

# The Toothpaste Incident

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On a nondescript autumn morning in my sixteenth year of life, I licked the soft pad of my thumb and through a haze of lingering sleepiness, reached up to the mouth of the new boy in drama class and wiped free toothpaste remnants that without his knowledge clung to the hinge of his smile. To this day, I can't muster any reasonable explanation for what caused me to commit this random act of intrusiveness. I do remember however, precisely how we drew apart from each other wearing identical expressions of alarm. The simultaneous startle wasn't because of the spit I smeared across his unexpecting mouth; instead it was the lightning bolt of familiarity we shared. I was destined to bathe his mouth in my saliva; we had been anticipating each other's arrival our whole lives.

When I close my eyes and succeed in quieting my interjecting mind, that blank canvas of a memory is sought out and I reconfigure him; paint him again, every finite detail of the seconds immediately following the toothpaste incident. If told I could retain only one memory of him for all of eternity, it would be just that one. The expression he wore, the light in his eyes, that split second of purity, the one right before we fell in love and replaced our youthful innocence with experience.

In our time, we frequented Harvard Square, together chatting up every invisible homeless person who littered the pristine streets of Cambridge. To him, these forgotten anonymous weren't eyesores, but rather grand story tellers eager to share their epic tales. As I witnessed this mere boy encompass the gravity of love with his enraptured attention to these folks, I learned the life lesson ultimately responsible for my carefully constructed conduct as a human being. He taught me that everyone deserves to feel like someone. The unfathomable warmth that emanated from him was palpable; he literally glowed with genuineness from his insides out, bathing everyone in his beautiful radiance. Until him and since him, I have never seen a light quite so luminous.

He was my first for everything; my first true best friend, first love, first lover, and with the end of his life, my first experience with death. As a grown woman, I now understand his pervasive impact on me to be like a stone skipped hard into a quiet still pond. He landed heavy in my heart creating enough of a splash to ripple endlessly, sustaining me through the span of a lifetime.

The love that we shared twenty-four years ago is a blink of an eye when put in

context to the years following. I have grown from girl to woman, a lost woman to one found. I have married and given birth to four children, and yet, that brief love affair has had a lasting impact on me far surpassing the other relationships I've had, even those of colossal caliber.

In the dusk of a beautiful May evening of my eighteenth spring, he was killed in a car accident, drowned by the waters of our beloved Charles River. The shock reverberated with hollowness leaving a life of substance to feel a then forever foreign concept. It took me a long time to see kindness in any form in a world lacking his presence, especially my own. Thankfully, the auto pilot gear I was stuck in finally shifted to neutrality; with a deep breath I paced myself through stages of grief. I wrote unrelentingly in journals numbers enough to fill the shelves of a library. Occasionally, when a butterfly would tease me with a flirtatious game of hide and seek, I imagined it was him, and laughed freely, hoping the breeze would carry my love for him wherever it was he flew away to.

I lived linked to him this way for years. Then, one day while brushing my teeth, I stopped; mouth full of minty foam; overcome with his disapproval of my anguished spirit. In my ears his voice, everyone deserves to feel like someone including you my love, so get to work. Every day since, while inspecting the corners of my mouth for lingering Aquafresh, I see his face that very first morning, morphed with my own present reflection, we are smiling reciprocally. In the glass, in our smiles, I discover he not only he lives on in every kind act I commit, but that we are eternally bonded by our mutual appreciation he passed no mirrors himself that day.