turned to her for good, mouth ever so slightly ajar. He didn’t seem upset so much as befuddled. “You really didn’t like this?”

She couldn’t hear it! Part of her wanted to shout it to Sungjin, just to see how he would react, but what if he sang the song and she still couldn’t hear it? Maybe he was making fun of her. It was possible the website had glitched, and he was waiting for her to notice that there was no melody, and he was singing along because he knew the song all along. Sungjin had not made jokes to her of that nature, but people changed and everything could become a pleasant memory

of old if somebody tried hard enough. Audrey took a deep breath. “I think it’s a grower,” she said, “for sure.”

“Grower.” Sungjin kissed his teeth again. “More like ‘Skyscraper’. It’s giving Burj Khalifa. But sure, girl, you do you. Still *growing* on you. I’m just...” he opened his arms in an invitation. “I thought you’d get it right away! You’re asking questions like...”

Like a white woman, a *bigot*, it went unspoken. She felt his hurt in her chest, a needle that clattered in a pile of them.

She glanced back at the screen, made sure to note the name and song to listen on her own device. “Let’s listen to something else,” she suggested. This worked for two Lady Gaga songs—and Sungjin wrapped his arms around her appreciatively as they belted along—and one Korean pop song that Audrey tried her best to sing along to, but then Sungjin went back to the silent song, and Audrey slipped away, excusing herself for some date she apparently forgot. She knew that he knew she was lying to him.

Back in her apartment, she forgot what the group were called, and she blocked Sungjin just so she couldn’t ask him.

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She began to avoid the apartment complex, both his apartment and her own. The time that Audrey would usually spend in Sungjin’s apartment listening to pop music and dancing with him she

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started to spend in Target instead. Inside the store, she heard every piece of pop music that was popular ten, fifteen, twenty years ago (Michael Jackson, who died when she was thirteen, was still in rotation) and occasionally would hear new pop music that was already old to her because she heard it all before it got popular. It wasn't an exact replacement, she was aware. But it came close, and she spent far more time browsing the aisles than she did in her own apartment, trying to dance when nobody but the camera saw it.

One of the women in the course asked her if she was going through a break-up. "It's in the eyes, you see," she said. Audrey said no and laughed it off. She couldn't break up with a gay man. But she did think of moving nowadays. She stayed outside for longer so she wouldn't have to meet him in the elevator. Once, just before falling asleep, her brain imagined a scenario in which she met Sungjin in the elevator. It would be sometime Friday night, when she went out and drank a little too much wine. She'd see him and say, you tried to scam me, didn't you? That song isn't a song. Upon saying it, he started to shout at her, but what he said exactly her brain couldn't come up with. They had never argued before. She had no

idea what he'd say. Maybe he'd call her a white woman for good this time. In either case, it made her stop drinking wine. The less she was compelled to talk about the Episode, the better.

(She called it the Episode now. Sungjin would appreciate it.)

The great benefit of pop music was that it was everywhere. Not in the sense of fairies—which one had to be trained for, or even believe in. It was in every store she went into. It was at the checkout when she bought groceries. Sometimes people played acoustic covers of pop music on the streets. Pop was the most accessible of magic spells, because like a spell, one had to repeat a string of words, and like an incantation, it worked something improbable on the body, a sensation akin to fever, an illness that sedated the brain and worked every limb to the extreme.

Over at Target, the music would pause. Not for too long—only long enough to ask the manager to come to the register, for example. But about a month after the Episode, a month where Audrey tried to get used to her new equilibrium, the pauses would stretch on for minutes, leaving the store closer to a warehouse than an actual store she liked to visit. It raised the goosebumps

on Audrey's skin.

On the third time this happened within an hour, she approached an employee and asked the young man if there was any problem with the sound system.

He furrowed his eyebrows. "There's music playing, miss," he said.

She tilted her head up. "I . . . what song?"

"Uhh, not too sure of its name, but it went viral. Guess it's now on the radio too." The deflated tone of his voice and the way in which his shoulders were raised only to drop them dramatically reminded Audrey of the many times she listened to one pop song a million times. He was sick of hearing it. He heard it.

"Does it come with a dance?" she asked. "You know, like Soulja Boy, or . . ."

