

The Myth of It

When they polled a bunch of little kids, posing the question “What is love?” one of the answers was: “**Love is when mommy gives daddy the best piece of chicken.**” – *Elaine, age 5.* So it got me thinking about love and when did I first have an opinion about it?

I know that Christmas is reportedly the “cornerstone for love and family,” but for me the two were polar opposites. Christmas was this cacophony and blur of too much everything and fighting and mostly me being ignored. The Christmas when I was 12 I asked for a collection of “**I love Lucy**” episodes. I wrote it four times on my wish list. Instead, my brother Chris got me this grotesque doll called “Stinky baby.” Her special features were two-fold: a life like smear of mucous across her nose and a realistic fart sound if you pressed her stomach. He thought that was fantastic. ‘Enough said.

I survived the rocky years of high school having found solace in the theatre department. My senior year I was cast as Hodel in the “Fiddler on the roof.” I had found great comfort in the drama department doing plays and it had awakened my love for acting. But more than that, I loved being a part of something, contributing and participating. With each new cast and with each new production there would be private jokes, and rough rehearsals, and romance somewhere and for four years this made my heart happy and my life full. “Fiddler” would be my last high school play. As always there was a cast party closing night. Around 11:00 everyone was gathered inside Julia Blum’s house celebrating. And all I remember is I couldn’t walk through the front door. I couldn’t make myself join in with them and I didn’t know why. I felt melancholy and strange that this was it- goodbye. Where would I feel safe and comfortable again? How could I break away from Janet or Andy or Jason? Shoring up my courage, I slipped quickly through the

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house directly to the backyard without stopping. No one was out there. The moon was reflected in the pool water, I noticed that, and I made my way over to the diving board and sat there. From my vantage point I could see everyone through the kitchen inside- lots of laughing and hugging and breaking into songs. Julie was crying, she was a crier, and Janet was doing a very funny imitation of our director, I recognized it. And I knew this was the end of innocence. At 17 I was mute when it came to emotions. My guard took a long time to build safely up and I wasn't about to let anyone see the obvious: I didn't want to let go. Not long after that Matt Hurewitz, another senior and a close friend, appeared and quietly sat on the diving board next to me. He has a bottle of opened champagne and two coffee cups. He pours some into one cup and starts looking where I am looking, into the house. Then he scoots closer, and hands me the cup to drink, to share. We must have stayed there an hour, never saying a word. And somewhere in that frame of time two important things happened: I was understood and I wasn't alone.

“Love is when you tell a boy you like his shirt and then he wears it every day.” Mary, age 6

At 26 I severed ties with my family and stopped celebrating Christmas with them. But, after a several year absence, I went back hoping for better. No, it was the usual nonsense, so my strategy was watch until there was enough distraction and then slip out the door. I did. I felt my father behind me following me to my car.

“Do you need any help Ames?” he was shuffling in his camel colored bedroom slippers down the driveway.

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“No, I’m good” I replied with a little irritation. Jeez, he had come outside wearing his maroon bathrobe, barely tied around his chubby midsection.

“I hope you liked your presents, I really wanted to find those c.d.s and...” now he is helping me put things in my trunk and I want him to go away. I am already late and he is making me later, moving stuff around and he wants me to be so happy and pleased and I find it all so confusing, these checkered feelings... annoyance, suffocation, tenderness, guilt. I want to leave so badly and for him to stop being nice because he isn’t nice, he isn’t always nice. The emotional thermostat for me at the family dinner was 42 below. I was conditioned for that and now I am thrown off. My dad is breathing a little hard, trying to start a conversation about one of the books he gave me.

“No I love everything. Thank you Dad.” I could feel the whole of me retracting, yanking back inside, turning cold. And I do not hug him, I remember that, and I drive away. I will tell you the image of his round belly poking through that maroon velvet bathrobe in the driveway and his fumbling want to please me haunts me still. But I know for sure: that was love. Clumsily eloquent maybe, but that was. And I couldn’t see it then. I was incapable of pulling it towards me and enveloping it. Opportunity missed.

“Love is what’s in the room with you at Christmas if you stop opening presents and listen.”- Bobby, age 7. Oh fuck off, “Bobby age 7.” What the hell do you know.

Sometimes when I need to get my mind off love I watch “1000 ways to die” on Spike TV. A recent episode included a showgirl who developed a flesh eating bacteria from shaving her legs. She died a really disgusting

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death. I don't know why I include this except sometimes I need to not care and exorcise all the good sweet stuff out of my brain.

For 5 years I was a school teacher. Though I began like everyone does with great optimism about changing the lives of young fresh souls, I quickly became cynical and watched the decline of western civilization right before me in room 14.

There was one student, Robert, that was not well liked by both the other kids and the staff. He was a small gloomy little character, short on brains, and he tried my patience. Robert got into a fight daily with the fleshy Asian boys in the third grade and at least once a week he was in detention. But I felt for Robert. I drew him out, asked why he got mad so often. He told me it was because when he read his stories out loud the other kids made fun of his poor English and his bad spelling and well, they were right, he spelled like a foreigner, but not about the teasing part. I became protective of him and we spent many lunch hours together even when he didn't have detention. As it was I was not much liked by the staff either, so maybe I saw an unlikely ally in this slightly smelly, scowling little kid. By the 5th year I knew I didn't want to be a teacher. It depressed me, it was colorless and I was sure I would never leave any contribution of merit. So that year I decided to quit. My last day of teaching, Robert wrote me a note on blue lined paper, **with every word correctly spelled**. "Dear Miss Lloyd. You are my favorite teacher ever. Thank you for always believing in me. Your friend, Robert." No Robert. Thanks for believing in me 'cause frankly I was a terrible teacher. I placed his note in a dark wood frame. Against all odds, I must have done something right.

So I think back- If my high school friends could have looked out at me and Matt sitting on the diving board that seminal night, what would

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they have seen? Was it more visible to others than myself? Was some kind of love sitting there with us, maybe holding the unused other coffee cup?

If a car had driven by and seen my dad in his goddamn pajamas embarrassing me in front of the whole neighborhood, desperate to make sure I liked my presents and me with my arms crossed, un-willing and horrible, was some kind of love still propped there on up on my dashboard?

In the end it isn't the big majestic gestures that count. It's the smaller stuff, the moment after you stop laughing, the unexpected cry that catches in your throat, or the bit of splendid comfort that comes when all is collapsing. Make no mistake; it's a messy business this love stuff. The untouchable fleeting kind, the awkward/ angry/ weird kind, or the surprising kind that comes from a kindred spirit, even if it is a misunderstood little boy. I had it all wrong. Love is the caulking between life's hard cracks; it is the stuff that keeps the edges softer. I think the heart has its own virginity, but it works in reverse. Withstanding all kinds of damage and ruin, we still spend our days looping it around hoping to bring the pieces back and sometimes if we are very lucky they finally re-meet, hobbled together, in the middle. ***"Paying attention- I think that's what love is." Amy, age 40-something***

By Amy Lloyd

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