

Boyfriend of the Year

“How is it,” Ashton thought, “she always does this to me?”

Every time, every visit she did it, and every time, every visit he let her. And enjoyed it.

The “it” and the “this,” as one might surmise if one discovered that Ashton was a healthy, red-blooded (what the hell does that even mean?) American (and why does “American” always follow it -- do Russians have blue blood and French green?) boy of twenty-one (was Ashton still a boy even?) was sex. Carissa always did it, and he always let her. And things were good. Or at least routine.

Ashton and Carissa had dated seriously for almost two years and had contemplated a future together for about one year and nine months of those almost two years. Well, that wasn't entirely accurate. Carissa had contemplated a life for her and Ashton -- one filled with children and dogs and mortgages and in-laws coming over for Fourth of July picnics and the exchanging of Christmas gifts and the shooting off of New Years Eve fireworks, and Ashton had given it a passing thought (career drudgery, household upkeep, leavened and made somewhat palatable by thrice weekly sex -- which would eventually dip to twice, and then to once a week and then to -- well, he hated to think about that. No thanks, indeed!) This theory of diminishing sexual returns, at least in the marriages of his parents and their friends, held that over the course of time that the physical communion of the two lovers, which seemed so spontaneous for the first few years (before children, anyway), would dwindle to special occasion screwing only (birthdays, anniversaries, Halloween -- masks included if he had his way).

Their visits (one weekend, he would take the seven hour trip from Creighton University, deep in the heartland to Northwestern; then, the next weekend, Carissa would return the favor

and make the trek from Evanston, Illinois, to Omaha, Nebraska,) had settled into a not unpleasant routine (if one were feeling slightly less charitable, one could have called it a rut). There was always the Opening Day sex, within half an hour of arrival like clockwork; dinner and a movie followed; and then back to the apartment, where they (Carissa mostly) talked until the early morning hours. Ashton tried with varying levels of success to keep himself roused, so that later (how much later depended on how talkative Carissa was) he could become aroused for the lascivious pleasures awaiting.

Saturdays meant sleeping in, holding each other (Carissa doing most of the clinging), and then a little wake up sex (Ashton was fully involved with that). Lunch downtown (Prairie Moon -- Evanston; Petrow's -- Omaha), browsing some of the little hippie arts shops (Ashton, a business major -- BUSINESS! -- feigning interest), and then back to the apartment to lounge around and cuddle and watch whichever sitcom was marathoning on TVLand or Comedy Central. Of course, after a while, being twenty-one, hormonal, and so in love for the last year and nine months (she kept up with the exact tenor of the relationship -- he took her word for it), and on a couch, a makeout session, lustful and hungry, was inevitable. Eventually, after they had wearied of merely Frenching and fondling, they migrated to the bedroom to navigate more fully each other's bodies.

Then, when their sexual congress was complete, and after the requisite canoodling (Ashton kept the time here), they went clubbing, drinking, and dancing with friends (Marisa and Landon -- Evanston; Melissa and Brandon -- Omaha). They laughed at the same jokes, danced to the same music, and even did the same cross-flirting -- Marissa and Melissa with Ashton; Brandon and Landon with Carissa. The sexy banter never led to anything, just titillation without

the payoff. Besides, Carissa only had a heart for Ashton, and Ashton knew exactly what he had with Carissa at least while in the grips of intercourse. Although ... Ashton usually stopped his inner discourse right there, but he could not stop his mind from racing to the predetermined conclusion of ... "Oh, my God, YES!!!" (Ah, such a relief for a young man!)

Ashton, who was considered to be a strapping fellow and quite handsome, conveniently forgot (outside of the bedroom, that is) that Carissa was utterly enchanting, as well -- just like the perky, young, beautiful television reporter she was aiming to become (breaking the worst news imaginable while still being irresistibly bangin'). And, considering that Northwestern is quite well known for broadcast journalism, and that television stations and networks are loathe to hire unattractive people, ergo, one would quite rightly assume that there were many very attractive young men and even young women from which Carissa could choose (if she were so inclined to venture forth into the unknown -- although there was that time that she and Candace in her freshman year of high school ...).