He looked away, then back at her, and blinked several times like he was asked to explain the sky.

"Never mind," she said, laughing. "I know that song. Just took me a while. Horrible, right?"

"It's quite good, actually," he murmured, but he passed her by.

Audrey whipped up her phone and lifted it high to record. When an ad jingle started to play, she stopped it. On the graph, she saw movement. She played it. Nothing. She played it at high volume. Silence.

"Miss," the young man called. "Please turn down the music?"

The recording ended by itself, but she found she couldn't move. A trap door had opened up, and her soul had been sucked inside, leaving her

body frozen by itself, unsure of its next move. There was music and she couldn't hear it, none of it.

Audrey locked her phone and walked out of the Target. She walked in a way that was entirely too fast and hurt the shins in her legs; though she didn't run, her breath eventually came in short gasps. She sat down in a coffee shop and heard pleasant jazz music that was not meant to be identified. Focusing on it brought a part of her soul back in her body.

Would this store play the song? Would all stores do it? How popular was this song, really? She closed her eyes and listened to her own breathing. She had always assumed her alienation came from the seriousness with which she committed to her choices, her preference to stick to the bold and blatant. That had come with its own gift, an indelible prize that kept her steadfast. Now it felt as though the choice had transformed the whole of her body, left her incapable of experiencing things that other people, *all* people, did—on the very thing that she had chosen to love the most for the longest.

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True to the Target employee's word, the song had spread like wildfire across social media. Audrey scrolled Instagram, a place she didn't often visit as it left her as shriveled as a raisin inside, and found videos that seemingly had sound, but played no music when she unmuted it. Every

single time she made sure to remember the name, and every single time she forgot anew, leaving her with the same unpleasant sensation as before. She put her phone at maximum volume and forgot that she had done so until a barrage of videos (time lapses of drawings, slow motions of waterfalls, get-ready-with-me videos) was broken by an advertisement that loudly asked her if she was interested in disrobing a female celebrity. Audrey shrieked, her heart racing as she muted her phone.

It was the same on TikTok. She assumed, initially, that it was the same with the sound on TikTok, anyway, until she came across a silent dance that was done with no leg movement at all, only with arms and hands. In some videos, it was two people in their rooms; in others, it was a group of people in a strange delay; still others, this one possibly taken in South Korea, it was a small congregation of people, twenty people at most, that made this lifting and sinking of arms in sync. It reminded her a little of the flash mobs that Audrey had, as best as she was able, joined and danced along to with her friends. She had even organised one, to “Gangnam Style,” which was how she and Sungjin—a friend of her high school boyfriend—had met in the first place. It had been fun, sure, a great deal of sweat and organizational exhaustion. She would do it again, any time, just not to this song.

She googled it. Google recommended the song and sent her a bunch of reviews that called the song “unlike anything ever conceived”, “a

true marvel”, and “wildly original”. She closed her laptop with an unkind whack to the lid.

She dreamed that Sungjin was talking to her. She couldn’t hear what he said, and when she asked him, the employee over at Target told her that they were shouting; she found herself in a crowded supermarket full of people that were staring at both of them. Sungjin, eyes wide, turned around and left, shaking his head all the while. Audrey wanted to tell him that she was sorry, but she got so angry that it glued her lips shut and brought tears to her eyes; she woke up with her top drenched in sweat.

She called her doctor and decided to tell him about it. He told her, in an unflappable, almost demeaning tone, that she should visit the ENT. She called her ENT after spending about fifteen minutes googling the person nearest to her that her healthcare would just about cover. She was told by an affable secretary—a middle-aged woman that she vaguely recognised—that Dr Abdullah would be available for her in a month, at about 1pm, if that was fine for her. Unless it was an emergency?

“I can’t hear,” Audrey said.

The pause was thick. “Pardon?” the woman asked.

“I, uh . . .” Audrey had the nonsensical hope that the song wouldn’t be out of fashion by then so she could explain to her ENT what was happening. She felt brittle these days, started to feel vague nausea when going to her job. She felt even worse at the idea that Sungjin was gone

from her life, or at least around but erased from close proximity.

She could go to the hospital and declare herself an emergency and feel guilty that she declared her state of mind an emergency while people would sit there with broken bones or worse and wait for anyone, anyone at all, to look at them. She had no problems. She only had . . .

