

Spring 1999

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Recommended Citation

Susco, Carroll (1999) "Love Story: An Untelling," *CutBank*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 51 , Article 17.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/cutbank/vol1/iss51/17>

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LOVE STORY: AN UNTELLING

WHAT I WANT TO KNOW is how to write a love story. I thought maybe you could tell me why I can't write one, how it got to be this way. But when I called you, you had your own set of answers, your own set of questions. So I stopped asking, hung up, stretched out on the couch, and set to the unpleasant task of holding a funeral and burying you. This required a blanket over my head, sad music playing, a candle burning, abstinence, repetition.

I've done this before: buried my lovers in unmarked graves. The time it takes to dig them varies. There's the dirt to consider. If it's a nice day for it. If I feel like digging. If I want to pretend a little longer that they're alive and kicking, just forgetting to call. But when I picture them, there they are, their graves, some gloriously grown over. Yours, still fresh, mocked all attempts to subdue you. Night after night, blanket over my face until it was moist and breathing was hard. The dirt churned and you rose and strutted away. I ran after, just to catch a glimpse between the trees, to see you turn with that laugh, that smile, that said you'd be back again the next night, and the next, with those dancing eyes that know me better than I do.

One night, blanket heavy and thick, a second candle burned to a nub, your grave sits undisturbed and quiet. I look at it, think maybe you're going to stay dead this time. That's when I start unearthing your grave, an unholy task, digging you back up. My fingernails broken and full of dirt. There you are, in various stages of decomposition. Your hair remains, a look, a smile, the way you wore your socks half on, half off. I pack the dirt down, spit on your grave, dare you to come back again. And when this doesn't work, I pray, make an offering to any god who will listen. Even then I know the danger of asking for you, dead, to come back to me, that what I'm asking for isn't resurrection, but I tell myself what I'm telling is a love story, knowing I don't know how to tell one, that that isn't what I'm telling. I don't want you to stop coming back to me. I want to stop wanting you to come back to me.

The magic hours between eleven and two in the morning are

bewitching. During this time, I trouble myself. I go someplace where the memory of you can't find me. There, I spend my time talking with someone I do not desire to talk to. I can talk myself into it. I can't sometimes. But I can talk myself into people. See them and see possibilities. Imagine them in full court regalia, talking of phoenixes. Or they are closed books with titles I don't recognize. I examine the covers, the binding, the cloth worn on the edge.

I find a man who'll listen and tell him the things I used to save for you, but he doesn't respond the way you would. This is a disappointment, but it's OK, I can imagine you responding, anyway. Maybe that's all I ever did. I forget to listen to him. He buys me a beer, so I tell him I'm trying to write a love story but I'm having a little trouble. I put them in a scene together, but nothing happens like it's supposed to. I send them down the rapids without helmets on because it would mess up their hair and they wouldn't look good to each other. They hold onto the boat, lose the paddles, water rushes in. They bail it, see there's too much weight. There's a struggle. They try to kick each other out. Never stand up in the boat, that's what the guides warned them, but there they are, grabbing at each other like cats. The whole thing flips. She drowns. He's crushed on the rocks. The man I'm telling my story to has long eyelashes, which he crunches together. He tells me he can't help me write a love story, and I believe him. He says, Maybe you should try your hand at horror. We talk about all the horror movies ever made, but it always comes back to the dead movies for me, *Night of the Living*, *Dawn of the*, the *Day of*. All those dead people coming back and taking a bite out of you. Next thing I know I lose interest in talking to this person I am talking to, I lose interest in talking, and then I can't talk at all. A shot helps here, but for the most part, the words that come out of me make no sense. They simply refuse.

I have a lot of stamina and find that this someone I am talking to who is not you is listening anyway and drinking rapidly. I think about this person, I like the way he's listening to me and that fast I look and his eyes say I confuse him. You know, when the person's head tilts slightly and they frown. They look at me and squint. I think he is reevaluating his chances of achieving

coitus with me. I try to remember what I just said, forget to listen to what he says, and then there's that silence and I don't know what he's thinking, can't hear him to save my life, and look at that chin. Whose chin is that? I look at him and think Who the hell are you? He vaporizes, goes to the bathroom and never comes back.

This is tiring, as you can imagine. I can't do it too often. I stand at the bar and watch faces transform, become pale and abstract shapes, noses, cheeks, foreheads, wet blank eyes. They see me looking past them, looking down into the pit of the dancers. I can be the dancers, I can dance like a woman whose spine is elastic, not vertebrae. You wouldn't recognize me the way I can dance like there is no limit to my legs, arms, pelvis.

