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A Bit of Maturity: My Peek into Belle & Sebastian's Latest Record

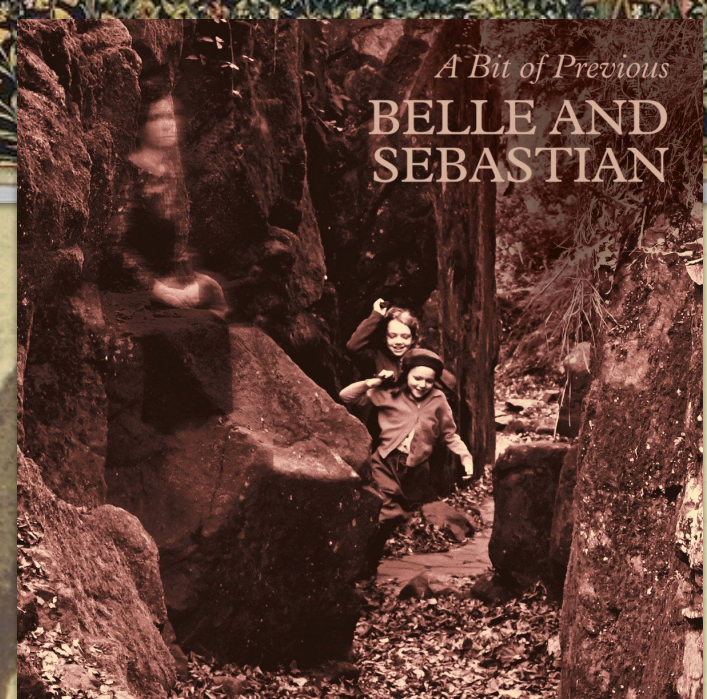
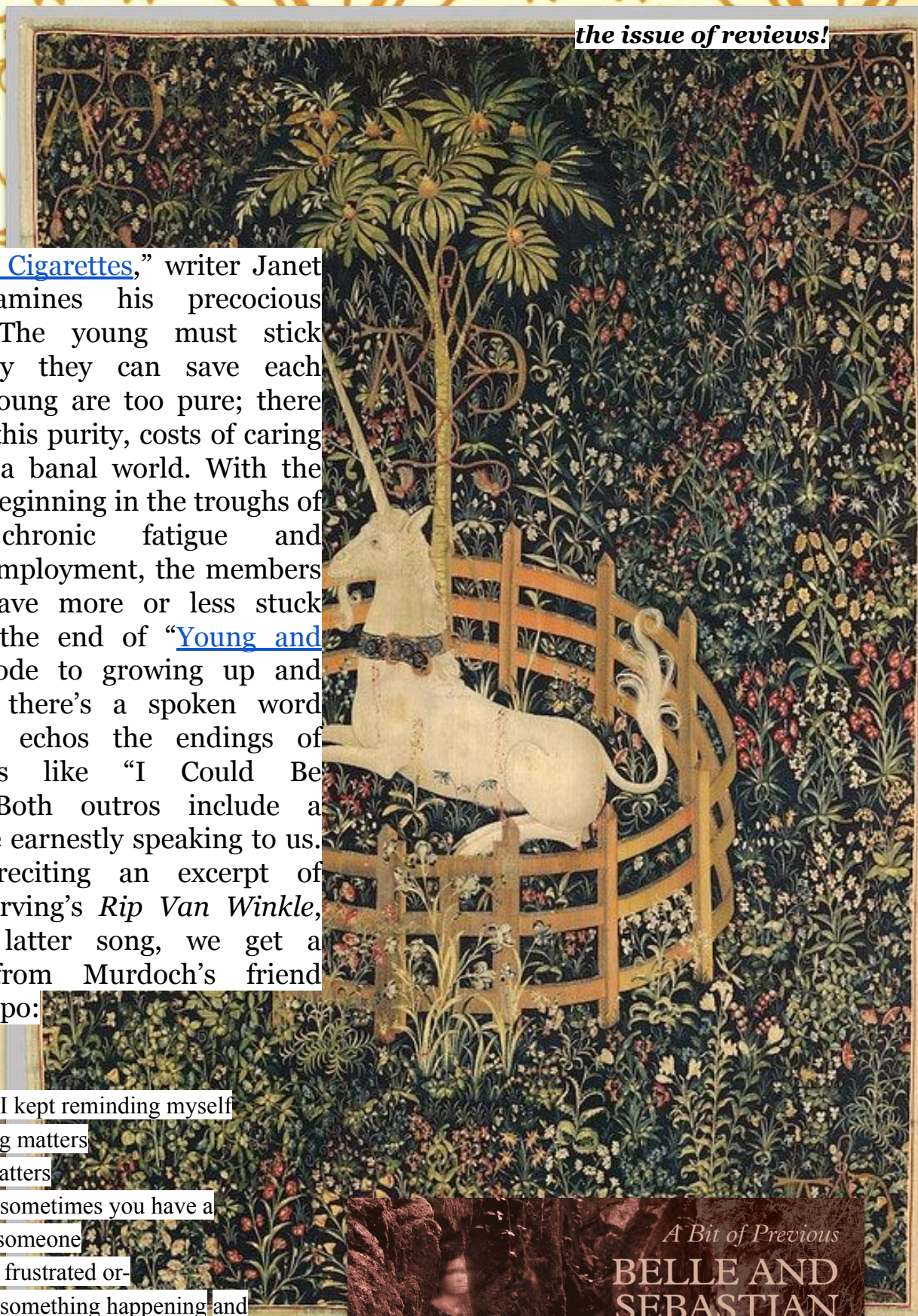
By Ashley D. Escobar

