

Love Is What Love Is

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I.

In the years before my mother met my father, she used to stand in the kitchen of her parents' old farmhouse in Stoney Creek, Ontario, looking down at the flickering lights that came alive in the downtown at night. She was nearing thirty, still living at home, and beginning her work as a high school teacher. She hadn't had many boyfriends, but she knew she always wanted to be a wife and a mother. She told me one time that she used to stand there for hours, watching the lights flicker and dim, whispering to herself, "he's out there somewhere."

Across Lake Ontario was my father, a mature student at (then) Ryerson University in Toronto, working as a research assistant in the chemical engineering department. Also nearing thirty, and having started school much later than his contemporaries, he, too, never had many girlfriends. He's always been quiet about his love life, but I knew at that time that he'd always wanted something more out of his life. If only he knew his future wife was sitting just across the lake, staring down at him, unable to make out his figure amidst the blur of city lights.

When I think about my parents' relationship, it always feels magical. They grew up in similar environments, with both their parents coming from Greece amidst high civil tensions in the 1950s and 1960s. Settling in the biggest, most prosperous cities at the time, both my parents had to juggle growing up as first-generation Canadians. The fact that they grew up on opposite sides of the lake makes me think of destiny. I remember when they told me how they met. It was a Halloween party, and my mom dragged my uncle along with her because she didn't want to go alone. There was my father, she said, dressed as John Wayne. My mother likes to joke and say it was one of the only times that she'd ever seen him wear jeans. She smiles as she recounts the smallest details, like where the party was, who was there, and what it felt like to see my father for the first time. My father sits quietly during the telling of the story, not wanting to give away too much, as if there is still a good chunk of the story that he likes to keep to himself. To hold onto forever. Twenty-six years later, they tell the story like it was yesterday.

Is this ... love?

II.

I casually place the phone down on the shaky, plastic tabletop. The text message has been sent. *I'll meet you at your place in 15 minutes.* With every second, I quiver just a little, going through every possible outcome in my head like it's a revolving door. She doesn't know what I'm about to do. She has no warning. I hope her roommate doesn't answer the door. I hope she doesn't answer the door. I march down the creaky stairs of my student house and I think about how old I am. 20 years old. Young. I get closer to the front door, thinking about each passing millisecond like they are small slices of eternity.

As I walk along the sidewalk, curling my fingers inside my coat pockets for warmth, I feel the beam of the streetlights hit the top of my knitted toque. Each flash of light tries to give me a reason to turn around and not go to her. I remember our first date and the sweat that dripped down the back of my neck as I fluttered my hand onto her thigh. I remember our first kiss inside her Chevrolet Sonic, Queen's "Bohemian Rhapsody" fading gently into a hum as my endorphins lulled me into a state of emotional overload. I remember the first night she slept over in my twin bed, my whole body wedged between the wall and the mattress in the morning because it simply couldn't hold us. I chuckle at that one memory as the winter wind rests its chilling hand on my face, seemingly trying to comfort my pensive expression. I remember the night after the keg party, when I pressed my body against her bedroom door and screamed for her to run out the basement window because I thought someone had broken into her apartment, when it was really just her roommate running in because there was a skunk outside. I remember her hearty laugh that night. I remember her smile.

Each patch of darkness, however, gives me a reason to keep moving forward. I remember lying in her bed awake all night, stroking my fingers through her hair, hearing whispers from the autumn breeze that maybe this is not what I really wanted. I remember feeling her heartbeat as my head lay gently on her chest, wondering if this seemingly natural rhythm is really shared between the two of us. I remember sitting half-naked at the edge of her bed, exploring her body and trying to murkily consolidate the divide between our levels of experience. I remember that night when I nervously told her that I wasn't ready to have sex. I remember the fear in my heart when I couldn't bring myself to touch her anymore. I feel a pain in my chest, bringing me to question whether a relationship is strictly dependent on physical intimacy.

Finally, I turn the corner down the dark side alley and step towards her door, unsure of what I was going to say.

Is this ... love?

