

In the Garden

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When first you see her it is just before spring. Snow-covered Pikes Peak stands stark against a Colorado sky. You have just turned twenty. From behind the fountain where you work, up to your elbows in chocolate and caramel, pineapple and strawberry, hot fudge and whipped cream, you watch her. This is Michelle's: restaurant, ice cream shop, chocolatier and candy maker, a downtown Colorado Springs institution. She sits in a booth across from a woman you will later learn is her mother. Transfixed, you try not to gawk. Once, your eyes meet and she smiles, looks away, brushes her hair behind her ear. Shortly, to your shock, she rises, and walks to your counter. She has mischievous eyes and shoulder-length black hair, wears a red blouse and dangling peacock feather earrings and even many years later, this moment and the brief period that follows—can it be it was only a couple of months?—will remain forever imprinted in your memory. She orders a single scoop of rocky road, but you give her a double, and she smiles, says thank you. Do you say anything back? No. But rehearsal will come after the play. The lines you might have delivered will be brilliant, and you will practice them for days.

Later, as she's leaving she smiles at you again, and you watch as she makes her way past the register, past the display cases of candy and chocolates, past the shelves of gift boxes wrapped in golden ribbons. And then she is gone. You assume you've seen the last of her, and if you have, so what? The status hierarchy from high school still holds your esteem in its grip: more than likely, you never stood a chance.

Your life is not going well. After high school, you had tried one college, and then another, until, the previous fall semester, you didn't return at all. You live with your parents. They are concerned about you. Sometimes you sleep until noon.

But it all started before that really, two years before, during the spring of your senior year. You sat in your high school library with Teale, your friend and spiritual guide. You and Teale once had a short-lived

romance when you were each in seventh grade and attended rival junior high schools. But she listened to Eric Money and Bette Midler; you, the Commodores and Earth Wind and Fire. She lived with a hippie mom and a step-dad at the edge of a red rock garden. Your parents were Kansas Republicans, and you lived in a neighborhood with finely manicured lawns. The romance proved ill-fated, but the friendship remained. In the library that day, she listened patiently as you re-hashed your sad tragic pathetic circumstances. The basketball career you'd been nurturing on the hoop in your driveway since you were seven had ended with you perched at the bench's end. Your basketball coach was a moron. Colleges weren't calling. The heartless girl from Oregon had broken your heart and then returned to her native Portland. Teale listened patiently. She had heard it all before.

"What are we going to do," she asked finally, her attempt to ground you in pragmatics, "after graduation?"

You could think of nothing. People had been asking since September. What did you want to do? You often gave canned answers, none of which you actually believed. Who you wanted to be changed daily—filmmaker, newspaper reporter, songwriter. It all seemed unattainable. The school counselor had informed you that your aptitude test showed a proficiency in math. You felt doomed.

As Teale waited for an answer, you skimmed through a *Campus Life* magazine. You stopped on a page in the middle—an article about a man who'd pedaled a bicycle from one coast to the other. In the photo, he was smiling.

"I'm going to ride my bicycle to Oregon," you said. You realized only after you'd said it that you weren't joking.

"You mean motorcycle," said Teale.

No. You shook your head. "Bicycle."

"Daryl, do you even own a bicycle?" she asked. You did not.

Now, it's two years later. Are you closer to being a filmmaker, reporter or songwriter? No, you are not. You are a soda jerk. A maker of ice-cream concoctions. A bartender for future diabetics. Also, you have taken a second job, every Wednesday night, cleaning offices in the building where your father works. Sometimes you don't get there until after midnight, and before vacuuming, emptying the trash, cleaning the bathrooms, you sit in his chair with your feet on the desk sipping sodas and skimming sports magazines. You work alone, a tourist in the badlands of business, and as you move from office to office, you look at the photos on desks, the spouses and kids, the fishing trips. Golf humor reigns, along with inspirational posters, hung and framed, scenic images with one word captions. Ambition. Perseverance. Potential. Sometimes you open desk drawers looking for secrets. Instead you find pencils and paper clips. When the cleaning is done, you drive aimlessly through the city, inventing secrets for them, imagining a future for yourself. You have a bicycle now, and you have planned a trip across the West. There are those who believe you will never actually depart. You may or may not be among them.

