



Love Volunteering Love

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Do you know a song by heart, a song which you do not necessary like, just because one of your volunteer colleagues was desperately in love and sang that song, day after day, all through your volunteering period?

Did you ever notice how many volunteering organisations have either the image of a heart or a hand in their logos?

How many of you, us and our friends have memories of *falling in love during volunteering*?

Well, the *Coyote* editorial team has its suspicions.

There is something going on with love and volunteering.

Volunteering is an occasion when we let our feelings flourish and transform into actions for and with others. It is an adventure in which we passionately claim and demand better conditions for all. It is an atmosphere in which we act with solidarity to reach a common goal.

And finally it is a segment of our life journey during which we fell in love.

Here are some beautiful love stories, from all around Europe, which happened during volunteering. **Do you have a similar story to share?**

February 2005

A cold morning. Trying for days to meet with him to prepare and issue a common position paper about the decision of the European Commission – communicated briefly right before Christmas – to hold the EuroMed Youth Programme, Sacrilegio!

I am coming back from Paris Charles de Gaulle and before that, from Tizi Ouzou, Algeria. He is on his way to New York for a meeting of the United Nations. Or an assembly, our memory is fading. Not many options: let's meet at the Midi Railway station in Brussels, in between our respective trips.

I arrive. It's about 8.30 am. He's ready to get on the rails soon. It's too early. I am tired, still in Algeria. He is tired, still in his mood from the previous meetings. I need a coffee and a cigarette. Him: freshly starting in his new role and function. Me: determined to have that statement ready soon (and more than anything else to get a common position). Action can't wait.



We find each other. We both look as if we need some extra hours of sleep. We find a more or less isolated table in one of those typical 'welcome-to-Brussels' railway station types of bars. It was quite puzzling at that time of the day, to be honest. A mix of early travellers and late beer drinkers. Or maybe it is the opposite? And us, in the middle of the crowd.

We order that coffee. Him: mumbling, a bit nervous, 'sorry, problems with the computer, cannot logon'. Me: tired, 'no worries, I can tell you everything about it.' Him: 'Still, I'll just make some phone calls.' Looking for files in each other's computers and flash drives. Him: 'I see you like Celtic music? I am quite an expert in this and I could share some if you want.' Me: 'Really? Yes, I'd love it. Thanks' (a bit later and as a way to say bye: 'by the way, I love your scarf'). We talk, we plan, we move on. Metro for me. Train to Charles de Gaulle for him. Back to other realities. A few months and meetings later, our lobbying work did generate some modest results. Then, a few more occasional encounters here and there. Warmer days came, so did the initiative of a beach-volley session (yes, yes, even in Brussels!).

A very special story started ...
How it continued will not be told here!

And I could only say: 'Could it be because I have contact lenses?'

Rewind. The story.

It was back in the days when international youth meetings were rather new for us, for the young people from my region. Setting: a youth exchange for two weeks, in which young people from Mediterranean, European and European-Mediterranean countries would meet. Topic? Integration and citizenship. The essence? A rather big group of young people (we were more than 50) experiencing living, moving, doing and reflecting together. There he was, with the most beautiful smile anyone could possibly have. The charm of his laughter was apparently better recognised in the group but I was amazed with the smile. As I was so excited around him, I managed to stay out of any conversation. Totally scared of having to talk to him and saying something stupid! Better not to talk then.

I was probably seen staring at him as we were having our lunch packages in a beautiful park next to the lake. He came with his sandwich, sat next to me and said: 'Do you know that your eyes shine beautifully?' Panic. I had to respond. I had to respond quickly. My response had to make sense. I should not shake. Is he flirting with me? Do not think. Respond. Quick. 'Could it be because I have contact lenses? Lenses reflect the light much stronger.' Laughter in response, followed by the smile. Somehow I was not scared to talk to him anymore. The following days proved that.





One may ask why I still remember that particular week of January 2009.

- My answer to this question would be 'because it introduced me to a person that later on left a permanent mark in my heart'. It's romantic, isn't it?

To make that romantic story a bit twisted, I must admit that it was not that obvious at the beginning. It was one of the events my NGO organises annually. We were supposed to discuss 'queer', 'gender', 'discrimination', 'inclusion' and 'LGBTQ' issues – all the hot topics within my organisation. I remember running around, occupied with all the preparations and taking care of the infamous 'last minute' details, and that lasted for the whole week! I was really glad we had sessions so that I had a chance to talk and get to know people a bit more! And then there was this one person, usually sitting on the floor, everyday wearing unmatched socks on purpose, super passionate about equality, stubborn and a fierce activist. I was so impressed by her voice and strengths and power, but that was it at that point in time. Again, it continued for the whole week. You may say that it was the week of constant continuation!

Suddenly it was Saturday and 'the end' of our queer adventure. At the end of the evening I was walking around and saying 'bye' to my friends... And then it happened! I got the longest, one of the most amazing and breathtaking HUGS in my life! Do you know the feeling when you do not want to let someone go so badly that you could just stand there for hours, even fall asleep in the process but not let go? If you do, it was something of this sort. I was totally blown away! After that, I left. However, as soon as I reached my floor, it turned out that she and some other people were there, talking, laughing and having fun, so I joined them for some more gossip and the last bit of chit chat. Mysteriously, our friends left quite fast and she and I were left alone sitting on the floor and talking the night away.

It was only few weeks later that I realised what was going on back in January and I knew then that I wanted to have her in my life. Amazingly enough, I did and ... I still do.