

Unrequited

ROSEMARY FORD

In third grade Marcus asked me to be his Valentine. At the time I assumed that he, a lowly four-square player, had been enchanted by my prowess in the tether ball circle. I imagined he was the ball and I the pole to which he was tethered, whirling helplessly around and around...

The next day I allowed my mother to dress me for the first time in years. My dress had a solid black top and a red skirt. I wore tights, shiny black shoes and a large red bow in my hair.

Marcus avoided me all that day and I couldn't play in my dress; the sleeves were too tight for tether ball, I disdained four-square, and a lady did not swing from the rings in a dress.

On the way home I tried to sit near him at the back of the bus with the fifth and sixth graders, but he sat with weak-chinned Billy, and together they stared at me, pointing and giggling.

Sixth grade made way for Levi. Amazingly, he spent more time in the principal's office than I did. When we tie-dyed t-shirts, Levi filled his rubber gloves with dye that turned his hands blue up to his wrists. He was sentenced to stand alone outside of the portable and I faked a trip to the restroom to be with him a few moments. We exchanged phone numbers and talked for hours about our favorite

movies. For him I learned to play wall-ball and let him win a couple of tether ball matches.

A few weeks later Levi began dating Miranda, the lead in the school production of "The Wizard of Oz".

I was standing at the corner waiting for my ride. The school emptied rapidly behind me, friends I'd made smiled and waved. Some upper classmen still stared at me as though they'd never seen a 'fro before.

"Take a look in the mirror after getting caught in the rain," I wanted to tell the Sisters.

"Google *Soul Train*" I considered suggesting to the Latinas. But for the first time, I was happy at school, and really, what did it matter?

I began humming to myself. It was some tune we were working on in jazz band. We played songs with names that made my tongue roll, like *Mi Tierra*. I rehearsed my part in my head. I could feel my hands at my sides, fingers twitching against the imaginary keys of a saxophone, my lips folded around an invisible mouthpiece. The rhythm section laid down the beat on the congas and the bass, the trumpets carried the melody, I had the counter-melody and the rest of the band followed.

Somebody hit me- punched me in the shoulder. I hadn't been hit since elementary school. It didn't hurt, but still... I could feel my eyes narrow and tension gather between my shoulder blades ready to travel down to my own fists and explode.

I looked up and around. A boy was smiling at me. He had a do-rag on and his skin was the same shade as mine, but more yellow than red. He was big and looked

solid. His face was rough but his lips were well formed, his teeth straight and white. His eyes seemed dark and they were laughing at me, like we shared a secret. After a moment I recognized him from band. Tenor sax. Senior; he sat to my right not two feet away. His shoulder sometimes pressed against mine. I didn't remember his name.

Then, I wondered how upset Aunt Beverly would be if I got suspended from school for punching him in his laughing face. Later, I learned his name.

When I was twelve I discovered the movie "Purple Rain" and the Artist Formerly Known as Prince, and I fell in love.

In eighth grade I discovered Mario, whom looked just like a young Prince, and I fell in love with him. Mario was the baddest, bad in school; while other boys mouthed off to teachers and vandalized school property, Mario watched from the sidelines, but my friend Crystal told me that at night you could buy pot at his bedroom window like the drive-thru at McDonalds.

*This didn't matter to me because he had the darkest eyes I had ever seen and I wanted to be Appelonia to his Prince. We passed notes in English while we should have been reading *The Call of the Wild*. Those notes were teasing and provocative; their contents made me blush, and we would have had detention for a week if we'd been discovered.*

Our note-passing affair ended when Mario began dating stripper-shoe wearing Kris-kris, an older woman whom had been held back after her pregnancy last year.

Octavius. His name was Octavius Something-or-other. I thought his name was wonderful because it was

worse than mine, not simply old-fashioned like Rosemary, but thousands of years old.

I knew where to find him in between classes.

If I took the central staircase down to Mr. Bayron's class before first period, he would be sitting at the bottom with the honey-eyed boy, Marcus, and he always stared at me until he couldn't see me anymore.

We passed each other on the way to third period. In the beginning we simply looked at each other. I was wary, he seemed amused. One day he touched me. He caught a hold to my left arm, just above the wrist. His palm was rough, like very, very fine sand paper, warm and broad. He had large knuckles, his fingers were long and square-tipped with short, clean nails. His hands looked confused, like they didn't know whether to make music or break bone.

He held on until he was forced to let go; his hand sliding down my wrist, into my palm, our fingers tangling then parting, and gone.

