

Free Love

Allegra Hyde

By the time I was fifteen, I had fallen in love eight times, and things showed no sign of slowing down. “Leave the tall boys for the tall girls,” my grandnana says, but she knows I get attached to all kinds of people. Thick, thin, black, white, strong, feeble, obstreperous, prosperous, peckish, mustached, freckled, unbrowed, eye-patched...

“Love is grand,” Nana says. “Divorce is a hundred grand.”

But my parents taught me that love is like having to pee real bad. Or like expatriation from Zimbabwe when one is suspected of espionage, and possibly treason.

Sometimes it can't be helped.

Sunday has rolled in without asking anyone's permission. I'm languishing on my bedroom floor, drenched in the usual listlessness of a stranded *amorata*. Nana's in the kitchen; odds-on that she's got one hand in a mixing bowl, one eye towards my door. I can hear her rattling through cupboards, spitting out sayings like a wrinkled old almanac. “Some people are like blisters,” she says. “They only appear when the work is done.” There is a volley of throat clearing and expectant spoon tapping.

Nana speaks in the language of old wives—wives who've slipped themselves a little something, if you know what I mean. She gets that I like sayings I can bite, chew, and put in my pocket for later. And, if there wasn't an envelope stuffed with uncomfortable content leering at me from my bedroom dresser, I might act less like a blister, and more towards the sort of person Nana prefers: namely, someone who leaves her bedroom to help make carrot coleslaw and freeze homemade orange juice popsicles.

Earlier today, when Dr. Virginia “Call-Me-Gina” Eubanks, Ph.D., put down her notepad, smoothed her blouse, and remarked, “Ms.

Joy, I know you are unusual—I mean I know your situation is unusual,” I assumed she was referencing my particular knowledge and concern for the neo-liberal indigenous movement mobilizing in Ecuador. Then again, she may have got wind of my fondness for twig tea and salted clover. There's even a chance she was alluding to my mother, who took an acid trip three months ago and hasn't come back, or to my father, whose alarmingly progressive leadership of the Free Oaks Commune caught the attention of the Federal Government, or to my own grimly disorienting reality as an uprooted flower child sent to live with a woman who owns four types of muffin pan and tablecloths for every holiday.

But I couldn't tell from the tone of her voice.

Sixty-four days ago, I was plucked from Free Oaks by two aunts and one lawyer, all buzzing with compassion and heroism.

“She can't live in that madhouse,” said the aunts. “Feds are gonna shut the whole place down any minute. It's a regular doped-up circus freak show.”

“It's 1983,” said the lawyer. “No one's got patience for that hippie business anymore.”

Now, I've grown up thinking I was a revolution and a half, that's why I went along with the whole thing. Father always told us that existential alignment is living inside out and upside down, and I was hard pressed to come up with anything more inside out than moving from Free Oaks back onto the grid.

“It's for the best,” the aunts promised, as I sat pinned between them in a station wagon, trundling across the country. “We just want you to have a stable home life, a little structure, some family support.”

They dropped me off at Nana's.

It was early August then, and as I stood blinking in my aunts' dusty wake, I felt fear swirling up in my stomach like a bad lunch. Nana stood beside me, gripping my rucksack in one hand. She was certainly on the sturdy side, with thick eyebrows, a pile of gray hair, and sleeves rolled up past her elbows. Help a relative in need and

they will always remember you,” she said, watching my aunts drive off down the road, “the next time they are in need.”

To be honest I wasn’t sure if she was talking to me or to herself. That was the first time I’d met Nana. My mother had never offered much in the way of ancestral characterization, except to say that her parents had been real style-cramping squares. This was more or less confirmed when Nana turned to me, sniffed the air, and said I better make a beeline for the shower. Not being one to abandon my principles, I told her that I would not be showering. Everyone at Free Oaks felt best when scented by pine needles and damp earth.

Nana raised one large eyebrow.

I didn’t want to start off with sore feelings, so I told her I would go swimming later.

“You know,” said Nana, as she offered quick salute to the neighbors lurking nearby with watering cans and dogs. “You’re gonna have to make some changes. We don’t run loose around here; we wash our hands before dinner.”

“You and who?” I asked, looking down at the fingernails I kept dirty on principle.

