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## Buckalew: On Love

### ON LOVE

Elizabeth Wade Buckalew

In sixth grade, I traded my first kiss for a Reese's Peanut Butter Cup. A year later, I baked bunny-shaped sugar cookies as an Easter gift for the boy I was going with. The recipe called for an abundance of powdered sugar, which I managed to sprinkle onto nearly every surface, ceiling included, of my mother's kitchen. When Mama asked how he liked the cookies, I was too embarrassed to admit the truth, how I'd gotten to school and realized that middle school couples didn't commemorate Easter, how the cookies sat in my locker for two months, how gray mold made the icing look like real fur, how the Red Hots I used for the rabbits' eyes grew mushy, and the color seeped onto the animals' faces. Eight years would pass before I baked again.

My first high school boyfriend and I were too distracted by other hungers to ever share a meal. The next beau, an artist, had parents I found exotic, because they grated fresh parmesan over pasta. Together, the artist and I discovered brie and negotiated its troublesome rind. One summer, a horseman bought me pizza at Papa John's in Nicholasville. An older man snuck me White Russians in a bar named Charlie Brown's. The morning after the boy I loved told me he hated poetry, I threw Mama's untouched rum cake—his favorite—in the trash can outside his house and never saw him again.

In college, I survived on mac & cheese—you could get three boxes for eighty-nine cents at the local Harris Teeter—and washed it down with wine from a box. I didn't try the bottled stuff until the politician took me to a wine tasting when I was just nineteen. A boy whose name I never remember left chocolates outside my chemistry class. The one who became a lifelong friend brought bagels and orange juice before my finals. The fraternity boy took me to Steak & Date, where the meat was piled foot-high on platters. I knew it wasn't for girls, and supped instead on

salad. Away from campus, the fraternity boy took me for lobster dinners, ten dollars a plate at a roadside shack in Hingham, Massachusetts. He bought me a ring, but I didn't learn that till much later, after we'd broken up, when a mutual friend spilled the secret over a pancake breakfast at Disney World.

The man whose ring I did accept was allergic to peanuts and avoided spicy things. He liked sandwiches, not prosciutto and chèvre on seven grain bread, no, just a single slice of turkey and Miracle Whip on Wonder. When the artisanal cheese maker asked over ice cream in England if I was happy in my marriage, I lied and said yes. I should have known better.

My first meal as a divorcée consisted of tomato basil soup and whole wheat crackers straight from the box. My sister tried to set me up with an all-American boy, a former quarterback with a penchant for fillet. There were several boys I didn't date—the bigot who followed me into bars and the bourbon drinker who reminisced about barbecue ribs after a lazy afternoon with friends. I swore off dating, but when my best friend and I went out, waiters always thought we were a couple. We knew each other's histories—how my mother carries a steak knife in her purse, how his ex-girlfriend publishes love poems about a woman who tasted like mangoes—and finally decided what the hell, we'd give it a try. On our first date, the chef sent a complementary salad of sliced tomatoes, fresh mozzarella, and basil leaves, and we thought it a promising omen. Since then, we've dined on lobster ravioli and driven three hours for chili dogs. We've invested in a pasta maker, a potato ricer, a citrus zester. Each morning he brings me tea in bed.