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Elegy to First Love

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Elegy to First Love

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Elegy to First Love
Ela Thompson

The first girl I ever knew I loved was odd-eyed. She had one shining briste brown eye and one that was lazy and green. It was india green and vibrant, like full summer foliage, with flecks of gold hidden deep within the iris. It never fully looked at you; indeed, it seemed to see beyond you. To me, Marcelle was the most beautiful girl . Odd-eyes aside, her front teeth were crooked so that one tooth was slightly pushed out and crossed over the other. Her face was round, her cheeks full and pink, so that something about her looked vaguely Korean, although she wasn't. Her nose was broad, with a distinct bump mid-bridge. Her eyebrows were dark and thick, and, if she let them grow, they'd meet in the middle of her brow. Her skin was always sun-kissed, a deliKate brown, and soft like damp earth.

Loving girls did not come easily to me. I'd always been afraid of girls, not knowing why. I made better friends with boys, who were rough and not afraid to dirty their clothes in the woods or steal through abandoned buildings. This isn't to say I didn't have girl friends; I did, but it seemed much harder to keep them. Perhaps this was because I never felt like a girl, more vehemently than I ever felt I wasn't a boy, and I was told I was supposed to be one over and over. It's hard to say why, but when I met Marcelle, I knew I loved her and would not let myself give up easily. I won't say this girl, the first one I knew I loved, was different from other girls. She was soft, gentle, nurturing, like I was taught a girl should be. She had a voice that was quiet, but carried, and she sang pretty bird melodies when she knew someone was listening. She had a way of moving that made you want to reach out and hold her hand or brush the hair from her face. She let me, often, walk to class with her, our fingers knitted tightly by pressure and sweat. It kills a heart to be honest, but I've never held a hand that fit so well since. She used to kiss my cheeks, daintily, as you would a buttercup, when we parted, as if to remind me of something I was trying to forget. I was so afraid to love her, or maybe I was afraid she already knew I did.

When I first realized my own feelings, I ran, crying to Marcelle's roommate, my good friend, Kat. Kat was a 4'11" strawberry shortcake goth, "mother to us all" type, who had not one, but three moms she went home to over breaks. If anyone was going to be able to help me with this romantic awakening, it was her. I remember we sat on her bed, my head in her lap, as I sobbed about what I thought was the most unfortunate thing to ever happen to me. When I was thoroughly finished crying about being in love with a girl, Kat told me that it was "normal" and "not to worry my pretty little head". She even asked me if I wanted help in wooing Marcelle. I politely declined. I have always been resolute in love, unwavering, but unable to act. When I am in love, I make handmade cards, cookies, cakes, and anonymously give them to my beloved, so I can watch their delight (and often confusion) from afar. But Marcelle knew this about me; it was the kind of thing we laughed and whispered about together, so my affections could never be expressed with one of my trademark secret gifts.

To make matters worse, Marcelle had a girlfriend, Greta Unger. Greta was a tall, willowy, classic beauty. Everything about her face and body were perfect, except maybe she was a bit too tall for insecure boys to like her. Her hair was deep chestnut brown and cropped short around her face. But Greta was a mean girl. She was in love with someone else, a boy, and was only dating Marcelle for attention. Looking back, I think it hurt me more than it ever hurt Marcelle. I was jealous, indeed, I was a fury, and I let that jealous fire rule me. Although they were dating, Marcelle still allowed me to holds hand with her. She still kissed my cheeks and forehead; she still let me change for the required Monday night formal dinners in her room. I could feel her

eyes lingering over me as hid my body in the corner of her room and hastily covered my skin; it was as if she were simultaneously laughing at me and taking comfort in my unwavering affection.

I didn't know which it really was until after Greta broke up with Marcelle and left school altogether (the demands of boarding school were too much for her apparently). One afternoon in spring as we were walking along the path lined with full, pink magnolia trees to the dining hall for lunch, Marcelle let go of my hand and took my arm hard in hers. She pulled me so close to her that my ear was just centimeters from her mouth. I thought for a moment that she would kiss it. "Do you like me?" she whispered. The feeling of her warm breath on my face and neck filled me with bone rotting anxiety, I could only look at her in wide eyed shock and nod a single sharp yes. "I thought so," she giggled and let go of my arm. "I was thinking about asking you out, but I think we make better friends."

