

## A Time to Love

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**A**t the onset of a romantic life, a couple usually experiences a strange kind of dumb animal love. A sort of love that lives and breathes with them and there is no running away from it. For many, such love, as is felt by the turtle doves in the initial stages of romance, more often than not leads straight to the altar – and that is just the beginning of a fairy tale with highly complicated plots and subplots to be presented to the protagonists in the later years of the married life.

In a majestic outburst of jubilation and in the presence of hundreds, the bride and the groom share their 'I do's, hoping that the walk down the road to happily ever after would be a cakewalk. Immediately after the wedding, the couples love is usually fuelled by a shared sense of insecurity and hopelessness. Still caught in the wedding tizzy, they are apt to experience a medley of confused wishes, desires and future aspirations that bring home the idea that life without the spouse is implausible, if not impossible altogether. Such emotions deepen the already deep bond of love and bind the two protagonists by a knot of a satin ribbon that might in the commoner's eye seem to last forever.

But 'forever' is a dangerous word when love is concerned, for when romance becomes routine and habits occupy the somewhat drained compartments of affection, animal love corrodes and is replaced by prudence in general. Under such circumstances, a couple is prescribed to spend a good amount of their day recalling the happy memories of the past, and thereby, constantly remind themselves that they are still in love. In course of the connubial life, there often comes a period of considerable misery and mental pain, a condition termed by shrinks and marriage experts as the 'seven-year itch' – in reference to the extemporaneous appearance of the symptoms of this malady around the seventh year of marriage. Couples that survive this mysterious disease usually finish writing the epilogue of their romance in fine hands. And those who fail to adroitly handle the situation and end up exhuming skeletons of the past are torn asunder.

And if a bond of love is broken at a mature stage of life, it is broken for good. Couples separated by this malady are extremely vulnerable. Once split, they either try their best to find a new partner or accept solitude, frozen food and maudlin soap operas. Those who try to interest themselves in new romance habitually find themselves attracted to people who are either very much like their ex-partner or a totally different from them. These people, mind you, are a very sensitive bunch and are forever debating in their minds whether diving into a new romance is feasible at all, since such an action is always accompanied by the caveat of a fresh heartbreak. But then risks are meant to be taken and no two people are alike. And there, my friend, lies the dichotomy of the situation. When the confused bunch of newly split couples is presented in solid terms the prospect of a new matrimony, they, in a great number of cases, start flashing in their mind's eyes experiences of their past relationship; and when I say experiences, I mean the bitter ones, of course, for human mind tends to brood more over distress rather than happiness. So, when they start refreshing their old memories they end up digging out the inequities that led to the severance of their old relations. A moment of

truth dawns on them, and they cringe away from new romance leaving their prospective partners clueless and distraught.

In Mark Edwards' case, however, the heartbreak and separation was not the result of the seven-year itch; it was a fatal car crash that tore him and Lisa, his wife, apart. He was not with her the time the ominous incident occurred; he was at home sitting in his plushy armchair brooding over the things Lisa had said to him during the course of an altercation they had in the morning. She was angrier than usual having found Mark talking to his ex-fiancée, Isabelle. There was an unusual vigor in her words that day and Mark found himself reduced to ashes when he was accused of being a spineless and characterless bloke among other things. Lisa had a peculiar character: happy and gay at one moment and throbbing with anger very next. She was a strange and vague girl; she seldom could make her own decisions, leave alone be independent, but she was high-strung emotionally. When Mark, in the heat of the moment, accused her of being a perennially spoiled girl and suggested that she visited a shrink, she just flew out off the handle. A distressing situation arose and a number of china was smashed. Mark's Blackberry was trampled upon and destroyed. All for the simple reason that Isabelle needed a word of advice regarding the setting up of an online craft shop at a website. She refused to listen to Mark and left the house, shouting with rage.

