

I Loved You Even Before I Met You  
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Before you were born and while you were floating in my womb I saw you in a dream.

In the dream you were only a day old. I was pushing you in a pram, fully covered with a thick black cover. Because of it I couldn't see you. It seemed as if I had never seen you before, either. Yet I felt your presence intensely. It was emitting waves that aroused dear and tranquil emotions, I must say, luxurious to my usually-in-a-constant-condition-of-restlessness soul. A condition in which the soul of that dog across the street we look at when I am introducing the world to you from behind the window must be in. That one, which worriedly waits for four days in a row in front of the mini casino for his owner, the gambler, to come out. Poor creature, this never-ending January's rain only makes it worse for him. Don't worry, my son, the dog looks this painfully skinny just because its hair is wet. Isn't it funny, son, for dogs we can say that they have either hair or fur, because fur and hair are basically the same thing. Imagine how hilarious would be if I go to the hairdresser salon and ask the hairdresser to give me a fur-cut. It would be such a funny thing to say. Life will bring you so much joy and fun, son. You'll see. As for the dog, please don't be worried. It's not that his owner doesn't care for him, he does. He sends cold sandwiches now and then through the waiter for him to eat.

Your father calls the condition an unfounded fear, which is exactly what it is. When we found out that I was pregnant with you, when the fear of failing as a mother overcast the overjoyed news, your father asked me, as a joke, considering how our grandparents raised us, how we turned out to be the people we are now: awesome and genuine.. The point is, if they did it, we can do it too. He had to repeat this joke every time my soul was screaming in panic from behind my eyes, which was unbearably often. As soon as he told the joke I soothed and straightened my body in relief, but soon, very soon after this, the anxiety wrapped my vulnerable soul again in a cramp as though it is one of these little brown worms, you will meet here on the Earth, which curl into a tight coil when touched.

You are made of stars, do you know that? I am such a silly mother. You arrived on the Earth just a second ago; how would you know? Nevertheless, please remember it. It will make you feel transcendent. I have been silly again; don't bother with this big word, transcendent, people use it only when they want to sound clever. I should have put it a different way instead: it will make you feel part of the whole, or it will make you feel as if you are the whole itself. There it is, I fixed it. Me, you, your father, everybody and everything on the earth is made of stars, except the hydrogen, of course. When

you grow up you can ask your father about this, he is an astrophysicist. Isn't it cool that my little boy your father looks into the stars and measures them. Until the time comes when you can understand abstract concepts, I'll sing to you Moby's *We Are All Made of Stars* as a lullaby instead. But first let's get back to the dream.

I was pushing the pram towards the city center of Strumica where your father and I were born and raised; where most of your family lives, and where we will take you this summer so you can meet all of them in person. Your little cousins will pack one more suitcase, loaded with their clothes from when they were as small as you will be when we get to Macedonia. You'll meet in person both of your uncles. One of them will make you a swing out of wooden planks. The other one will introduce you to every single townsman of Strumica. Your grandmothers will take care that you eat on time, check the state of your diaper and will search for sweat on your back, right below your neck. Your grandfather will take you fishing. We'll also take you to the grave of your other grandfather. We will bring flowers and say hi to him. We will go on long walks in the park with Leo and his mom Dina. We'll be there to celebrate his second birthday in July. He will let you blow the candles on his birthday cake with him. The difference in age between the two of you might seem big now, but as you both grow the difference will become imperceptible, and you can play together and become friends for life, as his mom and I are.

I think of Dina and Leo day and night. No wonder they were in the dream too. It was so funny to see Dina walking on high heels, even in the dream. All of us headed towards the city plaza of Strumica, where some kind of music festival was happening. Dina was leading our group of two mothers and their babies. I do not know the month or the day, as it is usually in a dream, but judging from the pleasant feeling of the hoodie, which resembled a kind of feeling one gets when hugged, I can say that it was a chilly summer night. We stood far from the stage, where food stands were placed. The air was filled with a mixture of the smell of beer, burgers and hot-dogs, the smell of a drunk night out. Festive faces were munching messy burgers nearby. Multi-colored lights, coming from the stage, illuminated the surface of your pram. They were coming from the stage, in the shape of green stripes, red hearts and blue stars, and were moving across people's faces, as though they were laser scanning people's souls.

