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# MY YEAR OF LIVING VULNERABLY

RICK MORTON

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*To my sister, Lauryn  
I wrote this for us*

Here I understand what they call glory:  
the right to love without limits.

– Albert Camus, 'Nuptials at Tipasa', *Nuptials*, 1938

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## Introduction

When I phoned my mum, Deb, to tell her I was writing a book about love she was overcome immediately with wheezing laughter.

‘What, *you?*’ she managed to ask, although the emphasis on ‘you’ was long and made it sound like it had been shouted by a ghost on a passing skateboard.

She had a point.

Since late childhood, love and I had been on poor terms.

Of all the gauntlets high school asked us to run, Valentine’s Day was the one that challenged me the most. I wasn’t smart enough then to latch on to the fact that it was an invention of marketing, and instead disliked it for how it made me an unwilling participant in love itself.

Of course, teenagers don’t really understand what love is. The cruel stings of passion and jealousy do not match the grace and acceptance of true love any more than those first attempts at sex matched the elegant freestyle of later encounters.

As we neared graduation, most of the grade were engaged in figuring this stuff out. To attend any house party was a lot like trying to stack the glass display counter in a butcher's shop with the day's fresh cuts; just flesh and hands.

My fate, for what it's worth, was to avoid these embarrassing attempts at intimacy in favour of complete celibacy on account of being gay in a regional Queensland school. Gay and in the closet, moreover. Except for two occasions when secrecy demanded proactive misdirection, my lips remained sealed.

And though all I was really doing was deferring the awkward discovery tour until my mid-twenties (on the whole, not recommended), I was unable to escape the broader pursuits of the heart and, for all the desperate willing in the world, could not stop others from deciding that they loved me.

One year, on 14 February, I was handed a single yellow rose from a friend who had given it to me on behalf of another student, an anonymous admirer. Anonymous admirers are cowards who would absolutely give away your hiding location during a war if it meant they could better protect their own interests. In a sense, this is what this girl had done to me. I mean, who gives a rose in public, forcing the recipient to smuggle it back to the bag racks so that it can be hidden before people start gossiping about whether they have feelings? Monsters, that's who.

She may as well have given me a grenade with the pin released. Or anthrax.

This wasn't love. None of the rituals we practised as teenagers met the criteria for romantic love, but my reaction to this one act exposed the weakness in the scaffolding that would bring me down later in life.

The rose, with its delicate assemblage of yellow petals and disappointing thorns, was an admission of vulnerability because

it signalled that perhaps its new owner was a vessel for human emotion.

*Emotions.* What a horrible word, I thought. It sounded like the accidental bowel movement one of my then classmates had during computer studies. In my extended family, we didn't love anything. It was a necessary precondition of survival in a world that punished vulnerability. Animals died, so we did not love them. Humans erred, so we did not love them. Friends, well, you only loved your friends if you were queer or dying.

Although I had, unfortunately, turned out to be gay, I was determined to uphold the rest of the Morton family legacy by turning my feelings into a misplaced work ethic – like in origami when you set out to make a swan and end up with a chest of drawers.

There were darker overtones here that my teenage self had not managed to recognise, largely because the work required to recognise them was intricate, substantial and largely beyond me.

Through a combination of knowing and subconscious necessity, I had grown afraid of exposing my emotional hinterland to the world because I knew, in my essence, that doing so would mark me for destruction.

This rose might have seemed innocent and entirely irrelevant to that bigger project of self-protection, but another thing I had learned was this: the smallest transgressions must be rigorously policed because the whole falls in parts.

There could be no leave passes, not even for telling my mum I loved her. I did – more than anything else in the world – but saying so out loud made my insides twist in uncomfortable ways. It was an opening. A small one, true, and one most people everywhere are willing to allow. Even the tough boys in gangs I saw on television loved their mothers and told them so, before opening fire in a drug deal gone wrong and going to prison.

Even them.

Where had I learned this shrinking behaviour?

