

# Love Me, Love Me Not

*Theo Coles*

The first time you thought you might be in love, you were standing outside a fitting room. Dresses that she had discarded were bundled in your arms, but not before zipping them up her spine, and resisting asking her to twirl. When you were young, when your Mother was still dragging you into clothes stores by the wrist, you would throw the dresses she suggested for you across the floor, like they were the flags of a country that killed your ancestors. Now, you take them and put them delicately back on their hangers, twisting either prong into the shoulders, while she twists the knob, ready to show you another.

‘We should go. You’re bored.’

You still take a moment when you hear her voice. Perhaps you are in a film and the credits will roll soon. Perhaps you will reach the end of the poem, and go back to highlight the lines you liked most. When you find yourself here, and she is looking at you expectantly, you can’t quite believe it.

You shake your head, smiling into the right corner of your mouth. She told you once that you looked like you were plotting something, with that smile.

‘I’m not bored.’

It was the truth. You were not bored watching her try on dresses, you were not bored sitting opposite her with a scrabble board across the table, your chin propped up with your palm, as you arranged the word ‘love’ vertically on the board, well before you would finally find the courage to say it. You were not bored on Sunday’s when the pair of you drove through the backroads of the city you grew up in, just for the sake of finding somewhere to end up.



That Sunday, two days after the dresses, you drive your truck, with one hand laced loosely through hers. You lift both her hand and your own, to change gears. The music is loud, Fast Car, her favourite.

‘You know, I always thought I’d leave this place.’ you say, mostly thinking aloud.

‘Once I got here, I never wanted to leave.’ she says. This is not unusual for the pair of you. To have conversations that are as much to yourselves, as they are to each other.

She is from a different planet. Where skyscrapers kiss clouds, and traffic hums constantly, like cicadas in summer evenings. A planet where it is easy not to run into people in the supermarket who knew you, before you knew yourself. When she first told you about it, you thought it sounded so freeing. You thought, of course she kisses you in the daylight. Maybe you would too, if you lived somewhere where you weren’t haunted by all of your old ghosts.

It was different here. There was more river than road. More open sky, than buildings that brushed up against it. You spent your adolescence hiding under baseball caps and large hoodies, chased by your past wherever you went. Your primary school teacher would call your old name in the vegetable section of the grocery store, and you’d nervously pick at produce bags as you corrected her. The neighbour of your family home would tell you she was praying for you. You had not pleaded any repentance.

‘What do you see in this place?’ you ask her.

You pull up the truck at the cusp of a forest, switching off the ignition. You turn to her, watching the light fall across her cheek. There is a small scattering of freckles beneath her eye. You could write a song about those freckles. You can’t even sing.

‘It’s quiet. I can breathe here. And you’re here.’



You smile again, into the right corner of your mouth. The left, too.

That week, you do her laundry together with yours. Pine needles have caught on the skirt of her dress, you pluck them off, one by one. She loves you, maybe, she loves you not. The clothes smell of lavender, when you peg them on the line. Her dress, her cardigan, and your t-shirt and overalls.

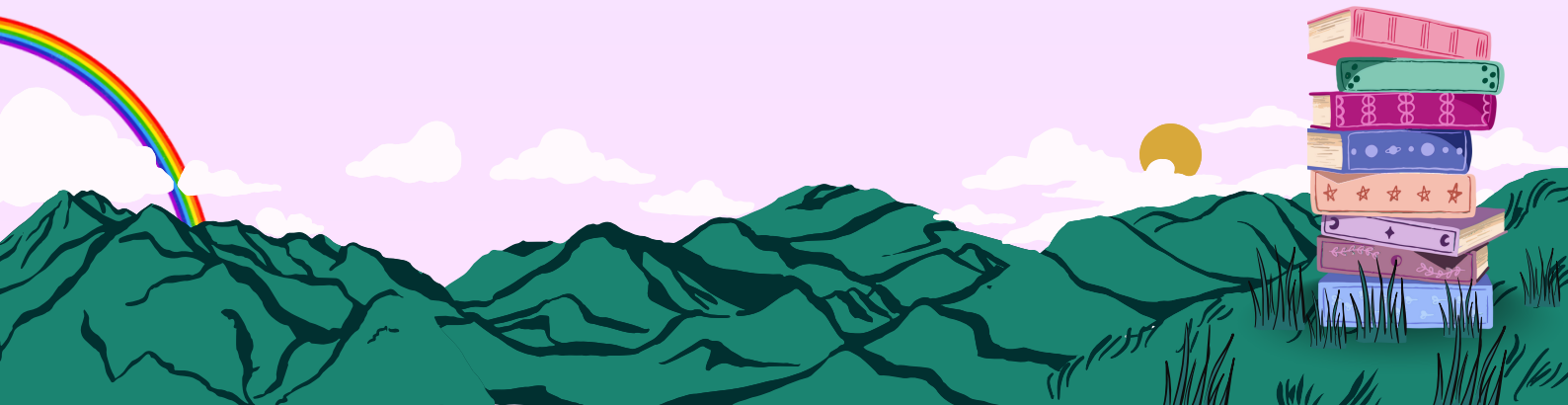
Your hair is getting longer. You plug the clippers into the kitchen, and shave it in the last of the afternoon light. You run your hands over your bald head. You do not think of the way receptionists will pause, unsure how to properly address you. You do not think of your Mother, offering you headscarves for the family barbeque. You think of wooden alphabet tiles and pinecones. You think of Sunday and tomorrow.

