

**2004-2005
CBC Writing Competition**

CBC Student Entry
Category: Fiction
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Living

“Love without return is like a question without an answer.”

--Unknown

“So what are you writing?”

“A story.”

“What about?”

“You know, the normal. Angst, emotion, all the crap that makes an otherwise simple life into something ridiculous and... Like... Melodramatic. But mostly, it’s about this girl I know.”

“Sounds like you’ve thought a lot about it.”

“Yeah.”

“Do I know this girl?”

“Probably.”

“Probably. Nice.”

“Yeah.”

“You’re really bad at all that ‘hiding your feelings’ business, you know. Always have been.”

“Maybe you’re just smarter than you look.”

“Oh, Jack, you always know just what to say.”

“Shut up.”

“So what’s so great about this girl that you think you need to write stories about her?”

I always loved that smile. It was always just wry enough, just understanding enough. It betrayed exactly the right amount of emotion, and at the same time left me guessing as to what was actually going on inside her head. Actually, I hated that smile. It was always just indisputable proof that she knew more than she let on. It was proof that, potentially, everything she said was a lie. It was proof that through the right twist of the lip, the correct turn of a phrase, she could have anything she wanted. She could do anything, twist my emotions into knots, get me to give her anything, give up anything, say, feel, or think anything without me even knowing something was amiss.

That smile could, at any given moment, destroy any sense of safety, any form of emotional detachment I had been able to build up around myself. It melted my walls like they didn’t exist. In the past, every time I had built the walls, I had loved them. Their purpose was to allow me to live my life as I

saw fit. My walls were freedom. As long as they were there, nothing could affect my way of thinking. My logic coolly presided over my actions, and the meddling villain known as emotion was shut out and unwelcome. When she tore them down, each time I so much as thought about her, she replaced my feelings of cool collected-ness with an ache around my chest. It made me weak. It never left. I became unable to discern the difference between sadness and happiness.

I always loved that smile.

“How can you be in love with me, Jack?”

“Did I say that? I don’t recall ever saying that I was in love with anyone. I have a girlfriend, you know, I mean,”

“Yeah right, I know you’ve had the biggest crush on me.”

This had happened about two weeks earlier. I remember having sat in my chair, my head burning. I’m sure my face was completely red. I couldn’t think of any way to reply to that last one. I looked around to my friends, hoping for aid of some sort. Matt was enraptured in the movie playing on my TV, and Nick was far too busy playing who-knows-what on his X-Box to even notice that anything was going on. The room had become ridiculously hot. My head had become light and airy. I couldn’t think of anything at all. This seemed to drag on for hours, when finally, she spoke.

“Are you infatuated with me, Jack?” Her question penetrated my non-existent thoughts in exactly the same way that a diamond-edged razor blade does glass. Her tone was light, whimsical, unconcerned, amused. My life had become complete silence, except for the musical perfection that was her voice, attacking me on my weakest level, completely obliterating my entire reasoning process.

“Yes,” I spoke; one of the two most honest things I can ever remember saying. She laughed. That laugh, breathy, sincere, as if she was genuinely amused and happy about what she heard. Whenever I heard it, I was taken away to a completely different place. I felt nothing but searing heat and numbing cold. Everything I thought I heard ceased to exist, and my mind was a single, solid representation of the laugh that had pushed it into the realm of its temporary stupidity. She had always laughed that way, always coupled it with that smile. I always loved it. She spoke again, and I was forced to think again. It hurt.

“How?”

“What?”

“How could you feel that way?”

“...How am I supposed to know that? Honestly,” I waited for her to change the subject; instead, she issued forth a command.

“Tell me.”