The night always ended with an entanglement of arms and legs and then a deep, satisfying sleep. Dreams rustled through their heads concurrently -- the only ones that either of them ever remembered. In this nighttime scenario, they were always in bed, each adorned with placid expressions (hers a bit more peaceful) while gripping tightly onto the other's hand.

Their interpretations of this dream, the same down to the very last detail, were starkly different.

As Ashton saw it, the dream, for Carissa, symbolized someone to hold onto through the many dark valleys of life -- someone to be her guide, her rock. It also signified someone to shower with her love: Ashton, her chosen one. When she made love to him, it was a full

expression of herself and what she would do for a man to keep him at her side or underneath her or on top of her. In their nearly two years together, she thrilled him in a variety of ways, but it was hard for Ashton to imagine that, after all this time, totally new (s)experiences awaited him. Absent public copulation or multiple partners (hmmm, he daydreamed -- Melissa and Marissa were both pretty damn cute), he felt that they had run the gamut of the playbook. It was a winning playbook, but the coach did not believe in improvisation. (Run the play as called, son.)

For him, the dream stood for the same old thing day after day, night after night. This little sleepytime play never featured Ashton and Carissa engaged in carnal activity of any kind -- no exploring caresses; no sloppy, passionate kisses leading to anything; nothing except the two of them eyeing the ceiling serenely, a blissful expression on their faces (again, hers more than his), and their hands tightly grasped (his knuckles perhaps a little whiter than hers). It was the most peaceful dream that one could imagine. For most, this vision would have been a reassurance that a life with Carissa could be meaningful and imbued with a blissfulness that surpassed human understanding.

Instead, it scared the hell out of Ashton -- for a different reason perhaps than it would have other young men. The monotony of the dream didn't especially bother him; he knew that all relationships lasting any amount of time traded on the familiar, the tried and true. It was the perpetuation of that sameness for years, decades, even a lifetime that always threw him. Ashton was not afraid of the predictability so to speak, but of his reaction to that plodding repetition stuck on an endless loop until he (or Carissa) was finally put out of his (or her) misery. He knew one day -- two years, five years, twenty-two years, whatever -- he would veer a little too close to

the ledge and hurtle off, splitting into an infinite number of pieces on the hard, unyielding ground below.

And pulling Carissa, for whom he still cared a great deal, into the maw with him as well.

That March Sunday in Evanston dawned clear and crisp (mid-30s), nothing out of the ordinary for a late winter morning. Ashton and Carissa huddled close to keep warm, her hand slowly stroking him to tumescence, as she had Sunday after Sunday after Sunday. One more sensuous mattress-bound tussle lay ahead. Then sleep, cuddle -- cuddle, sleep. Neither of them was one to break the bedroom routine that guaranteed success for them both (he was just sure of that) each and every time. Then, breakfast (Prairie Joe's -- Evanston; Jimmy's Egg -- Omaha), return to the apartment, pack, and finally long, soulful kisses sending them on their way with only the dread of the seven hour drive and a full day of classes on Monday staving off the erotic urges storming through them.

Ashton sped down I-80 toward Omaha and Creighton. If he didn't run into heavy traffic, he figured he would arrive at Omaha around 9 o'clock, enough time to study for a few hours. Midterms loomed this week, and he really needed to do well. His classwork had begun to suffer with him spending every weekend squiring Carissa around town. And when they were at the apartment (either in Evanston or in Omaha), and not even making out, she still threw Ashton so many levels of shade for even getting out his textbooks. Her time with him was *her* time with him -- he should not have his nose in some stuffy old book, when he could have it somewhere so much more pleasant. At least this was the vibe he got. Perhaps he was making too much out of it,

he thought; on the other hand, her passive-aggressive remarks (“Okay, if you’d *rather* study,” always said as she was massaging his leg, achieving an unstoppable swelling -- either that or she simply took off her shirt) seemed fairly controlling to him.

It was also unfair, he thought. She was the one, he recalled with a certain amount of spitefulness, who pushed him to go for that MBA. Insisted, really. Well, Creighton required a 3.0 just to have a chance of getting into the program. He was sitting right now at a three-oh-two, so -- well, just do the math, damn it, he shouted in his mind, castigating himself for his weakness, only for what, admittedly, was great pussy.

