

I've heard stories about it, but after the War To End All Wars decimated our world as we once knew it, the Leaders agreed that Love had died with the final war. They decided that in order to move forward as a productive, sustainable and peaceful global community, emotional Love was just too distracting and painful. The last war created such sadness, heartache, pain and devastation, the Leaders vowed never to have that happen again. Productivity was the wave of the future and anything or anybody having to do with Love would be halted. All animals began to die off, and oxycontin was no longer present in the world refraining love to occur. Humans persevered, we learned how to live without it, and here we are now, no love at all. Now a days, people frown upon the thought of love, they think it's weird and unnatural, they think that since we have survived so successfully without it since the last war, bringing it back would be dangerous.

Rosespring was a perfect place to live. We have the same weather everyday, all homes are equal so no one feels excluded, our school systems are impeccable, we grow and create all our food, and have been able to create clones of animals that once died off in the War. As a 16 year old, there's plenty of things to do. I go to school, and then usually like to go to the library, and I also was given the gift of dance.

"Cleo! Time to leave for school, you have approximately 14 minutes until school starts!", my guardian yelled from upstairs. I grab my bag and head downstairs. I wave goodbye to my guardians Claudia and Jerome and jump on my bike and head to school.

Today, the weather seems warm, yet comfortable for my liking. The same weather as yesterday, the same weather every day. I see our neighbors leaving from their homes to get to work or school. All the sprinklers are on, the mail is being delivered, everything is just perfect.

“Cleo! Wait up!”, I hear from behind me. I turn around and see Jax quickly riding behind me. Distracted I lose my balance and fall off my bike.

“Jax! I told you not to come up behind me like that!”, I say as I brush my knees off and grab my bike.

“Sorry, I wanted to ride with you.”, he says grinning. I look into his blue eyes and smile. “Alright, I guess now you have to.” We set off, riding in unison to school, watching everything pass by us.

We arrive at school, leave our bikes out front with everyone else’s and head inside to our separate classes. I didn’t even realize I was still smiling, or that I had a lovely morning. Usually mornings are always the same, but today felt even better than normal, which is strange. Things are supposed to feel different, Rosespring was designed to give consistency to our lives. I walk into class with my teacher staring at me. He gave me an uncomfortable look, as if I walked into class with no shoes on or something. I look at the class and they are also starring.

“Class I want to demonstrate how you are not supposed to show up to class. We take care of ourselves here in Rosespring. Cleo clearly thinks it's appropriate to wear pants that are ripped on the knee with blood on her knee. If you are to ever fall, you know that you are supposed to report to the medics immediately.”

I look down at my pants, with a huge gash in my knee, with blood and dirt surrounding the wound. How did I not notice this? I can’t believe I came into class like this? I was so distracted... distracted by Jax. How? He’s nothing but another person in Rosespring. I didn’t even feel the cut. Embarrassed I quickly said, “I’m so sorry, please excuse my unacceptable behavior, I’ll head to the medics immediately.”

My heart beats faster as I decide to run out of the room abruptly. I can feel tears in my eyes I refuse to let roll down my cheeks. I can't cry, it was just an accident, everyone deserves to have at least one accident in their life. I continue to think of reasons to justify my actions.

Smack! I ram right into Jax.

“Cleo, where are you going, and what is on your knee?” he asked glaring at my cut. He had a look of disgust on his face. Embarrassed I replied saying, “Oh..um.. It's when I fell off my bike, I have to go to the medics.”

I rush out of school, feeling the blood trickle down my leg and feeling my face flush as I biked towards the medical center in the middle of the town.

“So, you cut yourself and didn't notice?”, asked the treatment giver. I thought for a moment. How did I really not notice? It doesn't make any sense. I play back the moment over and over in my head and all I could focus on was Jax.

“Cleo? Did you hear what I said?”

“Oh, sorry no. Can you repeat that?”, I asked.

“I said you need to change your bandage every night and clean it with what I'm going to give you for the next week. Are you sure you're okay? You seem a little off.” She was right, I was a little “off”. I've heard stories of people acting out and then suddenly they just disappear. With that said, I should get my act together.

“What, why wouldn't I be? I'm fine.” I lied.

