

I used to spend an inordinate amount of time considering what other people were like in bed. The scenarios I imagined were not poetically beautiful moments between two loving souls, though. What I saw was more a desperate collection of limbs interspersed with bodily functions and guttural noises – pornography without choreography. At first, Todd seemed to find my ramblings amusing. Arousing, even. No harm in adding a little spice to our marriage, despite us being less than a year in. But after a while, he seemed more pissed off than turned on. He said I didn't know where to draw the line. In my case, everybody was fair game.

The obese soccer coach who constantly rearranged his balls while he screamed what was supposed to be encouragement to the boys on his team, I had him pegged as a two-minute man who didn't bother to take his socks off in bed. The kind of guy who belched right after he climaxed.

The scrawny little librarian who passed her age-speckled hands over the covers of my loaned books, I had her figured for a dynamite lover. A sweet lady who whipped up wicked good scrambled eggs the morning after and patted you on the hand as a kind of thank you.

The half-retarded guy at Kroger bagging my groceries like he could give a goddamn he just put canned beans on top of my eggs. You don't even want to know what I thought about him.

The list went on and on.

The images filled me up in a way food no longer could. Though I still tried like hell to get full on food, I'd always walk away from a meal feeling empty. When I thought about the sex lives of others, time stopped. I was transported to a place where I saw

a person for who they truly were vs. who they said they were. See, genetics don't dictate where your hands and fingers go during sex, how hard you press against your lover's body. What words you murmur before, during, and after. These things are choices – the essence of who you are.

If a guy jams his tongue into your mouth, bites your fingernails during foreplay, and calls you very specific names during sex, he's a certain kind of person. He always will be. His other titles; real estate agent of the year, husband, recovering alcoholic, can change but he will forever be the nail biter.

He may initially find ways to hide himself so you'll fall in love with his other, more polished behaviors. But eventually his real self shows up. One day, during sex, he hauls off and smacks you across the face for no reason whatsoever. A month later he comes home with a magazine and some accessories and demands things of you that you've never even heard of before. Things that leave you sore for days. Things that make you wonder, is this intimacy?

We were lying in bed after just such an occasion when my mind started to wander. A new second grade teacher had been hired at the elementary school where I taught. She had this malformed, child-size arm that dangled from her torso. Nice lady, really. Not deserving of my libidinous thoughts at all. I'm sure she had enough struggles in her life already. Anyway, for various reasons I started thinking about her.

What would her lover be like? The word selfless came to mind. Someone who wanted to make love to her so badly he'd see beyond her flaw, maybe even embrace it. He wouldn't be afraid to touch her arm. In fact, he'd plant delicate kisses all over

it. Then he'd take her face in his hands and tell her how beautiful and unique she was, and mean every word of it.

Todd noticed me crying and said, "What's the problem now?"

I tried to put the beauty of the scene into words but Todd didn't want to hear it.

"You're crying about some deformed chick's sex life?"

The talk escalated from there. Ironic, Todd calling *me* a pervert. But, I decided I'd better work at keeping my thoughts to myself after that. No sense in letting Todd down any more than I already had. I did a decent job of concealing my meanderings.

Then we went to the Affinity Realtors Ball.

I hate Todd's work functions but this one was mandatory. All the top executives came into town to see who was willing to kiss ass the hardest. A real pressure cooker atmosphere, if you ask me.

While Todd toured the crowd acting like the model employee, I hovered near the food table for comfort. I had just shoved another one of those jalapeno poppers in my mouth when some guy backed into me. He apologized all over the place then introduced himself and his wife. Brett and Alecia Mc*Somebody*. I introduced myself, garbling around the scalding, cheesy mess in my mouth.

"Todd's had a banner year," Alecia said.

"If he keeps it up, he'll be in the running for our Agent of the Year," Brett added.

I wondered how many years of marriage it took for them to perfect their one-two punch way of talking. They were otherwise so mismatched.

Alecia stood about five inches taller than Brett and towered over me. Her legs were long and sinewy, like pulled taffy. I imagined those legs wrapped around Brett,

squeezing the life out of him in a candy hug. Brett would be the one on top, sweaty. His face buried just below her manly shoulders until he satisfied her.

By the time Todd showed up and reminded me the McSomebody's were actually the McFarlands -the owners of the company, I'd just concluded Alecia would most certainly make Brett sleep in the wet spot. No post-coital spooning for her.

Todd pinched the back of my neck in what would've appeared to be a loving manner, but signaled to me that I'd better, *Cut this shit out. Right now.* I tried to stop then, focus on some other aspect of these people's lives, the statistics. What kind of car they drove. Where they lived. Where their kids went to school. I smiled and nodded, smiled and nodded.

We left very shortly afterward. Todd drove home NASCAR-style without uttering a word. He jerked the car to a stop in the driveway and said, "Get out."

