



BAYARD TAYLOR HORTON

Readers Write

TRUE LOVE

FIRST THING IN THE MORNING, I GO into my studio and sit at my desk. Relieved to have survived another night of insomnia and bad dreams, I reward myself with a pot of fresh, strong coffee.

Next comes the best part of my day. My wife, who sleeps later than I do, wakes. On her way to the bathroom, she stops at the studio door and says hello. Her hair is a mess, and she hasn't brushed her teeth yet.

She comes to me, bends down to give me a kiss — either on the lips or on the cheek, depending on how bad she thinks her breath is. I put my arm around her and draw her closer, feeling her “fanny” (no one else is allowed to call it that), so endearingly soft and modestly proportioned.

And that, my friends, is the best moment of my day.

*Peter Selgin
Bronx, New York*

AS A NURSE ON A HOSPITAL WARD, I usually took care of elderly stroke patients. Robert was different. He had

been paralyzed from the neck down in a motorcycle accident ten years earlier, when he'd been just twenty-two and a newlywed. Only his face seemed to be alive; the rest of him depended on machines to function. He was in the hospital now for a stubborn bed sore and bowel impaction that required frequent enemas.

All the patients on the ward needed assistance: lifting, turning, feeding. Family and friends were a big help, filling water pitchers and adjusting bed levels. Robert's wife arrived each day to help with his feeding tube and bath. She read to him and brought flowers and familiar objects from home: a softly clicking clock, pictures of them and their dog.

One day three new stroke patients were admitted to the unit. The staff had to move quickly to stabilize them and still keep up with the daily routine. When I finally made it to Robert's room to give him an enema, his wife told me she'd be glad to do it.

“You already do enough,” I told her.

She looked me in the eye and said, “It isn't hard for me to do this. I love every part of my husband. It's just an enema. I do them for him at home.”

I wondered how this woman, only a little older than I, could care for such a physically helpless man. It just didn't fit my idea of love, which was intertwined with romance: a fancy candlelight dinner leading up to a night of passionate lovemaking.

As I handed her the enema bag and she rolled him over on his side, I realized that she offered her husband a kind of devotion that had always frightened me. This woman changed how I thought about love.

*Carole Urmy
Franklin, Tennessee*

MY HUSBAND AND I TRAINED VOL-unteers to work in orphanages in Quito, Ecuador. Most of the volunteers were U.S. college students. These women showed an enormous capacity to love children they'd likely never see again, but they

were hesitant to compare their feelings with the love a mother might feel for her own children.

Pablo, a fourteen-year-old orphan who was probably autistic, was particularly difficult to reach. He never acknowledged others or participated in activities. He didn't like physical contact. Because he was quiet when left alone, we tended to focus on the more-vocal children.

Then Cami arrived from a small Utah town. When Pablo would not join in activities, she would hold his hand and take him on long walks. She would mimic his sounds and laugh when he laughed. She discovered that he loved ice cream and took him to the corner store for treats. Because he didn't want to be hugged, she rubbed his head to show affection.

One day he was hospitalized for a seizure. It wasn't serious, but the hospital needed someone to stay with him until he was discharged. Off I went, leaving a note for Cami and asking her to meet me there.

Cami arrived at the hospital in a panic. My note hadn't indicated that Pablo would be OK. I was struck by the intensity of her concern. Pablo was barely capable of responding to her, yet she was as distraught as any mother would have been. When Pablo saw Cami, he took her hand and placed it on his head.

*J. Gauntt
Folsom, California*

AT A BIBLE-STUDY CLASS CALLED "Loving Your Husband" we were instructed always to refer to our spouses as "my darling husband." I often uttered those words through clenched teeth or tears. If I wanted to vent about how inconsiderate he was, I had to begin with "My darling husband" or I'd be asked to start again.

Soon I began calling my husband "darling" at home. Reminding him to clean up his clutter, I'd say, "Darling, remember to take your baseball bat off the table."

He began using terms of endearment with me: "Sugar, you forgot to turn off the garage light."

Somewhere along the way I remembered why I'd fallen in love with him in the first place.

*Arlene A. Craig
Bowie, Maryland*

WHEN I WAS TWELVE, MY MOTHER came home from her waitressing job and told my dad she didn't love him anymore. Then she left.