III.

I tend to gravitate towards people who are older than me. Most of my friends are 3–5 years older. My roommates are all 24 and have been in long-term relationships for about seven years. I remember struggling with my first relationship late last year, and so I asked them, what’s the secret? What makes this last so long? I’ve heard them say “I love you” to each other before, but what does that actually mean? They give me the usual answer: communication, reciprocity, personality. The one thing I suppose they wouldn’t want to mention publicly is physical intimacy. But how much physical intimacy is really involved in a very healthy, long-term relationship?

There is something about this that I may never know. But when I see my roommates interact with their partners, they always seem to transcend the nitty gritty details of physical intimacy. Whether they play a board game together, have a high-level conversation, develop inside jokes, buy coffees and treats for one another, or even hold the door open for one-another, there is this spark, this essence of something, that seems intimate in and of itself, but does not require any sexual acts. When I come home from a long night at school, I see them, cuddled together on the couch in our living room, watching *The Office*. They sit quietly, seemingly diverting their attention from the show to each other’s company.

Is this ... love?

IV.

I remember an early moment feeling what may have been love. When I was in the fifth grade, we had a new girl come to our school. I remember the rumour being that she was going to be in our class. I got excited, not because there was going to be a new student, but because I now had a new opportunity to use my well-developed fifth grade charm. When she showed up on the first day, I started falling on the ground on purpose. Each time I did it, I looked back to see if she noticed. In gym class later that afternoon, we were playing a game of basketball. I remember my teacher put the girls on one team and the boys on the other. She cut the gym in half though, and so the boys played against each other and so did the girls. I felt this was my chance. If I could somehow play really well against the other boys, I might catch her attention. But I couldn’t do that. That’s not how I worked at that age. I resorted to slapstick humour, hurling the basketball at the net from thirty feet and screaming a ridiculous word when I’d watch the ball fly over the basket and onto the stage behind it. Every time I did this, I checked the other side of the gym to see if she was looking. Much to my dismay, she didn’t look once.

During the school year, I kept up my antics, tripping purposefully on chairs and tables, watching my other classmates laugh, but not her. Never her. I remember crawling under desks and making obscene jokes that I memorized from *Saturday Night Live*. Nothing ever worked. Looking back, this was probably one of the most

embarrassing things I've ever done in my life, but I was ten; slapstick humour was all I knew. Eventually, I heard through the playground rumour mill that she had expressed some interest. I was super excited because I thought my tactics had finally gotten through to her. When we met at the playground later that day, we talked about things that seemed relevant in the fifth grade: shoes, cartoons, and French class. I remember her other friend was there, too, probably to oversee my quality as a potential suitor. We talked for the entire recess, and I remember picking at a rock in my shoe, feeling the breeze of the spring air rustling through my buzzcut hair, and feeling the dryness of the residue from the playground equipment seep through my fingers. Once the bell rang, I thought I had done a good thing, but I ended up being confused about what I was actually doing.

Our relationship progressed well enough throughout the end of the fifth grade. I used to visit her occasionally at the purple slide to discuss our days and how school was going. I made a very vigilant effort to sit beside her in class, and I even went so far as to design her a personal Valentine's Day card. At the time, I was doing everything right from the standpoint of what I remember seeing on television. Romance seemed pretty simple—respect, gifts, laughs, conversations, fun. There was less stress with having to deal with what lay behind the bedroom door because to me, at that time, there was no bedroom door to have to look behind. This relationship, as young as it was, felt good enough just because I felt like I was stumbling through some aspect of human life that I wanted to be involved in. I was just naïve to the other parts of it. That's why I still remember the day she met me by the smaller playground—a setting for a more personal conversation—and said that she'd like to start holding hands.

At the time, we had just moved into sixth grade. We were in different classes, though, and I remember being scared to approach her in different contexts because she wasn't inside my direct experience. It seemed like a daunting task to meet up with her at recess because I felt like she was too far away. I would see her on the playground but look from afar. I noticed that each time I looked over, her turquoise eyes looked back at me with a desire for recognition. But I was helpless. Inept. A wandering preteen with no sense of direction. And she could tell.

