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The Space Between Before and After
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Soundtrack for *The Space Between Before and After*
 (Songs that inspired the characters)

On a sunny afternoon in the early eighties when I was working in New York, I walked around the campus of Columbia University listening to John Mellencamp (actually, I think he might have still been John Cougar at that point) on my Walkman. I'd moved to Manhattan from North Carolina after college and on that particular day, I was feeling homesick and lonely.

The song "Hand To Hold On To" began to play. The lyrics suggest that everybody needs somebody to count on, and that it doesn't have to be somebody particularly strong or wealthy, simply someone who cares—a hand to hold on to.

At that very moment, I looked across campus to find the most delightful sight. A group of preschool kids, on some kind of field trip. They trailed off in a line of connected hands that began and ended with a teacher. With the music tight inside my head, I watched all those hand-holding four-year-olds stretching across the campus lawn in the bright daylight, and I realized that a small narrative was playing out right in front of me.

At that time, my fiction writing consisted of scenes and vignettes, character studies, of sorts. I decided that it would be helpful, in my own creative process, to listen to music as a way of fleshing out the emotional lives of the characters. The songs helped me then and still help me today to define the essential selves of the people who populate my imagination and, eventually, my books.

I thought it might be fun to share my own working soundtrack for the characters in *The Space Between Before and After*. I will follow each song with a brief explanation of how the music brought me closer to each character.

Hollyanne:

"Walking on the Moon" by The Police: Hollyanne longs to feel that her mother and her sister are somewhere together, happy and safe. There is a bouncy, child-like cadence to this song, and lyrics that speak of an almost magical reunion "on the moon." "Stand Back" by Fleetwood Mac: The gut-wrenching plea of someone who has been rejected, and is left vulnerable, but also angry to her very core. Stevie Nicks' long, echoing wail, "take me home." near the end captures the heartbreaking essence of the defiant little Hollyanne.

Holli:

"The Long and Winding Road" by The Beatles: The journey in the song isn't a joyful homecoming, but a satisfying and necessary one. Holli must always circle back to Thaxton, Texas—to take ownership of her life before—in order to make sense of the future.

"You Can Close Your Eyes" by James Taylor: Holli's theme song as a mother. Maybe it's because James Taylor's voice has soothed me through some of my roughest times, but this adult lullaby holds for me all the comfort that a mother would want to offer when her nearly grown child finds himself with significant troubles.

"Strong Enough" by Sheryl Crow: Poor Harrison. Suffering not only for his own failings, but also for the mistakes made by Holli's father. As I developed him, I came to understand his flaws, but also to admire his steady presence as Holli fights with all her inner demons.

"The Great Beyond" by R.E.M.: My favorite song for Holli. The metaphor of a magician in a manic series of parlor tricks trying to keep momentum flowing in a search for spiritual answers. This helped me to define the thrill and exhaustion of keeping everything in life just barely balanced while chasing answers to the really big questions.

Conner:

"Steady, As She Goes" (Acoustic Version) by The Raconteurs: (The *other* band of Jack White of The White Stripes) The song came out long after I'd written the initial draft of the book, but it seemed to be *singing* Conner's story. As I edited his chapters, this drew me in more tightly to Conner's mindset.

"Romeo and Juliet" by Dire Straits: Naïve, earnest and lovesick, this urban Romeo wants an adult relationship, but he's ill equipped to deal with the reality that he has created. Even so, he never ceases to try, and to hope.

Kilian:

"Fountain of Sorrow" by Jackson Browne: Browne's opening description of the girl in the picture—seemingly carefree, but with a "trace of sorrow"—defined Kilian for me. All the big themes are here. Among them, the idea of taking flight to escape unnamed fears. Some of Browne's songs are novels played out in the span of minutes.

Raine:

"Hurt" by Nine Inch Nails, as covered by Johnny Cash: A gorgeous piece of self-recrimination, this cover benefits from the trembling qualities inherent in Cash's aging voice. In this song, I could hear the pain Raine endured after decades of keeping her secret.

"Landslide" by Fleetwood Mac: Almost too obvious to mention, but it is such a quiet, beautiful anthem of accepting change.

Harrison:

"Sky Blue and Black" by Jackson Browne: Baffled as to exactly what happened to his marriage, Harrison is nevertheless willing to step up and be there for Holli. Even as a post-mortem on a relationship, this is a love song. Jackson Browne in pain equals genius.

Ray/Georgia:

"Angels Would Fall" by Melissa Etheridge: No one gets all-consuming desire like Melissa Etheridge. Even—maybe especially— the kind of physical wanting that leaves everyone else around wounded or worse. That's the place where Ray and Georgia begin with each other, and it destroys the known world for both of them— as well as for Hollyanne.

Conner/Killian:

"You Can Sleep While I Drive" by Melissa Etheridge: The narrator in this song wants to care for her partner, but also needs that person with a kind of desperation. She proposes taking flight away from wherever they are and has a plan for how to get along. In the beginning, the caretaker is Conner. But by the end, Killian in her own way, takes control, trying to do the right things for Conner. Holli/Harrison:

"Moondance" by Van Morrison: Holli and Harrison's early life, first in college and then in Houston when Harrison worked for NASA had an impulsive, spontaneous quality. I see the two of them as having been able to capture (and holding the desire to somehow recapture) all the romance and whimsy of this song.

"The Water is Wide" traditional song, as sung by James Taylor: The gulf that separates Holli and Harrison from finding common ground for a relationship is defined by Holli's difficult family history and Harrison's nature. Maybe it's because I love the water, and sailing in particular, but the metaphor of a "boat" that can carry the two of them across their difficulties appeals to me on a very elemental level.