“No reason, just checking. I'll see you in two weeks.” I nod my head, grab my things and head back to my school.

As I rode back to school, the temperature still felt the same, the sprinklers were on, the city was quiet, the streets were empty because everyone was where they were supposed to be. It felt like the whole world was moving around me, but I was stuck in the middle. I felt flustered, overwhelmed, and I couldn't help but think about this morning. What does this mean? More importantly, why do I care? Just the thought of Jax makes my heart melt and my palms sweat. Maybe I'm sick, which scares me because no one ever gets sick here. I remember a classmate of mine, Emmaline I think her name was, just disappeared one day. She was a very outgoing person and it often would throw people off. She was always asking questions that no one would dare to ask and sometimes even challenge what was expected. Everyone, including myself, thought she was weird, but I still was intrigued by her. One afternoon after a particularly awkward encounter with one of the teachers, she ran out of school red-faced and screaming. It made the rest of the school day uncomfortable for everyone and we were shocked by her very public display of emotion. The next day, she didn't come to school. We assumed her guardian was handling the situation at home. But a week later, still no Emmaline. And still no Emmaline to this day, three years later. No explanation. No discussion. No mention of her name. Eventually I overheard one teacher mentioned to another that Emmaline was sick and was being handled. This can't be me, I can't be sick. I don't want to be "handled", whatever that is. But it doesn't sound good.

Once I got back to school, the day couldn't have moved any slower. Usually my day goes by at just the right speed, but today was different. I'd sit at my desk moving fingers along the ripped part of my jeans, thinking about Emmaline, or Jax, or why it felt like my heart was beating out of my chest. Throughout the day I found myself counting the number of times I would see Jax in the hallways. Once he left my view it didn't seem to matter because I would

continue having the image of him in my head. I know I shouldn't think about someone this way, but I couldn't help it. In two different classes, I lost my train of thought and got called out for not being on task. A couple of my classmates started looking at me oddly because of my behavior. Fearful that I was calling attention to myself because of my actions, I willed myself to get back in line and at least look the part of compliant student.

When the day was over, I headed to my home quicker than I ever have. I didn't wait for Jax, nor did I wave to my neighbors as I pulled up to my house. I made a beeline for my bedroom where I fell into my bed and let my body sink into the mattress as if I was becoming apart of it. Then I pulled the covers over my head and started to feel a sense of comfort. My thoughts quieted. The tension in my shoulders eased. I started to talk out loud, but under the covers my voice and thoughts were muffled. Just me, myself and I could hear them and it was such a relief to speak, even if to myself in a whisper. I eventually tire but sleep restlessly.

The sun was shining. Claudia yells to remind me that I have 14 minutes to get to school as she always does. I head out of the house and hope for a smooth ride unlike yesterday. I convinced myself that yesterday was just an odd day. Chalk it up to some weird merging of planets where I was pulled into a strange emotional abyss by some magnetic force and all the pent up emotions of yester years happen to be absorbed into and under my skin. That must've been it I told myself as I grabbed my bike. Or something equally bizarre for me to suddenly experience these unwanted feelings. I closed my eyes, took a deep breath, listened to my surroundings and vowed to begin anew today. I will not let myself get caught up in this silliness. I can't afford the danger.

The weeks passed. Slowly. Same movements every day. Same weather. I keep my focus on my school work. I follow the rules. I maintain my routine. I get lost in my dancing. I find solace, deep under the covers. My sleep is still restless as is my heart when I see Jax, no matter how hard I try to conceal it. Oh how I wish I could talk to someone about all this. If only Emmaline was still around. I didn't know her well, but she seemed like the type who would relish a deep conversation. And that's what I needed. I tried to do a little snooping about her but got nowhere. I would nonchalantly throw her name out there when talking at lunchtime but most the time was met with blank stares, odd glares or dead silence. I did it a few times over the course of a few weeks, but decided to stop when I started to sense something unusual - not necessarily danger, but an uneasiness that people were starting to feel towards me. I didn't want to call any unwanted attention my way, so I stopped. And the weeks continued to pass. Very slowly. Without incident. Without love.

