SEVEN HOUR LOVE

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I fell in love for the first time two summers ago. It was probably sometime in July, but seeing how all of the long and hot summer days tend to mold into one, I couldn’t be sure. I don’t remember how warm or cold it was. In fact, I couldn’t remember many things at all. I was lost. Lost in the girl who sat next to me in seat 27B.

I was sitting in 27C, which was the window seat. I always hated the window seat. It was often too small, the walls would make my headphones vibrate when I leaned my head on them, and the small fear of something cracking and sending me out the window at forty thousand feet was always present. But not today. Today, that wall was my friend, a friend and a wingman, no pun intended.

If this were a normal flight, I probably would have spent the entirety of the airtime with my neck bent over, leaning on the dining board or leaning on the person next to me. But no, this wasn’t a normal flight. I was awake, I was involved, and I was in love.

Thankfully, the flight was early in the morning, so no sleep was necessary. It was a flight from Bordeaux back to New York. Luckily, Air France tends to underbook their flights due to pricing, especially during the summer, so seat 27A was up for grabs. Usually, I wouldn’t resist hopping at the opportunity to get as many open seats as possible. However, I knew my hooligan ways weren’t going to fly today. I had this girl next to me who had me wrapped around her finger, and she was oblivious to it. She was my puppeteer, and I was the loose toy begging for mercy, yet simultaneously falling deeper in love with every string she pulled.

I swear, I don’t think I’ve sat up straighter in my life. I tried to construct a plan of how to get the empty seat in my possession: Should I ask her to slide over? That would be rude, and she might think I wanted her to sit further away. Maybe ask if she wanted the window seat? No, that wouldn’t work, seeing as my profusely sweaty body had already managed to drench the entirety of 27C.

I was so lost in thought that I failed to notice that the girl had already moved over. I stared at her, motionless for what seemed like forever. She caught me, but instead of awkwardly redirecting my observance of her, she just stared back, and soon enough, we were both grinning.

She moved over for the extra spot…. Shit, I could marry this girl right now.

As the plane crept out the gate and approached the runway, I was desperately looking for an icebreaker that would initiate a conversation with this girl. The shaking of the cabin was sort of helpful, slapping me back and forth into reality. Finally, after twenty-some minutes of spastic speculation, I cultivated the greatest icebreaker of the modern teenage Casanova:

“Gum?”

After milliseconds of hesitation which felt like minutes, she reached out to grasp the piece of gum. “Oh—thank you!”

The anxiety that had filled my chest finally stabilized. I was in, or so I thought. Yet as moments passed and her attention shifted back to the small screen in front of her, all hope seemed to be tossed out the window at the altitude of thirty-something thousand feet, like a DM that was responded to but in such a way that clearly said “thanks, but no thanks.” Just like that, the moment of reminiscence about our future lives, filled with our kids and country house weekends, was gone.
Cruising altitude.

“You know, I was looking for uh...gum at the airport, but I couldn’t find it?” She finally pushed the much-needed words back to me. Naturally, I reacted and tried to force the conversation further.

“Really? That sucks! Maybe the airport didn’t have it. I was in Hawaii this summer and on my way back, I was looking for gum too, and one of the women who worked at a store said that the whole airport banned selling gum. Isn’t that crazy?”

“Whoa, no gum at all? That’s really uh. Strange. How was Hawaii?”

Through this halting conversation, I learned more about her. She was French on her father’s side, but her mother was from Manchester, and she lived with her most of the time. So, she spoke English with an accent, and French, the sexiest language in the fucking world. She had this habit where, for a moment, she wouldn’t know a certain word in English, so she would replace it with a French word until she remembered it. Seeing her struggle was both cute and amusing. It got to the point where I would completely understand what she meant to say, but I would rather let her figure it out on her own. Sometimes I would even start chuckling a little, which she would roll her eyes at, nudging me.

That nudge was what got me. It was the only time I fell out of focus, and that’s because I was overcome by those same visions of our future intertwined lives. We would talk about other planets that we managed to remember from failed elementary school days, life after death, our ambitions, and our biggest fears, some which we’ve both experienced already, like why her last boyfriend beat her.

I come back down to Earth.

“I didn’t know why he would hit me,” she said. Hearing that infuriated me. No one should ever have to be in a position to figure out why someone you love would beat you. I was disappointed that someone in this world had the audacity to place his hands on this girl in any other way than lovingly.

I’ve only known this girl for a couple of hours now, and she’s already trusted me enough to tell me about something so personal.

“He didn’t deserve you; he never did.”

“I know that...now. Just a little too late, you know?”

“Sometimes, we don’t know why things happen the way they do, or why they take the time they take.” I tried to comfort her. Nevertheless, an unnatural silence now filled row 27. Neither of us knew what to say after that. Instead, I placed my hand on her shoulder, courteously patting with four fingers. I didn’t know if that was the right thing to do, but it felt right.

She raised the armrest and slid next to me, lifting my arm around her as she fell onto my chest and back into seat 27B.

“At our age, everything feels like the end of the world,” I added after a while. She stayed silent for a bit before she deflating her chest, falling further into the crest between my underarm and rib cage.

“I feel safe,” she said. “For the first time in a long time, I feel safe.”

And for the first time ever, I felt real love.

After fifteen minutes, she sat up. Neither of us could sleep; she was surely rested from the previous night, and I was overcome by hundreds of new emotions that would never let me close my eyes. That’s the way she made
me feel—as if I would never sleep again.

Eventually, the beverage cart reached our row. The stewardess reached down and locked the cart.

“What would you like to drink?” she asked me, the furthest seat first.

“Just a water please,” I replied.

“I’ll have a Cabernet Sauvignon.”

