The Vocabulary of Love

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by Mo Kiley

Retrospect – Noun; A review, survey or contemplation of things in the past

41 years old

"Look, I know it's only one test, you'll just have to study harder next time. Less TV, and more books!" I glanced over to the passenger seat, where my frustrated son was pulling off his shin-guards and socks.

"Dad, I did study. Like at least an hour. The words are just so hard. When am I ever gonna need to know what "ostentatious" means anyways?" He raised his eyebrows at me and gave me a quizzical look. I could remember doing the exact thing to my parents, and I'm not sure they ever had an answer for me.

I just smiled and assured him that he would need it someday....

"Look, we can practice the words together so that you can do better when you take the re-test." I ran my fingers through his red buzz cut. We drove home in contemplative silence.

Serendipity – Noun; The faculty of making fortunate discoveries by accident

21 years, 3 months

The first time I saw that beautiful red hair was two months before I actually met Nora. I was standing at the soda machine, filling my glass with my daily dose of caffienated beverage. I glanced to my left, trying to spot some friends, when I saw her sitting alone, reading the newspaper. I paused, long enough for the glass to overflow all over my hand and Coke to dribble down my arm.

What caught my eye was that she was wearing the gaudiest, most hideous sweater I had ever seen. It was neon pink, green, orange, and yellow. There were puffs and polka dots and stripes, like something out of a bad 80's movie. My first reaction was of disgust for the sweater, my second, admiration for the person that could have the guts to pull off something so hideous.

After that, I saw her practically everyday. It was as if I had suddenly discovered something that I had passed by so many times and never noticed. And now I searched for her. Everywhere I went, I mentally scanned the area, looking for this intriguing girl. Sometimes she wore that sweater, sometimes not. She was one of those girls that just seemed so perfect in her imperfection. She haunted my thoughts, the nameless girl with fiery red hair and poor fashion sense. I started to take note of where and when I saw her each week. I got to know her schedule. Not that I was a
stalker, I just happened to know that she worked at the coffee shop at the same time every week, and that she liked to study in the same seat in the University center. I just couldn't get up enough courage to talk to her, well, at least to hold a real conversation. The most I had ever said to her was “Large coffee...black”. That's it. After that encounter, I sat for hours and analyzed those three words to try to determine how she may have perceived them. Did I seem too cool? Or did I seem like some baboon who couldn't use his paltry vocabulary to create a full sentence? My hopes were down. It was my senior year. I was supposed to be living it up, and all I could think of was this girl with the ugly sweater.

Then something happened. Some people may call it fate, but I tended to be skeptical of using such words to describe something as uncertain as probability.

I woke up late for the class I had missed one too many times already. One more would be an F. I quickly threw on the clothes that lie at the foot of my bed from the night before. I grabbed a notebook and ran down the hall. As I kicked the door open, I caught a glimpse of someone on the other side of it, but it was too late. The door hit hard. The person went down, a flash of Rainbow sweater. Neon pink, orange, green, yellow puffs and patterns scraped the dirt. I stood there too afraid to move, for I believed I had just killed the woman of my dreams.

Culpable - Adjective; Deserving of blame or censure as being wrong, evil, improper, and injurious

10 years, 2 months

Her name was Sarah. She had just joined our class midyear. She had been home-schooled until her mom died that year. After a few weeks of grief, her stern and somewhat intimidating father declared that it was time she faced the world, no matter what she looked like.

I'll always remember her. She sat next to me in math class, and often times I would catch a glimpse of her face. While my teacher babbled on about numerators and denominators, I would slowly turn my head in her direction, pretending to look at the clock, as if I was antsy for recess. My eyes would rest upon her left cheek, a craggy landscape of scar tissue. My gut would tell me to turn away. My conscience told me to leave her alone. But I couldn't. I was mesmerized. My eyes would walk up and down the left side of her face, visually tracing the grooves and ridges of pink puffy flesh.

She always caught me looking. I was so engulfed in the lunar surface of her cheek, envisioning microscopic aliens hitting golf balls, and claiming her face as a new colony. She would quickly turn; her eyes would look directly into mine. They were the clearest blue. The right side of her face, the half that was turned away from me, was so smooth, so normal. She looked like two different people, cut in half and sewn together. The injured look in her eye brought the shame. I didn't say a word or even smile. I just turned my head away and concentrated intently on simplifying the fractions that lay on the paper before me.