“Just stand up to the bitch! End this shit!” he shouted loudly, so eardrum-rupturing loudly that if anyone was looking at the piece of mini-theater taking place inside his car, he hoped they thought he was simply chiming along to the latest little death metal ditty. Immediately, he felt ashamed. Carissa was not a bitch, and he knew that, but to him that malignant word became a disgusting little bit of verbal shorthand to work out his frustration with the boredom he felt (at least with anything concerning Carissa that did not directly involve sex.) Suddenly, Ashton felt low and little and mean.

He knew that he should want to wrap Carissa up in an eternal embrace, if for nothing else because of the fact that she has for so long -- two years (God!) -- made him the centerpiece of her life. To most people, those looking on from the outside, it must have seemed great -- a pretty, sexy, smart girl giving herself up to him in every way imaginable. But, to him, even their unbridled carnality became constraints designed to keep him around, when all he really wanted was to get the hell out. Find someone new. Different experiences, different ways of doing things

(sex). However, he was always fearful. Of what? -- the question rang with a certain sense of sarcasm in his ears, vibrating all the way to his brain.

Fearful, you asshole, he mused (with more than a little self-flagellation), that she would wither and die (literally) without her Ashy (pet name that he hated). Afraid that one day soon after they broke up, he would find out that she had slit her wrists, hung herself, or overdosed on sleeping pills. He shamefully admitted that these thoughts, desperate and bleak, gave him a bit of a charge. He'd be out of this, whatever it was, for good! A phlegmy ball of shame rose in his throat.

Their last post-coital conversation (mostly her talking) caromed about Ashton's brain. To him, it was another instance where her clinginess dominated him. Neat bit of irony, he thought -- to be needy and powerful at the same time. It was a special skill that she had honed to a fine point over the course of their relationship.

"So, Ashy," she purred at him as he grimaced inside at that insipid little pet name -- that's about right (that's what he felt like -- her pet). She had during the course of the morning -- or it seemed to him that she had, with all the howling and the invoking of the Deity's name -- achieved multiple mind-rupturing orgasms, seemingly each of them the best she had ever had (they were certainly the loudest in memory).

"Where do you see us in five years?" she said with the most luminous smile.

Shit. Shit, shit, shitty, shit, shit, he screamed inside. Just the question he wanted to avoid. His brain screamed his answer within him, just to try it out.

-- Carissa, we have just had the greatest sex in the history of sex, like we do every damn time. We just keep topping the last time. Why in the hell do you have to ask me that question

now, at a time when my glands might override my brain and make me say something I don't want to say. Why do you do this to me? --

And then, thinking with trepidation that her hand was still really close to his testicles, he reversed course and took the safe route.

"How 'bout you, Babe?" he said, stroking her hair, trying to distract her from the fact that he hadn't answered the question.

Looking intensely at him, she parted her ripe, full lips to return an answer.

Thank God, she took the bait. He wondered if the relief flooding over him was palpable on his face.

"Me? Well, you've heard this before but --," Carissa said, breath catching, Ashton was certain, at the thought of a glorious future with him. "I think -- no, I know -- that I will be in television in a major market, Chicago, New York, wherever, with you and at least two kids, probably three. (That sounds like a good number, doesn't it, Hon? -- His eyes glazed over just a bit. She didn't notice.) I mean, as much as we love to bang each other, I know at least a couple of those boys shooting out from down there are going to hit something fertile. ... You, of course, will be a top executive for a Fortune 500 company, not sure which one -- not sure it matters. You and I will go work out together three or four times a week at an exclusive gym; I mean, we want to keep these hot bodies rockin', right? But the most important thing is we'll always be together in a nice little house in a leafy little gated neighborhood, and we'll barbecue with the neighbors every weekend. They'll be about our age (we'll call them Madison and Brody) and Democrats, of course. No MAGA idiots allowed, right? Won't it just be so nice? Just like now, except for all eternity."

