
HONEY AND FLAME

by
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Author's Note

Pennsylvania is my home, and I imagine it always will be. I grew up in a small town near Pittsburgh called Mars, and when telling people where I was from, they usually thought I was setting them up for a joke. Pennsylvania is where I learned to swim, learned to play the piano, and learned about love. It's where I ate my mom's tuna-surprise sandwiches and where my dad guided me on walks through the woods behind our house. Pennsylvania is where my sister, Amber, and I grew up together – playing together, then arguing all the time, then finally becoming friends. Pennsylvania is where I held my first job, experienced my first kiss, and had my first car accident on its winding back roads during a dark and heavy January snowfall.

Even when I left Mars for college, I stayed in-state. Trading the word “pop” for “soda”, I journeyed over the Appalachian ridgeline to study at Susquehanna University, a small liberal arts college in central PA. I took pride in the fact that I was the only one from my graduating class attending there. When the time for college was over, I took my first grown-up job in Williamsport, teaching music to middle and high school students in the Loyalsock Township School District. Slowly, just as SU had, Williamsport became home.

Pennsylvania is where my story begins and where I trust it will end. But when my familiar, tidy, over-trodden paths began to feel more like ruts, the trail was bound to lead elsewhere. I was bound to have one too many beers with old friends in Chicago, bound to panic about my survival in the barren terrain of central Wyoming, and bound to watch the cloud-covered skies of the Pacific Northwest open like a pair of clasped hands - as if to offer a gift - just in time to witness the sun set beyond the watery horizon.

The sun seemed to speak to me that evening: *Look at all the people you've known, places you've been, time you've spent, and things you wish you'd said. Be aware of the mistakes you've made, and of the gifts you've given and received. And know that when you step out of the woods, you will be changed from when you first set foot off of the pavement.*

Indeed, things were different after that.

So how do you know when it's time to say goodbye? How do you know when you've hit the point in the road at which continuing on means stepping out alone and leaving behind everything you've come to know as yours? How can you be sure that what lies ahead is worth letting go of everything you have?

I've learned that, when we are called to something strange and distant, we have a choice whether or not to answer. This story is about that moment when we realize that letting go is less about the *things* we leave behind and more about saying goodbye to the *person* we've known ourselves to be... the moment when the life that lies ahead is just a flicker in the dark of night spotted out the window of our warm and cozy apartment.

And we go anyway.

PART I

PENNSYLVANIA, BEFORE

CHAPTER ONE

THE END

"I think we should break up." I heard my voice speak the words, but it didn't feel like me who said them, like they came from somewhere else.

Erica seemed shocked, and she began to cry almost immediately. I sat silent, stoic, not knowing what else to say.

Eventually she pushed back. "Don't you care at all? Here I am crying and you're just staring at me! It's like this doesn't mean anything to you," she let out, looking at me through watery eyes.

"Well," I started slowly, "I guess I've already thought about it a lot." Then, getting defensive, I meandered through several justifications for the words I had just uttered, like a struggling salesman who should really be looking for other work: "I don't think the job in New Hampshire is right for me... things have been so tough between us... I've got a lot to figure out about myself... it just seems like it makes sense."

The truth is, nothing made sense. For almost five years, I had loved Erica and cared about her deeply. Being with her was familiar and comforting, and she was an inextricable part of the person I had come to know myself to be.

But something wasn't right and hadn't been for a long time. Like a riptide in slow motion, whatever it was had been pulling at me, carrying my affections away from the dry shore that was our togetherness.

Truthfully, we were both miserable in quiet, subtle ways that were becoming less subtle and less quiet. We both knew on an intuitive level that we were coming to an end. For me it was a

nagging restlessness. I think Erica knew it too, but perhaps she wasn't ready to admit it. What she *was* ready for was a ring, and I was nowhere close to that.

After sitting on the fence between the future we had envisioned together and an uncharted path I'd walk alone, some unseen force finally pulled me off.

"I can't believe you are doing this." Erica's attitude was growing increasingly sour as I rambled on, attempting to explain myself. Then, seeing that justification was futile, something switched inside me; a wall came down, and my body and mind were flooded every pleasant, joyful, and intoxicating memory of our years of love - months filled with enchanting moments, playful smiles, agonizingly tender touches, hours spent swimming in each other's eyes, the shape of her face, the feeling of her hand in mine, the sensation of our bodies lying side by side in a bare, delicate embrace.