Ninth grade science class, Mr. L says something about radioactivity. I am doodling in my notebook, even though it's made of graph paper. I am drawing eyes, realistic eyes, over and over. I want to perfect the human face. I don't realize that I'm drawing Marcelle's eyes, remembering, even subconsciously, every curve and shadow. Mr. L has taken out a Geiger counter and is talking about background radiation. I shift my gaze to the rest of the classroom and accidentally meet eyes with Emma from across the table. She glares at me and raises her hand. Emma hates me, although I don't know why. She thinks I'm weird, and she's right. I am strange. I don't flirt back with Peter Flanagan, the undisputed king of school, when he teases me about my name or pulls playfully at my hair or sits too close to me in our shared classes. I don't go to school dances with boys--I go with my friends. I hold hands with Marcelle everywhere. Emma has spread a rumor about me being a lesbian, although I haven't heard it myself yet.

Mr. L calls on her and she says, "Put the Geiger counter next to Ela. Put it next to her, I bet she's radioactive."

My heart sinks to my chest. She's right, I feel it. I am different, I am weird, I am radioactive. Maybe, maybe I am. Mr. L shrugs, and the whole class holds their breath as he turns and points the Geiger counter directly at me. I squeeze my eyes shut, waiting for a storm of beeps to erupt from the machine.

The device, which was beeping erratically, goes dead silent. Mr. L holds it in front of me for a few more seconds, but there is no change. The class tension defuses into laughter; it's almost funny how anticlimactic the situation is. I am anti-radioactive. I breath a sigh of relief, but I see a look of shock and disgust spread across Emma's face. Emma is wrong. I am not radioactive, I am not a lesbian.

Although it would take me two more years to know it, I am asexual. The love I feel in my heart is romantic only. I have been more than satisfied with my close friendship with Marcelle and could see myself doing nothing more. My love feels uncorrupted, pure. Although I know that all love should feel this way, to me, the crushes and romances occurring all around me seem strange and unappealing. My peers all seem to want sex, to intertwine in fields and bushes and locker rooms. I saw such figures many times on my walks from the art center to my dormitory late at night and was horrified that this was to be the ultimate expression of love. I wanted nothing more than to be able to tell Marcelle that she has the most beautiful and kind spirit I have ever known, to hold her hand, and to kiss her cheeks. I wanted her to feel that same pure hearted love with me, but she didn't.

“Happy Valentine’s Day!” Lydia said as she handed me a single red rose, her shining brown eyes nearly closed in half moons as she smiled. It was Valentine’s Day, the most dreaded holiday for me at the time, an awkward sixth grader. I had been certain that I would not receive any token of affection from anyone.

Bewildered by joy, I took the rose carefully from her hand and brought it up to my nose, inhaling the deliKate scent that reminded me cooking biryani with my parents. “Thank you so much!” I beamed, my 108 cheeks turning red with embarrassment. We stood together in the cafeteria during the time before homeroom, where everyone waited for class to begin. The entirety of Greencastle Antrim Middle School was staring at us with jaws ajar.

It is only looking back that I realize why; this was possibly the first time those middle schoolers had ever seen two female bodied people exchange romantic gifts. Plus, Lydia and I were in the middle of southwestern, rural Pennsylvania, where homosexuality was a cardinal sin. For me, in that moment, I was more concerned with the beautiful flower my dearest friend had given to me.

Lydia looked at me expectantly as I put the rose in my backpack so it stuck out. I wanted the whole school to see this perfect symbol of our friendship. I saw her face drop as I said, “You’re my best friend.” I spent rest of the day proudly showing off the rose and telling my other friends about how happy I was to receive it, and they all looked at me as if I were completely insane.

My friendship with Lydia declined after that day; I had no idea that she was in love with me. I didn’t know I’d broken her heart. I didn’t even know that I was allowed to be in love with girls, so I wasn’t able to comprehend her gesture. It wasn’t until eighth grade, when Lydia and my friend Alisa started dating, that I fully understood what I had missed that cold February day. And even then, I didn’t know if I had loved her.

Before I met Marcelle, I used to wear one brown-colored contact and one green over my cornflower blue eyes to imitate the heterochromia I’d only ever seen before in dogs and Kats. The phenomenon had fascinated me to the point of imitation, and I wished desperately that I too could have those magic eyes. I felt afterward, in the pit of my stomach, that I had appropriated something sacred.

Indeed, the very image of my false eyes is how we met. Marcelle had never met another person with heterochromia, so when she saw me from across the room of crowded first year high schoolers with my colored contacts, she bounded over to me. I’ll never forget the look of shock on her face as she moved closer and peered into my eyes, and noticed the blue irises hidden under brown and green rings. I think she said only, with the softest sigh, Oh. I apologized hastily to her, a stranger, for my deception.

Not long ago, I was driving. I wasn’t really going anywhere, just driving, when I found myself going past it. Not that there was much left of it to go past or see, except in memory. If you were to drive there, today, tomorrow, next month, you wouldn’t see anything, you wouldn’t notice it. 109 There isn’t a scrap of metal or magic left there, just grass. Not that grass isn’t something. I love grass, I do. But what is now a vacant lot next to a Sprint store was once Play Land: a house of fun, an after school treat, a universe, a kingdom.