I look at the men and want all of them. Ones that look like you, ones that look nothing like you. I relish their leather jackets, T-shirts, workboots, jeans, belt buckles, thick arms, wide hands, hipless torsos, their long quads and big knees, backs with shoulder blades and slight indents for a waist that tell me where the butt starts. The thought of the smell of them. Caught looking, I feel your eyes on me.

You make a fine love story when you are here for real but as a ghost your presence is more than a little unsettling. I yell for someone to close the door, but the door's closed, and I think it was your fingers that I felt on my back. Makes me remember the promise I made to you, the one I couldn't keep. It occurs to me that any of these men could be my next victim and I try to stop enjoying the sight of them, feel the need to apologize to each and every one, Sorry, sorry, right down the bar and into the men's room. Sorry. I wax poetic. I am the weed in the Potomac, hydrilla, that's spreading like dandelions, strangling boats, sucking up oxygen, killing fish and plant life. I'm drunk enough to start mumbling. I'm sitting on my bar stool saying, Your fish would die.

I wallow in my arrogance and in my strength. I lose myself in distance, contemplate my beer label. The best part of me, lost between the hours of eleven and two, lost in a carbon monoxide fog. Like the smoke in a bar. I head for the door, hacking.

I don't always go to bars, despite what you think. Sometimes I do nice things with my friends. Nice things: coffee and tea, pizza and a movie, shopping for clothes. Sometimes, we do real

things together like interact, talk about feelings, stuff you wouldn't be interested in. I meet a friend. Over coffee, we tell each other stories about our lives, but the story I can't tell her about me, the one I don't have the words for, is that damn love story, you know the one, the one we were supposed to be. Each time I start to make one up, it always ends so badly, ends in dismemberment, a car wreck, prison, nuclear war, death, something. No happy endings. The problem with happy endings is they don't end. They keep going. I try again. I keep talking. Her teeth fall out, his hair. They keep the same couch for twenty years until it's ratty and full of holes and they can't stand the sight of it, but neither says a word because they think the other has some sentimental attachment to it. I get animated here. My eyes bug out. Shaking my fist, I scream, But each time they walk in and see that damn brown couch and know they will sit on it tonight again, and tomorrow, they are filled with boundless grief! They sit quietly filled with terror and rage! My girlfriend reminds me here I need to work on my beginnings before I get to the endings. She tries to help me, says, She shouldn't have told him to stick a sock in it in that one, she shouldn't have corrected his English in the other, she shouldn't wear those shoes with those pants, she shouldn't run around the corner when she sees him cross the street toward her. No wonder she got hit by a bus. Running like that, not looking where she was going. I go home and type one up, try to fix what I've written. I spill coffee and the paper turns brown. The cat throws up on the page where she decides she likes him.

Sometimes I have to be home. This is because my stability falters. I feel it coming. My gown turns to rags. I don black pajamas. I don't want to be comforted. I drive home at a hundred miles per hour, eat a batch of brownies, turn the radio up to ten, even though it blows the speakers and the neighbors knock on the door. Other people seem so relaxed. Why don't you turn your radio down and be quiet? I don't understand this. They go home and go to bed. They stay home and watch all the prime time shows, the eleven o'clock news, and fall asleep. You don't know what I'm talking about here. Never mind. That part's not true.

There's a soap opera I watch. You would never watch it, so let me tell you, she came back after five years, he thought she was

dead, but she wasn't, only amnesiac. She's even more beautiful now and he, he's long haired and half shaven with soft eyes and Clorox-white teeth. He has that look when he smiles at her, and there she is, back, but he's moved on, had to you see, that's the way life is, even after the first love you have to keep moving so he did, he moved, and she was the same, only amnesiac, but then she remembered, was unwilling to forget. She learned to remember.

I take a shower and the present finds me, the moment when I step out of the shower and rub my stomach dry and look at the soft curve of skin. I stare at myself like I have seen this body before but forgot it was there.

I think the soap story's a variation of that terrible love story they spoon feed us in girl's training camp, *Sleeping Beauty*: I was taking a nap. I don't know how long—years—and I woke up and there he was, kissing me, how nice, and that's it. The end.

I try to write that story, post-ending: Sleeping Beauty fell asleep and when she woke up he kissed her and said, Let's go home, but after a little while he said, I'm going out. She followed, caught him kissing someone else and he said, I can't help it if you sleep too much. Maybe you should get out more. Sleeping Beauty goes to retro night at the local club but gets too drunk and doesn't feel like being nice to anybody. No one buys her a drink because she's leaning over the several she's already emptied looking morose and slightly dangerous, violent dangerous. Kind of mean and annoyed, but really who can blame her? It wasn't supposed to be that way, he was supposed to stay home after she woke up. She hates writers, they're always changing things.