My first pet was a blue budgerigar called Pretty Boy, a name I had been allowed to choose. On this evidence, my natural state must have been one of alarming openness and soft edges. I mean, really, what kind of a name is *Pretty Boy*?

Once, on a school holiday, we took him with us up the coast and decided to visit Steve Irwin's family zoo at Beerwah on the way home. We couldn't leave the bird in the car, obviously, so we asked the lovely people at the zoo if they could mind him for us in the office.

This was the home of *the* Crocodile Hunter – he was there that day, feeding the remnant dinosaurs with his mate Wes – and the place itself featured an assortment of other deadly reptiles and spiders. Even the tortoise, Harriet, had been alive at the time of Charles Darwin and in that small detail managed to take on the mantle of an interesting creature.

And here we were, the gall of it, asking predator wranglers to budgie-sit my tiny parrot with the weak name.

I knew the Welsh were fond of sending canaries down the mines but, given a few years, there was no way I would let Pretty Boy act as a sort of early warning system for the exposed flesh of my psyche.

The boy who named that bird grew into a young man who was alert to being found out; as gay, as loving, as vulnerable. I weep for that child because in his desire to hide himself he was forced to cut out every permutation of love, every last gorgeous edge of it. As if it were a tumour.

That's the crime of it, that excision of beauty.

We make mistakes of nomenclature if we think love is just one thing and not, say, the way the light makes little furnaces of the rusted leaves when it streaks through the sky at an angle in late autumn afternoons. Bring me the person who says love is just

that spark of romantic desire between human beings and I will show them Maxwell's equations describing electromagnetism or the weight of grief at a funeral. We could also look, and I mean really look, at the face of a baby as it recognises you on a second visit, and study the dive of a peregrine falcon as it tucks its wings into the body and rockets to the ground.

Falcons used to do this on the cattle station where I grew up, hurtling through space until they aborted at the last moment. Mum hated how they did this because they landed next to the large cages where she housed her budgerigars and this death-tilt upset the other birds; there's no denying there was a certain chaos that filled the air afterwards, but I always found it beautiful. For any of us to make an object that aerodynamic we'd need formulas and a long testing tunnel, like aerospace and motorcar companies use, but falcons simply evolved that way.

So, yes, add the theory of evolution to the list of love and its humble merchants. Any system that takes tens of thousands and millions of years to form the wing can only be truly appreciated through the prism of love. Think of it this way: love is the common ancestor of beauty and the sublime. It is the first entry in the tree of our own existence because, without it, there isn't any life at all.

Of course, in such a radical act of appreciation, we are also asked to confront the fact that evolution gave female spotted hyenas completely fused-shut vaginas (forcing them to give birth in an even more dangerous fashion than other animals: through their clitoris), as well as depriving a whole number of other species of waste management functions we take for granted, which gave rise to one of my favourite news headlines: 'A huge mouth and no anus – this could be our earliest known ancestor.'

Don't be fooled though, this is beautiful, too. Precisely because it challenges us in our thinking.

Rick Morton

In his 1963 bestseller, *The Fire Next Time*, the African-American writer James Baldwin offered what I have come to view as the most complete proof-of-concept for love.

Love takes off the masks that we fear we cannot live without and know we cannot live within. I use the word 'love' here not merely in the personal sense but as a state of being, or a state of grace – not in the infantile American sense of being made happy but in the tough and universal sense of quest and daring and growth.

In early 2019, I was diagnosed with complex post-traumatic stress disorder (complex PTSD), which is just a fancy way of saying that one of the people who should have loved me the most during childhood didn't.

I was impressed by this determination, not only because I had long assumed I was a simple man with basic problems (it's *complex* now), but because this condition underscored a theory I had been working on independently.

You see, I was born into a family already beset by generations of violence and its terrifying aftershocks. The cruelty of my own father's upbringing – the scion of a powerful family that owned a string of outback sheep and cattle stations – had turned him to stone. Some people continue the damage in the same old ways, with fists and anger, but he was too broken even for that.

