

Rhiannon

by **Kelsie Shaw**

She left me on a Tuesday, three years after we met, one year after I realized I loved her. We weren't together, though, not romantically anyway. Still, this felt like a breakup. I sat across from Rhiannon at a table at The Spot Cafe and stared at the small chai latte cooling in my hands while she told me she didn't want to talk to me anymore. I was too needy. I drained her. She needed space. I sobbed louder than I ever have in public, loud enough to catch glimpses of strangers peering at me from behind their laptop screens. She said we'd cross paths again someday, but I haven't seen her since.

We were friends in high school; we tried to remain friends in college. When I think about Rhiannon, I have to remind myself that she was never my lover, that we were never anything beyond two young women who enjoyed each other's company. We were close, emotionally: We could talk about almost anything—my depression, her father's death, our mutual anxiety about our futures. But Rhiannon and I were never close physically, no matter how much I wished we were. Sex, love, and romance were the only topics we would never discuss: If she mentioned a boyfriend, an ex, or merely hinted at a sexual experience, my face would get hot; I'd squirm in my seat. I never found out if she identified as straight, or bi, or something else, not that I could answer that question for myself; I don't think I wanted to know. When she pointed out my awkwardness, I told her that my family never discussed intimacy (which was true), and that I just wasn't as comfortable with sexuality as she was. I could never admit that I wanted her to want those things with me.

Sometimes, when I think back to the afternoon we met in September of 2011, I imagine falling in love at first sight: I tell myself that when I walked into my first day of German class, Rhiannon's voice or laugh or smile seized my attention and propelled me into a state of love-struck bliss. That would make a pretty story, but I know it's not true. I

didn't think much of Rhiannon when I met her; although I thought she seemed likeable, friendly enough, she was just another acquaintance. In fact, I found her strange. She didn't talk the way other people I knew did: She thought before she spoke—you could see her looking inward and choosing her words—and everything she said verged on whimsical. Rhiannon could quote *Winnie-the-Pooh* in one sentence and Shakespeare in the next; she referenced *The Sound of Music* or *The Wizard of Oz* daily; she sang to herself, often her favorite "Que Sera Sera," never caring who heard. On the day we met, I was a new student at our tiny private high school, and the first thing Rhiannon asked me was to describe myself in three words. I don't think anyone had ever taken such an earnest and polite interest in me before, which was enough to make me think she was weird.

I did notice immediately that we looked alike. Same wavy chestnut hair that frizzed in humidity, same slightly curvy build, same chocolate brown eyes, except hers were rimmed with rainbows when the sun hit them just right. But, unlike me, Rhiannon loved her body, and always seemed so comfortable in it; there was an effortless grace about her, from the way she flipped her hair over her shoulder to how she leaned back in a chair, that betrayed an innate strength of self and an awareness of that strength. It was this that first drew me to her: the sight of a girl who could pass as my sister inhabiting her body and her being in a way I had not yet figured out.

I should not have been surprised that the first person I loved was a woman, but I was. I can't remember if there were any indications in my childhood that I wasn't exactly straight: I don't recall ever having a crush on a girl; I have always appeared traditionally feminine, if appearance indicates sexuality; I certainly never "experimented" with anyone, ever. But I do remember learning about sex, the straight kind, and thinking it a strange affair. When asked if I thought a guy was attractive, I'd shrug my shoulders or give a weak "yeah, sure." I know I was captivated by any same-sex relationship I found in literature or history. Most of all, I could never imagine being some man's wife.

I wasn't aware of the word "queer" in its modern usage until my freshman year of college, around the time I was beginning to understand my feelings for Rhiannon. Not long before that, I discovered the Kinsey Scale; the thought that people did not come in only "straight" and "gay" varieties fascinated me. I spent many hours sliding myself up

and down the scale, trying to figure out where to land—was I a three, capable of attraction to both men and women? Or was I just a one or a two, a mostly-straight girl with exceptions? I couldn't possibly be a six, could I? I never picked a number. Kinsey's spectrum was still too limiting. "Queer" seemed more spacious, more open to possibilities. But, being a word lover, "queer" to me meant strange, unsavory, downright peculiar. And although I was confused, and overwhelmed, and slightly scared of being a lesbian, I didn't think there was anything queer about love, in any form. So I couldn't be that, either.

