

# *This Is a Love Story*

— AN ESSAY BY —

TAYARI JONES

**A**ll my life I have lived in a world where the men are under siege. When I was a little girl, there was a serial killer in Atlanta who killed thirty black children, most of them boys, two from my school. I was so shaken by this experience that it became the subject of my first novel. When I was in high school, it was fashionable for adults to refer to the boys of my generation as an “endangered species.” There are lulls in this fear. But then, as regular as a solar eclipse, there will be a reminder. Maybe it will be personal, like riding in a car with a boyfriend and suddenly blue lights strobe from the car behind us. Sometimes it will be more symbolic than deadly, like the arrest of decorated Harvard University professor Henry Louis Gates because he was thought to be burglarizing his own home. Other times, there is a shooting at the hands of police, a neighbor, or a total stranger. No matter where I am, the threat looms — either right in front of me or hiding in my peripheral vision.

In 2011 I was awarded a research fellowship at Harvard. I was a woman on a mission to make a difference. I wanted to write a novel about the tribulations of the innocent men who languish in America’s prisons. I watched documentaries, read oral histories, and studied up on the law. I was horrified and angered by a justice system that criminalizes black men and destroys families. Outrageous statistics troubled my sleep. But when I sat down to write, my old-fashioned Smith Corona was silent. I had the facts, but not the story. When I was a very young writer, my mentor cautioned me that I should always write about “people and their problems, not problems and their people.” After a year of research, I felt that I understood the problem, but what about the people?

I wasn’t sure how to go forward. Novels, like love, can’t be forced. But also like love, novels can enter your life in an instant.

One year when I went home to visit my parents in Atlanta, I overheard a

couple arguing in the food court of Lenox Square mall. The young woman was wearing a cashmere knit dress, cinched at the waist with a beautiful leather belt. Her beau wore a pair of inexpensive khakis and a polo shirt that was a little too tight for him. He wore a wedding ring, but she didn't. "Roy," she said with a sigh, seeming more exhausted than angry. "You know you wouldn't have waited on me for seven years." The man was obviously aggravated, but also (or it seemed to me) hurt. "This wouldn't have happened to you in the first place," he shot back. His voice was loud, and people turned and gawked. "Answer me," she said. "Tell the truth. Would you have waited for *me*?" The man was too frustrated to respond.

At the time, my sympathies were squarely with him. It was clear that he had suffered—I could see it from the strain on his face to the scuffs on his shoes. She, on the other hand, was pretty, poised, and prosperous. Her face and body language transmitted complicated emotions. She was sad, but not crying. She was annoyed, but not shouting. She stroked his arm. At some point, they caught me looking and I turned away, embarrassed to have glimpsed something so painful and intimate.

When I returned home, I wrote down everything I could remember about that encounter. I was intrigued mostly by her, as she reminded me of the women I went to college with— independent yet vulnerable, reserved and passionate all at once. I knew this woman. In many ways, she was a younger version of myself. I named her Celestial. I remembered she called him Roy. My imagination filled in the gaps. I decided that my characters were married and that Roy had been in prison those seven years—for a crime he did not commit.

When I write a novel, I like to think of a conflict in which both parties have a legitimate point. The couple in the mall would probably agree that he likely would not have waited patiently and chastely for seven years, and they might also agree that she would not likely be the one incarcerated in the first place. But I imagine that they would disagree about the implications of these agreed-upon truths. He felt that his suffering entitled him to fealty, if love alone was not enough. She seemed tired, like she had discussed this with him more than just once. He would probably say that she didn't love him, and she would likely counter that this is not a grade-school love letter where you check YES or NO. Or at least this is what I imagined.

I wrote this novel three times. The first time, I wrote it all from the point of view of Celestial — the wrongful incarceration of her husband is the creeping fear made real. She struggles under the pressure to stand by her man, which is exacerbated by the fact that he is innocent. She's talented and independent, and not cut out to be dutiful. These are the attributes that intrigue Roy, and me. For some reason, this approach just didn't work. After a frustrating year, I rewrote it from the point of view of Roy, the ambitious young man robbed of his liberty. This approach worked a little better — after all, a man's heroic journey is the bedrock of Western literature. Roy was like Odysseus, coming home from battle hoping to find a faithful wife and a gracious house. But this story seemed a bit too easy, familiar in a way that didn't address the questions in my mind.

Finally, I realized that this story is neither his nor hers. It is theirs. Roy says to Celestial, "This wouldn't have happened to you in the first place." But it did happen to her, in that it changed her life. He loves her because she is headstrong and resourceful, but can he ever forgive her for surviving? Can she be excused for finding happiness despite this tragedy? In his letters, Roy says, "I'm innocent." Celestial replies, "I'm innocent, too."

Who is to blame, then, when everyone is innocent? And what is the value of blame at all?

The epigraph of the novel is taken from Claudia Rankine's book *Citizen*: "What happens to you doesn't belong to you, only half concerns you. It's not yours. Not yours only." Does this novel have a "main" character? Is Roy more important because of how he struggles? Is Celestial's happiness with her new life illegitimate because of the shadow of Roy's distress? And then there is Andre, who has loved Celestial since they were babies bathing together in the kitchen sink. If she is his true love, should he give up fighting for her out of respect for Roy's predicament?

After six years of wrestling with the characters' points of view and sympathies, I don't presume to know the answers to these questions. I can only say that survival is a human instinct. To survive, Roy had to hold on to his memories of his marriage, fanning the embers to keep himself warm. In order for Celestial to survive, she tries to extinguish these same flames. Once Roy is freed, I can't say what they "should" do, nor will I spoil the ending for you. But, as Celestial says, "You can never un-love someone."

As I survey the final draft of this novel, my mind reels with the paradoxes in these pages. How did I do so much research for so little of it to make it into the book itself? This is not to say that the real-life statistics and policies I studied didn't affect the trajectories of my fictional characters. Never during the composition of this work did I forget the dead boys of my youth, the humiliated professor on campus, or the men killed in the streets. But when writing about Celestial and Roy and Andre, I had to look past their plight to understand their plight.

My characters are three people in love — with home, family, freedom, and each other. They are also three people in pain. Some of their problems they brought upon themselves, and others were dropped upon them. Some of their worries are recent and others are brittle as history. But today, they find themselves at a crossroads, and like every human being on earth, they walk their paths, heart-first.