



Girlfriend *fiction*

little
bird

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There was a question on the whiteboard:

What is love?

‘All right class,’ Ms Betts said. ‘Free writing time. I want you to answer this question. You might want to consider your memory work, or think back to *Pride and Prejudice*, or draw on some other personal experiences. Same rules apply as always, write whatever comes into your head and keep your hand moving. You don’t have to share this with anyone, but what you write today may form the basis of your next creative assignment. As you do this I’m going to come around and collect your memory pieces, so put them on the front of your desk.’

I stared at the blank page. Love? What did I know about love? I wrote the question at the top of the page. I put an extra curl into the top of the question mark and drew petals around the dot below.

‘Ruby-lee?’ Ms Betts said. ‘Where’s your memory assignment?’

I looked up without raising my head. Ms Betts' bustline was right in my line of sight. I readjusted my eyes, staring at a patch of blue shirt in the neutral territory between her waist and her boobs.

'I left it at home,' I muttered. An obvious lie.

Ms Betts didn't move on, nor did she lower her voice. 'Ruby-lee, you need fifty-five percent or more on your next assignment to attain a passing grade in English – at present, you are failing. Every day this assignment is late I am deducting five marks. Leaving it at home may have been an acceptable excuse last year, but you're in Year 11 now. Do you understand?'

'Yes, Ms Betts.'

Ms Betts sighed. 'Please call me Karen.' I still wasn't used to calling teachers by their first name. At Allanvale High they'd all been Mr and Miss or Ms or whatever. Derwent College was only for Year 11 and Year 12 students and suddenly the rules had all changed. It was hard to keep up.

Tegan made up an excuse about her printer not working, and she didn't get the spiel about the deductions. Which only went to show that Ms Betts – *Karen* – really did hate me.

After she collected all the assignments, Ms Betts sat at her desk to leaf through them.

What is love? I glanced around the room. Everyone else seemed to be scratching away busily. Everyone had the answers, except me. Even Tegan was writing. I craned my neck so I could read her first sentence. 'Love is swallowing, because it tastes so gross.'

Laughter exploded through my nose, and the sudden burst of noise bounced around the classroom walls.

‘What’s so funny?’ Ms Betts asked, a tolerant, mildly amused expression on her face as though she were ready to hear a joke, though she didn’t look up from her papers. Some of the class kept writing, but most of them had turned to stare right at me. My face burned. I glanced at Tegan, who had shuffled her notebook under her pristine, unthumbed copy of *Pride and Prejudice*.

‘Girls?’ Ms Betts looked up now, her eyes drilling into me. ‘Is there something you want to share with the class? A particularly astute observation about love, perhaps?’

‘No, Ms Betts. I mean, Karen.’

‘Tegan?’

Tegan shrugged, a ‘don’t ask me’ look on her face.

‘What is love?’ Ms Betts asked. At first I thought she was asking me specifically and I floundered for an answer. But then I realised she was moving on, resuming the class. ‘What is love? Would anyone like to volunteer an answer?’

One of the nerds at the front put up his hand. ‘A social contract that allows the perpetuation of the species.’

Tegan groaned quietly.

‘Interesting response. Anyone else?’

‘I don’t think you can say it in words,’ another girl, Katie, said. ‘It’s a feeling.’

‘And yet poets, playwrights, novelists and screenwriters have been putting love into words for centuries,’ Ms Betts pointed out. ‘It’s a timeless, universal theme.’

‘It’s not always about reproduction,’ said Jessica. ‘You don’t only love people. You can love your dog. You can even love ice-cream.’

There was a general titter.

‘That’s true, Jessica, and a very important point. We use the language of love for all sorts of things. Material possessions, family members, friends, pets, romantic partners, food. Does the language of love change depending on who we love? Is one kind of love more important than another?’

Tegan spoke up. ‘Boyfriends come first. Then family. Then friends. Then pets. Then ice-cream.’

I glanced at her. Was that really where I came in the hierarchy? Or was it another way of letting me know she was pissed off? At least she loved me more than ice-cream.

‘No way. Friends come first,’ said Jessica. ‘Way before boyfriends.’

‘Before family?’ Ms Betts asked.

‘For sure.’ Most of the class nodded.

‘What about a new mother, with a baby? Do you think her priorities are the same?’

‘Mothers always love their kids the most,’ Katie said. ‘They have to.’