One ordinary day, I was walking back to my classroom when I heard the faint sound of voices talking. I followed them. As I got closer to their location, one of them sounded vaguely familiar. It was Jax. I'm not sure who he was talking to, or why he was out of class in the first place. I listened when something piqued my interest. He was talking about his feelings towards someone. "I can't believe I'm feeling this way. This isn't right. This is not supposed to happen" he mourned. He went on to say how he had been holding back his feelings for quite awhile now, afraid to share them. They were towards someone he knew well, someone he was in school with, someone who lived close by...someone HE RODE HIS BIKE TO SCHOOL WITH! I gasped! He was talking about ME! Could this be really happening....Jax had the same feelings for me that I had for him? Not only did we have similar feelings of like, possibly love, but similar

feelings of fear and that we were doing something wrong. I had some thinking to do. How will I make it through the rest of the school day without giving away my thoughts? I could feel myself smiling from ear to ear. My head was in the clouds.

Maybe it was a sign from the universe that I should tell him how I feel. From the books I've read and the movies I've seen, it always goes a little something like this:

“Hey, I've been meaning to talk to you about something important.”

“Sure, what is it”, says the girl smiling at the ground and fidgeting with their hands.

“Recently, I haven't been able to stop thinking about you. You're constantly on my mind. I think I love you.” Then they usually live happy ever after is what they say. I wish it was that easy for me.

The day couldn't have gone any slower, yet my heart continued to beat fast. I was creating a conversation in my head, rehearsing for when the time came I would be prepared. I was hopeful, I was looking for the happy endings they get in the movies. As I daydreamed, the day began to move quicker.

The hour had finally arrived, the time where we would ride home together. Nervously, I waited for him by my bike.

“Oh, hey. You waited for me.”, he said unlocking his bike.

“Yeah, I guess I did.”, I said smiling.

We hopped on our bikes and began to ride. Today felt especially different, and I knew why. Suddenly the temperature didn't feel so perfect, I felt hotter than normal. Now is my chance, I need to do this before I chicken out.

“So, I couldn’t help overhear what you were talking about earlier in the hallway at school. I just wanted to say that I feel the same way.”, I said nervously.

“Same way about what?”

“You know, the conversation you had...about feeling a certain way towards someone. I know that it might be out of sorts and not be the best idea, but you don’t need to be afraid. I have these feelings for you too. We can figure something out, as long as we do it together I’m sure that it’ll all be...”

“Cleo, what the hell are you talking about? Why would I ever develop such ‘feelings’. I mean are you crazy? You know that type of stuff doesn’t exist and to think that it should is a sin. I’m so disgusted with you, I can’t even manage to look at your face right now.” He continued. “This puts us both in a potentially dangerous predicament, Cleo. Do you realize that?” He stood there looking at me, and not in a particularly nice way. Silence and tension filled the air.

“But I heard you talking about your feelings you had towards someone and I assumed you were talking about me especially since you mentioned it was someone you rode your bike to school with everyday. That’s me. That’s us!” I explained. I felt myself getting smaller. Why was he acting this way? I don’t understand.

Jax looked at me. He seemed to have calmed down a bit. He started speaking in softer tones. “Cleo, I was rehearsing a play I had written. I wasn’t expressing real feelings towards you or anyone else. I was acting. I don’t know what to say to you.”

We stood there awkwardly silent. Neither of us knew what to do or say. It has all gone terribly wrong. I had just confessed something that we are not supposed to feel. Others before me have disappeared for challenging or defying the system and our way of life. Will Jax now turn

me in? Would he feel it's his duty as a member of our community? What will happen to me now? It's obviously not reciprocated. I started to get very nervous. Jax took a deep breath, closed his eyes to find the words, opened them and simply said: "we are done." He turned his back and walked slowly away. Then his pace picked up and he started to run home. I was broken inside. Exhausted, I managed to stagger home, crawl into bed and hid under my covers.

The sun was shining. My guardian Claudia called up to me, "Cleo, you have 14 minutes until you have to be at school." I gathered my things, headed downstairs, said good-bye and got my bike. I heard the familiar sound of bike chains and I when I looked up, it was Jax riding past me. No wave. No stopping. That's how it's been these last few months.