“Um-hmm,” he mouthed, almost noiselessly, his hand stroking her hair. His placid exterior belied his terrified interior, where fear streaked pell-mell (ALL ETERNITY! ALL ETERNITY! ALL ETERNITY!) throughout his body. Wow, Ashton contemplated, she had put a lot of thought into this.

“You don’t have much to say this morning, Babe. Is my Ashy a sleepyhead?”

How could he answer that? He had to be very careful here, he thought.

“I am kind of tired. I guess I had a little too much to drink last night.”

“And then I kept you up too late. I was a bad, bad girl,” she said in that overly stylized baby voice that she was so sure he thought was so erotic. It was kind of cute, though, he had to admit. Kind of cute, but a little creepy, more than anything.

“Well,” he said. “If that’s bad, keep it coming.” He smiled wearily at her.

She did try, though. She really did. It all seemed so effortless, but at this point in their relationship, he could see the wheels turning. Carissa would never give up until she had that ring on her finger, and they were pronounced man and wife in the presence of God Almighty. She was old fashioned in that way, at least.

“Well, you sure as hell don’t have to ask me twice,” she said, proceeding to crawl head first under the covers. Then (and this had never happened before) she stopped.

“What am I thinking?” she purred, with the sexiness not quite drained from her voice yet. “You’re tired. I need to let you rest before that long drive.”

“Okay,” he said, admittedly a little deflated. (Damn, he thought. I wasn’t that freaking tired. Doesn’t she know not to believe a man who says he’s tired when offered sex? Anyway, he continued, I just wanted to avoid answering a question I wasn’t ready to answer.)

They kissed, and he drifted off to sleep. She busied herself in the bathroom, showering and putting on makeup for him, always for him. Definitely all for him.

So, that was how they left it. No proposal from Ashton. No hint that one was even imminent. Both of them frustrated in every way but sexually. They had a lot of sex, like they always did, but none of it, after the initial sensual charge, was remotely memorable. It wasn't that they weren't good lovers -- they were volcanic in their physical passion toward each other. But that was just it. That was literally all there was, for Ashton anyway. For her, there was no engagement; for him, there was no getting her to stop sending him little oblique reminders of where she expected all of this to end -- in holy matrimony.

Of course, what was he going to do -- be alone? Somehow, although he dreaded thoughts of marriage and a long life together (and it would be long -- his family history and hers also featured old, old, old grandparents and aunts and uncles. In their families living into their nineties was not a remarkable achievement.), being alone, even for a month or two, was infinitely worse.

Maybe he'd call her. Talk to her. Surely, life with her 24/7 wouldn't be that bad. The sex at least would be great -- for a while, maybe a good, long while. Maybe it was like he had heard some older (much older) people say. A few of them insisted that sex became deeper, more sublimely emotional the longer they were together. Shared experiences, and the like, made for richer encounters. He caught himself and laughed a little sheepishly. His buddies would laugh him right out of the room. Because, after all, he was twenty-freaking-one years old, straight, and possessed of a great (hot -- let's face it) body, and he had always been told (by Madison Avenue,

Hollywood, and the Internet -- he spent a lot of time alone there during the week) that he should be focussed on that onrush of hormones. That mushy relationship bullshit could wait until he was in his forties or fifties.

But still ... he could think of a worse existence. He'd call her, he thought, sure that she would be happy -- no, ecstatic -- to hear from him.

The phone rang. He gulped as she picked up on the other end.

"Carissa ...," he blurted.

"Just a minute, let me get her."

This ... was ... not ... Carissa. In fact, it was the very opposite of Carissa. The voice was husky and deeply male. No getting around that.

He heard a commotion over his cell as Carissa, in a huff, entered the room.

"You know, Kev, these little cellular devices have caller I.D. for a reason, you know. When Ashy My Love pops up on the screen there that means you don't answer, dumbass! God!"

"Hello," Carissa said into the phone.

"Hey, who was that? Kev? Why didn't you tell me you needed something fixed? Is it the pipes again?"

"Well, in a way."

Then a long silence, crackling with discomfort.

"Ashton, we need to talk about Kevin."

The Kia swerved slightly off the road.
