

CHRYS ROMEO



FIRST LOVE

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The magic voice

Eric had moved to a Western country from Eastern Europe when he was ten years old. He had been born in a difficult time of communist regime in Romania and his parents escaped the hunger and censorship by finding work in the West, closer to his ancestor's origins. He not only found his roots where he moved, he also found love.

At first, adapting to the new conditions was not an easy task; but Eric was a resourceful and adventurous boy, so he went exploring the neighborhood and quickly made friends with some other boys who were playing soccer, hide-and-seek or building rockets from paper and needles. Soon, he was doing just fine.

He wasn't lonesome because he had brothers and sisters at home: but his family was sometimes regarded as an immigrant tree that was casting shadows over the wealthy people of the neighborhood. Some of the rich kids watched Eric and his siblings with contempt because of it. At school they would sometimes mock them and give them nicknames, which made him angry. Their parents weren't very wealthy, so their clothes were most of the time the same, which added to the distance between them and the more wealthy children. He didn't regret the company of the pretentious, though: he preferred to play outside, free from any constraints of etiquette and schedule. There was a little river crossing the edge of

the town where he lived and he would go there in the afternoon and evenings to play by the water.

That was where he heard it for the first time.

He was just looking for shiny pieces of colored glass that he saw in the river, digging through the muddy leaves with a branch. He liked to collect colorful pieces of glass and stare at the world and at the sun through the rays of transparent hues that changed everything into a different view. It was a secret world he had access to, by looking through the pieces of broken glass. He found them in the streets, in the dirt, in the river... green, red, blue, yellowish or brown pieces of broken glass in many shapes. They had something mysterious: they were like portals to another space and time.

He had just seen a light blue piece underneath the leaves in the water and was trying to get to it, when he heard the sound. It was coming from somewhere nearby: it was a melody. He listened attentively: it had something magical. It was unusual. It was something he had never heard before. A voice so warm like the sunshine, magical like another universe, sweet and enticing like a spring day of freedom and happiness was connecting to his soul, linking the sound to his ears and beyond, to his mind, in a hypnotizing glow he could feel infusing his thoughts instantly. He dropped the branch and looked up. He couldn't see anything from the riverbank, only the rooftops of some nearby houses. The melody went on; the voice was charming and mesmerizing, as if calling him closer.

What is that music? Whose voice is that? he asked himself, in bewilderment.

It was too out of the world. It was like nothing else he knew. He climbed up to the street and tried to get closer, sharpening his ears. It was a melody he enjoyed a lot, even though it was the first time he could listen to it. He felt completely mesmerized. His heart started beating faster. He knew he had a new purpose: he had to find out whose voice had captured his soul so intensely. He looked at the houses, passing them by, trying to locate the one where the sound came from.

But then, the voice stopped. In just a few minutes, it disappeared.

Eric felt deprived of something, but also thrilled by the discovery: the neighborhood was magical and it had a voice from another world, singing of sunshine and captivating his imagination.

He returned to the river and picked the piece of blue glass he had found. He plunged his hand through the dirt and cold water, ignoring the wet sleeves and getting his knees muddy from leaning on the edge, taking it out to light. It was pastel blue and polished, almost round like a marble.

“What did you find there?” he heard someone ask him.

It was his friend, Jerry.

“A new treasure!” he exclaimed and showed him the piece of glass.

“It looks nice...”

“Nice? It’s magical! I’ll see Andromeda galaxy through it.”

Eric smiled and felt happy. It wasn't the glass that was making him feel like something magical had happened: it was the voice and the way it thrilled him down his spine and up to his most imaginative thoughts. He felt so enthusiastic and elated, like floating on clouds. He was in love and he didn't realize it.

In the coming days, he tried to find the voice again. He walked to the river each afternoon, listening attentively. He spent hours and hours roaming along the riverbank, but it didn't happen.

And then one day, he heard it again. Only he wasn't by the river: he was at school. He heard the voice coming through the corridor, resounding in the halls, between the walls and the windows, brightening the place with its surreal magic of sunshine and spring. Colors started flowing in the air like fireflies before his eyes. He felt his skin tingle with excitement. The voice was there again!

"Did you hear that?" he asked the other boys.

"Sure. That's our new colleague", a twelve year old answered him. "She's rehearsing for the school festivity next month."

"Do you know her? What's her name?"