I thought to myself. I thought about all the ways she made me feel, I thought about all the things she made me think. I thought of all those times, all those nights, when I couldn't sleep after talking to her. I thought about all those times when I felt like I ought to be shot for feeling the way I did. I cared, deeply. I considered writing a poem, right there, on the spot, trying to explain the way that everything she did enchanted me. A poem about how every word she said kept me listening, craving more, dreading the moment when she would stop speaking. I thought of a nice line about how she degraded the quality of my life by forcing me to live after interacting with her; how everything else, all other sounds, music, ideas, feelings, etc. were all dulled and muted in comparison.

I thought up an admirable simile comparing the feeling to the ringing in one's ears after something especially loud passes by. All life, after that point, after she left, hung up, stopped talking, everything after that inevitable and predictable “Goodbye, Jack.” was the ringing in the ears after the divine symphony that was her presence. I wasn't exactly sure that mankind had even come up with a form of expression beautiful enough for me to adequately express the reason that I was so “infatuated” with her.

“You're great.” I said into my phone. She laughed again. My thoughts were shattered. The shards were melted down and hastily pounded into a new form, and the new form was presented as a gift back to the destroyer. “I like the way you laugh.” Simple, rudimentary, not as elaborate as it would have been, but that's what happens when you destroy something complex and attempt to make something completely different out of it in a split-second.

“I always thought you were cute.” She said.

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. Although I never really thought of you that way.” I stayed silent. I wasn't surprised, it made perfect sense. “But now that I actually think about it... I don't know. It's weird.”

“Weird?”

“Yeah, weird, Jack, as in ‘not normal.’”

“What do you mean by that?”

“I don't know.” She sighed the last one, as if giving up on a thought path that was leading her somewhere she wasn't sure she wanted to go. There was a moment of silence. I broke it.

“So, you knew? All along?”

“Yeah.”

“And here I thought I was being all covert.” She laughed. I died for a moment, as usual, and was wrenched back to life again, as usual. We talked for a while. My two friends reminded me that they existed, then promptly went to bed. It was close to two o’clock in the morning. For a while, I listened, and lived in an odd world of warmth and interest, hanging on every syllable of every word, formulating miraculous thoughts and opinions about everything that was said. She had received a watered-down version of what I thought. I had come to the conclusion that she was afraid of me. Finally, she said something remarkable.

“What did we do, Jack?” She said it in exactly the same way that a she would have if she and I had just jumped off a bridge into a thick fog. She sounded unsure, unnerved, perhaps regretful. What did we do? What did I do? Everything was fast moving stillness, and calm chaos, like watching a battle rage while encapsulated in a soundproof bubble. I closed my eyes. I felt like I had stopped spinning with the rest of the planet, and was being pulled through walls and buildings as I fought the natural revolution of things. I flew through big cities, across oceans, through jungles, deserts, and mountains. I opened my eyes, and I was back in my hot room with the air unstirred by the noisy fan. I felt the urge to laugh, or cry, or scream; anything associated with a strong emotion.

“I don’t know. It’s weird.” Another silence came and was gone. I began to get the sinking feeling that my life was turning into a bad movie. “I’m so foxx’d.”

“What?”

“I said ‘I’m so foxx’d.’”

“I know, what does that mean?”

“It means I’m foxx’d.”

“What does foxx’d mean?”

“It’s a more polite way of saying fucked.”

“Watch your language.” It was then, exactly then, that pinpoint moment that I realized that things were not the same, nor would they likely ever be again. I realized right then and there that if any of the many sayings and clichés that I’d ever heard about the ridiculous notion known as “love” were true, then I was too far into it’s camp to be able to get back out without a fight.

We talked every day after that. Three days later, we stayed up until dawn talking about this and that, nothing in particular.

“I need to know,” I said. “Where you see this going.”

“I told you already, Jack. I thought about it, and I think it could work. But it’s still too... Weird at this point.”

“I just don’t like to leave loose ends. I’m waiting for you. You already know what I think, how I feel. It’s all you. The ball is in your court now.”

“You’re just gonna have to learn to be patient, Jack. It’s better to take these sorts of things slow.”

“Yeah,” Is what I said, “No,” is what I meant.