One afternoon, after the lunch rush, as you are wiping the fountain counter, she returns alone. You do not trust your own imagination, so you take a cube from the sugar bowl, plop it in your mouth, close your eyes. You taste the slow sweet dissolve, and then open them. Definitely her. She sits in the same booth as before, drinks coffee, smokes a cigarette. She knows that you watch her, she must, and she smiles as she writes in a small book.

You are afflicted with debilitating shyness. Once, in a high school English class you were required to give a speech. The day it was due, you played sick and stayed home. The next day, the teacher said you could still make up the speech. You spent the night preparing it, fretting over it, practicing it again and again and again. But on the way to the class, you turned and entered the library instead. You cowered at a back table where no one would bother you, pretending to study. The teacher was forced to give you the zero, and you were relieved. Speeches were bad. Females were worse. Now, there she sits. Waiting. A perplexity: you cannot face this inevitable rejection, but you must. You must act now. Giving yourself a silent pep talk— *you have nothing to lose, when*

she rejects you no one will know but her, take a risk for once in your life you poor pathetic wimp-suck of a boy—you grab a napkin and pen, and communicate in the only way you've ever been effectively able. You write:

Congratulations. You are our one-millionth customer. As a result, you receive for free this milkshake created by our master chef.

P.S. Master Chef phone number on request.

You read it, read it again. You are not a chef. You are a soda jerk. It doesn't matter. You think it not half bad; when she rejects you, you can live with this effort.

You quickly make the thickest shake ever known to humankind. Chocolate, because you remember her rocky road. Also, you have heard it is an aphrodisiac. Then you call for Susan, the waitress, to pick up the order.

"Number one," you call.

Susan looks at you.

"I don't have an order," she says, confused.

"Yes, you do," you say, gritting your teeth, hoping that Tim, the owner, who is running the cash register in the adjacent candy shop won't bust you. You are not supposed to give food away. But you are a twenty year-old virgin. Hope sits before you. This is urgent.

"No I don't," she insists.

"Yes, you do," you say, and point your chin toward the woman in the booth.

She looks at the woman, looks back at you. Smiles her approval. "Oh, that order," she says, and takes the note and delivers the milkshake. You watch the woman's surprise, and then her smile as she reads the note, folds it, places it carefully inside her purse. You look down, wipe the counter for the umpteenth time, can feel her looking at you, but don't dare to look back. Your whole body is shaking.

"This is for you," says Susan, moments later, dropping a folded napkin on the counter. Carefully, you unfold it.

I knew if I came in here long enough I'd get lucky. Thanks for the milkshake. It is delicious. So what is your phone number? Do you ever get a break?

"What does it say?" asks Susan.

"It says I'm on break," you say.

Now you sit across from her. She places her elbows on the table and leans in. She smiles and touches

her earrings. You hide your shaking hands under the table. Try to feign suave confidence, hope your nerves won't betray you. Thankful that you had just enough presence of mind to have removed the apron you are required to wear before joining her. She tells you she is here, downtown, for a job interview. The interview is at three o'clock. It is two-thirty.

"What are you doing after that?" you ask.

"I don't know" she says. "I don't have a car. The bus doesn't leave until six-thirty. I hate riding the bus. It takes forever. What time do you get off work?"

"Five o'clock," you say.

"What are you doing then?"

Even you can see there is only one correct answer now.

"Taking you home," you say, and so it begins.

What are weeks? What are days, hours, and minutes? Time is a blur. There are nights you pick her up where she works a second job at a video store and together you drive through the city streets, park in the city's dark corners. You bring her gifts: baked cheesecake, books of poetry, roses. She tells you of her travels, her family, how her father and mother met when he was stationed in Japan. He and both her brothers are in the Navy. The first time you meet her father, he doesn't shake your hand. He looks you in the eye, says "You don't look very tough." This is correct.

After high school, she says, she boarded a bus and travelled the country. She lived in Cincinnati for a short time, then New York. Then she settled in Los Angeles, where she worked briefly as a model. She sips her coffee after she says this, lets it sink in for you. Let's you think, *I am dating a model from L.A.* This is huge, but before Twitter, before Facebook, before, even, cell phones. So you linger alone in the improbability of it all. Her stories of L.A. fascinate you: the transvestite bars, the all night parties, celebrities on the beach, dating millionaires. You realize how little you know about the world and wish you had stories of your own to tell.