At first my three younger brothers and I assumed our abusive father had driven her away. Then we thought it was the burden of raising four young sons that had caused her departure. Eventually we learned that she'd fallen in love with another man, who was also married and had three young children of his own. They'd left behind two broken, crushed families in order to be together. They'd married the day after my parents' divorce had become final.

Forty-one years later, my mother and her second husband are the most in-love couple I've ever known. I speak to my mother regularly and love her dearly, but my father still cannot talk about her without getting emotional. My two living brothers (one died recently) are estranged from her.

My question is: Does finding true love justify the destruction of two families?

*J. M.
Islandia, New York*

AT THE AGE OF EIGHTY-TWO MY FATHER went to the Philippines to marry a young woman he'd met through an advertisement. He came back alone. The plan was for her to follow later.

Sick with cancer, he eventually became too weak to drive and asked me to help him until his new wife arrived. I left my job, friends, and dance classes in LA and moved back home to become my father's primary caretaker.

One day I took him to an appointment with his lawyer. Thumbing through his will, I saw that he was leaving everything to his new bride — all except the refrigerator, the old couch, and the freezer in the garage. Though I felt hurt, I understood that by marrying her he was grasping at youth and immortality. The only thing that really mattered to me was that my father die with dignity and the least amount of pain possible.

One night, sitting at the table where for many years we'd gathered as a family for dinner, my father read a letter from his bride. "There's not one word of love,"

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UPCOMING TOPICS	DEADLINE	PUBLICATION DATE
Winners And Losers	December 1	May 2006
Neighbors	January 1	June 2006
Waking Up	February 1	July 2006
Temptation	March 1	August 2006
Coming Back	April 1	September 2006
Falling	May 1	October 2006

he said. "It's all business. She doesn't love me." He never again mentioned her. My name replaced hers in his will.

Sometimes I'd put on a Cowboy Junkies CD and crawl into my father's bed with him, the same bed he and my mother had slept in when I was a child. I'd hold him while we listened to the quiet songs.

He became weaker. One night, as I helped him back to bed from an unproductive trip to the toilet, we both almost fell. "Daddy, we can't do this anymore," I said.

"I know," he replied.

The next morning I got into his bed and put my arms around him. We lay there awhile, so close. Then he said, "I love. . .," his mouth silently forming the word *you*.

"I love you too, Daddy," I said. And he died right there in my arms.

*Leilani Squire
Honolulu, Hawaii*

AS A TEENAGE GIRL IN THE EARLY FIFTIES, I was best friends with a boy named Kevin. Our friendship existed in a cocoon of time and space. We knew almost nothing of the world beyond the rural valley where we lived.

One chilly morning everything changed. Kevin's mother arose early to make breakfast and thought the fire in their coal range had gone out overnight. Mistaking a can of gasoline for kerosene, she doused the coals. The gasoline caused an explosion that engulfed her in flames. She was rushed to the hospital with third-degree burns over 80 percent of her body.

Kevin told me that when he visited his mom, her body was so charred he recognized her only when she opened her eyes. She soon died.

After her death Kevin took care of his aging father, who was mentally and physically deteriorating. Eventually his father's care became too much for a high-school boy to manage, and Kevin's dad was committed to a state mental hospital. Kevin went to a boys' school supported by the Masons. It was there, he told me, that he had his first homosexual experience.

One summer afternoon when I was visiting Kevin at the school, he showed me two cashmere sweaters, one lime green

and the other yellow. I assumed a gay lover had given them to him.

"Just feel," he said. They were the softest things I'd ever touched. "Which one do you want?" Kevin asked.

"I can't take one of your sweaters," I said.

"I have two, and I want you to pick one." He had no money and no family, yet he was offering me this fabulous gift. I reached down and picked the green one. It was by far the most exquisite thing I'd ever owned.

That gift came just as I was crossing the threshold from tomboy to young woman. It became my trademark. I wore it until it was threadbare. It was more precious than even Kevin could have imagined: a gift from my friend who had almost nothing and still shared with me.

*Helen M. Stump
Lewistown, Pennsylvania*

WHEN I WAS FIFTEEN, I FELL MADLY

in love with a high-school senior who didn't know I existed. I went to watch him play soccer, hoping to get his attention, but he barely acknowledged me. I cried while I waited for my mother to pick me up. A player from the other team walked over to ask if I was OK. His name was Alex. I could tell he wasn't hitting on me but just wanted to make sure I got home all right. When my mother showed up, I waved goodbye to Alex, but I thought only of the boy who had ignored me.

