

The History of Love

Nicole Krauss

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Extract

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THE LAST WORDS ON EARTH

When they write my obituary. Tomorrow. Or the next day. It will say, *LEO GURSKY IS SURVIVED BY AN APARTMENT FULL OF SHIT*. I'm surprised I haven't been buried alive. The place isn't big. I have to struggle to keep a path clear between bed and toilet, toilet and kitchen table, kitchen table and front door. If I want to get from the toilet to the front door, impossible, I have to go by way of the kitchen table. I like to imagine the bed as home plate, the toilet as first, the kitchen table as second, the front door as third: should the doorbell ring while I am lying in bed, I have to round the toilet and the kitchen table in order to arrive at the door. If it happens to be Bruno, I let him in without a word and then jog back to bed, the roar of the invisible crowd ringing in my ears.

I often wonder who will be the last person to see me alive. If I had to bet, I'd bet on the delivery boy from the Chinese take-out. I order in four nights out of seven. Whenever he comes I make a big production of finding my wallet. He stands in the door holding the greasy bag while I wonder if this is the night I'll finish off my spring roll, climb into bed, and have a heart attack in my sleep.

I try to make a point of being seen. Sometimes when I'm out, I'll buy a juice even though I'm not thirsty. If the store is crowded I'll even go so far as dropping my change all over the floor, the nickels and dimes skidding in every direction. I'll get down on my knees. It's a big effort for me to get down on my knees, and an even bigger effort to get up. And yet. Maybe I look like a fool. I'll go into the Athlete's Foot and say, *What do*

you have in sneakers? The clerk will look me over like the poor schmuck that I am and direct me over to the one pair of Rockports they carry, something in spanking white. *Nab*, I'll say, *I have those already*, and then I'll make my way over to the Reeboks and pick out something that doesn't even resemble a shoe, a waterproof bootie, maybe, and ask for it in size 9. The kid will look again, more carefully. He'll look at me long and hard. *Size 9*, I'll repeat while I clutch the webbed shoe. He'll shake his head and go to the back for them, and by the time he returns I'm peeling off my socks. I'll roll my pants legs up and look down at those decrepit things, my feet, and an awkward minute will pass until it becomes clear that I'm waiting for him to slip the booties onto them. I never actually buy. All I want is not to die on a day when I went unseen.

A few months ago I saw an ad in the paper. It said, *NEEDED: NUDE MODEL FOR DRAWING CLASS. \$15/HOUR*. It seemed too good to be true. To have so much looked at. By so many. I called the number. A woman told me to come the following Tuesday. I tried to describe myself, but she wasn't interested. *Anything will do*, she said.

The days passed slowly. I told Bruno about it, but he misunderstood and thought I was signing up for a drawing class in order to see nude girls. He didn't want to be corrected. *They show their boobs?* he asked. I shrugged. *And down there?*

After Mrs. Freid on the fourth floor died, and it took three days before anyone found her, Bruno and I got into the habit of checking on each other. We'd make little excuses—*I ran out of toilet paper*, I'd say when Bruno opened the door. A day would pass. There would be a knock on my door. *I lost my TV Guide*, he'd explain, and I'd go and find him mine, even though I knew his was right there where it always was on his couch. Once he came down on a Sunday afternoon. *I need a cup of flour*, he said. It was clumsy, but I couldn't help myself. *You don't know how to cook*. There was a moment of silence. Bruno looked me in the eye. *What do you know*, he said, *I'm baking a cake*.

When I came to America I knew hardly anyone, only a second cousin who was a locksmith, so I worked for him. If he had been a shoemaker I would have become a shoemaker; if he had shoveled shit I, too, would have shoveled. But. He was a locksmith. He taught me the trade, and

that's what I became. We had a little business together, and then one year he got TB, they had to cut his liver out and he got a 106 temperature and died, so I took it over. I sent his wife half the profits, even after she got married to a doctor and moved to Bay Side. I stayed in the business for over fifty years. It's not what I would have imagined for myself. And yet. The truth is I came to like it. I helped those in who were locked out, others I helped keep out what couldn't be let in, so that they could sleep without nightmares.