Happy endings don't end, and that's why they're happy. But there are always endings, beginnings and endings. They teach you that, first thing. You never could tell me how to write a love story, and now you can't help me end it, either. There must be other stories. Why always love? What does that mean, anyway—love—such a badly worn word, like the seat of a bus. And why does it sound to me like so many slamming doors?

On my soap there's no one else on the set this woman can fall in love with. They brought in a rival for a week or two but he's since disappeared and how can she have a love again like the first one? No one'd believe it. They pulled out all the stops for the

first one, having her lose her virginity on a deserted island and going on location for the wedding. That dress, outdated, but I still remember it. Must make you feel like royalty, to wear something like that. How impressive, how it all looked, monumental. How was she to know that he would forget, stop loving her? I yell at the TV, He's not right for you! He doesn't understand. Get over it! I'm standing, sit back, aware that I was standing and that I should have been sitting. That I'm yelling at the television set and that this is a stupid soap opera. And then I start laughing at her, at me. She is saying she will wait, if it takes the rest of her life, and my stomach hurts she is so funny. I am already leaving to go make lunch. The rest of the day I laugh and even get some reading done.

I tell myself, sex is such a silly thing, and go to bed, but in bed I remember the smell of someone else on the sheets, the warmth under the covers, dandruff on the pillow, two-hour sloppy wet kisses in a car. I get up and drink some milk, go to bed, and can't remember what it's like to smell someone, kiss two soft lips. I get up and try to tell the story again but I don't know how to write a love story and what I want to ask you is how it got to be this way. Did I know once and forget? Don't tell me this is one. Sleeping Beauty with runny mascara looking tired and crunching ice cubes at retro night, and Prince Charming off with someone else and, yeah, he's getting it but one look at his pasty skin and you can tell he's not happy.

OK, I tell myself, you can do this love story thing. You just need better examples. I think of the classics. *Love Story*: two people meet, intimacy and passion occur, but she looks a little sickly, can't act. She dies and he stands in the snow saying, Now what? Perpetual suffering? The end. Or the other one: two made one through the magic of infatuation kill themselves before they get to the disillusioning part where they figure out two are still two. The part where she is brushing her teeth and he is clipping his toenails, he doesn't feel like it and she does. I write *Romeo and Juliet Revisited*. She doesn't die, at the last minute can't swallow the poison. Days later, without remorse, she's riding bareback when she meets two brothers who have a farm and offer to water her panting horse. Gleefully, she accepts. The one is a world famous accordionist, the other plays sad songs on the harmonica. I don't

tell whether she sleeps with them or others, or whether, riding the horse, she achieves orgasm. After writing this I relax, find out I'm tired.

I sleep and there you are, come back to me. In the dream you're watching me have sex with a man neither of us know. I wake with a start. Dead people do that sometimes. Just sit up like they're about to get off the table. It's creepy when it happens. No one kisses them, despite the *Sleeping Beauty* propaganda.

It's four a.m. now and I'm not sleeping. How has this happened that I'm not sleeping? I thought I'd always be sleeping this time of night. Always assumed you, or someone, would be next to me, planned on it even, took precautions to guard against sleeping alone, and then ran off one day to go sleep by myself. Why did I do that? Because you can buy a dildo for seven dollars? But it's not waterproof. These are the questions I ponder until five a.m. when I decide there is something wrong with me. There are people who have lived on the streets for ten years and never have a lover, they don't wake up at four a.m. wanting. What if they do? My God, they might. Still, there are starving children all over the world. Don't I have something better to do? What do you do in your house day after day? Why don't you have to call someone, me or your mother? How can this be that you have no need to call and I call and I call. I call the weather report to hear the sound of a voice and I go out when I want sleep. What is this compulsion? This is not love. What is this compulsion that drags me out of the house when I could be home getting fat, eating cookies, watching *Nightline*, or getting my *Sleeping Beauty* rest. And I look at my cat who remains immobile fifteen hours a day and I want to know how he can sleep all the time and then I remember how, every once in a while, he peels from room to room with his ears back and his claws grabbing the carpet. I wonder if I am an insomniac, but I'm no insomniac, what am I?

Coming home, waiting for the bus, I talk to a man. His wedding ring causes me to fawn, like he is a fragile thing, a present, a flower, a passing storm. I wonder if he's happy. I wonder what that means. Doesn't matter, he should stay with her, no he shouldn't, I don't know if he should or not. That's the terrible part, those awful decisions we have to make. I wish the bus would come.

