

## Love Story

“Take off your clothes.”

We played games like this a lot, so I did so without really questioning. Kristie took her clothes off too, revealing her pale, flat chest and the gentle curve of her hips.

“Is this like doctor?” I asked.

“I don’t think so,” she replied, “But it made my sister really happy, so I want to try it.”

“What do we do?” Kristie and I had been best friends for as long as I could remember, which wasn’t very long since I was only five. My parents baby-sat her every day while her parents worked, so she was as close to me as my sister even though she was about four years my senior. Her own siblings were all more than ten years older than her.

“I think you lay down on your back, and I climb on top of you.”

I lay down, completely sure that Kristie had some fun new game in mind. After all, she always taught me fun games to play that she had learned from friends at school. I felt lucky to have someone that knew such cool things.

I had lots of friends that were girls; in fact, I was the only boy anywhere near my age on our street. My mom used to joke about me marrying one of our neighbors’ daughters. It bothered me a little at the time, but not much. I had a lot of fun back then. I even had a girlfriend that I thought was “specialer” than all the other girls. I had kissed her on the lips. It wasn’t Kristie.

Kristie climbed on top of me, straddling my naked body, the smooth skin of her thighs brushing past my hips until her warmth pressed against me. I waited, expectantly.

“I think we bounce now,” she said.

I felt a little awkward with my private parts mashed against hers, but I trusted her. We bounced up and down for a few minutes. She pressed her body closer to mine, but it just wasn't a very exciting game.

“You want to play with the blocks?” she asked after a couple of minutes.

“Yeah.”

\* \* \*

About a year or so later, I lived across the country from Kristie, but I hadn't forgotten that strange day. I was just beginning first grade, and was reading above my level when I first encountered a love story. I fell in love with it, and from that day forward, I began idolizing that media form of love, that connection between two people that can never be broken. That trust. That faith. That perfection.

I learned about sex from a movie I secretly watched behind my parents' backs.

It looked an awful lot like what Kristie and I had done.

I soon learned about AIDS from a news story about a dying basketball player.

I lay awake in my bed one night, staring at the dark ceiling. I could hear the tv on in the living room where my dad sat watching Jesus Christ, Superstar. He had borrowed it from a friend; we weren't very religious. Images of Kristie on top of me played in my mind, side by side with the sex scene from the movie. *I had done it*, I thought, *I've had sex*.

Then, *I'm going to die*.

It was clear to my six and a half year old mind that I had AIDS. I began to cry, devastated with the realization of the horrible thing I had done. I would never have that perfect love I had begun to idolize. My life was coming to an end. Kristie had killed me.

I had to tell my dad. He had a right to know.

I walked out of my room like a dog with its tail between its legs. When I saw him, I cried so hard that I couldn't talk. My chest heaved.

He stood up and walked over to me, kneeling to give me a hug. "What's wrong, buddy?"

"I- I have A-AIDS."

I can only imagine the thoughts that went through his head at that point.

"No you don't," he said soothingly, "what makes you think that?"

"Kristie..." I didn't know how to explain it, "She was on top of me, and- and-"

My dad sat me down and explained sex to me for the first time. It made me feel better, I was safe. I wasn't going to die. We hadn't *really* done it. Just close.

But from that point on, I feared sexual activity. Love and sex were not intertwined. Love was different. Love was trust, caring, giving. I longed for it. Sex was dangerous and dishonorable.

\* \* \*

There was a little brown haired girl in my first grade class that I had a crush on. Her name was Miranda, and she had a gorgeous smile. She skipped around school with her friends. She was happy. She was innocent.

I had had several girlfriends when I lived in New York, and even in Washington, many of my friends were girls. I could talk to them all with ease.

I never said a word to Miranda. I didn't deserve to.

\* \* \*

The summer before I left Washington, I had garnered a little more confidence. I had always been a bit shy, but as I began to feel what I still associate with love today I began working on strategies for dealing with my feelings. I wanted a girlfriend to spend my summer days with. To laugh with. To goof off with. I was only seven, but that never struck me as strange.

