

to the guy who let me cut in front of him at the gas station restroom line

I love you's sit on the tip of my tongue like
boiling water ready to spill over, like
barely contained preschoolers waiting for recess, like
balloons big enough to burst.

I want to say it to the man at the gas station restroom line that
lets me cut in front of him when it's clear I can
hardly hold it in, and whisper it
across time and space to whoever invented
grilled cheese sandwiches and tomato soup.

I want to say it to the extra nice dental hygienist who's there
the first time I get my braces, and
to the crossing guard that helps my sister get to school.

I want to yell it
through the window at the McDonald's cashier that gives me
extra buffalo sauce without me asking, and to the
little girl in the Ross dressing room that says my dress looks pretty.

I want to.
But instead, I do like the penguins of Madagascar and wonder
at how often love hides behind things like tight-lipped smiles and waves,
at how many different kinds of love there are and ways to say it, like how
my mother seasons every enchilada with it and
my brother squeezes it into every post-volleyball game hug, and I think that
maybe
even when we're not brave enough to say it,
we still find a way to show it.
And maybe,
even if we can't explain it,
we still try our best to grow it.

pretty in pink

I used to be really fast,
like Speedy Gonzales fast.

The day of my brother's 6th birthday party,
we celebrated at the same park
we always went to,
playing the same game of tag
we always had.

The long skirt and brown chanclas my mom
had forced me to wear weren't exactly
star-athlete gear,
couldn't compare to my wanna-be converse
but
it wasn't anything I couldn't make up for
with my skills.

I was going,
going fast,
doing everything in my power
to avoid getting caught,
even zooming down the ladder
next to the slide
in my less-than-ideal footwear.

It all happened so quickly after that.

My chancla got stuck on
one of the ladder rings.
I was still about seven feet above the
ground, and
before I knew it,

My foot got stuck on
the break.
I was going at a
dangerously high speed, frozen,
as I watched

I was falling
falling
falling.
"I'm going to land on my back,
break my spine, and
end up paralyzed" I thought,
as I kept falling
falling
falling.

And so, right before
I landed,
I had the brilliant idea of
placing my left arm behind my back,
you know,
to soften my fall.

the corner getting closer
closer
closer.
"It's too late to make the turn, I'm going to
end up in the middle of the street
looking like roadkill" I thought,
as it kept getting closer
closer
closer.

And so, right before
I got to the intersection,
I had the brilliant idea of
ramming into the nearest pole instead,
you know,
to evade the busy street.

A 12-year old's logic can be
a deeply flawed thing.

I did, indeed, save myself from
ending up paralyzed.
All it cost me was
a dislocated wrist.

We didn't go to the hospital.
I didn't have health insurance,
so we went to the sobador,
like all our family friends recommended.
He was way less expensive
than a hospital bill would have been.
It turns out,
he was also way less effective.

Two weeks later,
it still hurt to move my wrist,
and it wasn't any less swollen.
We went to four different hospitals before
someone would treat me,
and we had to drive two hours to the nearest
county hospital
only to wait over six hours for someone
to finally do it,
but eventually
I got the bright pink cast I needed.

A 21-year old's logic can be
a deeply flawed thing.

I did, indeed, save myself from
getting run over.
All it cost me was
a giant gash across my hand.

On that day,
I walked down the street
to the closest emergency center,
flashed my Aetna insurance card
- courtesy of Princeton University,
and paid \$5.
The doctor fixed the cut
across my hand with 9 stitches.

2 days later,
I was back on campus,
taking Advil
every 4 hours
from the comfort of my room.
I walked across campus to the
University Health Center,
waited 15 minutes,
and had a doctor remove my stitches.
I was in and out
in 30 minutes.

chasing ghosts

I stared at the flames in the firepit,
feeling as it grew inside me,
this realization that I would spend
maybe my whole life trying to emulate a man I
never really met.

I sat sandwiched between his daughters, listening to
the pride in their voice as they spoke about this stranger, this man
who woke his kids up with
 tickles and kisses on their feet,
who wore his nails down to the nub
 playing his guitar into the early hours of the morning,
 sitting around his own campfire hundreds of miles and
 three decades away,
who sang with such passion his praises became preachings piercing the heart of anybody who
 could hear him,
who drove across borders
 in the middle of the night and the work week
 because he couldn't fathom being away from his wife while she
 recovered from surgery,
who gifted his daughter snickers bars for her birthday because even when
 he couldn't afford to buy anything else,
 he also couldn't afford not to show her how much he loved her.

And I don't understand
how he's the same man from my memories,
this man who I only ever heard utter a handful of words at a time -
who I heard laugh even less.
It feels like I might be in the wrong timeline
except sometimes there were moments
where I caught a glimpse of this stranger,
like when he was forced to spend too many days away from his wife
and so he refused to let go of the bobby pins that she usually kept in her hair
but that he then kept safe in his pocket.

I watched his funeral on facebook live
and though it was better than nothing, it didn't quite feel like closure.

But what is closure anyway?

When the flame of the person you love has been dimming for over a decade?
When you can't remember who they were before the dementia started tearing away at them?
When you feel like you never even got to know them in the first place?
How do you grieve the death of a relationship that was never birthed to begin with?

Grieving then becomes a burial of would-haves.

 I wonder what it would have been like
to hear him tell me stories of my mom bullying her brothers as a child and whether
 he'd done the same,

to sit with him - guitar on my lap - as he taught me how to
make music sound like it was
pouring directly from my heart the way he did,
to understand the kind of passion and faith and boldness that
made him love God with all his heart,
to listen to him reminiscing over the first time he met my nana,
the time he decided he was in love,
the countless times in their more than 50 years of marriage
when he decided
again and again to keep loving her,
to know whether he would be proud of the way his daughter raised me or
the way I'll raise my own.

I stare at the flames in the firepit,
feeling as it grows inside me,
this realization that I will spend
maybe my whole life trying to emulate a man I'll
never meet.