

Not the Greatest Love Story Ever Told

written by Guest Contributor | January 31, 2019



In second grade, I joined the Girl Scouts, “where girls grow strong.” In high school, long after almost everyone I knew had abandoned the group as a nerdy club, I trained to be a counselor and lifeguard at a camp along a frigid, salty stretch of waterfront in Washington state. I wanted to be independent, adventurous, and of service. I helped run a troop for girls who were homeless, leading the organization to give me a partial scholarship to attend college in New York City—where, in my last year, I met Rose.

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Recently out of a short but crushing relationship, I was determined at twenty-one never to be vulnerable again. She and I seemed compatible on paper: Though she was a few years older, we were both seniors and aspiring poets. My friends liked her loud, dramatic stories. I felt nothing, really—just a quiet detachment I mistook for maturity. Grown-ups, I thought, enjoyed each other’s company but didn’t lose their heads to love.

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Her mom had been raised Catholic but well into adulthood was “born again” and attended a small prayer group that seemed to us to make things up as it went along. Sometimes she’d call and say she’d been talking to God, and Rose would ask, deadpan, “Yeah, and what did God say?” For a while, God said I wasn’t allowed in their house unless Rose came out to her father, which she and her mother both suspected would prompt him to disown her. So after we’d driven all day back to New York from visiting a friend in Virginia, I sat in the car, pretending I wasn’t about to wet my pants while she grabbed something at her parents’ place. We listened to The Butchies and mimicked her mom’s nasal

New York accent. We were outlaws against the world.

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A few months into our relationship, she hung out in my dorm room while I took a shower. Once she'd left, I realized old files had been opened on my laptop, including draft poems and saved chats with my ex. I felt violated and called her.

"Did you go through my computer?" I asked.

"I may have," she said.

In a parallel universe, I told her I couldn't forgive the betrayal, that it was too large a red flag so early in our relationship, and we were over. In another life, I hung up the phone and walked to my favorite café on Amsterdam. I overcame my shyness and self-doubt. Instead of avoiding eye contact, I smiled at the woman I had a crush on studying there. She gave me her number, and we lived happily ever after.

In this life, I did what came easily to me: I contorted my emotional self until I ended up comforting Rose in her distress at being caught. I reassured her we shouldn't break up. We stayed together, my distrust lingering between us.

In the spring, I was accepted to grad school in California. I loved the Bay Area and wanted to return to my home coast. "What do you think?" I prompted her, assuming she'd initiate a breakup. She thought the sun rose and set in New York, and this seemed to be the logical end to our chapter. But she swept me in an effusive hug and said, "Of course I'll go with you!"

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We got to Oakland and had screaming fights almost every day, about nearly everything. She took my prescription sleeping pills and lied about it. She went on a date with a woman she'd met online. I resisted being intimate with this person I couldn't trust, a constant source of contention.

Once, she tried to slam the door in my face, and I stopped it with my hand and then my shoulder. We each leaned in, lurching back and forth, until we heard the hinge breaking off the frame and stopped, startled from our trance.

Together, we conjured a volatile abyss. We baited each other and took the bait, filling the hole of our alienation with drama. Our relationship brimmed with emotion of all the wrong kinds. We never physically hurt or threatened

one another, but we acted like natural enemies trapped in a cage. A few times, I scared myself.

At the height of one argument, she announced she was going to take a shower. I grabbed the shower curtain and ripped down the rod. She stared at me wide-eyed, like I was a monster. I felt like one.

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I wish someone had handed me a book that didn't exist, *You're Just Not That Into Her* or *Some People Bring Out the Worst in Each Other*—or simply: *It's OK to Be Alone*. My parents tried their best at their marriage, but theirs was not the greatest love story ever told. From watching them, I thought fundamental differences in values were obstacles to hurdle, never a deal-breaker—and that nearly incompatible communication styles were typical. *This is what a relationship is*, I would think every time she felt more like an enemy combatant than a partner—and press on. Besides, I'd led her across the country instead of making a clean break. I felt guilty and wanted her to decide what happened next, even though she mocked me and tried to drive a wedge in my other close relationships—as when I hung up the phone with my father and she said in an exaggerated baby voice, “Hi, Daddy.”