Then one day I was looking out the window. Maybe I was contemplating the sky. Put even a fool in front of the window and you'll get a Spinoza. The afternoon passed, darkness sifted down. I reached for the chain on the bulb and suddenly it was as if an elephant had stepped on my heart. I fell to my knees. I thought: I didn't live forever. A minute passed. Another minute. Another. I clawed at the floor, pulling myself along toward the phone.

Twenty-five percent of my heart muscle died. It took time to recover and I never went back to work. A year went by. I was aware of time passing for the sake of itself. I stared out the window. I watched fall turn into winter. Winter into spring. Some days Bruno came downstairs to sit with me. We've known each other since we were boys; we went to school together. He was one of my closest friends, with thick glasses, reddish hair that he hated, and a voice that cracked when he was emotional. I didn't know he was still alive and then one day I was walking down East Broadway and I heard his voice. I turned around. His back was to me, he was standing in front of the grocer's asking for the price of some fruit. I thought: You're hearing things, you're such a dreamer, what is the likelihood—your boyhood friend? I stood frozen on the sidewalk. He's in the ground, I told myself. Here you are in the United States of America, there's McDonald's, get a grip. I waited just to make sure. I wouldn't have recognized his face. But. The way he walked was unmistakable. He was about to pass me, I put my arm out. I didn't know what I was doing, maybe I was seeing things, I grabbed his sleeve. *Bruno*, I said. He stopped and turned. At first he seemed scared and then confused. *Bruno*. He looked at me, his eyes began to fill with tears. I grabbed his other hand, I had one sleeve and one hand. *Bruno*. He started to shake. He touched

his hand to my cheek. We were in the middle of the sidewalk, people were hurrying past, it was a warm day in June. His hair was thin and white. He dropped the fruit. *Bruno*.

A couple of years later his wife died. It was too much to live in the apartment without her, everything reminded him, so when an apartment opened up in the floor above me he moved in. We often sit together at my kitchen table. The whole afternoon might go by without our saying a word. If we do talk, we never speak in Yiddish. The words of our childhood became strangers to us—we couldn't use them in the same way and so we chose not to use them at all. Life demanded a new language.

Bruno, my old faithful. I haven't sufficiently described him. Is it enough to say he is indescribable? No. Better to try and fail than not to try at all. The soft down of your white hair lightly playing about your scalp like a half-blown dandelion. Many times, Bruno, I have been tempted to blow on your head and make a wish. Only a last scrap of decorum keeps me from it. Or perhaps I should begin with your height, which is very short. On a good day you barely reach my chest. Or shall I start with the eyeglasses you fished out of a box and claimed as your own, enormous round things that magnify your eyes so that your permanent response appears to be a 4.5 on the Richter? They're women's glasses, Bruno! I've never had the heart to tell you. Many times I've tried. And something else. When we were boys you were the greater writer. I had too much pride to tell you then. But. I knew. Believe me when I say, I knew it then as I know it now. It pains me to think how I never told you, and also to think of all you could have been. Forgive me, Bruno. My oldest friend. My best. I haven't done you justice. You have given me such company at the end of my life. You, especially you, who might have found the words for it all.

Once, it was a long time ago, I found Bruno lying in the middle of the living room floor next to an empty bottle of pills. He'd had enough. All he wanted was to sleep forever. Taped to his chest was a note with three words: *GOODBYE, MY LOVES*. I shouted out. *NO, BRUNO, NO, NO, NO, NO, NO, NO, NO, NO!* I slapped his face. At last his eyes fluttered open. His gaze was blank and dull. *WAKE UP, YOU DUMKOP!* I shouted. *LISTEN TO ME NOW: YOU HAVE TO WAKE UP!* His eyes drifted closed again. I dialed

911. I filled a bowl with cold water and threw it on him. I put my ear to his heart. Far off, a vague rustle. The ambulance came. At the hospital they pumped his stomach. *Why did you take all those pills?* the doctor asked. Bruno, sick, exhausted, coolly raised his eyes. *WHY DO YOU THINK I TOOK ALL THOSE PILLS?* he shrieked. The recovery room turned silent; everyone stared. Bruno groaned and turned toward the wall. That night I put him to bed. *Bruno*, I said. *So sorry*, he said. *So selfish*. I sighed and turned to go. *Stay with me!* he cried.