That touch started a tingling that began at the nape of my neck and traveled lower. From sex education and romance novels I'd assumed that arousal would come from between my thighs. That day I learned otherwise.

When I was 18 I met an actor. His name was Allan, and he had sketched out an improv piece for our acting class. Being a young, single father at the age of twenty-six, he had decided to profile a friend of his whom also had a child.

"Come on in", he invited boisterously.

"Dude, I'm glad you guys made it! This game is

gonna be off the chain. Who has the beer? My man! Yea, have a seat anywhere... Yo, I think I have some chips and shit in the kitchen. Hey, I got this dime bag from my hook-up across town, he said this shit is so good it'll make you stutter and shit. Wanna light up? The kid? He's in the back room, we ain't gotta worry about his ass..."

Watching him perform that piece, I was hooked. I was fascinated with his commitment to the world he had created. One moment he was any stupid young man, smoking pot and watching a game with his friends, and we laughed. In the very next instant he was screaming at his child, that "little bastard", had picked up a broom and stormed off stage, leaving the rest to our imaginations, and we were appalled.

On stage Allan was the conductor and the audience was his orchestra; we felt whatever he wanted us to, and were glad to feel it.

I was with Allan for one week, and dumped him the next.

She was a narrow thing, and tall. Taller than myself, anyway. She had barely enough hair for a ponytail, her parents probably should have invested in braces and her glasses were very round, and didn't flatter her face. Later... *much* later, I would be sorry for talking about her weight, her hair, her teeth, even if it was only in my head. She couldn't choose her genes and perhaps her parents couldn't afford braces. But I *never* felt bad for hating her glasses. There is no excuse for bad taste.

His hair was only half braided. Her long arms were wound around his waist. He was staring into her eyes, almost besotted, I imagined.

In that moment I was Jimi Hendrix in his pauper's grave back home. Imagine the autopsy report: Asphyxiated on her own vomit, a mixture of tears, 2% milk and an unidentifiable substance curtsey of the Lake View lunch ladies.

I started dating Jamar a few weeks before my twenty-second birthday. He was a beautiful dark-chocolate brown. He wrote poems in which he compared our relationship to a tennis match, and I always won. He taught me how to play video games, and laughed when I lost. We Didn't go out for Valentines day because I was sick, but he delivered orange juice, cough drops, a white teddy bear, a singing card and a dozen red roses to my room.

When we were together he liked to stay several paces behind me to admire my walk.

I broke up with Jamar just before I turned twenty-two.

I had just finished putting my sax together. She's a Bundy II Alto, student model. My father picked her out for me the summer before fifth grade. Nearly my whole family, a great aunt, two little brothers, my father and I, went to three different music stores before he found her at Yenny's Music. My father insisted that she be brand new. She was a particular shade of gold that I called Asian Gold. To me that was the color of the earrings and bracelets the Cambodian and Thai girls wore. She was perfection and we were perfection together. I tell you when she was almost body temperature from neck to bell and my reed was just broken in, my embouchure airtight at the corners and soft in the middle; when my neck-strap was choked-up so that her bottom just caressed my thigh, my nails were cut to the quick and the fingering position was on pointe; when we were

like that I could play her like a Preacher does a Sinner on fire and its Ash Wednesday.

I was just sitting down to warm up when I felt the chair beneath me shift to the left. Octavius looked at me slant-eyed.

“Don’t do it, Rose.”

I ignored him. I began with a scale in G major. The chair continued to list to the side and for a few moments I ignored it as well. Then imagined it suddenly falling out from under me in the midst of my *Chillin’* duet and began to reconsider my position.

“Don’t do it, Rose. Get a new chair” he said again. “If you fall and bust your shit, I’ll have to laugh because I told you so, and then you’ll be mad, so please, just get a new chair.”

I didn’t point out that he was already laughing. I didn’t think twice before trusting him with an object that held some of my most precious memories. I just sighed, handed him my saxophone, and went to get a new chair.

I sometimes see my old crushes, and I think of them only when I see them, which is not often. They are like the songs I cut my chops on when I picked up my Bundy. They were new and exciting, each skill mastered a joy, every bar navigated without a missed finger was to be celebrated. Erie Canal Capers and my first solo, the driving rhythm and syncopated beat of Rock Island Express, the pitfall of accidentals that was the melody of Sakura- they thrilled me. When I play them now I can almost recall when those songs, those boys and those feelings, were new. It feels the way a new reed tastes; bitter, yet necessary. Each young man was special in his right and necessary in his time.