There was a sixth grader who had talked to me at the bus stop. Her name was April, and she had curly, dirty blonde hair. She was fun and made me laugh. She was pretty. My best friend liked her, and he was nine- only two years older than me. He used to talk about her in our fort, telling me how she was the only girl that didn't drive him crazy. She lived just down the street.

I had a dream one night that I saved her from a flood that buried our houses. We floated on a raft together for days. She kissed me in thanks. I woke up that morning, and suddenly, I was in love.

"Hey Logan, hey Nick," she greeted my friend and I as we walked up to the bus stop.

"Good morning," Logan replied.

I tried, but I couldn't say anything. She looked awfully beautiful that morning, as though God had designed the sun to make her glow. For some reason it embarrassed me that I liked her so much, so I wanted to keep my feelings hidden. I hoped she would notice me and ask me to hang out.

She taught us one of those clapping games the girls were always doing as we waited for the bus that day.

When the bus came, we all climbed on, passing the bus driver that always smelled like alcohol. April sat with Logan that day. I read my book in the seat behind them.

When Valentine 's Day came along, I finally got my nerve up enough to do something. When my mom took me shopping, I bought a little, white porcelain cup and filled it with candy hearts, carefully picking out the ones that applied to my feelings towards April:

“Love U”

“U R KIND”

“BE MINE”

I wrote “To: April” in red marker on the side of the cup, scolded myself for shoddy handwriting, then snuck out of my house just after dinner. I looked around, making sure no one could see me- I would be embarrassed if anyone knew I liked a girl. Especially if Logan did. Then, I ran down the street until I stood in front of April's house.

I planned to knock on the door and give it to her. She would smile and give me a kiss. Maybe she would even invite me inside. We would talk, and laugh. I would tell her my secret. She would love me back. Our love story would begin.

But when the time came, my heart grew weak. I didn't deserve April either. I turned around and carefully deposited my hearts in her mailbox. She would smile, but she would never know it was me.

\* \* \*

We visited some friends at their house. They were English and a lot of fun to be around. All the kids slept in the same room while our parents stayed up drinking and laughing uproariously.

I kissed their daughter on the forehead while she slept. There was a peace about her that I momentarily couldn't resist.

\* \* \*

When my family moved again, this time to Texas, I became shyer than ever before. For a while I was the kid who observed society without really fitting in. I guess it was then that I began to have only a few close friends rather than a lot of people I knew. I had a crush on a girl named Amber Prailey for awhile, but she never knew it. I read a lot. I found that in books, people always had these wonderful relationships or fell into love instantly. I was probably one of the few fourth graders around who enjoyed reading Romeo and Juliet in my own free time. I thought a lot about my life and how I wanted it to work. Maybe it was then that I first developed the notion that any true love had some great love story.

“What’cha thinking about?”

I looked up from my thoughts one day to see a girl I barely knew from swim practice sitting next to me on the roof of the playground. She smiled at me.

“Nothing,” I said, embarrassed to be caught off guard.

“Do you want to play with us?” she asked, “We’re playing tag.”

I shrugged, “Okay.”

From that moment on, Christine and I were inseparable. She became the girl I would consider to be my first real girlfriend.

Our parents were good friends, so we had plenty of time to see one another. We walked to the snow cone stand every night after practice, and then played in the park as we waited for our parents to finish. During that summer after fourth grade, she broke through my shyness, pulled me out of myself.

One night at a party, we danced together for over four hours. No one else danced. I remember her laughing when I told her that my favorite color was a mix of purple and green that could only be made with a certain kind of paint.

We went skiing and challenged each other to races and difficult slopes. At night, we both lay in our sleeping bags in the downstairs area of the condo, playing cards and whispering. Our parents and siblings slept all around us.

“What’s the craziest thing you ever did?” she asked over a 2 a.m. game of War. Kristie came to mind, but I couldn’t say that. Way too shameful.