His was a wounded silence that shattered people all the same. I've written about my family before, in my debut book *One Hundred Years of Dirt*, but spent so much energy focused on everyone else's trauma that I never noticed my own.

More specifically, I didn't know there was a name for what I had. And knowing that coloured in so much of what I had

been, and still am, experiencing. The foundations for this complex PTSD diagnosis were laid in my earliest years as Dad silently and unconsciously chose the company of my brother, Toby, over the awkwardness of whatever our relationship was. But the intensity of this condition was assured when the world that belonged to us – my mum, brother and newborn sister, Lauryn, and me – was blasted out of its orbit. In a mechanic shed fireball, Toby suffered third degree burns to almost half of his body while I watched. I was right there and his screams tore through me. My family battled to save him in the hours before the Royal Flying Doctor Service arrived in the waning afternoon sun. And I was there when he was loaded aboard the plane with my mum and sister.

While the three of them flew more than a thousand kilometres away I was stuck on the cattle station, bearing witness to an affair my father was having with our then nineteen-year-old governess.

This is where a life of searching terror began.

I have blacked out most of what I saw and did during those weeks spent alone but the things I do remember are kept as tokens of despair in my mind. It is impossible to be rid of them, were I even given that choice.

Imagine it, if it helps. You are seven years old. You have been direct witness to physical trauma and you spend your days and nights alone in the shadow of a ruined man. The nearest other people, apart from *her*, are hours away. The nearest people who love you are fifteen hours away.

Dad cannot be there for you, though he does not even try. And you see him giving the love and affection you so desperately crave to a young woman.

You see them kissing and touching. The aftermath of sex, all of it. It is one of the clearest memories you have all these years later.

And you have never before or since felt more alone: geographically, emotionally, totally. What the trauma does when it is born is force your brain and body into an anything-goes mission to bring you through the pain. Sometimes, it requires of the child something almost as disfiguring as the trauma itself. It demands a near-total shutdown.

You become the absence.

And the thing about all this extravagant hurt is that it becomes a part of you, as much as your own bone and blood. It lies in wait until certain things or moments or people remind you of those excruciating weeks and then it comes for you, all alarm bells and a palpable sense of *doom*. And when it does, you become the boy again. You don't just remember him, you *are* him.

There is nothing in the universe that terrifies you more than being that boy but that is what you become, again and again.

In the desperate throes of a five-year mental breakdown stretching into 2019 I had tried almost everything to save my sanity – not in a particularly systematic way, mind you, but in the way a falling man swings wildly at the air with his fists.

Mindfulness helped, though not when I was experiencing an episode of complex PTSD. I tried most permutations of cognitive behaviour therapy, muscle relaxation, narrative therapy. It took most of those five years to even understand what it was that triggered my meltdowns. It always followed a close friend – a straight man, always – in the early stages of establishing a relationship with a woman.

At first, I thought I was in love with these men. But that was too simple an explanation. I wasn't. I was, however, in love with the idea that they treated me with kindness and open affection. As I experienced repeated episodes like these over the course of the years it finally occurred to me that each time a man, around whom I felt secure and loved, began seeing someone new my

body and brain worked in tandem to tell the other that I was under attack.

It always happens the same way.

The moment I find out my friend is seeing someone it is as if the world goes blurry. I can feel myself leave my own body. There is ringing in my ears and a sensation that has no equal in daily life but what I can only describe as 100,000 ants marching up from my feet along the length of my nervous system, nesting in my chest. It is the most agonising type of fear where death itself feels imminent.

After the first shock the only thing I care about is modelling. I need data, as much as possible, to run every conceivable simulation of how events will unfold. I do this to convince myself that there might be a way he doesn't leave me and, in so doing, confirm my fundamental truth: that I am unloveable.

But, if I am honest, these simulations are cooked from the beginning because really what I hope to establish is proof. I know I cannot be loved and these moments of despair are arranged so as to push this beyond reasonable doubt. If only I could prove it, perhaps then I might move on with my life.