One night you take her to a Denver Broncos charity football game held at a local high school. After, while he is signing an autograph for you, a famous defensive lineman openly flirts with her. This kind of pisses you off, except: *you are dating a woman desired by Broncos.*

Two days later, a Saturday, you dress in your best and only suit and take her to dinner, a candlelight affair at a place you can't afford. After, you walk together around Broadmoor Lake, and beneath the light of a lamp, as two swans glide across the water, she kisses you, and later you make out in the Garden of the Gods. It is spring, the snow is gone, and the world is turning its annual shade of green. You drive her to her sister's house, where, for reasons you never really understand, she is staying; but when you get there, her sister is gone and has forgotten to leave a key.

"I'll be fine," she says. "My sister will be back eventually."

So happens you have taken a job house-sitting for one of your mother's friends. You finger the key in your pocket.

"I'm not leaving you here alone," you say. She looks at you and smiles. Together you drive to the house. It feels adult to share this with her. There is wine in the refrigerator, and you pour a glass as she smokes a cigarette. There is an old turntable in the living room, and albums beside it. You choose Ray Charles from the stack. He croons about moonlight shining through pines. This house is yours. You own this house, at least for tonight. There is kissing on the couch, but why? Why the couch? You are here.

"C'mon," she says and stands, takes your hand and leads you.

So, you think in the morning, *this* is what love is. Because it feels good. And because you have nothing to compare it to, and because you are in the throes of something new and mysterious and beautiful. You know that everything has changed, that you can never again be the person you had to this point been. Always, that night will divide a before and an after.

There is no Twitter, or Facebook, but there are phones, albeit land lines. So, later that day you call Teale. She is happy for you.

"Too bad you're leaving soon," she says.

"I think I might not go," you say.

"Oh," she says. "But you've been planning it forever."

"I know," you say.

"Hmm," she says.

How many mistakes are made by the young

who mistake infatuation for love? Years later, you will think back to that night, that time, that city, those stories she told about her life in L.A. It is easy to believe in fate, in the miracle of human connection, to conflate romance and sex with love. Because you want what she has—stories to tell, street smarts, experience—you think you want her. You have been planning the bike trip for two years, ever since that day in the high school library. But, now, you decide not to go at all. You have a new plan.

One day, a rare day off for each of you, you drive through the Garden of the Gods. The red rocks glisten in the sun. It is mid-April now. You park the car, put your arm around her as she smokes a cigarette.

“Do you like living here?” she asks.

“I guess,” you say. “I’ve never lived anywhere else.”

“You should go to L.A. Or even just Denver. Get away from your parents. You’d learn a lot. You’re too sheltered.”

“I’m not so sheltered,” you say.

“Yeah, right,” she laughs.

You look out at the mountain. On the other side is a whole West you’ve never seen, the world outside Colorado Springs feels very large, sophisticated, and the idea of exploring it by bicycle suddenly seems foolish and naive. A boy’s dream. Storm clouds are slowly moving in, and that night it will rain, and you will make love with her, for the final time, in the backseat of your father’s car.

But first you dine together at Jose Muldoon’s, a Mexican restaurant downtown. The low lights inside contrast with the still partly sunny sky outdoors. She holds your hands across the table. You admire the light in her eyes as she laughs, the way she flips her hair over her shoulder. She wears a white cotton dress with purple and red floral designs. By the time you leave, the rain has begun. You drive back to the Garden of the Gods and park, steady streams of water rolling down the fogged glass. Bryan Adams singing “Heaven” on the radio.

After, she pulls away from you.

“This is too perfect to last, you know,” she says. You sit back and watch the rain blur the windshield. You don’t want to believe her.

One afternoon during the week before you had originally planned to leave, you take the money saved for

the trip and drive to Templeton Gap Mall. Your heart is pounding. You take deep breaths, try to be calm, and walk into Diamond Jewelers. You can feel your voice shake as you explain to the clerk what you want. The clerk frowns, looks at you closely. You buy the more expensive of the only two engagement rings you can afford.

“Are you sure about this?” the clerk asks. His question makes you angry. What kind of salesman is he? You don’t answer, just pocket the ring in its box, and hurry out of the mall. Driving home, your hands shake so hard you have to hold the steering wheel tight just to steady them. Early that evening, before she is scheduled to work, you call her.

“I want to see you after work,” you say. “I’ll come pick you up.”

“I can’t,” she says. “I have to get up early.”

“I’ll just give you a ride home. I could be leaving in a couple of days.” There is pleading in your voice, and you hate yourself for it.