Later that year, just before the school year had ended, she wrote me a letter saying how we couldn't be together anymore. She felt that I wasn't paying enough attention to her and that being in different classrooms was a difficult task to navigate. She felt I was growing distant. She was right, I mean, I remember being terrified to talk to her at recess because I wasn't sure what to do. I had done all the work to make her interested, but when we actually got to the stage of holding hands as eleven-year-olds, I couldn't work it out. My brain felt like a plate of mashed potatoes.

Now, I sense it as being something to do with naivety, but the more I reflect on it, I think about it as a fear of physical intimacy. A fear of maybe having to do something that exists so far outside the plane of both my knowledge and my experience. The commitment of having to try and share yourself with someone physically is a fact of

life that I had somewhat arbitrarily discovered in that moment, but it is only now that I can put words to it. The idea of love as a shared, physical process is tough to comprehend. They always say you have to love yourself first before you can love someone else, but if you spend too much time with yourself, does anyone else want to come in?

Is this ... love?

V.

At the table at my grandparent's farmhouse in Stoney Creek, Ontario, I asked my grandmother: "did you like him in the beginning?" referring to my grandfather, who was sitting in the living room watching the news. I could hear the crackle of their old television turn to static as he slowly increased the volume, the screaming Hellenistic commentators ringing loudly in my ear. My grandmother cocked an eyebrow as she peeled an orange. She looked at me through her glasses and gave an answer honestly, as she usually did: "No."

The story, even in their old age, never changes each time I hear it. My grandfather came to Edmonton from Greece in 1963, settling for a small, part-time job in the local Greek Orthodox Church. My grandmother came to Edmonton shortly after, joining the same church as a volunteer, singing in the choir. My grandfather's smile passes from cheek to cheek as he tells me the next part. "We had a dance at the church," he says, grinning, "and I drank too much because I liked your *Yiayia* and wanted to talk to her." I turn to my grandmother, the laughter bouncing around the room, and asked her what she thought of this. She laughed and said, "I couldn't believe it. I couldn't believe *him*."

After 58 years, they have one of the most loving relationships I have ever seen. They are two very different people; my grandfather is tough, but kind and jovial; my grandmother is serious, calculated, but caring. Their relationship depended on many, many years of trust and loyalty. They were married soon after they had met because my grandmother knew that, and she says this warmly, my grandfather "was a good man." Unlike today, they did not have the time to go on dates, text or call each other until the late hours of the night, or spend time really "getting to know each other." There was a desire to come to Canada and start a family. My grandfather always says, "I wanted a better life for my kids." What began as a drunken escapade eventually turned into a graceful, loving marriage that saw the ebbs and flows of trying to navigate a new world. My grandfather knew, as he told me earlier this year, that the minute he saw my grandmother, the Holy Spirit appeared in front of him and said, "THAT'S THE GIRL YOU'RE GOING TO MARRY!"

Even now in their old age, they sleep in separate beds, but their love has persisted for so long. Whether it is the laughter that comes out of my grandfather singing his Greek demotic chants throughout the house at seven in the morning, or my

grandmother making him warm, hearty meals every single night, the idea of their love is greater than anything related to physicality. The commitment was never in question; the idea of physical intimacy was in play for the sake of having children, but when I watch them now, and when I hear stories of their exploits as immigrants in Canada, it always seemed to me that whatever exists between them is so strong because they took the time, after all these years, to cultivate a relationship that strengthens their minds and brings them both joy during the days when they only have each other.

Is this ... love?

VI.

In Richard Linklater's 1995 film *Before Sunrise*, Jesse and Celine meet on a train to Vienna. They strike up a long conversation about books, ghosts, and visions, and when Jesse finally has to leave, he tells Celine that he'll regret it for the rest of his life if he doesn't keep talking to her. She gets off the train with him, and they spend the rest of the night in Vienna, walking around, talking, drinking, and smoking. One scene that has become famous is a scene when they visit a record store. Celine picks a record, and they go to the listening booth together to hear the tracks. Inside, they stand next to each other, their gazes unmatched. As the music swells, Jesse looks at Celine, but when she looks back, he looks away. When Celine looks at Jesse, and Jesse looks back, she looks away.