More than once, those moments filled my being with a sense of wholeness - what I imagine it would feel like to dance across the sky with the gods.

My eyes welled up with tears.

Erica's demeanor changed, my expression of sadness apparently dulling her own feeling of betrayal. "Maybe you're right," she conceded, fresh tears gathering in her emerald-green eyes.

And that was that.

Erica wasn't my first love, but she was the first woman I loved who loved me back. It started with an unexpected kiss on the cheek. It was my sophomore year of college. I had just finished playing a recital on campus, and I was standing in the receiving line with my fellow performers. At the time, Erica and I were just

acquaintances - and barely that. I was a music major and she was a theatre major. We all saw each other on campus, ate at the same tables in the dining hall, and generally knew that one another existed. That was about the extent of it. Acquaintances usually shake hands when they greet one another. If they are particularly friendly people they might offer a brief hug.

But a kiss?

Standing in the recital hall lobby, I was smiling and receiving the obligatory compliments from concertgoers. Then Erica was next in line. One moment, I was greeting an acquaintance like all the rest; the next moment, it happened. With eyes shining and cheeks pulled tight in an unabashed smile, she leaned in - as if for a hug - and planted her lips quickly and smartly on my right cheek. Like an adrenaline rush following the initial shock of an accident victim, I was at first confused and then had absolute focus. All I could see was her.

For the next week, all I could see was her.

In the practice wing of the music building, I'd linger outside the room where she was practicing, waiting for a pause between the phrases of rich, stirring music that rose from her velvety soprano voice.

I knocked on the door to ask her what she was singing. Satie's "Je te veux". Romantic, whimsical, sensual, and all-in.

At the time, I was practicing Rachmaninoff's second piano concerto. Also romantic, but brooding, volatile, self-absorbed, and dead serious.

This is how we started, and it's how we would end.

I was in a funk throughout the months leading up to that first kiss on the cheek. Coming back to college for a second year presented me with confusion. It was like the first year was just

for fun - making new friends and learning new music - but now college was real and I was supposed to be doing something with it. I was unsure of what that something should be. Furthermore, my cohort of other second year music students, having been a tight-knit community the prior year, was now splitting into noticeable cliques.

My heart was also lost. The previous summer, I had managed to muster the courage to approach my biggest high school crush, Katie, and ask her if there was any inkling in her mind regarding a potential romance between the two of us. There wasn't. The interaction concluded a cherished infatuation that had lasted for over two years. A hopeless romantic by nature, I held to the belief that true romance will solve every woe and provide every need. And so my one-sided love affair with Katie had filled my inner well of hope until it was overflowing with imagined stories about how we would someday, years after high school, find one another, get married, and have a family.

Katie's clear response of, "Nope, sorry!" gave me closure, but it also meant pulling the plug and draining the well. 'Dry' and 'empty' are good words to describe the feelings that followed. My fantasies had been so rich and sturdy that I had been able to rely on them as if they were the real thing. Now that they were gone, I was unmoored.

Confused about my purpose at school and lost without an idle to which to devote my burgeoning affections, I began seeing a counselor on campus. That was two weeks before the recital, and Erica changed all of that.

The Saturday following the recital - November 6 - was the day we would come to celebrate as our anniversary. The people in Erica's apartment were throwing a party. When I got there, she

and her roommate were serving margaritas in their room. Shortly after my arrival, they ran out of margarita mix, and the crowd slowly dispersed to search for the next bit of excitement. I lingered.

“Wanna watch a movie?” she suggested.

“Sure,” I responded, simultaneously sheepish and eager.

“I really like Harry Potter. Is this OK?”

“Sure,” I said again.

It was the second Harry Potter movie – the one with the snake. The third one had already come out by that time, and I had gone to see it with my sister who was a big fan. I thought the newer one was better, but I was just glad to be sitting next to her.

We watched the whole thing, seated side by side on her dorm room loveseat. We never made eye contact or exchanged any words, but ever so gradually, our hands touched, and then held one another. Fingers of one slowly and gently ran along the back or the palm of the other, slowly back and forth like the subtle swing of a hammock in the breeze.