The bookish, *twee*, Glaswegian lead singer Stuart Murdoch tweeted “Understand we can’t take you back to those days and the way you felt then” as part of a [listening guide](#) for the *established* Belle & Sebastian fan to follow on the advent of their latest album *A Bit of Previous*. Sure, I will never be that same sixteen-year-old listening to *Tigermilk* on the back of the bus—“Oh, and now I’m feeling dangerous, riding on city buses for / a hobby is sad”—but I still listen to “Expectations” when I wake up on Monday mornings, tripping over my clogs on the way to *The Whiteness of the Whale* instead of English. I have the advantage of youth on my side, the precarious misadventures and melodramas of letter-writing and schoolyards present, that I can’t imagine what listening to Belle and Sebastian will feel like in ten, even five, years from now. It’s too soon to worry.

In “[Salinger’s Cigarettes](#),” writer Janet Malcolm examines his precocious characters: “The young must stick together; only they can save each other.” The young are too pure; there are pains for this purity, costs of caring too much in a banal world. With the band’s roots beginning in the troughs of Murdoch’s chronic fatigue and collective unemployment, the members themselves have more or less stuck together. At the end of “[Young and Stupid](#),” an ode to growing up and recollections, there’s a spoken word element that echos the endings of earlier songs like “I Could Be Dreaming.” Both outros include a childlike voice earnestly speaking to us. Instead of reciting an excerpt of Washington Irving’s *Rip Van Winkle*, like in the latter song, we get a monologue from Murdoch’s friend Alessandra Lupo:

You know I kept reminding myself
that nothing matters
Nothing matters
You know sometimes you have a
fight with someone
Or you get frustrated or-
You know something happening and
you catch a little glimpse of the
outside
And I don't know, it's just a bird
flying or you see a funny shape in
the cloud
And you think what am I doing
You know, I'm so small, nothing-
nothing matters
So whatever

Their first album since 2015, *A Bit of Previous* is a sophisticated patchwork of bits and bobs, familiar yet new. It doesn’t sound like a pastiche, but rather a response to getting older, like a book of common Belle and Sebastian prayer conceived during the lockdown. The band has always been influenced by J.D. Salinger’s writing—think “I Fought in a War” and “Allie”—and *A Bit of Previous* starts with that disconnected sense of reality from the adult world: “I was yelling in my sleep / I was crying feeling week / Do we have to feel this way / It wasn't like this yesterday.”



“...like a book of common Belle and Sebastian prayer conceived during the lockdown.”
Park, looking west.

01



“but there’s no shame, no wrongdoing here.”