“I snuck up to a hermit’s house once,” I said instead, recalling a moment in Washington, “even after he shot at my friend and I.”

She beat me, and we started playing again.

“Have you ever had a boyfriend before?” I asked.

“Yeah,” she replied, “I dated Jeffrey for a long time.”

“Did you kiss him?”

She blushed, “Only a couple of times.”

We ran a lemonade stand together in the summertime, thrilled at making almost sixteen dollars a day. We were living the good life.

“Do you dare me to kiss you?” I asked jokingly one day. We had been dating for several months, but I hadn’t kissed her yet. It never seemed important to me, though I had wanted to several times.

“You wouldn’t.”

I leaned in to do it and she leaned back, laughing. Her chair tipped over and she fell onto her back in the grass. We both laughed, and I dropped down to my knees beside her. Leaning over, we kissed for the first time.

\* \* \*

“What’s your deepest, darkest secret?”

Christine and I sat together in our secret place at the bottom of a drainage ditch near my house. Grape vines grew around it, and a big tree covered it in foliage. A small pool of water gleamed, and the sun danced through the leaves, bright green in springtime. We had been together for nearly a year.

“I don’t know,” she replied, “I guess I don’t really have one.” We sat side by side on a rock, our hands touching tenderly but not clasped. “Do you?”

It was time. I had to tell her. I loved her, and I knew we couldn’t be together if we couldn’t share everything. My lips trembled.

*Please don’t let her hate me,* I prayed, then I began my story.

“When I was little, I had a friend that came over every day…”

“…for a long time, I thought I’d had sex.”

When I had finished, we sat in silence for a while, thinking. My body quivered visibly, and I couldn’t raise my eyes to hers. I was so upset. Kristie had changed my life

forever, made me unacceptable to the world. I had done something unforgivable. Then, after a time that felt like hours, Christine said:

“It’s okay.”

“You don’t hate me?” I whispered, raising my eyes ever so slightly.

“No,” she said. I began to cry I was so relieved.

“I love you,” I whispered softly.

“I love you too.”

\* \* \*

I will never forget the feeling of utter jubilation that came when she said those words. I was ecstatic, filled with a searing energy that put a twinkle in my eyes and a boyish grin on my face. I don’t think I slept for the next week. Life couldn’t have been better. And though we didn’t have the greatest love story, things were brilliant. Love wasn’t about kissing or anything beyond that. It was the feeling. The knowledge that there was someone I could share everything with. For a long time it was perfect, but then, the day came when she broke my heart, and for the first time, I came to understand the despair of love lost.

We rode bikes down a dirt road at a Thanksgiving party, escaping the people together as we had done so often in the past. The air was crisp and cool, and though we talked at first, we soon fell into silence.

“Do you still love me?” I asked playfully when we stopped at a corner. It had become a game since that day in the pit: one of us said, “Do you still love me?” and the other would say, “always and forever.”

This time though, Christine merely whispered, “no” and shattered my heart.

\* \* \*

I nearly fell off the bike. When I asked her about it, it was revealed to me that she “just didn’t love me anymore.” But when I dug a little further, I discovered it was more than that. She was frustrated with me: I moved too slowly. Apparently one kiss in a year just wasn’t going to cut it, even though we were only in sixth grade and she knew my secret. And there was this new kid in school that all the girls were batting their eyelashes at....

So much for that love story idea. I stopped believing.

A few months later, my dad told me he was planning to divorce my mom. She came to me that night, enfolding me in a hug and bawling onto my shoulder. Ice seeped into my soul, and a darkness caressed me.

I never stopped reading, though, and in each book I read, it was there. That perfect love story. The couple that fell in love at first sight, went through countless trials to be together, and then lived happily ever after. God, how I wanted that. I had had that. I had lost that. There were nights when I cried myself to sleep because I lived in a world in which true love had been lost or had never existed at all.

