

My body cannot distinguish between the terror of being chased by a human-eating grizzly bear with no help in sight and flying in an airplane. Honestly, I would prefer the bear. My fear of flying isn't mild discomfort. It is a visceral, paralyzing anxiety that strips me of all logical thought and consumes me with a full-body panic attack. I have determined that this fear stems from two core triggers. First: confinement. Being trapped in a sealed metal tube with no accessible escape route is quite literally, my worst nightmare. Second: displacement. Planes don't just lift you into the air; they pull you far from home. Home, for me, is where "my people" reside. I want to stay close to everyone I love. For as long as I can remember, my nervous system has validated every reason I've given it to dread flying. I never challenged that fear until I turned 24 and met love in its full complexity.

One question people often wrestle with is: How do you know if you truly love someone? **Love is an enigma.** It is maddeningly elusive. There are no quantifiable answers, but there is a way to gauge it qualitatively using hypothetical inquiries. As absurd as this sounds, I ask myself, "Would I get on a plane for them?" If the answer is yes, I would step onto an aircraft to see them, I love them. Days before a flight, the unraveling begins: nausea, tears, insomnia, panic attacks, trembling hands, a brain caught in a spin cycle. I suffer in every sense of the phrase. But **love is a sacrifice.** It says, "I love this person so much more than anything I am going to endure." Love wins.

On the other hand, if the answer is no, I wouldn't get on a plane for them, I don't love them. **Love is selfish.** It is an essential self-preserving emotion that says, "I love myself enough to protect my peace, and I choose that over them." Everyone must consider a tangible question to determine where their love for someone lies. If we don't, we are floating amoebas swimming in an abyss of non-answers, and we lose someone we love as a result. Trust me, I would know. Start by asking yourself if you would overcome your biggest tangible fear with determination *for them*. If you would, please know how insanely batshit crazy that is. **Love is crazy.**

He was exactly 982.8 miles away when I realized I loved him. With a tight grip, I held onto this number like I held on to our memories. I kept imagining these miles in moments. 982.8 moments that I would've spent in an airplane. Stuck, suffocated, and panicked. 982.8 moments that would've been spent in a vessel moving me far away from everything I know. Stuck, suffocated, and panicked. 982.8 moments that would've been spent lost in my mind, hopelessly trying to convince myself that I made the right choice to start a new life across the country. Stuck, suffocated, and panicked.

24 years old, I stood at a fork in the road. One path led me to home; the other, 982.8 miles away, led toward the man I loved. Already tired from grieving the loss of friends, family, a career, and myself, I didn't have the energy to chase him. I was in desperate need of predictability and comfort. Though his path was narrow, dusty, and uncertain, it glowed with equal promise as mine. I stood frozen, paralyzed by indecision and grief. I now understand that my body knew more than my heart did. My hesitation wasn't failure; it was my body's way of protecting me. Still, part of me resented that he didn't try to help, didn't run after me the way I sometimes imagined I would've followed him. Nonetheless, by the time he left my sight, it was already too late. **Love is timely,** and we were not on time.

It is a human condition not to know what we have until we no longer have it. When he and I went our separate ways, metaphorically and physically, the terrible anxieties that riddled my being were no longer amplified. **Love is powerful.** For the first time in my life, the airplane

and fear of confinement weren't the biggest problems in the room. The core struggle I wrestled with was not being able to have him. I could no longer call him to talk about things only he knew, or hear his voice when he said my name. He wasn't there to laugh with me over nothing and to stay up late talking about everything we could have been. I would never know how his hockey career was progressing, never mind if his dog was still alive. The chapter for us was over. Love, I found, doesn't always conquer fear. Sometimes, it simply sits beside it. My fear of flying never left me, but something more significant took priority- the pain of missing someone. It was a foreign feeling to experience my largest fear diminish so rapidly in the presence of regret, loss, and love.

