

Counting the Ways

The thud sent me racing to look out windows closed tightly against frosty north winds. Abandoning my homework, I bolted into the evening's dark without stopping for a coat. Tire tracks in a fresh dusting of snow led to a car smashed against an oak tree on our neighbor's lawn, its front end crumpled. Inside, a woman lay motionless; the back of her seat had collapsed.

Since the driver's door had jammed, I crawled in the passenger-side. I waved my hand in front of the woman's face. She did not respond. In the soft glow of the car's dim interior light, and to my twelve-year-old eyes, the lady looked beautiful and quite possibly dead. When I hesitantly touched her shoulder, she moaned. "Stay still," I told her, working to project a calm I did not feel. "I'm going to get help."

Unaware that the neighbor whose tree she'd hit was standing directly behind me, I was startled when he said, "Already called. They're on their way." I turned toward him. He shook his head. "I've been expecting something like this to happen. People take that curve way too fast."

The woman moaned again and tried to sit up, but only managed to lift her shoulders and tilt her head back a bit. As she did, I saw blood seep out from a gash under her chin. I pulled off my shirt, wadded it up and held it against her wound, hoping to stop the bleeding. "Don't think you should touch her," my neighbor said. "You could get in trouble."

Drawn by the woman's vulnerability, I leaned over and kissed her forehead as my parents had done to me when I'd been sick. I whispered, "They'll be here soon." She smiled slightly. Her hand found my arm.

Once the ambulance arrived, someone pulled me from the car and deposited me on the curb, draping a blanket over my shoulders. Everything from then on happened fast. What I remember best is shivering in the icy darkness as two men in blue uniforms removed the woman from the car and placed her on a gurney. They slid her into the ambulance and drove away with the siren blaring, while I sat with my arms wrapped around my chest, desperate for my parents to return home from their early dinner out.

My father explained to the nurse behind the emergency room desk that I had helped the woman in a one-car accident who was brought in a few hours earlier. The nurse nodded, humming her acknowledgment. "Sorry, but I'm unable to tell you anything about that person without authorization." My father had warned me that the hospital might not be allowed to tell us anything. Defeated, I dropped down onto one of the waiting room's sticky vinyl chairs.

"Wait here," Dad said. "No sense in both of us freezing. I'll get the car. Look for me in a few minutes."

After he left, the nurse walked out from behind her desk and took the seat next to me. She leaned near and, in a low voice, said, "You did the right thing, putting pressure on her wound." The nurse held out a small pad of paper and a pencil. "Write down your name and phone number. I'm sure she will want to thank you when she's feeling better."

Weeks passed. We'd received no word. The fate of the woman in the accident haunted me. Thoughts of her distracted me from my schoolwork. She woke me up at night. I dreamt of her modest smile, of her holding my arm, and of her frightful injury. Had I actually helped her or done something to worsen her outcome? Exhausted by the fixation, I went to my father, who was sitting in his den. "Can I ask you a question?" He removed his eyeglasses, and pointed to the chair across from him. I cleared my throat. I could feel my cheeks flush. "How do you know if you've fallen in love with someone?"

I could tell that he hadn't expected that question. "Is this about a girl at school?"

I shook my head. "It's about the lady in the car wreck. I can't stop thinking about her. She's on my mind all the time. Does that mean I'm in love with her?"

My father closed his book. He began to chuckle, but stopped when he saw how serious I was. "Caring about an injured stranger is called compassion." He nodded. "It's a good thing to feel. It's the kind of concern that a doctor has for his patients." He cocked his head. "Maybe you should think about a career in medicine."

"But what about being in love?"

My father pushed himself back in his chair and sat straighter. "I guess compassion could be thought of as a kind of love. There are many kinds." Before I could say anything, he continued, "You love Maxwell, don't you?" Maxwell was our black Labrador retriever. "And, you love your mother. Two different kinds of love. See?" He walked over and rubbed the top of my head. "And, there's a big difference between *having* love for someone and being *in love* with that person." He returned to his chair and picked up his book. I nodded thoughtfully, trying to

appear as though I'd understood, but his explanation hadn't chased away my confusion, nor did it diminish recurring thoughts of her.

