

Empathy

By Lauren Cole

The dawn was warm milk. Like any other, its heat poured down her throat and flowed through her veins until it tingled every part of her awake, alive. Each morning it fueled her, washing away the scars of the previous day and preparing her to face the next. In the last five of her twenty-three years, she had never missed a sunrise. It had become a ritual, a compulsion not unlike a superstition, not so much because she feared some great thing would befall her if she broke her routine, but rather because she feared that the moment she ceased to demonstrate her appreciation for the world, the moment she took it for granted, its great love would be lost to her once and for all and so would her chance to reclaim it. Of all feelings, love was the strongest but also the most fragile. In the first moments of the day she was inclined to believe it when she told herself that she was luckier than the others, to have known this kind of love, but even then these thoughts evaded conviction. The newness to be found in a day always eclipsed what she thought she had known, and so she could never align herself with blessing or with curse. And she probably never would, with time slipping through her fingers as it was. The cliché was accurate for once; the hours really did feel like grains of sand.

Special was an easier and more timely lesson than different. She was nine years old when her mother beckoned her to the bed. Arista. She loved the lilt in her mother's voice whenever she spoke her name. When she got close she could still smell the lavender through the septic odor that came and went with the nurses. Though her mother's cheeks and palms were like ice, the crook under her arm remained a warm place to snuggle up into. She laid there, face buried in the pillow, for nearly an hour, content to be near her, to feel her heartbeat as if it were her own. It wasn't until one of the nurses returned, stirring Arista with

her sickeningly sanitary aroma, that she realized that she had fallen asleep and been moved to the armchair, and had been there for some time. But still she sensed the dull ache of her mother's heart within her own, fading like the wake of a dream. Though it seemed the kind of thing that required no explanation, she crawled back into her mother's bed (against the will of the nurse), and told her about it. She remembered her mother's knowing smile, the sensation of her stroking her hair. "You are an extraordinary girl, my Arista." It would be comforting years later to know that her mother would've stood by blessing.

Unfortunately cursed was more convincing. It was a couple more years after her mother's death that she learned to accept what she was, and though for some time it was like a wonderful secret, she longed to tell someone else. Puberty brought with it the same curiousness and clumsiness with one's own body for Arista as it did for everyone else, but though she sensed it, she had to confront another human being to confirm that she was not normal. It was easy enough to giggle at the mention of a training bra, but that awkward stage was one shared by all. The look given to her the day she asked her friend if she could feel it when other people were sad, really feel it, was enough to keep her too self-conscious to mention it to another peer for years. That night, however, she went to her father, for if anyone would understand and provide her guidance, it would be an adult. Something had been missing in Arista's relationship with her father ever since her mother had died, but she knew that he still loved her very much, and she him. She expected a reassuring pat like that her mother had given her, that same depth of understanding though many things went unspoken. Instead, when she told him at the tender age of twelve, she got that same dismissive look as that given to her by her friend, eyes incredulous with a tinge of wariness, regarding it as no more than the caprice of a child, but nonetheless one that ought not be

mentioned again. She was more puzzled than anything else, for she was not yet at the point where she could read sincerity, and so did not know whether her father's reaction was as innocent as her friend's. But she took the look seriously, and buried her unsatisfied curiosity back into secrecy. And so the seed of loneliness was sown.

She had her first boyfriend at fifteen, and in Brian she thought she had found eternity. Sitting beside him in algebra class, she ignored the daily lessons and instead focused on memorizing his pain. He, too, had a loneliness about him, a romantic distance. His teenage despair was intoxicating and she became utterly desperate to be the one to save him. Knowing him in and out, she calculated, and one day she orchestrated the right time, the right place, and the right thing to say, and he was hers. He was completely taken by this girl, whom he had never bothered to notice when she sat next to him in class, and yet seemed to know him as if they had been together their whole lives. Though they only ever kissed, being only fifteen after all, he had never known such intimacy. It delighted him, but so did it occasionally cause him a slight unease of the sort that he could never seem to put a finger on. She, the whole time, was obviously happy. When they reached, far quicker than most, that point of the relationship in which there are no secrets, he dared to ask her how was it she knew, that day, just what he wanted to hear. Finally, she thought, someone I can tell. But though she was an expert in moments, she never did master predictions. His revulsion stung all the more because it was not at what she was, but at what she had done, that, try as she might to explain, he could regard in no way but as invasion of the deepest kind. Ironically, his pitch, his cadence were burned into her memory forever. Rape, he had called it.

