



PHOTO BY ERICA ZHAO

# 9 AM WAFFLES AND SHOWER CURTAIN RINGS: A LOVE LETTER

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by MARK ELLIOTT

Like creatures inhabiting native legends and more than a few drunk-at-the-end-of-the-bar testimonials, society calls us creative types by many names. Some of those names; dreamer, passionate, and star, feel good across the shoulders, like a broken-in jean jacket or a midnight lover's arm. While other names; freeloader, egomaniac, and sellout, send us shoulders first into the ground like a sledgehammer drives a railroad spike. All those names are true, and all those names are false. They are painfully honest lies. Honest, because artists are all those beautiful and terrible things. But lies too, because like any human being, especially artists, you cannot boil the soul down to something as superficial as a label.

Creatives exist in the gray areas between those labels. We

own the shadows making up the not-quites and the more-thans. We are writers, singers, musicians, painters, potters, and sculptors. We are composers, filmmakers, actresses, designers, and photographers. And we are artisans of work I cannot imagine and may never know. What we are not though, and all due respect to them, are shower curtain-ring salesmen. I relate to the salesmen part because to be an artist of any type, is to be a salesman, if only to yourself. But we creative types cannot separate ourselves from what we sell (or too many times, give away.) Our product is blood and bone, not plastic. Our creation is spiritual and not singularly utilitarian. Our merchandise will not keep water from spilling on the bathroom floor but may well keep someone from caring in the least that it did.

Though I won't argue the merits of a good commission and some degree of personal pride at being able to sell a homeowner or a big box store on a brand of shower curtain rings, losing the sale doesn't strike me like a body blow or soul-killing turn. Not being able to separate ourselves from what we sell may be the Achilles heel of all creatives.

Rejection is the oxygen artists breathe. It is not to be avoided but embraced. It is not to be hidden but held up. Wear it as a badge of honor. Brandish it as street cred. We must feed on rejection like a marathoner does pasta. Rejection makes you taller by cutting your knees out from under you, stronger by vanquishing your soul, and humbled by being an ever-constant morning-face mirror. Embrace rejection. Drink it down.

Make love to it, control it when you can, but on your mother's grave, never allow rejection and failure to sit as judge and jury of your worthiness. You're not strong enough for that, nor should you be. You're too innocent for that and thank God you are.

As artists, especially touring artists (no matter the medium,) we often find ourselves too something for someone. Too country, too rock, too folk, too rap, too white, too black, and always it seems, way too loud! We are too conventional and too out there. We are too plain, gauche, boring, and edgy. We are too yesterday and ahead of our time. And sometimes we are all those things in a single, hurtful, and ultimately untranslatable critique. I was once called, for reasons passing understanding, a devil-worshipping atheist. That's what I'm talking about. Can you really be both?

But sometimes, the stars align, as do the needs of the artist and the audience. In a moment, we become the music to someone's ears and the joyful puzzle piece missing in a stranger's life. You know how that feels. Every artist does. Pain and pleasure are twins, and you learn to love them both. You can't know rejection without knowing acceptance. And the acceptance is worth the rejection. Suddenly, the long litany of dumb-ass criticisms, smartly-worded takedowns, and nauseating moments of nothingness you've endured, fade like early morning mist on a river. You are left with blue skies, bright sunlight, and a cool breeze carrying you for days, weeks, and months.

Hell, I've been known to ride upon a momentary soul connection or whispered compliment for years. We are fragile, yes, but ultimately frugal in our needs. At the slightest hint of validation, we pack our guitars, backpacks, and merchandise in a car barely worth fifty percent of what it holds, and head into the unknown. We drive out of town on highways we promised ourselves the week before, we would never travel again. And we risk losing what we've won because we realize that standing still is never worth the ground we stand upon.

When at our best, we are drug dealers, peddling planetary highs and marrow-deep lows. We deliver our drug, not with needles or glass pipes, but with guitars, pianos, drums, and whatever last-minute instrument we throw in the car because we have just enough room. We are carnival barkers, cajoling the skeptical with promises of joy beyond

measure and peace beyond practicality. We are painstaking librarians and grand purveyors of memory. Memories of mistakes and missed opportunities. Memories of lovers and good wine. And memories of total strangers, bypassed towns, midnight miles, and of an entire country seemingly bent on forgetting.

When at our best, we are subsistence farmers, enviable drifters, and soothsaying-card sharks. We are sentinels, and sometimes martyrs of whatever art forms we fear are endangered. We are gullible, natural-born believers in everything, capable of convincing any cynic in less than three songs. When at our best, we deliver our best in the worst of circumstances. You know what those worst of circumstances are; two people in the audience, one of them being the club owner. Fifty percent off food (not alcohol) and a door-split that would offend a beggar. A blown tire that turns



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out to be the spare, a monsoon rainstorm just before your set at a festival called Sunshine-Fest, and the two-day bout of food poisoning you got from sneaking into the headliner's green room.

When you are an artist, you must be your best on the worst of days, because Christmas, your birthday, and high-paying corporate gigs don't come around but once a year. For the other three-hundred and sixty-two days a year (not counting Leap Year) you must be a light in the dark. For that reason, and a million others, I do not fault you for your arrogance. The world takes its cut no matter who you are, or who you think you are. If you don't go into this creative life with more than your fair share of

ego and self-confidence, you will be left on a proverbial park bench with nothing but a basket-full of shit that no one else finds worthy. Reality eventually smooths the edges of ugly ego. And when it does not, the transgression is forgiven through pity alone.

This is a love letter to my fellow artists, struggling or not. You inspire me, and you scare me in a good way. I want to share a 2 AM waffle with you before we head in opposite directions. I want to believe in your lyrics and rock to your groove like a brainless cult follower. I want to write the best song I ever wrote, alone in a hotel room, after opening for you in a sold-out hall. I want to argue politics with you, agree

with your grandiose life philosophy, and listen to all your old road stories, especially the ones that aren't true. I want to share your dreams and your bed and then never see you again. Oh yeah, and I'd also love to get your agent's number before you go.

But most of all, my dear troubadours, I want you to be kind to yourself when the world is cruel. Remember, the world sometimes, most times even, is clueless of how empty it would be without you. But I know how empty my world would be without you and I hope that now, you know it too.

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