When told to report to the vice-principal's office, I assumed that my lack of attentiveness in class had at last landed me in trouble. Since the accident, I was often distracted. Mr. Morton, the school disciplinarian, was famous for making students wait in the hallway before seeing him. He referred to it as "stewing time." While I was stewing, it occurred to me that I might be here because the woman in the accident had died. My next thought was that I had been responsible.

I walked into Mr. Morton's office, my stomach knotted and my mouth dry. A big man, Mr. Morton's presence dominated the room. He wore dark-framed glasses and spoke in a deep gravelly voice. He barely glanced at me before pointing at one of the two chairs in front of his large mahogany desk. I sat silently, avoiding eye contact by staring at his framed photographs, intercom equipment, and black telephone, which he picked up. "Have her come in."

A woman with pulled back hair and plain features walked in. She sat in the other chair. Assuming that she was a counselor or psychologist, I returned her smile and braced myself for bad news. "Kenny, I imagine you're glad to see this lady again," Mr. Morton said. I had no idea what he was talking about. Besides wanting everyone to call me Ken and not Kenny any longer, simply hearing him say my name filled me with dread. When I didn't respond, he seemed confused. "Ms. Blackburn is the lady who had the accident across from your house."

Now, I was confused. This lady looked far older and not nearly as beautiful as the woman I remembered.

“Ms. Blackburn still has some trouble talking because of her injuries, but she very much wished to speak with you.”

“Hi, Kenny,” she said, her voice a breathy rasp. She lifted her head and pointed to a raw and reddish, raised scar that wrapped around the front of her neck. “They said that this is where I hit the steering wheel.” She traced the scar with her finger. “I don’t remember much of what happened, but I heard that you had helped me. I wanted to thank you.”

The wound confirmed her as the person in the accident. I felt pride and relief, but also disappointment.

After that meeting, life snapped back into place. Thoughts of Ms. Blackburn dwindled to few, eclipsed by homework, math and history tests, running cross-country, and a request from my English teacher that I audition for a part in our school play. I’d never considered acting before, and while her faith in me was flattering, it was also intimidating. The part was not the lead, but it was an important one, with quite a few lines of dialogue.

In the audition scene, my character proposes to his girlfriend and kisses her. Laura Stadler, who was in the class ahead of me, had already been cast in the part of the girlfriend. While waiting for the audition to begin, I confessed to her that I didn’t know anything about acting. She told me to believe what that character says and to try to feel what the character is feeling. Okay, I thought, amused, this is the girl I want to marry.

Reciting the lines went well. We both spoke with conviction of our devotion to each other, and

of spending our lives together. But when it was time to kiss, I froze. I'd had little experience. I closed my eyes, hardened my lips, and puckered, the way I had when kissing my grandmother. I wasn't sure how else to do this, especially with others watching.

Laura set her hands on my shoulders and gently pulled me closer. She kissed me, though the script had called for me to kiss her. Unlike how I held my lips, hers were relaxed and soft, and her mouth opened slightly. As we kissed, my whole body responded. "Wow," was all I could say, although the script did not call for that, either.

After the audition, I gathered my belongings and walked out of the gymnasium. "Wait," Laura called, jogging to catch up with me. "I didn't get to thank you for taking care of my mother."

"Your mother?"

She nodded. "When she hit that tree near your house."

"That was your mother? I thought the lady's name was Blackburn."

"Her maiden name. She uses it." Laura leaned forward and kissed me again, this time on the cheek. "I can't tell you how much my family and I appreciate what you did."

My heart hit against my chest. As I looked into Laura's brown eyes, I again wondered, was *this* love?