

Love Letters

Love has never come easily to me; then again, I've never come easily to love. From an early age I've been in constant protest of the romantics. Their commercialization of Valentine's Day, mushy songs on the radio, and the entire movie genre of "romantic comedy" made me gag. I became jaded at a young age. In second grade, there was a boy named Greg Woodhead. He was a head shorter with brown hair, a ready smile, and the polo shirts and khakis of a miniature executive. We both liked grammar and hanging upside-down on the jungle gym at recess. Whenever I passed by his desk, my palms got clammy and Stride Rites fumbled over each other. I was in love, so like any enterprising seven-year-old, I pulled out some gray paper (it had the dashes in the middle of the line to show where to cross the t's) and started writing him a love letter. *You are the cutest boy in school*, I wrote in my best handwriting. *I like you lots*. I finished the letter with a few swirling flourishes and hearts at the bottom. My best friend Julie Oleson looked over my shoulder and nodded approvingly. "You're writing Greg a love letter?" she asked, adjusting her splatter-painted glasses. I nodded, busy proofreading. "But aren't you going to sign it?"

"No way! Are you nuts?" It was too big of a risk to associate my name with a vow of eternal love; *Love from Your Secret Admirer* was more than enough information. After drawing a few more hearts with arrows through them, the letter was ready for stealthy delivery. When Greg asked Mrs. Kerrins for the bathroom pass, I stuffed the letter halfway up the sleeve of my hot pink Espirit sweatshirt and walked casually up to the pencil sharpener at the front of the room. I forced myself to breathe regularly while I ground the already-sharp pencil to a nub. When there were only three inches left of my pencil, I knew I had to quit stalling: in the game of secret love letters, hesitation is death.

I wiped my palms on the thighs of my turquoise stretch pants and nonchalantly walked my customary route back to my desk, which just happened to go by Greg's desk. As I passed, I let my fingers brush the corner of his desk and I dropped the crisply folded note. I hurriedly returned to my desk and slid into my chair.

"Did anyone see?" I asked Julie.

"Nope. You're home free," she whispered. "But he's coming back!"

Greg seemed to walk into the room in slow motion, as if he knew the next few moments would determine our second grade destiny. He handed Mrs. Kerrins the pass with graceful confidence and turned back to

his desk on the right side of the room.

When he noticed the note, I forced myself to turn towards the windows and get the play-by-play from Julie.

"Oooh! He's reading it!" she squealed as I desperately shushed her. Although she was my best friend, she truly didn't understand the nuances of discretion.

"What's he doing?" I tried to talk through the corner of my mouth, which must have made me look like a distorted cartoon character.

"Well... he's going like this," she said, curling her lips in an Elvis imitation gone wrong. Not exactly an expression that said, *I hope Laura sent this to me, I'm in love with her.* "Now he's looking around."

"Don't look at him! Look somewhere else!" I begged, sinking lower in my plastic seat. Eye contact could ruin everything. Julie looked quickly around the room, searching for somewhere else to look. Choking under pressure, my best friend was halfway under her desk looking at her scrunch socks when Greg glanced our way. I put my head in my hands and mumbled, "Great Jules. That's not obvious or anything."

Still under the desk, she tapped my leg. "Don't worry! He's standing up," she reported.

"What? Where is he going?" I hissed. Commanding myself to stare at my desk was

becoming increasingly futile; I was desperate to see what was happening.

"He's...going to the back of the room," she said as she straightened up.

"Oh...my...gosh."

"What is he doing? Is he throwing it away?" I wailed.

Julie shook her head. "Worse. He's giving it to Mrs. Kerrins."