“Us,” she said, wrapping me snugly in her rules, and leading me inside.

People love me. They drag their chairs across the school cafeteria for a better view. I am ten steps west of anything my new friends think they understand, and all the more fascinating because of it.

“Your name is Almond Joy?” they say, their faces incredulous, bamboozled, star-struck. “Like the candy bar?”

“Exactly like,” I reply. “It’s Positive Occupation of Corporate Lingual Hegemony.”

“That is Unbelievable. Phenomenal. Magnificent. But—”

“But what?”

“What is a someone like you doing in place like Winchester?”

“Someone like me?” I can be a legendary tease.

“We thought you moved here from some sort of hippie commune.” *Hippie* is pronounced delicately, as if the word is anatomical or unstable.

“I suppose you could call it that,” I say.

“So you grew your own food?”

“Yes.”

“And you shared everything?”

“Yes.”

“And you lived in a yurt, and walked around barefoot, and never went to real school, but instead learned from an extended family of bohemians and artists and sexologists and burnt-out Berkeley professors; and it was all about harmony and life-flow, about nondualistic empathic communion and synergistic attunement; and no one took showers or told you when to go to bed; and everyone felt that earth was one great ship and that you were all sailing through a beautiful and mysterious universe?”

“Yes, more or less like that,” I reply brightly. “That, and child neglect, relative poverty, and television deprivation.”

“It just seems rather atypical,” said Gina, Ph.D., as we sat in her office, “that someone with test scores as high as yours would have such a difficult time getting settled.”

“I know!” I said, as if I too were surprised by this fact.

She leaned forward, and I leaned in as well, recognizing that at this very moment, Gina was about to share her greatest secret.

“You have to understand,” she explained. “It is important to be yourself, but not too much yourself.”

I nodded, even though this psychologist’s greatest secret was nothing to boast about. At Free Oaks, I perched in the laps of transient poets and tugged at the robes of bilingual *maharishi*, collecting nuggets of enlightenment like stones. My head has been stuffed full of meanings-of-life as long as I could remember.

Gina wasn’t done, though. “Think of it this way,” she said, sitting back in her chair and crossing one leg over the other. “Daisies grow in Winchester, but orchids don’t.”

She smiled, pleased with her metaphor. I smiled too, leaning back in my own chair and crossing one leg over the other. I had noticed there were a lot of daisies.

“Do you have any hobbies, Almond?” she continued, as smoothly as a car on an interstate highway, bound assuredly for that shimmering other-side. “Anything you like to do in your spare time?”

Nana rustles outside my door. “You gonna have something for me to mail tomorrow, Almond?” she says.

I tell her my letter is in the works, and listen for the fading shuffle of feet. She stays put. The woman could smell a fib from a mountaintop. I glance at the envelope—untouched—and consider inviting her inside.

But Nana isn’t finished. “There’s someone on the phone for you,” she says, as if this happens all the time.

I shoot out of my room, skid down the hallway, and lunge for the telephone, pressing the receiver to my ear.

“Almond?” says a voice, and for a moment I think it’s my father. “Almond Joy? This is Clark Butler. We have Home Economics together on Thursdays.”

Clark is the kind of boy who flosses his teeth everyday, writes prompt thank-you notes, and reads books by Dickens because he believes they will be good for him.

“Miss Almond Joy,” he says, with the voice of a budding professional, “I’m calling because I’d like to take this opportunity to ask if I could take you out sometime. I would like to propose this Friday at six o’clock.”

I’m already swooning over his interest in timetables and protocol. He’s the most inside-out prospect to come along yet.

“Almond? Are you still on the line?”

I envision our date: *The two of us are wedged in a booth. He orders a chocolate malt, and I ask for a strawberry-vanilla-coffee combination, which he finds attractively bold. He says that his father is an investment banker, that they go fishing together every summer and his mother packs them each a bacon ham sandwich (his favorite) and the two of them are planning on selling their boat to buy a bigger one. He tells me that he loves Civil War history, roots for the Dodgers and that his parents’ twentieth anniversary is next week. They go*

out to eat every year. Sometimes they come home from the restaurant as late as eleven o’clock at night.

