

CONFESSIONS OF AN ETERNAL ROMANTIC:

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Passion and enduring love often seem at odds. So why do we keep striving to capture both in the same relationship?

At the age of 77 my father fell in love with a woman of 64. My father—small, Sicilian, tender-eyed, working class, intelligent, twice married--is a man who's sinned and been sinned against maybe more than most, but who's managed to keep his courtly, nineteenth-century style of dignity. And Rosa (or so we'll call her): a Caribbean immigrant, down-to-earth, savvy, also twice married, and with a style, a dignity, not unlike my father's. They were brought together by the odd, fateful coincidences that always bring people together--suddenly a stranger is in your life, deep in your life, and everything changes. In any case, more than 30 years since his divorce from my mother; more than 20 years after his second wife died; and at least 15 since the only affair he ever had--suddenly there was a woman in my father's life. And no one was more surprised than Papa himself.

He would rhapsodize about his Rosa. "You know, son," he once said with a sweet, shy smile, "how a little kid separates the food on his plate--the peas, the potatoes, the meat--and saves the best for last? I'm glad I saved the best for last."

I don't readily admit to being hopeful (Hope makes you soft, doesn't it? And soft gets you hurt?). But I was speaking in a veiled way of my hopes when I said to my brother, "Isn't it great! You can be pushing 80, living alone, thinking your life is over and all you have are books and memories, and zap! One fine day you can still fall in love like a youth."

My brother was, to put it mildly, less enthusiastic: "Have you gone nuts? You know what this means? No matter how old you get, how wise, how bitter, how experienced, it makes no difference. Love can still grab you by the balls and lead you wherever it wants to!"

My brother was appalled at precisely what delighted me: the power of love to lead you by the balls (or whatever else), in any direction it wants to, unpredictably, unreasonably, and no matter what you've been reading, thinking, or telling yourself about love. Suddenly the lines from silly songs tell more truth, more cogently and sweetly, than whole libraries of philosophy, the hair-splitting insights of psychology, and the suburban homilies of self-help books. It won't matter who's from Venus or Mars, much less what Freud said about sleeping with your mother. Gershwin's "They Can't Take That Away from Me," sung in Frank Sinatra's smokiest, most intimate voice, will sound far wiser. Audrey Hepburn's big loving eyes in *Breakfast at*

Tiffany's will seem to reveal far more than Tolstoy's Anna Karenina when she threw herself under a train. You'll feel, as the poet Anna Akhmatova put it, that "the secret of secrets is in me again." Who would deny that these are the times we've felt most alive?

And yet, what did I actually say the last time I was falling in love? "Shit, I'm in trouble now." Deep terrors get stirred. Our experience of love is in part an experience of failure--giving too much or too little of ourselves, going too far or not far enough. "In love," the Spanish poet Antonio Machado wrote, "a little exaggeration feels right." Yes, but too much exaggeration obscures the face of the beloved: Are you seeing the real person, or are you making your lover up as you go along, both engaged in a mutual act of living theater, playing roles loosely based on dreams, expectations, and even the truth? Both of you are trying to live up to some dangerously high hopes, and that's nerve-wracking, but still--the liveliness of the adventure sweeps you along, and the beauty of it all makes you forget the odds. (Isn't that the dark purpose of beauty? But even if it is, should beauty then be denied?)

In any case, for two years they were pretty happy, and beautifully silly, my father and Rosa. I watched, living vicariously through them, hoping my father would have better luck than I was having in the same arena. (Yes, it's so much easier to speak of them than of myself--at least I can pretend to be a little objective. My wounds are still too fresh for commentary.) Then their occasional fights turned into a fairly regular rhythm of conflict. All too familiar. The particular issues don't matter much, not really, because their underlying trigger is usually the same. To put it as benignly as possible: People hurt each other plenty just by having different needs, when those needs aren't in sync. And most of us aren't very graceful about not having our needs met when and how we want them met. No one can put a finger on when exactly it starts, but little irritations become large issues. Something sours at the core. No longer is this other person a door into "the secret of secrets"; our lover becomes a walking symbol of what we most want and can never quite have--someone who sees us as we most want to be seen. The fights get worse, as each strives to be seen in their own way, on their own terms. And then ...