"Of course I know her, she's in my class", the boy bragged proudly. "She just moved in town recently. Her name is Estelle."

Eric was staring along the corridor. Her name sounded charming and magical too. *Estelle*, he thought. It was just right. He needed to meet her immediately. He stared nostalgically and curiously along the corridor.

“Take your mind off her”, the boy warned him. “She’s out of your league. She doesn’t mix with immigrants like you... Besides, you’re still a kid. And she’s got enough real men in her class”, the boy continued, grinning defiantly and flexing his muscles mockingly.

Eric didn’t listen to him. He was used to that attitude, so he discarded the words like empty dry leaves falling from a tree. He was determined. He needed to meet her.

He turned around and walked towards the door to the music hall, much more preoccupied with what was inside. He placed his ear on the door, listening to the flow of the melody... and the magical voice. He closed his eyes blissfully. He didn’t realize how time went by.

And then a hand grabbed his ear, tearing it painfully.

“Why aren’t you in the classroom at this hour?”

The break had been over for twenty minutes and the school principal was walking along the corridors, checking on the children - standing in front of him unexpectedly.

“Go to your class at once, or I’ll call your parents and tell them about this!”

Eric ran away, but he was still happy and smiling he had heard that voice, even if his ear was strangely giving him the feeling of sudden ache and detached stinging burn.

He wanted to see Estelle. What did she look like? he wondered.

He imagined her like a summer day... like a spring trip in the fields... like sunshine rays touching his face as he closed his eyes, dreaming of her voice.

The diamond eyes

He asked around the school, inquiring about her classroom. It was on the first floor. So he went there when he heard the bell at the end of the school day.

The door to her classroom was open. Children were gathering their books, zipping jackets, stuffing hats on, going home. Eric leaned on the doorframe. There were many girls still in the classroom, arranging their school bags. He knew girls took longer to prepare for leaving, so he was sure she was still inside. She hadn't left. And he was right. She was there.

“Estelle, here's your coat” one of the boys said courteously.

“Thank you”, he heard her say.

It was that voice. And now it was a person.

He thought he was prepared to see her. And yet her appearance was just as stunning, surprising and hypnotizing as her singing. It bewildered him just as much. It had the same effect: it sent him flying to another space and time. As she turned around to look casually in his direction – because he was standing in the doorway – her bright eyes reached him, directly in his mind, fixing him there, nailing him next to the wall. He stared, mesmerized. She stared, unaware of what she was doing to him, watching indifferently.

Hair as electrifying as a night lamp, neither blonde nor creamy, but flowing freely on her shoulders, like a waterfall, contrasted

softly with the pastel pink woolen hat and the fluffy white winter coat; gestures delicate and gentle, yet firm and decisive, her attitude as majestic and elegant as a swan, floating on smooth water, as intimidating as a dangerous feline. And yet it was her eyes that were the most impressive: bright and direct, powerful and enticing. He couldn't decide if they were silver, green or blue. He couldn't decide if they were clear like water, evocative like the sky or mysterious, from another world, like the pieces of shiny glass he collected. He decided they were bright like diamonds. They were unique. They had something wild and absolutely mesmerizing, something words could not express.

This is her... he thought, as he couldn't take his eyes off her.

She walked past him, as if he were invisible.

He followed her, unable to speak and unwilling to let his newfound delight out of sight, strutting behind her like a lunatic under hypnosis.

It was snowing outside and the soft white flakes were covering everything.

They crossed the schoolyard and went out in the street. His steps almost matched hers, like echoes. At some point she heard it and turned around. He stopped. Her eyes went through his mind again, leaving it in blank stare. He was trembling from the cold and the thrill in his bones, as she was looking in his eyes. He was covered in snow, like a snowman. He stood speechless under those sharp bright eyes of hers, diamonds cutting his heart in pieces.

"Are you following me?" she asked him.

The voice brought the spring and summer over the winter streets, in an instant. Fields of colors were dancing above the snow.

He felt awkward and shy. He shook his head. He tried to speak.

“I’m Rick – Eric. I heard you sing”.

But she didn’t hear him because she had turned around, continuing her walk home. And his voice was stifled by emotions and by the cold air. He wondered if she at least had heard his name. He looked up: a gray sky was pouring snowflakes in silence. He watched the steam from his mouth, mixing with the colors that were disappearing above the white as she was turning the corner of a frozen building.

