

LOVE, OR SOMETHING

by Patrick Spiker

I met Regan Cox on a Tuesday. She poked me in the middle of my back three times and when I cried out, she said I sounded like a doorbell. She imitated me—a squeal far louder than my tiny yip—and then, when I turned to walk away, she grabbed my wrist.

“I’m Regan. It’s pronounced kinda like ray gun but it isn’t spelled like that. There’s no ‘a,’ so it looks like I should be Reegan but I’m not.”

She was a tiny thing with long brown hair, dressed in flip-flops and jean shorts and a blue shirt whose collar looked like it had barely survived an ambush by a grizzly. Her braces were pink. She kept scratching at a line of zits across her chin.

We were standing at the back of a Maverik. While this scrawny child enlightened me on the history and pronunciation of her name, I side-eyed the fountain drinks and told myself that I didn’t need to get the regular Coke, that diet was just as good.

“Do you poke everyone you meet?”

“Nah, but I do when I need their help. You’re pretty.”

“Thanks.” I was in my boyfriend’s baggy gym shorts and my stained college shirt. I hadn’t bothered with makeup and my hair was everywhere. I couldn’t help but smile a little: so

young and already practicing the art of buttering a person up.

“Is that your natural hair color?” she asked.

“It is. What do you want help with?”

“*Will* you help me, though?”

“I asked you first.”

“Fine. I need you to buy cigarettes.”

“Excuse me?”

She rolled her eyes. “They’re for my mom. Obviously. Do I look old enough to smoke?”

“You look like you’re seven, so no.”

“I am *ten*. I’ve been ten for like three months almost.”

“My apologies. And no.”

“No what?”

“I am not buying you cigarettes. Your mom wants them, she can come in and get them herself.”

I didn’t know then that her mom, Emily, was waiting out at the farthest pump, leaning against her rusted Bronco and swigging beer from a Sprite bottle. I didn’t know that not quite an hour ago, she’d fled her boyfriend’s house after he threatened to strangle Regan with his belt if Emily didn’t agree to move in with him. I never did find out if Regan had been near enough to hear that threat. I found out later that several other people at the gas station remembered seeing bruises on her mom’s arms, scratches across her cheek, and that was enough to make *my* stomach shrivel. So it’s odd to look back and realize that when I stared down at Regan, her insides must have been so twisted it was a wonder she could speak at all.

“She doesn’t like crowds.” The girl bit her lip and glanced behind her, as if she might

have grown enough in the last forty seconds to see over the shelves.

“Well, good. She doesn’t need any anyway. Smoking’s terrible for you. Little life lesson.”

“You don’t have kids, do you?”

“Do I look old enough to have kids?”

“My mom was sixteen when she had me. You look older than that, so...yeah. Actually.”

“What does me not having kids have to do with anything?”

“Because you think I *don’t* know that smoking kills people. Like, hello, I *do* go to school.”

Something else I didn’t know then: sitting in the Bronco’s backseat, strapped in, was a blue stuffed bunny with its left ear torn off and a chocolate stain down its chest like a tie. Regan’s mom had gone back into her boyfriend’s house to retrieve it for her daughter—went back in *after* he had threatened the girl, probably after delivering most of those bruises and scratches. I’ve never been quite sure what that meant, whether Emily Cox was the kind of horrible mother whose love arrived in spurts, or just a horrible mother who was occasionally a little less horrible.

“Well, maybe you’ll convince your mom of that one day,” I said.

She raised her eyebrows and I swear I’ve never had a kid break me out in goosebumps like that before or since.

“I might lose my sanity before that, though.”

“Yeah, well, I’m still not helping you.”

Perhaps if I’d known that Regan was going to run out to her mom and endure a profane lecture, I’d have said something more meaningful as my last words. If I had known that Emily would drive them out of the lot and hit seventy long before the speed limit became forty-five, I

might have delayed Regan a bit longer, maybe asked about her summer, or if she wanted me to pour a Coke for her. I wish I had. Maybe even just asking her last name would have kept her there long enough to let the semi get all the way past the blind curve instead of meeting Emily's skidding Bronco head-on.

Is it possible to love someone you only knew for the span of a minute? I can't say. All I know is that when I drove up to that scene and saw Regan's pink shirt sprawled on the blacktop, her mom's limp body dangling out a door that had literally disappeared—the rest of Bronco now just a scribble of metal—I screamed. I gave Regan CPR even though her head was the wrong shape, and when I dream about it, she usually opens her eyes and tells me something sweet, like how I'm a lot nicer than my face looks. I can never sleep afterward. I've given up trying. I just head out to the living room and study my pale reflection in the window until daylight erases me.

That might not be love, but it's something.