Did it really matter who I was attracted to, though, if I was too nervous to talk to anyone? I told myself it did not. What I remember most from my romantic development is that I tried hard not to have one. While other girls were identifying the classroom heartthrobs and, eventually, dating them, I was studying. I told myself I was above love: I was a thinker, a bright one, and caring about romance would only distract me from my studies, which I would not allow. I realize now that my strict adherence to intellectual life was a disguise that masked my true desire for a relationship. If I was honest with myself, I wanted to be loved more than I wanted to be brilliant, but I feared all non-familial love was off-limits to me, though I could not articulate why. I knew I couldn't talk to anyone without my throat tightening around my breaths and my heart racing as if for a trophy. Given my social awkwardness and anxiety, all romantic issues were incomprehensible: How do you even get into such a situation, first finding a potential partner, and then forming a relationship that would involve intimacy, emotional or physical? What are the steps involved, the rules to follow? I still cannot answer those questions. I was sure I was incapable of any kind of intimacy; I could not imagine anyone ever being attracted to anxious, emotional me. So I refused all labels, and love itself. It's easy to say you don't want what you think you can never have.

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Not long after we met, I discovered that Rhiannon played classical piano, like I did. Music became the glue that bound us: We played pieces for each other on our school's piano; we spent hours comparing Chopin to Tchaikovsky to Rachmaninoff; we made lists of the pieces we dreamed of playing, including duets to learn together.

Rhiannon and I went to a concert once during senior year. It was my first classical concert, given by a pianist at our town's college. That night, I spent an hour getting ready, assembling an outfit of my favorite cream-colored lace dress, a black shawl, and the glossy black stilettos I wore on only the most special occasions. Completely overdressed, I told myself that classical performances were more formal than a typical concert, so I must prepare accordingly. But, in retrospect, I think I really wanted to look good for Rhiannon. I had started admiring her style—black and white dresses almost daily, matching cardigan tied up around her waist, signature red paisley scarf, curled hair pinned in faux victory rolls. I found myself looking at her a lot, quick glances here and there when her attention was elsewhere; I thought I just wanted to see how she looked that day, to see if she had deviated from her almost formulaic wardrobe, but there was a deeper motive that I couldn't name, or didn't want to. My heart pounded as my eyes traced her form, following her profile down to the slope of her shoulders and lingering on her strong but slender hands. I had never felt sexual attraction before; I didn't have a clue how to recognize it. So I ignored these impulses, denied them outright. I told myself I was simply appreciating a beautiful person, as if Rhiannon was walking art, an ancient statue of Aphrodite sprung to life. I was comfortable with admitting that much.

I don't remember what Rhiannon wore the night of the concert, though I probably noticed then. All I do remember is that I could have stayed there in the shadowed seat of that concert hall for eternity, basking in the thought that next to me was someone who wanted me with her.

I first heard the Fleetwood Mac song "Rhiannon" when I was three or four, on one of the afternoons when my mother, a long-time Stevie Nicks fan, would slide one of her CDs into our stereo and dance with me around our small, wood-paneled living room. Some days we would twirl in circles to "Bella Donna," and others we would jump around to "Edge of Seventeen;" on particularly special days we would sing "Leather and Lace" with me on Stevie's part, Mom on Don Henley's. Though I don't remember hearing "Rhiannon" specifically, I am sure my mother played it; the music didn't matter to me nearly as much as the fun I had dancing with her.

When I started going to school, I forgot those afternoons in the living room. I didn't think about Stevie Nicks or Fleetwood Mac or "Rhiannon" again until my first semester of college. Driving home one evening in December and listening to the local oldies station, I heard the opening sixteenth-note guitar riff of "Edge of Seventeen" and was suddenly back in my old living room, bouncing around with my once thirty-five-year-old mother. I went straight to my computer the moment I got home, opened up YouTube, and listened to every Stevie Nicks or Fleetwood Mac song I could find.

And then I found "Rhiannon." I must have listened to it ten times in a row. Stevie's lyrics, crooned over a simple a-minor chord progression, mesmerized me. The song tells of Rhiannon, the Welsh goddess of horses, birds, and the moon; flocks of birds follow her and chirp tunes that ease pain. With a name meaning either "Great Queen" or "White Witch," she appears in the first and third volumes of *The Mabinogion*, a Medieval collection of Welsh stories. According to legend, Rhiannon leaves her spiritual world when she falls in love with a human, but runs away from him when he attempts to return her affections—she'll lose her powers if she marries a mortal. In the end, the two do marry, but Stevie only wrote about the enchanting yet elusive goddess. I didn't know that story until after many months of listening to the song, not that it mattered. To me, "Rhiannon" was, and is, about a woman terrified of getting hurt, of people she loves leaving her. Maybe it's happened before; she wonders what she has to do to make them stay—must she promise them heaven? So she flies away "like a fine skylark," never stopping anywhere, letting herself be "taken by the sky." What she doesn't realize is that someone would "love to love her," if only she let herself get close.

