

In Favor Of True Love Over Settling

Joyce O'Brien

Two years ago, married and with a young child, I fell in love with another man. Within a very short space of time I knew I had to leave my husband; the relationship with him had suddenly become intolerable. I also knew the love affair was about to come to an end. Things happened very quickly. I have never been more directly, precisely, absolutely in touch with my feelings and I acted on every one of them. Since, I have been trying to figure out what happened—but first let me tell you about my mother.

My mother and I were never really close. We liked each other, sort of had a basic understanding. I had been liking her better though since I joined Women's Liberation and she seemed to be responding to the liking. I was in a really bad state after fully executing the above mentioned instant upheaval. I was genuinely in despair but I also had this other, more complicated feeling of growing strength, first because I felt absolutely justified about everything I had done—I felt I did what I had to do; second, because I was free, I was starting all over again. Anyway, she called, my mother. I hadn't planned on telling her anything, or not much anyhow. This required some tact, budding friendship or not. More, I'm afraid, than I could muster up at that moment.

"Ma," I found myself saying, "men stink."

"What's the matter, Joyce?" she asked, kindly enough.

"Oh, I don't know," I said hesitating—my mind really too muddled to carry off any pretenses. "I left Paul," I said. "I fell in love with someone else and left Paul."

"Oh no, Joyce," she began. "Are you sure that's what you want. . .?"

"That's not all." I interrupted. "The someone else . . . he left me. I feel rotten, Ma. I really loved the guy." There was a silence.

"Well, Joyce," she said rather warmly, "you know sometimes these things just don't work out. I was very much in love with someone once and that didn't work out either."

"You were?" I said, actually rather shocked. I told her all the bad news—at once—and she's telling me she was in love once and she's not talking about my father. "With whom?" I asked, suddenly overwhelmed with curiosity by

the story of my mother's love affair.

Oh, it was a long time ago," she said. "I was 25. He was a lawyer, a brilliant, up and coming lawyer. I fell in love with him almost immediately."

"It sounds familiar," I said.

"We went together nearly five years."

"What happened?" I asked.

"I don't really know," she said. "He had a very sick mother, he never seemed quite ready . . . willing . . . to make the necessary moves."

"It lasted five years?"

"Yes, nearly."

"Did you sleep with him?" I asked, carried away with the openness of the conversation.

"Joyce, of course not," she said, reverting for a second to her middle-American Catholic tone. "Oh, Joyce, did you. . .?"

"Of course I did," I said, feeling rather confident that the change in sexual mores from her generation to mine was certainly a change for the better.

"Well, maybe that's why it didn't work out," she suddenly offered, beginning a familiar speech about how men don't respect women they can have too easily.

"Ma," I interrupted to remind her, "you didn't and I did and neither of us got the man."

"Yes, I guess that's true," she said thoughtfully. "You know, Joyce," she continued in the same thoughtful tone, "he never married, to this day he never married. I just couldn't wait for him any longer," she said, almost apologetically. "I was 30 years old, which was even harder to be then than it is now. I met your father; he was nice, ambitious. I didn't love him, it's true, but there was a future—I grew to love him."

Was my mother telling me she didn't love my father? She was in love once, it didn't seem possible, so she settled for my father. Was she admitting to me that she settled for my father? Wow!

You know, I don't know why I left my husband. I mean I know why I left, it's just that when I think about it, it doesn't seem to make sense. My marriage was not in bad shape. Well, I didn't think about it much, but had I, I never would have said we were headed for trouble. I do remember that disturbing conversation I had with Carol, though. God, it must have been three years ago now. "Why did you marry your husband?" she asked in the course of talking about something or other.

"Oh, I don't know," I said casually, "I was young, there

was a strong attraction, but if I had to do it over again things would certainly be different." I never understood what made me say that—for weeks I remained in disbelief that I really did say it. I had never verbalized that my marriage involved any sort of compromise before, much less that things could be done differently. Like my mother. Had she told anyone before what she told me?