Mark stayed home that day. In no mood to face his colleagues at the school all beaming with *joie de vivre*, he took the day off to regard the aspects of his difficult marriage. The whole day he sat in his arm chair, his mind nonplussed, his excited nerves throbbing; his head in his palms and lips quivering with emotion as he recalled the morning incident and the thousand other fights he had with his wife. There was not even a speck of love in their relation; love had been reduced to routine and romance had bidden adieu long ago. What was left in their relation was a trash box full of unfulfilled expectations. Lisa always hated Isabelle, called her "she" and never addressed her otherwise. It was curious since it was Lisa and not Isabelle who was the other woman in Mark's life; the reason Mark's engagement with Isabelle broke in the first place. But Lisa had always been jealous of Isabelle and called her "a bitch". Often she woke up in the middle of the night to ask Mark the same old question, "Honey, is she better than me?"

Lisa usually returned home from her boutique around six in the evening. So, when the ticking clock – beating like a shocked, weary heart – announced the approach of the deadly hour, Mark began praying for help. He knew the fight hadn't abated, but he lacked the energy to continue. Lisa never came home. Not in the evening, not ever.

The call from the police station came early the next morning. The telephone began ringing with a horrendous note, waking Mark. The metallic ectophony of the telecommunication device was an augury of evil. Mark knew instantly something was wrong; in a matter of moments he would come to know what it was. He picked up the telephone.

The next so many hours passed like a whirlwind, such that Mark could never recall their passage later. A series of fast paced events went by, like the changing scenes of an action thriller: a group of uniformed policemen, a couple of bloody bodies, two cars, a head-

on collision, talk about drunk driving, the blinking red and blue lights of the cop cars, the sounds of the ambulances, a sea of confusion. Mark's doppelganger took over his earthly role carrying out his duties without any sentience. He didn't cry at the funeral. He was in a state of shock; numbed by an unforeseen disaster. He didn't even know if he should blame himself in any way for the mishap. Conscience, when available, told him he should, but logic spoke otherwise. For days he fought with the two antithetical feelings and took to heavy drinking to assuage the mental discomfort.

In the months immediately following the accident he felt a strange discomfort in his chest. A longing to hear the same old voice of his wife; the kitchen noises; the wish to see the new clippings from the 'Better Homes and Gardens' magazine which hung in the study from a number of clothespins glued to brightly colored scrap wooden boards. He wondered sitting in his lonely home in the late evenings what he would say if he saw Lisa once again. He endured endless hours of self-pity, dejection and a series of other confused emotions. A feeling of lethargy overtook him and life in general took on the appearance of one long inebriated journey.

On certain bright mornings when he woke up with morbid headaches, he often questioned himself what he was doing with his life. He tried to make himself understand that life with or without Lisa must continue in its regular course, and it was high-time he accepted that fact and gave life a new chance. He made routines and to-do lists; tried going out with friends and colleagues and even went on a couple of dates to put his life back on track. He was unsuccessful in all cases. After a few outings, the vapid conversations with friends seemed unbearable and the prospect of seeing a new person next to him in bed appeared loathsome. He drew himself in his shell and started drinking once again. He didn't know why he drank, he just did. The wriggling nameless pain that nudged him was forever impatient.

Mark knew it was not love that caused this pain since he and Lisa were already drifting apart when the accident took place and might have had a separation soon, had she not died. So, it was not love but solitude in general that cowed him. The idea of finding the empty house sitting all by itself in an empty plot of land at the end of a given day sent shivers down his spine. The uninhabited corners of the dwelling bearing vestiges of a dead relationship, the pictures hanging in the hallway, and the overall creepiness of the house made it unbearable. One night the pain was worse than usual. He had spent the whole evening drinking from a bottle of Mexican tequila and was filled with self-loathing. He blamed himself gratuitously for Lisa's death and inculpated himself for several other disgraceful incidents that had happened in his life. He even tried calling Isabelle, but she wouldn't talk to him and put down the receiver without one word. She was evidently scared after she heard about Lisa's death and feared the police might blame her for the death in some way. The investigation was long over, still she wouldn't talk to Mark anymore. In desperation, around midnight, he put on his running shoes and walked out of the house. The night was cool and pleasant and the crickets were busy with their drones. Mark took a couple of deep breaths and began walking down the sidewalk. The houses on either side were dark and sleepy; those which had the windows opened allowed a ray or two of faint light to escape through the sides of the drawn drapes. The street lamps, which stood like lonely lighthouses at regular intervals, illuminated the

