

Love Like Oil

Love and oil—two different things. I started to tell him that I loved him. I meant it then, but not being absolutely certain I didn't. I liked the way he rubbed the back of my neck when I was tired of studying. I would raise my head, take off my glasses, and rub my eyes until they were raw and scratched. I ached to get up and stretch until my bones cracked, but I felt this was a luxury I couldn't allow. Not in the middle of the spreadsheet that I was completing for a business class. I guess that, somehow, I was not totally aware of his intrinsic value. He would lean over and rub the back of my neck his strong fingers working in the deep tendons on either side of my neck sliding down to the tops of my shoulders. He would hit strange bumps and knots that tied into the top of my spine, allowing tension and tiredness to melt away. I loved that feeling.

When I meant to tell Michael I loved him, I meant that I liked the way his hair spiked in unruly ways when he woke in the morning. His longish hair had double cowlicks—one in front and one in back. He had dark blue eyes, black looking until you edged closer to him. When you were a breath away, you realized they were blue with flecks of amber mixed in. I liked the way he described things he felt passionate about. In his excitement, words would spill out in all directions. Sometimes, he mispronounced simple words. I wanted to correct him; I didn't.

Oil seems irrelevant to love, but then you consider how oil can grease or smother something. When he texted me constantly, I felt a tight band across my chest squeezing. Fluid building slowly bubbling upward. Was I proud that he wanted to know where I was? Was he truly worried about me? Probably.

It wasn't that I didn't feel close to him. It is simply that it is very hard for me to feel close to any man. Numbers, I know and love. People, not so much. I don't say that I blame my mother entirely, but I guess I really do. When my dad was around, he would swing me up in his arms, my pink girly dress swirling around me. I must have been around four then. He would tell me that not only I was beautiful, but that I was the smartest girl in all the land. By the time I was five, he was gone.

My mom didn't think I was all the beautiful or smart. Well, smart later, when I would manage the checks and bills that were due and overdue. The cash, she took care of. Her boyfriends were numerous and mostly obnoxious. She didn't want me to meet them. She stuck me in my bedroom that was closet sized. I didn't care, particularly. I would simply work out patterns with numbers, games with numbers, and count the number of bottles I heard crashing against the walls and/or floor. Different bottles made different sounds. I could usually determine if they were vodka or beer.

My numbers games impressed my teachers. They believed I had a future in finance. Well, I could always hope. My mother whooped and hollered when college was mentioned. "Now, shit, how are we supposed to have money for that?" I assured her that I, with the help of my counselor, Mrs. Fredrickson, had already worked up a plan for scholarships, coop jobs, and other methods of getting money together. She would only have to help with her signature on forms, but otherwise, I had it handled.

After she thought about it a bit, she decided that, yes, this was probably the ticket to finding a rich husband, so that I wouldn't have to hassle my keep like she had had to do. After another round or two of Botox and an eyelid lift that the latest man had paid for,

she took me in his borrowed car to visit the state school. It was close enough to home, but far away enough so that I wouldn't have to go home too often.

I met Michael when I went to the bookstore to pick out my books for my first semester classes. He was a smooth looking older guy with pressed slacks and a collared shirt that I thought was a student worker. He wasn't, but he did try to help me find all the books I needed, anyway. He was plenty shocked when I'd totaled the prices before the cashier started plugging in my purchases.

He invited me to go for coffee afterward. This seemed ultra-sophisticated to me. Not a bar, just a place to get coffee and a muffin that didn't come out of vending machine or out of a package off a grocery shelf.

During this conversation, I learned that he was the son of two doctors, one a pulmonologist and the other, a cardiac surgeon. He had gone to one of their schools, initially, following his older brothers, but this type of learning wasn't easy for him. After I knew him better, I sincerely thought he would have been better at fixing things, but what did I know. He was sent back to the state school to get the basics out of the way. Get his feet on the ground, they told him.