We never spoke of it after that. Just as we never spoke of our childhoods, of the dreams we shared and lost, of everything that happened and didn't happen. Once we were sitting silently together. Suddenly one of us began to laugh. It was contagious. There was no reason for our laughter, but we began to giggle and the next thing we were rocking in our seats and howling, *howling* with laughter, tears streaming down our cheeks. A wet spot bloomed in my crotch and that made us laugh harder, I was banging the table and fighting for air, I thought: Maybe this is how I'll go, in a fit of laughter, what could be better, laughing and crying, laughing and singing, laughing so as to forget that I am alone, that it is the end of my life, that death is waiting outside the door for me.

When I was a boy I liked to write. It was the only thing I wanted to do with my life. I invented imaginary people and filled notebooks with their stories. I wrote about a boy who grew up and got so hairy people hunted him for his fur. He had to hide in the trees, and he fell in love with a bird who thought she was a three-hundred-pound gorilla. I wrote about Siamese twins, one of which was in love with me. I thought the sex scenes were purely original. And yet. When I got older I decided I wanted to be a real writer. I tried to write about real things. I wanted to describe the world, because to live in an undescribed world was too lonely. I wrote three books before I was twenty-one, who knows what happened to them. The first was about Slonim, the town where I lived which was sometimes Poland and sometimes Russia. I drew a map of it for the frontispiece, labeling the houses and shops, here was Kipnis the butcher, and here Grodzenski the tailor, and here lived Fishl Shapiro who was either a great *tzaddik* or an idiot, no one could decide, and here the square and the field where we played, and here was where the river

got wide and here narrow, and here the forest began, and here stood the tree from which Beyla Asch hanged herself, and here and here. And yet. When I gave it to the only person in Slonim whose opinion I cared about, she just shrugged and said she liked it better when I made things up. So I wrote a second book, and I made up everything. I filled it with men who grew wings, and trees with their roots growing into the sky, people who forgot their own names and people who couldn't forget anything; I even made up words. When it was finished I ran all the way to her house. I raced through the door, up the stairs, and handed it to the only person in Slonim whose opinion I cared about. I leaned against the wall and watched her face as she read. It grew dark out, but she kept reading. Hours went by. I slid to the floor. She read and read. When she finished she looked up. For a long time she didn't speak. Then she said maybe I shouldn't make up *everything*, because that made it hard to believe *anything*.

Another person might have given up. I started again. This time I didn't write about real things and I didn't write about imaginary things. I wrote about the only thing I knew. The pages piled up. Even after the only person whose opinion I cared about left on a boat for America, I continued to fill pages with her name.

After she left, everything fell apart. No Jew was safe. There were rumors of unfathomable things, and because we couldn't fathom them we failed to believe them, until we had no choice and it was too late. I was working in Minsk, but I lost my job and went home to Slonim. The Germans pushed east. They got closer and closer. The morning we heard their tanks approaching, my mother told me to hide in the woods. I wanted to take my youngest brother, he was only thirteen, but she said she would take him herself. Why did I listen? Because it was easier? I ran out to the woods. I lay still on the ground. Dogs barked in the distance. Hours went by. And then the shots. So many shots. For some reason, they didn't scream. Or maybe I couldn't hear their screams. Afterwards, only silence. My body was numb, I remember I tasted blood in my mouth. I don't know how much time passed. Days. I never went back. When I got up again, I'd shed the only part of me that had ever thought I'd find words for even the smallest bit of life.

And yet.

A couple of months after my heart attack, fifty-seven years after I'd given it up, I started to write again. I did it for myself alone, not for anyone else, and that was the difference. It didn't matter if I found the words, and more than that, I knew it would be impossible to find the right ones. And because I accepted that what I'd once believed was possible was in fact impossible, and because I knew I would never show a word of it to anyone, I wrote a sentence:

Once upon a time there was a boy.

It remained there, staring up from the otherwise blank page for days. The next week I added another. Soon there was a whole page. It made me happy, like talking aloud to myself, which I sometimes do.

Once I said to Bruno, *Take a guess, how many pages do you think I have?* *No idea*, he said.

Write a number, I said, *and slip it across the table*. He shrugged and took a pen out of his pocket. He thought for a minute or two, studying my face. *A ballpark guess*, I said. He hunched over his napkin, scrawled a number, and turned it over. I wrote down the real number, 301, on my own napkin. We pushed the napkins across the table. I picked up Bruno's. For reasons I can't explain he had written 200,000. He picked up my napkin and turned it over. His face fell.

