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Long-Form Essay
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Forsaking All Others

Or--A Funny Thing Happened at the Airport. Twice

The day after my husband had me deposed--because my years as an utterly ordinary suburban wife and mom apparently warrant hostile grilling--in what often seems the most horrible and interminable divorce ever, I took my daughter on a long overdue trip to someplace tropical.

She and I have essentially been functioning alone as a family unit for at least six years, now, and have weathered every storm of adolescence, high school, and family breakdown without ever failing to love each other wholly. Epic arguments now and then, of course, because though we are deeply connected, we are not the same person, and our perspectives naturally differ. So, we've had to work our way toward understanding both our common ground and our differences, and this has required occasional venting, not to mention levels of empathetic, straightforward, and difficult honesty that people rarely ponder the eventual potential necessity of when they are picking out tiny socks, snapping photos of birthday cake frosting smeared on little laughing faces, or warming the bleachers through children's endless adventures in competitive sports. But we somehow hung in through age 18 and graduation, her departure for college looms, this is our last shared summer of her rapidly waning childhood, and so sand, surf, sun, and palm trees seemed fitting.

We made it to the airport, got through the security line quickly, grabbed a few things that passed for breakfast, and settled into chairs at our gate. A family soon settled into the row of chairs directly across from and facing us. A dad, a mom, and two children, the eldest a dark-haired boy very focused on his electronics, and the youngest a girl with long blonde hair who stuck close to her mother.

The dad kept staring at me--staring and staring. I could not figure out why, at first, but it soon enough clicked: here was my first love, my first lover, with his young family.

His hair is gray, now. He's a bit chubby, but this was also true way back when I was 15 or so and he became my boyfriend. (I liked feeling enveloped by him. It felt safe, I suppose.) He has a bald spot on the back of his head. No mistaking the eyes, though, or the intensity of the gaze, and every one of those passionate moments and promises came flooding back immediately. No matter how he ages, no matter what he looks like, that boy will always be, for me, the very same boy I loved, and never really stopped loving, though life brought our parting.

Details	
Words	2,345
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Sentences	106
Paragraphs	37
Reading Level ?	9-10th Grade
Reading Time ?	8 mins 32 sec
Speaking Time ?	13 mins 2 sec

It was rattling, but there was only a final long mutual stare, no words exchanged, and then we carried on with our separate families, our separate trips that just so happened, bizarrely, to collide at this unlikely moment in this vast airport at this time in my life when I'm utterly at sea about sexual and romantic love, not knowing if they really exist at all, or if everything now is mere limerence, and nothing more, like a fire of dried and bleached driftwood: alluring, hot, fast, fleeting.

Thoughts of him lingered during our trip. My daughter--who amusingly had found his daughter annoying--was fascinated by the synchronicity. Coincidence, or fate? We wondered if we would encounter the family again on the way back.

We did.

More staring. Still no words. This time, I heard his voice as he spoke to his son, and oh my gosh that voice--the hours and hours on the phone, the innocence and whole-heartedness of the belief that this love was forever, the whispers in intimate moments. All still there in their entirety, as though all of it unfolded just tantalizing moments ago.

My daughter wondered why I did not speak to him. Wondered why I avoided his attempted approaches. Wondered why I said I would not follow the encounter with a call, or try to meet him privately, when it seemed pretty clear that I want to, badly, and she sensed that he did, too.

She was very taken with the way he looked at me. She figures I deserve always to be seen that way. She was particularly impressed that he only had eyes for me, and never once swept her with an assessing gaze, as so many middle-aged men so creepily do.

And here was my answer: Yes, I do want to--possibly even yearn to in a way that simultaneously surprises me with its intensity all these years later and does not surprise me in the least, because that's my boy--but he is married, they have children, and I would never allow myself to act in a way that could (and likely would) hurt so many people. He will always be my boy, but the fact is that he is not mine, I have no right to him, and my desires of the moment do not and cannot take precedence over all that is right and good. No matter my shocking but inevitable yearning, it is not good or right to interfere in a marriage, or to risk setting in motion events that break a family. My moments of wanting quite fiercely to be back in that innocent, fiery past with my one and only first love could never justify the level of damage required, particularly for what is only a fantasy as compared with the current material reality of this man's life, about which I know next to nothing, or my life, about which he knows next to nothing.

I tell all of this, I suppose, partly because the timing of these encounters was so stunning, and that's the sort of thing that often happens to me. I'm forever trying to piece together what such things mean, and what I am meant to learn from them.

More than that, though, I tell it to shed some light on what it means and how it feels to be the faithful one in a marriage undone by infidelity. Yes, I can absolutely do monogamy, and I value it. For me, it's a necessary foundation for profound intimacy.

But that does not mean I do not know or appreciate what it means to want someone very badly, right now, and beyond all reason. I absolutely do. I would walk barefoot across miles of hot coals for mere minutes alone with that boy. Every inch of me leans toward him. My very corpuscles react to the

gravitational field he will clearly always be for me. I know--simply know without doubt--that the sex would bring more relief and deep satisfaction than I have felt in ages.