neighborhood with their yellowish glow. It was a pleasant, dreamy and peaceful night. Mark walked in slow steps, the intoxicated feeling started to abate in the cool air and he felt refreshed. The tumultuous thoughts that wrought him also started to disperse, and after he had walked a mile or two, he felt positively rejuvenated. He did some soul searching and for the first time in the eleven months that passed since his wife had died, he felt peace. He made himself promises, he counted the positive aspects of his character and intended to nurture them; he decided to finish the memoir he had started writing some time back. By the time Mark reached home, the soft light of the morning sun had already started to set the world aglow. He eyed the morning sun and went inside. The next day he forced himself out in the evening, and in a week brisk walking after a day at school became an indelible part of his routine. In a month he felt better, almost like those cancer patients who are awarded a new life when there was no hope for survival. Mark lost a great deal of old weight and felt refreshed and invigorated. He gave up frozen meals and began to cook.

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He saw her at the Annual Artisans' Festival that was being held at the Richmond Park. It was a very hot summer afternoon. Mark was out on his daily run and after jogging up a few blocks he found himself in front of the park entrance. The park was dotted with several white tents and temporary stalls, food-carts, face painting tents, children's activity corners. A live musical performance by some girl with a heavy country voice was underway and most of the crowd had gathered around her. There were only a handful of people and a few dogs that were roaming about checking out the stalls. The stalls displayed a range of crafts from traditional paintings to handmade jewelry, furniture and woodwork. Mark walked in and began to look around. He stood outside a unique shop that sold goods made from recycled stuff and was appreciating a wind chime made of Coke bottle caps when he heard her laugh. It was a mouthful of laughter, a fresh and melodious little gag. Mark turned round and saw her. She was having a nice conversation with the store owner of Artisan Clocks – a stall that displayed brightly colored hand painted wooden clocks with little wooden pendulums. She stood with her back to him, her yellow curly hair tied in a loose ponytail. Mark walked in the direction of the store; his mind blank, his heart ready for some unknown excitement.

There were a number of other people in the store, all casually checking out the goods, but he wasn't interested in the goods, he wanted to have a look at her.

"It was great meeting you, dear. Do visit us next year," said the store lady to the girl, cordially, handing her a package and a couple of dollar bills.

"Sure!" she replied, the same melodious voice like drops of honey, smooth and delicious. Then she turned around and faced Mark. She was a young woman, probably in her mid-twenties, well-built, and had a round, friendly face and a couple of deep brown eyes decorated with heavy eyelashes. She was wearing a maroon t-shirt that said 'Department of Social Sciences University of Southern Illinois' in bold white letters. A little blue from the cotton candy she had just consumed smeared across her upper lip area like a delicate beauty mark. Mark was smitten.

“Excuse me,” she said, looking confused. Mark woke up from his reverie and realized he was blocking her way. She smiled at him.

“I am so sorry,” he said, apologetically. A rush of blood warmed his face.

“It’s okay,” she said and walked out.

“How may I help you, sir?” the store lady asked Mark.

“Oh! Nothing! Just browsing,” he replied with a confused smile and walked out to pursue the girl.

Mark followed her around. She stopped and checked the items of several over-expensive pottery stores. Mark looked at her. She was an ordinary girl, a little on the plump side. There were marked deposits of adipose tissue around her waist. She had freckles too. But there was a strange kind of magnetic attraction in her that pulled Mark; he could not say if it was the floral scent she was wearing, the blue cotton candy mark or her laughter, but he felt like drowning into a forbidden pool. Standing in the middle of the park on the hot summer afternoon, Mark Edwards felt love-struck.

