

Why You Should Never Speak to Your First Love

With special emphasis on how his fading memory
will be a comfort to you during times of trial;
including, but not limited to, miserable break-ups,
writing (but never sending) sarcastic letters
to former employers, and
making naive decisions of an impulsive nature.

REASON No. 1

*You Should Not Speak to Your First Love,
Because Upon Encountering Him,
You Were 15 Years Old,
And Annoying.*

Even when you weren't garbling out a brace-face sing-song, or transposing wit with nonsense, everything you said was battered and fried in the thickness of giddy teenage angst. Half your time was spent in the hugely colored worlds of anime and Japanese imagination, and the other half in enduring reality. You watched Miyazaki for hours, lying on your belly before the television screen, so close that the colors scattered and rainbowed on the whites of your eyes. You shifted from your house, to the oatmeal-colored hallways of high school, to your part-time job, then back to the house again, all with the naive disinterest of a dream.

Kicking off a two-year fit of aimless originality, you dyed your hair green. The next Sunday, when MeeMaw saw you sashay into church in a sprigged white cotton dress and combat boots, your short fluffy hair an emerald nimbus around your head, she started to cry--loud enough to be heard over the plunking piano and feet shuffling in their pews. Huge, cartoonish tears rolled from her face and splashed onto the church bulletin. The words on the announcement page grew fat and swollen with water, sprouting thin-ink lines of caterpillar fur.

So it was that, after MeeMaw had been dropped off at home to recover from the shame and shock, your family went to the Pizza Hut buffet, as they did every Sunday after church.

And so it was that, with a plate of rapidly-cooling, thin-crust pepperoni and an icy coke, you turned the corner round the salad bar, fell in love, and dropped your food all at once.

You crouched on the carpet and scrubbed the sauce with a napkin, and felt your heart quietly and instantly collapse in on itself. You kept your head bent, and could see his feet still standing as they were, right nearby, but still you never spoke.

Before you dropped the food, you'd seen, or if you didn't actually see, you somehow abstractly sensed the crooked smile on his face.

When his black patent shoes turned and walked away, you felt you could hear your own bones turn to water. Finally, and somehow, you stood up and managed the surreal business of feeling in love, but walking away.

When you slid into your seat, you were crushed . . . but no one in your family even noticed the shift in your spirit; they just kept on talking and eating, or stealing bits of each other's breadsticks.

You were miffed that your silence went unnoticed. But still, too preoccupied with the pang and the mystery inside your own ribs, you didn't really care; you only felt snubbed out of principle. You were a martyr, a sensitive spirit, surrounded by beings of lesser feelings, which made you love and pity your boisterous family so much that the combination of loves made you feel your entire heart was bound to swell up and explode.

For years, the usual ritual upon arriving home was that you and your sister tumbled out the van's backseat and rushed into the house, shedding patent shoes, itching dresses, and nude pantyhose to make a long, lacy trail through the kitchen. But today you let your sister slam the door in front of you, then sat, slowly, on the front steps, yanking off shoes and nylons, and pulling the pins from your hair.

You squinted out towards the road, and shuffled your feet slowly on the warm, sun-soaked slate.

The gardenia bushes that flanked the sidewalk grew so high and thick that they were taller than a grown man, and the air was heavy with their smell. Always, they bloomed in the two weeks before and after your birthday. Despite being your favorite flower, you'd learned restraint: picking the blossoms was a waste. The skin-smooth petals wilted so quickly, and in a few hours, their thick petals turned shriveled and brown.

But still, you brushed the unopened lips of a few tight buds with your fingertips before stepping inside. The house was quiet, and your parents and sister were draped with boneless ease over two couches and an easy chair.

From the tight-squeezed stacks of the thick bookshelves your grandfather made, you picked out a brand new journal--one your Aunt gave you two Christmases ago, that had always seemed too beautiful to use. But after today, you felt yourself more or less a woman, and the journals you kept yesterday, the week before, and the months before that no longer suited. Their childish wide, blue-scored lines brimmed with yearbook-style abbreviations. Those journals were fat with the looping-cursive secrets and movie-star, singer-songwriter crushes of a frivolous high school girl who had, until a few hours ago, never been in love.

On the first page, and after much thought, you wrote:

*I have both brushed and avoided an entirely interior tragedy.
I am a Picasso piece and my legs and arms are too big
for my tortured body.*

In retrospect, this entry earned its pretentious veneer from the heavy influence of that semester's AP Art History lectures.

REASON No. 2:

*He Will Not Notice You
When You See Him Again.*

Same place; same time—the lunch buffet, eleven till two. From behind your sweating-cold glass of cherry coke, you watched the boy with the limp make his way across the parking lot to his brother's car. If you were in your room watching movies with hot tea under an old quilt, you'd think by the way he walked that the dvd was scratched. It was a quiet scene--you watching, him leaving--but it froze in small breaths. Halfway between each step, a snagged suspension; then, a jarring collapse as his foot hit the ground.