Play Land. Looking back on it, it was nothing more than a building with rectangular white walls that had that could’ve-been-made-of-cardboard look. But I loved it for its neon lights and colors, for whack-a-mole and every other too bright, anger relieving game. I loved the other

kids, the way my mother would pay attention to everything I said, the greasy pizza, the prizes. The prizes. Plastic ponies, silver crowns, speedy race cars, rubber bugs, glow in the dark slime--I always loved the dinosaurs. I almost always chose dinosaurs at the prize counter. To this day a T-Rex remains, frozen, in my closet, ready to claw and bite, despite his missing tail. His eyes still glow red fire, I'm sure.

I was nearly six when I had my first kiss. It was Friday afternoon and Micah's birthday. Micah, who was fast and clever, who waited for me in line and was always my partner. He was my best friend. The whole of my kindergarten class was packed into the back room at Play Land. We were crowded around a single table, screaming, the joy falling out of our eyes and excitement sweating out of our fingers. Under the table, Micah and I held hands; we never cared what this was supposed to mean, or at least, I never much did. Suddenly, everyone was singing, all around and off key. "Make a wish, Micah," I said, beaming, whispering close in his ear. One breath. Blow! In the instant after he blew out the candles, Micah turned and kissed me full on the lips. I was shocked, unable to think or act, confused.

Junior prom. I went with my roommate, Adele. She was dressed as the sun, in a gold dress, and I was the moon in silver, purple, and blue. I didn't want to go with anyone as a date, so we went as art, as a conversation piece. Marcelle went with her latest crush, Trent. They looked like a bride and groom because Marcelle wore a long, all-white lace dress and Trent wore a traditional black tuxedo. We took pictures with them and posed as their wedding party. We called this prom "M's wedding", although she wouldn't be engaged to Trent for another year.

At dinner, dates sat across from each other in pairs along a narrow table. Marcelle and I sat next to each other, our shoulders and arms touching, bumping, as we ate. It really did feel like I was at Marcelle's wedding. There was laughter and music, a meal, dancing, and two lovers at the center of it all. When the school photographer came around to take pictures of our table, Marcelle reached her arm around me, and held me close so that my head nearly rested on her shoulder. She cupped her hand on my face, on my chin, and held our faces together so that they touched, her cheek to my forehead. In this photograph, I look happy, but shy, or coy perhaps, bewildered by this display of affection, perhaps wondering what the others at the table are thinking. Marcelle's face is warm and glowing and in motion. It is only her hand, which is cupped so precisely on my jawline that tells a different story. It looks as if, Marcelle is turning towards me, moving to turn my head and pull me into a kiss. It is a hand angled with possession, with purpose. She does not, however, kiss me, I know this. Instead, after the picture was taken, she gently released my face, letting her fingers linger over my neck for a few spare seconds, and returned to dinner, to Trent, and left me alone the rest of the evening.

I was drawn to Marcelle. I followed her everywhere. I pressed my feet close to her on sidewalks, pushing her into the grass because I wanted us to be nearer. When we weren't holding hands, I would take up her arm and hold it against my chest with the hopes that she would hear how my heart beat. We would never be closer.

Junior year she met her fiancé. They were far from perfect for each other; at first, Trent wanted nothing to do with Marcelle, but she wormed her way into his heart, as she did with everyone around her. Trent was a Mensa member, a one-year senior, and all around a good guy, but he only starting dating Marcelle as a favor to a friend. I was sure they would break up senior year when Trent went to college in California, Cal Poly to be precise, but they stayed together through it all. I was there, through it all too. Marcelle would cry on my shoulder about not

wanting to say, “I love you” for the first time via Skype, and we would still hold hands with fingers interlocked everywhere we walked together as, according to Marcelle, Trent preferred to hold hands with open palms, which made it “not cheating”.

I wanted to forget about Marcelle, to put my affections onto someone else, as I knew it was a hopeless love. During junior year, I half heartedly pursued a Czech exchange student named Selena. I made her pink heart sugar cookies for Valentine’s Day and hid them in her student mailbox. She never found out it was me and instead thought they were made by a creepy boy who was stalking her. My senior year, I decided to give in and date the boy who had been in love with me since his freshman year. I won’t say I didn’t care for him; I did, but it was more out of pity than it was out of love.

Nothing made me forget Marcelle. Even now, part of me longs to be with her, if only to see her smile at me with those rosebud lips and crooked teeth I’ve loved so well.