

What I Love About History

by Angi Becker Stevens

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My roommate, Cara, wears all black, which she thinks scares me. I've never bothered to tell her I wore all black for two years, eighth and ninth grade, and I'm just over it, not that I think she's lame or passé, but there's nothing remotely intriguing about the things you yourself did at thirteen; you spend the rest of your life wanting to be as far away from reminders of your thirteen year old self as possible. The things that actually scare me are far more varied and complex: failure, the possibility of falling through sewer grates, adulthood, escalators, living the remainder of my life unloved, most forms of transportation. What scares me is that in my senior year, I'm still living in dorms and being blindly paired with some random freshman from another state, because in three years I haven't gotten close enough to anyone to live with them. That's far more frightening than some gaunt 18 year-old in Doc Martens.

Cara is only from Ohio, which means she goes home often on the weekends, and I have the luxury of all 9x12 feet of our room to myself. Sometimes I order food from the late night Chinese place, which is how I meet Kevin: unlikely delivery boy, at least five years older than I am. He wears thick glasses and his hair is always a mess even though he keeps it short. We never say anything to each other, but when he leaves he smiles and waves on his way out the door, like I'm an old friend.

"So why always just dinner for one?" he asks me finally, on probably his fourth or fifth midnight trip to my dorm. He leans in my doorway.

"Aren't you kind of old to be a delivery boy?" I snap back.

"Actually, I'm independently wealthy," he says. "This is just my hobby."

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"You love driving around at night, getting shit tips from drunk nineteen year-olds."

"It's the fresh air. No, no, actually it's the family business."

"Funny, you don't look Chinese."

"Adopted." We both pause. "No, really I'm writing the great American novel."

"Oh, I see. And this is research."

"No," he laughs. "It's rent. What about you? You have a thing for chop suey, or just delivery men?"

"I just decided I had a thing for chop suey when I saw you." I've never said anything so ridiculous in my life, but he smiles. I smile. I watch him lean in my doorway and think about how funny it is that sometimes such stupid little moments have weight, they press down on you as if they mean something.

When I was a little kid, I used to always read those "Drama in Real Life" stories in Reader's Digest, which damaged me for good. Monsters and ghosts of fantasy are one thing to keep a kid up at night, but these were actual things that had happened to actual people. And what is it about childhood that draws us to the things we're horrified by? "Drama in Real Life" left me with a lingering and permanent awareness of the myriad of ways in which I could be killed or nearly killed. Bridges collapse. As do balconies, roofs. Houses burn down. Madmen hijack cars, force you to chauffeur them with a gun to your head, and if you're witty enough and scrappy enough you could live to tell the story that will stick with some other little girl for the remainder of her life. I remember one story about a family lost in some arctic wilderness, and how they had no choice but to eat their beloved family dog. I have never owned a dog without looking at it and thinking "I would not be able to eat you." As if this is an acceptance of my fate. As if this is a dilemma I will ever actually be faced with.

I'm not saying I go about life in a state of constant panic and fear. It's more like a calm acknowledgment of the possibilities. I walk around always half expecting that buildings will come crashing

down on me, sinkholes will open up under my feet. And you'd think I would at least have the satisfaction of constant relief when I survive for yet another fifteen minutes, but really each momentary dread is just followed by quiet embarrassment, self-accusation, what the hell is wrong with me, of course that highway overpass wasn't going to crumble to the ground.

In the margins of my philosophy notebooks, I write out reassuring arguments:

1. Bridges very, very rarely collapse.
2. I rarely drive on bridges.

Therefore,

3. It is unlikely that I will plummet to a watery grave from a collapsing bridge.

Kevin starts bringing my delivery when he gets off work, along with his own meal. We sit across from each other, cross-legged on the ratty area rug now in its fourth dorm room, eating out of Styrofoam containers. Kevin teaches me to use chopsticks. I have nothing to teach him in return. I lack in every kind of experience. If there's a fairly obscure band I like, he not only likes them but is also familiar with their demos and side projects, things that often predate my cultural awareness. If I try to recommend a book that most people have never heard of, he's not only read it, but is able to recommend a dozen similar-but-better books that even fewer people have heard of. I have nothing to offer him, not even a wit to match his. Sometimes I want to ask him "what are you doing here?" But I'm too afraid he would realize he didn't know the answer, would get up and go.

Either because he has no understanding of socially acceptable behavior or more likely because he just doesn't care, Kevin asks me the kind of questions you aren't supposed to ask people.

"Why don't you have any friends?"

"I have friends," I tell him, but the truth is I only have acquaintances. He looks around my room, as if to see where they

might be hiding.