Maybe the saddest Beatles song ever made would play in the background, skipping notes in sympathy with the boy's arrested movements. You watched through the tinted window with Wes Anderson-wide eyes.

In the hot Florida sun, he shimmered, the braces on his legs burning through the thick air. He seemed a fleshly ghost in a Hurley brand t-shirt and brown suede shoes; a paranormal presence that made your chest ache and sent goosebumps scurrying down your arms.

His limp seemed more like an accent than a handicap . . . some smooth and beautiful trick of the voice. You wondered if that meant you understood him more than other people, or less.

His brother limped as well, but more severely, so his knees knocked and he swayed like a man just come from sea. The shudders in his footsteps was harsher, the half-collapse between his steps more dangerous: a sight that made you feel ill.

You went home and wrote on the second page of your journal, in the very middle:

*Just being born with a twisted leg
does not mean you always had one.*

It seemed very profound at the time, and you shut the door to the bedroom you shared with your eight-year-old sister and cried--from sobbing to snuffling, then the slow heavy breathing of a stuffy nose and drained emotions.

When your little sister ran into the room looking for her soccer cleats, you yelled and threw a stuffed menagerie of rabbits and hippos and bears until she ran out again.

You wanted to apologize, but you felt too strange and tender, and too awkwardly placed in other people's existence. After she left, you slid off the bed to lock the door. The door's mirror was cracked down the middle, and a black streak jagged down between your eyes, then veered left to slice through your shoulder.

Twisting and turning in front of the mirror, you hoped that some particular purse of the lips or turn of the head would make your face beautiful--exotic and knife-thin. You couldn't quite succeed, but your own loveless glamour, or maybe the excess of tears, gave you a stomach-ache.

*I never love my own blood.
This family beats through my veins,
but my heart pulses for someone else.*

At dinner that night, while pushing the vegetable stir-fry around with your knife, you tried to remember the boy's appearance, but couldn't--not really. More than anything, you felt the impression of his eyes--dark and dark-circled--meeting yours, and his limping step. These two things seemed a complete image, but you didn't really know

. . . you didn't know how to look at men enough to know when their outlines blurred, or when they had edges and bodies and mouths to distinguish them from the all the rest.

REASON No. 3:
*The Why Does Not
Answer The Question.
(You Found This Phrase
Of Ambiguous Origin
Meaningful, But Not Clear.)*

Girls--and some women who never quite grow up--feel more beautiful when hidden. Born too big and broad for attractive frailty, daintiness can only be achieved through artificially spiritual means, or a well-timed, romantic illness. But even round, healthy protestant faces look otherworldly and pale when cloaked in fantasy, hidden inside Tolkein's mountains, or wrapped in white cloth and pseudo-catholic, heaven-gazing prayers.

A body looks beautiful in tragedy: when a nun with almond eyes and a smooth face floats down any street (in any country), businessmen peer around their newspapers. Waiters leaning against a wall to smoke their coffee-break cigarettes follow her path with their eyes.

"A damn waste."

But she is too perfect and untouchable for anyone to even say this aloud, so the businessmen shake their papers with a crack, and ask for another espresso, and the waiters stub their cigarettes viciously into the brick walls before crunching the ashes underfoot.

After high school, you realize that all first loves are, for women, part catholic mercy and part wound-stitching pity, bound together by the yearning to brush fingers against fevers, and run a feminine hand through boyish curls.

It was only after college that you realized boys do not have first loves at all, only Wendybirds and Wendydarlings, stretching tall and growing up by their bedroom window, hoping for next year's Spring Cleaning.

Even knowing this, years later you still loved him--loved that boy you saw in the first shake of a Florida summer.

Or at least, if not dependably or steadfastly, you still loved him a little bit. More than the other person that you still loved, and shouldn't have bothered with in the first place. The first one, the limping one, would resurface in your thoughts during moments of immense safety, sometimes when you were wobbling in a palm tree pose while waiting for the water to boil for your tea; sometimes, while rubbing the thick leaves of your potted plants, or pressing your index finger into the soil to test for moisture.

More rarely, though, you thought of him while slipping into church late, just so you could listen to the sermon from the loft, closer to God, alone and warm, looking down on bald heads and the thick, perfect curls of women's wigs. Both seeing and unseen, with the exception of God.

REASON No. 4:
*Someone Less Worthy,
Less Mysterious,
and Of Significantly Less
Psychological Interest
Will Crush You.
(Figuratively Speaking.)*

After that boy, you fell in love maybe two or three times, and once with the person you were actually dating.

