

“I suppose you do love me, in your way,” I said to him one night close to dawn when we lay on the narrow bed. “And how else should I love you —in your way?” he asked. I am still thinking about that.”

-Anne Carson.

On Being in Love with Your High School English Teacher

When you discover a random substitute sitting behind his desk as you walk into class, don't turn around and skip the rest of the day just because seeing him was the only thing worth getting out of bed for. Conjure the motivation to take a seat because it's what he would want you to do. Limit the number of afternoons you linger by his doorway when the final bell has rung and everyone else has gone home. You want to be taken as seriously as possible. The daydreams will end eventually but for now, they're the only form of existence where you two are together in harmony. You will think that he has created you because of how his interests have transformed into yours, miraculously.

You carry around his favorite books while listening to a playlist of his recommendations. You give him all the credit for being the person you are today, but don't forget that you were smart before he told you that you were. You crave meeting his sixteen-year-old self, and in a perfect world, you would have. Your paths did not cross until much later in life though, when he's thirty-two. Meanwhile, you're still admiring the pictures from the day you got your braces off. You're young enough to know but old enough not to care.

If he has a history, you'll want to know about it. You spend the afternoons, when you should be doing statistics homework, plugging his name into every search engine that exists. You discover he's a Libra, what his middle name is, how he grew up in a small, suburban neighborhood just like you and went to a good college. He was with a girl who had the same zodiac sign as you and you consider this another reason to be with him. She died of cancer some years before your path crossed his. You find out that

she went to an ivy league school, was beautiful, and probably could have saved the world, unlike you. He does photography on the side and is quite good from what you've seen. He travels once a year to places you've only ever dreamed of.

Your mom calls you down for dinner from the bottom of the stairs, but your mind is elsewhere. As you push the food around your plate, you realize you're not really at the kitchen table but in a coffee shop, a million miles from your hometown, sitting across the table from him. You discuss books and problems in the world like you two normally would after school in his classroom. Talking to him is your therapy, so you end up skipping your actual therapy session because you feel understood enough that week. He likes that you enjoy casual walks through the town's pet cemetery when you're lonely, looking for company in all the wrong places, imagining the little skulls staring up at you with reverence. When you dye your hair back to its natural color, he takes notice. You wonder about other things he might've noticed; the poems on your jean jacket, the shade of lip gloss you wore, the scars on your left arm. That's one you sometimes wish he's seen but then you think how juvenile you'd feel talking about it, especially to him. On the days he isn't at school, you try your best to make it through even though your soul reason for being in that harrowing place has disappeared.

You start spreading out the days you visit him after class because the other teachers' looks forced you to. You can tell that some of them think it's cute and endearing, the fact that you have a little crush. The rest know your intentions, they are aware of the heat you radiate, the stubbornness in your eyes. They know you're not just a sixteen-year-old and they fear for your loss of innocence at the hands of another. That is why you love him, though. He would never act on his desires, even if he wanted to.

You understand his self-control, his reasons for leaving the classroom door open when it's only you two in there, for ending the conversations early, for not responding to your drunken midnight emails containing a playlist you made special for him.

Senior year ends with graduation and an infinite number of goodbyes are exchanged, but there's only one you really care about. You envy those kids that leave high school and never look back, but you can't imagine abandoning the only place you've ever found love. He remains stuck in time behind that desk while you age rapidly and vanish from each other's lives. Other than the boy who stole your virginity and ran away with it, heartbreak is a fairly new concept for you. You don't exactly know how to move forward because there is barely a loss to mourn, but in your mind the entire world is burning. When you're a sophomore in college and you ache to visit him at your old high school, don't. There are only so many things you can hold onto in this life and he isn't one of them. You tell yourself to grow up and that he won't be here forever. Neither of you will.

At nineteen, a boy's familiar face reaches out to you and, soon enough, the two of you can't get enough of each other. He says you're a mystical girl with some fascinating interests and you believe him. Only one other has gotten this close to your body but he was never as kind. He takes you to museums and observes you like you're the only work of art worth looking at. It's not long before you visit him at college and have sex for the first time. The pain is a different kind that you've experienced only once before. You think about this after you kiss him goodbye and drive home. Your seventeen year old self gets further away and you know one day it will be just a speck

of dust in your eye, like a dream which reluctantly slips from your mind after waking up. His mother sizes you up and decides you're the one. You hope he feels the same.