Photo: Hollie Fernando

Instrumentally, “Young and Stupid” has all the melodic elements that could be placed on any other album on their oeuvre—the acoustic background bounce, the harmoniously swift violin—however, the lyrics provide the distance of a protagonist looking into the past rather than living in the present. Rather than sounding nihilistic, the “nothing matters” is a wistful return to childhood and its endlessness.

There’s a balance of maturity and nostalgia, regret and forgiveness, caring and letting go. The following tracks maintain that balance, nothing feels overwrought or overtly lonely—yes, this, unfortunately, leaves less room to cry—but I suppose adulthood means stability and if you want to retreat into the lulling adolescent five-minute-plus soundscapes of “The Boy With the Arab Strap” or “This Is Just a Modern Song,” you can easily queue them up instead.

“If They’re Shooting At You” gives us a chance to zone out, but this mellow track is slightly terrorizing. A song about misunderstanding, being misguided, and mistrusted, it evokes an image of Holden Caulfield sitting atop an atomic bomb. “If they’re shooting at you, kid / You must be doing something right,” Murdoch sings as a gospel-esque choir of voices—led by vocalist Anjolee Williams—harmonize and clap alongside him. The band [made a video](#) for the song in collaboration with photographers covering the war in Ukraine, sending and matching all proceeds to the Red Cross. “In creating this we aspire to show a hopeful, defiant side, as well as bringing an awareness to the plight of the people there,” Murdoch said earlier in March.

Solidarity, togetherness, compassion—these themes make up *A Bit of Previous*.

Other songs like “Reclaim the Night” evoke the danceable rhythms found in “Poor Boy” from the *How To Solve Our Human Problems (Part 3)* EP or “The Power of Three” on *Girls in Peacetime Want to Dance*. Swirly synths provide dance breaks in between all the existential woes. “Prophets on Hold” returns to the tender summer imagery prevalent in a lot of Belle and Sebastian songs. “We don’t have to be lovers / We could be less alone.” It’s a song perfect for putting on a special playlist to let the unspeakable speak for itself.

The softest song on the record, “Do It For Your Country,” starts like the softer “The Boy Done Wrong Again” off their seminal *If You’re Feeling Sinister*, but there’s no shame, no wrongdoing here.

02

“So banish all your fears, grab it by the ears” sounds silly on first listen but it evolves into a guiding ballad. There’s some love, there’s gentleness, some sweetness. I smile at sipping oversugared tea with my friend in a sunbeam of a memory: “Drink honey if it helps you out / With every choice there comes a nagging doubt.” But then Murdoch sings, “The people that you fall in love with / Are never what they say,” resulting in a sigh of defeat. How can we ever reach clarity? It’s a song that has the potential to become a stormy day but it tiptoes into the faintest rainbow with its shimmering undertones.

“Unnecessary Drama” was released at a crucial point in my life when I was wrapped up in a titular situation. Murdoch writes, “The song is about a young person experimenting in being a human again after a forced hiatus.” Even if any Belle and Sebastian song theoretically holds the power of doing so, this feels pointedly written for me to hear this year. I had been on a *forced hiatus* due to the pandemic and petty dramas, that Murdoch singing, almost chanting, “And this is my life / This is my so-called life” became a theme song for re-entry, a new start. “And if the intimacy ever stops (This is my so-called life) / I’ll miss your stories, miss your letters (And this is my life) / Ever awkward fumble should be framed (This is my only life).” How did Murdoch know of my affairs? How could he phrase them better than I ever could? The harmonica conjures the feeling of falling in “Me and The Major” off *Sinister*, except this time, the harmonica is an intervention, an upwards commotion to continue moving forward when you desperately want to look back and reflect. “You and me could talk like kissing / Every conversation was divine.”