“Miss Audrey, did you say you couldn’t hear?” the secretary asked.

“I— I— No,” Audrey said. “No. Sorry. I, it was just something with my operator. It was kind of weird just now. I hear you just fine.”

“You hear me just fine.” The secretary sighed in contentment. “I’m looking forward to class tomorrow! You know, I was just wondering, since you’re so interested in pop music. . .”

Audrey had to sit down. Already, her body felt weak. Already she felt bile rise up her throat, a sense of the world spinning in the opposite direction, a sense of silence, a silence that felt like a curse.

“Would you be willing to play this song? It’s called—”

As soon as the secretary said it, she forgot. By now, this was how she knew it was the song she couldn’t hear. “I. . . I’m not. It’s nothing personal. I just don’t want anyone to feel excluded, you see.”

The secretary didn’t mind, or at least made another affable, friendly laugh that let Audrey know a businesswoman understood another businesswoman, but that she was, deep down,

disappointed, befuddled, that she would go for any obscure, highly catchy pop music, just not the one track that was actually popular and demanded.

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Dr Abdullah declared her fine. She didn’t, in the end, tell him about the specific deafness she got from the song. By this point, silence ruled her social media feed, every store she visited. It was, at all times, no longer than three minutes before other music resumed. It dulled her, the silence. She didn’t find herself within it, only sank deeper into a bog that stretched on for most of the summer. Her heart wasn’t in any of the movements she made; soon, she stopped sweating up and down on the steps, and began to make the exercises in a playlist that her coworker—heavily into boxing—compiled. Rock filled her hours. Nobody quite enjoyed it, and nobody quite found the heart to tell her the obvious.

Audrey sat in her apartment, the only place she knew was silent in earnest. The pages of any magazine she bought turned blank when she looked at them. Would she end up with a whole profile if she ever told any journalist that cared that she couldn’t hear the song, nor tell how the dance went? Her fifteen minutes of fame, branded as a hater of pop music, a philistine in the true sense of the word, an anomaly.

She texted her music critic ex for

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recommendations. She was surprised she got any, but she found the songs somewhat drab and without any hooks that she could hum along to. They weren't even by celebrities. She had told him that her clearest memory of pop music was when Madonna kissed Britney Spears, but it apparently fell on deaf ears.

He did ask her what she thought of the new song. What new song, she asked. She couldn't read what he sent; it seemed like a bug in her phone, a glitch that prevented it from being read. The YouTube link went nowhere. She knew at once what it was.

She blocked him. Part of her immediately decided to text Sungjin about it, maybe to laugh, maybe to get chided that she had texted an ex (breaking a sacred rule of Dua Lipa's New Rules), but she realised she had blocked him. She hadn't seen him at all lately. She wouldn't be surprised if his sales had exponentially risen in the store from all the imported CDs. Maybe he had, like she had seen in her youth, made mixtapes based around that song. Three minutes of silence, followed by actual pop music. The realisation that she wouldn't get one made her cry, suddenly, ferociously, in a way that shook her body from her limbs to her back, making her convulse,

almost, on her couch, spilling wet hot tears all over the magazines in a loud, fat *splat*.

Pop music was everywhere. This song wasn't all there was to pop. Audrey took the C-Train to St-Port Authority, then walked to Times Square. She walked without headphones, hoping that, somewhere, somehow, she would end up with the most ebullient pop music possible from one of the most visited places on Planet Earth. Maybe the way to live her life, the blatant and bold way she had aspired to be, was in being a tourist as a local, in trying everything obvious to truly subsume herself to a mode of living in which she would finally, somehow, hear the music that had been barred from her, like the way sometimes a toilet clogged and flushed fine the next time.

At Times Square, nothing moved.

It did move, but in a way that required standing still; rows and rows of people, standing there, looking in every kind of direction, moving their hands to an imaginary beat, up, up, then down. A swiping, a sudden pointing up. Then down and back again. If this was for some world record, she wasn't sure. She heard silent huffs out, the gentle rustling of clothes, the wind rushing through legs and arms in a hurry. She wasn't asked to dance, but more than once she

caught a glance that let her know she was meant to, eventually, *somehow*, from the music she couldn't hear. Audrey glanced at her phone and recorded it. But if there was a line, now, she would start screaming. The weakness seized her again. She couldn't bear the thought of being this different, this out of step, in such a massive moment.