And yet, I can't and won't. Infidelity apologist Esther Perel can call chasing such compelling desires acts of "exuberant defiance" all day long, but that, alas, does not alter the reality that the many de facto victims of such self-centered acts--victims that include not only unsuspecting spouses, but wholly blameless children--must tend their wounds long after the sheets have cooled and the realities have crumbled the fantasy.

The faithful partner forsakes all others not because he or she is frigid or rigid, and not because our partners necessarily deserve it, but because we know that we can never step into that temptingly dancing fire alone. People we love, people we have made promises and commitments to, get dragged along quite without their knowledge or consent. The damage runs deep and lasts long.

Further, we're unwilling to compromise our own deepest beliefs and values, and possibly even unable to. Even knowing that my putative spouse is currently involved in an extramarital relationship--the most recent of several that I know of--the fact remains that I am still married. We who belong unashamedly to the ever shrinking minority of those for whom that matters simply cannot betray our vows, or compromise anyone else's. Even the wordless gazes felt impossibly self-indulgent and treacherous, for there were his wife and family, and his interest and attention belong wholly to them.

But make no mistake: the faithful do understand the wanting. I certainly do.

In the end, though, my yearning, strong as it is, does not outweigh everything else. It is not a thing to build a life upon. It is, instead, like the sand I stood upon during our vacation. When the waves that crashed up around my legs receded, they pulled the sand right out from under my feet, and tried to pull me, too.

Yearning--like the ocean, like fire--is beautiful and dangerous. It's a thing to be awed by, a thing to respect, and a thing to learn from and about.

But it is not a place to live.

"Boy," by the way, is a deliberate bit of diction, here.

The little that has reached me over the years suggests that the man would have been a poor choice. I knew he had been married at least twice, so this would be his third, and he is a year older than me, so I note that very young third wife and their very young children and can make some reasonable guesses about his choices. I see that in how much older than me he looks, as well, though the planes of his face aren't a thing I could ever fail to recognize for long.

There will clearly never come a time when I do not react viscerally to the sight or sound of that boy, even though there were reasons it ended.

A bookish kid like me with a tough boy like him was not going to work forever--none of the parents were fans, either--but somehow I was given the warm and open aspects of the bad boy, and am forever grateful for the gift of that. I did not get a marriage of having to cope with his drinking and assorted other less than stellar choices, and I'm grateful for that, as well. College and escape from my difficult

family and that small town were the right things--he knew it, too, and that was a painful parting--though I landed in a marriage every bit as bad as that might well have been.

So why did the cosmos conspire to make our paths briefly intersect in this unlikely way?

To be regarded as beautiful even for a few moments in a world in which much younger and unrealistically perfect females are the impossible standard is quite something. That was one of the gifts in this brief encounter, and is also one of my strongest memories of him--at some point, he realized that I did not regard myself as attractive (I matched exactly none of the qualities in fashion at the time, and felt awkward and eternally disheveled around the girls who did). He disabused me of that notion very persuasively, and in a spontaneous and genuine way that made the message lasting. A very kind and generous thing for a bad boy to do.

Then, too, the encounters reminded me of something essential about how my own gaze functions, for though I noted the paunch, the gray, and the bald spot, there was no critique involved. He was every bit as attractive to me at 57 as he had been at 17. Clearly, object permanence is an essential aspect of my romantic and sexual make up. I do not have to be with someone every single moment in order to love, desire, or be faithful, and when I do love, the object of desire increases rather than decreasing in value over time. For some, familiarity breeds at least boredom if not downright contempt, but for me memory and history enrich connections. For some, age is a threat to be desperately fended off, but for me age can never detract from a valued lover's appeal. Time deepens meaning. It would, in short, be quite impossible for me ever to find that boy unattractive. Those eyes, that voice, those hands, the planes of that face are most importantly his, and will always be deeply woven into my history, my self-image, and my concept of love.

Maybe most of all, though, seeing him drove home the point that ethics and love are inseparable for me. While my daughter was happily ignoring the wife and family and envisioning a story of true love recaptured--featuring a contented mom safely ensconced in a relationship with a man who looks at her always the way she ought to be looked at--I was dodging his awkward attempts to speak with me one-on-one, turning or walking decisively away as need be at each faltering approach.

Likely only pleasantries and brief factual updates would have been involved, so whence the studied avoidance?

Wife, kids, marriage, family, respect, and empathy stopped me. This was no mere old friend. This was my first love, with all that entails. Would I want to be the wife watching her husband interact with his first love? I would not. Would I want to be the kind of woman who thrilled to the wife's discomfort and proceeded anyway, as she squirmed? I would not. Did I want his kids wondering who that lady was and why daddy looked at her in that funny way? I did not.

Those were instantaneous choices, made in a moment. I could not even have articulated them clearly at the time, but despite curiosity, memory, history, attraction, and instant desire, the soul proclaimed an unequivocal, unbreachable no.

Strange and thought provoking as the entire experience proved to be, I'm glad my daughter witnessed--up close and personal--what forsaking all others looks like in action. It's something that we do both for

ourselves and for others. It's a decision that becomes a habit that in turn becomes a steady aspect of character. And it's an important act of quiet love.

I'm very glad I saw that boy--twice--and (though admittedly still a bit wistful) I'm glad that's where it began and ended. The memory of the boy is precious enough to me that I would never willingly disturb the present reality of the man he became--a married man I deliberately do not know, and never will.