For a minute, I was confused. As she reached out to the stewardess, handing over a beat up red passport, I couldn’t fathom the idea that this girl was over twenty-one. Yet, the little red booklet was handed back to her without fuss, and the wine was placed on her table. I noticed her giggling, looking straight forward as she took a sip of her red wine.

“Works every time.” She handed me the passport as an explanation, which was open to the main page. The photo loosely looked like her but was clearly someone else. “It’s my sister’s. She lets me use it when I fly and she doesn’t.”

She was as slick as she was witty, and the fact that she was bold enough to order a drink on a flight was beyond me. I low-fived her as we giggled. She handed me the plastic cup for a sip.

As the hours flew by, so did our conversation. I learned that she wasn’t stopping in New York; she was going to California to visit her grandparents in Vichy Springs, near Napa Valley. We talked about the stars and our favorite fruits. She told me she would leave this planet if she could, alone forever, heading into the stars. She called it her “voyage de rêve.” It meant her dream trip. We talked Sartre, Nietzsche, Hemingway, and Camus, both agreeing that “The Myth of Sisyphus” is one of the most important writings of life itself.

Soon enough, she asked me about my life. She asked me about deeper things, things that I struggled with, about love, and everything in between. So, I told her everything—about the lack of love in my life, and how it’s something that I haven’t yet experienced. I told her what it’s like to be alone and how beautiful it can be, yet how solitude is also a cancer, slowly filling your body with self-neglect.

Time flew and before we knew it, the pilot announced our descent into JFK airport, and everyone began to stir, adjusting their seats and bags. We didn’t. We managed to stay in the same position for what seemed like forever. It wasn’t until the stewardess asked us to fix our seats that we actually snapped out of our euphoric daze.

Five thousand feet.
Before I knew it, she was explaining where she planned on spending the rest of summer and when she’d head back. She spoke quickly—a reminder that our time was coming to a close, and we both knew it.

Three thousand feet.

She asked where I lived in the city. I explained why the East Village is the best location in the world, which she laughed at. I told her that she had to visit at some point to let me show her around.

Two thousand feet.

We didn’t say much for a minute or so. Maybe it was because we were excited for our plans, but we also knew how hard it would be to actually see each other again.

Five hundred feet.

We both looked out the window. The sky seemed to be rising as the plane was ready to touch down. The sun was half hidden behind the Freedom Tower.

Touch down.

We finally landed to the sounds of old folks clapping in celebration. We laughed, knowing it was the last laugh we’d share for a while. Everyone was struggling to get up and grab their bags as soon as possible. We both knew this wasn’t necessary and sat back for the time being. She said her connecting flight wasn’t departing for another couple hours, so she had time to spare, whereas I was already home. We were motivated to extend our stay in row 27 for as long as possible.

Finally, we came across the topic of when we could see each other again. I told her that I would be here for the rest of the summer, running around, and getting into trouble with friends. To my surprise, she said she was willing to visit that summer and stay for a bit on her way back home to France.

Immediately, I felt as though I was falling from the altitude we were at an hour ago. I
hesitated as I tried to get the right words out.

“Y-you can stay with me when you come here, it’s no problem! You can stay for a week or even longer if you wanna.” I felt bolder than ever—she had rubbed off on me. We both smiled.

“I would love that.” At this point, most of the aisles were cleared, and we figured it was time for us to go, as hesitant as we were.

Entering the airport, we were greeted by bright daylight. I could only imagine how I looked, cringing against the harsh light, yet the short glimpse of her in this bright light just made her that much more beautiful. Our steps got shorter and slower until we finally came to a stop.

“Well, hey, I’m so happy I met you on this flight. You really made my summer.”

“Yeah, you too, this was really fun,” she replied, looking down at her feet, smiling.

To my surprise, she snuck under my chin for a hug, with her arms wrapped tightly around my neck. It was the first time I actually noticed her height, a little more than a head shorter than me. As I felt her head slowly decompressing from my white tee, I felt the warmest, most gentle sensation imprinted on the left side of my cheek. As we both stood there, I felt her fingers reach for my left hand, spread my clenched palm open, and place what felt like a small, dry piece of paper. Then she picked up her bag, grinning, and walked towards the connecting gate lane. I waved in a very nerdy way, waiting until she was out of sight before I opened the piece of paper.

It was the gum wrapper. Her phone number was scribbled in cursive inside it.

Joyfully, I picked up my carry-on and headed towards baggage claim, stuffing the gum wrapper in my wallet. The ride home was one big blur. My attention was lost in the lightness of the blue sky, soaking the sun and the wind in its fullness. My eyes were closed, and I could feel every part of nature’s beauty. Every sensation felt clearer and purer than it had ever felt before. I was again lost in this girl, this time infatuated with the last seven hours I had spent with her—and the countless hours we would spend together soon enough.

Twenty minutes later, I finally got to my block. The cab ride was forty bucks. I reached into my pocket.

The wallet wasn’t there.

For a minute, I couldn’t believe it. I looked through every pocket on my body in a panic, as the sinking feeling got stronger and stronger. It was truly gone.

I couldn’t have cared less about the wallet. Its contents would have been replaced by the end of the week, but the chances of seeing this girl again were gone forever. At that moment, I realized that we never actually exchanged names or anything else. I wouldn’t be able to find her even if I tried. How fucking stupid was I to not ask for more ways of reaching each other?

That regret didn’t fade, and I don’t think it ever will. The universe dragged us apart quicker than it brought us together. In my attempts to understand, I reflected on the belief that everything happens for a reason—that is until you’re the victim yourself.

I unintentionally hurt both of us. But maybe she didn’t think much of it after that. Truthfully, I can only hope. Yet feeling what I felt, I can only assume she felt the same way.

She waited for a phone call that never came.

Who knows, maybe she still is.