At times I believed that the last page of my book and the last page of my life were one and the same, that when my book ended I'd end, a great wind would sweep through my rooms carrying the pages away, and when the air cleared of all those fluttering white sheets the room would be silent, the chair where I sat would be empty.

Every morning, I wrote a little more. Three-hundred and one, it's not nothing. Now and then, when I'd finished, I'd go to the movies. It's always a big event for me. Maybe I buy some popcorn and—if people are around who'll look—spill it. I like to sit up front, I like for the screen to fill my whole view so that there is nothing to distract me from the moment. And then I want the moment to last forever. I can't tell you how happy it makes me to watch it up there, blown up. I would say *larger than life*, but I've never understood that expression. What is larger than life? To sit in the front row and look up at a beautiful girl's face two stories

high and have the vibrations of her voice massaging your legs is to be reminded of the size of life. So I sit in the front row. If I leave with a crick in my neck and a fading hard-on it was a good seat. I'm not a dirty man. I'm a man who wanted to be as large as life.

There are passages of my book I know by heart.

By heart, this is not an expression I use lightly.

My heart is weak and unreliable. When I go it will be my heart. I try to burden it as little as possible. If something is going to have an impact, I direct it elsewhere. My gut for example, or my lungs, which might seize up for a moment but have never yet failed to take another breath. When I pass a mirror and catch a glimpse of myself, or I'm at the bus stop and some kids come up behind me and say, *Who smells shit?*—small daily humiliations—these I take, generally speaking, in my liver. Other damages I take in other places. The pancreas I reserve for being struck by all that's been lost. It's true that there's so much, and the organ is so small. But. You would be surprised how much it can take, all I feel is a quick sharp pain and then it's over. Sometimes I imagine my own autopsy. Disappointment in myself: right kidney. Disappointment of others in me: left kidney. Personal failures: *kishkes*. I don't mean to make it sound like I've made a science of it. It's not that well thought out. I take it where it comes. It's just that I notice certain patterns. When the clocks are turned back and the dark falls before I'm ready, this, for reasons I can't explain, I feel in my wrists. And when I wake up and my fingers are stiff, almost certainly I was dreaming of my childhood. The field where we used to play, the field in which everything was discovered and everything was possible. (We ran so hard we thought we would spit blood: to me that is the sound of childhood, heavy breathing and shoes scraping the hard earth.) Stiffness of the fingers is the dream of childhood as it's been returned to me at the end of my life. I have to run them under the hot water, steam clouding the mirror, outside the rustle of pigeons. Yesterday I saw a man kicking a dog and I felt it behind my eyes. I don't know what to call this, a place before tears. The pain of forgetting: spine. The pain of remembering: spine. All the times I have suddenly realized that my parents are dead, even now, it still surprises me, to exist in the world while that which made me has ceased to exist: my knees, it takes half a tube of

Ben-Gay and a big production just to bend them. To everything a season, to every time I've woken only to make the mistake of believing for a moment that someone was sleeping beside me: a hemorrhoid. Loneliness: there is no organ that can take it all.

Every morning, a little more.

Once upon a time there was a boy. He lived in a village that no longer exists, in a house that no longer exists, on the edge of a field that no longer exists, where everything was discovered and everything was possible. A stick could be a sword. A pebble could be a diamond. A tree a castle.

Once upon a time there was a boy who lived in a house across the field from a girl who no longer exists. They made up a thousand games. She was Queen and he was King. In the autumn light, her hair shone like a crown. They collected the world in small handfuls. When the sky grew dark they parted with leaves in their hair.

Once upon a time there was a boy who loved a girl, and her laughter was a question he wanted to spend his whole life answering. When they were ten he asked her to marry him. When they were eleven he kissed her for the first time. When they were thirteen they got into a fight and for three weeks they didn't talk. When they were fifteen she showed him the scar on her left breast. Their love was a secret they told no one. He promised her he would never love another girl as long as he lived. *What if I die?* she asked. *Even then,* he said. For her sixteenth birthday he gave her an English dictionary and together they learned the words. *What's this?* he'd ask, tracing his index finger around her ankle, and she'd look it up. *And this?* he'd ask, kissing her elbow. *Elbow! What kind of word is that?* and then he'd lick it, making her giggle. *What about this?* he asked, touching the soft skin behind her ear. *I don't know,* she said, turning off the flashlight and rolling over, with a sigh, onto her back. When they were seventeen they made love for the first time, on a bed of straw in a shed. Later—when things happened that they could never have imagined—she wrote him a letter that said: *When will you learn that there isn't a word for everything?*