My best friend that year, Eddie Walker, said that I loved her, and that we were going to have a hundred babies. I shuddered, and looked to where she sat by herself on a swing at the other end of the yard. All my friends were laughing, singing “Sarah and Radley sitting in a tree...KISS!!!”

My face grew hot and I clenched my fists. I said through gritted teeth, “I do
NOT like her! She is so......stupid......and UGLY! No one will ever love her, especially not me!” I stopped short, realizing that my whisper had quickly turned into screams. I turned to where she sat. The swing was still swaying back and forth, but Sarah was gone. She never came back. I never saw her face again.

Empathy – Noun; Identification with and understanding of another’s situation, feelings, and motives

25 years, 11 months

The call came while I was at work.

Nora moved so slightly, her bandaged hand shifting in mine. It was not until she gave my hand a squeeze that I knew that she was awake. Her face, wrapped in gauzy bandages could have been that of anyone, but I knew that it was Nora, by the red hairs peeking out from beneath the white fabric. She gave a little moan. She did that all the time without even realizing it. It was one of those things that I loved about her.

“Hi,” I whispered, and gave her hand a gentle squeeze. “You’re okay, the doctors are making everything okay.”

But I knew that things would never be completely okay. The doctor’s said that her face was badly torn up. She hadn’t been wearing her seat belt, and as a result was thrown through the windshield upon impact. They said that her face would never be the same.

I looked down at her form that lay on the sterile sheets. Strands of her red hair stuck out from behind the gauzy mask. I reached out and stroked them. It was then that I had to turn away.

Nora, my Nora. Her beautiful face etched in my memory, a beauty like no other.

Melancholy – Noun; Sadness or depression of the spirits; pensive reflection or contemplation

22 years, 7 months

Dear Nora,

I just want to start off saying that I love you. If you don’t read the rest of this, I want you to know that much. Because I do. I love you.

My thoughts are a jumble. I’m not sure that I am going to be able to say what I want to say, but just bear with me. Saturday was the worst day of my life. I’m not going to go into some long cliché about how I wish I could go back and not say what I said, and what I thought. Because I did say the things that I said and I thought horrible things. That is me. I am not infallible. I say things that are wrong, and are prejudiced, and are cowardly. But nothing makes me feel like more of a coward than when I imagine the life that I would live without you.

It’s sounds stupid, but hitting you in the face with that door was the best thing that ever happened to me. It meant a day of apologies at the emergency room for me, and a broken nose for you. But I can not imagine what my life would be like if it had never happened, if we had never met.

Remember that time when you made me that peanut butter and jelly sandwich at three in the morning? I want to do that again. I want to make a thousand peanut butter and jelly sandwiches with you. Just don’t give up on something that has been going so well for so long. You have made my life sweet. I need you. Again, I love you. Again, I love you, I love you, and I love you.
Vacillate – Verb; To sway from one side to the other

18 years, 5 months
I was driving back to campus, the dark night blanketing my car. My contacts had already begun to fog up. There were halos around the headlights of the passing cars. I began thinking about the possibility that lay on the path that I was currently taking. I could finish college, get a job, maybe get married, and then die. These options bored me. They were inevitables. In order to “have a life” I had to give up living, and become the zombie that so many others had become. “Need things...get job....buy things....buy more.”

And I sat there, listening to some DJ who thought he was cooler than he really was. “Hey go on down to Circuit City for all your home and office needs. Well, I know what I need right now...and I don’t think that they got that there...he he he....if you know what I mean...he he he.”

Needs? Any available future path became a slippery slope. Everything led to meaningless possessions.

The music pulsed, my head pounded and my foot grew heavier. I approached the bridge that led to the front of campus. As I picked up speed, my mind began to wander. What if I suddenly jerked the wheel? What if I flew off the bridge into the icy water below? My life would suddenly change. Predictability would be erased. I may live, I may die. For that brief instance it pleased me. I was aroused at the possibility.

And just as suddenly as the thought entered my mind, a fear gripped my stomach. I held on to the wheel tightly, to steady my shaking hands.

Deliberation – Noun; The process of considering a matter carefully and weighing alternatives

35 years, 3 months
Nora’s decision had nothing to do with this, I told myself, as my hands gripped the wheel. I would have met that woman anyway.

Cathy. Divorced Cathy. Her name made me guilty just to remember. But I thought it anyway. I hadn’t done anything, wouldn’t do anything...but sometimes when you’re driving, thoughts just seem to come from nowhere.