Somehow, I never thought about my own Rhiannon when I listened to the song—I thought only of myself. This song was mine.

The summer after graduation brought on one of my more troubling depressive episodes. I've never handled changes or transitions gracefully. At least Rhiannon and I would be staying in the same town, and that knowledge was enough to keep me from a total breakdown—I had someone to see, someone to talk to. I called her a few times that summer, just to hear her voice. I don't remember what we talked about, if we talked

about anything; sometimes I just cried, and she listened. I didn't mind though—even the sound of her breathing told me I wasn't alone.

Many of those phone calls ended with us meeting at a coffee shop or her apartment, on the days my depression was dim enough to accept her invitation. We didn't do much beyond chatting about the music we were learning and the books we were reading—our relationship was comprised largely of conversations, with the occasional concert thrown in. Still, this was more than I'd ever had. I remember trying, subtly, to make everything we did together last longer: suggest another place to go; start a new conversation; ask her anything I could think of. Every minute with Rhiannon was a minute I was not alone. I think she caught on to my minor manipulations eventually. I wonder, now, how much they pushed her away.

Although I cannot pinpoint a moment when I realized my love for Rhiannon was more than friendly, I know this summer was when things changed—on my end, anyway. Every time we met, I tried to ignore how her eyes brightened when she talked about something she loved, or how pretty she looked no matter what she wore or what she was doing. I began to think everything she said was perfect: Her references to old films I once found odd were now adorable; her singing under her breath became more beautiful than a Liszt melody. You could say I was infatuated, but I didn't think so then. I thought this was the simplest and most honest love there was, a love that was felt and given but did not demand anything in return. I struggle, now, to think it was anything else.

You would have thought she died by how I reacted to Rhiannon's departure. I couldn't eat, couldn't sleep; I went to class but couldn't focus. I still managed to get As, if only because studying gave me something else to think about. Otherwise, it was always Rhiannon. When I wasn't in class, I either slept or banged out Chopin nocturnes, the tears in my eyes blending the black and white keyboard into a column of gray.

Rhiannon's ghost followed me wherever I went. Everything reminded me of her: the cafes where we once sat; Rachmaninoff and Ravel; the hand-knit blanket she gave me; my own reflection. I avoided any place we had gone together; I drove miles out of my way so I wouldn't pass by her neighborhood. Even in sleep, I saw her: Nightly I

dreamt I was searching for her through tangled woods or congested city streets, and I would come so close, within inches, only for her image to disappear. I'd wake up breathless and weeping, unable to fall back asleep.

I started listening to "Rhiannon" almost daily; I memorized all the lyrics to every version, and they flew around my mind constantly, chirping like the birds that follow the mythical goddess. If I was alone at home, I would don my most Stevie-esque black embroidered shawl, turn up my laptop's volume, and twirl around in circles to the music.

It didn't hurt to hear her name repeated over and over, although I am still not sure why. Maybe it was because I was not aware of the song for the first two years of knowing my Rhiannon, and when I did hear it, we were still friends—the title was just a coincidence. But really, I think I identified with the mythical, musical version of Rhiannon too strongly to think of anyone but myself. Wasn't I as elusive and mysterious as the goddess, a fellow "cat in the dark"? I've flown away from everyone I've ever cared about like a "bird in flight," except for my own Rhiannon. So who would be my lover? Not her, I knew. But someone would "love to love" me, right? Would I ever win?

"Did something happen between you and Rhiannon? You don't talk about her anymore."

I don't remember what spurred my mother's question. We were eating lunch silently across from each other at our kitchen table, both typing on our laptops. I had never noticed that I talked about Rhiannon, apparently enough for my mother to notice that I stopped. She was right though—I didn't talk about her anymore. "There isn't anything to say." Although we both knew there was more to say, a lot more, the conversation ended there.

A few weeks later, my psychologist asked a similar question: "What exactly went on between you two?" Dr. Sullivan was, at this point, the only person who knew Rhiannon and I were no longer friends, and the only one who'd seen me cry over my loss. But her question was different than my mother's: She wasn't asking me if the friendship ended, but if the friendship was strictly—platonically—a friendship. An inexplicable increase in the tension between us signaled her next question. "Kelsie, this

might sound weird, and please correct me if I'm wrong, but ... did you maybe love her ... as more than a friend?"

Shit, she knows. Somehow, I did not expect a psychologist with decades of experience to figure that out. I never answered Dr. Sullivan's question—my immediate bawling was enough to confirm her suspicions.