Audrey clenched her fists. She unblocked Sungjin and prayed that he wasn't mad at her, or not mad enough to not pick up the phone. Ring . . . the dance seemed almost complimentary with this sound. Ring . . . an undulation, a gentleness, that she hadn't seen earlier. Ring . . .

"Hello?"

She took a deep breath from her mouth. "Can you come pick me up?" she asked. It was all she managed before a knot closed her throat shut. The next noise she made was a strangled nothing.

"Yeah. Yeah, drop the pin."

She hung up and sent him her location. She stared at the pin. Part of her wished to call every person she knew, just so the movements made sense. Part of her wished to copy them, and when she followed the movements—they were not particularly hard—she felt even more aware of how little she heard, of how close everyone was around her now, closing in on her, moving like weeds to a song that surely couldn't be this slow to dance to. She slowly backed away.

"Ow!"

Someone behind her, one hand pointed

upward, another in the shape of a gun.

"Sorry!" she called. She started to back away more, but every time she tried to turn around, she found she couldn't. If she looked away now, she would forever look away, listen away, rather, from her one true love. She would have to say goodbye to it. Who was she when she wasn't into this? The people around her looked blank-faced, a little heated, the arms no longer going as high as they could from exhaustion. She would have to say goodbye to that place, too, the point where thought stopped and movement led to a gentle exhaustion that was a restful sleep.

She wasn't sure for how long she crept back, but she eventually ran against a back and two hands that held her on her shoulders. "Careful," Sungjin said, moving next to her without quite looking at her, only at the slowing movements ahead of him. His mouth closed, his eyebrows furrowed, and he shook his head.

"Do you hear it?" she asked. "The song."

Sungjin didn't respond right away. When she looked at him, the confusion had ceded to something more distant, as if in a dream. "Girl, I'm not even sure," he said eventually. "I swear at some point it was a song, and I thought it was great, but...what was it? What did it give?"

Audrey used her phone recorder, lifting it high to the sky. She waited a few seconds, then brought it back down. The whole time, the recording line was flat.

Something close to relief washed over her. It made her laugh in either case. They were dancing

to nothing right now. She wasn't totally insane.

“Ehh, Macarena,” she murmured, and watched the line jerk ever so slightly.

Sungjin laughed. He wrapped his arms around her and moved her out from the crowd. She leaned into his touch, finding strength in her legs again, her lungs, as they walked back to the subway station.

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The song did indeed exist; it was a pop track of about two minutes with a quick little beat and a coy vocal performance. Love you, love you all the time, up in the sky, down by your side, went the chorus. But the performance at Times Square had, indeed, been conducted in silence, due to an audio malfunction. Everyone she had seen had worn headphones, making it the first time a flash mob was organised in the style of silent disco.

By the time Audrey heard it, the song's vitality had long passed. It ceased being played on the radio, no longer soundtracked any shop nor social media, and nobody seemed interested in mentioning it. Here and there she saw children dance to it, but they seemed about the only people that still were. She heard it entirely by accident, when, on a long run, the podcast she listened to brought it up briefly, just a snippet. It

didn't sound like something she'd enjoy, or care about. She, too, was embarrassed by her emotional outburst that summer. It felt so juvenile to care, to feel as deeply as she had.

So did Sungjin, who, following the Episode, had gone from selling pop records to albums from around the world, decidedly not “world music” but nonetheless frequented by the kinds of people that felt better when they listened to the mainstream of another country, like a souvenir to flaunt at home. She rarely visited him; they did not talk about music anymore, and it seemed weird to talk about rent and inflation with a sincere smile, anyhow.

When she needed a fix, she chose to listen to drone music; music her new boyfriend, who worked at Wall Street, didn't understand but respected. Within those deep, long stretches of nothing, she felt the void. Maybe if she listened to it for long enough, she'd find her soul again. Or the place where the first song was, the original that Sungjin heard, the building of towering height.

For now, she ran, and at the first sight of a guitarist covering a pop song, she pressed her hands against her ears, knowing the pop would come eventually.

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