Once upon a time there was a boy who loved a girl whose father was shrewd enough to scrounge together all the zloty he had to send his youngest daughter to America. At first she refused to go, but the boy also

knew enough to insist, swearing on his life that he'd earn some money and find a way to follow her. So she left. He got a job in the nearest city, working as a janitor in a hospital. At night he stayed up writing his book. He sent her a letter into which he'd copied eleven chapters in tiny handwriting. He wasn't even sure the mail would get through. He saved all the money he could. One day he was laid off. No one said why. He returned home. In the summer of 1941, the *Einsatzgruppen* drove deeper east, killing hundreds of thousands of Jews. On a bright, hot day in July, they entered Slonim. At that hour, the boy happened to be lying on his back in the woods thinking about the girl. You could say it was his love for her that saved him. In the years that followed, the boy became a man who became invisible. In this way, he escaped death.

Once upon a time a man who had become invisible arrived in America. He'd spent three and a half years hiding, mostly in trees, but also cracks, cellars, holes. Then it was over. The Russian tanks rolled in. For six months he lived in a Displaced Persons camp. He got word to his cousin who was a locksmith in America. In his head, he practiced over and over the only words he knew in English. *Knee. Elbow. Ear.* Finally his papers came through. He took a train to a boat, and after a week he arrived in New York Harbor. A cool day in November. Folded in his hand was the address of the girl. That night he lay awake on the floor of his cousin's room. The radiator clanged and hissed, but he was grateful for the warmth. In the morning his cousin explained to him three times how to take the subway to Brooklyn. He bought a bunch of roses but they wilted because though his cousin had explained the way three times he still got lost. At last he found the place. Only as his finger pressed the doorbell did the thought cross his mind that perhaps he should have called. She opened the door. She wore a blue scarf over her hair. He could hear the broadcast of a ball game through the neighbor's wall.

Once upon a time, the woman who had been a girl got on a boat to America and threw up the whole way, not because she was seasick but because she was pregnant. When she found out, she wrote to the boy. Every day she waited for a letter from him, but none came. She got bigger and bigger. She tried to hide it so she wouldn't lose her job at the dress factory where she worked. A few weeks before the baby was born,

she got news from someone who heard they were killing Jews in Poland. *Where?* she asked, but no one knew where. She stopped going to work. She couldn't bring herself to get out of bed. After a week, the son of her boss came to see her. He brought her food to eat, and put a bouquet of flowers in a vase by her bed. When he found out she was pregnant, he called a midwife. A baby boy was born. One day the girl sat up in bed and saw the son of her boss rocking her child in the sunlight. A few months later, she agreed to marry him. Two years later, she had another child.

The man who had become invisible stood in her living room listening to all of this. He was twenty-five years old. He had changed so much since he last saw her and now part of him wanted to laugh a hard, cold laugh. She gave him a small photograph of the boy, who was now five. Her hand was shaking. She said: *You stopped writing. I thought you were dead.* He looked at the photograph of the boy who would grow up to look like him, who, although the man didn't know it then, would go to college, fall in love, fall out of love, become a famous writer. *What's his name?* he asked. She said: *I called him Isaac.* They stood for a long time in silence as he stared at the picture. At last he managed three words: *Come with me.* The sound of children shouting came from the street below. She squeezed her eyes shut. *Come with me,* he said, holding out his hand. Tears rolled down her face. Three times he asked her. She shook her head. *I can't,* she said. She looked down at the floor. *Please,* she said. And so he did the hardest thing he'd ever done in his life: he picked up his hat and walked away.

And if the man who once upon a time had been a boy who promised he'd never fall in love with another girl as long as he lived kept his promise, it wasn't because he was stubborn or even loyal. He couldn't help it. And having hidden for three and a half years, hiding his love for a son who didn't know he existed didn't seem unthinkable. Not if it was what the only woman he would ever love needed him to do. After all, what does it mean for a man to hide one more thing when he has vanished completely?