Arista's second boyfriend a year later was of no import, save that he prepared her for the third, who was the most important of all. It was through Caleb that she discovered that

her ability could extend beyond the emotional. They were at his house, and naturally, his parents were not home. They had almost done it before, but his flashy little sports car didn't have much in the way of a backseat. They were kissing. She liked kissing him, loved it, in fact, for she had never been kissed quite like it before. They were both hungry when he eased her down on the bed, but she started to protest. "What is it?" he asked gently, tickling the crease of her arm, "first time?" No, she shook her head. It wasn't that, exactly. "It gets better the more you do it, I promise." He smiled; it wasn't his first time, either. "I know," she answered. "That's why I want to do it, but..." His blue eyes sparkled. "I've got to tell you something first, because I like you, a lot." And he nodded, and he listened, and when she was done, he didn't frown, he didn't shout, he only shrugged and squeezed her fingers. "Maybe that'll make it all the better, huh?" She knew he probably didn't believe her, but she didn't care. It was the best reaction she'd ever had, she thought as she unbuttoned his shirt. And oh, how right he was. He brought her to places she had never previously been, never dreamed of. Together they climbed, like in a dance, synchronized to a heightening pace, a heightening pleasure, harmonized to a degree she had never felt before. It was a fraction of a second too late when she realized that it was not only her own ecstasy that she was experiencing. "Wow," he breathed, and sunk into her chest, eyes fluttering. But they snapped open soon enough, and he was no longer on top of her, but beside her. "What's wrong?" he panicked, "Are you cold? You're shaking!" And she didn't stop for nearly four hours.

Blessings, you see, don't usually come with a price. Caleb had called her father that day, and his anger as they drove home was too complex for even Arista to read. The fissure was growing, and there was nothing she could do about it. And then, on June 4th, 1994, three

months before Arista went off to college, he chose Maureen. Arista felt no resentment, only what would be a preemptive sense of loss. Her father became a man shared between two worlds, and though Maureen seemed nice enough, it was fair to say that she and Arista did not really mingle. The timing was preordained by fate, itself. Maureen had a child from a previous marriage, five years old. As Arista's "condition" rendered her extremely maternal, assuming maternity to have its place with compassion, she was happy to baby-sit on the rare occasion when called upon to do so. From Katie, she absorbed the bittersweet reminder of her father's capacity to love a child unconditionally, sensing his immediate attachment to this other young girl who was not truly his own. The sting of that knowledge drove her to accept the distance he had resigned to long ago. After finishing her degree, she moved east, where she could be among the first in the country to greet the rising sun.

Lying on her back, a memory suddenly bubbled to the surface. That is, she remembered that it was a memory, and not a dream or remnant of adolescent whimsy. She was ten and walking home from school, all alone. It was a baby bird lying in the middle of the gritty sidewalk, crouched, wrapped close in its own wings. She remembered the way its beak gaped and its little chest heaved. The afternoon light glared through the leaves of the tree overhead, flooding any view of a nest. She got on her knees, feeling the same grit of the cement scrape beneath the denim of her jeans. There were cats in the neighborhood, she knew, and no other adults in any of the surrounding houses had seemed to find it yet—or cared. Her mother would have known what to do, she was certain, but she did not. It made no noise, no move save the flick of its head. She reached out slowly and methodically, whispering to soothe. She knew she shouldn't have, but she touched it, running her finger gently along its back, feeling the softness of its baby feathers. And a warmth rose in it, and

tingled as it traveled up her arm and into the depths of her heart. And she wasn't sure why she was crying when the little bird's breath steadied and it sung a note as it flapped its way into the air and disappeared. And her body ached for days afterward, she was remembering, but that was okay because the bird was okay. Why had she always told herself that she had imagined it?

The phone rang one night and it was Maureen on the other end. Her father was sick, she said. Maybe dying, said the doctors. So Arista boarded a plane and retreated for the first time in two years back to where she had come from. She met them at the hospital, which was so full of pain and anger but also joy and peace that she could barely stand it. Maureen greeted her kindly, but Katie was silent and shy, and Arista took note that she would be about nine years old now, going on ten. She could feel their sorrow like unseen tendrils of mist, licking at her heart and mind. She entered the private room alone and saw him lying there, in a deep sleep from the medication, as they warned her he would be. She sat his side and took his hand and told him that she no longer blamed him for anything. How could she? She felt his fear. She told him how much she loved him, and spoke of many things, not caring whether he heard her or not. But some things she could not say, even now. She wondered if her father knew about the baby. She wondered if Maureen had chosen not to tell him, or if it was that she, herself, was not yet aware. But Arista knew, and the meaning of that new life was the surest thing she had ever known. So she closed her eyes, and squeezed his hand, and moved her other fingertips to his chest. Her mind's eye pictured his crippled heart beating like that little bird's wings. She didn't cry. The warmth rose to bathe them both, and, sitting so still, she took every last drop of his hurt for her own.

One of these dawns, she knew, would be her last. The suffering was not much, but she sensed it would be soon. Whatever gift she had been given, whether for worse or for better, she had learned how to give it to others, and that seemed to satisfy her purpose in this complicated, emotional world. Her thoughts traveled far these days, but most often to her mother. Arista had never felt her affliction, even in the last days, she recalled. And for the first time it occurred to her that maybe her mother had been one, too. Of all of the things Arista had experienced, the instant of death was somehow not one of them; she had been sheltered from that. What she remembered best were the smaller things in the lives of the thousands around her, private moments that she was felt so honored to share. The adventure of toddlers taking their first steps. The pride of their parents. The awe of young lovers. The nostalgia of the elderly. For all the bad in the world, even in her own life, she alone knew just how bright the good shined, rivaling the sun. She hoped she could take that with her.