Well, then they broke up. Of course, many people don't -- break up, I mean. They grow up, or accommodate, or whatever it is. The comforts of intimacy, or the needs of the children, or sometimes just the (usually unadmitted) fear of being alone, make for the gracious and/or resentful compromises of which long-term relationships are made. Most admit that the sexual juices then tend to flow quieter, and not as deeply, but that's often judged an acceptable tradeoff -- maturity, as it were. To rebel against the constrictions of maturity is to be branded a romantic. But is a romantic immature, or just someone who insists on feeling completely alive? No one will ever settle such

questions. Suffice it to say that a romantic (me) is here speaking of at least two other romantics, and, yes, they broke up.

At 81, Papa is heartbroken. Until recently it was all he could talk about. But still I envy him. Even my down-to-earth brother envies him a little. "Life just never stops, does it?" is how he put it. I would say that love, and life itself, are not a gift but a dare. If love's about anything, it's about daring the uncertainties. Love, that mysterious and overpowering sensation, visited our father unexpectedly, like a biblical angel, rather than those cherubs on calendars. It was beautiful and frightening by turns. (As the poet Rainer Maria Rilke said, "Every angel is terrible.") Love's angel gave Papa life, and hope, and the whiff of eternity And then it gave him despair. And each of these gifts, even despair, was a door into his deeper nature. And isn't that, finally, what love is all about? Opening the locked doors within us?

It's dizzying. We don't call it falling in love for nothing. ("To my own personal earthquake," a woman once inscribed in a book she gave me.) We feel a great rush of wind, as though all the locked doors and windows within have been thrown open, and body and spirit can finally breathe again. Blockages inside us -- hang-ups, inhibitions, and bad memories -- shift, bubble, start to dissolve. It sometimes seems that a different set of blockages dissolves with each person we love (as though that's why we love them). But something else is moving too, set free by love, and some of it is a surprise, unwelcome, unsteady, issues we thought resolved long ago -- our attraction and/or repulsion to a mother or father, an unsuspected sexual bent that frightens even more than it excites. We're not in control of what rises from so deep within us. An inspired friend defined it this way: "Love is that which calls up all that is not-love to be healed." Thus every deep love is an immense venture of the soul. We feel more inner movement than we bargained for, both in ourselves and in our loved one.

Who can hope for security in the throes of an emotion that throws so much into question? Security is a sense of staying put, but love is always in motion. Security is a sense that something has finally been settled, but even parting doesn't settle anything between lovers, for then they must deal with each other in that hall of mirrors we call memory. You can leave a lover, but you can't leave an ex; the ex-ness of them is always with you, changing its meaning as you grow older. So how can we speak of anything being settled or secure between us?

We know what we feel today, but who knows what they're going to feel a moment or a year from now? We can promise to want to love someone for the rest of our lives, but we can't control falling out of love any more than we can control falling into love. We're all aware of this terrible uncertainty, whether or not we admit it, so our promises are no more than good intentions, and (as promises) they ring hollow.

The impulse toward security and the impulse toward passion seem completely at odds. And yet most of us want to be blasted by passion and cocooned in stability -- in one and the same relationship, and we feel personally cheated when we can't have both.

That seems to be what people are really complaining about when they gripe about love. I know people who've been securely and more-or-less happily married for years, who, when their guard drops, admit that they resent the lack of passion in their lives. For the unhappiest among them, marriage has become a long series of negotiations of various, deep resentments. And I know people (like myself) who've gone from passion to passion, and are hitting middle age fearful and almost in despair, because they can hardly believe anymore that they'll ever find security in a relationship. The impossible trade-off between passion and security has led to a bitter resignation in many that isn't pretty to look at. Yet when are we ever reconciled to it?