I couldn’t remember a time when I was so relaxed and yet so excited. Suddenly, after two and a half hours of the slow, seductive dance in which our hands were engaged, I felt the end of the movie creeping up on me like a big kid on Halloween who wanted to steal my candy. I had to do something, or else I wouldn’t have an excuse to stay after the movie was done.

Kiss her. It was now or never.

In one fluid movement, I turned to my left, leaned in, and reached out with my lips. Much to surprise, my gesture was met only with the back of her head. She had apparently turned away to look at something, and was totally unaware of my advance. Feeling quite foolish, I played it cool and pretended nothing had happened. A long three or four seconds later, she turned back

towards me. An intuitive touch on the arm brought her face to mine, and our lips connected.

The weeks and months to follow brought long beautiful walks, long revealing conversations, and lots more kissing. Erica admitted to hiding the second bottle of margarita mix at the party, and I shared my flubbed first attempt at kissing her. Just after Christmas, Erica made the trip all the way across the state - Scranton to Pittsburgh - to visit me at my parents’ house. We went for more walks, shared holiday traditions, and exchanged gifts. Her gift to me was a simple picture frame with a photo we had taken before the semester ended. But covering it were dozens of words and phrases she had clipped out of magazines, all invoking the spirit of our budding romances and held to the frame with some sort of crafting magic that was a mystery to me. With such heightened senses, I never felt so much love from either giving or receiving a gift. The picture was also accompanied by a mix CD. The first thing I did when I returned to campus for the spring semester was to rip that CD to my dorm room computer. I listened to it over and over, bathed in the bliss brought on by the romantic rhymes and tender melodies.

We tallied the euphoric months and celebrated each with a ritualistic “missed kiss” - Erica turning away just as I was leaning in for a kiss - a surprise that would momentarily frustrate the anticipated affection, only to amplify the joy that came from the kiss that would immediately proceed. Those months eventually became a year and then *years*. Though the months that filled those years were not all blissful, we remained unquestionably committed to one another. We talked often about what the rest of our lives would look like together, and we both felt like we were working towards our Happily Ever After.

Just short of our two year anniversary, however, something began to call me away from the stable, domestic future I had been envisioning with Erica. A figure had begun to creep out of a corner of my past, a part of me I had more or less forgotten about and had been glad to leave behind.

In middle school, I hung out with a crowd that dangled from the fringes of the school's social landscape. Everyone had long hair, wore baggy pants, and listened to the music of counterculture - from Hendrix to Green Day - anything but the bubble-gum pop we had imagined all of our peers had on their stereos. Since many in the gang were into Nirvana and black fingernail polish, my tie-dyed shirts and Birkenstocks had earned me a reputation as the hippie of the group.

Later in high school, I would jump ship after some of my friends started getting into drugs. I cut my hair, got myself some "normal" clothing, and started hanging out with another group of friends whose primary venues for socialization were Bible studies and church youth groups. It couldn't have been a more dramatic shift.

This character - the long-haired me - was summoned by a woman. Silvana was her name, and she was a resident in the building where I served as an RA in college. Silvana reminded me of this former version of myself mostly because she reminded me of a girl I knew back then. Her name was Rose. I mentioned before that Erica was not my first love. *Rose was.*

Rose and I met in seventh grade when her family moved to Mars from the gritty outskirts of Pittsburgh. She was quiet and shy, but if you studied her closely enough - the way I had - you would have seen that she was privately determined, driven to get the most out of life. Long brown hair, brushed straight down from the top of her head, covered her ears and framed her huge

puppy-dog eyes, Eastern European-brown and full of tricks and secrets.

By eighth grade, Rose and I were spending nearly every weekend with one another, and we shared thoughtful conversations about life and spirituality. Our friendship was sprinkled with the occasional moment of affection - her head on my shoulder in the back seat of my parents car as they drove us home from a concert, or lying side by side to look at the stars on a warm summer's night. Delightfully spontaneous and unpredictable, she also had a taste for danger that she seemed to keep hidden from me, perhaps aware and respectful of my innocent nature.

Long before Katie, I was hopelessly in love with Rose, and she was ultimately the reason I ejected myself from the group that made up my dear middle school friends.