Over the years I fell in love with many men who never loved me back. They often mistreated me, and I thought I deserved it. I was held back by my insecurities and self-doubt. I got pregnant while I was in graduate school, and my boyfriend walked out. I decided to have the baby and moved back home with my parents. When my son was born, he was perfect.

By his first birthday, I'd bought a house and had a job as a fourth-grade writing teacher. Being a mother made me proud and gave me strength. Graham was the center of my world. But increasingly he became a challenge, throwing violent tantrums and failing to adapt to new situations.

When my son was four, he was diagnosed with autism. My love for him didn't change, but my dreams of dating again,

marrying, and having more children now seemed impossible. I worked with my son every evening and studied about autism after he went to bed. I didn't have time for a social life.

One night my mother stayed with my son while my sister and I went to a restaurant. And there, thirteen years later, I ran into Alex. We talked like old friends. This time, when I waved goodbye, I wasn't thinking of anyone but him.

On our first date I told him about my teaching job, and about my son and his autism. I didn't know if I'd see Alex again, but he called later that week. In the intervening days, he'd done extensive research on autism. I fell in love with him at that moment.

We've been together for more than a year. Our life is stressful. Others have advised Alex to find a less difficult relationship. But when he holds me in his arms, I know that our love is the only thing that matters to him.

*Wendy R.
Birmingham, Alabama*

"DID YOU USED TO BE DELIA SWANSON?" the e-mail reads. I'm stunned — nobody has used my maiden name in more than thirty years. The "From" line is even more stunning: Jack Morgan. I whisper his name aloud.

In 1967 I sat next to too-handsome-to-be-true Jack Morgan in English 425. I spent the term flirting, hoping he would ask me out. When he did, it kicked off a watershed love affair that lasted nearly a year and became the standard by which I measured all subsequent relationships.

Jack made me laugh, and each date was an adventure. He wanted to be a writer. He taped a note inside my textbook that said, "You make me feel like a kid who just got a new Voit basketball." I loved him with an intensity possible only once or twice in a lifetime. I was so dizzily happy that I missed subtle clues. That winter, when I told him I loved him, Jack replied only, "I know."

I was blindsided when he told me it was over. I can't recall whether he'd met somebody else. All I know is that I was angry and in pain. I gave him a Leonard Cohen album for his birthday, hoping its sad songs would make him miss me

and want to come back. He did return several times. Each time we would talk, cry, make love. Two years after our breakup, I moved back in with my parents in Chicago. One day Jack called and left his mother's phone number. When I returned his call, his mother coolly informed me that he was married.

I got married, moved to the suburbs, and had two children. I love my husband. After thirty years together, we are as happy as most married couples I know. We've always assumed we'd stay together till the end of our days. Yet through the years I've often thought of Jack. I still love him.

Now this. I reply to Jack's e-mail, and we tell each other about our lives. He is still married to the same woman and has two grown children. He's an English professor at our alma mater. He even teaches English 425. He says every time he walks into that classroom, he thinks about us and mourns that lost opportu-

nity. He confesses he was too immature and scared by the intensity of our love.

Over the years, he says, he often flew to Chicago and drove to my parents' house, where he'd pace the sidewalk in front, lacking the courage to ring the bell and ask my dad how I was.

Now Jack wonders if he did the right thing, looking me up. I wonder, too.

Name Withheld

EVERY THIRD NIGHT, WE WERE ALLOWED in the prison day room, where for a few hours we could play cards, watch TV, and relax. One night I was watching TV when Danny dashed across the room. At six-foot-three and 220 pounds, Danny is a menacing figure. He's also a bully and a hard-ass.

Danny ran across the day room to catch an old man who was falling off a stool, having a seizure. He gently cradled the man and screamed for the guard to call an MTA (medical technician assist-

ant).

The MTA arrived, and the prisoner who was having the seizure got taken away.

Later I asked Danny why he had helped that old man; it wasn't his style. Danny told me that his sister had been prone to seizures all her life. When he saw the other prisoner having one, he responded automatically.

Years later I heard Mother Teresa say she would see the face of Jesus Christ on everyone's face. I thought about Danny. He hadn't gone to the old man's rescue, but to his sister's.

*Raphael A. Cabrera
Calipatria, California*

(end of excerpt)



ALAN MASS