\* \* \*

*Reversion.* After months of closing myself off I fell for someone again. She was older than me. I saw her at swimming. We talked in the park. We played truth or dare and I gave myself a swirly to impress her. She didn’t know how I felt. I obsessed over her. I wrote a story about us, almost a diary of what I dreamed would happen.

She found it. She read it.

She didn’t talk to me again for years.

\* \* \*

Another time, another girl. We joked together in our seventh grade computer class. Notes were passed. I asked her friends to find out if she liked me. I made elaborate plans. We talked a lot. Maybe this was it, maybe I could love again.

I wrote a poem and had people help me to get a single line of it onto her desk in each and every class she went to. When she opened her locker at the end of the day, there was a vibrant red rose waiting for her. Tied to it were the final lines of the poem and then a simple message:

“Will you go out with me?”

I sat at home, biting my fingernails, waiting for her response. Days passed like turtles trudging through mud. The world was on fire.

“No, she said at last, you’re really nice, and fun and all... but you’re just too tall.”

\* \* \*

There was a dance at school. I asked her boyfriend if I could dance with her. For a few moments, I held her in my arms, a treasure, then I let go forever.

\* \* \*

I sat in someone’s living room at three in the morning, listening to two couples having sex in the room next door. One of them banged continually against the wall. The friend that I had come with sat on a couch nearby, making out with his girlfriend. An older boy who had never gone to college sat a few feet from me, silent, mellow, filled with drugs. The smell of pot and alcohol drifted on the air.

I thought about my internet girlfriend living in Washington, a freshman in High School like me. She had called about ten minutes earlier, extremely drunk at a party with

some friends. She wanted to have sex with me. I slid down onto my side and closed my eyes, resting my head on the dirty carpet.

\* \* \*

Lights danced on my skin, tingling, mesmerizing. I reached out to touch them, only vaguely knowing that it was impossible. I lay down in the grass and sprang back to my feet from my hands, a trick I had learned in karate. I did it again.

A girl walked up and I stopped for a second to smile. She gave me a hug. Nice. Kendra. She had lied to her parents to be there too. She didn't love me.

I lay down and sprang to my feet once more. I did it until the ecstasy wore off.

\* \* \*

Karate saved me. I couldn't go too far. The kids needed me as a role model. I saw that eventually and pulled away before I got in too deep. One time on drugs was more than enough. It gave me another dark secret. Two now. I would never escape their burden.

\* \* \*

My friends convinced me to try again. They told me to date for fun, and that I didn't have to be in love to take a girl out.

"Hey, nice to meet you, I'm Nick."

"I'm Shelby." Athletic.

"I'm Erin." Beautiful.

"I'm Erica." Old Crush.

"I'm Barbara." Wild.

"I'm Lauren." Interesting.

“I’m Mandy.” Sweet... but crazy.

“I’m Ruby.” Spanish.

“I’m Taylor.” Seductress.

“I’m Amy.” Why did I leave her?

Each girl had her own things that were special. Each one was fun. I dated each of them for about a week, then I was the one who broke it off. I couldn’t kiss them. There was no love there. I wonder how many hearts I broke.

\* \* \*

“Who is that?” I sat in a McDonald’s after a regional swim meet near the end of my junior year of High School, eating a yogurt parfait. I felt pretty good, I had been named regional swimmer of the meet and won gold in every event.

One of my swimming buddies turned and looked over his shoulder. “Her?” he said pointing.

“Yeah.”

“My sister.”

“Why isn’t she on the team?”

“She’s still in eighth grade,” he told me, “She’s pretty cool though. You should meet her, she’s almost a black belt in Tae Kwon Do, and she swims too.”

I stood up and went to get more food. She walked up behind me in line.

“Hey,” I said lamely. I hadn’t had trouble talking to a girl in years.

“Hey,” she replied, then she smiled at me, and her smile filled me with warmth despite her braces. There was magic there.