He never hoped it would happen to him. He knew not how it happened, it just did. A rush of blood pumped through his heart and it began to beat with a curious lub-dub noise as he approached near her. She did not notice him, however. She walked around some more checking out the other stores and then walked in the direction of the parking lot, the package hanging from her fist. Mark walked behind her, consciously maintaining a distance lest she should think he was a stalker or something. She approached a red Buick and headed out of the park.

It was more than a week before he saw her again; Mark had the ingenious idea of doing his daily runs in the university campus. It occurred to him one evening, two days before his actual experimentation of the idea, to search the university website and find out more about her. For a pretty long while he had been fighting roughly with his mind, asking it to calm down, do some work and forget the cotton candy mark. But love is such a strange emotion, an untamed, a deaf-mute kind of a feeling, always yearning for something that it knows in its heart is impossible to gain. In his midmorning reveries he admired her gentleness, her musical voice and wished he knew a way to get in touch with her again. She was a mystery to him, an imperfect Southern mystery – a woman who in many ways was so different, yet so delicate and perfect for him.

He called himself stupid and was filled with abashment for his teenaged stance at a mature age of 37. The emotion did not suit him; what did he know of love? A mundane computer science teacher at The Goreville Community High School, what could he possibly know about a deep and poetical, polished and revered emotional we fondly call ‘love’? Thinking about it he got the jitters; he had never felt like this before, not about Lisa, not about Isabelle, not about any woman for that matter. It was strange, it was new, and it was love. At least Mark thought so, for the more he tried to launder the dirty linens of his soul, the more violent the emotions became. His mind wouldn’t simply listen to him and would spend the twenty four hours of a day, if given a chance, on vague thoughts about her. Mark knew it was time for action.

The university website provided a grand list of students and grad students, assistant professors and associate professors who belonged to the Social Science Department, but they had no pictures posted in the site. Mark had no way to find out if she was a grad student or a master's student. She certainly could not be a professor; she was too young for that. The website, however, presented a well marked map of the campus which showed the campus lake only yards away from the Social Sciences building and boasted of a well maintained walking and biking trail of a mile and a half around the lake. The precise information proved useful since Mark had his brainwave in no time. He smiled, sideways, a sort of mischievous smile unbecoming of a mature man; yet, what the heck? Love is love.

It took him approximately one hour fifteen minutes to leave his home, walk three miles to the university campus, ask random people and find the Department of Social Science. Eventually, he found himself standing in front of brick building of moderate dimensions neighbored by tall trees with nameplates on them. Mark walked around the building. The parking lot at the back of the building had a number of cars. He spotted a red Buick. 'Genius!' he wanted to shout, but somehow controlled himself. It was now a matter of mere moments before he knew he would see her. He had no idea what he should do once he saw her; go and ask her for a date or continue ogling. What if she did not show up? Mark, sadly, had no back-up plan. He felt optimistic; he trusted he wouldn't need a plan B.

He was tired after the four something miles walk and sat down at a bench under a tree facing the building. It was six in the evening and he had waited for almost half an hour, yet there was no sign of her. His mind was wild with excitement. The blood inside his body rushed with Bacchanalian ecstasy; the dancing, prancing, confused feelings pestered him; they wanted to know how long? Mark did not know what to say. He got up and began to pace up the graveled road that led to the campus lake. Hardly had he taken a step or two when he heard a laughter, the musical voice said, "See you tomorrow, Nancy." Mark sprung around as if stung by a beetle. She was there, right in front of him, the hair flowing in the wind, the face glistening in the sun, the eyes sparkling with unknown mysteries. Mark noticed it all. She seemed unreal, a mirage of some sort, a passing fancy that never stands stable. In a moment she was gone; the red Buick backed up and then headed out. The plan had worked. Mark smiled and paced up toward the campus lake for a little breather.

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"Can I offer you a ride?"

Mark looked up and saw her peering out of a passenger seat window of a red Buick with an anxious eye. Mark nodded.

"Come on in," she said, opening the door for him and clearing away a couple of magazines and soda bottles that occupied the passenger seat.

Mark seated himself and sighed. He was exhausted, his legs hurt, he was hyperventilating, and his throat was dry.