My head turned in the direction of Julie's horrified gaze, confirming that my deepest emotions lay naked in the hands of my fifty-year-old teacher. And while I loved Mrs. Kerrins with her short salt-and-pepper hair and perpetually misapplied red lipstick, I could not fathom the repercussions of this. Would she call a parent-teacher conference? Would I get a detention? Worse, would she laugh? My impeccable school record was unraveling before my terrified eyes. Julie patted my arm in a vain attempt at comfort as Mrs. Kerrins read the note with curiosity. Suddenly Julie whispered, "Wait, Laura. You didn't sign it!" Of course! I breathed a sigh of relief and congratulated myself on my foresight. But Mrs. Kerrins' loud voice floated from the back of the room.

"Well, no one signed it, so we can't tell who it's from, can we?" she said.

"But...hmm...that's interesting." She put on thick black reading glasses and pursed her lips. "Part of this is written in cursive,

and we don't learn that until spring. But I know the one girl who knows cursive already: Laura Navaratil. I'll bet she wrote it."

My jaw dropped. This had to be some huge cosmic joke: my teacher was a detective disguised in knit sweaters with shoulder pads. My head fell to my desk, whose whorls and nicks I was beginning to memorize.

"Um—Laura—" Julie stammered.

"What?" I moaned.

"Uh—"

"What? Nothing you could say will make me feel—"

"Mrs. Kerrins is coming over here," she whispered.

I could sink no lower. Pivoting on my forehead, I turned my face toward the back of the classroom. A broad, brightly colored sweater and gray-tinged teeth flecked with lipstick approached with surprising speed.

"Laura?" Her red makeup had never looked devilish before that day. She towered above me, clutching my letter with crimson claws. "Did you write this letter?"

Racing through all the possible responses and their ramifications, I took the safest route; a bald-faced lie. "No," I said looking at my desk.

"But it's in your handwriting, isn't it?"

"No..." I stalled, searching for something more to sound believable. "Julie

wrote it." Perfect: she'd written him a love letter two months earlier; besides, she was my very best friend. I was sure she'd take the heat for me.

"I did not!" she yelled in protest. I gave her a look telling her that I would sell my soul if she would agree, but saving her best friend wasn't worth the embarrassment. "I saw her write it," she told Mrs. Kerrins matter-of-factly. Any hopes of a love life swiftly ended underneath my teacher's raised eyebrow. I put my head back on my desk.

Greg Woodhead moved away at the end of fourth grade, but nearly a decade and a half later he lives on in my mind as the beginning of my failure with the opposite sex. Time didn't improve my skills. I attempted to woo Brad Spencer in fourth grade by giving him a dollar on Valentine's Day. I even handmade his valentine, complete with bees, honey pots, and a message to "Buzz, buzz, bee mine." Brad apparently didn't appreciate my artistic skill or my seduction technique. Even his mother found out about my attempt. I wish I'd asked for my dollar back.

While other girls in elementary school got boyfriends, broke up with them in a week, and got new ones, rejections continued for me until seventh grade. My first boyfriend was an eighth grader who

went to a different junior high, which greatly increased his coolness factor. I didn't tell my parents I had a boyfriend: instead, I went out with girlfriends and met him at the mall or the movie theatre. We had our first kiss on the corner of Washington and Main streets; his mom was waiting down the block in her minivan to take him to run errands. He called me from the parking lot of the grocery store half an hour later to ask if that was my first kiss.

"Yeah," I replied, and quickly kicked myself for sounding immature.

"I thought so," he said. I dumped Mark three weeks later because I could not go out with someone who implied that I was a bad kisser (even if I was).

At the end of seventh grade, Adam and I went out. We went to an amusement park together during the summer; when I preferred to go on roller coasters with other friends, he thought I was being distant. I broke up with him a week later because he was too clingy.

Once I left the junior high soap opera, my luck didn't change much. I dated Matt during my sophomore year. We listened to ska music in his green Ford Tempo and ate Wendy's chicken nuggets and Frostys. I thought I could save him from his abusive family life and lack of academic motivation. My dear friend Julie (yes, the same one from second grade) keeps in touch with him; she

told me that he is currently an illicit drug user, failed out of college and talks about moving with his weird girlfriend to Arizona. But other than that, he's doing well.

