**The Cassette**

**By Quentin Stuckey**

There were too many cassettes in the fifty-cent store bin, you almost wanted to jump in and take a dip. Dust flying up in your face as your arms would stroke through each enormous pile. Too bad you didn’t even know how to swim. So many damn cassettes and none of them appealed to you. The grey-haired store clerk waddled over and announced that he was about to close up for the night. You pleaded for him to give you ten more minutes. He jangled his store keys impatiently and asked you why you required ten more minutes to swim through this sea of disregarded tapes. You told him about Margot and how she was about to leave you if you didn’t buy her a new cassette tape. You told him precisely how a single tape could bring about love, fulfillment and erase all the pain you had caused her. He raised one eye brow. He told you to get the fuck out.

Once you got the fuck out of there, you tied up your shoe laces to prepare yourself for the marathon ahead. You thought back to that one time at lunch when Margot gazed up at you from her bowl of soup and declared that one day she saw herself owning a thick stack of cassettes, and a few dogs. You weren’t about to go out and buy a dog, so you laid all that cash out in front of the music store clerk the next day and said:

“I’ll take all of them.”

You couldn’t understand the appeal of cassette tapes. The foul, plastic stench with the dual sided reels-extremely analog. Vinyl had more character. There was that one time you broke her coffee mug because she despised the sound of *American Teen* as it spun on the vinyl player you bought her. Maybe you overreacted. You ended up returning the vinyl player. She was still pretty pissed about the mug. It was the only one left which you hadn’t smashed…until that argument. You never replaced any of her mugs. But, even then, she was still there. Even if she was mugless. She was there when you spent the early hours of the morning crying outside of her building. She would stroke your hair, check your wrists for red marks and tell you that you were better than good. That you were grand. The only thing you ever did for her was purchase copious amounts of cassettes, and you felt that would’ve been enough. Hell, it should’ve been enough. Margot loved her cassettes. Where could you ever hope to find love if there was no Margot in your life?

You had invited her to come to Adam’s house party the night before you tried to convince the store clerk for an extra ten minutes. You had met her through Adam after their first and only date didn’t pan out. He almost formally requested that you bring her. She said she had made plans with Susan. You knew that was bullshit, she hadn’t spoken to her since Susan’s mother had slept with her father-putting a damper on their friendship. You spent the majority of the party sitting alone on the couch, rubbing the empty cushion planted next to you. Then you started drinking.

After yelling at Adam’s ceiling fan and spilling your drink on some fucker’s white shoes, you wanted to call it a night and stumbled along in hot pursuit of a bed. It had occurred to you that his parent’s bedroom was usually down towards the end of the hall. But which direction did you have to go? Was it on the right side or the left side? Fuck, you couldn’t even fathom any sense of direction. You hoped that Margot was having a miserable time with Susan. You, eventually, took the chance and walked right into the first room you toppled into: Adam’s sister’s.

She kept asking you if the party was still going on as you sat on the edge of her bed. She was only a year younger than you, but you could feel the difference in age. You noticed a slight hissy slur each time she spoke and you suddenly remembered that she had been at the party too but decided to turn in early. She clenched your hand and insisted that you could crash on her floor. She just wanted to get changed first, she didn’t realize that she had fallen asleep in a tank top and jeans. She slipped off those jeans slowly but removed her tank top quickly. You got an eye full of Adam’s sister. The following morning you wish you hadn’t thrown your clothes out in the hallway. That was how Adam found out. He phoned Margot right away.

You kept calling her. Calling her. Calling her. Calling her. Calling her. No answer. She would respond to a text from you every so often, but she refused to see you. It was nine o’clock, you decided to make one final phone call before leaving her alone for the night. She answered after a mere two rings. That surprised you.

“No.”

“Please. I just want to have a conversation.”

“I don’t want to see you.”

“Let me come over for ten minutes.”

“Why should I?”

You scratched your head so loudly you were certain she heard it.

“Because I love you. That’s why.”

There was silence on the other end.

“Okay. Ten minutes,” she sighed.

If only you had gotten her a new tape, but that damn clerk wouldn’t give you an extra ten minutes. After lacing up your shoes, you sprinted to Margot’s apartment building. Your shoes hardly grazed the cement of the city streets. Eventually you came to the intersection of her building. You had made it. You were ready to win Margot back. The light turned a neon green and you thought that meant: GO, STREPHON, GO! You never saw the car coming towards you. The driver swerved as you cowered down in the middle of the intersection. The car in the other lane was t-boned instantly, car parts flinging helplessly in the air. The rubber of smoky, black tires seeping into your nostrils as you cradled your head beneath the chaos. The formidable thud of an airborne body striking the pavement, you swore you heard it land next to you. A police officer knelt down, asking you to get on your feet. She escorted you to a paramedic who asked if you needed medical attention. A stranger tapped you on the shoulder, informing you that both drivers were either dead or dying. They could all go fuck themselves. You ran over to Margot’s apartment building. She was probably sitting upstairs, all alone with her cassette collection. You hoped that she was missing you. Damn it, if only that clerk had given you ten more minutes!

You arrived. There were cigarette butts in her ashtray. A smoke detector laid on the floor in the corner by the doorway. She had quit smoking years ago.

“I know I screwed up,” you said.

“Is that all you have to say to me?” she crossed her arms.

“No. I have a lot to say. I just don’t know where to begin.”

She walked over to her shelf of cassette tapes, rubbing the edges of the wood sensually, as if you weren’t in the room. You had built her that shelf. You had bought every tape alphabetized on that shelf. As far as you were concerned, all she needed to be happy was the mere presence of that shelf. What more could you possibly provide her with? Maybe if that clerk had given you ten more minutes, you could’ve added to her collection. She stopped fondling the shelf and turned towards you. Her bottom lip quivered as you moved closer, your arms ready to embrace all her pain. You hugged her, even when she resisted.

Things seemed to be improving for you Strephon. You were really making some head way. Fuck yes! You started to examine the shelf you had built as you were comforting her. You started naming each title one by one, recalling where and when you had purchased each tape. You felt sort of proud of yourself. But…then you came across a cassette you didn’t recognize. It was a Kate Bush tape. You detested Kate Bush’s music. Margot should’ve too.

“Where did that come from?” you pointed.

She wiggled out of your arms.

“What are you talking about?”

“The Kate Bush tape. I never bought that for you.”

“So?” she shrugged.

“Who bought it for you?”

A cigarette appeared in her hand. She lit it with the lighter resting on her stereo.

“Adam asked me if I was busy today. I told him I wasn’t, so he took me shopping. We went into this antique shop,” she said, inhaling smoke between each word.

“I came across that cassette and he bought it for me. To cheer me up. What’s the big deal?”

The red neon flashing light of rescue workers from down below began to fill her space. Those drivers were probably dead by now, you could feel it. You grabbed the Kate Bush tape and began playing it on her stereo, listening to the opening track for a quick twenty seconds. You disliked what you heard. It was shit. You then grabbed the stereo and with one violent toss, it landed on the street outside her building. You should’ve aimed for the scene of the car accident. It was totalled beyond repair. Just as well. You always hated that stereo. But you weren’t about to buy her a new one.