

I LOVE YOU BUT

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My dad taught me what infinity meant when I was eleven. At the bottom of his birthday card I wrote, “I love you to the moon and back times a trillion gazillion double million,” and in parentheses, the number one with too many zeros to count or even make sense. *That is a lot of zeros, my sweetness*, he said joyfully. *Not enough*, I responded, *my hand cramped, but I pinky promise I love you more*. He grabbed a napkin from the table and wrote “I love you to the moon and back times ∞ .” *It means I love you more than the human mind is capable of knowing*. There is a potent unconditionality to infinity, and from that day on I simply assumed that all people knew it equally. But infinity is elusive and most people have never been given a napkin with unconditional love written on it.

Ahmad is, by pure definition, a whole-hearted and unconditional lover of both people and life. I ran into him early one October morning when time was dragging and the air was biting and my heart wasn't much warmer. He said *boo* instead of hello, always playful, always smiling. I appreciated this, as the morning was much too lonely. We were good friends, but not too good, ones that spent hours together but the hours never seemed to add up because of the chatter and anonymity of the group. I liked him though, thoroughly.

As we chatted, I noticed that his eyes smiled even when his mouth didn't and so I stared at the wrinkles that formed where his joy was carried. Around us, life went on. The wind carried fallen leaves and their musty scent around our ankles. The quad had a particular hush about it, as if everyone was too sleepy to ease their wintery loneliness. Time and students passed from this building to that one. Neither of us seemed to notice that we were in the middle of the walkway—not because it was a love-at-first-sight kind of meet cute—but because he was a familiar face and so was I, and both of us were far from home; him from the UAE, me from myself.

He asked my major and my birthday, excited to tell me—an English major—about how he—an engineering major—wanted to write books because his mother loved to read, and I felt embarrassed to know him without knowing him. *I want to write a love story about what happens after love*, he told me. He glowed differently, idling in a fullness and passion that warmed me in the chilly morning air. *All the books we read are about meeting and falling in love, but I want to write about grappling and maintaining the love you are in*. He told me he loved a girl back home, but *that* he still didn't know enough about love to write the story. *My country never learned how to respect women and so I wasn't allowed to love her in public*. The truth was bitter: public love—and public love without conditions—is a privilege, a privilege that Ahmad was not afforded.

As we stood there he told me stories, stories of intricate richness, but his tone remained eerily casual. I held onto his every word, desperate to escape into a good conversation with a good human. He spoke mostly of his younger sister and how he calls her each morning. He showed videos of her dancing or singing, desperate to show off what he loved, desperate for someone to see a piece of his home. He told me how he graduated high school and went into the military where he burned a hole through his hand after swinging into an open window and down a thick rope. He explained how he couldn't dress himself for weeks after simply because he had been scared of the heights and wanted to be on the ground as quickly as possible. After graduating, Ahmad went to Minnesota for a year to learn English, which he arrived knowing nothing of but is beautiful at now. His tutor had a crush on him. *I just needed to get an 80% on the language exam in order to go to university in America*, he went on. His mom wanted nothing more than for her children to study in the States, so Ahmad got an 88%.

Ahmad asked—him being the oldest sibling—if I was spoiled to be a younger sister. As we walked, I thought of my later curfew and gas tank that was somehow always filled. *Yes*, I said, *yes I suppose I was*. He said his little sister was spoiled too. He asked me if American fathers beat their daughters like Emirati fathers beat their sons. *My sister was never beaten either*, he said, *you both are lucky*.

Fireflies are good luck, my sweetness, my dad responded every time I asked why people caught them in mason jars. At the young age of four, I simply could not imagine how imprisoning anything would make it better. Bugs built with wings lost their freedom for someone else's temporary enjoyment. I turned the page of the picture book for him, indicating that I wanted him to keep reading; I was never the patient type. Most nights went like this. My parents took turns at who came into my room each night and I loved them equally and so every night my room was saturated with love. My childhood bedroom was plastered in purple heart wallpaper that said “love” in different fonts, and before I could read, I was tracing that word and learning it by heart and every night they kissed my forehead I re-learned that word. Night and night again, after my mom went to bed my dad would gather my sister and me on the bed to read “Dads are for Catching Fireflies”, and every night my dad would cry. *Why are you crying, Daddy*, I would ask, *It's a happy book!* He always answered, *It is happy, my sweetness, it really is*.

After a bit of time, we walked back to the dorms together, because I was cold and Ahmad needed to go to the dry cleaners to get his suits pressed. *I hate wearing suits*, he told me. When I asked why, he said that he only wore suits on Christmas day, and Christmas was the one day he had to stand next to his father in their family portrait and pretend that they were equally respectable men. Ahmad asked if I loved my father and whether I called my father dad. There is a great distinction in what we value by how we call it. I call my mom “Mama” and she has a beautiful spirit, one that hugs you no matter what. My dad has a colorful mind, one that is saturated in curiosity and a desire to understand. Not only was I never beaten, but I was often hugged. And I am convinced their love for me is what taught me how to hold myself. I never quite understood how Ahmad existed with such joy, grace, and kindness despite a faulty father. He is proof that a person is as significant and influential as one lets them be.

I was raised by family game nights and home-cooked sit-down meals, I was taken to the mountains to learn about myself, given an education to learn about everything else, and offered an infinity, not of time, but of love. While the most optimistic of people might assume that all people know and show love equally, there are distortions. This is something we cannot ignore, no matter how much we desire to. Love is a necessity, but also a privilege. It is people like Ahmad that are proof that conditional love does not always birth conditional love. It is people like Ahmad that keep hope kindled.

Ahmad and I slipped back into talking about the weather. It was even colder now despite being closer to afternoon. It was time to go. *Goodbye, Habibi*, he said. I knew what that meant, having been told weeks earlier that it meant “my love” in Arabic, and I wondered how a boy could so easily say a word that he had rarely heard himself. I loved him for it, loved him for his ability to love despite his own deficit. He carried on, waved, whistled a bit, and shrugged as he walked away. Another day, another conversation, another story told. His words crept into my being, and I found both a deep sadness and infinite appreciation for the joy that pools in the corners of people’s eyes as they speak of what they do have. He thought nothing of it, but I slept differently that night, and I love him for reminding me what a privilege it is to love and be loved.