Later on in the film, Celine tells Jesse that to really love someone is to explore the space that exists between you and them: "I really believe that if there's any kind of god, he wouldn't be in any one of us—not you, not me—but just this space in between. If there's some magic in this world, it must be in the attempt of understanding someone else, sharing something, even if it's almost impossible to succeed." In the listening booth, we get a sense of what Celine means. By simply saying nothing, and directing their gazes to the actual person, there is this growing sense of intimacy that does not bend to the physical. It is simply something like "magic."

Jesse and Celine end up having sex later on in the film, but it is not necessary for the sake of us—as the audience—knowing they are in love. They wouldn't have had to have sex to prove it to us. Their sense of intimacy comes through the fact that they have taken the time to understand one another, and it really shows in the way they cultivate their engagement relative to this understanding. Everything that they have developed within the last 90 minutes has come through high-level conversation. They both open up about their fears, vulnerabilities, goals, dreams, aspirations, grief, and it makes them like magnets, but instead of touching, the charge that exists between them continues to grow.

Is this ... love?

VII.

I am not scared of love. I just think that I am worried. Whether that comes from two years of a pandemic, or the rise of social media where we simply connect with the idea of someone, I can't help but think of failing to realize any kind of love. I hide away from fear of failure and stick to the things that I enjoy. I worry about if this unknown person will accept my interests. And I want to love. But not love as in the *idea* of love. I have seen what that does to people. I have seen endless nights of tirades across bars and clubs searching for your "other half." I have seen inconsistency and blabbering nonsense about the perils of fearing commitment. I have seen the pensive quiet of a long summer night spent sitting with someone in the front seat, anxiously waiting to see who will flinch first. I have seen the late-night phone call that comes in with an angry recipient on the other end blaming you for not being straightforward with your intentions. I have seen the drunken rides in backseats of poorly ventilated sedans, sitting calmly as the forehead of your high school crush rests on your shoulder. I have seen the moment of realization that comes when you decide you don't want to have sex right away. I have seen the endless swiping, wondering if anyone who goes off to the left will ever find someone, because it is not going to be you. I have seen the cheating and the lies that becomes all too well-known as I sit inside the frat house for the first time and wonder just how we ended up here. I have seen us get selective. I have seen us get impatient. I have seen us grow numb.

Is this ... love?

VIII.

This past summer, I sat down with my mother and watched 2013's *Before Midnight*, the last installment in the *Before* trilogy, for the first time. In it, we find Jesse and Celine married with children. Almost twenty years have passed since we first met them in *Before Sunrise*. They are on a vacation in Greece, spending the time together remembering, reflecting, and thinking about their lives up until this point. One night, they try and engage physically, but then an argument breaks out, producing some of the finest dialogue the series has given us. Celine accuses Jesse of cheating on her, and Jesse speculates that Celine might have cheated on him. Jesse, growing annoyed, says: "I also know that you love me, okay? I'm okay with you being a complicated human being! I don't wanna live a boring life where two people own each other, where two people are institutionalized in a box that others created—because that is a bunch of stifling bullshit." Celine is speechless. She storms out. Jesse sits in silence, clearly frustrated at not only Celine, but himself. Celine comes back in the room and delivers one of the most heartbreaking lines in the whole trilogy: "You know what's going on here? It's simple—I don't think I love you anymore."

This line is so shocking because we see Jesse and Celine in a situation that we've never seen them in before. The first two films presented what could have been the

highest form of love by appealing to their natural capacity to communicate, converse, and explore. Now, these elements are still present in their marriage, but in this scene the “ideal” nature of their love is slowly dissolving once they get hit with the realities of living in the real world—with real responsibilities—and taking hold of these burdens as a couple.