I’ll slouch in my seat back, sipping my milkshake, drugged by his description of a two-parent, housebound breeding. When his words run dry, I suck my straw loudly, and say something—some idea that goes down easy—like, I think I may have lived in Cairo in a past life. Or, have you ever wondered about the shape of the universe, that maybe it’s really like a giant hand and we’re all just roaming fingers?

He’ll look at me, his eyes wide.

I talk about the contours of acorn shells, describe the many uses for goldenseal and amaranth. My voice sounds like music. He forgets what it’s like to be afraid.

You can help me open my mind, he says.

Open your mind too far and your brain falls out, I’ll reply, even though the words are Nana’s and not my own. I’ll feel sick. I’ll have finished my milkshake too fast.

Standing in the kitchen, I tug the phone cord so that it stretches around my body in an elastic embrace. It’s been over two months since I moved to Winchester, but every day after school I flutter around the house like a trapped bat, which Nana says gives her the willies.

“Almond...” Clark’s voice squeaks slightly. “You still there?”

Outside the house I’ll be loose; I’ll be lost. There’s so much love sloshing around inside me, and no way to keep it all in. No way to plug up old leaks.

“Next Friday?” I say, trying to sound weary, like the women I’ve started watching on TV. “Oh geez, sorry, Clark, I’ve got some stuff then.”

I bury the receiver and uncoil the cord. Then I wish he’d call back so that I could pretend I’d been kidding.

He doesn’t. I scoot to the living room and give Nana’s knitting needles a go. I’ve got some experience in free-form macramé, and she’s got enough yarn to make an iceberg cozy. As it turns out, though, I’ve only got enough patience in me to keep an ice cube warm.

“Jeanette never got the hang of a purl stitch either.” Nana has arrived in the living room with a feather duster and an eye towards the photo frames spread along the mantel. My mother, I am reminded, had a different name before Buttercup. Nana picks up a photo and I put down my needles. We look at the portrait of a girl, about my age, with a headband and bright eyes.

“Never run after a bus or a man,” Nana says. “There’ll always be another.”

Other faces are on the mantel as well—a man, beardless and smiling, in a military jacket with striped cuffs, and a husband and wife standing solemn, frozen side by side.

“That Clark fellow seemed nice on the phone,” Nana suddenly seems to remember.

“He was on the dull side,” I tell her. “All establishment and no bag.”

Nana resumes dusting the photo of a daughter she hasn’t seen since ’67. For such an efficient woman, she wipes the frame slowly. I can tell we are both wondering the same thing: wondering whether my mother would still be wearing cardigans if she hadn’t met my father, whether she would have been the kind of woman who went to PTA meetings and made grocery lists and remembered birthdays, whether she would have allowed her daughter to wander freely in the muddy cacophony of a music festival with the only stipulation being that she catch the van by morning.

We wonder if meeting my father made her more happy or less happy.

There’s more yarn under the coffee table, Nana tells me. I should pull some out if I want to keep-on-keeping-on with my knitting. She’s got more dusting to do.

I was made in a psychedelic rainstorm, in an eruption of cosmic synergy, in the warm updraft of the Summer of Love—at least, that’s how my mother explained it when I was six.

“It was in a field,” she said, exhaling a plume of smoke so that a thick, sweet smell filled every crevasse and eddy of our yurt. My

mother patted my head, absent-mindedly handing me her lighter to play with. “It was a field of dandelions.”

“Baby, you are all mixed up.” My father was sprawled beside her, braiding a tendril of his hair. “It was the night after the rally. In the Blue Room. Remember?”

“Or was it the beach?” They grabbed one another’s hands. “In the moonlight—”

They kept talking and remembering and not remembering and putting their hands on one another’s faces.

I wandered off through the commune. A little girl in a dirty dress, looking for someone to take me in their lap, or to play guitar—but mostly for the Berkeley professors, who might give me something their minds were tired of holding.

Gina wasn’t the kind of therapist who liked to roll with the unresolved. “Almond, would you mind telling me more about your father?” she said, as if Freud had snuck into the office and whispered something in her ear. I recited the standard profile. Raised Catholic. Left home at eighteen. Traveled through India. Became successively infatuated by the teachings of Hare Krishna, Bhagavad-Gita, and B. F. Skinner. Convinced he could revolutionize society by starting his own. Staked claim to an abandoned farm in California with eight initial followers, including my mother. A brilliant orator. Lanky, blonde, roguishly unshaven. Remarkably charismatic.