\* \* \*

Carrie was too young, but she blessed my mind with her image. I thought of her. I dreamed of her. I didn't see her after McDonald's for months, and then, suddenly, she was swimming for me while I coached the summer league. She was happy. She was fun. Even if we couldn't be together, I just wanted to be around her.

"What do I do," I asked my best friend as we sat in the park one day, "If I think I've finally met the girl of my dreams, and there is no way we can be together?"

"Carrie?" my friend asked immediately. I nodded, he knew me well. "There's nothing you can do but try to forget about her and move on."

How does one forget an angel?

\* \* \*

"What'cha workin' on?" I sat down in the seat across from her on the bus en route to a swim meet. She had naturally joined the team at the start of high school.

"Nothing," she said, slamming her book shut and smiling, "how are you?"

"Pretty good."

We talked the whole way to the meet. We talked again the whole way back.

Conversations one and two of a million.

\* \* \*

I struggled hard against my feelings, decided I would just be the best friend she had ever had, that I would be content just to be near her. I loved her enough that as long as she was happy, I could be happy. And so our friendship grew, stronger and stronger with each passing day. It was hopelessly ironic. I grew closer to her than I had ever come to anyone, and yet, I could never tell her what I was thinking every time I looked

into her eyes. That burst of joy, that flash of luminescence. Love. We were just friends, though every fiber of my body longed to be more.

“Damn, she has a nice ass,” my friend said as she was leaving our karate studio in December of my senior year.

I had convinced her to join during our many bus ride conversations. I soon found out that there’s nothing more attractive than a beautiful girl, smiling brilliantly in your karate class as she kicks your assistant’s butt.

I gave him a disapproving look, but I had to agree. God I loved her.

\* \* \*

We danced in a spotlight in front of an audience, her head resting on my chest. The entirety of the karate school looked on. Ricki Martin’s “Hero” played, and we acted out some of the lyrics. She looked up at me, her green eyes glistening in the semi-darkness. My friend did a hilarious interpretive dance with a sheet around us, but I didn’t even know he was there. My heart was beating in my ears.

*Kiss her*, my soul screamed.

That night, I decided that age didn’t matter.

\* \* \*

“What would your parents think if I asked you out?”

“I don’t know. They’ve really liked you since you left that apology message about bringing me home so late the other night.”

I was driving her home from a track meet and Finger Eleven’s “One Thing” was playing on the radio as it always did when we were together, as if ordained by God. I had

joined track for her, only to find out that it was merely an opportunity to watch her kiss her muscular, black boyfriend.

“They wouldn’t think it’s weird?”

“What, that a senior guy is asking out their fifteen year old daughter?” she laughed, “normally they would... but I think they would be okay with you.”

“This would have to be our song.”

“Yep,” she agreed.

We pulled into her driveway. I didn’t get out of the car. “Good night. See you in a few days.”

“G’Night.”

\* \* \*

Nothing happened. She stayed with her boyfriend, and the more time that passed, the more I believed that my hopes had been unfounded. Perhaps love lay in self-sacrifice, giving up my needs for her. I needed her to be absolutely happy, and I didn’t want to stand between her and her boyfriend. It wouldn’t be right.

Thus, I pulled slowly away with a heavy heart, but at the same time I believed I was doing the right thing for her, and that made me happy. Just knowing her seemed to make the world shine, and somehow I knew that the world could never truly be dark again simply because she lived in it.

\* \* \*

“Bow to your partner. Ready positions. Begin!” I stood at the front of my advanced karate class and started the next grappling match.

Carrie surged forwards, tackling my assistant instructor to the floor. They tumbled about, striving to get one another in an arm lock or a choke. The match was intense; they were both excellent students. I turned away to watch some of the other students.

Then I heard a thud, and Carrie cried out in pain.

My heart sank.

“Break!” I yelled, signaling everyone to stop, then I rushed to Carrie’s side. She lay on her back on the ground, her face twisted into a grimace.

“I was trying to get her down and came down too hard...” my assistant said, ashamed, “I dropped her on her head.”

