

Wonderful, stupid, romantic love

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And really, who wouldn't rather sink than call Brad for help?

Roy Lichtenstein's iconic oil painting from 1963, *Drowning Girl*, nails contemporary teen romance like no other work of art.

With Brad's name on her lips she arrives on the beach, fresh as a peach blossom, perky as a fruit pie (whatever) and there is Brad – and he's... omigod... talking with Jennifer!! Her world is shattered. Naturally she thinks, "I'll go swim in the riptide." You and I would do the same.

In the conventions of modern romance, the young would all rather sink than call Brad for help. That's because an unreasoning, ill-thought-out passion is the first big rush of love. It happens only after someone goes all in, risking everything, confessing to another, "I love you."

The one who took the leap now holds their breath, waiting for the four-worder that must be said in return, right then and there, in order to complete the circuit: "I love you too." And then BAM!

Gentlemen and ladies, start your engines! Each one lives and breathes for the sake of the other from that moment. We're talking commitment, relationship, family, baby carriages, married filing jointly.

Make no mistake, falling ass-over-tea-kettle in love is the booster phase that launches "happily ever after" into orbit, and it's quite insane. Loveologists (love experts in white lab coats) say this phase lasts about 18 months. You develop your own little code words. He asks, "More popcorn, Snoogums?" She says, "Ooh yes, Squishy Lovey." and crinkles her nose. Pet names, the dopier the better, begin a journey of bliss to a world populated by only two. They're driving when "our song" comes on the radio, and they are once again circling above their two-person Earth.

It's the one time in your life when you can listen to "Teen Angel" without puking. Seriously, check it out:

That fateful night the car was stalled
upon the railroad track
I pulled you out and we were safe
but you went running back.

What was it you were looking for
that took your life that night?
They said they found my high school ring
clutched in your fingers tight.

Teen angel, can you hear me... etc.

Yeah, it's even a little creepy, but there's a time in your life when that song makes absolute perfect sense. That's your passion-crazed, Brad-sinking, high-school-ring-rescuing, slicing-your-own-ear-off phase. And here's the crazy part: God invented this. What could He... She... have been thinking?

I'll tell you what God was up to. God was thinking that, in order for love to be the most powerful, guiding force in the world, it needed some rampaging, hormonal torque at the start. Without this, love would hold few rewards when the hard times hit, as they always must.

Without cloud-floaty tweety bird love there would be too few stupid poems in the world, little giddiness, no need for springtime.

On the other hand, there would also be no blight of Jumbotron marriage proposals at football halftimes and fewer Saturday night gunfights. No infestations of chick flicks for sure.

The problem is that we, the consumers of love, have trouble spotting the difference between goopy, soupy, sometimes fraudulent, romantic love and the Real Deal romantic love. If you read Song of Solomon (Song of Songs) you know you are in the presence of a master of erotic poetry from around 900 BC. When he lauds her pomegranates, he isn't talking about fruit. Who's to know whether true unselfish love, or lust, was intended by the author? But somehow it found its way into the Bible, and Jewish tradition sees the poem as an allegory of God's love for the Children of Israel. That's beautiful, but personally, it's steamy stuff and it inspires me in several ways, some visceral, but other than that I haven't a clue.

Then what about Helen of Troy, owner of "the face that launched a thousand ships?" True love for sure, right? When Paris stole Helen of Sparta from Menelaus and she became Helen of Troy (one of those women whose last name is whatever city she lives in), it was Insult Numero Uno. But was she really that beautiful? Did she have lovely hands and pretty eyes? Uplifting pomegranates? Who knows? But we do know this: when a guy rustles the king's heifer, it makes us all look bad. It's at least about turf, so we gird our loins for battle. Heroic, yes, but sorry, I don't count this as true love.

Would Helen of Troy rather have sunk than call Brad Pitt? I don't think so.

Okay, then what about the Age of Chivalry? True love? Well, let's look at the culture of the deep South, pre-Civil War. You have granite-jawed manly men, and the tradition of women fainting when the swordplay got too intense or the language too coarse. Those girly girls would seize up with vapor lock and hit the deck. ka-KLUNK! Then the local Bradly would spring into action.

"She's fainted! You go get help. I'll loosen her corset."

[fade to the next scene...]

"What... where am I? Oh, Braaad, thaaank you. I must have fainted. Ummm... so where's my corset?"

"Now, Missy Belle, don't y'all go and worry that purdy little head of yours."

Can we all agree that chivalry is not necessarily true love?

Wait, I know. Romeo and Juliet. The first chick flick. An under-age romance with an ever-rising body-count.

It ends this way (spoiler alert): Finding Juliet drugged, and thinking her dead, Romeo immediately chugs a vial of poison. She wakes up, sees he's dead for real and then stabs herself dead for real.

Bada-bing, bada-boom!

What a stupid mess, and is it true love? Actually it sort of is, or at least it's in the ballpark. But the emotion I feel most is that I would just like to smack 'em both upside the head really hard. I would counsel Romeo not to let impatience and grief blind him. Why not wait a bit to make sure Juliet is really dead? Like DUH, check for a pulse maybe?

How about a last kiss? Hmmm... her lips are warm... that's odd.

Take your time and think it out, Romeo. People should act rashly more slowly.

What do we really know about love? A lot actually. We know the highest and most sacrificial love is to lay down your life for your friends. A preferable alternative is to stay alive and live your life for the sake of others. That's what we know for sure. The rest is mostly failed theories of poets and Teen Angels.

If you do it right, and this also involves a large measure of luck, here's how things will turn out for you:

Sometimes you'll see a very elderly couple, like 80-ish, walking along together. Each one is an ancient bag of bones with nothing even remotely attractive about them in any way you can imagine. They are wrinkled, with halting steps. But there they are, holding hands, smiling tenderly at one another. Letting the cane take his weight, he slowly bends over to her. She waits patiently for her kiss. He reaches her face and tenderly plants one where he has kissed her ten-thousand times before.

When I was a callow young man I thought I would never understand that attraction in a thousand years. Today, not even a hundred years later, I understand it completely. Very few people reading this will be so fortunate as to be in that old couple's shoes one day. But if it's at all possible for you, go for it.

Enduring love like this is my goal, and I saw it in action up close as I was growing up. It was the love my dad had for my mom, Peggy of Tulsa, and she for him. It was no fairytale. Nobody ever said marriage is a cakewalk, and they rode out the same storms every couple endures. But neither of them sank, or drowned.

She was pretty in a farm girl kind of way. No beauty queen, her face launched just one ship. His.