“Okay,” she said, “but what about *your* relationship with him specifically?”

I wanted to like Gina. She complimented my earrings when we first met, and seemed to know what she was doing. But she was all about accuracy and operandi and sharpened pencils. She’d never lived like I had: never woken up in the warm vacuum of a day without edges, never slept in the quivering space of an unfulfilled promise.

Let love fill you up, my father used to say in amused exasperation when I shook him out of his meditation to ask if anyone was fixing a meal that night. *Learn to give away everything and want nothing in return. That’s the greatest gift of all.*

I would look down at my empty belly, put my hands in empty pockets.

He would always keep talking, addressing the other revolutionaries as they gathered around, intrigued and impressed by the out-loud ideals of a courageous new counterculture.

Be a sponge. Soak up stories, he'd say. Look at the family we have here. Look at all the fathers and mothers and brothers and sisters we have. Be fulfilled by each other, by the energy, the vibrations—

“You want to know about my father?” I said to Gina, taking each syllable like a steep step. “He loved a lot of people.”

She nodded, urging me on. “And what about *you*?”

“What about me?” I echoed.

Gina wanted to hear about the bodies that slipped in and out of Free Oaks, that hovered in my embrace before pressing on. She wanted me to tell her about the kisses misplaced in the slow chaos of an unregulated life.

But even in the space of my own memories, I felt forgotten.

“Well Gina,” I finally declared, “to me, love is having nothing and wanting nothing. That’s the greatest gift of all.”

“When you gonna mail that letter, Almond?” Nana says, plunging her hands into the kitchen sink suds to do dishes.

It’s getting done, I tell her.

She pins down a baking pan, scrubbing the thing as if it might bite back.

I’m still trying to feel out the rhythms of a place with cupboards and coasters. I finger Nana’s highly breakable fine china. The teacups and the plates stand at attention, as if testifying on behalf of an antique marriage.

“Do you miss Gramps?” I ask.

She says she’s gotten used to missing him, and knocks off a catalogue of sayings about moving on, things changing, and making the best of a tough situation. I realize she’s got an inventory for a reason. As she speaks, she looks stronger, as if losing someone you care about doesn’t have to mean losing yourself as well.

I tell her I’ve been considering falling in love again.

She tells me the dishes aren’t drying themselves.

When I last saw my mother, she’d kicked back a whole lot of something—we weren’t sure what—and had been tripping for three days straight.

No one paid much attention, though. My father had two fresh flower children to liberate from uptight understandings of sexual relations, and everyone else was wiggled out over the Fed’s threats to crash Free Oaks.

“I’ve gotta split for a while,” I told my mother, who lay in a dark corner of our yurt, swaddled in blankets. “Least until all blows over. I’m getting put up with some relatives.”

She did not respond, but only clenched and unclenched her pendants and her beads, peering into me like I was a window.

“Mum, do you hear—”

She grabbed my wrist, pulling me close. “It’s better to be a circle than a square,” she said, half-whispering, half-singing in my ear. “Don’t you know? Are you listening?”

She burped and started giggling, her laughter turning into gasps that became sobs. “I—than—can’t—”

I held her hand and told her that she was my oracle, that I was listening. I was always trying so hard to listen.

She moaned, spit dribbling down her chin, her mind going limp again.

Outside the yurt, my aunts honked from their station wagon. I tucked my mother under another quilt and grabbed my rucksack, walking slowly towards the car in case she called me back. In case anyone called me back. All I heard though was the irked strain of a sitar, and the faint warble of displaced giggles, somewhere across the commune.

Gina ended our session by saying some things about attending school regularly, wearing a bra, and scheduling our next session.

I wanted to show her that I was really trying, that I was more than the damaged result of an adult preoccupation with self-indulgence, so I paused in the doorway to her office before leaving. “In the future,” I said, standing up straight and announcing my vowels, “I hope to be a lawyer, or possibly a news anchor.”

I wasn’t sure if this was my real hope, but I liked the taste of these ideas on my tongue. I wondered what a pantsuit would feel like, if it would wear like armor or a disguise. Or if it would feel like treason.

At any rate, Gina seemed to find my announcement compelling. She told me I was making some real progress. She was looking forward to seeing me again.

