

Michelle Cacciatore

“A Secondhand Emotion”

If you love him, then you don't know what love is,”my best friend Nicole snapped at me at our annual friend's Christmas party. “If you can love someone who's put you through what he has, been so irresponsible with your feelings, and actually agree to see him again, then you don't know what love is.” Offended to the core, I stormed out, got in my car, and drove home.

I don't blame them for hating him. “Them” meaning my close friends and family, and “him” of course, my first boyfriend, Larry. He was a guy who excelled at being a jerk.

Nicole apologized for her outburst. She explained she didn't mean to be so harsh, but that it had been hard for her to see me through the years get hurt by him over and over. She's had a front row seat to all my crying fits and his disastrous visits to New York (where I foolishly agreed to see him). She even consoled me after a nasty and unprovoked e-mail written to me in the spring following his joining the Air Force.

But, even though the fight itself with her was over, I couldn't help but having her words haunt me everywhere I went. What if she was right? What if after all the relationships and all the things I thought I've been through, I didn't actually know what love was?

Do any of us really?

About two weeks before the Christmas party where this happened, I tiredly took my work shoes off and plopped on my bed after waitressing for eight hours. I was just about to take a bite of my perfectly made turkey sandwich when a screen name popped on my screen that always made my heart beat a little bit faster. “Are you there, Michelle?” he said, after months of silence. After a few seconds of it all registering I wrote a hesitantly “yeah.”

There in that little instant message box was what it must look like when all the planets align. Larry poured his heart out, and for the first time in a really long time, I was speechless. “The military really breaks you down mentally,” he explained. “I've had nothing but time to think here, and I've done a lot of growing in these past few months.” He then proceeded to say he thought I was the love of his life. He then called me to tearfully apologize for being the way he's been over the years. He apologized for rarely wishing me happy birthday, for being a jerk when he visited, and even admitted to his self-awareness of his difficulties with commitment.

He also told me he was going to be in New York for New Year's Eve, and as you might have guessed, wanted to see me. Just when I thought it couldn't get any heavier or more shocking, he finally said, “When I'm done here I want to move back to New York, and I want to get back together, for good.”

At first, I was tough. I told him as graciously but as sternly as I could, that I had no desire to see him again. Of course, after two weeks of emotional monologues on his behalf and forced trips down memory lane, I was starting to soften up a bit. We began occasionally chatting, texting romantic nothings when we were drunk in our respective cities, and I found myself starting to once again, be charmed by my very first boyfriend. Some might say it was the comfort of the familiarity that was roping me back in, but me? I'd say it was love. The kind of love that is so relentless and consuming that you simply can't shake it no matter how many years have gone by, or how

much the other person doesn't deserve your affection. Despite all warnings and common sense, I had agreed to meet Larry on New Year's Eve.

It was 11 a.m. and I was lying in bed the morning of the 31st. I had my nails freshly polished, my new dress hanging on my closet door, and I thought I'd be more excited about the night, but I wasn't. The truth was, it was different meeting him now than it had been years before. I had dreamt for Larry to say the things he had been saying, and feel the way he was feeling, but for some reason, it wasn't as appealing. I mean, I have a life planned for myself now. I'm almost a college graduate, I have an apartment to move into, and a career in New York I am ready to pursue. Am I willing to throw all away for love?

If I decided to accept his sentiments as true, what am I supposed to do then? Become a military wife and follow him around for however long he serves? I started to see the future I had so carefully planned and worked hard for slip away. Suddenly, love seemed to require a lot more sacrifice than I had anticipated. Nevertheless, I got ready and headed downtown to meet the guy from my past.

Even through the snow flurries, a block away I could make him out in the distance. He was standing there anxiously, freezing, and prepared. His wispy blonde hair was covered in snow, and his brown scarf hardly looked like it was keeping him warm. I knew he was going to be on his best behavior that night, and I also knew he probably anticipated me eating out of the palm of his hand by midnight. I went to cross Second Avenue, and all of a sudden something stopped me. What the hell I was doing? I blew off my best friends to meet this loser who has done nothing but deceive me, hurt me, abandon me, and control me. It's bad enough that I have blown it with a small handful of good men because I was still emotionally attached but now I was sacrificing my friends and my self-respect?

Before I could really feel my blood start to boil, my legs turned the corner. At first I was walking fast, then I started jogging, and before I knew it I was running. I was running in a dress and five inch heels all the way to midtown. It was almost as if something else had taken control of me, and there was no way I was going to head back in his direction. My phone kept buzzing with his concerned texts "Where are you?" and "Can you see me out here?" but I just turned it off. I couldn't feel my hands or legs anymore because I was so cold and my adrenaline was pumping.

I took the Number One train all the way to my best friend's apartment, where I should've been all along. When she opened the door to see me, I didn't have to say anything. She hugged me tightly, and I cried. I cried because I knew it was finally over, and after years of trying to let go, I was done. I stood Larry up on New Year's Eve.

Throughout the last few days of his trip here, the calls and texts were non-stop. Finally, the morning he was supposed to board his plane back West, I sent him one simple message:

Maybe Nicole is right, Larry. Maybe I don't know what love is. But if this is love, this thing between you and me, then I think I'd prefer to live without it.