Nora had decided she was sick of operations. Sitting in the den, drinking tea before I left for the meeting, she sat up and declared that she had accepted that she would never look the same again. She said it so matter-of-factly that she could have been talking about something as mundane as her decision to paint the kitchen yellow. I didn’t know what to say, but she sat there, waiting for me to say something. What came was the usual drivel that seemed to make its way out of my mouth when my brain wasn’t looking. Of course I told her that she was beautiful no matter what, because I loved her. She was my wife. But on my way to the PTA meeting that night, there was a looming sense of disappointment. It felt strange, like I had just lost something. But it was her decision. It was her face, not mine.

The feeling stayed with me throughout the drive to the elementary school, and throughout the meeting, and ultimately until I was approached after the meeting. Cathy was trying to get volunteers for the upcoming field trip to Cox’s Farm. She had a daughter in Ben’s class, surprising because she looked at least 10 years younger than
anyone else there. And far more attractive. Beautiful in fact. Her red lips curled upward while her dark eyes flirted their way into my mind. Nora used to be that beautiful. I would lie awake each morning, just looking at her, thinking how lucky I was to have her. I haven't done that in years, I suppose I prefer to sleep in now.

After the meeting, I drove around for a while, thinking. When I pulled into the driveway, the house was dark. Nora and the kids must have gone to bed. The dogs greeted me at the door, and followed me into the kitchen, their nails clacking against the linoleum. In the dim sliver of light from the bathroom, I saw the sandwich. And the note.

"Just thought you might be hungry." It was my favorite, peanut butter and jelly. Quietly, I crept up the stairs, and peered in on Nora's sleeping form. She heard me and raised her head, a slight smile on her face. In the dim light, her scars were barely noticeable. I smiled softly, and slowly closed the door and walked back to the kitchen. With just the light from the bathroom, I sat at the table, and ate the sandwich in silence.

Inquietude: Noun; a state of restlessness or uneasiness

5 years 2 months

It was my favorite part of the whole day. After my mother had changed me into my pajamas for the night, I would sit down on my father's lap and read with him. Usually he would open up the book of generic fairy tales that we had owned for years. A few of the pages were ripped, and several were covered with streaks of orange, evidence of my sister's crayon experiments. But despite its flaws, I loved that book. Its pages filled my mind with images of fairies and talking wolves, and damsels in distress. My father would trace his finger along the lines of words that lay upon the page, reading slowly to me. Yet I knew every word before he said it. So instead of looking at the pages, I would turn to look at my father and watch the sides of his mouth as it opened and closed. I was amazed how it could appear so small in one instant, a little circle of pink wrinkles that would suddenly expand to cover most of the width of his face. The repetitions and fluctuations soothed me, and when the story was over I went to bed feeling that everything was going to be okay. Until one night. Dad had just finished reading the story about the knight and the dragon and the damsel. I sat there, not quite ready to go to bed, and looked up at my father. "But what happened after that?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, you just read The End, but I dunno, I guess I just wanna know what happens after he saves her and they fall in love."

"Well, they live "happily ever after"....I guess. It's just a story. Okay, how bout this? The prince and princess get married and open up...a shoe store....and....have a son, who asks too many questions when it is time to go to bed."

"That ending stinks."

"Well, it'll do. Time for bed."

That night I lay awake, thinking about that beautiful princess and her brave prince. And that dragon. I wasn't satisfied with THE END; there had to be something else to the story.

Euphoria – Noun; a feeling of great happiness or well-being

65 years, 7 months

I woke early. The sun was shining in
my eyes, and I knew that I would not be able to drift off again. The light filtering through the curtains fell upon Nora’s face, creating a map of shadow roads across her face. She lay on her side, facing me, her blanket clenched to her chest. Her eyes were closed in the softest way. She moved slightly with each breath, rising and falling, her nose whistling softly. I watched her as the shadows shifted into early morning and the sun grew brighter. I had the urge to reach out and touch her soft hair, which only hinted of its prior redness. But I didn’t. Something held me back, an inner peace that I did not want to disturb. Feeling was rising up inside of me, and I had to gasp for breath.

The alarm rang. Her eyes opened and closed, and then opened again. She saw me looking at her. She smiled, and I did not turn away.

Cynicism – Noun; An attitude that is scornful of the motives, virtue or integrity of others

19 years, 4 months

Let Go

The embryo of desire
is a polished, luminous pearl
lodged deep within the folds of our oyster-mind clamped shut. Open the shell and let go the priceless node into moments which shall never pass again—the tide of our life.

And if never again we berth the pearl
at least we found it,
and rolled it over our tongue.

by Melissa Patterson