A woman walking heavily approached us, grinning from ear to ear. It was the gym instructor Dina and I had in high school – The Gum. Of course that's not her real name. Her real name is Sonja.

She lives in Strumica too. Now retired, she owns a fitness center, located on the ground floor of her house. I usually go there to exercise when I visit Macedonia. She is always there, sitting behind the counter, chewing her gum with her mouth closed. You might meet her some time when we go to Macedonia, but don't call her The Gum. I think she does not like to be called that. I remember once, back in high school, she walked around the school for several days without chewing gum, with her mouth open. This was after she found out about the nickname we gave her. We found this to be sudden and strange because none of us had ever seen her before without chewing gum. Without the gum, her face was gruesomely different; it became similar to the face of the chemistry teacher after the unfortunate experiment which cost him an arm. Because of her facial expression, which was new to us, we started fearing her. She lost her gum, and now she was one of those people who could be unpredictably dangerous just for the reason that they have nothing to lose anymore. Three days later we saw her chewing gum again. After this she never yelled at the kids whose favorite subject was mathematics and could not jump over the vaulting horse. She didn't force them or herself anymore to jump over it. From then on our eyes were banned for good from seeing her magnificent somersaulting, which always left us stunned in front of her flexible body, which was the actual reason for calling her The Gum. I wonder if she ever learned this.

In the dream she came wearing the face from before the three day's abstinence of chewing; young, confident as a priest and friendly.

"Don't stand here like this, go and party," she said to us.

"We can't, we have kids now," Dina said and looked down at her boy hugging his bottle, head hung to the side in sleep.

"You're so silly, that's not a problem, I will look after them," The Gum took the pram and the stroller from us.

Dina asked if she was sure, but I knew she would regret it if the The Gum would have changed her mind, and had given the strollers back to us. Dina wanted to party, and so did I.

Empty-handed, Dina and I headed into the heart of the dancing crowd.

The second scene I saw was merely a fragment. In it I walked with a burek, a traditional oriental pastry, in my right hand and yogurt in my left. The sun was making its way up the buildings along the boulevard. The facades were so tasteless, my red communist aesthetic marked them as unusual in color: white and blue, as if they were an inside of a swimming pool. My mouth was full of food and I couldn't

talk or smile, but I knew that I had so much fun.

The next scene jumped to half a day later. I saw myself skateboarding on the street at the back of the same buildings along the boulevard I had walked by in the morning scene. As is usual for dreams, all around me was a disarrangement and blurring of all the things I already knew and had seen before, because dreams can't be made from something we don't know or something we have not seen before. I saw the gray cement from behind the house I grew up in. The dream took it from there, and covered the skateboarding field with it. Red, yellow and blue objects were blurred beside the street. As I recognized the blue swing with red seats on it and the yellow trapeze from the yard of the kindergarten I attended in my youth, they cleared out their features and I added them to the dream map. Behind the buildings a sunset made out of a million lemons turning into oranges, approaching a red dot in the center, spilling across a deep-blue sky just like the shade of your father's eyes, signaled that another night was about to come.

There was a group of kids skating there. I only saw neon-green laces peering out of the hoods of their hoodies, and colorful sneakers on their feet; each of them resting on even more colorful skateboards. I felt the aura of being the best skater among them hovering over my head. I don't remember the tricks I executed to deserve that epithet, only the feathered wind blowing against my face, the million-oranges sunset and the pride in my feet while showing off to them.

As a group we roamed around the town for a while afterwards. Dina wasn't there with me. I met her in my dream the next morning, skipping, again, a significant part in the dream timeline. The sun was rising once again. We were sitting outside a fast food restaurant. Chilly air particles were chasing each other all around my skin. They entered through my left sleeve and exited through my right. Dina and I were eating big burgers and giggling on account of last night's events, which I never saw.