I did as he said. Before I even got the passenger door closed all the way, he backed down the driveway, nearly running over the mailbox, and peeled out. Maybe I was a pervert. Something was definitely wrong with me.

Right?

Once I got inside and my hands stopped shaking, I opened a new pint of Ben & Jerry's. I dug out the chunks of cookie dough and ate them in the dark, then bumped my way to the couch where I fell asleep.

Todd came home around four in the morning. I could tell he'd been at Dooley's Pink Palace giving his money away again. He smelled like Mad Dog 20/20 and vomit. When he came in he didn't say anything to me, just looked at me like *see what you*

made me do, and headed to the shower. I talked to him through the shower curtain, tried to smooth things over.

“All those corporate people get jumbled up in my mind. It was an honest mistake,” I said.

“They’re the owners, Melinda. *The owners*. You can’t remember that without an org chart?”

He was right, of course. A good wife would commit certain names to memory.

“I bet if I gave you an org chart all you’d do is use it to think up a bunch of sick shit.”

He was right again, I would. And, I’d consider what kind of things each one of those self-important morons said to their wives during sex. The meaningless words that stream out of their mouths during what’s supposed to be an act of love. According to Todd, the things that get said during sex don’t mean anything.

I sincerely hope he’s right about that.

“C’mon, Todd. It’s not like they knew what I was thinking.”

“I knew what you were thinking.”

“I said I was sorry.”

Todd raked back the shower curtain and snatched his towel out of my hands. He dried his torso and around his crotch. His penis looked like a recoiled party favor, inching away from me in disgust.

“Sorry doesn’t cut it this time.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means I’ve had enough of your bullshit.” He threw his towel down and pushed past me.

I immediately thought, *is he leaving me?* Then I thought, *look at yourself. Of course he is, you cow.* I collapsed on the bathroom tile and cried, sobbed right into his wet towel. I grabbed the extra folds on my gut, got a good handful of fat and squeezed. Moved down to my thighs and slapped the excess gathered there.

Todd came in. He stepped over me to the sink and brushed his teeth. As soon as he left, I climbed into the bathtub, pulled the shower curtain around me and turned the hot water on. I let the water roll over me, wishing it would melt my skin and boil my bones down small enough to get sucked into the drain.

I had two options right then. I could get up, make myself presentable, and cook some corned beef hash for Todd. Or I could count the Vicodin pills again and continue to entertain how nice it would be if I wasn’t around anymore; if I found a black hole I could slip into forever. I wallowed for a few minutes, imagined Todd’s face when he found the empty bottle of pills next to my lifeless body. As usual, as soon as I got to the part where Todd might actually put words to his remorse, all I could picture him saying was, “Bitch, you took my Vicodin.”

I got up. Made corned beef hash. Diced up the onions real small the way Todd likes.

For almost two weeks I walked around like a ghost, quietly hovering in the shadows, trying not to be seen. Todd softened a little. He stopped avoiding me, stopped glaring at me. When he laid down next to me in bed and fell asleep, I knew we would be okay. When he put his hand on my hip, I forced myself to relax and go

with the flow. I didn't flinch, not even when he got to the part that usually hurt. Intimacy comes at a price, I told myself.

Everything was sailing along in the right direction until last night. I was in the living room alone with a bag of Doritos when this bit came on the T.V. about Monica Lewinsky, a mini documentary about how her life had turned out in the years since the Clinton scandal. I considered turning the T.V. off but something about this woman sucked me in. She was never a bad looking girl, but when the world first caught up with her, she'd been completely steam rolled. Used and humiliated by the President of the United States. The situation took its toll, left her haggard at twenty-three years old. But now here she was, the picture of serenity.

The interviewer caught the audience up on the past events then asked Lewinsky about her current life. I propped my feet on the coffee table and opened the Doritos. *All right, I thought, what've you got to say for yourself now?*

Lewinsky said before she hooked up with the President she was an average girl. She had hopes for her future. A career. Marriage. Kids. The scandal, however, made people forget she *had a soul and was once unbroken*. For a while, even she forgot.

She was hopeless. Worthless. Suicidal.

The interviewer asked Lewinsky how she got past the scandal, emotionally.

The camera zoomed in on her face. Her smile was easy. Her eyes, confident. She stared right into the camera and said she figured out she was more than that moment in her life. She deserved to be loved for who she was; past, present, and future. Didn't we all? She asked.

I'd never seen someone look so beautiful as she did then.

“That bimbo’s still around?” Todd’s voice startled me. I hadn’t noticed him come into the room. He reached into the untouched Doritos then held his hand out for the remote. I hesitated.

Todd rolled his eyes and sighed. “Give it here,” he said.

I didn’t budge. Instead I swallowed down Lewinsky’s final words...

“You can insist on a different ending to your story,” she said.

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