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A year later, she got into grad school in the Midwest and left. She called me, drunk, first raving about one man and then, a few months later, another. Still, we made plans for me to move there when I graduated. I was playing for time, waiting for some *deus ex machina* before I had to load another moving truck. Then, while I was visiting her over spring break, a street-racing teenager struck and killed my father. Rose flew home to Seattle with me and read a poem during the memorial service. I was sinking, gasping for air, and clung to her. I worried if we broke up, anyone else I dated wouldn't have known my dad. It felt impossible to face another loss.

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In the wake of losing my father, a devout classmate and her husband were kind enough to bring me dinners at my apartment in Oakland. I was never baptized and had only spent Easters and Christmases at church to appease my grandmother before her death, but I asked them in all seriousness where my father was, wanting a concrete answer. They talked about the doubt inherent

in faith and the promise of Heaven. Deeply in denial he was gone, I was willing to believe anything that pledged to bring him back—not his memory or his legacy but his intact, fallible human body and personality, even if it involved a God whose name I'd taken in vain ten thousand times and whom I forgot except when it was most convenient. They took me to their church, a casual evening affair where the young pastor wore jeans and the contemporary song lyrics appeared on an overhead projection, like karaoke. I'd lost my sense of irony. I sang along.

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When I moved to Chicago, I couldn't imagine leaving the ocean behind, but people reassured me Lake Michigan was so big you couldn't see the other side. It looked like the ocean, they said, and even had dunes. My first weekend in town, the latest man Rose had become infatuated with took me kayaking. She stayed on the shore, not one for outdoor recreation or, as she derisively called pigeons and tents and spiders and dirt, "nature." He was kind and affable—and married. I didn't feel jealous, because I was stuck, not in love. I dragged my hand in the water and nursed a deep, unceasing ache for my father.

That was the only time I paddled there—periodic swimming bans punctuated the rest of the summer as the *E. coli* bloomed.

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By then engaged, we spent my twenty-fourth birthday in Milwaukee with the married man and his wife—she hadn't been told we were celebrating anything and treated us with indifference, as casual school acquaintances. I plodded along with the group, straining to stop time. For this and every age to follow, my supportive, shy, Eagle Scout father would not know me. At the art museum, I approached what appeared to be a simple suitcase. I looked inside and saw light dappling the seafloor.

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Chicago's landscape felt flat and broken, a highway separating me from the lake, a chasm separating me from the world of the living. Everywhere I walked in my new city, I thought about my father. He and I had often taken long strolls down the hill from our home and around Alki Beach in West Seattle. We'd point out interesting houses and gardens to each other, sailboats, lens

effects of the marine air on the structures across the bay. We agreed on very little politically but debated in urgent, respectful tones. If he saw a piece of litter, he picked it up and carried it until he found a garbage can, even if doing so meant a pocket full of someone else's sticky candy wrappers and a grimy plastic bottle in each hand all the way back up the hill.

Years before, he'd dragged me through the route to exorcise my teenage moodiness, but such frustration seemed lifetimes ago. Now, buffeted by the wind off the Great Lakes, I bargained to be good, understanding, and patient, never to take my relationships or fortune for granted, if he would just come home. He began speaking to me in pennies—day after day, they'd appear before me on the sidewalk as I chewed on my longing. Once, I found wheat pennies in two different neighborhoods. But he stayed dead.

The place where he was killed is a bike path skirting the intersection of two industrial arterials adjacent to a freeway overpass. Next to the path is a small hillside overgrown with invasive blackberry vines, where passersby drop refuse without a second thought. On visits home, I began spending hours there, filling big black garbage bags with disintegrating shards of styrofoam, condom wrappers, crushed Gatorade bottles harboring murky rainwater—until I'd cleaned up a patch of green reverent enough for memories to haunt.

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My mother, lost in her own grief, had no easy fixes to offer when I'd call weeping and looking for the secret to make the monstrous absence in our lives go away. I couldn't tell her about the chaos in my relationship—more than once over the years, she and Rose had drunk too much together and commiserated about how I was a perfectionist, a worrier, a wet blanket, their cross to bear.

I didn't dress or act how Rose wanted. When my hair was longer, it would be better short; when it was short, it would be better longer. I was always buying the wrong sunglasses and bringing up dreary concerns about the ballooning student loans and credit card bill. I didn't want to have a baby, and I thought I might be going insane when she suggested the married man could be our donor, that I should forever inextricably link us all by carrying his biological child.