In my bedroom, I read my name written across the envelope sent by my father. His letter is scratched in the margins of a folded flyer for Pascal’s Lagoon Monkeys, in the small sharp letters of a man who would colonize the moon if you gave him time.

Almond, it begins, remember the Family’s collective freedom-visualization? It was a ship with no anchor. We have realized that dream. We are all in a houseboat off the coast of Mexico. The Man’s intrusion onto the farm may have been for the better. We Have Never Been This Free. Don’t let them close your mind. Return to us! Your Mother has been mentioning you. Love, Dad.

It takes twelve sheets of paper and three broken pencils to respond, but in the end, all I manage to write is, *I can’t*, even though I can, and even though I miss it all terribly.

My father will know I am lying. They all will. I could rejoin the Free Oaks Family, and live in a houseboat, and sail around the world. The idea sounds vibrantly imprecise, gloriously undeveloped. My only hope is that he understands how hard it was for me to have love slip through my fingers like water; that he’ll see that I’m trying to live inside out and upside down. All I can do is seal the letter before my mind changes.

I’m all wound up again. I read the beginning of five novels I’ve been saving, making myself quit after the first page, even though each book is begging me to continue. I think about Clark, about

my father, about all the times I’ll have to say no, and decide that it’s penance. Then I decide it’s practice.

When I was ten, we had a bonfire. It was fifteen feet tall, and glowed in the night like a hot head of hair.

“You can study how combustion precipitates thermal equilibrium as result of its inherent differential symmetry,” the professors told me, before collapsing into giggles.

Salvador toasted crackers on a flat rock, Jack coaxed drumbeats from an upside-down bowl, Clover sang a song about morning glories, and everyone stood a little too close to the fire. We jumped back when its flames lashed towards us; we let the ash sink into our hair and settle on our pores.

Then some of Sal’s crackers slipped into the fire, charring instantly. My father just laughed, and tossed in an apple he’d been chewing. Soon, everyone was whooping, emptying their hands and pockets. Letters, dollars, bracelets, pills, pictures, all leapt into the flames like willing victims of a sacrifice. Jack beat harder on his drums, keeping pace until someone threw them in, too.

“Get the books,” someone said.

“Burn the past,” said another.

“A fresh start, man! A new day.”

I watched as anthologies, encyclopedias, poems—the guts of our tiny commune library—fluttered and dove into the fire.

“I wrote that one,” said a professor, as his book sizzled and burned.

Clover and Sal were dancing.

“Isn’t it marvelous, Almond? It’s all happening!” exclaimed my mother, tearing off her clothes to add them as well.

“Don’t look so nervous, little lady,” my father teased. “We won’t throw you in too.”

I am sixteen now, and I’ve been heartbroken enough to know love isn’t easy. Thick, thin, black, white, strong, feeble, obstreperous, prosperous, peckish, mustached, freckled, eye-patched love. It’s all hard.

All kinds of love.

“There’s more than one fish swimming in the sea,” Nana says on cue, but I know now that fish aren’t the only thing swimming around.

“If you were a sea creature what would you be?” I ask that night at dinner. “A hermit crab? A manta ray? Maybe a beluga whale?”

It is a silly question, but she answers seriously.

“A sea cucumber,” she says. “They are the least exciting.”

Nana wants me to finish my soup. It’s the alphabet kind. It will make me feel better.

I dangle my spoon in the broth, watching pasta letters bob and sink in a sea of language. Several of Roosevelt’s New Deal agencies establish themselves, then dissipate. Otherwise, the soup’s messages are spelled out in words I can’t understand.

“You would make a good echinoderm,” I say finally. Then I inform Nana of my plans to clean my room later that night. She seems pleased, and offers to vacuum, once the floor is clear. I tell her I’ve also been considering an outing tomorrow afternoon, perhaps to the local supermarket or gas station.

I tell her I’ve come up with my own aphorism. She lifts one large eyebrow expectantly.

“*There’s no such thing as free love.* Get it? Like economics—free lunch.”

She gets it, or at least she puts down her soup spoon, pats my head, and tells me to always remember that I am something pretty special.

But I still feel strung out, loose, like a fish on land, or a girl on the moon, or flower no one recognizes, taking root in an unexpected place. ☾