

Love is Eternal—For as Long as it Lasts*

*with apologies to Gabriel Garcia Marquez

This is the story of two people, who, they were certain, loved one another unlike any couple who'd loved before. Indeed our heroes, that is to say Rhonda and Michael, believed their pairing was simultaneously miraculous and inevitable. Miraculous because the world was so large, so populated (overpopulated, Michael pointed out), they could have easily missed one another. For example, what if she'd been born in Australia and he in Denmark? Or worse (they loved to contemplate how much worse it could be), what if Rhonda lived on Tenth Street and Michael on Euclid, so they would have grown up in the same town but been assigned to different high schools?

Holding each other, they shivered at the thought.

In addition to the complications of geography in the here and now, there was the matter of time to consider. This, too, was a favorite worry, much like the thrill of contemplating a horrible car crash: What if Rhonda were a Roman concubine and Michael a modern-day aeronautical engineer? Or Michael an eighteenth-century French aristocrat and Rhonda a secretary in a 50s steno pool? The possibilities of such tragedy were nearly more than she could bear.

And Michael, too, of course.

And yet when they thought about it (and they thought about it a lot), how could they not meet and fall in love? How could nature or fate or karma construe to keep apart two people so compatible, nay, so perfectly matched? Such a cosmic aberration would be proof of God's nonexistence, for created as Rhonda and Michael were, one was incomplete without the other. Imagine a Holmes without a Watson. A Romeo without a Juliet. Impossible!

Thankfully, the opposite was the case. Michael and Rhonda *were* together and together offered an example of nature's rightness: a perfect rainbow perhaps, or a cascading waterfall. But even those were inadequate comparisons. Rhonda suggested they were more like the rainbow fashioned from the mist of that cascading waterfall.

At first she liked this new metaphor, but then modified it further saying, no, wait: He was the powerfully pounding force and she the delicate vapor of his essence. Yes, that was better. And probably (again Rhonda's suggestion) there were bluebirds swooping just outside the frame, though she couldn't quite manage incorporating them into her allegory.

(Frame? Michael wondered. Allegory?)

And if further proof of their inexorable destiny was wanted (although *she* didn't require any, Rhonda assured Michael), one need only recall the exquisite pain each felt when they were apart. (At least that's what *she* experienced, and Michael answered, well sure, he missed her too.)

It was this ache Rhonda both relished and hoped to assuage as she dialed Michael from her dorm room.

“Hello, Sweetheart,” she breathed.

“Hey.”

“I’ve got some news I think you’ll like.”

“I like it already,” he said, a little breathy himself, a nuance that didn’t go unnoticed.

With exaggerated suspicion Rhonda asked, “What are you doing?” hoping her teasing would mask the fact she really wanted to know. “You sound, I don’t know, *busy*?”

“Just came in from a run,” Michael said. “Five miles along the lake. Weather’s great. I feel great. I’m going to shower, then grab a beer with the guys.”

There was a hesitation from Rhonda. Not much, just.... “You ran without me?”

Michael laughed. “That’s pretty much the only way I can, since you aren’t here.”

The phrase *How could you?* stuck in her throat – all summer they’d run together. But Rhonda did not allow the words to escape because part of being in love, of being one half of a perfect couple, meant allowing the other person to grow and experience things even if they couldn’t be together.

“Well,” she said, coming back to the reason for her call, “my news is that I’m going to be home next week, and I thought you’d want to be there.”

This was welcome if somewhat confusing information. The school semester stood at mid-term, and as far as Michael knew she was doing well. *Coming home* must mean something had gone wrong. On top of that, her phrasing seemed odd. Of course he’d want to be there, and in fact *was* there. Where would he be if not home? Nevertheless, he wanted to be supportive, especially if she were in trouble. And he *did* miss her, so he said, “Cool.”

Rhonda laughed in her tinkling-bells way. “Cool? That’s the best you can do?”

Michael may have been less than an orator but he was not stupid. In an instant he cut through the literal meaning of her words – spiced as they were with Rhonda’s manufactured nonchalance – and produced, if not the perfect reply, then at least the understanding that much hung upon his answer.

“Way more than cool. Fantastic!”

Having successfully parried, he advanced to an offensive position, one from which he’d never failed to score. So to speak. He lowered his voice, modulating to a pitch slightly above a guttural rumble, so that his words had a tremulous quality somewhere between a Scottish burr and a Spanish trill. “I can’t wait to get my hands in your hair. Down your back, under your”

“No, silly,” Rhonda interrupted. “Not *home*, home. Just in the neighborhood. Actually, I’ll only be at the airport. Mom sent me a ticket to see her new place in Reno, and I have a stopover at PDX.”

Michael recalculated faster than a high-end GPS. The airport was a two hour drive each way. If he made the trip (and certainly he would, because it had been what now? six weeks since she’d left, and therefore six weeks and one day since they’d ... said goodbye), the visit would eat a good chunk of his day. Nevertheless, this was Rhonda he was talking about, and perfection, he reminded himself, had its price.