The next serious boyfriend was Dave. We both did theatre and dated for a year and a half. Dave recently started his own theatre troupe at his college and is presently writing a book that will be published in a few months. We went out for dinner a few months ago, and he told me that he is writing a play about his dating experiences. I demanded compensation for the use of my name and/or likeness. He thought I was joking. I think I need a lawyer.

Two years have passed since I've been willing to go into a relationship, partly due to the extreme slim pickings at Butler University. Currently, there are approximately nine guys on campus: two are gay, four have girlfriends, and three are grossly undateable. You do the math. As a freshman I lamented why I didn't research the guy-girl ratio more thoroughly before I applied, but I have learned to use it to my advantage. I can be good friends with guys without worrying about dating them. Since most girls are unattached, we joke and complain about the lack of quality males together. Competition is so ridiculously fierce that I've given myself over to fate and turned off the "radar."

Being alone—no, *independent*—has also given me a much more realistic perspective on love. I patiently help friends through the angst of inattentive boyfriends, smothering girlfriends, distrust, endless questions of motives and pain. Many are only in the relationships to combat loneliness until a better offer comes along. Despite my privileged vantage point, I've also had to watch Hallmark holidays pass with no stuffed animals on my pillow. The whole genre of "romantic comedy" had to be banned from my movie library for months. And although I am hesitant to admit it, sometimes I *like* stuffed animals and romantic comedies. I also refuse to lower my standards and succumb to the myth that women are incomplete without a man. I developed a personality in the last two years instead of being an offshoot of a guy's personality. Too many women in unbalanced relationships become like babies on a spider plant, derivatives of their partners with no identities. When the relationship ends, they have no root, no soil, no self-awareness in which to anchor themselves.

I'm afraid my entire case might make me sound like I am some crazed anti-male-overly-righteous feminist, which I don't intend. There's nothing wrong with dating or love, but something is wrong when society says that a single woman isn't a

whole person. At family reunions the first question relatives ask are "Who are you dating now?" with a confidential nudge of the elbow. And while my relatives don't have a whole lot to talk about before they hit the open bar, I still wish that the concern wouldn't be who I'm dating, but who I am and what's going on in my life.

The worst part of all this ranting is that recently, I've actually found someone who might be worth the trouble of dating. The unplanned two-year hiatus might end. He doesn't seem to mind that I'm addicted to Diet Coke. He likes to play Dr. Mario with me on the Nintendo I bought on eBay. We go to Perkins Restaurant at two in the morning to eat banana nut muffins and debate whose animal slippers are better: his gorillas or my rams. He writes me poetry but he can also cut down a tree with a chainsaw. His soccer-mom Volvo has windshield wipers on the headlights (How are those necessary?) He has an aversion to regular showers and sometimes wears the same pair of bright red socks two days in a row. After being his friend for months, I know firsthand that he's not perfect. Case in point: the boy wears moccasins. I didn't know they still *made* moccasins. I think his IQ is higher than mine, but I beat him mercilessly at games of skill and I pretend to be smarter. He likes it when I play with his

hair. I give him my good pillow while we watch movies, and when he leaves I can still smell him on it. I just like to sit next to him, even if he's just doing homework. He rarely shaves, and I can't decide if I like the stubble after one day or two. We go to parks to play on tire swings and schlep around in the mud. He writes random lines of poetry during class and doodles bees, the only thing he can draw. I am also starting to see signs that he's one of those die-hard romantics that used to make me gag.

For the last two years, I cocooned myself in solitude: part of the payoff of avoiding dating was that I couldn't get hurt. Breaking out of warm seclusion is terrifying; after all, a gamble in second grade resulted in my heart squashed under Mrs. Kerrins' critical gaze. The chances I took in second grade seemed just as monumental then as the ones I take now. I guess it's time to roll up my hot pink sleeves, break out the lined gray paper and write another inexperienced love letter.

Laura Navratil