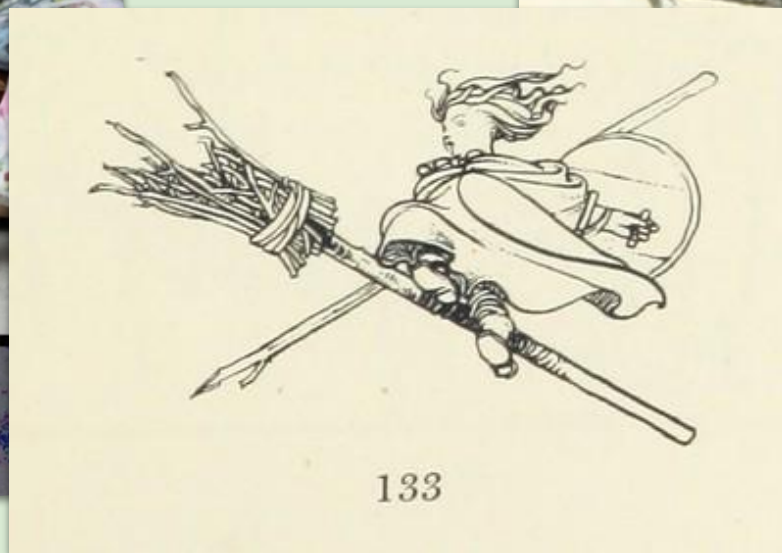
The universalness of their latest releases has led to less angsty, less moody, less solipsistic diction, but maybe that’s what Murdoch meant by their incapability of bringing listeners back to *those days*. We don’t get lonely house dwellers—“Mary Jo”—or teenage runaways—“Sukie in the Graveyard”—but we reach a sense of heightened thought, a graceful transcendence unsurprisingly juxtaposed with Murdoch’s deep-rooted interest in meditation and religion. Instead of surly diary entries, Murdoch virtually joins fans every Sunday evening for a weekly meditation session. “Sea of Sorrow” comes close to reaching a sadder ballad, but it’s still hopeful, a bit spiritual: “Swimming in a sea of sorrow / Heading for a world of promise.”

“Working Boy in New York City” closes the album with a flute-filled treat. Though initially a bit too uplifting for my taste, it reminds me of why I fell in love with Belle and Sebastian in the first place as a sulky young girl. The young boy’s search for himself—“You took the train to liberate your body / And liberate your heart”—parallels my journey as much as Murdoch’s formative struggles in “Nobody’s Empire” on *Girls in Peacetime*. “Working Boy in New York City” is the reprise, a reminder that even if Murdoch has reached another era in his life, there are still lost souls listening “to the music of the traffic in the city / singing to the hope.” The piano chirps in and out, like the *sleeping bird* in the song, in a trademark precious but not overly sentimental way. Maybe it’s the bird flying over us.

“Enjoy the fervor of your love life” is my notable takeaway. I want to say Murdoch’s words came too late, but I’m being ridiculous; it’s never too late.

His words are less of a demand to accomplish right away, unlike “Do something pretty while you can” in “We Rule the School,” but a reminder to appreciate and savor youth as it comes and goes. Rather than try to replace and regain lost time, we can only keep pushing forth into the future. “Between trouble and nothing, we still choose the trouble,” Murdoch admits. For now, I’ll listen along with my phone in my back pocket as I graduate from college—a place I would have never gotten through without the band’s guidance as one of their top 0.005% of Spotify listeners—and take the train to New York City myself. I promise I won’t lose the fencing equipment! I’ll end up in Glasgow someday, eating a plate of nothing but mac and cheese with a large side of *chips* at the University Cafe. I’m still young and stupid. Only this time, more hopeful.





Pretty Sick's Sabrina Fuentes is too young to remember the '90s. Yet, flipping her black-and-blond bangs from behind a VHS camera, she seems right at home.

London-based Pretty Sick repackages grunge and riot grrrl for kids who grew up playing with Bratz. Stylish and sardonic, their homage to the '90s alternative scene seems twinged with an air of satire. Like, yes, they know they're countering a culture that existed thirty years ago and no, they won't tell you where they got these low-rise jeans. They embrace nostalgia uncritically. Which is fine. Which is, in fact, almost political in its stubbornness.

The new music video for single "Human Condition" epitomizes this. Three decades ago, it would have been controversial—it's no-duh parable on the dangers of celebrity features a shotgun-wielding superfan and Fuentes masturbating in the back of a limousine. Still, the didactics seems tongue-in-cheek. The video is, in a word, cool. The grainy film, the corny gore, the copious leather—it works. By the end, it's clear that Pretty Sick isn't trying to teach a lesson. They just want to tell a good story.