“Okay,” he said as enthusiastically as possible. “I’ll grab us some lunch at Biscuit Heaven. It’ll be a picnic. We’ll just hang until your flight leaves.”

Actually he was thinking if he could get her out of the airport and into the car they might do more than hang, but one step at a time, Michael, my boy. Don’t forget, this was Rhonda-the-ideal he missed. All the rest, all the tussling, the sweaty nights (and mornings and afternoons) were only base expressions of the ethereal and pure love they both felt. If she only wanted to snuggle, snuggle they would.

On the other hand, if her layover was long enough, they might get a room.

“Yoouu,” Rhonda said, drawing out the word as if he’d tried to put over an obvious trick. “What do you think you’re going to do? Give the sack to a baggage handler? Have a flight attendant bring me the sandwich on the plane?”

Once again Michael found himself behind the curve. “Hang on. Let me get this straight. You are coming to the airport, right?”

“Uh-huh.”

“And you want me there.”

“Well,” Rhonda answered, clearly hurt. “I assumed you’d want to be.”

Michael knew this was tenuous ground, but it seemed the time had come for forthrightness. “But you’re saying I won’t actually *see* you?”

Rhonda brightened a little. “It’s not impossible. I might have a window seat and you could be in a spot to see the plane. I could wear a red blouse or something, so you’ll know it’s me.”

“But I won’t actually *see* you. I mean, we won’t actually be together, like holding hands or anything.”

Rhonda hoped Michael wasn’t being intentionally obtuse, because that would just be cruel. Even more, she hoped he hadn’t lost the notion they were meant for each other, that their relationship was beyond special, it was one-of-a-kind perfect, never to be duplicated. She quickly checked her list of superlatives and comparisons. All seemed intact, if somewhat precarious.

“Michael,” she said softly, knowing, as he did, there was something dangerous in the air. “Remember when you went camping with just the guys? Before you left you told me to go outside exactly at nine and look at the moon, because you’d be looking at the same moon at the same time so it would be like we were together?”

Michael did remember. It was a pleasant recollection and he told her so.

“All right, then,” Rhonda said, relieved. “This is the same thing. We can talk on our cell phones while I’m on the ground. You’ll be in the parking lot not a quarter mile away, so we’ll be *practically* together.”

Michael pictured himself not in the parking lot but in the cell phone waiting area. The parking lot would cost twelve dollars, and he might not have a signal in the concrete structure anyway. And that after a two-hour drive, with another two hours ahead. He did love her, but for goodness sake

“You can’t,” he swallowed hard, “be serious.”

Ten minutes ago, ten *seconds*, she might have been cajoled, dissuaded. But his tone now, his presumption that she wasn’t worth the effort, well, that was really too much.

“I have never been more serious,” she said, seriously. “Let me ask you something. Are we in love or not?”

Grateful for the ambiguity he answered, “Well, sure.”

“Which means we would do *anything* for one another?”

“Pretty much, yeah.”

Rhonda pulled the phone from her ear, looked at the mechanism as if it were defective, and tried again. “Pretty much? Pretty much isn’t the right answer, my friend. Not by a long shot it isn’t. Pretty much means, no, not *anything*.”

Yes, she delivered this vehemently, and yes, she was truly stung. But even now Rhonda believed she was practicing tough love, and in doing so all would be rectified. Meaning Michael would come to his senses. After all, when you came down to it he was just a man, and therefore allowances would have to be made.

Regrettably, it was at this moment Michael had a revelation. The sensation was a warm, bright light. It was the sun. It was clarity. Or maybe it wasn’t any of those things, but it felt good and made him laugh.

“You gotta be freakin’ kiddin’ me.”

This was not the response Rhonda had hoped for. It was not a response, in fact, she could deal with.

“Michael!”

“I mean, come on. You want to talk? We can talk. I’d love to talk. But I can do that from here. I don’t need to drive eighty-five miles, sit in my car, blah, blah, blah for ten minutes, and drive eighty-five miles home. That’s just dumb.”

“MICHAEL?!”

His name, albeit shouted, was all she could manage. Her world, that bright and shining Camelot, the rainbows and the waterfalls, and yes, even the bluebirds somewhere off screen, had in that moment evaporated, dried up, flown away. Rhonda would never again feel the same. Never again be certain she had given perfect love and been loved perfectly in return.

She could barely breathe. The air had been sucked from her room. She could not continue the conversation, and so carefully set the receiver in its cradle, causing the slightest *click* in Michael’s ear.

“Rhon?” Michael said. “Sweetheart?”

But it was too late and he knew it.

He sat on the edge of his bed, arms tucked between his knees. Michael closed his eyes, picturing Rhonda’s hair, root beer colored when the sun shone through. He recalled the smell of her skin where her neck curved into her shoulder; he saw the freckles dusted like cinnamon across her nose and cheeks. These things he did his best to memorize, knowing that for him they would exist only in memory.

He sat until the room began to darken. Then he showered and shaved and dressed. Late in the evening, feeling strangely lighter, Michael drove to the pub to meet his pals.