It's only five months into the relationship when he breaks your heart for the first time. You go over his house, he wanted to have sex and you didn't. You watch him take his phone off the bed as he announces that he's going to the bathroom to take care of it himself. You only sit on his bed for another thirty seconds, after the bathroom door closes, before running out the front door with a panic attack right behind you. You drive down the street to a local country store, leaving his calls unanswered as you shake violently while trying to move the transmission to the P for "park. "

You wonder if it was the slam of the front door that made him stop and call you. You wonder if it was when he finished, washed his hands, and went into the bedroom when he realized he should call you. You wonder what the girl looked like in the video he watched, what she had that you lacked, that maybe it was as simple as her saying yes instead of no, if she had ever said no before and been treated the same. You still wonder at twenty-two years old. After he coaxes you into picking up the phone, you end up driving back to his house, mascara adorning your chin, your heart a little heavier with grief. He is sorry, he is so very sorry. You don't know it at that moment but you won't ever forget the feeling of coming second to a girl on a screen.

It's been six years since you've graduated high school and three since you started seeing the boy. He is still a boy, also reluctant to grow into a man. On a random day in April, he crosses your mind; the one who stayed after school with you, all those years ago. After all, you've been silently comparing him to the boy all along, haven't

you? You compare him to every boy, entering them into a contest neither agreed to, and you realize they never stand as tall. It's a crude thing to do, it makes you feel dirty and not in a good way. Only the pages of your journal have ever seen how ugly you can truly be, the crave for revenge which fuels your engine, satisfaction at the turmoil people who have hurt you will go through when you're done with them. It was their fault, they put themselves there, didn't they? You're a good girl, kind to everyone, sometimes too kind, they tell you. Liability isn't in your vocabulary, you wouldn't hurt a fly. You think back to the man at the front of the classroom, the way he reminded you that having empathy for others is a gift not many people possess, it's what makes you so remarkable, and it's why you'll never know peace.

You give the boy another chance. Actually, you give him a bathtub-full of chances which you slowly drown in over time. Blame the alcohol, his inability to put his thoughts into words as softly as you can, the way he can never get a word in during family conversations, how he has to make up for that by being the life of the party and how that means being the drunkest one there. Blame everything else but him, because you refuse to admit you're settling. Maybe the man in the classroom was like this once and maybe he just needed the right person to guide him out of it. Maybe you can be that person for the boy.

On the nights he is out with his friends, he responds every four hours or so. This is just enough to keep you on your toes but you quit ballet for a reason. Peeling your toenails off each week helped you resign but the feeling that you were never far from hitting the ground was a lot more coaxing. You've been there before but it was on your terms. When it's been five hours, one more than usual for his timed responses, the

compulsions start again, the ones that are so primal to you by now that it's a better comfort than the bottle. Sobriety has become your new lover, although its haze makes you even more violent than before, you still consider it an ally. You embrace it like a new bruise, wondering where it came from, if it had always been there just waiting for your recognition. It's far too late, always too late, when your screen brims with a message from him because that primal instinct has scorched half your world already. Instead of responding, a rediscovery of music from your seventeen year old days emerges and it sticks this time because the voices croon to the contusions that have gripped your heart since you became an adult. You don't feel like an adult at all though, you don't even understand taxes, you only recently knew when to call it a night but there are those times when midnight comes and goes and you gladly walk it to the door, bottle in hand, slamming the portal closed between you and good habits, at least for the night.

