

THE POWER
OF
Love
FIFTEEN
STORIES
&
ESSAYS

Editor: John Langan
Introduction by Beth Johnson



THE TOWNSEND LIBRARY

THE POWER OF LOVE

Ubi caritas est vera, Deus ibi est.

(Wherever love is true, God is there.)



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ISBN-13: 978-1-59194-456-0

Library of Congress Control Number:
2014953581

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INTRODUCTION

Is there any word in the English language that is tossed around more casually than “love”?

We love our cars. We love pizza. We love our iPhones, our favorite drinks and movies and songs and TV shows of the moment. Our playlists are stuffed with songs about love—from classics like the Beatles “Love Me Do” to Rihanna’s “We Found Love.” “Love” is the operative word in commercials for everything from hamburgers (McDonald’s “I’m lovin’ it”) to beauty products (Olay’s “Love the skin you’re in.”)

Love, love, love.

With that kind of “love” all around us, it’s sometimes easy to forget the truly profound nature of love. Love is a fundamental force. Not unlike gravity, it exerts its pull in ways that are both irresistible and hard to understand. We can’t always put our love into words, or explain how it works. We just know it’s there. It moves us deeply. It changes things.

Fortunately, when we are stunned by love’s power and stand wordless and amazed, we have the poets to speak for us. One of the most beautiful expressions of love ever written comes to us from William Shakespeare. His Sonnet 116 begins with these famous lines:

*Let me not to the marriage of true minds
Admit impediments.
Love is not love
Which alters when it alteration finds . . .*

A modern take on Shakespeare's language might be this:

*Let me not declare any reasons why two
True-minded people should not be married.
Love is not love
Which changes when it finds a change in
circumstances . . .*

While Shakespeare is commenting on love that leads to marriage, his words apply to any love that is deep and true. Love does not change when the unexpected happens. Love knows that life is filled with uncertainty, and it stands firm in the face of misfortune.

A beautiful illustration of love that does not “alter when it alteration finds” appears in the book *About Alice*, in which author Calvin Trillin remembers his wife, who had died not long before. He describes a time that Alice volunteered at a camp for children with disabilities. Alice had become especially close to a little girl she called by her initial, L. The child had genetic diseases that kept her from growing normally and from digesting food. She had difficulty walking. She had to be fed through a tube at night. Still, the little girl was, in Alice's words, “the most optimistic, most enthusiastic, most hopeful

human being I had ever encountered.”

As Alice grew closer to the little girl, she became more curious about L. What had given her, despite her many challenges, such joy and optimism? What was her secret?

Then one day at camp, while the children were playing a game, L. asked Alice to hold her mail. On top of the pile was a note from L.’s mother. Alice glanced at it and saw the words that L.’s mother had written to her daughter. They read, “If God had given us all the children in the world to choose from, L., we would only have chosen you.”

Love is not love / which alters when it alteration finds. L.’s mother loved her physically challenged, “different” daughter exactly as she was. That unshakeable love shone through L., giving her the radiant strength and optimism that so impressed Alice.

That kind of love, powerful and mysterious, is the subject of this collection of true stories. You will read about a parent’s love for a child, and children’s for their parents. There are stories about strangers thrown together who form a bond that can only be called love. You’ll find love involving the young and the old, the single and the coupled, and even the non-human and their people. There is the love that leads to marriage, the love of lasting friendships, and the love of a cause that is right and noble.

Throughout them all, you will witness the

kind of love that Shakespeare describes when he writes, later in Sonnet 116:

*Love's not Time's fool, though rosy lips and
cheeks
Within his bending sickle's compass come.
Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks,
But bears it out even to the edge of doom.
If this be error and upon me proved,
I never writ, nor no man ever loved.*

Today's version might say:

*Love is not at the mercy of Time, though
physical beauty
Is mowed down by his blade.
Love does not alter within hours and weeks,
But, rather, it endures until the last day
of life.
If I am proved wrong about these thoughts
on love,
Then I never wrote a word, and no man has
ever loved.*

As you read through this collection, consider the thread that runs through it: the idea that love—not the “love” that we read about on billboards or toss about in casual conversation—is a fundamental force; one that makes people capable of becoming better and stronger, braver and more generous, than they ever knew possible. May these stories of love that “does not alter when it alteration finds” inspire you to consider the incredible power of love.



The Blind Vet

Preview

A flash of light, an explosion—and a young man would never see again. Nick came home from the war scared, angry, and depressed. Would his life ever seem worthwhile again? That question was answered by the love of one special person.



The Blind Vet

Tanya Savory

When Nick boarded the bus, everyone looked at him. A few people shook their heads in pity. It didn't seem right that such a young man should have so much trouble climbing the three short steps up to the bus aisle.

"Why does that man have that white stick?" a small girl asked her mother loudly.

"Shh!" the mother said quickly. "It's not polite to talk about him, honey. He's blind."

But Nick had heard the little girl. In fact, he could feel everyone's eyes on him even though he couldn't see them. Using his cane, Nick carefully measured the height of each step. Gripping the handrail with white knuckles, he slowly made his way to the aisle. Then he used his hands to feel his way. Gratefully, Nick eased into the first set of seats

reserved for the disabled. A thin rivulet of sweat trickled down Nick's forehead, and his hands shook.

Okay. Relax. Nick tried to calm himself down. *You'll be all right. You'll make it.*

Nick, barely 22, had been blind for just over a year. During a tour of duty in Afghanistan, the vehicle Nick had been riding in had run over an IED. Nick remembered a bright flash, a terrible explosion, and the screams of his comrades. Then, the bright color of his own blood in his eyes was the last thing Nick ever saw. Fragments of metal and glass had scarred his face and destroyed his eyes.

