

Ringsend

By Michele Bowes

There is a letter that I never opened. I am assuming that you, like almost everyone, has never been in love. That is why you have all sorts of questions about that letter. What did it say? Why didn't I open it? I ask you in return, what does it matter if I open it? Would opening it change anything on the page? All that remains is the spinning out circumference of things top-ended in me. I was tempted to read it but terrified that the repetition would destroy me. I had survived it once, only once.

The first words he said to me were in a jubilant voice, I know where we can go. I spun around and he was circling in a wide loop around me. There was music; it was strange there was music. There was a poet on site, he saw the whole thing and wrote a famous poem about it. I never dropped my eyes. I was so brave looking at him, looking at me. The circle collapsed in smaller and smaller turns until he was standing right in front of me. You said, "I know where we can go".

The poet called him a red fox and me a little bird that swooped down, into his teeth. That was what he saw, but I nodded yes, yes, yes. We took off just like that. We were inseparable. The poet published the poem without a word as to why a little bird would fly down from a heady height of safety into a snarling jaw. Obviously, he has been in love.

That is until one day when he said he wasn't sure, when the whole world stopped spinning on its mechanized axis. When the entire velocity of this planet came to an abrupt halt, crashing into a flat surface. Things inside of me continued to move forward,

the incredible inertia smashed and broke against other things inside of me. The force of the impact knocked all of the air out of my lungs and I struggled to regain my breath.

Dying must feel something like this.

The first time he kissed me. He lifted my chin with two fingers. All that loneliness of my fingertips meeting with his heart-beating chest. The first time we had sex, I never took my eyes off of the crocheted lace fringe on the pillowcase illuminated by the lamplight. It drew shadows on the bed sheet, the pattern moved but I was still. I am sure that I was still the whole time.

I thought that I no longer had any of your letters. In a rage, my husband threw out all of your old love letters to me. He came home to find the baby asleep in his crib and me sitting on the floor amongst your letters sobbing. The worst part was not that he threw them out – for I felt so guilty that I accepted his doing so without a fight. He gathered them up in his arms and threw them loose into the communal dumpster in the grotty basement of our apartment building.

I held a still sleeping infant in my arms, wounded beyond tears. I remembered the anticipation and elation of each letter: the quickstep down the stairs in the hall in Montreal at the familiar sound of the slamming mailbox. Silently watching him flinging the substantial mass of letters into the air above the dumpster.

For a delightful moment they were all airborne as I felt them within me, fluttering softly down into the bin. I promised the worst part: everyday, sometimes several times a day, each time I went there, I saw your letters to me at the bottom of the bin. Eventually, I noticed the ones that had escaped the bin to rest in the corner of the room. I left them there, averting my gaze as though rescuing them would be adultery.

Tonight, I found the only remaining letter: your last, unopened. You sent it to my Grandmother's house, the only address you knew. My Grandmother tortured me with that letter in her sitting room. She told me that you had come for me, just to prove her point. You wrote that letter over several days leading up to my birthday after we parted. You called me on my birthday. The sunlight was passing through crocheted curtains drawn closed. I told you not to call again, that it was doing my head in because I was trying to start a new life. It stung like when, in the middle of the fight, you asked us to stop to hold each other. I refused you. My arms were just tired from being spread out like that.

I called you on the day we were to be wed. I careened through the woods at the cottage desperate to find the rock on which we stood the day you asked me to marry you. As if the permanence of that bedrock of Canadian Shield would make your promise to me eternal. You told me in a cold recitation of my words not to call you; it was doing your head in. I sat for a long time on that rock, thinking about how romantic it would be to swim out to the centre of the lake. My arms shaking in fatigue from the strokes, I'd let my body give out. I would struggle to breathe and then stop.

I started packing to go home as soon as you made your announcement on New Year's Eve that you couldn't marry me. You kept calling it a second chance. Shortly after you went on a business trip to Chicago. Your letter reveals that you realized something profound on that trip. I recall the reunion in the sitting room in Ringsend. You told me that you had bought something for me on your trip while reaching into your bag to retrieve it.

Yet, he was stunned as my things became boxed at the threshold of the front door. When the men came for the boxes, he stared at me stupidly asking, “So, you are really going to leave?” Even at the airport he kept saying, “You’re really going to go”. He never said I know where we can go, only dismay that I was going.

My grandmother is the cruellest person in the world. She beckoned me into the sitting room to talk to her. She asked me in a deadly serious voice, “Are you over him?” I lied. She tested me, “If John Paul walked through that door right now...” I smiled trying to be brave, telling her that I had taken her advice and told him to stop calling me so I could move on with my life. Smiling like an idiot with hot tears streaming down my face, for I believed her. She replied, “Maybe I shouldn’t give this to you then”. She slipped your letter from her bag. I believed everything she said.

I read your letter for the first time tonight. All those love letters distilled into one. In the same box, I found a photograph of us staring into the lens of someone else, standing with our backs against a rock wall with a field that stretched up to the sky. It was taken that New Year’s Day. I used this picture to enter into evidence, ever-building my case that we were not happy together. I turned it over pitifully to discover the very next frame – both of us laughing, eyes dancing, looking at each other.

It was the look in your eyes the moment before you kissed me. Your cool, sweet kisses on my lips. Reaching out my hand to your chest. You were impossibly real. The tautness of muscle over bone beneath your skin, the rising and falling of your quickening breath, the mesmerizing rhythm of your heartbeat thumping into my fingertips. Overwhelming me as you pull me into your embrace with both hands. Telling me that I am yours, singing to me how we met – a boy and a girl.

You make a complete ass of yourself just to make me laugh. The faintest vulnerability in your eyes when I tease you the second before you start to laugh. When I recall our closeness then it really hurts me because of that hint of fragility in your trust. I feel my teeth tighten on it now. I was always too brave.

In that unopened letter you confessed that you wished I had gotten pregnant the last time we made love. I did. I lost her as well. I am sorry. I kept it to myself, hoping you would come get me. I didn't see it as an excuse. When I miscarried her, I decided not to tell you at all. I saw the pause in your stroke when you wrote that you have two daughters with your wife. The ink blurred in hesitation, then striking a blow with that little globe of blue hitting the flat white page.

Word Count: 1500