

# The Long Way To Her

The relationship has had seasons, as all enduring things do.

There were years of quiet bloom and years of dormancy so convincing they almost passed for absence. There were winters when it seemed to retreat entirely, packed away like a jumper folded into the back of a drawer, and seasons when it returned without apology. It never arrived dramatically. There was no confession, no collision of hands in the dark. It unfolded in plain sight, gradual as daylight moving across a wall, so slowly that even I could pretend not to notice.

We walk the long way home most afternoons, past the school oval and the row of units with the flickering porch light that has not been fixed in years. My children move ahead of us with the confidence of those who trust the direction implicitly. They know where they are going even when I slow down. They kick at gravel, race each other to the end of the footpath, call back to me without turning around.

I walk with my hand laced through hers. Our fingers interlock with a familiarity that suggests this is not new, only newly visible. She is difficult to describe, not because she lacks form, but because she resists being fixed. Her face seems to shift depending on the angle from which she is viewed. Sometimes she appears young, almost careless in her certainty but other times she carries the patience of someone who has waited a very long time to be taken seriously.

People stare, though never openly, but enough to notice.

They always do when children are present. It is as though the presence of small bodies makes affection suddenly loud, as if love becomes inappropriate once it exists alongside responsibility. A man watering his lawn pauses mid-arc, water spilling unevenly onto concrete. A woman loading groceries into her car hesitates, keys suspended between her fingers. But no one says anything, they rarely do.

People know how to process mothers. Mothers are legible, we are containers and providers, evidence of a man who was here once. Even if he is gone, he remains visible in the arithmetic of the children's faces. The story makes sense that way, and it follows a familiar sequence.

A mother with a lover does not disrupt much. However, myself with this lover unsettles the margins.

She is not masculine enough to be dismissed as a substitution, nor ambiguous enough to be absorbed into a phase. She does not soften herself into something easily translated. She stands beside me with a steadiness that refuses interpretation. She does not adjust her grip when someone looks too long, she really never has. Discretion has always bored her.

There was a time when she was welcomed. Back then she arrived flanked by men, softened by their presence. People smiled indulgently at her unpredictability and called her curious, experimental, a sign of youth stretching before settling into something respectable. I let them believe that and she let them believe that. It made things easier.

When she shared space with men, she was openness, she was modern. She was something they could enjoy without being threatened by, something they could frame as adventurous rather than autonomous. In their mouths she became a story about them, not about me.

But she did not dissolve when the men left and she did not shy away when children arrived. She did not excuse herself to make motherhood more palatable. If anything, she grew more distinct.

That is what confuses them.

They inventory me in a particular order: children first, past second, present last. They summon my history like evidence, there were men, there were vows and there were different surnames. As if continuity requires contradiction, as if having loved before disqualifies loving now, as if desire must remain loyal to its first public draft.

Inside the house, she moves easily. She leans against the kitchen bench while homework is negotiated and hovers in the doorway during bedtime stories. She does not flinch when small hands knock once and enter without waiting. She has never asked to replace anything, never demanded the erasure of what came before. She is not interested in competing with ghosts.

By now the children reach the end of the street and wait for us, kicking at stones. They are used to waiting. They understand that adults take longer to arrive at places they have already committed to.

She glances at them and smiles, not the careful smile people reserve for children they are unsure about, but an unguarded one. It is this, more than anything, that unsettles the onlookers. Her ease, her lack of shame. The way she does not recede in their presence.

People believe love should become smaller once it is witnessed by children. More symbolic and less embodied. They believe it should fold itself into something instructive and safe.

This love has never been good at that.

It spills into the ordinary. Into lunchboxes packed too late at night. Into the hum of the washing machine. Into the shared weight of bodies on the couch after the children are asleep. It does not vanish when the door opens and it does not pretend it was never there.

There were years when I tried to fold her smaller, years when I renamed her curiosity. Early adulthood when I described her as openness and in relationships with men when I treated her like a guest who had overstayed. I learned the choreography of suppression; how to redirect a glance, how to explain away a fixation, how to convince myself that longing was simply admiration stretched thin. Maybe for a while, that worked.

During those years, she went by other names. Some more masculine, some more digestible. Names that allowed her to be present without demanding permanence. People were kinder then, they believed her temporary. They assumed she would recede once real life solidified around me.

After my first child, I told myself it would be simpler to leave her behind. After the second, I tried to convert her into nostalgia. I told myself maturity meant narrowing, that growth required reduction. I mistook my endurance for adulthood. Yet she did not leave, she waited for me.

She resurfaced in the small hours when the house was quiet and the dishes were done. She appeared in conversations that lingered too long on certain details, in the unexpected relief I felt standing beside a woman who mirrored something I had long pretended was incidental. She re-emerged in the persistent absence that no arrangement with men seemed able to fill.

What unsettles people is not the presence of love but the refusal of erasure. It is the suggestion that a mother's desire does not retire, that it does not become theoretical once children exist and that it definitely does not require a man as scaffolding.

Later, when the house is still, she rests her head against my shoulder. Outside, someone laughs too loudly. A car passes. Life continues without noticing the quiet defiance happening inside these walls.

Tomorrow we will walk the same road again. The stares will repeat. The assumptions will follow. I will still be asked, without words, to justify how all of this exists at once.

The partner with her steady hand at the small of my back is not a woman who entered my life at a particular moment. She is the part of me that never consented to disappearance. She has moved quietly through every chapter — with the men who came before and now the women who come after. She is the constant that remained when partners left and narratives shifted.

She is not a lover in the way they imagine. She isn't a person with a face to hold, no body to walk beside but she does hold a name. She is not an identity borrowed for a season, but a relationship I have had with myself for as long as I can remember. The only difference now is that I no longer ask her to disguise herself as something easier to explain. I walk beside her in daylight and I finally let her hold my hand.