

## Their Love

I used to watch Disney movies when I was younger. It was as prominent in my life as the oreo crumbs ever present on my sticky fingers, the cheerios I had every morning for breakfast, and the Barbie dolls I dragged with me everywhere. It would be the first thing I'd cue up on the T.V whenever I'd come home from school, aggravating my brother and sister who just wanted to watch their shows. But I was the youngest. By default, I won the battle of the T.V before it had even started.

I didn't know what I liked the most. What is the thrill of adventure the movies held that made me feel like a warrior? Or perhaps it was the magical universes that I was constantly teleported to day after day. Now, I know. I watched as pure love blossomed among fictional characters on the screen, and in those exact moments, I desired nothing less than that when I was older. It was a bit unrealistic, but I didn't know that at the time. I thought it was possible, something I could grasp within my fingers and hold near and dear to my heart.

I want the soulmate like love that I saw between Ariel and Eric, and the playful bantering that I witnessed between Belle and the Beast. The dynamic that existed between these characters was something palpable, something I convinced myself I could grasp if I just held the belief that it could happen to me.

Those thoughts evaporated whenever I was around my parents.

If love is real, it certainly wasn't among them.

It was rare, when their love didn't involve yelling at one another, not caring if their three kids were watching and listening. It was hard to believe that once upon a time, they held each other in their hearts with love and adoration. They'd argue about money, they'd argue about my brother's grades because he was always struggling in school, they'd argue about who didn't feed

the dogs their dinner. I didn't know couples argued so much. My Disney movies didn't show the insults couples hurled at each other because someone left the toilet seat up. They also didn't know the sounds of them stomping away and doors slamming.

I tried my hardest to keep my eyes glued on the T.V. More often than not, I was able to block it out. But supposedly all good things must come to an end, and my ears picked up on more things than I care to remember. It all ranged from threats of divorce and taking the children, to threats of divorce, taking the children, *and* taking the house. I was a tool used for bargaining to get my dad to do what my mom needed. I wasn't something that brought immense joy or excitement, but rather something to keep my father in line.

My Disney movies were thrown out the window as I got older, and the love those characters had for one another seemed fake, childish, and unrealistic. I couldn't believe what I had seen in movies. For years, my sister had uttered words to me about how ridiculous Disney movies were, laughing at me when she'd catch me singing a tune from a movie, or wanting to be a Disney princess for Halloween. But suddenly, I changed overnight. Nothing was the same. I could never watch a Disney movie without the same hopeful lens I once had.

One Saturday night, my brother and I were sitting in the living room, our two dogs pooled at our feet, cheeks glowing a bright red due to the summer heat still hitting us despite the sun being long gone. Our home didn't have an AC, so we were left to suffer. Our parents had been avoiding each other all day, much to our relief. But as the day was ending, and the everlasting heat never wavered, tensions were running higher than I had expected because the next thing I knew, they were yelling at each other at the tops of their voices, as if battling each other to see who can yell louder.

Me and my brother wanted to sneak away and disappear into our bedrooms or even the backyard. But it was like a tornado, or some disaster you couldn't tear your eyes away from. It was horrible, but we were unfazed. It was their 500th fight at that point, and I was wondering who would be the victor in this one.

But instead of making the conversation about us, they redirected it *to* us. It was a first. But it was a new tactic on my dad's part, to single us out and make us pawns in some twisted game I had only ever been on the sidelines for.

"Who would you rather live with?" Eyes were pointed at both of us, like daggers that were dipped in fire and coated with venom. My brother and I looked at each other, and we both knew that it was a trap, a double edged sword. We both stayed quiet, and hoped the argument would end just as quickly as it started. But it didn't. It kept going, and going. It was the longest fight between them. The longest, harshest fight between two people married for over 10 years that I had ever witnessed.

I never considered myself to be cynical or a pessimist. But after watching the lack of love between two people transpire, everything seemed bleak. Relationships turned into screaming matches, competitions, and ending the night alone.

I used to consider myself lucky. Sure, my parents fought more than any other married couple I had known. And, sure, maybe I didn't have parents whose love rivaled those couples from Disney that I looked up to and admired. But I was lucky because they knew how to put on a facade- they knew how to make themselves appear to be the couple that's been through hell and still clung to each other's arms. With parent teacher conferences, school performances, or social events over the weekends, they always appeared together, shoulder to shoulder, but never hand in

hand. They often wandered away from each other. To outsiders, they seemed like they were going away with a promise they'd find each other later with smiles and laughter.

But my siblings and I always saw through the facade they built so carefully. When they'd part for the night, to venture toward their group of friends, there was no promise of reuniting with smiles and laughter. Their expressions lacked the tenderness and love that the other couples around me held. When they'd finally be forced to reunite, it would be with grimaces and eye rolls. Silence was the only thing heard in the car, for even the music from the radio was enough to make an argument begin.

Everyday it would feel like walking on eggshells around the two, tension coating the air like a thick, heavy, paint.

I would stay up at night, wishing I could go back in time and grab my five year old self by the shoulders. I wished I could shake her by the shoulders, and tell her to let go of those Disney movies she held near to her heart, like precious memories. I would grab them, shatter them, and tell her to let it all go. Let go of the hope, let go of the expectations, and the thought that what is shown is the reality of love in the real world.

What love was when I was five, changed entirely to how I viewed it when I was fourteen. It was true, I realized.

Maybe true love just didn't exist. Maybe nothing lasted forever. And maybe, just maybe, ending up without anyone is some sort of blessing.

The amount of happiness that filled my heart when my parents finally separated was unmatched. It was as though fireworks erupted in my head, and I could hear nothing but the words, "We're officially divorced". I couldn't help but have the feelings of happiness and relief consume me. I could tell my brother and sister felt the exact same way. The comfort in knowing

their fights will lessen and knowing their words would cut less. Knowing that even though we're separated, maybe we'd somehow get closer.

For once, there was something other than uncertainty and anxiety on the horizon. Maybe a new beginning. Maybe a new chapter that we could all learn from.

One thing was sure though: I was done with Disney movies for a long time.