‘Really? Are you sure? Does anyone disagree?’

A few hands went into the air. I thought about Colette. She hadn’t seemed keen to get home to Maisy the other day. But Maisy was all she had. Surely Colette didn’t love Shandra more than Maisy. And then there was Mum. When she married Stefan she’d said me and Shandra would always come first. I kept my hand down.

At the end of the class Ms Betts said, ‘Next week we’re starting on *Romeo and Juliet*. I’ll be screening Baz Luhrmann’s film in Monday’s session, so if you can get your hands on a copy yourselves, you are welcome to

skip the class. Those of you who do come, the screening will go into lunchtime, so bring something to eat. As you watch the film and read the play – and yes, I expect you *all* to read the play – I want you to think about Romeo and Juliet’s love and where it leads them. Is it the greatest love story of all time? Maybe. But to answer that question, first you need to ask yourselves this.’ Ms Betts tapped the board. ‘What is love?’



I wandered down the hallway. Tegan was still cranky with me about Saturday night and she didn’t seem to care that she’d got me into trouble in class.

‘Wasn’t my fault,’ she said. ‘You didn’t have to read what I wrote.’

‘What about that stuff about how I’m failing and she’s going to deduct marks? She didn’t say that to you.’

Tegan shrugged. ‘Sucks to be you, doesn’t it?’

I dawdled, allowing Tegan and Blake to get further ahead. They were going to Blake’s house after school, so I’d be catching the bus home alone. Again.

As I walked up the hall, sighing miserably, I almost bumped into Mick Spencer, the music teacher. Our eyes met. He smiled as I blushed and stepped aside. I glanced back and watched him saunter down the hall.

As usual he was surrounded by a group of music students: boys with rock’n’roll haircuts and T-shirts emblazoned with the names of obscure bands; girls with short skirts, flashing eyes, black eyeliner and a rhythmic way of walking, as

though they were about to break into some *High School Musical* number.

Spence, as everyone called him, was not only *their* god. He was a legend in the whole school. He might have been a teacher, but he had total street cred. Spence went to live music venues, and when he bumped into underage students, he was always cool about it (or so I'd heard, the only pub I'd ever been to was the Dawnvale hotel for a counter lunch, with my mum and Stefan). Spence let bands rehearse in his own home on weekends. Spence had petitioned the college council to fund the development of a professional sound studio, which was now considered the best in the state and real bands used it, even bands that were played on Triple J and stuff. Spence composed music for a Tasmanian advertising company. Spence played bass in some of the students' bands.

And, of course, Spence had had an affair with Colette, six months after she'd finished Year 12. Spence was Maisy's father.

Tegan had pointed Spence out at the beginning of the year; some of Blake's Year 12 friends had told her who he was. I'd been disappointed by how ordinary he was. A pleasant enough face, sandy blondish-brown hair, a few grooves already worn into his face as if he'd grimaced into the stage lights a few too many times. I didn't get what the big deal was, why all the girls were so in love with him.

After a while though, Spence kind of grew on me. I didn't tell Tegan. He had fiercely blue eyes that crinkled up when he smiled, which he did often. He always leaned in to listen to whoever he was talking to, as if they were telling

him some important secret. He could look at you like, in the midst of all the noise and crowding of the school hall, you were lit up like a beacon, you were the star of the show. That look tickled me deep in my belly, made me feel warm and gooey. I couldn't believe I'd once found him ordinary – he was the sexiest man I'd ever seen in real life.

I shook the feeling off. Spence was a bastard; that was the fact of it. Shandra claimed something had been going on between Spence and Colette when Colette was still Spence's star music student, though they both swore that it had been a whirlwind romance (which was a polite way of saying one night stand, Tegan reckoned) that began after Colette had finished school. Spence had left Colette 'high and dry', my mum said. Colette's promising music career was over before it began and life had just gone on as normal for Spence.

What is love? A big crock, if you ask me. Look what it had done to Colette. Look where love had left me at the ripe old age of thirteen when Mum and Dad divorced. Love turned Shandra into Bridezilla. Love had stolen my best friend away. It was because of love I had to ride the school bus alone again.

The hallway was emptying, Tegan, Blake, Spence and the music groupies were long gone. I shook myself out of my daze and rushed outside towards the school's driveway, where the bus waited to take me rattling all around the suburbs, and, eventually, home.

