

# YOU CALLED ME AN OLD SOUL

*Gillian Ruppe*

It was late, and my tiny hands gripped my kneecaps through the holes in my grass-stained jeans in desperation. Sleep tugged at my eyes, trying to serenade my young mind into drooling on the passenger side window. I needed to stay awake though. I didn't get to be alone with you often, and even less frequently did I get to sit in the front seat, it was a rare privilege.

The night streaked past the windows at breakneck speed, the mountain and trees and shadows trying to keep us. I was too assured by the haven of the minivan, the protective bubble that I thought was the headlights and blasting heater.

You called me an old soul that night.

I preened with the words, taking it as a compliment to my maturity. I was in such a hurry in that moment, in most of my memories, to get to adulthood. To be called an old soul, especially by you as you carried us from the dark of the cliffs with a practiced hand at the wheel, seemed like such a good thing.

My apartment is cold.

The thermostat is broken, stuck perpetually at 60 degrees. I didn't expect to need fuzzy socks in summer. I spend most of my time here curled up in the refuge of my cave, burrowed deep into my nest of blankets even as the sun bakes the pavement in the world outside.

My plastic bins packed full of first aid supplies and laundry detergent were supposed to cover every eventuality, but I wasn't prepared for this.

Who could've seen this coming?

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It reminds me of you. Everything does now, but the cold night calls to mind the time we all spent crowded on the couches. You loved home improvement shows. You spent hours watching couples with perfect teeth and spray tans buy and sell homes like they were Skittles. You would comment on those you thought had good taste and the ones that you thought were tacky while the wind from outside howled through the gaps in the duct tape I helped mom line our windows with. Cooking shows, too. I never cared much for either, but I would always fall into your side as we watched iron chefs mince and flambee and plate and sautee as we ate our frozen tv dinners out of cardboard dishes. On the few days when I did not have the patience for these distant colorful worlds, you would make concessions, changing the channel until we found NCIS or Criminal Minds, the stuff that you knew would make me stay. Sometimes I still wouldn't stay. I suppose you understood that.

The kitchen can be warm, when I make it that way. Steam from my skillet fills the small space and turns my cheeks pink. This is my third attempt at this stir fry, the first two scraped into the trashcan with the lid shut tight. I hope that when he gets here he won't be able to smell the burning. I've gotten better at this whole cooking thing, believe it or not. A few months ago it would've taken me six attempts to get something even close to edible. It may be warm in here now, but it's also loud, the vent's fan whirring full blast to keep the fire alarm from going off. I think I turned on music earlier, but I can't tell if it is still playing. It is a miracle that I hear the doorbell at all. It's even more of a miracle that when I pull the pan off the heat the vegetables are perfectly caramelized.

You used to play the piano. You used to write music. Used to.

I'm not sure you ever saw me, although I suspect you knew I was there anyways, but when you used to play that old piano, caressed the strips of ivory until they sang I would huddle in the stairwell. My back was pressed to the wall, my knees pulled close

to my chest. I would stare at that popcorn ceiling that you hated and listen to you worship in the only way you knew how, a way that mom never really did. I'm not sure I ever really believed in God, even back then, but I still think I understood. That piano followed us from house to house, and in some places, I had to get creative with my hiding places. Even as my body elongated and I became more aware of the world, I was still worried that if you saw me listening you would stop. I don't know why I thought that. I wonder when the last time you played the piano was. I wonder if knowing would have changed how I listened. As I got older I spent more and more of my time on the other side of the windows, seduced by the call of having friends and joining the debate team and pretending that I cared about the football games. Maybe I wasn't even there the last time. I'm not sure I even noticed how long the piano bench sat empty until after.

I think you would like him, Dad. He makes me laugh, not in the way you did, not the same long hard belly laughs, but his reassuring smile and floppy hair makes it easy again. I'll take what I can get. To be honest, I'm not sure I can laugh like that anymore. But he tries. He holds the door for me and texts me in the morning and I know that's not a lot, but I'm sure you remember why the bare minimum matters to me. There's more than that, too. He doesn't read, but he bought me books for my birthday. I already owned one of them, and he was so embarrassed by his mistake, but he got it because he thought I would like it and well, I guess he was right. I do like it. I like him too. I want you to meet him Dad, I want to know if you like him because I do and that should be all that matters but you never liked anyone I dated. You were right, but that is why I wish you could meet this one. I think I finally got one right.

Mom cried for two straight weeks. We all sobbed and shook and hid from the world, but I think she spent more time with tears streaming down her cheeks in that time than she did sleeping. You two were never very physically affectionate, and if I had

once doubted how perfect you were for each other because of that those thoughts were quickly put to rest. You hated when we cried, panicked and floundered and just tried to get us to smile because you knew what to do with that. You would have hated to see how much she cried, but it was your fault. It was all your fault.

I don't want to be an old soul. I don't want to shiver and shake with the horror of time. I don't want to know what it means to mourn, to become the backbone of a family that is splintering. I wonder if you knew that night when you said those sorry words, what would happen. I wonder if you knew then that I would one day have to carry us on my back the way you did.

I wasn't an old soul then. I was just a kid.

I think I hate you for that, for cursing me to become someone patient and reliable, for cursing me to become like you without preparing me for the role.

But most of all I miss you.

I don't have a tv. I decided it was an unnecessary expense when I can't turn it on anymore without wanting to cry. But still, as I curl up on the couch beneath three thick blankets, and close my eyes tight, I can almost imagine that the sound of the city is the distant murmur of Fixer Upper or Master Chef, or maybe even the sound of a well-loved piano, smoothing out my hair as I drift off to sleep.