What interests me about these episodes is that they never last for more than a couple of months at a time. I mean, thank God, because they feel like a lifetime. But if these men, my friends, enter into a stable relationship with the women they have started seeing, my fear vanishes. Like it never happened.

As if those months of furious internal dying were a total scam.

This only became obvious to me after yet another debilitating onset late in 2020, while I was writing this book. It's in *uncertainty* that I face psychological ruin. And I don't just mean a generic form of the unknown but the specific kind of insecurity that forces me to search, just like my boyhood self, for an answer to an impossible question.

Is anybody coming to save me?

As a seven-year-old I wandered the halls and rooms of our two-storey homestead for clues to my own demise. The governess on my father's lap. Him kissing her in the kitchen. Her with the stained bedsheets. His emotional distance. Strange mannerisms. The shock adults wear on their faces when they realise a small child has not been deceived.

All of them, clues.

And that was what I was still doing as an adult: searching the corridors of my own relationships for an evidentiary burden that could establish the original hurt.

The saddest thing about all of this, even now, is that I know it in the evolved part of my head but am captive to the sensations all the same. Trauma is not a memory. It is a Broadway production of the first hurt, a leg-kicking, show-stopping conflagration of the mind and body that needs no remembering. It is the thing. Each and every time.

During one moment of flailing, before I had figured any of this out, my closest friend hugged me and apologised. It was 2015, the year my precious foothold on sanity was lost.

'I'm so sorry I never told you I love you,' she said.

It was true, she hadn't, but neither had I. And I had thought I'd liked it that way: this unspoken agreement, this tacit knowledge that bound us.

What I had relied on as my key virtue, this mass of unfeeling, was in fact the thing that corroded my circuits and siphoned so much joy from my life that the outcome was inevitable, even if it was unintelligible to me at the time: I was broken and completely spent.

After that conversation with my friend, I felt marginally better. Was it because I'd told her that I loved her and that she'd said the same to me? Surely it wasn't that easy, I thought. But it was worth a shot.

I began telling everyone I loved them. Indiscriminately, at first. I would have moved on to objects such as fence posts and lawnmowers but for whatever reason there were still a lot of people in my life who cared about me and there was no time.

It was as if the colour had begun to run back into my world from the top of the frame, pooling at the bottom around the moss-covered rocks on one of my infrequent bush walks.

Before scientific studies explored the way language works as a defining principle, Ludwig Wittgenstein said: ‘The borders of my language are the borders of my world.’ We can only understand the bits of the world we have chosen to name, in other words.

Speaking of other words, the Inuit have a label for that specific feeling, while waiting for a friend or loved one, when you check to see if they have arrived yet: *Iktsuarpok*. The Germans coined *Geworfenheit* to describe that state of existence that comes after a person has been thrown into circumstances not of their choosing. Spaniards have one of the most beautiful words – *duende* – to describe the heightened sensation of passion or spirit, especially when it is linked with dance or art. And the Finnish, bless them, have a word for ‘bouncy cushion satisfaction’ – *Hyppytyynytyydytys* – to detail the distinct pleasure of sitting down for the first time in a comfortable chair.

University of East London positive psychology lecturer Tim Lomas started a list of such words (he calls it a ‘positive lexicography’), which includes ‘party pig’, a delightful entry from the Dutch, and ‘underpants intoxication’ from the consistently entertaining Finnish people.

It’s a fun exercise in its own right, but it proves Wittgenstein’s point. Sure, we English speakers might have roundabout ways of describing the same feelings, but without the direct word for ‘bouncy cushion satisfaction’, the chairs that have given us such delight in our own lives remain largely unremarked upon.

And where we limit the language of love and all its forms, we squander the chance to experience those same sensations.

Having opened the door just a crack, I began to let the light wash in.