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Shandra started her zippy black Baleno, took her foot off the brake and almost crashed into Stefan's old ute.

'Aren't you meant to put it in reverse?' I asked.

'Shut up.'

A car honked as she sped out backwards onto the road. 'Moron,' she muttered through her teeth, as she shoved the stick in drive. She took off down our street, screeched round the roundabout and through the suburban streets before swinging out over two lanes onto the highway with barely a glance.

'How are you still alive?' I groaned.

'Guardian angel,' Shandra said. 'I think it must be Nana. Sometimes I smell tulips when I feel her spirit's close.'

'Tulips don't smell, do they?'

'Oh, you know. Roses or something.' Shandra changed lanes to overtake a car sitting on the speed limit.

'Head check!' I wailed. 'Why would you smell roses if it was Nana? She lived in a small upstairs flat.'

‘Old person smell,’ said Shandra. ‘All old ladies smell kind of flowery.’

‘Nana smelt like onion soup.’ I screwed up my face, trying to recall the smell. ‘Sort of gassy. Like the end of a match.’

‘Well, she wouldn’t choose to smell like that if she was a ghost, would she?’

‘Hang on, is she a ghost or a guardian angel?’

‘A presence?’

Shandra accelerated, sticking her chin out fiercely, and changed lanes again. Another car swerved out of her way and blared its horn. ‘You’re just jealous because Nan loved me better than you.’

‘I am so not having this conversation. Now if you don’t mind, I’m going to pray quietly to Nana that she takes your licence away.’

‘Go right ahead. But don’t be disappointed if she doesn’t listen to you. She always said you looked like a goblin, remember?’

‘An elf! She called me her little elf.’

‘Elf, goblin. What’s the diff?’

‘I hate you.’

‘I love you.’ Shandra smiled deeply at me.

‘Watch the road. Please, watch the road.’

Perhaps Nana was taking care of both of us because we made it to Colette’s North Hobart apartment in one piece. As we headed up the stairs, my palms became clammy with nerves. Could I do this? What if Maisy screamed the whole time Colette was gone? What about cot death and robbers and fires and terrorists?

I wasn't sure what I expected, but I was surprised by the clean, sparse appearance of Colette's small flat. The front door opened straight into a living room with creamy carpet, a round rice-paper lampshade hanging overhead, two low couch-type things without backs and a long coffee table. Tucked away in a corner of the room, the smallest television I had ever seen. The best thing about the room was the view across the city to the sun setting behind Mount Wellington.

'Better give you the grand tour, Ruby-lee,' Colette said. Her knee-length skirt was patterned with green apples and yellow lemons and it flared as she spun towards the kitchen. It worked effortlessly with her black shirt that had three-quarter length sleeves and a round collar, and bright red boots. I wrinkled my nose at my own baggy jeans and shapeless T-shirt, but even Shandra was just ordinary-pretty compared to Colette. Colette had an air of mystery about her, and it wasn't at all diminished by the daggy kitchen, with its orange lino and plasticky brown faux wood everywhere. The chrome sink shone clean, but there was a stale, greasy smell in the air, like old fried rice.

'Tea and coffee are in here. There're Tim Tams in the cupboard, and Iced Vovos, rice crackers and wasabi peas.' She grinned, sheepishly. 'I wasn't sure what you'd like.'

Colette and Shandra had been friends all through high school, but I didn't know her very well. Shandra always shooed me away (on pain of death) when Colette came to our place. Even so, I'd seen enough of Colette to assume her self-esteem was made out of concrete where mine was fine, crumbling sand. So this shy, eager-to-please Colette was new to me.

‘There’s a list of numbers on the fridge. My mobile. The hospital. My mum’s home number and her mobile – only for extreme emergencies. But I’m sure everything will be fine.’ She gave me a reassuring smile. ‘I’ll show you how to make up a bottle for Maisy. She’ll probably wake up soon and want something to eat.’ Colette opened the freezer to reveal a neat assortment of ice trays, and each contained coloured frozen cubes. ‘There’s pumpkin, apple, carrot, pear and broccoli. She has about three cubes heated in the microwave and mixed with a little milk. She’s not fussy, so pick any of them, they all go together fine.’

‘Carrot and pear?’

‘Yeah, it’s nice, believe it or not. Have you eaten?’