During my last big breakup, with its accompanying crackup, I headed for an old friend's, a man I've known for 40 years. He's been married for about 30 of those years -- two people with two kids who seem, no matter what the strain, to weather every crisis and remain deeply connected. Long after my friend had gone to bed, I sat in his living room, drinking his wine, wondering why he could and I couldn't sustain such a life. (Six years is my record for being with someone; usually it's been more like two.) I sat in that living room where I'd always been welcome no matter what state I was in -- gazing at the fireplace mantle that my friend had built, the photos of their family going back three generations, the books on their shelves so very different from mine-- and realized that they had lived in this house for two decades while during that time I had lived in at least 15 places. There was an irreducible difference in our natures, in their innate capacity for stability and my overpowering restlessness. And I got hit with this insight: These friends have never had to discuss, not for one hour, the meaning of all the important words--God, work, love, money, child, home, risk, safety, intellect, past, future, responsibility, politics, sex. Those kinds of words.

Their agreement hasn't been a matter of intention or negotiation. Rather, their very metabolisms agree, and always have. As for passion and intimacy, they've had good years and bad, but the meaning of the words we build our daily lives around had not substantially changed for them. Me, I'd felt terrific passions for several people, but our definitions of most of those words had always been different. (As someone told me, metaphorically, of the woman of my last big breakup: "You two pray to different gods.") So when our passion was in trouble, as passion will be, there was not much else to sustain us. The friends for whom this room was truly a "living room" trusted their shared values and each other. I seemed only to trust the journey, the search itself, and you can't share a search for long.

Maybe the key to longevity between two people is wanting the same things, which means defining the crucial words in the same way. Up until about 50 years ago (the time I was born), most of these definitions were supplied externally and people had little choice about them. It took a lot of hard work to survive. Very few people (and virtually no women) attempted to survive on their own. Society wasn't fluid -- economically or geographically. It was very rare, even in America, for people to advance in affluence beyond their parents or to socialize with people outside their community. (Even as a boy in Brooklyn, I knew people who, in old age, still lived in the tenement where they'd been born.) Life expectancies were drastically shorter. In the time of Jesus, the life span of a Palestinian peasant was 29; in the year 1900, in the United States, most people could not expect to live past the age of 44.

This was the civilization that invented the form of marriage that we still adhere to -- a relationship based on shared definitions more than passion. Tales of passion were told all the time. But whether the lovers were Launcelot and Guinevere, Orpheus and Eurydice, or Romeo and Juliet, their passion inevitably led to unmitigated disaster, both for the lovers and their communities. Everybody suffered when individuals let their passions run wild. It was as though the voice of collective humanity was saying: We recognize that passionate love is a wonder, but if you give into it you'll upset the delicate balance that allows us to survive. Passion seemed so threatening that, in virtually all cultures, and until fairly recently, most marriages were arranged.

We should also remember who was telling the stories, and whom they were about: the aristocracy. Even folktales told by peasant peoples were about doomed princes and princesses, because who else but the elite could have the time for adventures of the heart?

Very few of us would have been among that elite. To follow our passions would simply not have been among our options.

This has been a century that changed all the terms. Two world wars liberated all our passions. The first war ushered in an era of technological advances, demolished old definitions, opened new possibilities -- five-day weeks and 10-hour days started becoming the norm, and mass-produced goods began to give people what seemed to them an enormous amount of free time. The movies were redefining intimacy -- human beings had never watched each other kiss every week and in close-up. The mass appetite was being whetted for passion.

In the 1930s, between the two wars, F. Scott Fitzgerald, in *Tender Is the Night*, defined love as "a wild submergence of soul." What five words better describe the thrill, joy, fear, and uncanny suddenness with which our entire beings seem transformed during the time of falling in love? But the human soul, as Fitzgerald knew, is wild, powerful, ravenous. It doesn't seem to care about our happiness. It's

hungry for experience -- hungry to open all its doors and let every angel and demon out into the open, simply to be lived.