“You should just go on your bike thing,” she says. You can hear her sigh and you sense, though you won’t admit it until later, that her wanting you to go has nothing to do with encouragement, or patience. Or love.

“You want me to leave?” you say.

“I want you to figure out what you’re doing,” she says. “I mean, if riding your bicycle helps, do it. But I don’t understand. I mean, you have so much potential. Why don’t you join the military or something? The Marines would do you a lot of good.”

“I’m going to go back to school,” you say.

“Great. To do what?”

You aren’t sure. “I’m going to major in physical education, maybe.”

“You want to be a *gym* teacher?” she says.

You ignore the disgust in her voice. “The only thing I know is I want to see you tonight,” you say.

“I can’t. The next few days are just going to be really busy, you know? I may not be able to see you before you leave.”

What is she talking about? Not see you?

“I may not leave,” you say. You open your dresser drawer, look at the small white box, open it, take out the ring.

“You should just go,” she says.

After you hang up the phone, you reach over and

turn you stereo up loud. Billy Ocean is singing “Electric Avenue.” Your hands sweat. You look at all the books you have stacked by your bed, books about the West, about bicycle repair, about camping. Maps are spread out on your floor, catalogs of bicycle gear cover your dresser. It’s been nearly a month since you’ve looked at any of it. You stand up, walk to the desk, sit down. That night, the Ray Charles night, the night you lived as a couple in a home you pretended to own, that night—you dreamt you were pedaling full speed down a mountain pass, unable to slow down, an eighteen-wheeler on your tail. To get out of its way, you rode over the side of the pass, felt yourself falling. It was a falling dream. You had woken screaming beside her.

You have never been outside Colorado by yourself before.

Now, you pick up a brown envelope that had been sent to you by the Washington State Department of Tourism, empty its contents on the floor, and start to sift through it. In a brochure, you turn to an image of a family riding bicycles on San Juan Island. One girl in the photo is about seven.

The next day, you drive back to the mall, walk into the jewelry store.

“I want to return this,” you say, holding out the ring. The clerk, a different one, looks at you with sympathy. He nods. He gives you a full refund, despite a sign on the register that says it is against store policy.

Her story is her own to write. You are not, and never were, anything more than a minor character there. An in-between-things love. As Paul Simon would later sing, “I guess she thought I was all right/all right in a sort of a limited way for an off night.”

You do see her, though. One more time before you leave. Together, you sit outside in her father’s pickup bed, beneath a streetlight and stars.

“This will be good for you,” she says.

“I’ll see you when I get back,” you say.

You want her to answer the questions: *do you love me? Did you ever love me? If not love, what?*

But you don’t ask, so she cannot reply.

Less than a month later, and you pedal into a rest stop in the wide open Red Desert in Wyoming. A car pulls in. A man and woman get out of the car. The woman has brown hair, and she smokes a cigarette. She

looks at you, sizing you up. She doesn’t smile.

“How can you ride out here in this place?” she asks. “God, aren’t you lonely. There’s nothing out here?”

You feel a rage that you don’t understand. You smile shyly, mumble something about the solitude, how it grows on you. But you want to scream at her, want to tell her to open her damn eyes.

That summer you will drink beer in a dark Montana saloon and listen to sad jukebox songs; you will sit on a campground picnic table and watch the sun fall behind the Pacific; you will lie awake atop your sleeping bag staring at the full moon shining over the Nevada desert; you will pedal, and you will sweat and you will think of her, will yearn for her, will feel a sweet pain, one you will grow to find not entirely unpleasant. Who can ever fully understand the reasons behind the connections we make? Maybe she was all about a future after all. Before her, you were going nowhere. Perhaps hers was a light that gave the confidence you needed to leave, finally; that helped you overcome the shyness that too often had held you back. Her photo you kept in your rainproof map holder on top of your handlebar bag definitely helped you up mountain passes, through headwinds and hail storms. And then later, perhaps, it was the bicycle trip that gave what you needed to handle whatever heartbreak you felt when she told you, upon your return three months later, that she was engaged to a Navy pilot.

One day, as you pedal, an antelope runs beside you. Later, twenty years later, you will reimagine this moment in the opening scene of your first book. Now though, you just want someone to share the experience with. You think about her, and wonder if she would understand why such a thing even matters. She would not. And you realize that whatever real love is, you have yet to experience it. But you will. For now, all you can do is ride as you live, moving forward, one mile at a time.