But Paul and I were going along as we always had. If there was trouble brewing wouldn't I have known about it? Wouldn't he? You know, I left him painlessly. I felt nothing, really nothing—with the slight exception of a few brief moments when, with all his things packed, he moved toward the door and walked out. I responded to the physical act of his leaving. The presence of a body—now the absence of a body. You're a cold, empty, shallow person he told me. I couldn't sympathize, not even when I repeated it myself a few weeks later to my now departing lover. Was I in a daze for five years? No, my mother said it: "settling". She forced me to admit it. I was settling. If my mother had told me what she had at any other time I don't think I'd have understood. I think I might have felt sorry for her. I might have condescendingly felt badly that my mother was forced to settle. At the moment I am more than appreciative for that bit of truth—it allows me to look at my own settlings. My mother fell in love and, finding it impossible, moved toward settling. I came from settling, fell in love, and found it incredible that it was even possible for the brief time it was possible. I remember the sensation—all my old, long-forgotten desires swarming back to me, all my hopes and dreams and ideals about what relationships could encompass. Did I really stop believing in the possibility of love? I believed in it once, I remember.

Things seemed so hard when I was younger. They seem hard now, too, but I understand them better and that helps. All the pressures. I never said I felt pressured to date, but I did. I never said I felt pressured to marry but I did. Dating was just such a burden. My dating ratio was 50 to 1. For every one exciting escapade I had, I had to sit through 50 boring, smiling, lovely times. "Good night," I would say, "I had a lovely time," and run through the front door.

Dating boys who were at times hard to tolerate was one thing; feeling obliged to marry some of them because you went too far was something else. Sex was a *big* problem. Periodically I would get heavily entangled, as we used to call it, with some guy and then feel obliged to marry him. It's not that these guys were proposing, mind you, it's just that I felt obliged—it was probably my way of working off the guilt of the escapades, although I do remember some guys who felt I should feel obliged.

I would make up lists during these times of heavy entanglement. In one column—Reasons Why I Feel Obligated to Marry; in the other—Reasons Why I Feel I Have the Right to Live My Own Life. Once when I really felt trapped and it looked like the inevitable might come to pass, I planned a series of activities which I hoped might possibly keep me busy for the rest of my life. At least, I thought, I won't be bored. That marriage never came to pass, but my best friend wasn't so lucky. She wound up quitting school at 16 to marry the guy she went too far with.

There may not be many good things left to say about the "free love" era after men got through defining it, but it still remains a better alternative than enforced marriage. It's true I settled for Paul, but, somehow, at the time, it seemed like a lot less settling than I had been doing—and probably was. Did I believe that love was possible then, with all of that? I'm not sure now—did I stop believing it or just get tired? Either way, though, you stop fighting, stop struggling. I remember feeling I just wanted to get this love thing over with; I was anxious to get on with life.

So, in fact, I didn't leave Paul for another man, or rather just because of another man; I knew the love affair was over with before the separation was even proposed. I was settled with Paul. I left because I fell in love. Because somehow I got back in touch with what I really wanted. If love was possible, why not put up a fight to try and get it? It's powerful stuff, this love thing.

I wonder if I can really give the credit to my lover, though. True, he put me in touch with it, but he turned out not to be such a firm believer himself. He had the convictions, but lacked the courage. I should credit Women's Liberation.

My own consciousness had been changing in the movement over the last five years. It allowed me to look more honestly at my situation—my group did anyhow, so I could see clearly what I had and what I didn't have, what I wanted and what I didn't want. Clearly if a women's revolution is possible, why not love?

I connected when my mother acknowledged her compromise. To get back in touch with what you really want, first you have to admit you don't have it. The conflict which came from that admission now seemed less draining than the compromise. No, not just less draining—involving because you could go out and search for it. Suddenly it just made absolute sense that faced with the alternatives of fighting for what you really want, a fight you might lose or you might win, or settling for something you don't really want, a situation in which there can be no winning, it was a lot smarter to pick the fight.

It's been awhile now since I got back in touch with what I really want. And clearly knowing what you really want and trying to get it are two entirely separate dilemmas. I'm doing my share of settling. I want to remain alive long enough to continue the fight. I have to live my life *now*, and I want to do it in the best way possible with the most I can get from life. But I'm holding onto my dreams, too. I'm staying in touch with what I really want so I'll be sure to recognize it when it comes along. My settlings now are different, they're done with my full awareness, they're done always in comparison to how this measures up to my dreams. I keep my eye on the target though I might shuffle around it. You don't feel guilty about these settlings. You know they're a matter of survival.