"What made you want to study history?"

"I like history."

"What do you like about it?"

"I just like it."

"Haven't you ever thought about why before? I mean, you're going to wind up in grad school for the next 6 or 7 years, and you'll wind up teaching after that and maybe after a decade or so you'll make a decent living at it. For god's sake, become a lawyer or an engineer if you don't know why you love it."

I don't know how to tell him that maybe I love it precisely because I don't want to have to figure out what I'm going to do with my life in another 8 months. I want the reprieve of grad school, the suspension of reality. I don't know why I picked history. History made as much sense as anything else.

I'm walking across campus on my way home from lunch, heading down a hill toward my building when I see this group of 8 or 10 pole vaulters gathered on this little patch of grass outside the dorms. They aren't vaulting, there isn't enough room for that. All they're doing is holding out their poles and running a few steps, like they're getting ready to vault, and then stopping short. They do it over and over again. I have my headphones in and can't hear anything other than the music. I stand at the top of the hill and watch them for a long time, until I realize the album is over and my headphones have gone silent without me even noticing. I don't know who's more pathetic: the cluster of kids who keep doing the same series of not-quite-actions over and over again for so long, or me, standing there and watching them. I wonder what exactly I think I'm doing with my life.

Kevin is thirty years old. He was married, once, for three years, and has already been divorced for four. When he got married, I was skulking around the halls of my high school reading *Catcher in the Rye* too many times, feeling oppressed because my parents wouldn't

sign for me to get my eyebrow pierced. When Kevin got his driver's license, I was learning to ride without training wheels. I don't have any illusion about how he sees me. But sometimes I catch myself thinking: If only I had been born four or five years earlier. It feels like a regret, as if I somehow waited too long.

1. Kevin does not see me as someone he would fall for.
 2. I would not want to fall for someone who would never fall for me.
- Therefore,
3. I will not fall for Kevin.

Cara makes friends more easily than I do. As the air turns cooler, she stops going home so often. I lay in the top bunk and pretend to be asleep while four or five kids in black trench coats with pink and blue hair and pierced everything sit on the floor and the couch drinking coffee until 3 am. I listen to the melody of their speech, all those voices flowing together. I listen to them while they sit down there hating everything together, and I feel a sharp pang of envy for their happiness.

Sometimes, one particular boy stays the night, and I sleep with my headphones in, lulled by the rhythmic rocking of the bunk beds. I imagine my bunk snapping loose and crushing them, or tipping just enough to launch me embarrassingly onto the floor beside them. Sometimes Cara's soft moans escalate above the volume of the music, breathy and surprisingly delicate.

The list of boys I have slept with can be recited in less than a second: Rob, Dan, Jon. Some individual names are longer than theirs combined. Rob was my high school boyfriend. Dan was a guy I had dated for a little while sophomore year. Jon was a guy junior year, when I had been hanging out with a group of people who never became more than casual friends. He was one of them, and we slept together after a party one night. All three of them conjure feelings that are vague and neutral: no warm nostalgia, no regret. If I miss them, it's in a generic sort of way, missing another body to press

against in the dark. Sometimes I wonder what's wrong with me for not falling harder, being wounded. But mostly I feel like I've lucked out so far, to not have had the Big Love, the kind that stays like a dull ache in your bones, so that you can feel your blood throbbing against it whenever it rains.

Sometimes when my room is too crowded, or just when I feel like getting out, I go to the bar with Kevin to drink cheap beer and listen to some bands play. Even at the back of the bar, we have to shout above the music to hear each other. Kevin leans over and cups his hand around my ear to tell me something, and I still can't hear him, I just smile at the heat of his breath on the side of my face. Everything else is gesture. When he stands there with his arm draped around my shoulders, I know it's merely companionable, almost brotherly, even. And yet when he rubs my bare arm, squeezes my shoulder, against all logic, it feels like the sort of thing that matters.

When the winter's first big snowstorm hits, Kevin and I are alone in my room. It's a Tuesday and I have class in the morning, but I'm learning to care just a little bit less about that. Cara is out who knows where, and we've already finished our chop suey and are sharing a bottle of cheap red wine. It's been snowing all day, a fine powder coming down steadily, a light dusting on the ground. But it turns into a blizzard out of nowhere, the way it often does, coming down so fast the whole night sky becomes a sheet of white. On the late night news, they're already talking school closings, possible accumulation of almost a foot, treacherous icy roads with limited visibility.

"Don't go out and drive in that," I tell him. "Just stay here."

"I'll be fine, it's not even a mile."

"Don't be silly," I say. "Just stay."