‘Oh, I um . . .’ Was Colette offering me baby food?

‘There’s leftover spag bol in the fridge. Help yourself. Have anything you want.’

‘Thanks.’

Colette led me up a narrow hall. Again I was struck by how normal everything seemed, how clean and ordinary. I’d expected something glamorous like Colette, I suppose, like the big lofts people lived in on American sitcoms. Or something shabbier, more gritty and urban, less little-old-ladyish.

‘Bathroom,’ Colette was saying, pointing at a peach tiled room with a comforting Pine-O-Clean clean smell. ‘My bedroom. And this is Maisy’s room.’

Colette pushed the door open. I hovered, worried about disturbing Maisy, but Colette stepped into the dim room.

‘Change table. Nappies,’ said Colette, continuing the tour. A paper bird mobile hung from the ceiling, wings

outspread. Colette blew a little puff of air at it and it bobbed and fluttered. She gestured at some neat plastic tubs lining the walls. 'Clothes. Toys. Books. She likes stories. She likes everything really. If she cries take off all her clothes and her nappy and let her kick on a blanket on the floor. Or hold her and sing. She doesn't cry much,' Colette added hastily, like a salesperson trying to seal the deal.

Maisy let out a loud moaning sigh and shifted in the cot. I tensed. What if she woke up? Would Colette leave if Maisy was awake and crying? But Maisy stayed asleep. I followed Colette back up the hall to the lounge room where Shandra was perched on one of the low seats, flicking through a *Vogue* magazine.

'Can we go?' Shandra asked, putting the magazine aside.

Colette bit her lip, lingering, as if she wasn't ready to leave yet. 'Oh! Let me show you the bottle.'

Colette explained how to sterilise the bottle and mix the formula and test the temperature, and I tried to listen, despite a dizzying, panicked feeling. I was sure the instructions would leave my head the moment Colette closed the front door, that I'd end up burning Maisy's poor baby mouth or that I'd give her some kind of bacterial infection and she'd wind up in hospital. Shandra huffed and puffed impatiently in the lounge room.

Then there was a flurry of movement as Colette added some last-minute touches to her make-up, found her purse and phone, and ran through the nightly routine once more. Then, all of a sudden, Colette and Shandra were gone, and the flat was silent and still.

I sat on the edge of the couch, listening for Maisy. I was too nervous to turn the television on in case it disturbed her, so I studied the lounge room instead. There was a huge print on the wall directly opposite the couch. It seemed weird to arrange the furniture around art instead of pointing the couches at the television. The picture was by someone called Klimt: a woman holding a baby, her long hair covered in flowers. I said the name softly. It sounded like a paperclip hitting a tiled floor. I don't know much about art, but the image was absorbing and tranquil. I allowed myself to relax a little. At least I wasn't at the movies with Dougal tonight, making awkward conversation with his left shoulder while Tegan and Blake sucked face.

I crept across the room and put the television on, with the sound turned down so low I had to strain to hear it. Every five minutes or so I stood outside Maisy's room, afraid she may have woken and cried out and that somehow I hadn't heard her. Each time her breathing was slow and regular.

On about the tenth time, I actually ventured into the room and peeked inside the cot, and I got the shock of my life. Maisy was on her back, quiet, but awake, eyes wide open. When she saw me she smiled, a wide-mouthed, gummy, utterly disarming grin. I swear I've never seen anyone so happy. I couldn't help but smile back.

Maisy was a classic baby shape, with a round head covered in soft curling fuzz rather than hair, big Spence-blue eyes and a small rose-petal mouth like Colette's. Though she kept smiling, a slight scowl puckered her forehead and for a moment she looked uncannily like her father. Then her forehead smoothed out and she looked like a baby again.

She made a happy noise that matched her grin, a pleased ‘*aii!*’ sound, as if greeting a long lost friend.

‘Hi, yourself,’ I said. I bent over the cot and scooped Maisy up in my arms. It was at that moment, as I lifted her, bearing her full weight, warmth seeping from her body into mine, the sweet biscuit-mix smell of her filling my nostrils, that it hit me. I felt a warm trickle in my belly, and an electric tingling sensation shot right through my bones. And I knew, with sudden certainty. *This* was love. Love at first sight. Or first touch. Maisy’s hand crept up to rest trustingly on my neck, her fingers finding a curl of my hair, which she gently held. She was unexpectedly heavy, and I slid one hand under her soft, napped bottom to heft her up. She rested her head on my shoulder, and gazed up at my face. It felt like the most natural thing in the world, loving Maisy, her smooth pink cheeks, her glittering eyes, her soft, spidery lashes.