“Are you all right?” she asked with concern. “Here, drink some water.” Mark took the pink water bottle she handed and drank from it. Instantly he felt better. The water was sweet and tasty, a touch of cold. He closed his eyes.

She started the car and looked at him. “Feeling better?”

“Yes, thank you,” Mark replied.

“You come here often?” she asked.

“Oh yes; everyday for almost a week now. You see, I am preparing for the marathon and have been doing daily four to five miles of brisk walking and occasional running.”

“Really? Wow, that’s great,” she said with a smile. “So where do you want me to drop you?”

“I live on Elmer Street; you can drop me at the intersection and I will walk the few yards,” said Mark. He tried to drink her features in surreptitiously. He was meeting her after four long days and he wished he could show her how grateful he felt to her for showing up like a good angel in a moment when he felt he wouldn’t see her anymore. People are right when they say wishes do come true.

“Elmer Street is on my way; I can drop you at your place. You shouldn’t walk now, you know.”

“I guess I overdid it,” Mark said apologetically.

“I am afraid so,” she said, smiling.

“I am Mark Edwards, by the way,” Mark said, extending his hand. Awfully stupid, he thought later, since she was driving.

“I am Hillary. Hillary Perfloff.” She touched his extended palm with the fingers of her right hand.

“I am a graduate student at the university's Social Science Department,” She said. Of course that was not new information. Mark knew all about the Social Science Department and her. He was somewhat hurt by the fact that she had not noticed him ever pacing up and down the graveled road right outside the department.

“So, what do you do, Mark?” she asked casually.

“Oh... I... I am a computer science teacher at The Goreville Community High School,” he replied clearing his throat.

“You lived here long?” she asked.

“Yes, all my life. My parents lived and died here so I never left the place. What about you? Where are you from?”

“I am from Tennessee. Nashville, Tennessee. My family lives there. I have been going to school here for the past five years.”

“Cool,” Mark replied.

“Actually, I am finished with my graduate work. I will be getting my degree this fall,” she said brightening up.

“Wonderful,” Mark replied with less enthusiasm than he had actually wanted to put in those words. She would be leaving the place soon; that wasn’t good news.

“Will you be staying here or shifting?” he asked with considerable curiosity.

“Oh... I am of going to Bangladesh for a year with couple of others in my department,” she replied turning the car right into Elmer Street and slowing down. “Which way now?” she asked.

“The yellow house on the left,” Mark said. “It is a few yards, I can manage, don’t worry.”

“Are you sure?” she asked anxiously.

“Oh... yes,” Mark smiled and she unlocked the car door.

“It was nice meeting you, Hillary,” Mark said into the open window.

“It was great meeting you too, Mark. You take care, huh.”

“Yeah, I will.”

“Bye then,” she said turning on the engine.

Mark realized something. “Listen, Hillary,” he shouted.

“Yes?” she said peering out of the window.

“I know we’ve just met, but would you care to join me this Friday evening for a movie and a dinner?”

“Is it a date? If it is then I am not interested.” She said point-blank.

“No, no... No date. Just a friendly treat to say ‘thank you.’”

“You don’t have to, you know,” she said.

“I really want to, please.”

“Okay then, if it is not a date then I am in,” she smiled. “You can pick me up at the school around say 7:30.”

“I don’t drive,” Mark replied contritely.

“Okay, then maybe I can pick you up around, say...” she thought for a moment, “eight-ish, would that be good?”

“That would be wonderful,” Mark said and pointed to his house. “That is my house over there.”

She looked at the house for a moment and said, “Okay then... See you on Friday. Bye!”

“Bye.”

They had gone out at least five times, and although Hillary always insisted that the outings were just ‘friendly dinners’ and nothing else, Mark knew they meant more. He had come to know her really well. He discovered her liking for chocolate, for every time they went for a bite she always ordered chocolate milkshakes; discovered she hated chick-flicks and girly stuff even though she herself indulged in several of them like carrying a pink pen and at least five different flavored lip glosses in her bag and watching romantic comedies on Netflix when she couldn’t sleep at night. She loved to talk about politics and social issues, hunger and poverty and how she wanted to help but lacked the machinery needed to bring about a change. She was a dreamer and a strong optimist; she believed that someday she might do something groundbreaking. In fact, Mark felt, that she forced a fresh dose of raw energy into her bloodstream every day; she was so lively. Mark doubted if she ever encountered real pain in life.