Like Rose, Silvana was small in stature, not an inch taller than 5' 1". She wore her wavy charcoal hair straight over her ears. Her olive skin, though it was touched more often by lamplight than that of the morning sun, was a testament to her Italian heritage. Rebellion was written across her sly smile and the late-night circles under her eyes. Besides the fact that Silvana reminded me of Rose, there was an openness that immediately took shape between the two of us. I found the novelty and allure of knowing and being known by someone other than Erica irresistible.

My forsaken adolescent rebel and my burgeoning addiction for intimacy became clever partners, scheming to pull me out of the comfortable, predictable life in which I had found myself, and Silvana proved to be the fertile ground they needed in order to plant their subversive seeds. Her sex appeal and Bohemian sensibilities presented themselves in just the right amounts for these shadowy characters to unearth themselves from the

shut-off regions of my psyche and draw me into a dance with emotional infidelity.

While she happened to be the one who triggered this drama, there isn't much more to say about Silvana. A few months into the school year, I inadvertently walked in on her drinking from a bottle of zinfandel with a few of her friends. Taking my job as an RA seriously, I reported the incident, a choice that promptly closed the door of friendly intimacy that had stood open between us.

Erica was aware of the strangely comfortable rapport that Silvana and I had with one another, and was rightfully threatened by it. While our soiree didn't result in so much as a single kiss, it had cracked the protective shell that had encased my affection for Erica.

Silvana was the first in a series of three dark-haired women who would eventually eclipse Erica's brightness. It's a fact that would haunt my conscience for years. I had heard stories of men who kept a tally of the women they had slept with, like points they were earning in some sadistic game. I wasn't out for conquest. I ached for intimate union with that one woman - *the one*. I longed for the domestic life I had envisioned myself occupying with Erica.

But now, nearly three years after Silvana had awakened my sleeping adventurer, I was forced to decide if happily-ever-after with Erica was truly what I wanted, needed, or was ready for. She had just completed her masters degree, and was searching for work in college student affairs. She was eventually offered an ideal situation at the University of New Hampshire - quite a distance from Williamsport. We each mulled over what the move would mean for our relationship, weighing it with the benefits it

would have from her fledgling career. On April 18, my 24th birthday, the decision was made that she would take it.

At first, I said I would follow her north and work at a coffee shop if I couldn't find a teaching job. It would mean moving in with her - a level of commitment we had yet to reach. But then her parents warned against establishing any situation that could pose financial strain.

"I think my parents are right," she said to me one afternoon as the summer was drawing nearer. "I don't think you should quit your job if you can't find one just as good in New Hampshire."

Easy.

We were all in agreement that the best situation was for me to stay put in Williamsport. Erica and I would lovingly put some distance between ourselves, and the inevitable end to our relationship that seemed to be just around the corner could present itself slowly and gently as we continued to live more and more separate lives.

Three days later, I saw the job post. Dover High School, a 13-minute drive from the UNH campus, was looking for a music teacher, and the list of teaching responsibilities read like the short form of my professional bio.

I had no other option but to apply. If I was going to maintain a convincing belief in what Erica and I had, there was no way I could ignore the opportunity.

Impressing the interview committee became my top priority. I bought a new suit, wrote up a customized portfolio in the car while Erica drove the seven hours to Durham, and spent the better part of an hour in the hotel room the night before assembling the photocopies we made at a Staples nearby.

After I was offered the job, I delayed making the decision for over two weeks, taking counsel from a mentor and even one of

the teachers who would become my coworker in NH. Like a fish on the floor of a boat, I flipped and flailed, doing and saying some reckless things in the process. I was hardly convincing anyone of my unwavering dedication to Erica.

A life without Erica was uncharted, invisible, dark... and that scared me. I didn't want to be lonely. I didn't want to feel like I had failed at loving her. I didn't want to re-do all the work that we had put into building our relationship.

But there was still this small voice that kept me unsettled. It whispered the disastrous seductions of the open road and an untethered heart, and it beckoned me to follow it. It wasn't the first time. If I could have just ignored it again, I could have stayed with Erica.

But there was no ignoring it. Something inside me wouldn't sit still. It was like the undeniable sense of needing to go for a jog, just when you're settling down to watch TV. I had tried before to sit and watch as my favorite reruns flicker across the screen, but it never quite felt as satisfying as the first viewing. My legs now pleaded to be stretched and used, and it meant leaving Erica alone on the loveseat.