Then the technologies developed during the Second World War blew the last gates off the hinges. For the first time in history individuals could survive alone -- with far less labor than their ancestors. Now, in the United States and much of Europe, about 12 percent of the population lives alone. Another 20 percent, in America at least, are single-parent families. This is a reality unparalleled in human history. Men and women are, for the first time ever, working and entertaining themselves, unchaperoned, unrestricted by law or custom. We're inundated, in our homes, cars, and on the streets, by tales, songs, and advertisements coaxing us toward sex and passion.

And now we marry as a celebration of the very passions that all the traditional cultures warned us against. Thirty thousand years of warnings have been demolished in less than a century. We are now allowed to change in ways--and at rates of speed--that our ancestors assured us would drive us mad. We are asking a lot of ourselves if we expect to find new ways to handle this in just a couple of generations. (Now the peasantry appear on the daytime talk shows. Watched avidly by their fellow creatures, they talk about very little but that our ancestors were right and that passion is making them nuts.)

Where does this leave you and I? In a situation where (as long as we're not too noisy about it, and sometimes even then) anything goes. Anything. And not many are strong enough to both protect and transcend their own boundaries (the two contradictory necessities of love) when everything is in flux, when there are no reference points and no sustaining traditions.

You talk to yourself, talk to your friends, talk to your therapist, buy self-help books, watch Oprah, take Prozac. Or you read poetry, go to the ballet, see art films, scan essays like this one, do old-fashioned things like drink and smoke cigarettes. You're looking for comfort, insight, a clue -- some way to reconcile your feelings and your life. The extraordinary thing is that very rarely does anybody tell you that looking for both passion and security in the same place is a very new human project. Love, circa 1997, is a huge experiment. We don't see ourselves as experimenters, however. We see ourselves as just "folks" trying to get along; nevertheless we've been drawn willy-nilly into a social experiment on a scale so great, and in ways so pervasive, that we hardly perceive it. We're trying to reconcile opposites -- passion and security -- that have never been reconciled before.

Again I think of my father, falling madly in love at the age of 77, and enduring a difficult breakup at the age of 81. I see him as humanity in miniature, a metaphor for us all. Most Americans live well into their seventies now, and love can still take them

by surprise. Apparently the soul doesn't age as our minds and bodies do. (I have two other friends almost Papa's age who have fallen just as hard as he did.) Marvelous, isn't it? The experiment isn't over till we're dead.

What are we to do with this situation? Anyone who tries to provide a definitive answer to so profound and rending a dilemma is liar, fool, profiteer, or all three. The greatest irony is, if passion suddenly grips you, you'll try to offer that answer with your life itself. Like me, like anyone, you'll want to reconcile, in yourself, with your lover, the entire history of this paradox. All I can do is remind you, in a swift and crude way, what an enormous task you're taking on when you love--what a fantastic dare!

For me, that's a comfort. But remember, I'm a romantic, and when I take a dare and fail I don't feel nearly as cheated, deprived, and disappointed as I do when I'm full of expectations that aren't fulfilled. The very nature of a dare is that the odds are against you, and some of us find that exhilarating. All the reassurances, insights, and self-help books in the world aren't going to change the odds. What's required of us is what the poet Ted Hughes described as "the simple animal courage of accepting the odds."

Late last night, as I was writing this essay, my father called. Papa seemed calmer than he'd been since the breakup. His voice, raspy with emphysema, sounded gentle and centered, I said, "Papa, I'm trying to write about love." I didn't tell him that he was, in effect, the star of my essay; I like to surprise him that way. I've written about him before, and he doesn't seem to mind -- he's even taken a kind of shy pride in being thought interesting enough, by his eldest son, to be the subject of an essay.

"Love," he said, "that's a wonderful subject to write about." Then he added, wistfully: "If only it were understood!"

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