

## It's Not a Love Story (or Maybe It Is)

By Ellie Hanson

My first love was a boy named Owen. I had liked the name Owen ever since my parents told me it would be my name if I were a boy. I was in kindergarten when I saw him for the first time. It was during recess, he was playing basketball near the playground. My dad plays basketball, my mom did too. I hoped I would play basketball someday. Like dad, and mom, and Owen. Maybe if I *did*, it would be fate.

Whenever I wasn't with my BFF Sophie, I would sit and watch him play. I wouldn't just sit and watch; that would be creepy. Instead I would sit on a bench that faced the playground, but you could still see the basketball court if you turned your head. I would sit there with my diary from the Scholastic Book Fair. My diary had a lock that only I held the key to. I would scribble down my first name with his last name, or our initials added together within a heart. Every so often I would glance over at his silhouette on the basketball court.

I invited him to my sixth birthday party at the local bowling alley; he got me a small *High School Musical* radio. How did he know that was my favorite movie? It must have been fate.

That night, after we got home, my mom balanced me atop her lap in her big red chair and asked me "what was your favorite part of the day?"

"The presents," I answered with a quirk of my lips, Owen's radio held carefully in my hands as I kicked my socked feet against her knee.

She smiled as my dad laughed from his spot on the couch. She then asked "And what present was your favorite?"

"Owen's radio."

"Do you like Owen?"

"I love him."

"I don't think you love him," my mom told me, a gentle smile still on her lips as she tightened her arms around me, "I think you have a crush." That was a word I had never heard before. After my mom explained the intricacies of crushes to me, I thought she was wrong. It wasn't a crush, I loved him. His name is Owen and he plays basketball, that has to mean something.

Except, maybe it didn't. Another year passed and I was in first grade; Owen never crossed my mind again. Maybe six is too early to know what love is. Fifth grade came around and my mind was changed again. There was a boy named Oliver in my grade; he was the funniest boy I had ever met. My mom said he was the class-clown. My dad was really funny too, mom said that was one of the things she loved about him.

It was one of the things I loved about Oliver too. He also had freckles, like me. It had to be fate. The only problem was a girl named Sophia (not my BFF Sophie, but Sophia, with a fancy letter 'A' at the end). Sophia was the most popular girl in the class. She had white-blond hair, like snow, and a 'contagious' laugh (that's what my mom called it). Oliver had a contagious laugh, just like Sophia's. Maybe that was fate too.

In the fall of fifth grade, everyone was finding a boy on the football team to wear the jersey of in honor of the homecoming game. Every girl wanted a boy to let them wear their jersey.

I walked into school one brisk fall morning, my heart in my hands and a question on my lips. That was until I heard the rumors: Sophia was wearing Oliver's jersey. I could hear my heart shatter against the imperial tile of the fifth grade hall.

That night, I cried slow tears along to sad songs in my mom and dad's bed, placing Oliver's name into the lyrics and wondering: *'Why not me?'* My mom came in after a while. Her hands brushed my hair behind my ear, gentle and soft in the way only a mom's hands could be. Those same kind hands wiped tears from my face, humming along to the song that was playing until I was subdued enough to tell her what was wrong. As I told her the story, my tears started again and the sound of my sniffles filled the quiet air of her bedroom. She gave a sad sigh of my name as I shoved my face back into Dad's pillow.

"Don't worry too much about it," My mom said after, "you are so much smarter, kinder, and funnier than him anyway."

"Funnier isn't a word, Mom," I groaned against the pillow, an undercurrent of snark cutting through my words. At least, that is what I wish I would have said. At the time, I didn't know that. Instead, I sobbed something along the lines of *'no I'm not'*. Either way, I didn't pay her any mind. After all, if I was really all of those things, wouldn't middle school boys notice that?

The crush (crush, not love) on Oliver faded with the seasons, and I decided to give myself a break from boys. After all, a middle school girl can only guess at what true love is so many times before she starts to lose herself. In that time, I grew taller and joined three sports (including basketball, just like I had wished to all those years ago). I drifted away from my BFF Sophie and made some new friends along the way. Mom's big red chair was replaced with a new, blue one. Yet, every high must have a low, and I underwent a lot of heartache, even if it wasn't at the hands of middle school boys.

The summer my dad passed was long and slow, even though the loss felt quick and painful. Like a hurricane, or a stab wound: the pain and fear happen suddenly, invading everything you know and feel seemingly all at once. Despite that, it's what comes after, the scar, the carnage, that leaves more of an impact. It was in the dawn of the aftermath, standing on newly leveled land, that what was left of my family collapsed together. This

time, just as my mom's gentle fingers had stroked tears from my cheeks every time before, my small, artless fingers would stroke tears from her own. Two pairs of shaky hands trying to hold their broken worlds together.

Despite all of this darkness, pain, and heartbreak, time continued to move, as it always does. Slowly, life got easier, the darkness no longer all-encompassing, but rather a bitter storm cloud in the rearview mirror as I forged forward. With this feeling of light, came my willingness to give boys a try again.

When I was in 10th grade, I thought I loved a boy. His name was Ben and he had been one of my best friends since I was thirteen years old. He told me he wanted to date me, and everyone in my life told me we were perfect, so I did. We had so much in common. He had lost his mom, just like I had lost my dad. We understood each other in a way nobody else did. Maybe it was fate. I thought I loved him, truly I did. We dated for eleven months.

The day I decided to break up with him was one of the worst in my life. But it was a pain that was necessary, at least that's what my mom said. Because each of those months was filled with a feeling of turmoil that only I could understand, yet I could hardly articulate. Because I didn't love him. Not truly. No matter how hard I forced myself, tried to convince myself that I could, I never fell. So I had to put myself out of my misery. Even if it felt incredibly selfish, knowing I was hurting my best friend. I wished I was enough of a coward to text him; to run away and never have to see him again, leaving the memory of him behind me like another cloud to populate my overcast sky. But I couldn't, not to him. My mom held my hand the whole day, as I waited for him to pick me up.

After it was over, and the damage was done, I stumbled back into my house with violent sobs stuttering their way out of my chest between gasps of air. Everything felt foggy as pain overwhelmed my senses. My mom was in front of me at that moment, gathering me into her arms with a soft tug of my shoulders. Catching me, just as she always did. She pulled my sixteen-year-old form onto her lap in the blue chair, placing her arms around my waist just like she had on my sixth birthday. She turned on low, sad music and I buried my tear-stained face in her shoulder, just like I had the pillow when I was in fifth grade.

"It's going to be okay," she shushed me as her fingers tucked my hair behind my ear, her fingers, though weathered by time, were just as soft and gentle as they always had been.

I knew she was right this time. Even if Ben and I were never friends again. Even if fate never seemed to allow me the right boys. Because she was always there to catch me when a day grew especially dark, boys felt impossible, and all seemed lost. Maybe it was fate that brought me to her, with her gentle hands and fondness for colorful arm chairs. A tenderhearted woman who was by my side, holding my hand and wiping my tears with every rocky misstep I took in the walk of life.

Maybe I do know what love is after all.