That fall, I stayed in the dorm with two roommates. Both nice girls, but Ellen, the tall one with nice teeth, was more interested in her sorority parties, and Kristin, the one with big boobs, was most interested in parties. I was interested in numbers, and I became interested in Michael.

My mother became very interested in Michael when she learned the professions of his parents. She wanted desperately to meet him. I wanted desperately for her to not. Mother wanted me to bring him home for Thanksgiving. She now had a somewhat decent

house paid for by her current friend. Michael and I had Thanksgiving dinner by ourselves at Cracker Barrel. It was turkey and dressing and the regular basic stuff. Michael paid for it in cash. He tipped the waitress almost as much as the meal cost.

“After all, she has to be away from her home and family to work on a holiday.”

I thought that was super generous, making me like him a little bit more. Enough so, that when he mentioned moving off campus into an apartment, I was all over it, but I needed to figure out if it was doable if I paid half.

“Absolutely, not,” he said. “My idea, my responsibility.”

He paid our rent in cash. He told me that it wasn't all that much, but he didn't tell me how much. A university friend who was studying abroad for the rest of the year sublet it to Michael with nice furniture, plants, and large windows that let in generous amounts of light on all sides. It had an expansive modern kitchen. I would have loved it more if I knew how to cook. It was almost too nice. I kept a tote in the closet. Too long living with my mother. I needed to be prepared if things went wrong.

We settled in, me going to class and studying, mostly. Him, going to class, I guess. I think he studied some, but I never saw too much of that. He was always there when I was, though. He puttered around the apartment, fixing odds and ends of things, and he cooked. He kept telling me that he was the oil that kept our relationship greased. I think he thought it was his cash that kept it mostly greased, but I didn't say much or complain.

We did go out to eat and take walks. He would grab cash out of the cookie jar, and off we would go. Oddly, I never opened the cookie jar and looked at how much was there, but there always appeared to be plenty. He would grab out a handful whenever he

needed to buy most things except for what he got online. He wanted to buy me jewelry and trinkets, but I didn't want that crap. That was my mother's way.

I didn't see or talk to my mother much. She called one day, totally out of the blue. I was on my way to take a final, so I cut her short, and said that I would call back later. I didn't. That didn't slow her down. She called me back the next day and said that her latest friend had a friend in Vegas. Her friend, John, go figure, told the Vegas guy I was this whiz with numbers, and he should meet me. He seemed really interested. I thought that since I hadn't met John, this made no sense. She said that she was sending me the contact number for the Vegas guy. He could offer me a great deal. Sure!

I began to consider the oily consistency of my relationship with Michael. It was if a thick coat was holding me motionless. It was too easy. We just slid along day by day. I felt as if I were spinning my wheels and making no progress. I would take steps forward but end up nowhere; nowhere important. This gnawed at me more and more as winter closed down around me. I would become impatient with myself that I wasn't a more patient and generous person. I did keep the contact number on my phone for the Vegas guy; maybe I felt a little guilty, but I kept it.

On a cold grey late January day, I felt more impatient and restless than normal. I paced around the apartment. I even tried to cook chili. Michael had been watching various teams play basketball all day. He stopped long enough to eat the chili. "Love it," he said. "You are going to learn to be the cook in the family." "What," I thought. "No way."

He finally fell asleep in the large recliner, remote in hand. I covered him with a blanket, kissed him softly on the forehead. I went back to our bedroom and pulled my

tote out of the closet. I wrapped myself in my warmest coat, emptied the cookie jar of all the cash, and walked out the door. I punched in the number of the Vegas guy as I walked down the hall. After all, I guess I am truly my mother's daughter.

Today, I realize that our relationship wasn't that bad. The oil wasn't smothering me in the way I thought at the time. I realize that it was a lubricant that smoothed my way. I didn't have to struggle but should have realized I was gliding. Gliding should have been a good thing. Another thing I realize now that it is too late, I realize that I never told Michael that I loved him.