“Are you alright?” I asked. I had dealt with injuries before, but the fact that it was her had my heart pounding in my chest.

“Yeah,” she said, and valiantly climbed to her feet with tears in her eyes. She held her back with one hand.

I went to help her walk, but she shook her head.

“Have a seat up front,” I told her, “you need ice or anything?”

“I’m fine,” she winced, “keep class going.”

She sat down in the front of the room as I instructed the rest of the class on what to do next. But as the next grappling rounds were beginning, she collapsed to the floor and broke into tears. Laying on her back, she found herself unable to move.

Terrified, we had her lay flat, quickly got her mother out onto the mat and called an ambulance. Carrie tried desperately not to cry, but she was in a lot of pain, and her

tears flowed out despite her best efforts. My assistant felt horrible, but I could only feel how much I cared about her, and hoped against hope that she was alright.

“Dismiss the class,” I told my assistant, then I turned to Carrie, “The ambulance is on its way... can I get you anything?”

She shook her head, but she reached up and took my hand in hers, holding it tightly. Her mother noticed, but she didn't say anything.

I loved her so much that I was at a loss of what to do, I wanted to help her, needed to, but I had done all I could and was left with simply holding her hand as we waited for the ambulance.

They came quickly and hauled her out on a stretcher. I followed them to the hospital, leaving my friend to close up. I spent most of the night sitting by her side, talking to her in between tests and x-rays, holding her hand. I got to know her parents whenever the doctors took her out of the room.

In the end, it turned out that she had pulled most of the muscles in her back and possibly pinched a couple of nerves. They put her on heavy doses of pain killers and told her that she would be confined to a wheelchair for the next couple of weeks, and that was only after she spent a few days in bed. I felt horrible for her, but at the same time I felt more connected to her than I ever had, as if that night in the hospital had formed a bond that would never be broken.

The next day, I brought her a bag of play-doh and coloring books to use while she was laid up in bed.

“Can you stay?” she asked as I turned towards the door.

“Sure,” I said, returning to the bedside to sit next to her.

I spent the day sitting by her side building sculptures out of play-doh. It struck me then in how many ways I loved her. It was more than intoxication, more than devotion, more than desire, more than fun. I just simply, purely, blissfully enjoyed being with her. This is what love is all about, I remember thinking, this sense of completion.

\* \* \*

I parked the car in front of the donut shop, then walked around to the passengers side to help Carrie out and into her wheelchair. I carried a small, white plastic bag.

“Mmm, donuts,” she said as I pushed her through the door, “breakfast of champions.”

“Dana’s an Olympian,” I joked, referring to my little sister, “and we used to eat donuts all the time.”

We ordered our food, then sat down at a table. I opened up my white bag and pulled out a heart shaped candle. I lit it, and placed it carefully in the middle of the table. She had broken up with her boyfriend the day before and called me. We had talked for hours.

“Betcha can’t guess what I’m going to ask you,” I said.

“What do you mean?” she smiled.

“Come here,” I whispered, leaning forward. She leaned in close. “Will you go out with me?”

She pretended to think a moment, “I don’t know...” she said sarcastically.

I gave her a sad look.

“Okay,” she said. We were both smiling as we dug into our donuts.

\* \* \*

I sat next to Kristie on a couch, holding a video camera in my hands. For years, I had harbored harsh feelings towards her for what she had done to me, but when I found myself back in New York on a visit with thoughts of Carrie boiling in my mind, I could do nothing but forgive her.

“Can you say hi to Carrie for me?” I asked, “She dared me to get everyone to say something to her.”

Kristie looked straight at the camera and smiled. She had grown up beautifully. I wondered if she remembered sitting on top of me, bouncing with our clothes off. She was alone, and had never been with a boyfriend for very long. She had slept with some though.

“Hold onto him,” she said softly, speaking to a girl she had never met, “I can tell he really loves you.”

I wondered what her love story was.