She and my mom, it seemed certain, could see the real me. They smoked and kvetched and hatched big plans together, while I was the preposterously dour asthmatic who didn't want to stay up all night in cigarette-hazy bars. I never questioned how I'd come to be nothing more than a useful foil and reliable fixer of messes. My rage of our first few months in Oakland had long ago given way to resignation. I yelled sometimes, but mostly, I tried to be invisible. I wanted impossible, contradictory things: to escape to a different life and not to be abandoned.

On one especially teary phone call, my mom said if I felt depressed, I should help someone else. I signed up to work at a Chicago soup kitchen. The other volunteers and I wiped down a sea of beige formica, set folding tables, and filled troughs with cafeteria food while church hymns and organ tones wafted up the decrepit stairwell. Some had been volunteering there weekly for years and talked about how much fulfillment they gained from the work. I nodded, wringing my sponge over the gray dishwater, looking up through the airshaft at the gray sky.

The service over, mostly men in faded clothing filed through as we ladled the week's selections onto their trays, and then they waited to find out whether there would be seconds. I tried to smile, a gesture toward civility—real happiness was a theory or a con, not something I would ever feel again. Still, I went back, drawn toward the quiet proximity of these strangers to shield me from the fear and emptiness of my life.

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As the weather cooled, my body rebelled against me. More than a decade after my wisdom teeth were pulled, a dormant bud became impacted. I made an appointment with the closest dentist, who specialized in cosmetic fixes like you see on billboards and had a flashing reader board outside his practice. He gave me the consent forms after he'd already gassed me. I moaned and flailed as he drilled the problem from my head. I'd signed an agreement saying a responsible adult would take me home, but Rose was busy and we didn't have a car, so I walked, ice pack to my cheek.

I got a sinus infection, then another, and another, and another, until by mid-October—four months into living in the city—I woke unable to stop coughing up phlegm and blood.

"I'm sick," I told her. "I need to go to the doctor."

"You're always sick," she said. "I need to get to work."

I let a physician I found at random give me a CT scan and put me on a long course of antibiotics that wreaked havoc on my stomach. Increasingly desperate, I tried an acupuncturist. I could hardly breathe. "The lung," she told me, "is associated with grief."

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Like a toadstool after Washington rain, a sandwich board popped up around the corner from our Chicago apartment building, advertising a contemporary church akin to my friends' congregation in Oakland—one that offered multiple

services a week in a secular school theater. I went and sat in the back, listening to a skilled preacher deliver not the disjointed, antiquated holiday sermons of my youth but something like a biblical literature lecture—a close reading of the Gospels that dove deep into the language and continued an explanatory thread from week to week, like a college course.

I attended for five weeks and even downloaded the church's podcast to listen to while I ran on the treadmill in the dingy basement of our building, until one evening, the pastor critiqued sex outside of marriage and lamented that our "don't ask, don't tell" culture lulls us into believing it's OK to turn a blind eye to sin. I felt my face flush hot in the back of the dim theater, my short dyed black hair, ears strung with captive bead rings, and unisex slacks in a sea of blonde twenty-something women in cheery dresses, already married to men and preparing for babies on the way. I'd never spoken to anyone there except to say, "Peace be with you." Of course this place wasn't meant for me.

Afterward, I emailed the "spiritual questions" contact to ask whether I was correct in understanding the church believed being gay was a sin. He said yes, the Bible teaches homosexuality is wrong, but so are things like lying, and the church wanted to be "in dialogue" with people "regardless of where they are in their spiritual journey."

In the contest for worst week of my life, that one still wins, as I imagined and tried not to imagine jumping from our eleventh-floor fire escape. Even my most tenuous comfort had been a delusion, my real self too horrifying for God to let me reunite with my father.

I wrote to my friend in Oakland with what I actually called a "spiritual entreaty"—she responded that the Bible holds up heterosexual couples as the ideal, but it's not really relevant whether homosexuality is a sin, because no one is perfect, and she was praying for me to find a relationship with God anyway. I was fumbling for someone to help me locate my inner compass, to remind me there is only one answer to whether any kind of true human love is a sin—and that answer is no. Coming up short, I folded further into myself and said I might need to grapple with my questions on my own.

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I didn't make a single friend that year by Lake Michigan. To invest in someone felt like it would create a tether to a city I wanted to leave as soon as possible. To care about someone felt like inviting an impending death, like all the torment spilling from me might drown them. Like I might drown myself.