That night, I have a nightmare. It wakes me up. It's about a man trying to break in and kill me. He has red eyes and wears a shadow. I guess my usual nightmare, the vampire that looks like the guy on the Coke commercial, the one with slicked back hair and a too-short suit, I guess he was taking the night off. And now I'm awake again, and scared. My own mind scares me. A killer man. Crazy. I wonder what he's so pissed off about? A story he wants me to tell that I'm not telling, I think. Just a thought, I dismiss it, like all the others. Like the others, it continues to lurk.

There is some connection between my dream and my decision to attend an Anything But Love Workshop over at the Y. They perform a ritual exorcism on me that involves screaming, dancing, chanting, kneeling on the hard floor. I'm sure you wouldn't want the details, it's bad enough I went. We pick a partner to tell off. I tell mine he is driving me nuts, screwing up all my stories. He yells at me to stop writing then, knowing this will provoke me. I write a poem:

Pygmalion Revisited

He carves my face like he would a stump
Wood shavings
tickle
I have to sneeze
Try to hold it
Can't
My head jerks forward
Spit on his collar
The look on his face
Is horror
I tell him Release me
I'm flesh

My workshop partner tells me this is the worst poem he has ever heard in his life. I tell him that's because he has the sensibility of a flea beetle. We admit we don't like each other over tea and cookies. We graduate and I go home.

You know what happens then. I undress. I lay down, pretend

to sleep until it's late enough to give up. I ignore the feeling of things lurking in the dark and go into the kitchen. The breeze rushes up my spine, pushes the hair off my neck and kisses it the way you used to when we could touch. It wraps itself around me from behind, plants soft hands around my forearms, lifts the hairs up off my arms, gives me gooseflesh. Gooseflesh: plucked raw skin, raised pink bumps. My nipples tighten and rub against my nightgown. Damn your ghost always coming back for more when I'm not sleeping. I dare you to come in the morning when the sun's out and the sky is as clean as a postcard. Wish you were here. Having a lovely time.

The breeze that blows in through the open window pulls the blue flame on the stove to one side, threatens to blow it out. The flame ripples and snaps like a flag in the wind. Outside the window is blue black except for the white cylinder of moon that makes everything shadow in contrast, except for the blue flame, which I watch, waiting for the pop and sizzle of water beginning to boil in the sauce pan.

Love story: Picture yourself in a small flat box and try to stay there. Now crush that box with your fist. That's a love story. That's how it ends.

Blanket over my head, I go at your grave with the shovel one more time, pack the dirt down. Inspect the other graves for signs of disturbance. Next time I'll know to dig more deeply. Digging graves in my nightgown and I don't care, this has to be done. The middle of the night is a fit time for such a morbid task. One final assault with the head of the shovel. Now stay there, I command. I listen for scratching, hear none.

Nothing left now but to drink my tea and listen to the quiet. Listen to all that quiet. That's quiet all right, not the empty kind. More like the ocean at night when the waves look dark and full of something, like tar. Not the waiting kind of quiet, but the kind where it is only you breathing in and out, in and out.

I turn on the radio and decide that I've given up trying to write a love story. They were always about something else, anyway: expectation, desire, longing, loneliness, fear, the absence of love, death. I decide to give up people altogether.

If I could write a love story, I would bring you back to life. I would paint you on the corner in that beat-up flight jacket with

that fake fur lining, your hair too long so it wraps around your collar. You'd be standing on a street corner, your face white with cold and your nose puffy and red, and when you saw me you'd smile, wrap one fist around the other and blow in your cold hands, dry because you never would use lotion. And I'd say let's go get warm. We'd fade out slow with our backs to the camera, walking away.

If I could write a love story, it wouldn't begin or end or make sense in the middle, it wouldn't be like it was supposed to be, it wouldn't use the word love, and it wouldn't be a story at all.

I listen to music, hold a mug of warm tea to my lips, sniff steam. I stretch out on the floor. Let the vultures have at me. I lay in my kitchen, waiting for predators.

Out back, I hear that old magic man, that snake charmer, not you. I hear him slipping through tree leaves, already can see that slippery smile. How did he get out? He's laughing because I still have the scar where I walked into the Frisbee my first lover was throwing. Walked into it with my left eyelid. He's laughing at the seven stitches, and the after beach suntan salt smelling puffy eyelid fucking in my girlfriend's basement. I don't know how I got there, how I got here from there. Why I went anywhere. He's knocking over trash cans. I search the top of the table, find scattered feelings under a pile of coupons I've been meaning to cut. I put on my slippers and head out the back door, already yelling Get back here, shaking my fist in the air. The screen door slaps behind me and the singer's voice on the radio goes low and rises in slow taunts. Like he knows how many times I've been buried, how many times I've risen again.