She arrives after lunch the next day, to pick up her clothes. She rubs her hand against your bald head, the way young boys do, when they score in sports. She laughs, all teeth.

'It tickles!'

She stays late, writing the name you have chosen for yourself in the dust by the fireplace, then a heart with an arrow through it. You wait for her to write her own name beside it, but she doesn't. You play another game of scrabble, and she tells you about her planet. How her weekends' used to be taken up by sweat soaked night clubs, hands curled around beer bottles, 1pm starts to the day. When she says, this is much better, she puts a hand on your knee. All the words you were ready to play out on the board, escape you.

You almost ask her to stay, but you're not quite brave enough yet.



When you clean your place on Thursday, between admin work, you wipe every surface except the fireplace. A little art exhibit, of the night before. You keep getting distracted from your work screen, by her facebook account. Yours is outdated. A profile of someone who you've put to rest. You wonder if she would've liked the person in the photo, with their long, chestnut brown hair. You don't recognise yourself, but it isn't lost on you that that ghost was easier to live as; a more convenient life, but a heavier one.

On Saturday, you are dancing in your kitchen, with no idea she is on her way. When you are dancing, you are not thinking about your ghosts. You are not thinking of their long hair, and chest you always buried beneath three layers of clothes. You are not thinking of whether or not to ask her to spin with you, or what she might say if she notices how your name in the fire has survived. You are not thinking of who you were before, or who you will become. This moment exists only as this moment. And then you hear the knock on the window.

How long has she been standing there watching you? How long have you been dancing? You tumble across the kitchen, and switch off the radio. She lets herself in the back door.

'That,' she says, 'placing her bag on your counter, 'was the most adorable thing I've ever seen.'

You might sink into the wooden floor. You stand there, as she walks across your kitchen, kisses you on the cheek, and switches the radio back on. The song has changed, something slower, you don't recognise it.

She starts to sway, and you're thinking about writing that song again. You're thinking about all the films and poems about love, in any of them, are people dancing in the kitchen? In this moment, you think all of them probably should be.



She takes your hand and spins you around. She doesn't ask, just lifts her arm expectantly, and smiles when you follow through. You think of suits and silk dresses. How quick it is, to go from embarrassment to hope, with her. You are wondering if everyone from her planet is this carefree.

You are spinning her now. Tomorrow, you will drive to the forest again, and get pine needles on your clothes. You will think about asking her to stay, and you might just be brave enough. She will put the radio on, loud, and sing along. Your voice will crack, as you join in. It will bother you, but then you will turn to see her smiling, and all your worries will dissipate, as they have in this kitchen.

Later, you'll wonder if you would've found yourself sooner, had you grown up around people like her. You'll wonder if you would've talked about how you felt, instead of reporting it on your wrists. You'll wonder if you'd be braver; correct people when they address you by the wrong name. Tell your Mother you hate her head scarves the same way you always hated the dresses she chose. Tell your Mother you were bringing a woman to the barbeque, and no she was not just a friend.

But for now you are spinning her around. She is wearing one of the dresses you chose together. It is Sunday; she loves you, maybe, you hope so.