“Good night, Jack.”

“Good night.” She hung up the phone. I laid in my bed, staring at my ceiling, now visible due to the new light of the early morning.

A week later, I stepped off a train in East Antigone, to see Mary for the first time since we talked. It was eleven o’clock at night. She had just gotten off her shift at Ultra-Mart, and had come to pick me up. It was raining. I’m not sure just exactly how it works, but rain has always had a special sort of meaning for me. It always both exaggerated and simultaneously muted anything that I was feeling.

“Rain means change.” Or so someone had once told me. At that point, rain was change. We greeted each other and began to drive. Her music was up way too loud. My ears hurt. It was raining, but the windows were down anyway. As we came over the crest of the hill overlooking the city on our way back to her apartment, I had no choice but to stop and think. It’s moments like this that make a person who they are. It’s moments like this that let a person know they’re alive.

The music was so loud, so penetrating, that I was unable to tell my heart beat from the song’s beat. I looked over at Mary, the most beautiful thing I had ever seen, and I smiled. I put my head back against the chair, and lived. What seemed like only a moment passed, and we had arrived at her apartment.

That night we talked until three, and I ended up lying awake on her sofa. After she had gone to bed, the only thing I could think was “The woman I love is less than fifty feet away, in the next room, and yet she may as well be on the moon.” It was a long night.

I left East Antigone with a hug from Mary and an ache in my chest. I arrived home and waited for a day, then she called. We talked about this and that, and I listened, intently. Finally, I asked something remarkable.

“So have you been thinking?”

“Always.”

“And?”

“Why do you care so much?” she laughed.

“I just need to know if I need to start getting over you or not.”

“Well... I’ve been thinking a lot about it, as usual,” She paused for a moment as if carefully considering her next words. “and I just think that the timing is off.” I felt lightheaded. Lightheaded in exactly the same way that a person who just got wanged upside the head with a baseball bat feels lightheaded.

“What?”

“Jack, if anything were to happen between us, I think it would need to be in a year or two. At the end of this year, I’m going to be moving away.” My chest involuntarily clenched.

“To where?”

“Traveling.”

“For how long?”

“I doubt I’d ever see you again.” It felt as if someone had unceremoniously shoved a cold metal sphere into the area between my chest and stomach.

“I see.”

“I’m sorry, Jack. I feel horrible.”

“Why? For what? This is all my deal, this was all my doing.”

“Are you mad at me?”

“No. Why would I be? I’m just a dumb boy with a stupid infatuation. It’s not your fault if you don’t feel anything. It’s just...”

“What?”

“Nothing.”

“Tell me.”

“Well, at this point, the cowardly part of my brain is telling me try to convince you that love is learned, and that you never really gave it a chance.” I sat in silence for a moment. “Well, I’ll tell you what I’m going to do. I’m going to hang up this phone, walk out to the kitchen, get a glass of water, then come back in here, cry for a bit, wake up in the morning and get on with my life.”

“I don’t want you to cry, Jack.”

“Sorry.”

“Jack, wait. Before you go... I want to ask, before it’s... Too late.” I waited for the question. “What made you love me?” I sat there for a moment, ironic tears etching wet trails into the sides of my face like acid.

“Your smile.” I smiled grimly.

“I thought you said you were going to wait until you hung up to cry.”

“Yeah.”

“Should I let you go Jack?”

“Mary...” I sounded far more desperate than I wanted to. “I really don’t want you to,” This was the second of the two most honest things I ever remember saying. “but I know you have to.”

“I really want you to have a good night, Jack.” I almost laughed.

“I’m sorry, but I really wouldn’t count on that.”

“You’re really, really awesome, Jack. I mean that.” She never once showed evidence of tears, or upset. It was unnerving.

“I really, really love you, Mary. I mean that. And I will keep loving you until I don’t.”

“I’m sorry, Jack.”

“Don’t be. This is living, Mary. This is living.”