

HALLOWEEN

My grandmother Jan had fucked-up ideas about love. This was something anyone who had spent about five minutes with her understood. She had been married three times—once to my grandfather and twice to a guy named David who I remember as a quiet gray-bearded man with a motorcycle, who had also broken into her duplex and set fire to the wicker patio furniture that she'd always kept in her sunroom. When I asked if she'd been afraid of him, she shrugged. "Sure. Sometimes." In her mind, love was an undertaking that required constant vigilance and bravery, and when she spoke about her relationships, I often thought of a woman I had seen on YouTube trying to explain why she had been raising the tiger cub that eventually mauled her. "We loved each other," the woman said. "I don't expect anyone to understand."

But when it came to Erika, the girl who had recently broken my heart, after what was admittedly just one relatively chaste summer together, Jan was my ideal audience: sympathetic, almost always avail-

able, and the only person in my life who thought that getting back together with Erika was both advisable and likely to happen.

“You’re beautiful,” she would say as if this settled the matter. “Look at you! This girl is obviously having cold feet. Maybe she’s just not ready to be gay.”

The logical part of my brain thought the more likely explanation was that Erika had only gotten together with me in the first place out of boredom and convenience. We had spent the summer working together at a frozen yogurt shop called Yotopia! and now that FSU was back for the fall semester, it embarrassed her to be with a high school student. Sometimes, though, in the midst of one of Jan’s musings, I could almost convince myself that there had been a misunderstanding and that if I could just show Erika I was a mature and attractive person, she would, if not see that she had made a mistake, at least consider making out with me in secret.

“When it comes to love,” Jan said, “you shouldn’t have regrets. I have regrets, and I can tell you it sucks. I never should have divorced your grandfather.”

It was a Saturday afternoon and we were walking along a paved path through a leafy park on the east side of town. During the week, it was mostly used by dog walkers and runners, but now the playgrounds were crowded with little kids, and under one of the covered pavilions a family of loud, happy people was having a birthday cookout for someone named Bianca. Jan walked very fast and we were both a little out of breath. She had told me this story many times. My grandfather was a decent and hardworking man who, after years of Jan threatening divorce every time he drank too much or came home late from work, had finally called her bluff. As a result, her life had been lonely and difficult for the past forty years.

“If you have a chance to set things right,” she said solemnly. “The least you can do is try.”

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