He took you to see a jazz band on a Monday night, and you both danced so fast and long that your skin was slick and the sky was growing light when you arrived back home the next morning. You shivered while he drove you home, happy and goose-pimpled, with the hem of your red dress (borrowed from your old college roommate) stuck to the tops of your knees. He didn't ask about the air-conditioning being too high, or think to offer his jacket, but you were happy and tense, smelling of dried sweat and other people's cigarettes.

Three months after that, he met your parents, your grandparents, and all your friends. (“Hi, how are you?! Yes, his job is very promising. Two promotions in two years.”)

Five months after that, he moved to Nebraska to work for his uncle. Two short weeks and three love letters (yours) after, he called to break up with you. It was as cool and quick as a cancelled appointment.

When he hung up the phone, you sat very still for a few moments, then went over to the coffeepot and measured out eight heaping tablespoons. It was eight a.m. on a Thursday, and the cool blue-pink air was seeping into your apartment from the sliding glass doors. You couldn’t find a pen, so you used a purple sharpie to scribble over his name in your new, pebble-covered address book.

When the trickle slowed down and the coffeepot was three-fourths full--shiny, fragrant, and almost too black to drink--you carefully, gently poured yourself a mug. When you called the airline company, your hand shook, but your voice was steady.

They promised to give you credit for the miles you would have used to surprise him on his birthday.

The very next morning, you got a phone call confirming that you were chosen for that fancy internship in California--the one that your boyfriend--your ex-boyfriend--had begged you not to even consider.

But even there, in the cold marble halls, tip-toeing through the temperature controlled rooms of perfectly preserved paintings and artifacts, you were wilting. You cried making copies; you cried with your feet tucked tight beneath you, perched on the toilet lid in the handicapped stall; you cried delivering Starbucks to the museum president and his celebrity donors. When he saw your tears splashing onto the plastic coffee lids and sugar-dusted scones, the president gave you his silk handkerchief to wipe your face and nose.

Between sobs, you managed to say thank you, and apologized, saying meekly that you felt very unprofessional.

“I can imagine,” he replied.

On the bus ride home, you fumed to yourself, clinging to the grab strap that dangled from the ceiling, and teetering in your high heels at every turn. You hated to know that your ex-boyfriend, for his entire life, could feel safe in the perfect doubtlessness that he was your first love and first heartbreak. He could believe, was privileged to believe, that he alone had wanted the relationship to end. He had power over you even if you never spoke again; by caring less, he had won.

Of course, the heartbreak was true, but years before you had stored a piece of your naivete in the subconscious of a perfect stranger. The victory of being your first love did not belong to anyone, because the first did not even know it himself.

Somewhere, a man with crooked legs carried something of your fifteen-year-old spirit in the cracks of his past.

Someone told you once--a hippie lady on the subway in New York--that the human mind is incapable of creating anything truly new. Our brains, she said, store every face we ever see deep in the furrows of our selfhood, and we use those faces again as the faces of strangers in our dreams.

"I look at the ground most days," she went on, "unless I sense a lovely aura. Then I look up to save your face for my dreams."

REASON No. 5:

*When You Quit Your
Internship, Damning Industry
Connections, Recommendation
Letters, And Coffee Runs To Hell,
You Will Cash In Your Unused Miles,
Plus Buy a Few Thousand More,
And Take A One-Way Flight To Asia.*

All your mom said when you told her was, "please don't stay," and, "just one year, right?".

You bought the ticket because round-trip airfare seemed too pragmatic, and one-way tickets like modern magic. You sensed that this was just twenty-first century superstition; the salt over your shoulder that wards away bad luck; the one-way ticket to guarantee happiness; the internal quietness that means you'll want to stay.

REASON No. 6:
You Will Meet Him Again.

You board the aircraft, and your seat is in the very middle of a row of five. Shucking your flats off under the seat in front of you, and trying to avoid the stewardess's judgmental gaze, you consider the uncomfortable reality that your cousin may have offered you her tiny apartment's loft with the assumption that you would not accept . . . but it is too late now, and the ticket stub lies crumpled at the bottom of your purse with the last strip of spearmint gum, and your morning to-do list.

Before even the flight takes off, the middle-aged woman to your left falls asleep, her head bobbing on her collarbone in a gentle rhythm. People still trickle down the aisles, cramming their carry-ons into too-full overheads, then shuffling sideways between chair backs and passengers' knees to collapse, with heavy sighs, in seats too small for their long legs.

A duffle bag drops on the seat to your right.

You don't look up, but can feel something shifting. The smooth-sliding bars of the conscious and unconscious moving into parallel, or the tense, heavy feeling of a combination lock, right before you click the last number into place.

You sense, rather than see, the dark eyes, the side-winding smile.

The sound of limping as he slides into the empty seat.