

It Really Ain't Me, Babe

by Susanna Donato

When I was 21, my relationships were Bob Dylan-themed. My off-and-on college boyfriend (let's call him Henry) was a big Dylan fan. So was another close male friend who bantered about dating me. As for me, one morning I jolted awake, suddenly in love with Dylan's music.

It was the 1990s, not the 1960s, but as I accumulated Dylan LPs from the used record store, I fretted that my Dylan mania was of an inferior variety. I envisioned political theorists and *Rolling Stone* writers dissecting Dylan's take on politics and protest. It seemed virtuous for men to stroke their chins and discuss "Masters of War" or "All Along the Watchtower." However, just as I prefer the "peace" parts of *War and Peace*, I liked "If You See Her, Say Hello" better than "The Times They Are A-Changing."

That was okay. I was young. Love songs were applicable. And after weeks of intellectual discussions about *Blonde on Blonde*, it was only natural that I'd quote Dylan as a mutual reference point when I wrote Henry an ultimatum about our long-distance relationship. I suggested the fineness of not thinking twice. I assured him he hadn't wasted my precious time. Underneath, I hoped he'd realize how much I loved him, and come around.

But as weeks turned into months of silence, it dawned on me: I'd either misjudged Henry or underestimated his ability to not think twice.

Dylan would move on, I told myself, and so I dated (and dated, and dated). After I found fault with the third boy in five months, I swore off men. No guys. No sex. (Well... no. No sex.) I ate salad. I swung my arms when I walked. I read five novels, went to the art

museum twice, cleaned my apartment, and took a bath in my stupid tub where I could hear pigeons in the airshaft. I painted my toenails red for me alone.

One vulnerable weekend, I called Henry. Maybe I wanted him back. Maybe I was just afraid to be without him. While I waited for him to come to the phone, my terrified heart bumped in my chest.

“It’s good to hear your voice,” he said.

We talked for half an hour. He liked his job, his life. When we hung up, I was happy that he was happy. Familiarity lulled me. I thought we’d at least be friends again. But he never called back.

I waited to hear from him without precisely waiting. I told myself I was copacetic, cool, until the evening when I took a pint of Ben & Jerry’s Rainforest Crunch ice cream out of my freezer. One year before, I remembered, I’d watched from his fire escape while Henry crossed the street to buy this, our favorite flavor.

I told myself Dylan wouldn’t care, man, and neither did I. I carved a fat swirl of caramel from the carton and let salty-sweet vanilla freeze the roof of my mouth while I tried to ignore even saltier tears stinging my sinuses. I shook a finger at myself in the mirror. *I’m over him*, I was going to say aloud, but instead I sobbed. Melted ice cream drooled from my mouth and pooled around a candy-coated Brazil nut on my comforter. The boys I’d burned through had been distractions. I hadn’t finished mourning Henry.

At some point during the wallowing that followed, my stack of Dylan albums made me think of Henry, and thinking of him made me drop the needle on “It Ain’t Me Babe.”

Honestly, I was looking for an out. I wanted to toughen up, punch myself on the arm like a bro, have wise insights about things not meant to be. I’d take comfort in having been the one who’d walked away. (I was, technically, even though it was more like I’d stomped outside and he’d quietly locked the door behind me.)

But on the hardwood floor, a thin cotton Indian rug little cushion for my bones, tears ran down my temples.

Then they stopped. I cupped icy hands over my eyes. Dylan had driven a spike of truth straight into my brain.

I hadn't walked away. I wasn't the free spirit. No. I was "Babe."

I am, in fact, the woman in all of Dylan's best love songs. I'm the grasping, clinging, demanding one, the soul-sucker who wants a man's heart and soul beating for her alone.

My tears dried because I was shocked raw, too ashamed to cry anymore. I'd always tried to tell myself and the world I was tough, like the bold individualist narrator of the songs. Instead I was the weak one. I lay humiliated, wishing I were different.

And yet something about knowing oneself heals, even when it hurts.

I'm needy, I whispered. I put my hands down to my sides, felt the ridges of the woven cotton rug. *I need. I want.*

I'd have to say it again, a thousand times, a million. I'll probably have to remind myself until I die, because I'd rather be tough. But I want to love. I need to love, whether the way or the amount is sanctioned or not. Whether anyone else thinks that's right. Whether or not the object of my love can take it.

I finally got it. When it came to Henry, I wished he could, I wanted him to, but he couldn't accept the love I had to give. And that was it.

We were put on this earth with different migration patterns. That's how it was, and that's why it was the end.

Henry got to be Dylan. I had to be Babe.

I cried for a while, but when I stopped I was washed clean. The tears burned. They left a scar. I think it may be permanent – twenty years later, I still feel its puckered edges – but it's a scar, not a wound, and there's honor in that.

I hope even Dylan might think so.