Grunge, goth, riot grrrl, and other '90s counter cultures were built to be an F U to the mainstream identities that Corporate America was peddling. Predictably, Corp. America caught wind of this fairly quick.

Instead of selling 'the youth' cashmere vests and tennis bracelets, they began hawking the totems of rebellion: ripped jeans, studded belts, flannel, etc. (Marc Jacobs, famously, brought grunge to the runaway in 1993, marking the death of the style's dissent).

Gen Z saw all that fail and land us here, where our subcultures—cottagecore and e-boy/girl, bimbo and y2k, etc.—are all about appearances. Rebellion is no longer something you can wear on your back. If it can happen at all, it will take place through actions. Most of us, now, are trying to unionize, to reduce waste, to hold politicians accountable. It might work, and it might not—we haven't really figured that part out yet, but as we do, why not look good doing it?

Go ahead; embrace the nostalgia of an era when rebellion felt more realistic. You look cute, and you're not hurting anyone.

Hot Girls Don't Care about Hauntology: A Review of Pretty Sick's "Human Condition"

by Elise LeSage

Photo Credit: Instagram (sickysab)



from the black car with diplomatic plates

by kitty

hands

i once knew an elvira. a 626 girl living in the 323. a girl who disappeared after high school. but, before then, she idled around lunch lines, wore a series of gray hoodies, and adorned her nails with sharp periwinkle.

she once told me that she liked my hands, that they were thin and long, that my fingernails were shaped like opals.

so when i held your hand last night, i attempted to inspect your hand as she did mine, noting rounded nail-beds, stubby fingers, and speckles of white among pink. she probably would have complimented your hands then and there, alongside a tidbit about some teenager she once saw at the santa anita mall, but i kept to myself and dropped your hand.

dr. ganache

have you dropped out of college? has your groove fluttered away unexpectedly? do your eyes tear up when you listen to “campus” ? if so, you need to visit the only drag queen with a masters degree in organizational leadership (that we know of)— dr. ganache.

horrific makeup skills, a tendency to strip completely naked during mini challenges, and thick country accent, dr. ganache is in a league of her own.

“munch munch, crunch crunch, silky nutmeg ganache is ready to eat the lunch.”

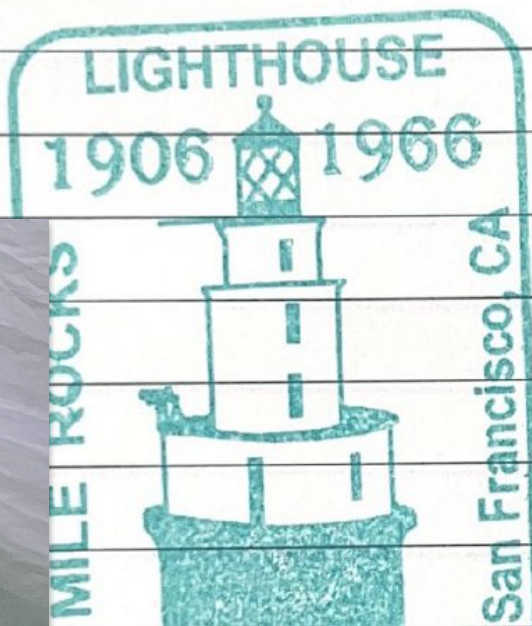
“if i would’ve lip-synced for my life today, bitch, i was ready to do so!”

everything dr. ganache does is absurd and it kills me that i have yet to read her thesis : *leading in the lunch-room, a comprehensive analog of discussion.*



I love it when animals do human things.





Failed society -
Sutro Baths



neighborhood music

penelope & i were haunted by the music coming from another room in solan's house. it wasn't a lingering note from the yo la tengo in the living room. he claimed there was "random music throughout the neighborhood." bullshit. we run into his roommate at rickshaw stop. he goes on stage. it's april magazine, and i love the tambourine player.

dummy

the kids are too scared to mosh. i compliment someone's fiddlar shirt but it's his friend's. i'm in the 90s and this is some swirling catherine wheel / ride fever dream.

tiniest horse

they've got fender stacks and a tiny horse sits atop. lalala their references are all part of my floating mural of color and words: "nothing to be done," "just like heaven and honey too."

