

## Love Notes: Uncertainty Written by Stephanie K. Hopkins



Photos: Stephanie K. Hopkins

In a Times Square alley, my brother and two other artists stand on a raised ledge and sketch on easels. He's part of an improvisational art piece in a public space called The Equus Projects. As the artists sketch, busy New Yorkers pass by, hustling to meetings and lunches; they talk or text on their cell phones or forge ahead with looks of intense concentration. A few notice the artists and gather before them. A handful gathers along the back wall to see what's going on from a safe distance.

Sounds emerge from hidden speakers; it's not music really, not yet. Pings and bongs and a steady rhythmic beat. A man sits down on the ledge and checks his phone. He doesn't notice the art being made behind him until a fallen drawing lands by his side and startles him. He gets up and leaves shortly after noticing the alley isn't what it first seemed.

For those who have gathered to watch the artists, there is a growing sense of wonder and anticipation. *What's going on here?* I'm along the wall at the back where I can watch the viewers' surprise as three dancers in long skirts appear and begin to move around the crowd. It becomes clear, suddenly, that the artists have been drawing the dancers this whole time.

The sounds build toward more recognizable music while the dancers move around the crowd. Meanwhile, the artists draw them, rip off paper, and redraw them. It's mesmerizing—watching someone try to nail down a moving target that just won't stay still. The dancers get involved in the process, running fingers over the easels as if to say, *I'm a living thing! I'm right here! Not on the page, right here!*

We watch this interaction between living thing and its attempted representation, living thing and the story that tries to capture it. We watch the movement of the dancer and the movement of the marker and delight in the moments the artist seems to capture her just so. We are also drawn in by the gap between life and story, by the dancers' elusiveness and the playful, antagonizing, pleading, flirtatious way the dancers escape their artists' reach.

What is it about this interaction that is so mesmerizing? The moment we become aware that we are privy to an unfolding, we have entered a game in which the bigger picture both flirts with and eludes us. Perhaps it's the pleasure of discovering new clues that delights us. Or the way our sense of what is real is turned

upside down and we wait, suspended, like we've been filled with air and hover above the ground, or like we are kids again, feet dangling off an amusement park ride that spins us this way and that.

Falling in love can feel like this: what felt solid and immovable before feels light, suspended. What will reveal itself next? We, too, can surprise ourselves. Perhaps that is why we often feel as if love makes us new, as if we are reborn through love—it can release us from what we felt bound to. We thought we were afraid of flying, but suddenly everything seems possible. *Let's just get in the car and drive and see what happens...* When we fall in love, we are boundless, freed from ourselves.

But such uncertainty is only delightful when there is hope of resolution. Too much uncertainty can backfire. If our sense of shifting reality continues without clues as to the bigger picture, we become trapped in an ungrounded state, our minds spinning, spinning, with nowhere to land. The process of figuring something out can feel like an adventure, but if meaning is completely withheld, we can become overwhelmed with anxiety.

We want to delight in trying to capture and understand the living thing of a relationship, and also in the ways this living thing is bigger than our understanding. This can bring a sense of the divine in love, like we are being carried along by something that has a shape beyond what we can see; we need to have faith in its unfolding.

When a relationship ends, we seek closure through understanding. We want to understand “what happened.” We turn the story around and around, rehash what was and wasn't said, try to nail down the moving target. But we can't always say what happened or why. We might never get answers from the person we want answers from. They might not even know themselves why they did what they did or needed what they needed.

Against my Times Square alley wall, I watch a couple take turns inching closer to the artists and dancers, then retreating back to the wall for safety. As the music and movement build, the initial crowd reveals itself to be part of the plan. People we thought were one of us now take part in the performance, spreading the artists' drawings along the ground. The invisible wall between art and audience collapses, and no space is safe from the performers' movement.

The couple becomes nervous, and the woman turns to the man and says, “Let's get out of here before we get nailed.” They disappear quickly, before who-knows-what will happen to them.

We each have a different capacity for sustaining uncertainty, for engaging with what is beyond our reach. Some might run from uneasiness. Others linger, curiosity outweighing anxiety, knowing that anything can happen when you enter a thing bigger than you, bigger than both of you, and that sometimes this can mean getting nailed.

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