

Missing Pages  
Amy Manning Burns

One night a few years ago, I was up late – job stress had been robbing me of sleep. Restless, I wandered in to my closet and noticed a stack of journals tucked behind a pile of old T-shirts on the top shelf. These were the chronicles I'd kept for two years after I'd graduated from high school. With a surprised laugh, I took a journal down and opened it. The spine cracked from years of sitting closed and forgotten.

It happened to be the one I'd kept during the summer I turned 18 and was dating a sweet guy named Cameron.

Whenever I remember Cameron, there is a tenderness that has lingered with me these 20 years. He always smelled like soap and fresh laundry; I loved how that scent would envelope the two of us whenever he hugged me. His hair was milky-yellow, and his eyes were gray blue like old denim.

Everything I knew about men by the time I was 18 was what I'd gleaned from soap operas, MTV, the occasional romance novel, and my relationship with my father. My worship of one-dimensional celebrities coupled with the emotional estrangement between Dad and I left a lot to my imagination about men.

Although I'd had three boyfriends before I was 18, I tended to develop infatuations that were comfortably out of reach. I'd indulge in innocent fantasies about the handsome jock in my typing class or the foreign exchange student with the adorable accent. Then there were the hours upon hours of me holed up in my room and churning out love scenes between a foxier version of myself and a rock star, who, in my world, was always drug-free, monogamous, and the ultimate gentleman.

I was still dreaming about rock stars the summer Cameron and I were together. We spent many a night enjoying the quiet of some random acre of country, lying side by side on the hood of his car on a lakefront, or spending late hours on top of Mount Petit Jean where we had our first date.

Per my journal, our first kiss went exactly like this:

We were sitting on a large, flat rock, gazing at the quadrillion pinpricks of starlight that swirled above our heads in the black sky. First-date tension hovered between us like a third presence. He asked me to tell him when I was ready to leave.

"But," he grinned, "I was really hoping I could swipe a kiss first."

Of course.

He slid next to me, pressed his forehead to mine, and kissed me.

Cameron had a sweetness he doled out in great lumps, without a second thought as to how it might make him look. If it crossed his mind, it crossed his lips. According to my journal, during another kiss, the wind whipped my long hair around our heads and in between our lips. Cameron looked at me with a sleepy, blissful smile. "I like smoochin'," he said in a dopey way that made me swoon. Another time, I noticed he was staring at me through the windshield of his car. He jumped in to the driver's seat and shook his head. "You are beautiful." Just like that. No hesitations. No red-faced mumbblings. No self-conscious silences.

Whenever I relived these simple scenes, neurons rocketed around the recesses of my brain. This was a real live soap opera; I was the perfect heroine for this charming, leading man.

My journal entries worsened with embarrassing lovesickness as the summer waned. From the beginning I'd known that my relationship with Cameron would last only two and half months. A French studies student, Cameron had been accepted to a college in France and was to leave that September. My anticipation of this tragic event smacked of daytime drama. I imagined the long goodbye at his doorstep, the tear-filled kisses, and the fervent promises to write.

With each page, an ache began somewhere in the back of my throat. It was a longing for that innocence we all lose as time and heartbreak make cynics of us all.

Waxing wistful, I came across this conversation:

"I like you, Amy. I love you."

"Don't say that unless you mean it."

"Well, I do," he said.

"How do you mean that?"

"Not that I want to get married or something," he shrugged. "All I know is that I do. It's always hard to say it the first time you know."

I re-read the conversation at least a dozen times. Lowering the journal, I felt my brain scramble to search for this memory that I had tossed aside. Then there it was, spinning before my eyes in magnificent technicolor. I saw Cameron standing outside holding the screen door open for me as I was leaving. His words stopped me just before I stepped out into the hot August night. I stared at him across the threshold, but Cameron, not one for dramatic pauses, turned and led me to my car.

The ache in my throat rose to my eyes, and I began to cry. Why did I forget about that?

I guess I'd always imagined the first time I'd hear those words from a man that they'd be wrought with emotion, uttered on the verge of tears. He'd cup my face between his hands and press his palms into my cheeks with the strength of his sincerity. There weren't supposed to be any shrugs or matter-of-fact declarations made as I was heading out the door. This was the moment that was supposed to blow both of us away and sweep us up in dizzying waves of romantic ridiculousness.

But the moment had come, simply, quietly. It'd been delivered in the only way Cameron could have done so: with a shrug and with the assumption that I'd known this all along. It wasn't the soap opera scene I'd built up in my mind. Disappointed, I dismissed the conversation then forgot about it.

Our love story had an unremarkable ending. On the day before Cameron left, he rushed around me packing clothes and blasting a Pete Townsend record on his stereo. He didn't cry with me as we said goodbye at the door. When I left his house, I drove my car in to a ditch at the bottom of his driveway.

After Cameron left for France, I received several letters and postcards from him. Sometimes he said he missed me. And although I missed him, too, I'd moved on, searching for that perfect moment of new love in the way I'd always imagined it, oblivious to the fact that I'd had it already and had missed it entirely.

I stared at the page that had literally rewritten my personal history in a matter of seconds. Up until that moment, if you'd asked me who was the first man to have ever told me he loved me I would have said without hesitation my first husband. But memory is fickle and selective. It becomes a fixed thing in your head that you don't question. However, a renewed past can yield a powerful clarity you carry in to the

future.

Closing the journal, I smiled at the gift I'd just been given.