Their conversations at the dinner table in a restaurant would mostly consist of useless topics, such as the movie they had just seen and how the actress looked dumb and whorish in her black dress carrying a fake gun or how the dialogues in the movie were ‘too mushy and unreal’. Mark wondered if she could handle reality at all. He told her about his wife.

In general, both Mark and Hillary ignored personal topics. All he knew about her personal life was that she stayed with a couple of roommates, all ladies, of course, in a university apartment and her family stayed in Nashville, Tennessee. She never talked about the members of her family, who they were or what they did. She never mentioned if she had a boyfriend or a fiancé somewhere. Mark couldn’t ask her, he was too modest to do so, but there seemed to be no other way. Here he was spending all his energy and efforts trying to woo this woman without having a slightest idea what she was up to romantically. He thought the talk about Lisa might open her up.

But it did not. She listened to him, all serious; the vivaciousness of her face gave way to an expression of deep pathos mixed with confusion. She appeared genuinely moved. She cupped his hand and pressed it, saying, “I am sorry, I really am,” with misty eyes and then got up to leave. “I need to go back home.”

Mark felt embarrassed to have brought up such a somber topic on a casual dining out.

“I am sorry if I have hurt you in any way,” he said and he meant it.

“It’s nothing,” she said, clearing her throat and trying her best to look normal when she was positively aggrieved. Mark was perturbed. He had been quite careful during the course of the conversation and had only given her bare facts like the date and place of the accident, and no hurtful details. What exactly upset her, there was no way to find out until she was ready to share it with him.

Mark asked her if she would like to go for a stroll in the park. “You might feel better in the fresh air,” he said.

“Okay, let’s go from here. The people are staring at me.” Mark looked around and there was nobody around.

They sat on a bench gazing off across the stream to the mounds opposite. The evening breeze was tender and calm, the gnats and insects carried out a curious orchestra of droning and buzzing noises. The stream was relaxed and at ease, a number of ducks paddled upstream. It was a time between the end of dusk and the inception of night; Mark's watch said 8:00 PM. A bulbous white moon stared at them from a purple sky. A number of casual walkers, bikers, roller-skaters and children still peopled the park. People laughed and giggled, talked in low voices and played Frisbee and ball. Hillary stared at the little mounds and eventually spoke in a hollow voice. Mark listened.

“I had a boyfriend, Andrew was his name. Andrew Ingram. He was from Dexter, Missouri. He was a grad student too; we were the same age. He was very enthusiastic and we had a lot in common. We shared ideas and thoughts, we debated. We were serious about our relation. We had been together for two years and he was returning from a weekend trip home. He called me from his place and said that his parents wanted to meet me. He was excited and said he had lots of things to tell me. I was visiting a friend at the time in Anna,

and we decided to meet on Tuesday morning at school. I was happy too. I loved him very much.”

Hillary stopped for a breather. She choked. A couple of drops of tears fell from her brown eyes and streamed down her face onto her lap. She began again. “He drove a 1994 Ford Aspire; it was an old car and was out of shape. He was traveling westbound on Highway 60 when another car, a speeding Pontiac driving eastbound crossed the centerline and hit his car. A head-on collision. He died on the spot. He was a bloody lump. The woman who hit his car died too. She was a young woman.”

“She was Lisa.” Mark nodded with a deep understanding.

Hillary sighed and wiped her face with her left hand. Mark looked away. A train of images halted before his eyes and in the softly rolling water of the stream he saw pictures: images of Lisa, her face, the fights, her fits of anger; her two depressing eyes staring at him with a questioning look and her mouth lipping the same old question, "Honey, is *she* better than me?"