Eric had forgotten his gloves in his desk in the classroom and his hands were freezing. He grabbed his school bag closer.

And then Jerry patted him on the shoulder, waking him from the vision.

“You didn’t wait for me! You left sooner. Why?”

Eric stared into the space where the magic singing wonder had been.

“I think I’m in love”, he said.

Jerry laughed.

“Really? Who is she?”

“Her name is Estelle. She sings... her voice... and her eyes...”

Jerry laughed.

“You’re talking like a drunk man. Come on! Let’s go home!”

Jerry grabbed his sleeve, making him walk.

“You’re talking about Stella, right? Of course... the entire school’s in love with her. She just appeared out of nowhere and became every boy’s fantasy in just a week.”

Eric blinked. Snowflakes were melting on his eyelashes, blurring his vision.

“Stella?”

“Yes, that’s what they call her because everybody thinks she’s gong to be a star, by the way she sings. I don’t know, some girls have that something special... but you shouldn’t get your hopes up with her.”

“I know. She doesn’t even know me.”

“Not only that, Ricky... but she’s twelve and you’re eleven. She’d never go out with you. She’ll probably go for a higher grade guy. And knowing where you came from... she probably wouldn’t want anything to do with you.”

“It doesn’t matter. I love her. I’m certain of it.”

Eric was so sure how he felt, he was determined nothing else mattered.

She was his magic wonder. He wouldn’t give her up. He couldn’t.

He ignored the older boys who were teasing him when they saw him next to her classroom. He had a better aim in mind.

He made a habit of waiting for her by the door every day when she went home, but she hardly noticed him. Most of the time she was with a group of girls, walking home in endless chatter. He made sure she wouldn’t see him tracking them down half of the way. He

could spot the pastel pink hat anywhere in the schoolyard and in the street, no matter how many classmates were surrounding her. He could distinguish her voice in a noisy classroom and could recognize her bright eyes in the darkest night, with his eyes closed.

He was attentive each time when she was looking for her coat, but every time a boy from her classroom would get it for her, from the hanger. He knew he would have his chance one day. And one day, he did. It was the happiest day he could ever imagine. She turned around for her coat and he saw the distance between the door and the hanger: it wasn't too much. He could run for it. There was no other boy around. He swiftly made a jump. In a second, he was reverently touching her fluffy coat like a precious jewel. He brought it to her, hardly breathing.

“Here... your coat.” he said shyly.

His heart was racing like a sparrow in a cage, beating out of his chest.

She looked at him and smiled.

“Thank you”, she said and her clear voice awakened his mind to another season.

He danced his way home that day, ecstatic and dreamy.

He felt he could do anything: he could conquer the world.

She had smiled at him.

Music for marbles

In spring, Eric discovered that she was actually living across the street from him, two houses distance. It was when Stella's father bought her a synthesizer that Eric found out she was actually closer to him than he had thought.

Eric was doing his homework and his window was open; the spring warmth came in with noises of birds and cars passing by, when he heard the magical voice and the surreal singing above everything.

He stood up, threw away the notebook and ran in the street. He was determined to find the source of the melody.

The voice was accompanied this time by electric sounds, from her new toy.

Eric stopped under the window and listened. When the song was over, he clapped his hands enthusiastically in applause, not realizing what he was doing. She probably heard it because her fuzzy hair appeared in the window. And then, her sharp bright eyes sent shivers through Eric's skin. Her eyes were intimidating and fascinating at the same time. He was smiling ecstatic in total surrender when she looked at him a bit surprised. He hoped she wasn't upset because he had clapped his hands.

She wasn't.

“That’s like a pirate’s applause”, she laughed. “I wasn’t aware someone was listening. Did you like my song?”

Eric was exhilarated she was really talking to him, after many months of his secret adoration from a distance. He wasn’t going to miss the chance of having a conversation with the girl of his dreams.

“I did, very much. Is it yours?”

“Yes, I invented it.”

She leaned her elbows on the windowpane and looked to the end of the street.

“I hope I’ll sing it on stage one day.”

“I’m sure you will”, he said without a doubt.

She glanced at him more attentively. His enthusiasm pleased her.

“That’s nice of you to say. I think I’ve seen you around... did you come to my classroom once?”

So she remembers, he thought, feeling a sting of warmth traveling up from his toes to his ears.

“I brought you your coat one day...” he mentioned.

It was a day he cherished as a bright dream.