"Are you ashamed of that, that you loved a woman?"

I gasped for air, but hardly found any. "No." And it was true, I wasn't ashamed that I loved a woman. But I was ashamed of loving *that* woman, whom I knew wasn't interested in me in the same way, whose actual friendship I did value more than the imagined future I wished for. I was ashamed of not knowing better.

What followed my appointment was the most intense panic attack I've ever suffered; it felt how I imagine suffocating feels, except the heart pounding and breathlessness lasted for hours instead of minutes. Although I really wasn't ashamed of my now-confirmed Sapphic tendencies, I told myself the day I knew I loved Rhiannon that I would go to my grave with that knowledge. But now the secret was out, spoken, known by someone other than myself. My body didn't know how to handle that stress. I almost drove myself to the emergency room, but I feared crashing my car on the way, and if I did get there, I sure didn't want to explain the problem.

I pretended to be asleep on the couch when my mother came home from work that night. After she retreated to her and my father's bedroom to watch TV, I padded down the hall, crawled into her bed, and curled up under the covers. The television clicked off when I started crying.

"Kels, what's wrong?"

I turned my face away from her, choosing instead to examine the folds in her taupe linen sheets. "There's something I should probably tell you. I don't really want to, but Dr. Sullivan brought it up in our session today and now I can't stop thinking about it."

A pause. "It's about Rhiannon, isn't it?"

"Yeah." I don't remember what I said next. I must have sputtered out something about how I loved Rhiannon as more than a friend, and that's why I'd been so sad lately, because the loss of her was more painful than it should have been. I know I wrapped

my arms around my knees and sobbed; my fingertips tingled, the cells there searching for oxygen.

"I'm sorry, Kels. I'm sorry you hurt so much. I wish I could make you feel better." She patted my arm, stroked my hair. She was crying too.

"I know, Mom. Thanks." I fell asleep right there, my face wet and eyes swollen, next to my mother in her bed. This became a habit for months, lying with my mother on nights when I was too sad to be alone. We hardly ever spoke; I'd cry, and she'd hug me. Never have I felt more like a child.

I have been told many times, mostly by my family, that I would not know how to love someone. Rather, I would not know how to distinguish love from loneliness—I would love anyone who gave me any attention. Although she did comfort me on the night I told her about Rhiannon, my mother also said I was just "confused." I was "wrong about that." What I really loved, according to her, was having a companion, and not the companion herself. I couldn't help but wonder if she would have said the same thing if I was confessing my love for a man, but it didn't matter in the moment. I was afraid my mother was right, though I didn't want to believe her. I *was* lonely, I *did* long for someone to spend time with and talk to. Did that mean any affection I would ever have for someone would actually be a fear of loneliness, manifesting as love? Or are longing and loneliness two separate but easily conflated things?

Just as I have to remind myself that Rhiannon and I were never in a romantic relationship, I have to remind myself that I did love her. I know I did. I felt most like myself when I was around her; I felt I *could* be myself around her, not only because she was someone like me, but because she liked me. Although I am sure our similarities were what drew me to Rhiannon, I truly loved her for her. I loved her for the ways she was like me, and I loved her for the ways she wasn't. Of course I loved having a companion, but I loved having *her* as my companion; I wouldn't have felt the same way about anyone else.

I was not confused, as my mother believed and still believes. But, she was not entirely wrong: My longing for closeness did propel me toward Rhiannon. But isn't such

a longing the basis of all friendships and partnerships and marriages? What are relationships, of any kind, if not remedies for loneliness?

About four months after Rhiannon ended our friendship, I read Cheryl Strayed's "The Love of My Life." *Just what I need*, I thought, looking at the title, *another love story*. But the essay is not a love story, not in the cheesy "rom-com" way I was expecting. Instead, Strayed attempts to cope with her mother's death through bouts of sexual promiscuity and heroin addiction. Meanwhile, an older and more healed Strayed intersperses her memories with critiques of modern attitudes toward grieving—she argues that grief doesn't progress in clearly-defined stages, and that all losses are not equal. But what struck me about the essay, what made me burst into tears the first time I read it, were the repeated lines, "I want my mother. My mother is dead," and "I cannot continue to live." I thought the pain of Strayed's loss resonated with my own; had I written this essay two years ago, I would have written, "I want my friend. My friend left me. How can I continue to live?"

But I hadn't lost anyone, not really. No one died. I could still call Rhiannon's number and expect an answer; I could punch her name into Facebook's search bar and find out what she was doing and where she lived. I would have been one of the people who tells Strayed about their minor losses that they equate with death. Did that mean I had no right to grieve?

