

Being In Love Is For High Schoolers Or Middle Aged Divorcees

by Jennifer Donnell

It's the same path we always walk. Past the bakery, left at the art supply store, and up the hill. Today, I have a spring to my step, I'm in love. I give my love a pat on the shoulder and imagine we'll walk this same route when we're eighty, hand in hand. He looks especially strong today, in a fitted black exercise top, his short brown hair blowing off his forehead, hipster sunglasses shading his eyes. I drop my empty hand to his backside, in compliment. He fights off a smile, appreciating my blonde hair blowing in the wind. I grip my yoga mat as he holds the leash for our dog tighter. We can't hold hands today, as she's as big as an ox and pulls like one. I remind him to slow down, quoting the article I've been referencing for two weeks. It proved that men in love walk slower, while he's sprinting ahead like a jack rabbit.

But who am I kidding, we aren't in love. Being in love is for high schoolers or middle aged divorcees exploring their sexuality. Our love is real, sweaty, backwards, forwards, angry, trusting. We love as you only can after seeing someone at their best and worst- through stomach flu and work promotions, through babies and lay-offs. We love like our life depends on it because, based on the amount of debt we've accumulated, it probably does.

"Know what I was thinking?" I begin, ten minutes into the endorphins of exercise flooding my brain with feel good energy, "I want to only accept job offers that utilize my gifts. Why work somewhere that doesn't bring out the best of you, where you'll always be struggling and never inspired?"

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It's not really a question and he knows it. He scoffs, his endorphins obviously slower in arrival. "Great." he snarls back, good at being my best friend or my worst enemy, "Glad *you* have the luxury to find the perfect job that fulfills *you* on all levels."

I furrow my brow, another stress wrinkle in formation. I should name them after him. I wasn't anticipating his zinger and defend, "I didn't have a choice with that other job. It might have seemed like it was up to me, but I had to quit. It wasn't working out. You saw what I wrote. I couldn't stay at a job where there would always be problems. If I didn't quit, I probably would have been fired eventually."

"Then you can explain to the kids why they don't have any presents under the Christmas tree." he spits out, slowing down in his annoyance.

I try and reason with him, but he isn't having any of it. He repeats his statement about Christmas, as we imagine empty stockings and our children crying hysterically around a bare Christmas tree.

"You better apologize to the kids because you quitting your job is the reason they don't have presents." he continues, more doubtful than I am that it will all work out. I'm an optimist at the best and worst of times. He sounds so mean, thus I decided to fight fire with fire.

"I will apologize." I say with a sickly sweet cadence, "I'll say that 'I'm sorry' their dad gets laid off every two years and can't ever get a job which pays enough, so we can actually live well and have presents under the tree!"

If I was writing a story or dialogue, it would sound good but feels meaner coming from my lips. He boils like a kettle as his eyes dart left and right.

"I.... I'm.... going back home!" he exclaims, reacting to my words. He begins backing away from the direction we were walking, adding, "I can't take this, you."

Is he in love with me now? What about now?

Realizing I've pushed him too far I try and backtrack, "I'm sorry. I was just trying to teach you a lesson, as you were being mean too. Please don't go. We were having such a nice time...."

He's not convinced but begrudgingly continues on the walk, both of us now silent. We reach another hill and my sweater gets too hot. He holds the sleeve and helps me remove it, still silent. He walks one hundred yards ahead of me down the next hill, but I don't remind him that he's in love so he ought to walk slower.

Half a mile later I convince him he should apologize for starting the whole thing.

"I'm sorry." he says blandly, staring off in the distance at a camper van.

"Why are you apologizing to a camper van, what did you do to it?" I joke. I'm sure he rolls his eyes, but he can't help but smile as he looks at me and says a, slightly, more genuine apology.

"I'm sorry too..." I admit, "I was just talking to you casually. I didn't know it would upset you, wanting a better kind of job... but, please, don't ever walk off like that. That's the kind of guy I dated before I knew you and part of the reason I dumped them."

We walk another two miles. I lose my sweater and we can't find it when we retrace our steps. We go home and decorate the Christmas tree. It shines like something beautiful.