Throughout the giggling a painful cramp stamped my stomach, I lay down as if a car had hit me and the engine had pressed right in the middle of my stomach.

"Dina!" I rose up despite the pain. "Dina, our kids!" I squeezed through the pain "We forgot our kids!"

In a struggling voice she said "Relax, they are in good hands."

At this point I realized that at least she didn't forget that we had kids, which prevented me from fainting from the painful realization I had just had. It's been three days without milk, you must be dead.

"I am sure she has given them garlic to eat, they love garlic," Dina tried to assure me, "and tons

of gum to chew.”

I wanted to say that you were only three days old and that babies don't eat garlic or chew gum, but every single word ended in an attempt to keep breathing. I cried out in pain and burst into a run. All of the food I ate in the dream came up in my throat and mouth and I was breathing through it. I was choking but still running. I passed the city plaza, my chest heavy as the devil's soul. I passed the buildings along the boulevard, my face crooked from sobbing. I still couldn't breathe, but I ran on. I passed the church, which was under construction, and the main post office, repeating to myself: please don't be dead, please, don't be dead. I passed the butcher, the bookstore, the toy store. "Please be alive," I squeezed out with an inhuman voice, "I promise, I will, never ever leave you alone again." I passed the bridge dividing the left and the right side of the town, running in disbelief: it can't be, it's been three days, it's not possible. I ran, but if only I could have flown. I knew that if by a miracle you were still alive, you would have been alive only for one, two, three seconds, but not more. I passed the windows of The Gum's gym and ran up the stairs to the house. Call it what you want, but the way I entered the house was not entering, but rather exploding or shattering. Once I was in the hall it was as if I knew exactly in which room to go. I opened the door located on the right side from the entrance and flew to the bed. Right in front of me was Leo, chewing a strip of leek. You were lying on the left side of the bed in a white soft cotton onesie, eyes open wide, full of wisdom and forgiveness for me. Everything about you was saying, "it's okay, you'll feed me now, don't be so hard on yourself."

That's when I woke up. The room emitted a feeling, the kind that only your grandma's warm hug can provide. It was soft and warm, as if the bed was a bear's tummy.

My fear of having you completely vanished, and I couldn't have loved you more for that.

I rested my head back on the pillow, peaceful as never before. "I am going to make it," I said. Your father opened his deep blue eyes. It was five in the morning. "Sleep, dear, everything is fine," I said to him. He pulled me in, under the blanket and tried to reach with his hand to hold onto my shoulder. You kicked from the belly and your father leaned in to stroke you instead. Under the blanket the temperature was one hundred degrees of love.

You came back to me in a dream once again after this. You were a light-haired boy wearing red and blue pajamas. Your mouth, rose pink, cheeks splashed in red as the Pink Lady apples are. We were in Target, facing the dairy section. You held my hand tight as if afraid that I might let you go. I held yours softly as it was so tender I was afraid that I might squish it. In your left hand you held one corner

of the picture book *The Snowman*. The other corner of the book was touching the floor, which was white as an ice-rink. We saw batteries placed on the top of the mozzarella cheese.

“I wonder what makes people realize that they don’t actually need batteries while staring at the mozzarella cheese?” I said.

You said nothing, but picked up the batteries and ran to the other side of the store to put them where they belonged. You did the same with the soap bar left among the jelly beans and the tuna can among the cotton pads. You also swept up the mess around the seeds and nuts in the bulk buy section. I held your book by its corner, high over the ice-rink floor and waited for you to finish the business you had. After you did, you came back to hold my hand facing the dairy section once again, the book hanging from your hand now.

“Mommy, what is a fantasy?” you asked.

“To carry an umbrella on a sunny day, just because it is raining in the book you read. That’s a fantasy,” I said.

“Is it a fantasy when you said that grand-grandma lives on a cloud and knits snowflakes all summer long?” you asked.

“That’s hope,” I said.

“What’s hope?” you asked.

“Hope is when the dreams we like would still be going when we wake up from them,” I said.