I don't think so. But I am aware that there was no narrative for my grief, not when the intensity of grief I felt is reserved for the deaths of family members and real romantic partners. There is no Hallmark card that says, "I'm sorry for the loss of your best friend with whom you were in love even if nothing romantic ever happened between you." No one sent me flowers.

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I'm afraid I've written myself as a cold-hearted woman's innocent victim, but Rhiannon did not leave me without cause. I was not just a sometimes sad but otherwise loveable friend, as I often thought of myself. I could be clingy, and desperately so. I know I was, as she told me, needy. If she did not return my text messages within a few hours, I'd text again. I'd panic if she was late to meet me somewhere (resulting in more

sent messages). I told her, on at least a few occasions, "I don't know what I'd do without you." That's a lot of pressure to put on one person. I'd need space too.

I was worse after she left, though. I'd call her, and hit voicemail; I'd text to no reply. Eventually, I decided to write her a letter, partly because Dr. Sullivan suggested it, but mostly because I could not imagine anyone rejecting a beautifully-crafted letter of apology, written in my neatest cursive on my best stationary. I don't remember what I wrote, except that I was sorry, and that anxiety made connection hard for me, but depression made loss worse, and that I was a little bit crazy, but I'd be whatever friend she wanted me to be if she'd just come back. I would not admit it, but I believed—I wanted so badly to believe—that if I put the perfect words in the perfect order, in the perfect tone, at the perfect time, she would forgive me, and we could continue on as friends, laughing about the mistake we almost made. I sent out the letter. Nothing.

About six months after sending that letter, I texted Rhiannon in a final effort to win her back. Actually, I don't think I wanted to "win her back" so much as I just wanted to see her, to know how she was doing, to remember she was real. I said I was feeling better, a lot better (an exaggeration). I asked if she wanted to get coffee sometime and catch up. Short and casual—how could she refuse? But she did refuse, and, apparently, had moved away. All I remember of her message is the last line: "Kelsie, you have an incredible future ahead of you." Somehow, reading that was worse than hearing her say goodbye, because I knew she was right. I did have an incredible future ahead of me, maybe even a future with someone who loved me back, but the thought that I would have to live that future without her tore me in two. Could I really be happy in this future? Could I possibly move on? What hurt was that the answer to both of those questions was "yes."

I want to say that I accept Rhiannon's choice; I want to accept that she lives her own life, and is smart enough to know what she doesn't want in it, even if I am one of those things. But I'm not sure I can. Although I forgive her for the pain she caused me—and I do forgive her, I forgave her the moment she walked away from me—I wish she knew that I was not myself when I was depressed. I clung to her with all my might because I believed I would die if I lost her—the melancholic mind requires something to

live for, and often grabs hold of the nearest person. I wouldn't do that now. Maybe it doesn't matter.

I like to think, if I ever saw Rhiannon again, she would greet me as if it was only yesterday that we went to a concert together or talked about books over coffee. I like to think I would curse her out and saunter off, hips swaying, tables turned. But I know better. I know I would be happy to see her, overjoyed even. I don't think I would fall in love with her again, but I would want her friendship just as much as I did three years ago. Perhaps it is best, then, that we don't meet. I can't watch her leave again.

When my mother would tell me on the nights I wandered into her room that "time heals all wounds," I would scoff at the clichéd truism and ask her when time started practicing medicine. I was positive that some wounds were irreparable, and that this was one of them. Though I still believe that you never fully heal from grief, I admit that thinking of Rhiannon is easier now, almost three years later, than it has ever been. Most of the time, I can recall the joy she brought me without feeling the stab of loss in my heart; I can imagine her out in the world, wherever she is, without yearning for her to return. I can write this essay.

Despite experiencing what was obviously a "queer" attraction, I am still as ambivalent about sexuality, and my sexuality, as I was when I was younger. I don't identify as anything, not straight, gay, bi, or queer. I can understand the comfort such labels bring so many people, that feeling of "yes, this is me," but every identity sounds like a song I don't know the words to, or a piece I'm playing in the wrong key—there's no harmony. And yet, I find something attractive in defying definition. I guess I'm like the goddess Rhiannon in this respect too—I won't be pinned down.

I still listen to "Rhiannon" frequently, sometimes dancing along, though I don't search for the same cathartic comfort in the lyrics like I used to. I hear hope instead. Maybe she is lonely, this Rhiannon, maybe she does fly away from love to protect herself from loss. But she's strong, too. She can survive on her own. Maybe someday, she'll find someone worth staying for. And someone who'd stay for her.



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