“Possibly...” she accepted and there was a glimmer of amusement in her eyes.

“I’m Rick”, he said boldly.

“Nice to meet you, Rick.”

He smiled, light filling his eyes.

“Nice to meet you too, Stella.”

“So you know my name?”

“I do.”

The whole school and neighborhood knew it, but she was still surprised.

Eric decided to take a risk.

“Can I come again under this window to listen while you’re singing?” he asked.

“Of course”, she agreed.

And then she went inside. He remained there for a few seconds, his mind enlightened by another miraculous day.

He thought he was walking in the highest sky when he returned home.

On the following days he went in the street as soon as he heard her through the window. He sat on the sidewalk and applauded after each song. Sometimes she came to the window to ask for his opinion. She confessed she was recording her songs on tapes, hoping to send them to some recording studio someday.

Eric’s under-the-window adventure didn’t go unnoticed in the neighborhood. The other boys started coming too, making much noise, playing with a ball and soon Stella’s father had to close the window and shoo them off.

Eric had another idea.

He thought of something.

He was addicted to her music, so he needed to listen to it.

On a Sunday afternoon he came under the window again and whistled. He was afraid to throw pebbles: he didn’t want to cause

damage and get in trouble. He had to whistle a few times until she heard.

“Why are you whistling?” she inquired after she opened the window.

He spoke very fast, trying to overcome his fears of her answer not being yes.

“I want to ask you something. It’s a business proposition: I’m inviting you to have ice cream at the coffee shop on the corner. I want to discuss something with you.”

“What kind of business?”

“About your music.”

“When?”

“Now?”

She was silent. He hoped for the best and clutched his fists in his pockets.

Seconds seemed like years. Minutes felt like centuries. She was considering it, stubbornly taking her time and evaluating the situation. And then she finally decided.

“Fine, I’ll come. Give me half an hour.”

He breathed deeply.

“I’ll wait for you here.”

He rushed home, suddenly happy to have a date with Stella and knowing he didn’t even have too much time to be blissful about it before he had to get ready. He grabbed his cardboard box where he kept his marble collection, then looked around again. He saw some change on the table and snatched it without a second thought. He

knew his parents might notice it, but he needed it more than he feared being punished.

He waited for Stella wearing his jockey costume that he had gotten for a school festivity. She came in a summer dress, wearing her mother's perfume and eyeliner. He didn't know enough of makeup to wonder about it. She looked stunning to him anyway. Her electrifying hair had a sparkling sticky spray over, which made it even more surreal. He stared at her, amazed. She was absolutely beautiful. Her clear eyes met his for a second and he felt his heart melt away like the ice cream they were about to get.

"What's in there?" she asked him a bit curious, as he was clinging to the box under his arm.

"I'll show you later. You'll see."

They walked to the coffee shop. He couldn't believe she was really there by his side, taking each step with him. Her warm presence made the asphalt of the sidewalk turn into a bright meadow. He saw colors and magic around her. She seemed more delicate and kinder seen from a closer look. He sensed she was a bit nervous and insecure about going out with him. He realized, with surprise, that she needed reassurance and safety, just like any other girl. Her diamond eyes had made her seem so invincible and determined – and there she was, walking by his side, a real person, with a delicate soul and a kind smile... she was also a warm girl, besides being a magical impressive ideal in his mind; he discovered she was sweetly human too, and it made him love her even more.

They sat at a table and he bought a tall glass of ice cream with the change he had taken from his home. It had strawberry and whipped cream flavor. They tasted the ice cream with teaspoons, in the beginning taking awkward turns at it. In the end, they seemed to feel a lot more comfortable eating together. When their teaspoons touched one another, making a clinking sound, they started laughing.

He let her finish the ice cream.

“You can have it. I don’t like ice cream very much anyway. But this was good.”

He placed his marble box on the table. He took off the lid.

She stared at the colorful pieces of glass, looking interested.

“What are these?”

“It’s my marble collection. They are portals to another universe.”

“Really?”

She looked at him seriously. Her deep eyes seemed to believe him.

“That’s wonderful! Can you travel anywhere with those?”

“You can travel in your mind... you can see through them to the other world. It’s a parallel universe and it’s very beautiful.”

She picked a yellowish one and stared through it. Then she picked another red one. And another green. Then blue. She was trying each one, attentively. He was watching her, delighted. His marbles in her hands seemed even more magical.

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