Shortly after this scene, Jesse sits with Celine at a café and performs a silly routine where he pretends to be a stranger meeting Celine for the first time. Celine at first doesn’t buy it—she has every reason to still be upset, as does Jesse—but she eventually yields to Jesse’s gimmick of being a time traveler. “We’ve met before. Summer ’94,” he says. Celine says there is no way that this man sitting across from her could ever be the same man that she met in 1994 on the train to Vienna. The big element at stake here is how their love—their seemingly perfect love—is hanging by a thread in the real, adult world. Jesse’s antics can only do him so much good. But then he hits Celine with this near the end of their exchange: “This is real life. It’s not perfect, but it’s real. And if you can’t see it, then you’re blind, alright? I give up.” Jesse and Celine sit in silence, the shot echoing the listening booth scene from twenty years earlier. They are engaging in “the space” between them, reconciling, contemplating, and thinking about everything that has brought them to this moment. Celine breaks the silence with: “so what about this time machine?” The film ends with them thinking about their futures, wondering what this night might look like when they reminisce about it in their 80s. Jesse and Celine still have time, and they still have love, and it is the difficulty of knowing that this love is fallible, inconsistent, and fragile that makes them so much stronger as a couple.

Is this ... love?

IX.

I find that too often, my idea of love involves having to give up some part of my life, whether that is my personality, or my sense of privacy related to physical intimacy. I think about my public-school musings on love and my most recent relationship as an adult, and the fear that came with having to try and extend myself beyond my current realm of experience, whether physically or otherwise.

I take my cue from Plato and remind you that sex is at the bottom of the ladder; if I look to my roommates, or my grandparents, or my parents, or even Jesse and Celine, I know that a strong energy can exist when you spend the time with someone who ignites this sensation within you that does not necessarily have to be sexual. These film characters, and to some extent my parents and grandparents, do occasionally work as complex models for love because they perpetuate the idea of a “soulmate,” a culturally loaded term. They couldn’t have been “soulmates,” though, because that implies no resistance. My grandmother was unimpressed, initially, with my grandfather. My mother was nervous about dating my father. Jesse and Celine feared never speaking again, and twenty years later had to work on grounding their “perfect” love in the real

world. I know, however, that when all of these people first met each other, there was a willingness to explore. Even as their lives progressed, there was still a willingness to continue having faith in a greater connection, the incentive for braving the ups and downs of the real world being that they had, and always will have, each other.

After *Before Midnight* ended, my mother, wiping tears from her eyes, reminded me that meeting my father was fate—"I believe in that, I really do," she says—but I feel now that it was about taking the time to align with someone who you really enjoy spending time with. After seeing this film and thinking about what it meant to really work through love, I realized that love is not about giving something up, but about sharing. Not necessarily sharing your body, but sharing your mind, your being, your *Self*. So far, I have seen that love is being with someone that makes you want to be better, do better, and confront the areas of yourself that you may be unsatisfied with or choose to hide away from the outside world. I know now, going forward, that what lies at the heart of love is the courage to try and be open and not fear what lies beyond my experience.

Is this ... love?

X.

Over a year after having gone through my first relationship, I stand, at 21, in the same spot my mother did back in 1994. The blinds are the same, the countertop is the same, yet in between my fingers rests no empty space, but a cell phone, lighting up every so often with notifications informing me of another friend who has seen a funny YouTube clip. I turn off my phone and toss it into my pocket. I undo the blinds, opening them slowly to reveal the dark night sky, and down below, the lights coming from downtown. If I squint hard enough, I can see the hustle and bustle of Toronto, whispering to me from across the lake, "be patient."

As I stand looking through the glass, I think about my encounters with love—the poor attempts at humour in public school, listening to my parents and grandparents, seeing my roommates together, watching Jesse and Celine bicker, and going through my first real relationship in university as a 20-year-old—and I remind myself that each of these lights, despite burning brightly, will go out one day. Buildings are going to get torn down, light poles are going to fall, cars are going to park. The stream of the bright glimmer will slowly fade back into darkness.