I think my mother has trouble with that sometimes. She seems to put up with a lot more from my father at times than I calculate she has to. I wonder if she feels guilty for not having loved him and therefore tries to make up for it in these little ways. Well, maybe it's a way out idea; they've been married for a long time now. But it's an interesting

thought if not overly sentimental to think that someone so understands what a precious exchange love is, that if it were lacking, they would feel obliged to try very hard in other ways to make up for it.

I just had a thought. Marriages are breaking up like crazy these days. There was a certain sector of the movement at

one time that encouraged women to break the chains of that oppressive union because love between men and women was impossible. Wouldn't it be ironic if, among those women now leaving their marriages, it turned out to be because they now saw love as possible, not impossible, and they decided to go out after it?

Letter to a Lover When She Left Him

This morning on the phone I was still into apologizing for my own existence and needs as a human being. I told you "even if our whole relationship failed I want you to know you can still be proud of getting me to come back to Missouri." You said, startled, something to the effect of "huh? What happened to our relationship?" *You didn't even know what had happened in your own life!* You had to go, but said you really wanted to know what I was talking about. Perhaps if we had some chance of seeing each other on a regular basis instead of weekends every few months, I might think differently about trying to tell you what happened to *us* and that includes *you*. Right now I just feel like writing it for the *record* because the very same reasons which make it almost ludicrous that I should try to explain *anything* to *you*. You told me yourself that you are like a Scandinavian, i.e. unable to express your feelings, and also that the way you survived your mother was by ignoring her (Idid manage to tell you that I know well that you had to do that and that you must have paid a terrible price in order to function in terms of thereby being cut off from your feelings about women and the threat that they may or may not pose to you). And so how can I reach you if I try to explain? All the way home on the plane I heard you saying on the phone this morning that you were touched by my weeping on the way to the airport. When I think of that, sometimes I blame myself for not having tried harder to communicate with you when we were together, but then I remember that every time we parted I've said to myself "leave it there, stop breaking your heart over him" and *as soon as I've gone* you've suddenly started missing me. I made the mistake of being moved by that when I really fundamentally *resent* that kind of medieval love. (And

now can only recall in pain the time I told you that only once had I felt you knew you wanted me and I was there: five minutes before we left—"hit and run" I called it, bravely.) It also means that you can miss a convenient image of me, not a full person; that person who seems "out of control" to you whether in joy or in "trauma". Someday I wonder if you'll hear how and when you use that phrase "out of control". It reminds me of that (c)old use of the phrase "keeping one's cool". Sometimes I want to burst and say to you, "What the hell are you saving your feelings for, the next life?" Even your phrase "stay loved" surprised me when it turned out that it was your way of saying "I love you," the passive voice, and the imperative for me to do all the work! Where *are you*?

I'm especially horrified at what this weekend says about my continued vulnerability. One month ago I could tell you that you were the most liberated man I know, because you told me that your goal in life was to learn to love and be loved. And yet, here I was in the past few days going through incredible mental and physical gyrations apologizing to you for me, and to me for you. I am sick that I almost fell into the trap of calling myself neurotic, a bottomless pit of need for affection, ugly, unlovable, naggish, insecure, cry-baby, when essentially what I am is a person who had gone to meet her lover with the expectation and the need to be received as given: I wanted you, I realize now, to act like I felt and acted about you—thrilled to see you and to be with you, and, *yes!* wanting to make love every time we came to a beautiful place on the river. I remember going on a logic trip. "Why," I said to myself, "isn't he moved by where we are, by being able to share with me the joys of his childhood. I just can't see why any sane man could stand here with a beautiful and bright woman who loves him and not simply yearn to make love with her, as I do with him." Soon even my logic fell apart, and I no longer felt beautiful, or even bright, and thought that it wasn't you, but that *I* was the kind of person you were treating me *as if* I were. Either not visible, not worth

This letter was written in Sept. 1969. It was distributed as part of the women's liberation newsletter SPAZM (Berkeley, California), the only national newsletter of that period, and later circulated by other groups.