When he came home from the war, Nick was frightened. What would his friends think of him? Two of Nick's favorite pastimes had been cycling and playing basketball, and that's how he had met a lot of his friends. Now he wouldn't be able to do either. Would his friends even want to be around him anymore?

But Nick's biggest apprehension was that his girlfriend, Kristen, would leave him. The two of them had been together since high school, and Nick had secretly planned on proposing to Kristen when he returned from Afghanistan. But he never dreamed that he'd be returning like this. Now Kristen would have to take care of him—if she even wanted to stay with him. *And why would she want to stay with him,* Nick wondered. Kristen was funny and smart. Plus, she was beautiful with long red hair and bright green eyes. *She won't want to waste her time with some blind guy who can't even see her,* Nick thought bitterly. *She'll never marry me now.*

At first, Nick's friends came around a lot. They

sat and talked with him, trying to get him to laugh at old jokes. They brought him foods he liked and often hung around for hours listening to music or reading the newspaper to Nick. They rarely mentioned basketball or the upcoming cycling races they were training for—they thought this would make Nick sad. In fact, they rarely even mentioned Nick's blindness because it made them uncomfortable. And, in time, most of Nick's friends' discomfort with his blindness outweighed their concern for him. They ran out of things to talk about. One by one, most of Nick's friends faded away.

Now Nick became angry and depressed. He felt betrayed and abandoned by friends, and he declined into self-pity. Nick might have sunk all the way to rock bottom if it had not been for Kristen. During that very difficult first year, Kristen never wavered in her devotion to Nick. She helped him in any way she could, even when Nick's frustration made it hard for her to help him.

"I'm blind!" he'd sometimes shout angrily. "Why are you ruining your life by staying with me? I'm no good anymore. Why don't you go find someone who can *see* you—someone who doesn't have to be treated like a baby?"

More than anything, Nick hated his loss of independence. He'd always prided himself on the fact that he was never afraid to try new things and go to new places. Sometimes on long weekend bike rides, Nick would make himself get lost intentionally just to see what kind of adventure it might turn into. Now he couldn't even walk to the corner store

without Kristen's help.

Kristen knew that Nick needed to feel some sense of independence, or he would only become angrier and sadder. As it was, he often spent entire days doing little more than listening to the radio, sleeping, and drinking beer—something he'd rarely done before. So when Kristen came across an article about a local center for disabled veterans, she mentioned it to Nick.

"It's a way for you to meet other men and women like yourself," Kristen explained. "And there's all kinds of help there to get you trained and prepared for a new career."

"Career?" Nick asked doubtfully. "What could I do without my eyes?"

Kristen walked over and took Nick's hands in hers. "A lot, Nick," she said quietly. "Why don't you go and find out?"

Nick agreed to give it a try. There was only one catch. The center didn't open until 9:00, and since Kristen had to be at work at 8:30, she would not be able to drive Nick there every day.

"Nick, the city bus stops right in front of the center," Kristen said carefully. "Why don't you learn how to take the bus?"

"Take the bus?" Nick replied angrily. "How would I even know where I was going? What if I get lost? I feel like you're abandoning me—just like all my friends did."

Kristen thought Nick might respond like this, so she had already figured out a plan. "Look," she said, "I'll make some arrangements at work. I'll ride

the bus with you for a week or so until you get the hang of it. What do you think of that?”

It took a little more convincing, but Nick finally decided to try. And, actually, he was excited about the idea of something new—something he could do on his own.

And so, for a week and a half, Nick and Kristen took the bus together across town. She helped him use his cane to feel for the curb, the bus steps, and the aisle to his seat. They counted the number of stops it took to get from their apartment to the center, and when they arrived, Kristen helped Nick find the sidewalk that led to the center’s front door. If Nick stumbled or became confused, Kristen was there to smooth things over and encourage her boyfriend along.

Finally, Nick felt sufficiently confident to ride the bus alone. He’d been enjoying the time spent at the center, and he was looking forward to being independent again. But now as Nick sat on the bus alone for the first time, he wasn’t so sure. He heard the little girl ask her mother again what was wrong with the man with the funny cane. Nick took a deep breath and tried to concentrate.

Two, three, four . . . Nick counted the stops. Very carefully, he got off at the seventh stop. Just like every day with Kristen, Nick used his cane to walk over the curb and to the sidewalk to the center. His heart was pounding. What if he was going the wrong way? What if he fell? No one was there to help him.

“Hey, Nick! Good to see you.” Relief flooded

Nick. It was one of the instructors at the center. He'd made it!

At the end of his first week of riding alone, Nick was hardly nervous at all. Every day had gone well. Only one time had he tripped on the curb, but almost instantly the hand of a stranger had gripped his shoulder to keep him from falling. Nick had said thank you, but the stranger just patted him on the back.

Now as Nick carefully made his way down the steps of the bus, the bus driver said, "You sure are one lucky young man."

At first, Nick wasn't sure if the bus driver was talking to him. Why would anyone think he was lucky? "Me?" Nick asked.

"Yes, you!" the driver said with a friendly laugh.

"Why do you say that?"

"Well, to have someone looking out for you like that," the driver explained. "Making sure you're okay."

"What are you talking about?" Nick asked.

"You know," the driver said, sounding a little puzzled by Nick's question. "That pretty woman with the red hair—the one who has been standing on the corner waiting and watching for you every day this week. The one who caught you when you almost fell."

Nick was too stunned to say anything at first. Then tears filled his eyes behind his dark glasses.

The driver chuckled again and said, "I wish my wife cared that much about me!"

Nick smiled through his tears. "She's not my wife," he said quietly. "But she's going to be."