*horsegirl show
at rickshaw stop*



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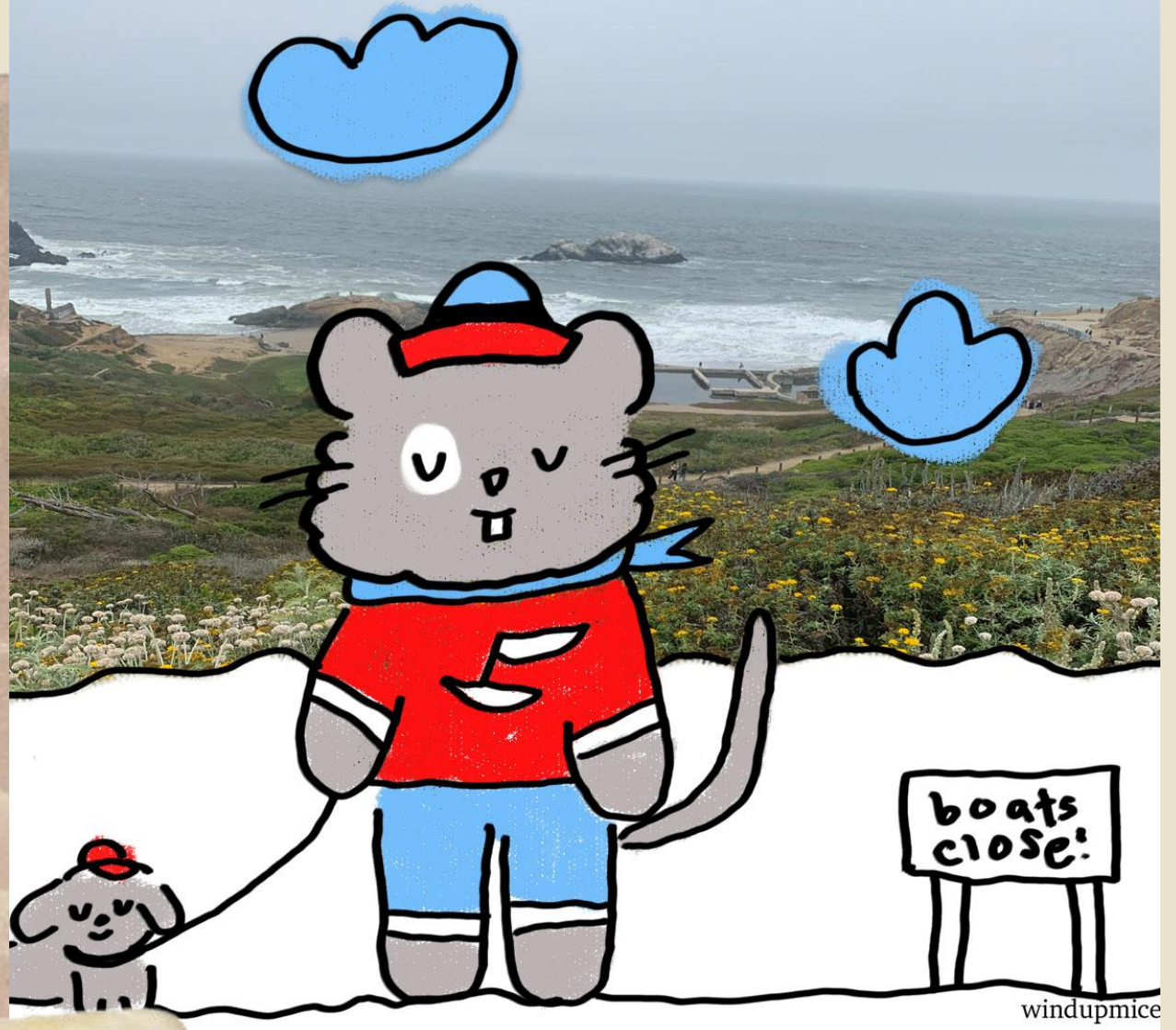


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