After a night out with her classmates, Rose told me, "You're pretty, but you're off-putting." I was convinced no one else would ever tolerate me.

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I tried attending "open and affirming" churches, first the United Church of Christ and then a Lutheran one uptown whose rainbow flag flapped over the entrance and whose minister was a short, sturdy woman who put a black cross of ash on my heathen forehead. I didn't feel like a second-class citizen there, but the services were the stilted, distant, nonliterary patchwork I remembered from childhood, and I decided not to go anymore. On the bus ride home, a middle-aged woman suddenly stood up at a stop, jolted down the aisle like a horse stamping her hooves, and collapsed on the sidewalk. I still had some distance to go, but I got off, too. The man she was with called 911. I put my coat under her head while she rolled back and forth on the concrete, in the throes of a seizure.

I walked the rest of the way back, carrying my coat now damp with the stranger's drool, and came stunned into the apartment, where Rose and the married man were hanging out on the couch, watching TV.

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She insisted we get a kitten, whom I ended up caring for. I took the tiny animal on the bus to be spayed and picked her up afterward. I coddled her and cleaned up after her and found in her some solace. "I wish you talked to me the way you talk to the cat," Rose said.

I yearned to go home but was halfway through my second semester teaching at a local college. I'd closed off from my body months before. We still fought almost every day but slept like sisters on our cheap, creaky futon. Most mornings, she'd turn on her side in her sleep and knee me in the tailbone, jolting me awake. She spent many days off with the married man and told me in great detail about their excursions, how people at the zoo smiled and looked at them like they were a couple, unlike us—strangers had yelled "Dykes!" and more than one parent had pulled a young child away as we walked hand in hand down the street.

It seemed she was just flattered by his attention and leading him on as a boundary-crossing friend, but I found myself hoping I'd catch them sleeping together, so I'd have an irrefutable reason to end things.

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After almost four years locked together like scorpions battling, we broke up over a Post-It note. She reached for one on my desk, but the unused stack was

a stocking stuffer from my father the last Christmas he was alive. It had become a talisman, and to use a single sheet felt likely to shatter me. She screamed that I was just looking for ways to make her feel bad. I told her I was leaving.

"I don't think it's fair for you to take the cat," she said, "and I *will* be keeping her."

I spent the last two weeks of the semester trying to ignore the small, soft animal, the one living being in Chicago who'd made daily existence more bearable.

Then I stood on the curb with two bags holding what remained of my belongings, and Rose walked away from me in a plaid skirt, turning twice to lift her hand in a tentative wave.

We were free.

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Where is my father? He's in a bronze book filled with charred bone fragments on the top shelf in a mausoleum north of Seattle. He's in his genealogical research, which lives on in other people's now-digital libraries and family trees—work he painstakingly conducted by reading through thousands of lines of handwritten census reports and physically searching for gravestones in small towns across the country. What would he make of amateur genealogists spitting in a test tube and simply clicking links on a single website? What would he think of seeing our first Black president inaugurated, followed by a reality TV huckster? Smartphones?

He's in half my DNA.

He never had a niece or nephew. He may never have a grandchild. Both of our remains may become the toxic dust of nuclear war. Those of us who've survived him may choke on our own carbon dioxide or colonize the moon. If there is a god, it knows we are a speck in the expanse and time of the universe. It has not led me step by step through the pain. If there is a heaven and I am invited, I do not expect to find my father's living body there, his windshield-shattered skull intact again, his arches propped up with prescription orthotics.

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I've been married for seven years now. When my partner and I got together, he told me I was a good person and he was interested in my dreams. I'd almost

forgotten that I could be or that I had any. We hungered for time together. We laughed until my eyes teared up. The upheaval to my identity as a lesbian falling for a man was eclipsed by the sensation of downpour after a long and wrenching drought. My marriage is no less sinful than my relationship with Rose, but now I believe joy exists.

Since leaving Chicago, I've returned many times to the camp of my youth to volunteer restoring trails—restoring, in the process, my sense of self. My husband and I bought a used canoe, a dented aluminum behemoth from the '70s, identical to the ones I learned to navigate in the Girl Scouts. We take it out near our house, on Oregon's Willamette River. I point to light playing across sharp rocks on the bottom, and together, we paddle a safe passage.



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