After more than a decade of concerted emptiness, guarding always against feeling, this was a small but new routine. I told people I loved them and tried very hard to believe them when they said the same to me. How I adored this renaissance of tiny joy.

It's not a cure. I can't tell you the number of times I've wanted to slug someone who says my at times crippling anxiety and suicidal ideation exist because I'm thinking about it all wrong. You know, just, kind of, think nicer?

I want, also, to hold parades for them. Celebratory parades, with streamers and confetti, that announce the long sought-after solution for acute mental illness has been discovered by the Darren or Mary or Karl who's made such a pronouncement. And though they all approach a level of serenity that borders on suspicious, we know it emerges from the lived experience of never having been told the trauma wormed deep into the grey matter of their brain is just *bad juju*.

This is, sadly, not that book. And, yes, I still have complex PTSD and a tendency to dissociate when it is triggered. It feels a lot like I'm in one of those extended sequences in war movies, after the bomb has gone off and the sound disappears and the world around is blurred.

What my rediscovery of love did do, however, is give me permission to do the work required to get better. Not cured, nor fixed or entirely healed. Just better.

It is only fitting. The condition is caused by an extreme lack of love and it makes sense that we should counter it by the intense, rigorous and scattergun application of love.

I practised random acts of kindness and targeted, precision acts of forgiveness – in the understanding that such acts would help me love myself. I learned to say the words out loud, over and over again, as if the phrase *I love you* were an animal's name, and calling it again and again would stop it walking over the threshold of a door and out of my life for good.

When I was in Year 10, I saw a pigeon get sucked into an air-conditioning vent in a shopping centre. *Shoonk*. The air filled with a burst of white and grey feathers. I imagined being the protagonist now in that vignette but instead of a pigeon, I hurled good grace and the ability to be awestruck by life into that vent and watched it coat the room.

I was Oprah, bestowing surprise gifts to audience members, but instead of giving cars, I gave abiding affection. *And you get warmth and attachment! And you get warmth and attachment! And you!* People think they want cars – and they do, to get to jobs and appointments in cities and regions where public transport has failed them. But what gets them into those cars, out of the house, out of *bed* for God's sake, is love.

I've been a news reporter for more than fifteen years. In journalism, we are trained to be cynical and distrusting. This has its uses in the political arena where there is more spin than an orbiting lazy susan, but I find it is a tool that fundamentally fails when applied to real human beings. People, the ones who are going about their lives and sampling survival as if at a buffet, should not be handled as such.

In my reporting job, covering social affairs from all corners, I traverse the full range of human suffering. Addiction, mental illness, entrenched intergenerational poverty, the trauma of institutions on the old and disabled. Grief. Injustice. Homelessness. The staggering hurt of hope offered and snatched away.

The way these individual deprivations coalesced was slow, at first. I couldn't see the common theme for the various tributaries. But, gradually, the waters of my understanding began to flow together, surging on and into my consciousness with urgency.

All of these different people had a unity about them. Their suffering had a unity. Whether it was their own or foisted on them by parents, family, friends, caregivers or *the system*, what these people all lacked was love.

This isn't some new-age moment of epiphany. It's right there, written into all their lives. Trace the lines back far enough and you will find someone who should have loved them and couldn't, which begat the perpetuation of neglect and emotional abuse down the generations. Go back far enough in any direction and the evidence is knotted together through family breakdown, abandonment and the stories of a thousand people who all wanted to be loved in one thousand specific ways, but who never were.

I saw this in my own life, too. There was a man, my father, who I believe wanted to love his children but was never shown how and was too frightened to discover it for himself. That fear destroyed his life and the damage was cast outward in the radius of the explosion. The shrapnel of that great terror lodged in everyone he held dear.

And what was he afraid of? Weakness.

Just like his boy who would follow.

In deciding to try to change this one fact about myself, I realised it couldn't be done alone. My story is not singular and there are, just maybe, ways back for each of us. We are all due a resurrection of feeling and emotion.

First, however, I had a more pressing concern to deal with.

You see, it started with my skin.