Virulence is an older woman who furrows your brows, runs the bath, removes the clothes, tells you to not look in the mirror because what you need right now is to direct the fire towards him, not yourself or the extra skin which hugs your abdomen. You think of the term "love handles," how it's origin must've come from a man because only a man could diminish such a tender part of the body as just something to hold onto while they make the mundane motion of going in and out, in and out. She combs the knots out, picks an oversized t-shirt from your excessive collection, and pulls back the covers. She is not always this gentle. It was just the other night when she lead you to an article about an American soldier in Iraq who posed in pictures next to the tortured, burned, mutilated bodies of prisoners of war, always with a thumbs up and a smile. The soldier was a twenty six year old woman who had never seen combat before, had never even

fired her weapon before becoming a guard at the prison. The violence, the brutality, and gruesome nature of the pictures nest like a colony of bats in the garret of your thick skull. These thoughts are not an amenity to you, they keep you up at night and you dream about them a few times, waking in a cold sweat as each one passes, also shocked that a woman is capable of such gore. People love horror until it becomes real, when blood on the screen is not just cough syrup like in *Carrie* but actual brain matter from someone's head. Horror is like love in the way that people grow terrified once it's right in front of them, standing and waiting for a response.

Eventually, the boy gives you a ring which never hugs your finger quite right and his mother buys a spread of bridal magazines filled with options for flowers, long lace veils worn by fake women who wear fake smiles. You imagine the man in the classroom would be happy for you, congratulate you on finally growing into the woman he always knew you'd be, but he is nowhere to be found. The big day comes and goes with an anticlimactic ending and you slowly sink into the dress you're supposed to be the happiest in, so why do you feel so empty? Perhaps it's because the flower arrangements weren't the poisonous white oleanders you picked out, rather red roses without thorns.

The sting that comes with living occurs when we least expect it, on sunny days where the warmth is so gentle you want to cry, getting attached to a character in a book so much you hope your story ends when theirs does, screaming out the car windows in the middle of a tropical summer night, high on the feeling that it will never end. The truth is, everything ends and you learned this long ago, the moment you walked out of that classroom and never stopped looking back. There are days when the night can't come

soon enough, canceling out the light along with the blue abyss above that you once loved. The night has become your time and it's not because of the stars or the owl who never fails to remind you she's there, hoo-ing away the sweat of the day. The night means darkness and since you've become an adult, you're not allowed to be depressed or angsty anymore, rotting in your teenage bedroom which you filled with dead flowers in beer bottles and melted candles on top of books. Adulthood and marriage snuck into your house in the middle of the night and by the next morning you were thirty years old, wondering how it's possible you ever got to this age. The man behind the desk would be much, much older by now, like you. You swat this thought away like a fly and kiss your husband as he walks out of the door, on his way to work.

But then the night comes, the stars, the cooing of the owl, the darkness that you love and, you're convinced, loves you back. Hasn't it always? When you're sure he is asleep, you know it's safe to creep out from under the covers and walk down memory lane which is now just a box in a closet. In the box you find a spread of death's head; your old converse covered in black Sharpie, a pack of stale cigarettes with two flipped up ("one for good luck, one for a good fuck," you heard somewhere and took it for your own), an academic award for "Excellence in American Literature" award from high school, covered in dry blood from a night you've since forgotten, dried flowers from your prom corsage, and finally, a polaroid of the man behind his desk. He is caught off guard, and he is laughing because the stupid innocence of a fifteen year old is enough for him to be okay with it, at least in that moment. You wonder if your husband has ever seen it but then you remember he doesn't go looking for clues of his past in the way you do, ready to pick the scabs and endure the stomach-drops from the things you discover.

You put the converse on (they still fit like a glove), pin the flower in your hair, grab the pack of cigarettes, fold the papered award and place it in your pocket (you may as well have something with your name on it, in case you never return), and sit the polaroid in the left breast jacket pocket, the one closest to the organ that's kept you going this far, the organ you blame for everything. It's been a while since you looked in the mirror but tonight you fear nothing, not even him finding your absence in the morning because although you know it will break his heart, you also know that it needed breaking. He will ask what he did to deserve this and you'll eventually have to tell him.

Your decisions were never about him, not even the one you made when you decided to be with him. They were always about the man, always made with him in mind, always with one foot out of the door like you're ready to run. So, you do run tonight. And it hurts when you realize that all of your choices were because of a man, another person, someone who is not you. What betrayal your mind must feel after all these years. The weather station says a thunderstorm is on the horizon. What's more perfect than a storm to start over, start fresh? Something that will erase the trail of blood you'll leave behind once they discover you're gone. Have you ever done anything for yourself? No, but you think you'll start now.