

love you, mean it

It was a hot, humid summer, the kind where your skin seems to be perpetually damp and your hair becomes frizzy the moment you step outside.

On one particularly sweltering day, I received a text from my childhood best friend, Anne:

wanna smoke @ the park l8r? it's been awhile

I mean, I had nothing better to do, so I replied:

sure.

I met Anne during the summer after eighth grade.

We were both invited to the birthday party of a mutual friend, Lu. I was shy and aloof, uncomfortable in my body in the way most preteens are. I was sitting at the side of the pool in my turquoise one-piece swimsuit, the one with the low back that made me feel adult. We were waiting around for Lu's mom to bring out the cake, and I watched two boys hit each other with pool noodles, wiggling my toes in the cool water.

I felt a tap on my shoulder and looked up at the most beautiful 13-year-old I'd ever laid eyes on.

"Excuse me," Anne said.

The sun was right behind her head, giving her a halo. I shielded my eyes and squinted to see her face; she was like an angel, the biblically accurate ones that are too holy to behold. It hurt to look at her, she was so beautiful. Or maybe I just like to remember it that way.

"Oh! Sure." I scooted over a few inches, making room.

She sat beside me and reached out her toe to poke at a water gun floating on the pool. Stretching further, she used her foot to pull the toy towards us.

"Watch this," she whispered, picking up the water gun and taking aim at the boys across the pool.

She sprayed them with water and laughed at their surprise, a high, twinkling sound. Then she snorted a bit, which made *me* laugh. Startled by my laughter, she aimed the water gun at me.

“Wait–,” I was cut off by a blast to the chest from the water gun. The impact sent me tumbling into the water; when I came back up, I sputtered water out my nose and mouth between laughs.

When I regained my bearings and saw Anne’s wide smile grinning down at me, I reached for her leg and pulled her into the pool. She held onto me and we sank together below the water. We resurfaced, nose-to-nose, gasping for breath.

“I’m Anne, by the way,” she said, laughing and out of breath. And after that, we were inseparable.

I got dressed and grabbed my keys and tote bag from the hook by the door. I told my mom we were going to see a movie and slipped out into the humid night.

I shot Anne a text as I strapped in my seatbelt:

omw

She replied immediately:

great! see u soon

rolled a girl blunt just 4 u ;)

By the time we reached ninth grade, Anne was a bona fide cool girl, à la *Gone Girl*. She could hang, and she knew it. But the Anne I knew wasn’t a Cool Girl, she was just my best friend.

Cool Girl Anne took boys behind the bleachers at football games while I stood watch. She loved RedBulls and ate Belvita crackers instead of breakfast. She wore baby tees and Nike Dunks and got her nose pierced in ninth grade. She was smart, but not too smart; creative and talented without being insufferable. She had a high, twinkling laugh.

My Anne liked Juicy Fruit gum and *Star Wars* and climbing onto her roof to look at the stars. She loved surprises, hated her stepmom, and always made wishes when the clock struck 11:11. She painted her nails to keep from biting them and snuck her hamster into school in ninth grade. She liked to kiss both cheeks when she greeted people; it started as an ironic thing, but then became a part of her. She ended every phone call with, *love you, mean it*, as if she could ever say something she didn’t mean. She snorted when she laughed.

But both versions were her. And I loved both versions, for better or worse.

I saw Anne's car in the parking lot and pulled in beside it. The car was empty and looked just like it had when I'd seen it last, months ago. I stepped out of my car to run my hand along a scratch on her car's back bumper; it corresponded with one on the front bumper of mine, a relic from when she'd scraped my car while trying to back out of a movie theater parking lot. There was a window decal on her rear window that read "What Would Dolly Do?" Sunglasses and a tie dye scrunchie hung over her rearview mirror. Suddenly, my phone buzzed:

in the usual spot, lol

Anne and I started smoking weed together in the playground in the summer between our junior and senior years. It was a small, rundown playground behind an abandoned elementary school. It was the school that I had gone to before they rezoned our school district; the rezoning put Anne and I in the same high school, where we had previously been in separate districts. The rezoning also shut down my childhood elementary school, as its relatively small population was simply combined with a nearby, larger school.

I'm not a terribly sentimental person, but there's something strangely comforting about getting high as balls in the playground castle where you played tag as a 7-year-old.

One night that summer, she confessed to me.

"I think I might be, like, bi," she looked at me like she was trying to gauge my reaction.

I exhaled the drag I'd been taking of our joint. "Cool."

"Just, cool?"

"Yeah," I said. "I mean, like, thank you for telling me."

She swatted my arm and laughed. "Okay, cool."

"Yeah, cool."

"Well, um," she looked away and took a hit of the joint. "What about you?"

"What *about* me?"

"Are you...?"

“Bi?” I looked at the sky and then at my hands, consciously avoiding eye contact. I’ve loved women for as long as I can remember. It’s not really something I thought about labeling, to be honest. “I think I might be gay, actually.”

“Woah,” she said. I laughed and then she laughed, the twinkling kind with a few snorts mixed in. “I just love women, you know?”