It would feel sort of ridiculous for us to climb into the bunkbeds, so we spread out all my blankets and pillows on the rug. In the dark, in the quiet, we lie side by side on our backs watching the snow light up in the streetlights outside of the window. We talk about things

everyone talks about: how we stopped believing in God, what our parents think of us, how we have no clue how to imagine our futures. When silence falls, he asks "what are you thinking right now?"

"Mmm," I say. "What are you thinking right now?"

"Evasive," he says. "I asked first."

"I don't know what I'm thinking right now," I say. The edges of our bodies are just barely touching, maybe not even quite touching, maybe just close enough to feel the presence of each other, the millimeter before touch. We're like a near miss, a slanted rhyme.

And what would he say, and what would he do, if I answered with the truth: I'm thinking that I just realized I'm in love with you. I'm thinking I didn't know until now that I had never been in love before. I'm thinking about how sad that is. I'm thinking I've been too busy worrying about the world falling down on me to realize where the real risks have been all along. I thought you were safe. I thought my heart was smarter than this.

In the morning, Kevin is still sleeping when I slip out. I look at him for a few seconds and think about how harmless he seems there on the floor with his mouth half open, his glasses off, his arms folded close to his chest. I want to stay, lie next to him, watch him sleep, touch the side of his face when he wakes up. I want to be lovers, spending the day drowsy in bed, our hair still messy and our breath still sour. But it takes more than a blizzard for them to cancel class the week before finals, and it would take more than this tugging in my chest to make me skip them.

Outside, the world looks perfect, every surface and every tree branch coated with a layer of snow and ice, so precise it doesn't look real. I hate winter, but I love the snow before footprints, when it looks like a solid thing, like you could walk on top of it without sinking through. I trudge across campus and try to just appreciate the plain beauty of it all, try not to think how it will all be dripping, dirty sludge in another few days.

My English professor tells us that scientists have discovered it's the

right frontal lobe that processes figurative language. It's possible for someone to suffer brain damage and wake up unable to understand simile or metaphor. They take everything completely literally. I think about how that would be terrifying and simple at the same time. I wonder if there is a brain injury that would remove the ability to feel flattered and smitten. Which lobe is responsible for misinterpretation of gesture. Where an EEG would flare at the moment the idiot heart overrode all rational thought. I wonder about the location of longing, and if I put my finger there and sat very still, would it feel like a pulse?

I survive finals without pulling any all-nighters, bored as usual with the lack of real effort it requires, my ability to eloquently bullshit my way through essays and regurgitate facts for objective tests, filling in the tiny ovals until they're shiny and almost black. Grad school applications are due in the next few weeks, and I entertain the idea of going off to California or Florida, somewhere sunny and warm, but I know in the end I'll probably just stay here in the cold, relative safety of the known.

I ring in the new year at Kevin's apartment, surrounded by his friends and acquaintances, shocked that among them all, he spends so much time hovering around me, linking his arm through mine. I know I've had too many beers, and I'm probably acting like a ridiculous, flirtatious little girl, but the room is glowing with the warmth of alcohol and companionship and Christmas lights, and it all feels somehow okay. Kevin's ex-girlfriend is there, surrounded by a cluster of people, talking and laughing and drinking. She's four inches taller and ten pounds skinnier than me, and when I look at her, what I wonder is how anyone survives having him and then losing, carrying on as friends. When I look at her, she smiles at me, but I imagine there's something sad in it just before she turns away.

At midnight, we all clink beer bottles together. Kevin gives me a chaste peck on the lips, the same as what he offers all the girls, but it melts something in me anyway, the block of ice in my gut going all watery around the edges.

Because I've had too much to drink, I slip outside with a friend of Kevin's for a cigarette, a short girl with black hair whose name I know but always forget. We lean against the brick building, holding our coats tightly shut against the cold, blowing smoke up toward the streetlights.

"There's sure chemistry between you two," she says.

And I laugh, "me and Kevin?" I'm shaking my head, feigning amused indifference while my heart lurches into my throat.

"But you have to watch out for that one," she says. And my eyes must go wide, because she laughs, then, and says "oh, no, it's not like that, it's not like he's out to use anyone. He's no kind of player, at least not in the intentional way. He's just...Well, he's a man. And he gets to where he genuinely cares about a girl, as a friend, and then the next thing you know he'll wind up in bed with her, and she's thinking it means something and he's just clueless that anyone might really fall for him, no matter how many times it's happened before. He doesn't mean any harm. He's just an idiot." I look at the door, chewing my bottom lip. What I'm doing is making a risk assessment. I'm wondering if I could have him just once, if it would be worth what it would cost me. I'm not drunk enough or stupid enough to think it would make anything better. But I wonder if it could possibly make things any worse.