‘Are you hungry?’ I asked her, feeling golden and dizzy. ‘Let’s get you something to eat.’

Maisy was very patient as I clumsily buckled her into her high chair. Her wide blue gaze followed me around the kitchen as I retrieved an ice-cube tray and struggled to pop out a colourful assortment of the cubes. I microwaved them for ten seconds at a time, nervously poking the icy lumps around with a spoon. Microwaving wasn’t a natural gift with me.

The feeling of love hit me again as I sat down in front of Maisy and offered her a spoonful of food. Something about the trusting way she opened her mouth wide, like a baby bird, flooded me with a sense of peacefulness. It was

a feeling I recognised from when I was little, lying in front of the heater on a wintry night, listening to the wash of my parents' voices and the background hum of the television.

After dinner I lifted Maisy from the chair and took her into the lounge room, where I laid her out on the rug. Maisy smiled up at the light fittings and kicked her legs joyfully while I gobbled hastily reheated, but still half-frozen Spaghetti Bolognese.

A slow, wet, blurring noise rumbled from Maisy's lower half. Her expression was thoughtful, and she didn't seem at all bothered, but panic surged in me again. Poo! Could I deal with poo? Colette hadn't told me anything about poo.

As I carried Maisy into the bedroom, a distinct smell wafted around her (not entirely unlike the smell of Spaghetti Bolognese, which grossed me out a little). I laid her down on the change table. Her outfit had buttons everywhere, to get at her nappy without completely undressing her, I assumed. I unsnapped the buttons at her crotch, but I couldn't see how to get her pudgy legs out without bending them the wrong way. I undid more and more buttons, until I may as well have just taken the whole stupidly complicated suit off her anyway. She kicked her legs in the air and laughed at my distress.

'Oh, help!'

There was poo everywhere. Somehow, by the time I got the nappy undone, Maisy managed to put first one foot into it and then the other. It oozed out of her nappy onto her back and all over her clothes. I armed myself with a wad of wipes, and dabbed gingerly at her private parts, making little impression. Clearly the only way to deal with it was with

firm vigour. As I grew more confident Maisy didn't seem to mind me hauling her from one side to another; she grinned up at me through her legs when I folded them over her head to wipe her bum and back. Every time I thought I was done, I found another sneaky crevice that needed cleaning.

In the end I gave up. I bagged up the dirty nappy and the used wipes and ran Maisy a bath. I lowered Maisy's body into the shallow warm water, her legs curled up to her chest. She poked at the water experimentally with her toes and then stuck her feet in. She slapped the top of the water with her hand and solemnly swished her tiny fingers back and forth like little fish.

I soaked a flannel and squeezed it, dribbling warm water onto Maisy's back, and Maisy grew quiet and thoughtful and still. 'You like that?' I asked and did it again.

Being with Maisy made me feel wonderful, and it also made me a little sad, but I didn't know why.

All I had known about babies before was that they cried, fed and slept. Maisy hadn't cried once. She was full of joy, like her little life was an endless series of happy possibilities.

When Maisy was dry and snuggled into a soft all-in-one pyjama suit, looking like a teddy bear, I held her in my arms and fed her a bottle of formula. Maisy gazed up into my face as she drank the milky concoction and the expression on her face mirrored the utter bliss I was feeling. As Maisy drained the bottle her gulps slowed into a shallow suckling, and her eyes blinked dreamily. I tried to remember a lullaby and the only one I could think of was *Silent Night*. It felt a bit weird singing a Christmas carol in April, but the familiar

tune sounded magical in the quiet of the apartment. Maisy watched me as I sang. All my life I'd felt transparent, as if people saw through me – even the people I loved, like Shandra or Tegan. But Maisy saw me. She looked at me as if *I* were full of possibility too. As if I were as amazing to her as she was to me. And then she drifted off to sleep, her eyelids blinking heavily closed.

I carried her to the bedroom and lowered her gently into the cot. I watched her sleeping face for a while in the dim light. Then I curled up on Colette's couch and drifted off too, under the Klimt print of the mother and the child and the cascading hair and the flowers.