“I do,” I said. I put out the joint and lay on my back. Anne laid down beside me and we stared up at the stars together.

I walked through the wood chips surrounding the playground castle, our usual spot.

“Ahoy, matey!” I looked up and saw Anne on the roof of the castle, legs wrapped around a turret as she waved to me.

“Anne!” I admonished. “Be careful!”

She clumsily slid down the turret and fell to the platform. “I’m okay!”

I climbed up a ladder on the side of the castle as she ran to meet me, plowing into me with a bear hug.

“I’ve missed you,” she whispered. “So much.”

“I’ve missed you, too,” I said into her hair.

Anne threw me a going away party the week before I moved to New York.

It was a rager, with kids from every surrounding high school draped over couches and on poolside recliners. We separated to mingle before stumbling into each other in the kitchen a couple hours later.

“Babyyyyy,” Anne slurred, taking my hand. “I was just talking to Lu about you.”

I looked over at Lu spinning back and forth on a barstool. She smiled at me widely, eyes glazed with inebriation.

“I wanna tell you something,” Anne said. She gripped my hand tighter and led me up the stairs towards her bedroom. Upstairs housed the bedrooms in Anne’s house, and it was off limits to partygoers. The room was clean and quiet, her bed neatly made with pale blue sheets.

“You were saying?” I said. We sat on the periwinkle loveseat in the corner of her room, shoes off and cross-legged with our knees touching.

She reached over and put her hands on my shoulders. I hadn’t realized I was rocking back and forth. The room was spinning a bit, but her face was more or less in focus.

“I love you,” she said.

“I love you, too.”

And then Anne looked at me, really looked at me. She was searching my eyes for something, I think. Her gaze was intense and it was hard to look at her; I fought the urge to shield my eyes like I had the day we met.

“Have you ever wondered about us?”

I stared at her blankly. “Wondered what?”

“It’s just, like, on paper, we’re like a perfect couple, I think. And I love you, obviously. And you love me, obviously. And we’re both gay, so like, why aren’t we gay together?” She took her hands off my shoulders and folded them into her lap. “I mean, like, what if it was you the whole time, you know? I know it sounds corny but I’m for real.”

I made a small *hmm* sound, and Anne laughed. It was the twinkling one, but it sounded more fearful than usual.

“I’m not, like, asking you to be my girl. I’m just saying, you know, what if?” She paused and looked at me for a few seconds while I remained silent, staring at my hands. “Are you gonna respond, or just give me another *hmm*?”

“Give me a sec,” I said.

“Okay,” she said before standing up and walking into the private bathroom. “Take your time. I’ll be in here freaking out a little.”

Sapphic relationships often blur the line between the platonic and romantic, I think. I love women with everything in me, as lovers and friends and life partners and sisters and soulmates.

Anne and I were always just friends. There was something intrinsically romantic about our friendship, sure, but it was always just a friendship. We were in love with each other, obviously, but as friends. But part of us always wondered, I think. And curiosity demands to be satisfied.

I knocked on the door of the bathroom.

“I love you in every way, I think. Even my platonic love for you is gay.” I paused, then said quietly, “But I don’t wanna ruin our friendship.”

“Me neither,” she said from the other side of the door.

“So what does this mean, Anne? I mean, what do you want?”

“I don’t know,” she said softly. I heard her walk closer to the door. “Maybe we can figure it out when we’re sober.”

“Maybe,” I said. “Can you come out now?”

“I already did, silly,” Anne joked. “Some time ago, actually.”

She opened the door. We looked at each other, each standing on a different side of the door’s threshold.

“Can I kiss you?” I asked.

“I thought you’d never ask.”

She tasted like cigarettes and vodka cranberries. I felt her hands around my waist, over my butt, grasping my face. There was something frantic, hungry about the way we touched each other. Soon, our underwear were on the floor, dresses hiked up around our waists. It felt like electricity was coursing through us, each touch shocking life into my body.

“When I heard you were back in town, I knew I had to see you,” she said, exhaling smoke into the air above our heads. “I haven’t seen you since... you know...”

Translation: *I haven’t seen you since we fucked and then we both left for college and didn’t speak for four months.*

“Yeah,” I said.

Translation: *I have no clue what we are anymore but I love you. I love you I love you I love you.*

I didn't expect a pandemic to send me back home, obviously. And I certainly didn't expect to ever be sitting in this playground castle with Anne again. But life comes at you fast, as they say.

We sat in the center of the castle, cross-legged with our knees touching. We'd been passing a blunt back and forth, rambling on about everything and nothing.

"Have you ever shotgunned a blunt?" Anne asked me.

"...shotgun?"

"I'm gonna blow into your mouth, okay?" she said. "I smoke it, then you smoke it. It's pretty simple."

"It sounds like this is just an excuse for you to kiss me."

"Maybe it is."

She took an exceptionally long drag and pressed her lips to mine, exhaling into my mouth. I inhaled her smoke before exhaling it into the night sky.

Anne put out the blunt and lay on her back. I laid down beside her and we stared up at the stars together.

"I love you in every way," she whispered.

"Ditto."