"Why isn't he ever interested in more?" I ask. "If he cares about a girl, and finds her attractive..."

She sighs. "I think he would be interested, if he could be. But it's Mandy, he's not ever going to get that one out of his system." She shakes her head. "Men, you know? They never know what they want." But I'm standing there thinking how I don't know men, not really, not even the one I love.

It's close to 3 by the time everyone is gone, and Kevin insists on walking me home, when what I really want is for him to insist that I stay. Most nights he would, but he's as drunk as I am, can't trust himself tonight. So we bundle up in scarves and hats and walk the near-mile back to campus, both of us quiet and almost staggering, kicking at hard chunks of snow like rocks on the sidewalk. He waits

in the yellow light outside my building while I'm fumbling in my pocket for my keys, digging past chapstick and spare change and bottle caps.

"I hope you had a good time tonight," he says. I look up at him, the simple sincerity on his face, and I know what I'm doing but can't stop myself when I'm tilting my face up toward his, putting my arms around him, crashing into his lips with mine.

And I know I'm drunk, but I'm not imagining it, the passion from him. He's got his hand on the back of my head, all tangled in my hair, and the other arm around my waist, pressing me to him, and I'm hating the bulk of our jackets in-between us and thinking how I want more of him, all of him, I want him inside of me, not just in the obvious physical way but in some other less tangible way as well, like I want him to be in my veins. And even when he pulls away, he doesn't pull back; he stands there with his arms still around me, breathing into my open mouth, and I want to swallow his breath, I want to hold it in my lungs for as long as I can.

"Come up to my room," I whisper. He closes his eyes. He pulls me against him, but not, now, with intensity or hunger. The side of my face is resting on his chest, his hand stroking my hair gently, as if to comfort, to calm.

"You've had too much to drink," he says.

And I'm thinking: All that does is give me the balls to do what I've wanted to do all along. But I say "And I'm making an ass of myself." "No," he says. "Don't be silly. You're not making an ass out of yourself. You're perfectly fine. You're wonderful." I squeeze my eyes shut against the hot tears burning in them. Drunk or not, he must know by now how I feel. It's been all too painfully obvious, the way I lean in his direction, the way I tune out the world when he speaks, the way I'm too eager to laugh at his every hysterical, deadpan joke. And if he wanted me, he would know better by now than to worry that he was taking advantage, that it was only the alcohol making me willing tonight.

"You think of me as a child, don't you?" I ask.

"Of course not," he says. "You're a woman." He waits a beat, and

no less than everything seems to hinge on that measured pause.
“But you're a woman at a very different place in her life than I am.”

I pull back from him, look at him at arm's length. “Why did you break up with her?” I ask.

“Mandy?” He sighs. “I don't know. She wanted to be with someone she could imagine marrying someday, and I don't think I believe in marriage anymore. I don't know if I could ever do it again.”

“But you love her.”

He scratches the back of his head, looks away from me. “It's complicated,” he says.

“Isn't it always complicated?” I ask him.

He looks back at me. “Yeah,” he says. “I guess so.”

“If I loved you,” I say, “and you loved me, I'd say to hell with everything else.”

He does a funny thing, then: he leans toward me, and kisses me softly on the forehead, the kind of kiss that lingers somehow even after he's moved away. I put my arms around his waist and lean into the smell of him, whiskey and beer and fabric softener and sweat. “Happy New Year,” he whispers, just before I let him go.

I might tell Kevin someday, or I might not, that what I love about History is the perverse sense of safety it offers me. Its horrors are distant and contained. I will not be stoned to death when I don't bleed on my wedding sheets. I won't face the guillotine if I fail to bear a son. I won't die like a trapped animal in a burning, overcrowded sweatshop. History is terrible and cruel in ways that can't touch me. Of course I've read accounts of some atrocities that chill me to the bone, that keep me up at night. But it's the modern perils that haunt me. Whenever I board an escalator, I think of a story I saw on the news as a child, at my aunt's house, about a little boy who lost his toes in an escalator because his shoelaces got sucked into it. When I drive near water, I remember being in the backseat of my parents' car, listening to the radio and hearing about a family who had crashed into the Detroit river, how the kids

drowned, still buckled in.

When I was maybe twelve or so, I was at a friend's house watching the news when they did a special report on train/car crashes. What I remember is the engineer, maybe in his fifties, who solemnly hung his head as he said "Sometimes you just can't possibly stop in time...You never forget the first." And that's what I think about, always, when I think about love.

