

# The Marriage and the Elbow

I don't understand what love is; I'm seven. I spend every day—Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, and the other ones—in Ms. Escher's classroom. Half of the room is consecrated for carpets and a piano. Ms. Escher plays the piano for us every morning while we cross our legs on the carpet around her, and we're supposed to sing with her. All the songs are about stories from the Bible. I think maybe they're not real songs. Someone just made them up.

I hate the piano. Cas and I take lessons with Mr. Dave Mullins on Tuesday mornings but I never learn anything. I just dangle my legs on the staircase while Mr. Dave Mullins leans, purring, over Cas. Cas is good; he knows what to do with his fingers and elbows. After he plays, Mr. Dave Mullins gives him a Werther's Original. He drops one in my hand too if I've been quiet. Sometimes they go talk in another room, and I look at the piano and I wiggle onto the bench and pretend.

At school there's this girl, Rita, who—I don't understand what love is. She's seven too. My mum made me go to her house last summer. We sat upright in tiny plastic chairs at a picnic table with her sister and drank juice, but we called it tea. And her mom watched us and laughed quietly. Now Rita sits next to me on the carpet. Neither of us sing. I think I might be in love with her.

When you're in love you kiss. I know that.

But asking her for that is frightening, so I just sit next to her and wait and fidget. One day a new boy walks into class in the morning. He has dark hair and freckles, and the teacher calls him Hamish, and a shirt that says I ♥ CANADA clings tightly to his scrawny arms and shoulders. He picks a spot on the carpet and folds his legs under him, and Rita suddenly gets up and, as gracefully as possible for a seven-year-old, goes over to him and lets herself down and leans against him.

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Lots of things stay the same. We play in the leaves and later in the snow. Every recess, there's games on the field, and in the treeline we make forts and grind up logs for sawdust. We all abide by the unwritten law that sawdust should be called "cheese" and may be used as legal tender to trade with other kids for sticks and tarp to build forts. We all scramble to establish ourselves, we gather together to make little kingdoms, we claim our land, and it all just means who you talk to and who you fight. Somehow in all of it I end up in a kingdom where Hamish is king.

It's a spring day and sunny. Both of us stand outside the little fort, the king and his peasant, in jeans, sweatpants, and light blue corduroy jackets, holding rocks and

sweating and beating a stump together. I can't tell if we're friends.

"Hey, Luke," Hamish says between strikes. "Will you be the pastor?"

"The pastor?"

"Me and Rita are getting married," he says, freckles dancing.

"Okay, when?" I've almost never felt despair in my life. "Where?"

"Today under the cherry tree, Luke."

So they found a pastor minutes before the wedding. The wedding turns out very beautiful, actually. Twenty or so seven-year-olds crowd under the old cherry tree, which they will cut down next year but now blooms very very very pink and drops pink all over us. We form an aisle, me at the top, looking awkwardly at my feet. Rita and Hamish stride slowly down the middle, holding hands.

"Guys—do you?" I say very officially.

"I do," says Hamish, and "I do," repeats Rita with reverence. They kiss each other on the cheek. And so they're married.

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Life goes on, as it always does. We all squeeze together on the carpet behind Ms. Escher every morning and sing those Bible songs. My mum tells Mr. Dave Mullins he can't teach us anymore because I haven't learned a thing. Instead now we see an old lady who she lives near a park, so I have somewhere to go while I'm at piano lessons, but I miss the Werther's Originals. Sometimes I still catch sight of an ugly blue car with the license plate DMULLINS.

I never see Hamish and Rita together, now that they're married. She never sits next to him these days. But Hamish invites me over to his house now and then. His family always serves hot dogs to guests, no matter what. And we mostly just hang around his basement and he talks about boring things. But he has a pool and a computer, so I go anyway.

One morning when all the days are summer, something snaps in me and I realize school is almost over. None of us can stand being inside now. The class finishes math and the recess bell rings; everyone falls over themselves scrambling out the door. They have factional wars to wage in the sunlight and mud. But I'm last out the door, and once on the pavement I don't see anyone I like, so I hesitate. In that moment, through the open door, I hear the piano faintly.

I turn halfway and freeze perfectly still for a moment, as if time got caught on a hook before tearing free. Released, I step in that half-sure waddle of the young over to the classroom and peek in. There's Rita playing at the piano with her back turned to me. She plays worse than she sings. I think I'm still in love with her. I take off my

shoes so I can draw closer unheard.

She smells like maybe a flower. Or French vanilla... I slowly, gently sink to my knees just behind her and pause to listen. This is love, I think. I wonder if I should kiss her. No, I couldn't put my lips to her lips, or even face her, without her noticing me. Still... you're supposed to if you're in love. She's wearing a short-sleeve shirt. Her arms are bare. Below the shoulder, they move as she plays. She must know what to do with her fingers, I think, glancing at my own stubby appendages. Oh, that's it! She smells like butterscotch.

The lights are dimmed inside but sunlight leaks through the window. I remain in this worshipful state only a minute longer. I lean forward and up, hold steady—and kiss her elbow.

She startles, twists around, yelps in shock. The spell breaks. The music stops.