

Is Love Like Oil?

Love and oil—two different things. I started to tell him I loved him. I meant it then, but not being certain, I didn't. I liked the way he rubbed the back of my neck when I was tired of studying. He noticed when I'd raise my head, take off my glasses, and rub my eyes until they felt raw and scratched. I ached to get up and stretch until my bones cracked, yet I felt this was a luxury I couldn't allow. Not in the middle of the spreadsheet I was completing for a business class. 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 blended with little shivers of delight. I loved that feeling.

When I meant to tell Michael I loved him, I meant 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 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 and slowly bubbling upward. Was I proud that he wanted to know where I was? Was he truly worried about me? Probably. Did I feel encased in a slick coating of a heavy greasy substance where my breath was trapped between my ribs? Yes.

It wasn't that I didn't feel close to him. It is simply 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.

"How is my princess?" I could smell the slight scent of peppermint on his breath covering a harsher distraction. With his forehead pressed against mine, I could see the slight dusting of whiskers on his chin. "You know, you are the smartest girl in all the land." He would grin a happy grin, and I could feel the swirl of air under my skirts. By the time I was five, he was gone.

My mom didn't think I was all that beautiful or smart. Well, smart later, when I managed the checks and bills that were due and overdue. The cash, she took care of. Her boyfriends were numerous and 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. Clunk, the beer bottles. Clink, on a higher note. Ah, wine. Thump, Vodka. Grey Goose or Absolut, I wasn't sure.

My number games impressed my teachers. They believed I had a future in finance. I could always hope. My mother screamed and yelled when college was mentioned. "Now, shit, how are we supposed to have money for that?" I assured her that with the help of my counselor, Mrs. Fredrickson, we had worked up a plan for scholarships, a coop job in the mathematics department, and maybe a small student loan. Mom only had to help with her signature on forms, but otherwise, I had it handled.

After she thought about it a bit, she decided that 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 of Botox and an eyelid lift that the latest man had paid for, she borrowed his car, and took me to visit the state school. It was close enough to home, but far enough away 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 an older guy with pressed slacks and a collared shirt. *Hmm, must be a student worker.* He wasn't, but he did try to help me find all the books I needed. 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 first 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 let me know that 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. *A family demotion*, I thought.

That fall, I stayed in the dorm with two roommates. Both nice girls, but Ellen, the tall one with nice straight teeth, was more interested in her sorority, and Kaitlin, the one

with big boobs, was most interested in parties. I was interested in numbers, and I became interested in Michael.

I became interested in Michael since he asked my opinion on everything. He acted as if it was wonderful that I was able to think about the economic state of the world as well as the state of our lives.

“You know, Athena, you were named after the Goddess of Wisdom.”

“Right,” I said. In my mind, Athena was the Goddess who sprang from Zeus’s head fully armed and proficient at the strategy of war. However, I allowed myself an inward smile because it was nice that he saw me in this special way that I didn’t.

My mother became 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 bit more. Enough so, that when he mentioned moving off campus into an apartment, and living together I gave it serious thought, but I didn’t want to be contained in a situation I couldn’t control. I wanted to be enthusiastic, but I needed to figure out if it was doable if I paid half. Could I afford to pay half? Did I want to pay half and have a commitment?

“I will pay half for six months,” I said.

“Absolutely, not,” he said. “My idea, my responsibility.” He tucked his head down and smiled. “You know my parents feel bad because they aren’t having to pay the tuition that they are paying for my brothers. They are sending cash as a guilt payment, I guess. Well, not cash, but a deposit to my checking account. I get it out in cash.”

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 when things went wrong.

We settled in, me going to class and studying, mostly. Him, going to class, or so he said.. He mentioned that he was an Industrial Arts major, but I don’t know. 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 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 ceramic cow cookie jar he had stashed on the kitchen counter. He called it the cash cow, and he would grab some bills and off we’d go. Oddly, I never opened the cookie jar and look 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. He stopped at a jewelry store when he saw

me looking at fancy gold bracelets. He saw bands of golden love. I saw easy to pawn gold. No, I mentally slapped myself. 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 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. Was it a thick coat trapping and 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 around me. I would become impatient with myself that I wasn't a more patient and generous person. I felt annoyed because Michael was so patient and generous. I did keep the contact number on my phone for the Vegas guy; maybe I felt a little guilty, but I kept it.

I tried to make myself to become a better roommate. I made a spreadsheet of apartment chores that I would do daily, weekly, and monthly. I would keep my part of the bargain.

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. I googled a recipe that sounded easy. We had tomatoes, so I chopped them up, the little red guts of them sliding around

the cutting board. We had ground beef, and I fried it with onions. The strong onion odor burned my eyes and lungs, but I kept chopping and stirring my eyes blurring and tears tracking down my cheeks.

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."

I could hear my mother say, "*Okay, Athena, now you are becoming a kitchen bitch.*"

"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, lots of big bills, wow! More than I thought there would be, and I walked out the door.

I punched in the number of the Vegas guy on my phone as I walked down the hall. Got an answer. Smooth well-greased voice telling me about opportunities to be mine upon my arrival to Sin City. Made plans for a flight to Vegas. He was to meet me with further details. Hmmm, after all, I guess I am truly my mother's daughter.

Today, I realize that mine and Michael's relationship wasn't that bad. The oily feeling 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 then, as I do now. The odds are not always in my favor. I should have realized I was gliding. Gliding should have been a good thing

Another thing I realize now that it is too late, in the still of the night when I am ragged with the effort of conning those who are willing to be conned at the tables and machines, I realize that I never told Michael I loved him. Those were the words that I should have used. Those are the words that are the essential oil.