The day I lost him, I didn't lose *just* him. *Just*. As if that wasn't enough. I lost the girl I could have been if I moved 982.8 miles away. **Love is curious.** It makes you wonder not only about the people you lose, but about the selves you never got to be. The girl who moved 982.8 miles away was adventurous, passionate, happy, faithful, and excited about life. She fell so in love she couldn't see straight. She flew back and forth to visit her old home and her new one. She chased happiness across state lines and boarded planes with shaking hands but a full heart. I can't help but glorify her. That woman is everything I want to be and will never get to see. I understand there is zero benefit to ruminating on a life I won't get to experience, but it's important to grieve it. Some grief simply belongs to the futures we gave up reluctantly and quietly. I eulogize this alternate life because there is sorrow in not being able to live it. Now, I'll always be left to wonder about the things I never got to ask him and the stories he never told. I will be eternally filled with envy for the people he chooses to love instead of me. **Love is sad.**

As much as I romanticized being the woman who fearlessly moved across the country for love and never looked back, I've come to understand- she would've longed to be me. *The grass is always greener.* The girl who moved 982.8 miles away wouldn't get to see her family as much as I do. Sit in her comfy bedroom. Go to the yoga studio down the street. Take care of her sick father. Visit her grandfather in the hospital just blocks away. Sit with him, laughing through old stories, and getting advice while she still could. Whisper "I love you" before his final breath. Go on late-night gym runs with her best friend. Hear the pots clinking downstairs as her family cooks dinner. Smell the scents that travel down the hallway. Pick up and drop off her little sister at inconvenient times. Stay up late, splitting a bottle of red with her mother. Drag her brother to their favorite restaurant just to order the same thing. Go out on the weekends with her girls. Say "packie", "nips", and "cAH" without wondering if people will understand her. Big things and little things. Yet all of them, mine.

I am unlearning the notion that I am weak, afraid, or an imperfect blend of catastrophes because I did not get on that plane. I am still deserving of love in the mundane, predictable, stable life that I chose. I didn't realize how much I appreciated what I had in front of me until I saw 982.8 versions of my life without it. Love doesn't always mean leaving. Sometimes, love is choosing to stay. There is an unrecognized bravery in that. I love the life I have. I loved my life with him. I just loved one more than the other. **Love is complicated.**

Even though I am content with my decision, a little piece of me keeps begging the universe for a loophole. For a forgotten corner of the Earth, somewhere in the center of 491.4 miles, where time bends just enough to let us try again. A place that had everything we ever wanted. A season when we still existed. But **love is out of our control.** Even though I wish there were, I know the truth. There is no bending of a timeline to force two people into readiness to leave behind everything they so deeply know and love. There are no shape-shifting locations to find a middle ground where our families and friends reside, all hometown roads intertwine, and

all local coffee shops are mini reunions. There is just as much love in his decision to stay home as there is in mine. There is love in the priority of our siblings, friends, and family. There is love about everything in our present that we aren't ready to put in the past. There is selflessness, kindness, and passion in saying goodbye, knowing we are fostering a love that isn't ours because it is far more indestructible than us. **Love is a priority.**

Love is an enigma, a sacrifice, selfish, crazy, timely, powerful, curious, sad, complicated, out of our control, and a priority. But above all, **love is inevitable.** Whether you love a hot coffee on a cold morning, the person lying next to you in bed, the soul you see in the mirror, or the one who got 982.8 miles away, **love is present.** Love exists in what we do and don't do. It lived in every one of the 982.8 miles I ached to cross for him, just as much as it existed in the 982.8 moments I knew I never would. Love is incredibly potent in the bittersweet taste of loving a life without him. It is the unexplainable force that made my biggest fear so incredibly small. Love made me walk away, with blurry vision and a heavy heart, from the first-ever airplane I truly wanted to board.

Even as I mourn what could have been, I find myself anchored in the quiet comforts of home. I am sitting in my warm kitchen with my mom humming a tune and smelling the chocolate chip cookies in the oven. My dad asked me to get ice cream later. I see the pictures of those we lost around us, watching over. I have an overwhelming love around me. I am filled with peace and meaning in the silent moments I almost gave up. The weight of choosing a different path than him doesn't feel like regret anymore. It manifested into a blessing. Love, after all, isn't just about the distance you travel or the grand gestures you make. It's about where you are in this moment, finding love in the quiet stillness of staying.